

# SHATTERED

IN DISGRACE #3

SHILPA SURAJ

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IN DISGRACE

BOOK THREE

SHILPA SURAJ

*To Z, You are the sun I orbit.*

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# PROLOGUE

MOMENTS. Endless moments.

Life seemed to ebb and flow around her, a streaming consciousness that she was aware of but wasn't a part of. Would it always be like this? Would her life always be about watching not participating, breaking not healing, wondering not doing?

“Nisha?”

She startled out of her dazed contemplation of the window and, outside of it, the dirty wall of the next building, at the hesitant call. Ma hovered in the doorway, her hands mangling the end of her chiffon dupatta.

“Hmm?”

Ma's hands fluttered in the air like birds with a broken wing, listing and falling, with no apparent direction.

“Rahul is here to see you. Aarushi's with him.”

Nisha sighed, the exhale of exhaustion seeming to come from deep within her soul. She loved Aarushi, she truly did, but her friend's open happiness scraped across Nisha's still raw, emotional wounds.

And Nisha hated that. What kind of person resented her friend's joy? The ugliness inside her, new but there, was a constant reminder of what had happened. Would Aman's mark on her psyche ever fade or was she destined to be this tired, angry, bitter wreck for the rest of her life?

“Nishu?” Aarushi bounced into her room, her now fading green streaks of hair flying around her beaming face. Rahul followed behind at a more sedate pace, his posture military straight despite having left the Navy. A wave of distaste flooded her at the sight of him, at the reminder of the Navy and all that it meant to her, but she swallowed it down and looked away, looked to her friend who was literally leaking happiness from every pore.

“How are you?” Aarushi asked, dropping down on the wooden bench beside Nisha.

“Good,” she replied automatically. She glanced at Rahul who was watching her with those shrewd eyes of his and returned his polite smile with a strained one of her own.

“I have some exciting news.” Aarushi caught Nisha’s hands in her own, her slender fingers managing a surprisingly strong grip.

“Lovely,” Nisha managed to say, retrieving her hand and discreetly flexing her squashed fingers.

“Rahul is setting up his own private security firm.”

Oh. She glanced at Rahul. “Congratulations,” she offered.

“Thank you,” he smiled, a little stiffly but with genuine warmth. “I’d like to talk to you about it.”

“Me?” Startled, she stared at him.

He held her glance and nodded, gesturing to the chair in front of her. “May I?”

“Sure.” She shot her friend a bewildered look but Aarushi was busy nibbling on a block of cheese like a little rat. Aaru had developed a weird obsession with cheese in recent times. She’d heard love made you do strange things but cheese cravings might be pushing the envelope on that...

“Nisha.” Rahul’s gentle voice drew her gaze back to him. She wanted to look away but the quiet strength in his eyes wouldn’t let her.

“Yes?”



“I want you to come work for me.”

ONE

## NISHA

A DARK DISTRESSED brown solid oak door stood between her and her destination. A discreet board beside it, again dark brown with old gold lettering, spelt out J&A Security, in Marathi and in English. She saw the broken pumpkin with camphor and haldi and kumkum on both sides of the door, a reminder that someone had prayed for this company's success and to keep away evil eye.

Her evil eye, she mused. She certainly wasn't a fan of the occupants of the office and yet, here she was.

"I should just leave," Nisha whispered to herself, but her feet wouldn't move. They stayed rooted to the beige tiles she stood on. Beige, forgettable, common. She was those tiles.

The classy elegance of the door and the nameboard stood out in stark contrast to the grimy old building it was housed in. Nothing that a little extensive cleaning wouldn't fix, she noted, her glance going over the common space. The other end of the corridor held a matrimonial or matchmaking bureau. A grim smile touched her lips as a mother and daughter duo left the opposite space, excited chatter spilling from them as they riffled through loose papers in their hands. Biodatas she assumed. She wanted to rip them from their hands, shred it to little bits and dance as the pieces of paper rained to the floor.

And still, she didn't move. The mother-daughter pair opted to take the stairs instead of the old lift, their slippers making a clattering noise as they left.

“Are you going to stay out there all day?” A vaguely familiar voice drawled at her back.

Nisha turned and met twinkling, black eyes, a broad smile that just radiated good cheer, and a smoking hot body that made even her detached mind sit up and take note. His lean face, chiseled, cleanshaven jawline were familiar. The longer hair that flopped forward into his eyes, streaked with a few perfectly placed strands of silver weren't.

“Remember me?” he asked, his eyes crinkling at the side as his smile widened.

He'd had a buzz cut the last time she'd seen him, she thought. Of course she remembered him. Lieutenant Paul Alvares was not a man you forgot. And not only because he was one of her despicable husband's best friends.

Paul's smile slowly faded as she stared back at him, her own face cold and still. The silence between them lengthened and stretched until it felt like it was its own entity.

“Rahul said you'd be starting at nine,” he said finally when it became clear she wasn't going to say anything.

Nisha could feel the familiar cold creeping through her, the biting anger that seemed to follow her everywhere rearing its head like a hissing cobra.

“And it's five minutes to nine,” she replied, her tone frigid. “I'm early.”

His eyebrows rose, a slow arc that had her wanting to smack his smirking face.

“You are,” he acknowledged. “Technically though, you're hovering on the doorstep. You haven't yet entered the office.”

Nisha rolled her eyes at him. “If you'd move, I could enter.”

He stepped aside, leaving her just enough space to squeeze past him. But that would involve brushing up against him if she wasn't careful. Sweat broke out on her brow as she contemplated the space. Maybe if she held her breath and sucked her stomach in?

His gaze swept her sweaty, trembling frame and he moved away from the doorway completely.

“I’ll see you inside,” he called over his shoulder as he disappeared into the corridor beyond the door.

His kindness didn’t go unnoticed. Swallowing the bile that had risen in her throat, she stepped over the threshold and into the space that would be her workspace for the next little while. If she stayed...

“Thank you,” she murmured, once she found him at the reception area flipping through mail.

“For?” He pretended to be puzzled but she wouldn’t allow it.

“For walking away because I couldn’t stomach the thought of having to brush past you to enter,” she said bluntly.

“You’re so good for my ego, Mrs. Rathore,” he grinned.

The surname dropped between them like a rock of lava, flammable and smoking.

“Nisha,” she said, the frost making her words crackle. “Just Nisha.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered quietly.

“No please.” She closed her eyes, sick nausea erupting in the pit of her stomach. “Don’t call me ma’am.” It reminded her too much of that time in her life, when she was surrounded by people calling her ma’am. She opened her eyes and met his sympathetic gaze.

“My name is Nisha.” The words were a ferocious whisper, a reclamation of self, a vow.

“Alright Nisha,” Paul inclined his head in acknowledgement. “Welcome to J&A.”

“You work here too?” Her gaze swept the spartan room, finding nobody but him in the space.

“I’m the A in J&A.” He smiled, a dimple winking into sight. “Jaishankar and Alvares.”

One of her new bosses then, she thought. Fuck her life. Just what she needed. Rahul felt safe or safer. He was Aarushi's and she trusted that relationship to hold a circle of respect for her.

But Paul...Paul was...Well, Paul was overwhelming.

Too handsome, too cheerful, too muscular, too everything...Nisha wasn't sure she wanted to be around 'too everything' at the moment.

"Actually," she began to make her excuses before she escaped.

"Acutally," he interrupted, his knowing eyes telling her he saw through her pathetic attempt. "You're just in time to help me put together a security plan for a celebrity wedding."

"Me?" she asked, her mouth falling open. She'd assumed she would be the receptionist or administration person or something. Maybe even housekeeping. She was just a graduate with zero experience. What did she know about security plans?

"You see anybody else here?" he asked, looking around with a mock frown. "Fuck please tell me you don't see people that I can't. I'm scared of ghosts."

A giggle fluttered in her throat, escaping her. She slapped a hand over her mouth, the sound of her laughter both alien and surprising.

"You're going to drape a white sheet over your head and jump out at me from dark corners, aren't you?" Paul asked wryly. "I should never have revealed my weakness."

"It's only fair," she murmured, killing the smile that teased her lips. "You know all of mine."

"No, Nisha," he said, his voice low and even. "I only know your strengths."

Two

## PAUL

THERE WAS a prickly porcupine in the middle of their new office.

Paul watched her tense, wary face scan the space, her gaze skidding away every time it landed on him. Which was often given that they didn't have such a large space to begin with.

“So.” He clapped his hands together, stopping a second later when she jumped in fright at the sudden sound. Damn, what had that bastard done to her?

Paul stopped clapping and cleared his throat as he powered up his laptop. “Shall we look at the client brief?”

She took a small step closer to him. “What exactly is my job here?” she asked hesitantly. “I thought it would be administration and office management.”

He looked up at her as he waited for his documents to load. “We're a firm of three people with contractors being used as and when required. I guess our jobs, all three of us, is to do whatever needs to be done.”

She stared at him. “I know nothing about security.”

Paul shrugged. “Use your common sense for now. Everything else, you'll learn along the way.”

“I will?”

“You will. I'm an excellent teacher.”

She stepped the tiniest bit closer. “*You'll* teach me?”



Paul eyed her. “That common sense needs to jump in right now. I just said I would, didn’t I?”

“Why?”

She was standing right in front of him. He was fairly sure she wasn’t aware of how close she was to him, her confused eyes focused on his.

“Because I don’t like having an untrained employee.”

“Then why hire me at all?” she shot back, her eyes flaring with anger. “I don’t need sympathy. Yours or Rahul’s.”

“It’s not sympathy,” he told her quietly. “It’s support.”

She blinked, the fury in her eyes banking. Just as quickly her eyes filled with tears.

“No. No. No.” Panic swirled in Paul as a single tear broke free and slipped down her cheek. “No crying.”

“Stop barking orders at me,” she growled, swiping roughly at her cheek.

Relieved that she was back to being angry with the whole world and him, in particular, he made a mental note to keep irritating her. He preferred the prickly porcupine or the fire breathing dragon to the sad sparrow with the broken wing.

“Shall we?” he asked roughly, gesturing to the laptop.

She nodded once and turned to face the computer, her braided hair slapping him gently in the arm with the movement. She smelt...delicious. Citrusy, tangy and with the hint of the ocean, the last a fragrance that sent a wave of nostalgia through him.

He shook his head, shoving all his idiotic, inappropriate thoughts into a box in the corner of his mind. He could take the memory out later and revisit this moment of madness.

“We got this contract through a contact of Vaani’s. Her agent represents this actress too. She’s marrying a prominent industrialist’s son and while it’s a small, intimate wedding, they still want top-notch security.”

Nisha listened quietly, soaking it all in like a sponge. He could see the furrow between her brows as she concentrated with a ferocity that made him smile. At least the tears were gone. For now.

“We’ll be using independent contractors for jobs like these, from firms we’ve vetted and trust, until we can hire and build a dedicated team of professionals that we can rely on.”

A whirlwind blew the door open at that moment. Vaani, Rahul’s sister, breezed in, her long, perfectly styled hair floating around her face.

“Guys!” she exclaimed, as Rahul trailed in behind her carrying a mountain of shopping bags and looking thoroughly disgruntled. “This place has no VIBE.”

“We have a vibe,” Rahul muttered. “It’s a ‘we get work done here’ vibe.”

Beside Paul, Nisha tensed, her eyes fixed on Vaani as she fluttered around the room, hands on her hips and sharp-tongued criticisms on her lips.

“That’s not the point Rahul Anna,” Vaani snapped at Rahul. “Branding and image are key to everything you do in business.”

“Professionalism and competence are key,” Rahul corrected. “We aren’t in showbusiness, Vaani. Looks aren’t important.”

“Looks aren’t,” Nisha said. “But image always is.”

All three of them turned to look at her, surprised. Nisha slapped her hands over her mouth, seeming horrified by the words that had slipped out.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“No,” Paul replied, intrigued. “Please interrupt. The yappy terrier over there doesn’t have a pause button.”

The yappy terrier glared at him but smiled sweetly at Nisha.

“Go ahead. Tell these bozos I’m right,” Vaani invited.

Nisha looked from one to the other before taking a deep breath. “Perception shapes every conversation. Branding and image, like your sister said, plays into that from the very first moment.”

“See?” Vaani said triumphantly. “No vibe.”

“They do have a vibe,” Nisha interjected, a small smile on her lips. “It’s just that the vibe is old, tired and boring.”

Rahul laughed, a bark of sound that had both women grinning.

“Alright then,” Paul said. “Looks like we need to factor branding into the budget. Nisha and Vaani can figure out what we need and we’ll see how to afford it.”

“No pink.” Rahul pointed a finger at Vaani.

“No pink,” she agreed. “But you need to give Nisha your requirements. She’s your employee and the one leading this.” She tossed her hair and batted her eyelashes at Rahul and Paul. “I’m just the expert consultant.”

“Lead?” Panic leached into Nisha’s voice. “I can’t lead anything. I’m just-“

“The one in charge.” Paul interjected smoothly. “You’ve got this, Dragon.”

“Dragon?” Vaani looked at him, intrigued. “She’s a dragon and I’m a terrier.”

“An annoying one at that,” he told her, ruffling her hair as he walked past. “Now, let Nisha work and stop disturbing us.”

Rahul laughed.

“We need to get on the Navarra Petrochemical brief,” Paul told him, dragging him by the arm out of the room and into the second room that he’d decided would be his personal office.

The women needed some time without the two of them. Nisha to decompress and to get over her panic and to find that platinum spine of hers. And for Vaani to just be Vaani.

No matter who and what any of them were, everyone needed a little Vaani in their lives.

# THREE

## NISHA

SHE WATCHED the other woman flit around the bare room like a colourful butterfly that didn't know where to alight. Vaani stopped in front of another empty desk at the end of the longish room.

“Who is this for?” she asked.

Nisha shrugged. “I don't know. I just walked in a few minutes before you. You'll have to ask them.”

“You're Aarushi's friend, Nisha, right?”

Vaani picked up the simple, metal penstand on the desk and stared at it, looking faintly contemptuous. Of the penstand or her, Nisha wondered.

“I am,” she confirmed. “And you're Rahul's sister, Vaani.”

“I am,” Vaani replied, mimicking her words and shooting Nisha a cheeky smile.

Nisha didn't smile back. She wasn't comfortable with this bright, confident, successful, *happy* woman. Vaani was a reminder of everything that Nisha wasn't. And Vaani was whom she desperately wanted to be. Minus the pink stilettos of course. She'd probably break her neck in them.

“They need help, Nisha,” Vaani sighed. “They need you.”

A scoffing sound escaped Nisha. Nobody needed her and she didn't need Vaani to patronise her like she was a toddler with self-esteem issues.

“You don’t believe me?” Vaani cocked her head, hands on her very slim hips.

Nisha took a moment to covetously eye those hips. Even at her slimmest, she’d probably been double that size.

When she realised Vaani was waiting for a response, she said, “No, I don’t believe you.”

For a moment, she wondered if that bluntness was going to cost her. Vaani was her boss’s sister, after all. One of her boss’s sister. She wondered what the equation between Paul and her was. She hadn’t missed the hair ruffle as he walked past Vaani. She’d felt a bit strange watching them but she couldn’t quite identify why.

“I like you,” Vaani said decisively, a broad smile on her face.

“You do?” She did? Nisha couldn’t hide her surprise.

“I do.” Vaani perched on the edge of the desk Nisha sat at. “This is your desk, I presume?”

Nisha looked down at the desk. It was empty and didn’t seem to belong to anyone. May as well claim it. “Yes.”

“Good.” Vaani made herself more comfortable, pulling her legs up onto the tabletop. “Now tell me your ideas for the company’s branding.”

Nisha paused. She didn’t really have any ideas, given that all of this had been thrown at her just a few minutes earlier. But even as she thought that, images bloomed in her head. Deep, glossy oak brown set off with a rich royal dark blue. The colours worked in her mind and would make for a strong statement.

She sat forward and started to talk. To her surprise, Vaani listened without interrupting once. When Nisha finally wound down, Vaani nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

“That’s it?” Nisha stared at her dumbfounded. “You don’t have any suggestions?”

“Nope.” Vaani jumped off the table. “It’s fabulous. Let’s do this. Shall we start tomorrow? You can take today to settle

in with those two.” Vaani jerked a thumb towards the office room the two men had disappeared into.

“Sure.” Nisha nodded. With a little squeal of excitement, Vaani rounded the desk and squeezed Nisha in what she assumed was meant to be a hug.

“Say bye to those idiots for me.” With a last wiggle of her fingers, Vaani disappeared out the front door.

Nisha stared at the shut door as silence descended around her. What had just happened? This morning had left her feeling strangely unsettled. At the same time, a distinct thread of excitement strummed through her body. For the first time in a long time, she had purpose.

*“I love rubbery phulkas,” Aman teased. “These are your specialty na?”*

*Nisha stared down at her plate. Was it that bad? Ma had never complained about her phulkas. But Aman wasn’t complaining. Just teasing. She needed to lighten up, to not be so sensitive.*

*“You know how you said we might be buying a house? I was reading the new budget that was released today. Did you know-“*

*“I hope the price of atta has gone down,” Aman chortled. “At the rate you are wasting it, we need to be able to keep replacing our stock.”*

*Nisha’s smile tightened. “The interest rate on-“*

*“I love that you have all of these opinions.” Aman pushed back from the table and kissed the top of her head. “It’s cute. But I have to go now. Let’s eat rice for dinner tonight, okay? No more phulkas.”*

The memory slammed through her and the excitement started to leach out of her, a familiar fatigue creeping back and making its presence felt. She couldn’t do this. Why had she thought she could? Did she honestly believe her cute opinions were going to be important enough to create an entire branding concept for a fledgling company? She was going to sabotage them before they even got off the ground.

Nisha picked up her old handbag and got to her feet. She should get out of here before she made an even bigger fool of herself.

She was almost to the front door when it opened. A giant of a man with a full beard and a shaved head filled the doorway. A small squeak escaped her before she could smother it.

“J&A Security?” he rumbled at her.

Nisha nodded, craning her neck to look up and make eye contact with him. The man was a veritable mountain.

“I’m Agamjot Singh.” He held out a massive paw.

Nisha watched as her hand disappeared into his. He clasped it firmly but gently. She should be scared. If he decided to turn on her, she would get squashed like a bug under a shoe. But as she looked at him again, a crick developing in her neck, she realised she was looking into the kindest eyes she’d ever seen. And the anxiety running rampant inside her eased.

“I’m Nisha.” She smiled, the smile coming easily. “Let me get Rahul or Paul for you.”

As she stepped back from the door, she dropped her handbag onto the table she’d earlier claimed. Maybe she wouldn’t leave just yet. Maybe, just maybe, she could actually do this.



# FOUR

## PAUL

“AGAM!” His pleasure at seeing his old friend was palpable. No matter how many years passed or how much distance separated them, the bonds you formed during your cadetship stayed with you for life.

Agam picked him off the floor in a bearhug that threatened to break his ribs.

“It’s nice to see you man,” Paul gasped as he hovered in midair. A small giggle sounded from behind him. An intriguing sound that. It almost made being crushed and slowly asphyxiated worth it. Almost.

“Hello. Hello.” Rahul thumped Agam on his back in greeting leading to Paul’s welcome release. He chuckled as Agam thumped Rahul back almost leading to him faceplanting on the floor.

Another little giggle. Paul turned towards Nisha. His gaze met hers and her smile immediately died. For some reason, he felt the loss of it keenly.

“Agam, have you met Nisha, our colleague?” He kept his tone light and casual, trying to will her smile back. But when it did reappear, it was forced.

“I did.” Agam, the gentle giant, beamed. “It was nice to be greeted by her pretty face instead of your ugly mugs.”

“Hey!” Paul pretended affront. “Speak for yourself. I’m gorgeous.”

That got him a full blown laugh. He didn't even mind that it was at his expense.

"Delusional is what you are," Rahul chuckled. "So Agam, have you considered our offer?"

Leave it to Rahul to cut straight to the heart of the matter. Paul watched as Agam shuffled his feet and looked uncomfortable. Damn. His heart sank as he realised that Agam may not be joining their little team after all. The other man would have been a fantastic addition to the company.

"I'm not sure," Agam huffed, rubbing one hand over his shaved head. "If I'm the right person for the job."

"You're not just the right person," Paul said, conviction colouring his voice. "You're the perfect person."

Agam flushed a brick red, his open and trusting face going blotchy and sweaty. "After the accident," he began. "I'm not in the best physical condition."

Paul eyed his friend's massive, ridiculously fit frame. Agam looked like he could benchpress a truck. With one hand. It wasn't his fitness that was a problem. It was his confidence.

"And my mind," his friend continued miserably. "I still struggle sometimes." He glanced shamefacedly at Nisha who was listening silently. "The anxiety attacks make it hard to function. What would you guys do if I choked in the middle of a job?"

"We'll build it into our plans," Rahul replied quietly. "We know how to do that, Agam, and we also know how hard you're working to overcome what you've been through. We need you, my friend. We want you to be a part of this firm." Rahul's tone lightened as he added, "Please don't leave me to suffer Paul without you."

Agam managed a weak laugh, still looking conflicted.

"What happened?" A quiet, gentle voice broke through his racing thoughts.

Paul looked at Nisha who'd been standing to one side, trying to blend in with the wall behind her.

“What happened to you?” she asked Agam, her eyes shining with an intensity that had his gut clenching. He didn’t appreciate his friend being put on the spot like this. None of them were prodding at Nisha’s wounds, were they?

“If Agam doesn’t want to talk about it,” Paul said, his voice low but lethal. “He doesn’t have to.”

Nisha ignored him, her eyes on Agam. “I have anxiety too,” she told him. “So does my best friend Aarushi. We have breathing techniques that help.”

“I tried those,” Agam replied disgruntled. “Damn things don’t work.”

“Maybe you’re doing it wrong?” Nisha offered.

“No, I’m not,” Agam growled. “I followed the doctor’s instructions perfectly.”

Hold on a second. What was happening here? Rahul and he exchanged a confused look as their gazes darted between Agam and Nisha.

“Clearly it’s not as perfect as you think,” Nisha retorted tartly. “If it isn’t working for you.”

“Listen, Ms. Know-it-all.” Agam was bristling like an irate rooster now. “There is no one size fits all with panic attacks.”

“Did you read that off the internet?” Nisha arched a brow, a small smile teasing her lips. “Because I’m pretty sure I landed on the same article.”

“It was a perfectly well researched medical piece,” Agam informed her, turning his long nose up at her derision.

“What is with your obsession with perfection?” she asked, stepping towards him. “People like you and me should know better than to use the word perfect.”

“People like you and me?” Agam’s face softened as he looked at her. “What happened to you sweetie?”

Nisha smiled sadly. “I’ll show you my scars, if you’ll show me yours.”

Rahul's sharp intake of breath was the only sound in the room as Agam studied the tiny woman in front of him.

"It looks like I might be joining you guys after all," he said slowly, his gaze still on Nisha.

"Welcome aboard, my friend," Rahul replied.

"We should put her in charge of hiring," Paul told his friend, his throat feeling uncomfortably tight.

"We don't have budget to hire anymore staff," Rahul told him drily. "This is our team for now."

Paul looked at the other two who were deep in conversation in the far end of the room. "Looks pretty good to me," he said, quietly.

# FIVE

## NISHA

“IT’S NOT the right shade of blue.” Nisha frowned at the bolt of cloth in front of her. Beside her, Vaani was haranguing a salesman into looking through older stock for more shades of blue.

“It’s a pretty blue,” Agam offered, his tree trunk sized arms folded over his chest.

“But it’s not the blue I had in mind.” She hopped over the old, scarred table and landed on the startled salesman’s side. “Woh wala dikhaiye.” She pointed to fabric high above their head.

The salesman pulled it down almost clonking her on the head. She thought she heard Agam growl but that might have been her imagination.

“This,” she said, her fingers stroking the fabric. “This is the colour I had in mind.”

“But it’s not thick enough for upholstery.” Vaani appeared at her shoulder, peering down at the material, deep navy blue with scattered dull gold dots.

“But perfect for drapes,” Nisha replied, stroking the fabric.

“Okay.” Vaani pulled out a battered notebook with all the measurements they’d noted before coming. “Let’s get what masterji needed for the drapes.”

“Vaani!” Nisha protested. “We need to look at more stuff.”

“Why?” Vaani asked perplexed. “Didn’t you just say it was perfect?”

“It is but...” Nisha’s voice trailed off. What the hell did Nisha know about something being perfect or not? She was just a failed housewife working for guys who were trying to assuage their guilty consciences.

“But what? If it’s perfect, we get it.” Vaani was scanning the rest of the list.

“It’s expensive,” Nisha said anxiously, looking at the tag. “Do we have enough budget for it?”

“We can cut on something else. Spend less elsewhere.” Vaani waved a hand in the air in a gesture that could have meant anything. “Now chop chop.”

Before Nisha could fret over the price, the salesman had cut off the required amount of cloth and bundled it off to be billed. Anxiety pooled in her stomach as Vaani paid up and they left the tiny store and entered the crowded roads of Khar.

Were Paul and Rahul going to be mad at the amount of money they’d spent? Why the hell hadn’t they bargained? They should have looked at a few more stores...they should have done more research. They should have video called Paul and Rahul and gotten their opinion.

Her mind went round in frantic circles as they walked around a few more stores, Vaani dragging them into several that she seemed to have intimate knowledge of. Beside her, Agam walked silently, carrying the bags they’d accumulated in their shopping spree.

“Okay there?” he asked softly.

Nisha nodded, a jerky movement.

“Nisha, anything else we should be looking at?” Vaani asked, tapping her pen against her lips.

“Not today,” she said, the words tumbling over each other. “Shall we leave? It’s really hot.”

“It is?” Vaani frowned. “Wow, you really are sweating? Are you okay?”

Nisha shook her head, aware of the sweat dripping down the side of her face. “Just hot. Can we go?”



Agam and Vaani exchanged a cryptic look and then they were hailing two autos. Agam got into one with all their bags and Nisha and Vaani into the other. The breeze wafting through the open sides of the auto brought a little relief, as Nisha's galloping heart pounded in her throat. She swallowed hard, trying to breathe through the fear.

Vaani didn't say a word but two seconds into the ride, she slipped her hand into Nisha's and held on tight. Nisha glanced sideways but Vaani was looking at her phone, although her fingers squeezed Nisha's in comfort.

Marginally calmer by the time they reached the office, Nisha could still taste the acrid fear burning through her throat. On the heels of it came anger. Anger at herself for fearing everything, anger at the men who would probably be pissed at her irresponsible spending, and anger at Vaani and Agam for encouraging her to be reckless.

She'd worked herself into a fine snit by the time they pushed open the front door of the office. They found Paul and Rahul in the conference room, projecting up plans of the venue for the celebrity wedding. Agam grunted, dropped the shopping bags in the reception area and wandered off to join them.

"Are you okay?" Vaani asked softly, her hand coming to rest on Nisha's shoulder.

"Yes." Nisha nodded, her lips pressed together in a tight line. "Yes, I am fine."

"If you're sure..." Vaani's voice tapered off.

"I am." Nisha nodded again.

"Then I have to leave. I'm needed on set in an hour."

"Okay." Nisha took a deep breath. She would face the music alone. "Goodbye."

Vaani gave her one last pat on her back and left with a last, troubled look in her direction.

Nisha paced the reception room, chewing on her lip and trying to get her mind off the hamster wheel of the trouble she

was in. She rifled through the bags and their purchases and sat down to count and inventory the cutlery they'd picked up for the office. Lost in her own worries and the repetitive task, she missed the door of the conference room opening behind her.

“What are you doing?”

She squealed, the deep voice startling her. A glass went flying from her hand only to be caught by another strong, brown one. She stared, dumbfounded, as Paul carefully placed the glass by her feet.

“Sorry,” he said. “Didn't mean to startle you.”

Nisha stared at the glass, at him and then back at the glass. And then she did something that would mortify her till the end of time itself.

She burst into tears.

SIX

## PAUL

THE DOOR to the conference room opened as Nisha's noisy sobs escalated. Paul shook his head at Agam and Rahul and they disappeared back into the conference room. Setting the glass down carefully on the ground, he sat down beside Nisha.

And let her cry.

They sat in silence for what felt like an age but was probably minutes. Slowly, Nisha's sobs slowed down and finally tapered off into hiccups. Paul, still silently, held out his bottle of water to her. She took it.

"Sorry." She unscrewed the cap and took a small sip. "I didn't mean to lose it like that."

"No one ever means to." He grabbed one of the bags by her feet. "Want to show me what you got?"

Nisha grabbed it back, swiping one hand over her damp cheeks. He watched her hesitate before she took a deep breath and slowly took him through her purchases for the office.

"These look great," he said when she finally ran out of steam and her voice petered into silence.

"The material for the curtains was quite expensive," she replied, not looking at him. "I'm worried it might have taken us over budget."

Paul shrugged. "I'm sure Rahul built in some give in the budget. And if it still doesn't fit in that, then cut corners somewhere else."

“You’re-“ She stopped and then started again. “You’re not mad?”

“People accuse me of being mad, that is loony bin mad, on a regular basis. So if that’s what you’re asking, I probably am. But if you’re asking if I’m angry, no Nisha, I’m not. And Rahul won’t be either.”

Her fingers nervously pleated the curtain fabric that still sat in her lap.

“Why not? You hired me to do a job of work. If I’m screwing up simple tasks, then you should be angry.”

Paul met her wary gaze. “Has Rahul given you a detailed job description? Has he explained exactly what is required of you?”

Nisha’s eyes widened as her alarm levels spiked. “No. Was he supposed to? Am I not doing what I am meant to?”

“Nisha.” Paul took her hand and gently squeezed pulling her out of what looked like a familiar panic spiral.

She stared down at their joined hands, riveted.

“We’re in startup mode. That basically means everyone does everything. Rahul and I know nothing about décor and branding and vibes and whatever else Vaani and you were spouting off about the other day. So we tossed this task to you. As Vaani doesn’t work for us, her contribution is solely voluntary, and that means that you lead this task.”

“I lead this task?” Nisha gaped at him. “I know nothing about leading anything.”

“Then learn,” he said easily. “And what you don’t know, you ask questions about. You ask for help. You research. And, like I said, you learn.”

“Or you could hire someone competent,” she said bitterly.

“We did.” He squeezed her hand again. She stared at their joined hands. Again. “We hired you.”

For a moment, they both stared at their hands. Her slimmer, slender fingers in his big, broad, calloused palm.

“We all make mistakes. It’s forgivable and fixable. But if you don’t learn from your mistakes, and repeat them, then we have a problem. An unforgivable and unfixable one.”

She didn’t look up, her eyes still on their hands where his thumb was drawing lazy circles on the back of her palm.

“Review your budget, see what you can adjust to fit this expense into it. That’s step one. If you can’t adjust, then look to see how much give Rahul worked into it, what’s the buffer zone on expenses. That’s step two.”

He forced himself to let go of the soft, silky hand in his. He squeezed her shoulder once in comfort and then got to his feet.

Nisha looked up at him from her still seated position on the ground. “And what’s step three?”

“You nail the brief given to you.” He smiled. “And show yourself who you really are *and* who you want to be.”

“What if I don’t like who I am?” Sparks of temper and flares of sadness lit her beautiful dark eyes.

“Then adjust, revise and learn to be someone you like. We’re all a work in progress, Nisha. Just like this office. When we stop learning, stop adapting, stop evolving, that’s when we’re looking at a loss. And we, the team at J&A, don’t lose.”

“We don’t, do we?” A small smile, a huge victory, tilted her lips upwards.

“No, *we* don’t.” He smiled back, a big, broad smile. “And we are a WE. All four of us. We’re going to make this company succeed and we’re going to do it together.” He glanced at the myriad bags on the ground. “With the right vibe apparently.”

The front door opened and they both turned towards it. Rahul’s girlfriend and Nisha’s best friend, Aarushi, stuck her head in.

“Hello beautiful,” Paul grinned at her anxious face. “Welcome.”

“All okay?” she asked cautiously. “Rahul said I was needed but it doesn’t look like I am.”

“Your boyfriend is a worrywart,” Paul replied, his tone calm even as he shifted to cover Nisha with the bulk of his body and give her time to put herself back together. “What’s happened to your hair?” he asked Aarushi, injecting the right amount of horror into his tone.

Aarushi grimaced. “That awful green colour is washing out, leaving the bleached, faded out colour behind. I need to fix it.”

“I can shave your head for you,” Paul offered.

“Fuck off Paul.” She shoved him good naturedly. “Leave me alone with my friend.”

“My colleague needs to work,” he told her sternly. “You get ten minutes. Don’t disturb her beyond that.”

Aarushi rolled her eyes at him and stepped around him to Nisha. “How do you tolerate this fellow?” she asked her friend.

“He’s not that bad,” Nisha said, her eyes soft as she looked at Paul.

That look made him feel ten feet tall. Bad, that was bad. Feeling anything like that was bad. It was simple compassion and friendship, he told himself. Nothing less, nothing more. There would be no ten feet tall moments.

None.

Just this one. And then none.

Definitely none. After this one.

# SEVEN



# NISHA

*I found a love, for me.*

*Darling, just dive right in and follow my lead.*

ED SHEERAN'S 'PERFECT' floated through her little workspace as Nisha worked on a spreadsheet Rahul had assigned to her. She hummed along to the tune, enjoying the fact that she had the entire office to herself. Rahul and Agam had gone to meet the contractors they were hiring for the celebrity wedding and Paul had gone to a meeting with a new client, someone in the corporate space.

Nisha kept her head down as she inputted the raw data Rahul had given her into the appropriate cells, a sense of satisfaction filling her as the values tallied correctly. Maybe she'd do some online accounting courses. Maybe she wasn't quite as useless at figures and budgets as-

She slammed mental brakes on the thought even before it could be completed. Not going down that road today, no thank you! Today, she was feeling good about herself. And she was going to take this one day at a time. And this day was a good day.

On the heels of that thought, she moved from humming to singing, the words flowing out of her like a long-forgotten dream.

*Baby, I'm dancing in the dark.*

*With you between my arms.*

She was full on warbling now, singing her heart out. She didn't hear the door open nor did she notice the people who'd entered and were watching her, mouths open, eyes wide as saucers. It was only when she added a mini spin in her wheeled chair that she saw them. All four of them. One of whom was Paul.

She squeaked into silence, her voice trailing off on the word 'arms.' She had her own arms thrown out since she'd been mid-twirl when she saw them.

Paul's eyebrows had shot up so far they were now practically a part of his hairline. Horrified, she stared at him, her arms still out ala Shah Rukh Khan. As she watched, he slowly brought his own hands together and started clapping. Was he mocking her? But no...A delighted smile split his face as he applauded her.

The people with him exchanged confused looks but followed his lead and started clapping too.

"You sing beautifully," he told her, coming forward to push her arms down to her sides and kiss the top of her head.

"Huh?" she said, sounding as articulate as she felt. The top of her head tingled.

"Our associate, Nisha Gaikwad," he introduced her to the still dumbstruck people standing behind him. "As you can see, she's multi-talented."

He turned back to her. "Nisha, this is Mr. Bharucha and his team, our newest corporate clients. They came over to sign the contract and to meet Rahul."

"And, of course, we had the absolute pleasure of meeting you too," Mr. Bharucha seemed to have regained his powers of speech.

Sadly, the same couldn't be said for Nisha who was still wading through mortification and trying to find level ground.

"Nisha." Paul prodded her in the middle of her back.

"Coffee?" she squeaked, her voice still high and shrill.

“I beg your pardon?” Mr. Bharucha was back to being confused.

“Would you like some coffee?” Nisha was proud she’d managed a whole sentence even if it came off a little creaky. Then she glanced at the two prudish people standing behind him. They were staring at her like she was a clown who’d escaped from a traveling circus. “All of you?” she added.

“Yes,” Paul answered. “We would love some coffee. Although, you don’t have to get it. I can help you make it.”

“No!” Nisha jumped to her feet, almost headbutting him in the process. “You all go and sign the contract. I’ll bring the coffee.”

She didn’t wait for them to reply, instead ushering them all into the conference room and turning on the air conditioner and the lights before she exited it to head towards the pantry.

Coffee she could do. Coffee she could always do. Even Aman had never had a problem with her coffee. In fact, he’d always said it was one of the few things she did perfectly.

Her hands shook the slightest bit as she put the coffee cups out on the counter. One of the few things she did perfectly... the words seemed to swirl around her as she measured out the coffee and milk into the bowl on the stove. She set the tray that Vaani and she had picked up the other day with the sugar pot and the coffee cups.

And then she served her perfect fucking coffee and carried it into the conference room. She saw Mr. Bharucha take a sip and then beam at her, toasting her with his cup. She smiled, accepting the compliment even as it lanced like a spear through her heart.

She went back to the pantry with the empty tray. Hands braced against the counter; she hung her head as she took deep breaths. Had she really been contemplating accounting courses? Had she completely lost her mind? She washed the bowl she’d used to make the coffee, her movements terse and angry.

She cleaned the pantry out and set it to rights. In the outer area, she heard the clients leaving, murmurs and shuffling abounding as they made their exit. She didn't join them to say goodbye. She'd done her bit, the bit she was good at.

She stared blindly out the window. Once they left, she'd go back to the spreadsheet. She was meant to finish that for Rahul today. She may not be good at stuff like that but she'd do her best to not let the guys down.

*Well, I found a woman, stronger than anyone I know.*

Nisha startled out of her bitter thoughts at the sound of his deep baritone singing loudly but totally off key. A surprised laugh clogged her throat as she looked up to see Paul crooking a finger at her, beckoning her over.

She went, helpless to resist his reckless grin. He held his arms out one to place on her waist and the other held out for her to place her own hand in and God help her, she did, she allowed him to reel her in.

“You're awful.” She laughed a little as he continued to sing in his beautiful, toneless voice and they moved in a small circle in the center of the reception area.

He only shook his head, twirling her in his arms, as his voice dropped an octave, getting deeper.

*Now I know I have met an angel in person.*

*And she looks perfect.*

*I don't deserve this.*

*You look perfect tonight.*

Something shifted inside her as this wonderful man sang to her, making a fool of himself to help her feel better about her own foolishness. The words that tripped from his lips, tone deaf and off key, were the most perfect music she'd ever heard.

And in that moment, a tightly curled ball of fear, bitterness, and pain started to unfurl.

# EIGHT

## PAUL

“THERE ARE TOO MANY ENTRY POINTS,” Rahul said, tapping a pen against the giant printout of the venue’s floorplan. “Monitoring them all is going to be a massive headache.”

Paul stared at the drawing of the wedding venue the movie star had chosen. “Another migraine waiting to happen is the red carpet entrance. We’ll need at least six of our best guys there to keep the crowd away from the stars who are attending.”

Between the two of them, Agam sat in silence, his gaze on the paper they were all hovering around. Paul could practically see his mental gears creaking in motion.

“We onboarded four new clients,” Rahul said, his quiet voice breaking their contemplation. “Maybe it’s time to bring on some more full time hires.”

“Not unless its people we trust completely,” Paul growled. Aman’s betrayal had hit them all hard. Neither Rahul nor he could wrap their heads around the fact that they had been close friends with a serial rapist and not known what he’d been upto. How the fuck had they not known?

“Accepted,” Rahul said, his voice level and cold. “The consultants have been vetted carefully. They have enough manpower to deploy although some of their junior members are still very green. Let’s work with their team for now but keep an eye out for people we can bring on board at J&A.”

“I know someone,” Agam rumbled, looking thoroughly pissed off by the words that just came out of his own mouth.

Paul shrugged as Rahul raised a questioning eyebrow at him, picking up on Agam's annoyance.

"Someone you don't like."

Agam sighed, his massive shoulders drooping a bit. "I wouldn't say that. She's...complicated. But she's efficient, competent, and trustworthy."

"She?" Paul asked.

"Yes." Agam glowered at him. "*She's* capable of handing you your ass any day and if you think for one minute that her being a woman means-

"Hang on!" Paul held his hands up in surrender. "I did not mean that. *At all!*" he emphasized. "I was just asking for a clarification. I'm well aware that any woman with the same training as ours would be capable of handing me my ass. Fine as it is, it isn't that special."

A snort of laughter had them all looking towards the conference room door. Aarushi and Nisha stood there, like the conjoined twins they were in all but body.

"It's way better than fine, Paul," Aarushi grinned as she sauntered in. "I would say it's an ass-et."

Paul groaned at the terrible pun. He was about to say something when he saw that Rahul wasn't looking up from the floorplans. He was, in fact, frowning at it with a ferocity it didn't warrant in any moment, forget the one in which his girlfriend had just walked into the room. Paul's gaze darted between the two, noting Aarushi's narrow eyed glare to the top of Rahul's head.

"Am I interrupting?" she asked sweetly enough to poison someone's tea.

Drawing on his years of combat training and military experience, Paul deduced that that someone was definitely Rahul. Who was still studying the venue floor plans like he planned to imprint it on his brain.

"Not at all," Paul answered, when it became apparent that Rahul wasn't going to. "We needed a break."

“I’ll get everyone some coffee,” Nisha said from where she still hovered by the door.

“No.” Paul got to his feet. “I’ll get the coffee. You sit.”

“No.” Nisha shook her head. “I’ll get it. It’s my job.”

“Who said?” Paul stared at her.

“What?” Nisha stared back, equally baffled. The rest of the room watched them like spectators at a Wimbledon final.

“Who said making coffee for everyone was your job?” Paul swung around to glare at Rahul who’d finally looked up from the floorplans. “Did you?” he demanded.

“No!” Rahul glared at him, offended. “Nisha is here as an associate. She’s going to help us with administration and office management.”

“And train for more,” Paul inserted, glowering at his best friend.

“And train for more,” Rahul repeated, raising an eyebrow.

“And we’re getting a fucking coffee machine!” Paul announced, still incensed that Nisha had assumed she’d be the one making coffee for everyone because she possessed ovaries.

“What if someone wants tea?” Agam asked, raising his hand for the question like he was in class and wanted the teacher’s attention, the bloody troublemaker.

“A coffee and tea machine,” Paul grumbled.

“Or,” Rahul said mildly. “We could revise the contract with the housekeeping agency that comes in to clean to include this in their list of duties. And until they do,” he looked at Nisha. “We’ll all take turns making tea and coffee when it’s required.”

“I think it’s Paul’s turn this time,” Agam grinned. “Nisha, come and sit.”

But Nisha didn’t move. “What more?” she asked, looking at Paul.



“Sorry?” Paul was struggling to find his legendary charm and poise.

“You said train for more. What more?”

“Yes Paul.” Rahul leaned back in his chair, twirling a pen between his fingers. “What more?”

“We want people we can trust working with us on our jobs, right? Instead of constantly hiring people from outside and wondering if we can trust them, why don’t we train the people we do trust.” He was working himself up into a fine, fiery speech now.

“You want me to work security with you?” Nisha looked like he’d just handed her a gun and asked her to shoot him.

“Yes. We’ll train you. Start with the corporate jobs.” The ones with limited-to-no danger. “And then we’ll see where your aptitude lies.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Rahul said slowly, his mind clearly examining the suggestion from all sides.

“Are you insane?” Nisha glanced between the three men and Aarushi. “What the hell do I know about the security business?”

“Learn then,” Paul said brusquely. And then he threw her a challenging look, one he knew would get her back up. He didn’t need to coddle the sparrow right now, he needed to poke the dragon. “Or would you rather spend the rest of your life making coffee?”

# NINE

## NISHA

*Would you rather spend your life making coffee?*

The man made her blood boil. Nisha clattered around the small pantry, putting away the washed cups and dishes. The maid had just finished doing the same job but the compulsive cleaner inside her made it hard for her to ignore the messy way they were arranged in the cupboards.

She slammed the cupboard door shut. It ricocheted off the hinges and flew back to whack her in the face. FUCK! That hurt!

Growling under her breath, she prowled away from the vengeful cupboard and towards the sink. Someone had left a dirty spoon there. Probably someone who'd made coffee and didn't clean up after themselves, she grumbled. This was why she wanted to make the coffee. Not because it was her life's calling or something. But because the rest of them made extra work for her otherwise.

"Is it safe to come in?" Agam whisper hissed from the kitchen doorway.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Nisha sniped back. "After all, who am I to have any problems with anything?"

Agam paused. "Maybe it isn't after all."

"Whatever," Nisha muttered like a truculent teenager. "What do you want?"

He held a file out to her. "I've been asked to give you this file. It's Mr. Bharucha's account. Once you've familiarized

yourself with it, you and I can sit down and talk.”

“Talk about what?” Nisha threw her hands up in the air. “I know nothing about any of this, Agam. I’m just a housewife, a failed one at that.”

“You’ve only failed when you’ve given up.”

The quiet words stopped her in the middle of her hissy fit. Paul filled the doorway as Agam darted a quick look between the two of them and disappeared. She threw a fulminating look at Agam’s retreating back, the traitor.

“It’s easy to give advice,” she told Paul, familiar fatigue rolling through her and making the anger drain away, leaving nothing but emptiness. “It’s not that easy to act on it.”

“It’s the toughest,” he agreed, taking her by surprise. “But what choice do you have?”

*What choice did she have?*

“One step at a time,” he said now, her self appointed messiah. “And you’ve already taken the hardest step there is.”

“And what would that be?” she asked, her voice sounding like it came from far away.

“Leaving him and getting a divorce.”

He’d got that half right.

“I’m not divorced yet,” she said.

She’d left Aman but the divorce was still a work in progress, thanks to the slow turning wheels of the judicial system. And the many roadblocks her husband threw up to keep it turning even slower.

Paul watched her, a measured look. “Semantics and a matter of time,” he shrugged.

He stepped closer to her and Nisha instinctively backed up against the counter.

“How do you feel in here?” he asked, tapping her temple. “And in here,” this time her chest, right above her heart, a gentle touch that was as fleeting as it was impactful.

She stared up at him. The man had ridiculously long eyelashes, she thought. They framed dark, inky black eyes that looked right through her. She felt like he could see every fear, every insecurity, every prayer, and every hope. She felt like he could see her, the real her.

“How do you feel, Nisha?” he asked softly. “Do you feel married?”

“I feel free,” she replied, the words slipping past her lips and taking form in the space between them. A hope and a prayer wrapped up in a breath of air.

“Then you are free. The rest is a piece of paper that will come when the world stops being a dick.”

A startled laugh escaped her. “The world’s being a dick?”

“Isn’t it?” His gaze roved over her face, an inexplicable something shadowing those beautiful eyes of his.

She wished she could see him the way he saw her, right through to the center of his soul.

“Read the file Nisha. Take that freedom and make it work for you.”

“I can’t,” she whispered. “I’m not capable-“

“Are you going to let him continue to define what you’re capable of or not?” he interrupted, his eyes blazing with emotion now.

She couldn’t look away. That emotion was not aimed at her, not what she was used to. That emotion was for her, again not what she was used to.

“Are you going to give him that power? Are you going to let him continue to have that power over you?”

“No.” The answer seemed to come from her core.

He smiled now, a feral tilt of his lips. “Then take that file and show him his place in your life now. Show him what freedom actually looks like? It’s not like he is going to be able to taste it in the years to come. Take your life and the power

over it back, Nisha. Take it back and don't ever let anyone take it from you again."

Her heart started to beat faster, a thunderous roar that seemed to start in her blood and echo through her veins.

"Take it back, Nisha," he said again.

"Yes," she murmured. "Yes, I will."

Paul stepped back, a small step but she felt the loss of his presence like a physical blow. She wanted to grab hold and bring him closer, pull in the quiet strength and cheerful confidence that seemed to ooze from his pores.

"We review the file at oh nine hundred tomorrow," he said, the military terminology slapping her out of her daze. "You, me and Agam."

She shook her head, feeling like she was surfacing from underwater.

"Yes?" he asked, those dark eyes on her.

"Yes," she replied. Goddamn yes.

TEN

## PAUL

“I NEED to speak to you-“

Paul trailed off as he saw Rahul and Aarushi squaring off across the conference table.

“Right okay,” he amended. “I’ll come back.”

“No.” Aarushi’s cheeks were red with anger, her eyes boring holes into Rahul. “Please stay. He’s all yours.”

And with a slam of the conference door that had it rattling on the hinges, she left. Silence descended on them as the men shuffled their feet and tried to figure out what to say.

“All okay?” Paul finally asked gruffly.

Rahul just shrugged, looking infinitely tired and yet, agitated enough to be yanking at his hair with one hand. “Fucked if I know.”

Paul wanted to run from the room and the tense vibes, but he dug deep and braced himself as he asked, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. Let’s leave for the meeting.” Rahul gathered up his phone and strode out of the room.

Paul followed, relief coursing through him. He’d used up his store of advice and life altering wisdom with Nisha. Although Nisha hadn’t looked ready to alter her life so much as bash him on the head with a coffee cup.

Agam joined them on their way out and Rahul led them to his jeep, beeping it open. Paul slid into the passenger seat,



tossing the files into the backseat so he could strap himself in with the seatbelt. Agam got into the back and exhaled heavily, spreading his considerable size out in the empty seat.

“You want to tell me what the fuck you’re upto?” Rahul asked as they drove out of the parking garage in the basement.

“I would assume the same as you,” Paul drawled. “Going to the wedding venue.”

“Fuck you,” Rahul said, sliding him a mild glance. “And tell me what the deal with your prodding at Nisha is.”

“Once you tell me why you’re fighting with the love of your life after you just finished playing Devdas for a couple of months.”

Rahul growled a little as Paul grinned. Agam rolled his eyes at both of them and stared out of the window.

“She’s fragile man. Leave her the fuck alone.” Rahul was literally getting stiffer as the poker up his ass bolstered him.

“No,” Paul muttered, looking out on to the teeming pavement as the car slid to a stop at a traffic light. “The fuck she is. She just needs to find her spine.”

“And you’re going to help her do that?” Rahul asked. “Why?”

“Why did you offer her the job?” Paul shot back.

“Because I wanted to help.”

“Likewise asshole.” Paul muttered. “I want to help too.”

“You’re both assholes.” An annoyed rumble from the back cut them off. “Has it occurred to either of you that she may not want your help?”

Startled, Paul stared over his shoulder at Agam. “We’re just being-“

“Dickheads.” Agam snorted and shut his eyes, signaling that he was done with the conversation. “That’s what you’re being.”

Paul's phone rang cutting the rest of the conversation off before he could say anything further. He glanced at the display and groaned. Silencing the call without answering, he was about to turn around and argue again when Rahul pulled into the parking lot of the wedding venue.

Right behind them, a Mercedes convertible pulled in followed by a Thar Jeep full of bodyguards.

"Boys!" Minakshi Dave, reigning sex siren of Bollywood and the not-so-blushing bride, hopped out of the cherry red convertible smiling at them. "Isn't this just the best? All you handsome men here to guard me?"

Boys? Paul could almost feel his balls shriveling up in embarrassment. He sent a pointed look towards the safari suited men who flanked her and she grinned, acknowledging the wordless barb.

"Will Armaan be joining us Ma'am?" Rahul asked, ever the gentleman.

"No. It's just me and the wedding planners. And of course," she clicked her fingers. "My boys."

This time she meant the safari suits. Paul rolled his eyes, looking away from them and scanning the large open space with the enclosed dining area at the end. Located on the Mumbai – Karjat highway, it was beautiful, scenic and-

"Awful," Minakshi announced. "I hate it."

The wedding planner who'd just arrived looked ready to cry. "But Ms. Dave," she said. "We selected the site after you visited all the other sites."

"I changed my mind." Minakshi spun in a circle, disgust written all over her face. "I want something different. I want more. Maybe Italy?"

"Italy is overdone." The wedding planner, Ritika something, seemed to have recovered her poise. "Maybe Austria? Or Switzerland?"

"Switzerland!" Minakshi gasped. "A white wedding in the snow!"

“Neither of you are Christian,” Paul felt compelled to point out.

“And this matters why?” Minakshi shot him a narrow-eyed glare.

Paul shut his mouth.

“It looks like we’re going to Switzerland,” Rahul said, under his breath.

The logistics of planning security for a celebrity wedding in a foreign country flooded his mind.

Fuck his life.

# ELEVEN

## NISHA

“Hi.” Aarushi poked her head around the front door of the office.

“Hey you.” Nisha smiled, shutting her system down and starting to gather her things in preparation of leaving. “You’re back!”

Aarushi flushed just the tiniest bit. “I was hoping to talk to Rahul before he went home.”

“Oh?” Nisha watched her friend shuffle her feet and wring her hands. “They’re not back as yet. They went to that Karjat highway site.”

“Right.” Aarushi deflated. “I forgot. I had an interview close by and thought I’d drop in so I could...” Her voice trailed off.

“All okay Aaru?” Nisha asked, shoving her favourite pen back into her handbag but keeping a close eye on her jittery friend.

“Yes.” Aarushi smiled brightly. “Wonderful. Perfect. Excellent.”

Things were bad then, Nisha thought, eyeing her friend’s feverishly bright eyes and quick, bird like movements.

“I don’t feel like going straight home,” she said now. “Want to get an early evening drink before we head back?”

Aarushi glanced once more towards the front door but when Rahul didn’t miraculously appear through it, her shoulders slumped and she nodded. “Let’s go.”

“Shall we go to Bar Stock Exchange?” Nisha asked, as they headed towards the front door. Nisha keyed in the passcode to lock it behind them and they stepped out, letting the door swing shut.

“I don’t care where we go as long as they make a good Margarita.”

A large crowd of people were gathered in the foyer of the marriage bureau. Nisha glanced at what looked to be a bunch of angry, excitable people and her heart picked up pace immediately. She hated this. She hated her body’s instinctive reaction to other people’s anger or displeasure.

Aarushi stepped to her side, blocking her vision of the unruly crowd. “There’s a Margarita calling my name,” she said, rubbing her hands briskly. “Let’s not keep it waiting.”

“Thanks,” Nisha whispered as they made their way down to the ground floor and out onto the crowded pavement.

“Nishu, the day we need to thank each other for small shit is the day the sun decides to bleed green.”

Nisha slipped her sunglasses on, laughing. “I will never understand how you come up with these weird comments.”

“Perks of being a writer,” Aarushi said smugly as she flagged an auto down. The auto driver sped right past them without a backward or for that matter sideward glance.

“Dammit,” Aarushi muttered, scanning the road for her next target.

“There!” Nisha yelled as an auto hove into view but before they could get his attention, someone else did.

“Let me check the cab app,” Aarushi said, thumbing through her phone.

“Bhaiya!” Nisha screeched as the auto guy they’d just spied shook his head at the other customers and revved his motor.

“Jeez.” Aarushi shook her head, rubbing her right ear. “Could you do your banshee wail a little further away from my ear please?”

But Nisha was too busy gleefully haggling with the auto driver to bother with Aaru's whining. "Get in," she said happily, shoving Aarushi into the auto before her and climbing in right behind.

"I'm in. I'm in," Aarushi grumbled.

Hot, dusty air hit their faces as the auto driver sped into traffic like a race car driver with an empty track ahead of him.

Nisha watched as Aarushi compulsively pulled her phone out of her pocket and checked it. After the fourth such check in, she asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Aarushi glanced at her, her eyes wide and sad. "It's complicated and silly."

Nisha nudged Aaru's shoulder with her own. "As long as it's not complicated and tortured like mine."

Aarushi laughed, a small, bitter sound.

"Is it the fallout from before?" Nisha asked quietly. "Because of me?"

Earlier this year, Aarushi, a journalist, had gone undercover to dig up proof on the many misdeeds of Nisha's husband, soon to be ex, Aman. It was in that process that she'd met and fallen in love with Rahul, another Naval officer and Aman's friend. Not to forget the man who considered himself Jesus's shadow warrior, Paul.

Nisha shook her head, trying to dislodge the last thought. Clearly, her earlier resentment at Paul's high handedness, well-intentioned or otherwise, had gone nowhere.

"No," Aarushi said, after the longest pause in the history of their conversations. "It's not that."

"Is he finding the shift to civilian life difficult?" Nisha persisted. Guilt swamped her at the thought that her friend, her sister of the heart, was struggling because of issues related to Nisha's shitty marriage.

"Maybe." Aarushi stared out of the auto window. "I don't know."

After a beat of silence, she burst out, “I don’t know anything because he won’t tell me! Do you know how frustrating that is?”

Without waiting for an answer, Aarushi continued, “He’s all stoic and responsible and caring and he won’t let me do anything in return, to help or to comfort or anything. If I try, he just shuts down even further!”

Nisha kept her mouth shut, knowing that her friend was nowhere close to done with her tirade.

“Paul isn’t having any issues adjusting to life in the civilian world,” Aarushi raged.

“Ahh but then everything comes easy to Jesus,” Nisha said cryptically, her own irritation surfacing.

“Jesus?” Aaru stared at her, startled out of her angry rant. A second later, she burst into laughter. “Oh my God, that is perfect.”

Nisha started to giggle too, the release valve on her stress and resentment hissing open.

“Jesus.” Aarushi squealed. “I can’t wait to use that one on him.”

The two of them wiped tears of laughter just as the auto screeched to a stop in front of the Bar Stock Exchange. Nisha went flying forward and crashed her head into the side bar.

Rubbing her head and still laughing, she helped Aarushi pay the auto driver and step out onto the pavement. For the moment, the world felt brighter, lighter, and dare she say, more hopeful?

She’d take it. She’d take every moment she could get.



# TWELVE

## PAUL

“NISHA and Aarushi are at the Bar Stock Exchange in Bandra West,” Rahul said, from the backseat. He’d relinquished the driving to Agam for their return journey. “You guys want to join them?”

Before Paul could answer, his phone rang again. He glanced down. His mother. Again. Guilt squeezed him as he declined the call and sent her a quick message explaining that he was at work and would call her later.

*When later?*

He winced at her terse reply. He couldn’t speak to his mother in front of the guys. Even Rahul, his closest friend, wouldn’t understand the strange dynamic they shared.

*Later.*

He couldn’t commit to a specific time or his mother would hold him to it. She didn’t understand his world and he’d given up trying to explain. He stared out of the car window at the passing landscape.

It wasn’t just his world his mother didn’t understand. It was him. But could he blame her? He didn’t understand her either.

“Paul?” Rahul’s voice broke through his thoughts, drawing him back to the present. “Bar Stock Exchange?”

“Sure.” Paul nodded. He could use a drink to decompress before he got back home and called his mother. Anything to push that eventuality out a little further.

Agam rumbled something from beside him, but Paul's mind was already far away from there. All the way in Goa, in a small house close to Sinquerim beach.

That beach had saved his life and his sanity in more ways than he could count. The water sports he'd helped run and organize on that beach had gone a long way towards putting food in his family's stomach, and towards providing an outlet for his frantic fight or flight induced adrenalin.

"You guys get off," Agam said, jolting him back to Mumbai and its muggy madness. "I'll park and join you."

Paul's shoes had barely hit the pavement before his phone vibrated in his pocket.

*Now?*

He sighed.

"You go ahead," he told Rahul. "I'll just finish a call and then join you guys."

Rahul nodded, leaving him to the evening crowds teeming the Linking Road pavement outside.

Paul took a deep breath and dialed his mother.

"Hi Ma."

A frozen silence answered his greeting.

"You wanted to talk to me about something?"

He heard some shuffling noises from the other end before she finally replied, "The money came late this month."

He exhaled hard. "Just a couple of days. With the new business--"

"It's okay," she cut him off. "I understand."

Did she? He wasn't sure what exactly she understood.

"Ma--"

"I'm not important," she cut him off again. "It's his medicines that are no man? It has to be got on time no, Paul? You know this. At least send that amount."

He swallowed the angry, bitter remarks that rose to the tip of his tongue. "Sure Ma. I'll keep that in mind for next time."

"Don't be like this Paul," she sighed now sounding exhausted. "He is your father. It is your duty, our duty, to care for him."

He was not his father. Paul stared down at his hand. Without his conscious knowledge he'd ended up clenching it into a fist. He focused, forcing his fingers to unclench and flex.

"How's Sammy?" he asked his mother, his tone conversational and showing none of the strain his mind and body were buckling under.

"Sammy?" His mother's voice softened. "She's good. She's a good child."

Subtext, he was not, Paul reflected.

"Thomas and she are bringing Andrew home for dinner tomorrow."

"Wonderful," he replied, his gaze going to the door of the bar which had just opened. Nisha Gaikwad stepped through it, her gaze landing on him, her expression turning to frigid ice.

Wonderful indeed. Another person who didn't like him.

He looked away from her. "Ma, if there's nothing else, I need to go."

"There is," his mother murmured in his ear. "Do one thing for me na, Paul. One favour."

Sure, why not? He'd done an endless number of favours, none of them being good enough to mention. What was one more?

"Tell me Ma." In his peripheral vision, he noticed Nisha wandering off to a more secluded spot under the awning of the building. She pulled out her phone, tried calling someone and when that didn't work, started texting.

"You remember Aunty Violet? From church?"

No. He didn't remember Aunty Violet from church. He didn't remember anyone from church. He would prefer to forget church existed to be honest.

"Her daughter, Mimi, is moving to Mumbai on work. Help her settle in?"

"Ma, I'm not marrying Mimi," he said brusquely. Visions of a Pomeranian in a dress danced before his eyes at the sound of that name.

"I didn't ask you to," she retorted.

"But we both know that's what you want," he grumbled. He'd suffered through enough of his mother's matchmaking schemes.

A passerby jostled his shoulder and he stumbled on the pavement. A slim hand shot out, steadying him. When had she gotten so close? He looked at Nisha, who smirked back at him, clearly eavesdropping on his conversation.

"Can't you do this much for me, Paul?" His mother's voice quavered. "Am I asking for too much after everything I've done for you and Sammy? After everything I've sacrificed?"

Ruth Alvares had always known exactly where to strike to get her children to do what she wanted.

"Fine Ma," he sighed. "Give Mimi my number. I'll help her settle in when she comes to Mumbai."

He clicked off the call, his gaze caught by the woman who stood there, watching him, a challenging stare in his eyes.

"What?" he asked irritably.

"Take it back, Lieutenant," she said softly.

"What?" he asked again, confusion trumping his annoyance.

"Take the power back." Her smirk was in full force now. "Are you going to let her take it from you like that?"

And with a swish of her hair over her shoulder, she sauntered past him. "I look forward to meeting Mimi," she called, letting the door slam shut behind her.

Would you look at that, he marveled. She'd found her spine.

# THIRTEEN

## NISHA

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT Lt. Fix It All would be a mamma's boy? Nisha smirked as she retook her seat beside Agam who pushed a bowl of masala peanuts towards her. Across from them, it looked like Rahul and Aarushi were making up...or making out as it were.

She rolled her eyes and looked away meeting Agam's amused but resigned eyes.

"Good day?" he asked, bringing his mug of beer to his lips for a sip.

Nisha shrugged. The days just sort of blended into each other at this point. She didn't really know what would distinguish one as a good day.

And then Fix it All stepped up to their table and the air around her changed. Just annoyance, she assured herself. There was nothing else in the air, or in her stupid body either.

Paul glanced down at her as she shifted in her seat, trying to put some distance between them. Her butt almost slipped off the high bar stool in her bid to move away from him. Something undefinable crossed his face and he stepped away quickly, moving to stand on the other side of Agam.

A strange sense of loss swept through her at the absence of his solid warmth beside her. What was wrong with her? What loss? He'd been standing there for seconds and she was the one who'd been trying to edge away from him. He'd just made it easier on her by removing himself from the equation.



She should be thanking him for his consideration, the interfering ass. But instead, she wanted to haul him back into place beside her, the muscled warmth of his body a reassuring presence that she hadn't known she craved until this moment.

The server stepped up to their table and everyone ordered another round of drinks. Paul, she noticed, asked for a Berry Cooler. When the violently pink mocktail arrived, topped with a jaunty, little umbrella, her eyebrows shot up.

"What?" he asked, his broad hand curled possessively around his pink, frosted glass.

"That's what you're drinking?" She couldn't control the smirk on her face.

He took a deep, slurping sip from the pink monstrosity. "Broaden your mind, porcupine. I'm happy to place taste over so-called masculinity any day."

So, she was a porcupine now? The nicknames made her smile, a small wonder given how little made her smile nowadays. She picked up her own beer and took a larger swig.

Paul toasted her with his ridiculous drink making her smile broaden.

"You aren't drinking today?" she asked, still unable to stop smiling at his pink drink.

"I am but no alcohol. Not today." He rubbed a hand over the back of his head, rumpling his wavy hair. "I need a break."

"Detoxing?" She took another swig of her beer, watching the way his eyes dropped to her lips before tracking away.

Agam grumbled something under his breath and moved his stool so he wasn't between the two of them. Nisha watched as Paul moved closer, his pink drink clutched in his big paw. That random knowing swam through her again. That feeling of rightness when he came closer. This time she shifted toward him, not away.

"You look tired," he observed, his gaze tracing her face.

"Thanks," Nisha grimaced, straightening. "I know I look like crap. Didn't need that reminder."

“That’s not what I said, Porcy.” He slurped up some more pink, sugary madness. “I said you look tired. If I wanted to say you looked like crap, I would.”

Huh? Was that even a thing? Did people just say what they meant?

“I am tired,” she admitted, the truth sounding weird to her ears. She was so used to deflecting, covering up, keeping her brave face on...this felt strange.

A shout from a table nearby had her flinching instinctively. Paul’s lips flattened into a thin line even as she registered the fact that the people at the next table were just celebrating someone’s birthday or something.

“Have some sugar,” he said brusquely, shoving his drink across to her.

“No thanks. That’s a cavity waiting to happen.”

“And that,” he gestured toward her bottle of beer. “Is an acidity attack waiting to happen.”

Nisha clinked her bottle against his glass. “Agree to disagree?”

“With pleasure.” He scooped up some masala peanuts and tossed a few into his mouth. “Okay. Let’s make this interesting.”

“Make what interesting?”

Agam made a growly noise from behind Paul again.

“What? What does that mean?” Nisha asked, peeking around Paul’s broad back. “I don’t talk bear.”

“Any time he,” Agam pointed at Paul. “Says let’s make this interesting, the whole evening goes to shit.”

“Really?” Nisha eyed Paul with interest, her long forgotten party girl rising to the challenge. “What did you have in mind, Jesus?”

Paul choked on a mouthful of pink sugary water.

“Jesus?” he asked, when he could finally breathe again.

“You know!” Nisha made a rolling motion with her hand in the air. “Tell me your woes, let me heal you.”

Paul stared at her. “You think Jesus is a therapist or something?”

Nisha opened and closed her mouth without making a sound. That beer was really going to her head. She should stop talking. Right about now.

“Like you. The therapist cum fixer cum know-it-all.” Her mouth apparently didn’t get her brain’s memo.

“Oh?” Paul’s eyes fired, affront and challenge lighting them up in an unholy mix. “*That’s* what you think of me?”

Shut up, Nisha. Shut up.

“Yes.” Her tongue ran away on its own agenda as always.

“Alright then, Ms. Judgy. You think you’re better than me?” He leaned over the table, bulging forearms crossed and a rather scary looking vein throbbing in his temple. “Let’s see you put your money where your mouth is.”

She should finish her beer and go home to the safety of her apartment. She should watch *Anupamaa* with her mother and forget that this man with the very sexy forearms was glowering at her. She should bite her tongue into silence.

Instead, she heard herself say, “Bring it on!”

# FOURTEEN

## PAUL

HE WATCHED Nisha as she squinted, one eye squeezed shut as she concentrated or tried to concentrate on the dart board. A lock of her hair fell forward, slipping out of the tight braid she tamed it into, and she blew it out of her eye, the tip of her tongue slipping out between her clenched teeth.

It was adorable.

He squashed the thought as fast as it flashed through his mind. He had no business thinking anything about this woman was adorable. She was a colleague, a somewhat acquaintance, and his ex-friend's soon to be ex-wife. He'd danced at her wedding for Christ's sake! She was many things, adorable and sexy was not part of them.

Where had sexy come from now? He shook his head and glared at his third pink drink of the night. All that damn sugar was going to his brain.

"Score!" Rahul yelled, pumping both fists in the air.

Clearly, he wasn't the only one feeling addled, he thought watching his friend do an impromptu jig in the tiny, empty space beside their table.

"You're going down, Mister," Nisha growled, pointing at Rahul with a dart. Agam wisely reached across and took the dart from her.

Rahul, of all people, made 'bring it' motions with his hands inciting another growl from Nisha.

“Control your man, Aarushi,” Paul laughed. “Or he’s in for a world of hurt.”

Aarushi giggled, perched on a barstool, her back to the wall, her legs stretched out in front of her. But she made no move to come between her boyfriend and best friend. She looked to be enjoying their bloodthirsty darts battle more than was normal.

With a slightly bloodcurdling whispery scream, Nisha threw her dart and managed by some miracle to hit the board on the rim of the bullseye. She clasped her hands to her cheeks like she’d just won the Miss India crown.

“I beat him,” she whispered. And then on a scream, “I BEAT HIM.”

“No, you didn’t,” Rahul frowned. “I had –“

Paul shoved a chicken sausage into his mouth to shut him up. “No, you didn’t,” he said firmly. “She won.”

Rahul glowered at him, trying to chew and swallow fast enough to argue back.

“Nu uh.” Paul shook his head while wagging a finger in Rahul’s sozzled face. “She won.” He caught his friend by the chin and turned him to look at Nisha and Aarushi hugging and jumping in place. “Tonight, she won.”

Rahul’s eyes cleared a little and he swallowed the rest of the sausage before Paul could choke him with it.

“She can win every night,” he said softly.

“Yep.” Paul slung an arm around his shoulder and dragged Rahul into a boisterous hug. “Although,” he added in a sepulchral whisper. “Deep in our hearts, in the pit of our soul, we know the truth. And you-“

“Is the bromance done yet?” Agam interrupted. “Because if you’re done dry humping each other, we need to pay the bill and go home.”

Rahul stared bleary eyed at him. “You know I love you no, Agamjyot?”

“Oh fuck!” Agam muttered as Paul started to laugh. “I’m going to pay the bill. You fuckers get the women into the car.”

“I want pav bhaji.” Nisha suddenly materialised beside Paul startling him. She’d loosened her hair from its wickedly tight braid and it fell in loose waves around her shoulders. Paul was possessed with the irrational urge to bury his face in that heavy mass of brown black hair.

He stepped away from Rahul, his tipsy friend almost losing his balance in the process. “I’m going to help Agam pay the bill and then I’ll come get you guys.”

“And then we’ll eat pav bhaji?” she asked, her big eyes looking even bigger in the dim light of the pub.

Shit. What was happening to him?

“Also, one minute.” She dug in her handbag. And dug. And dug. Until, she finally produced a wallet and pulled out a card. “I want to pay my share.”

“That’s not necessary.” He gently pushed the hand waving the card in his face down.

“Why?” she asked, hands on her hips. “My money is not good enough? Or you think I don’t have money?”

Paul sighed. “Your money is wonderful darling. I bet you have gold plated, platinum framed notes shoveled away into giant vaults.”

“No.” She frowned. “I have regular money. The ones with Gandhiji on it.”

God save him, he wanted to kiss the tip of that scrunched up nose.

“Okay,” he told her gently. “Let Agam and me pay tonight and tomorrow, we’ll split the bill and the rest of you can give us your share. Does that sound alright?”

She frowned a little more as her alcohol-soaked brain followed the logic of his proposition. “Okay,” she nodded finally. “Okay.”

“Now, go sit with Aarushi and Rahul.” He propelled her gently towards the couple. “I’ll be right back.”

“Come soon,” she said, peering up at him. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

The words landed with a weight they had no business possessing. Paul nodded, unable to speak.

He was halfway to where Agam was frowning down at the billfold when she called out, “After that, Pav Bhaji.”

A hoarse chuckle escaped him. “Yes,” he called back. “After that, Pav Bhaji.”



FIFTEEN

## NISHA

“NISHU, COFFEE!”

She groaned, a broken sound that escaped her from under the pillow she'd crammed on top of her head. Did Aarushi need to be so LOUD?

When no further sound came from the other room, she slowly emerged from her 'hiding pillow.' Only to spy her demonic friend's gleeful face hovering right about hers.

“Gaaahhhh!” she screamed.

Aarushi bobbed the coffee she held, splattering Nisha on her face and making her scream louder. And now Aarushi was screaming too.

“Ho kya raha hain?” Ma stormed into the room, wiping her hands on the ends of her dupatta.

Nisha and Aarushi lapsed into frozen silence for a second.

“She dropped coffee on me!”

“She startled me!”

“Enough!” Ma glared at the two of them. “Are you both children?”

“We're your children?” Nisha wheedled while Aarushi made her best attempt at puppy eyes.

Ma muttered under her breath as she took in the two of them. “Where were you both last night? You came home so late.”

Nisha did her best to look innocent while Aarushi gabbled about doing some renovation work on the office space. Ma didn't seem to buy any of it. Honestly, Aarushi was a shit liar. How she managed to pull the wool over Rahul's eyes earlier this year was a mystery that Nisha would never solve.

"I'm making aloo paratha for breakfast," Ma announced now, still eyeing them suspiciously. "Come to the dining table in ten minutes."

Bile rose at the back of Nisha's throat at the thought of ghee laden parathas. Normally her favourite, today they were going to make her throw up on Aarushi's feet. If she didn't move fast enough.

"Move," she hissed, poking Aarushi in the side.

"You move." Aarushi poked her back like a petulant toddler.

"Aaru--"

Ma pinned them with a furious glare. "Again, you both started?"

"I--"

She shut her mouth as Ma marched closer. "What is going on?" she asked, staring into Nisha's face. "You look sweaty and strange."

Nisha looked desperately at Aarushi who finally cottoned on. "She always looks sweaty and strange," she jumped in. "Nothing new."

"Thanks," Nisha muttered, shoving Aarushi and trying to step around her to get to the bathroom.

Ma started dusting and settling the bedsheet now that Nisha wasn't splayed on the bed like a beached whale.

"Don't let Ma get close to me. Can you smell alcohol on my breath?" Nisha whispered, breathing into Aarushi's face.

"No." Aarushi gagged. "But it smells like a frog died in your mouth."

"Feels like it too," Nisha moaned. "Move. I need to puke."

“Har waqt ghus ghus ghus ghus,” Ma sniped, taking the dirty linen and walking past them. “Don’t know when you two will grow up.”

She was barely out the door when Nisha lunged for the bathroom door, Aarushi jumping out of her way this time. When she was done getting rid of all the rubbish she’d ingested the previous night, she washed her face, brushed her teeth and came back out into the bedroom.

“I’m never drinking again,” she whined, clutching her pounding head.

“That’s what you always say,” Aarushi grinned, munching on some almonds from a tiny bottle that Nisha had never seen before.

“This time I mean it.” Nisha flopped back on the now immaculately made bed.

Aarushi patted down the wrinkles that formed, well aware that they wouldn’t survive Ma’s wrath a second time today.

“Aaru.” Nisha rolled her head to look at her friend. “I can’t eat aloo parathas today.”

“No option.” Aarushi crunched on another almond like a ravenous little chipmunk. “We have company coming.”

“Nooooo,” Nisha moaned again. “Is it Paramesh Tauji? I can’t handle his silent disapproval and hangover nausea at the same time.”

“It’s not.”

“Amjad Chacha and Wahida Chachi?” Nisha shot Aarushi a hopeful look. She loved their next-door neighbours.

But Aarushi just chewed another almond while shaking her head.

“It’s the guys.”

“What guys?” A deep sense of foreboding hit Nisha even as her nausea surged and her head pounded. Was she dying? Was this what dying felt like?

“Us guys,” a familiar, annoying voice answered.

Of course. Of course it would be him. She turned slowly to face the doorway. Rahul, Paul and Agam crowded the tiny space. Rahul looked as miserable as she felt but the other two...they were just smug, smirking dipshits.

“Go away,” she told them, looking pointedly at Paul.

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll aim for you when I throw up,” she told him matter-of-factly.

“Ahh.” Paul took a strategic step back as Aarushi chortled. “We’ll wait for you guys in the dining room.”

“Good boy,” she muttered as he fled.

“He is,” Aarushi said quietly. “He’s a very good boy. Or man, as it were.”

Nisha cast her a wary look. “Where are you going with that?”

“Nowhere that you’re ready to be.”

“But?” Nisha narrowed her eyes at her friend who was carefully screwing the cap back on the almonds bottle.

“He’s not Aman, Nishu,” Aarushi looked at her, meeting her gaze squarely. “He doesn’t have to pay for that dickwad’s sins.”

SIXTEEN

## PAUL

THERE WAS something to say about food made by mothers, Paul thought as he shoved another giant bite of paratha into his mouth. Every time he went home to Goa, his mother made sorpotel and he could swear that there wasn't a hotel or shack in the entire span of Goa who made it better.

A pang of homesickness struck him. Not specifically for home, but more for his sister and the fewer uncomplicated moments of their childhood. He should call Sammy later tonight. Ask her how Ma was doing, if she needed help that she wasn't asking for.

"Have one more beta," Nisha's mother dropped another fat paratha onto his plate. He eyed the ghee glistening on it, his full stomach protesting. He should really stop. No amount of time in the gym was going to be able to counteract this.

Oh what the hell. He just wouldn't eat anything for the rest of the day. He dug into that fourth paratha like he'd never seen food before. He'd pay for this indulgence later but like all good sins, the punishment would be worth it.

"I want to talk to you boys about something," Nisha's mother announced.

"Gahnumph," Paul answered around a mouthful of paratha. Beside him, a far more controlled and also lightly green Rahul replied using actual words. "Yes, Aunty?"

"It's not right to keep the girls at work so late at night."

Paul's eyebrows shot up as he continued to chew as fast as he could. Agam stilled, his big paw holding onto a glass of water like someone was going to steal it from him at any second.

"Sorry Aunty?" Rahul said as Aarushi squeaked on the other side of him.

"I don't work with them Maasi," she barged into the conversation with all the finesse of a road roller.

"I know Aaru but--"

"And my work requires me to be out all hours of the day and night."

"I haven't finished talking, Aaru. Wait." The older lady sighed and slapped another paratha into Agam's plate.

"Actually," the giant said. "I think I've had enough."

Nisha's mother fixed a stern glare on his bearded face. "Eat," she commanded.

Agam ate.

Rahul cleared his throat and stepped into the breach like the good boy he was. "Aunty, Aarushi's work--"

"Oh I know all about that one's work," she said huffily. "You think she'll listen if I tell her to come home on time? Or to be careful? She didn't even tell me about what she went to Vizag to do."

Silence descended over their little group at that reminder. Nisha's mother looked stricken at what she'd just said.

"I mean--" she began and then stopped.

"Ma," Nisha spoke for the first time since they had sat down at the table. "Aarushi doesn't work for them. I do. And if you have an issue with my work timings, you need to take it up with me, not them."

"Two o' clock in the morning you came home last night," her mother replied sharply. "What kind of a job is that?"



Oh! The sneaky little dragon was lying to her mother. Paul looked at her with newfound respect. He hadn't thought she had that much 'bad girl' inside of her.

Nisha's cheeks turned a rosy red. Paul grinned. He took another large bite of his paratha and sat back to enjoy the show.

"Y-y-yesterday," she stammered, conscious of everyone's eyes on her. "Was an exception." Her voice firmed as she moved away from the lie and said, "But my job will require me to work late sometimes and you will just have to accept it."

"I don't have to accept anything." Her mother's eyes were stormy now. "Girls from good homes don't do this kind of thing. I thought you had more sense. Aarushi already fought and did this. Anyway, she is getting married soon so I don't have to worry about her."

"I am?" Aarushi's voice was so high pitched now that only bats would be able to hear her soon.

Now Aunty was staring at her down the length of the crowded dining table as Rahul turned into a statue beside her.

"You're not?" Aunty asked, her voice reaching as high a decibel level as Aarushi's. "What are the two of you doing then? What is this?" A butter knife waved between Aarushi and Rahul, looking decidedly deadly for something so blunt.

"We love each other," Aarushi said bravely as Agam closed his eyes, the upcoming trainwreck something he clearly didn't want to see. Paul couldn't stop watching with morbid fascination.

"And love means you get married. Or you'll just be in love and do this?" The butter knife waggled again.

If Paul had been in Rahul's shoes, he would have been protecting his family jewels at this point.

"You will get married," Aunty said now, fiercely. "Do you hear me?"

"No, she won't." The fiercer words came from Nisha who shoved her chair back and stood, her eyes hard and bright as

she stared at her mother. “Aaru won’t do anything she doesn’t want to.”

“So she will just be with this boy? Without marriage?”

“Yes. If that’s what she wants.”

“She has to get married!” her mother screeched.

“Why?” Nisha faced her mother, her entire face frozen like she was carved out of marble. “So she can be as happy as I am?”

And it looked like the life drained out of her as she asked the question.

Paul ached to go to her, to hold her, to...what could he do? As a soldier, he knew better than most that some wounds, some battle scars never fully went away. You just learnt to live with them until the pain eventually lessened from gut searing agony to a dull throb.

And right now, all he saw was agony, so rich and horrific that he wondered if it would ever lessen.

# SEVENTEEN

## NISHA

SHE STEPPED out onto their tiny balcony, her hands trembling with rage. The bitter kernel of anger that she kept suppressed in a corner of her heart had broken free and swamped her. An embarrassing loss of control in front of her colleagues and family.

Behind the shut glass door that kept her from the rest of the crowd, Aarushi and Rahul were attempting to do damage control while still dodging the topic of when they were setting a wedding date, a delicate dance if there ever was one.

She watched the two of them, their body language bordering between being on the same side and still having some strange distance between them that had never been there before. She turned away from the scene, their tension making her own anxiety flare.

A second later, the screen door behind her opened and *he* stepped out. She didn't need to look toward him to know who'd joined her.

“Agam left. He asked me to say bye to you.”

“Left or fled?” she asked, a bitter laugh escaping her. “I sure know how to clear a room.”

“Everyone else is right here Dragon,” he said quietly. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his cargo shorts and stared out at the crowded pavement outside her house. “And Agam had to leave to pick up a friend from the airport. He would be here grumbling at you otherwise.”

True words, she realised, a strange warmth battling her anger and embarrassment back.

A drying stand stood between them. Ma had apparently put a fresh load in the morning and the sharp tang of detergent filled the air between them. A breeze wafted through them bringing with it the scent of impending rain. She watched Paul valiantly ignore the yellow bra flapping in his face and stare to his right at a young couple who were taking a romantic stroll, their clasped hands ineffectively hidden by the girl's large handbag.

"I'm so angry," she said abruptly.

His gaze switched to her with a speed that had her blinking.

"I know Dragon." The words were a murmur that caressed her skin. "I know."

"I don't want to be," she confessed, the words long suppressed tumbling out. "I want to be okay, to be healed, to move on. I want to be someone else. Anyone but the victim."

He didn't say anything, just listened to her lance the long festering wound.

"I went to therapy. I sat through endless counseling. I spoke about everything, every last dirty detail. And still I feel..."

Her voice trailed off as she put it into words.

"So much. I feel so much. I want to feel nothing but I feel anger, pain, betrayal...so damn much."

Tears gathered in her eyes and spilled over. She didn't bother to hold them back. Why this man got to watch the dam break she didn't know...but she knew that it had broken and there was no holding the flood back.

"Ma didn't push me into marriage." She flapped a hand at the glass doors separating them from her mother and Rahul and Aarushi. "Not like she's trying to bulldoze Aaru over there. I wanted to get married. It's all I ever wanted, to be a wife and a mother. To have a family. And to love and be loved."

My father died when I was very young. After that it was just Ma and me, struggling to make ends meet, to keep our two-person family together. Until Aarushi came along and we went from two people struggling to three people dragging each other up.”

Paul dragged the clothes stand out of the way, shoved a wet dupatta off his chest and shifted closer, not touching but close enough for his warmth to seep through the cold parts of her. She found herself instinctively turning towards him, moving infinitesimally closer as if her body couldn't stand to have any distance between them.

“I did everything right. Watching Ma struggle to bring us up made me want to be the perfect daughter, the one who never stepped a toe over the line she'd drawn. The only time I fought with her was when I wanted to bring Aarushi home. I bulldozed Ma into accepting her.”

Memories cascaded through her, the good and the bad. She was barely aware of moving even closer to Paul, her body grazing against him, his muscled side burning like a brand against her.

“I did everything right,” she whispered. “Everything. And it wasn't enough. I wasn't enough.”

With a muffled curse, Paul wrapped his arms around her, hauling her against him. She melted into the embrace, her face buried in his hard chest, the tight grip of his arms loosening the band of grief and shame crushing her own chest.

“You are enough. You are more than enough. You are a gift that bastard never deserved. *He* wasn't enough. He was less than the dirt that isn't fit to touch your shoe.” The words were growled into her hair, a tight kiss on the top of her head sealing their weight into her.

“I hate it,” she told his shirt tearfully. “I hate being what they call a ‘trauma victim.’”

“Oh baby,” Paul sighed. “You are nobody's victim. You are a survivor. You left him. You reported him. You helped bring

him down. You fought your own pain and fear to put him behind bars.”

“Is that enough? Why doesn’t it feel like enough?”

Paul tipped her chin up, his calloused fingers grasping it gently. “Because it isn’t. Not yet. Your divorce will come through Nisha. You’ll throw this marriage off, grind the memory of this time into the dust and move on like the warrior you are. And then, it will be enough.”

She wanted that. She wanted that so desperately, she could almost see the future he painted shimmering like a vision in front of her.

“You’re a dragon remember.”

“I thought I was a porcupine.” She couldn’t look away from the tender, intense look in his eyes. No one had ever looked at her like that. It did funny things to her inside. Things she wasn’t ready to examine too closely.

“You are many things, Nisha Gaikwad.” His eyes continued to caress her, every glance a gentle stroke against her shattered heart. “You are a sparrow, a porcupine, a dragon... You are everything you were, everything you are and everything you want to be.”

He clasped her hand and brought it up to her chest, resting it over her thumping heart. “All you have to do is choose. Nobody else, Nisha. *You* choose who and what you want to be.”

“And then?” she asked, acutely conscious of his broad hand on top of her own.

“And then you be that...just be.”

# EIGHTEEN



## PAUL

“So...DID YOU FIX A DATE?” Paul asked, tongue in cheek.

“Fuck off,” Rahul muttered, staring straight ahead as they walked down the pavement of Carter Road in Bandra. The distant sound of the waves crashing against the rocks was a siren call that Paul was determined to ignore but he saw Rahul’s wistful glance before he too checked himself.

“Do you miss it?” he asked Rahul now.

“The ocean? Of course not,” the worst liar in the world answered, his cheeks reddening.

“I miss it like crazy,” Paul admitted. “Some days I can still feel the pitch and roll of the deck beneath my feet.”

Rahul sighed. “So do I.”

“I know.” Paul shoved his friend. “You can’t act to save your life. Don’t ever go undercover like Aarushi.”

Rahul snickered. Paul was glad his friend had gotten to the point where he could laugh about it. The last few weeks of watching Aarushi and Rahul together had him concerned.

“You know I’m here for you right?” he asked. “If you want to talk and shit?”

“Hug and get in touch with our inner child?” Rahul asked dryly.

“I don’t need to get in touch with my inner child, asshole,” Paul told him loftily. “My inner child comes out to play regularly.”

Rahul threw his head back and laughed. “That it does.”

Paul chuckled, watching his friend loosen up for the first time in a long time. His phone rang, drawing his attention. He noticed Rahul pulling his own out and frowning down at it.

“What’s this about?” Paul asked, showing Rahul his display which had the name of the event manager for the celebrity wedding flashing.

Rahul frowned down at his own phone, without answering. “Whatever it is, it isn’t going to make our lives easier.”

“When has anything?” Paul shrugged philosophically. “I’ll pick up and put it on speaker.”

Rahul nodded.

“Hello Ritika,” Paul answered cheerfully. “I’ve got Rahul here with me. What’s up?”

“She’s changed the wedding venue again,” Ritika’s voice was clipped and cold. Paul didn’t blame her. This must be the project from hell.

“Which part of the world are we off to now?” Rahul asked, his gaze back on the ocean, his eyes tracing the distant horizon.

“At least it’s still in India. She wants a beach wedding in Goa.”

Paul’s heart crashed, a hard thump against his ribcage. Home. He wasn’t ready to go home, not yet. And still, maybe it was time?

“I’m scouting venues,” Ritika continued crisply. “Once I have something concrete, I’ll get back to you guys. Just wanted you to know the Swiss thing is off so you don’t do any extra work on that.”

She disconnected without waiting for murmured assents from the two of them.

“Well, that certainly makes life easier,” Rahul muttered.

Paul grunted.

“Goa should be a breeze compared to doing this shit on the slopes of Switzerland with foreign contractors.”

Paul grunted again.

“We should get Nisha to look through our database for contractors based out of Goa. Having a local team would be an advantage.”

Paul grunted a third time.

“And then we’ll hire elephants to carry us into the venue so we have the advantage of height when we’re trying to scope out the place.”

“The fuck we are!” Paul glared at Rahul.

“Good to know you’re paying attention and are still capable of using words.” Rahul glared back at Paul.

“Using words doesn’t seem to be a job requirement for Agam,” he argued, shoving his phone back into his shorts.

“And J&A can handle only one Agam at a time. You please use your big boy words.”

Paul ignored him, his heart still doing its irregular thrumming in his chest. They walked back to where they’d parked their car in silence.

Rahul slid into the driver’s seat, still casting suspicious sideways glances at Paul’s face. It was starting to annoy him.

“You have something to say, say it,” he said gruffly.

“I’m not the only one struggling,” Rahul replied. “If you need anything, you know where to find me.”

Paul didn’t respond. He stared out of the window, the dirty, dusty pavement looking endlessly fascinating.

# NINETEEN

## NISHA

“WHAT DO YOU SEE?”

Nisha stared at the data in front of her, frustrated and annoyed. “I don’t know. I’ve already told you everything I thought I saw. Clearly, it’s not enough. Why don’t you just tell me what answer you want from me?”

Paul huffed, looking as annoyed as she felt. “Get up,” he ordered.

Nisha stood, the need to obey a barked command so ingrained in her it didn’t even occur to her to stay seated.

Paul didn’t notice. He grabbed for his suit jacket and waved her forward. “Let’s go.”

Nisha stayed frozen by her desk. “Where are we going?”

“To the client’s office.”

“Why?” she asked, her heart starting a slow pound, just holding her ground making her feel a little shaky.

“The best way to learn is in the actual environment of the issue,” Paul replied puzzled. “There’s only so much spreadsheets and images will tell you.”

Oh. Nisha released her grip on her desk and picked up her bag. Her fingers hurt from being forced to relinquish their death grip on the table.

“Come on.” He beckoned her over with a hand. “Let’s go.”

Nisha went, her mind still struggling to catch up with what was going on. Did Paul always have to move at breakneck

speed?

“We’re going to Mr. Bharucha’s office to speak to his staff.”

“How is that going to help?” she asked, sliding into the passenger seat of his ancient car. The seat creaked under her like it was sighing at the addition of her weight. She tried not to be offended. “It’s not like they’re going to come out and admit to embezzling funds. It makes more sense to follow the money trail like we were doing back at the office.”

“Cyber security is just one way of approaching this and Agam is digging deeper as we speak. That’s his forte. I want you to do what you do best.” Paul put the car in drive and pulled into traffic.

“And what would that be, Oh All Knowing One!” she remarked dryly. “Make coffee?”

He grinned at her, not in the least deterred by her sarcasm. “Be you. Go in there, talk to people. Get a feel of them.”

She stared at him bemused. “And you’ve decided I would be good at this how?”

Paul sobered, his gaze on the garbage truck in front of them. “You had a sense that something was off with Aman, didn’t you? Before that night?”

Her heart jolted in her chest at the sound of her husband’s name. Ex-husband, she reminded herself. Soon to be ex-husband.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said, her own gaze finding the road outside her window.

“You don’t have to,” he agreed easily, pulling into the basement of Mr. Bharucha’s office. “You just need to use it.”

The words stopped her in her tracks as she followed him towards the elevators. When he showed no signs of slowing down for her, she shook herself out of her daze and ran to catch up.

AdarfraTech occupied the top three floors of the building and was done up in cool, pastel tones that made Nisha feel

nervous. She checked the heels of her brown wedges to see if she was tracking mud onto their pretty cream and pink tiles. Her own drab brown kurta with cream leggings looked as out of place as a partridge in a flock of parrots.

“Hi.” Paul smiled charmingly at the receptionist. “We’re from J&A Security.”

“Yes, of course. How can I help you?” The receptionist fluttered her eyelashes at him. Nisha made a gagging noise that earned her a cold look from the eyelash flutterer.

“We’d like to meet with the finance and accounts teams in one of your empty conference rooms. You can clear it with Mr. Bharucha before you set it up.”

“Sure,” she smiled bashfully at him before leveling a lethal glare at Nisha. Then she picked up the phone, made some pointless calls before stepping away from the reception desk, leaving them waiting there for her return.

Nisha watched the receptionist’s long, shiny hair swish against her butt as she walked out of the front office and into the long rows of cubicles beyond. A wave of petty envy swept through her as she wondered what her life would have been like if she’d made different choices, if she’d chosen to work in an office like this instead of getting married and settling into a so-called happy-ever-after. Maybe one day, she too would have batted her eyelashes at a Paul of her own.

“Is she your type?” The words escaped her before she could hold them back.

“I beg your pardon?” Paul’s eyebrows shot up.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t notice her flirting with you!” Her voice had a completely unnecessary edge to it.

An edge he noticed, his brows pulling together as he watched her. “Did you also notice that I didn’t flirt back?”

“That’s not the point,” she said testily.

“What *is* the point, Nisha?” Paul cocked his head to one side watching her.

Nisha opened her mouth to retort but then shut it again without saying a word. What was her point? Paul could flirt with whomever he wanted to. It didn't matter to her at all. Did it?

Shiny Hair came swishing back into the reception area at that moment and beamed at Paul. Nisha was possessed with a strong urge to shave the other woman's head.

"Mr. Bharucha asked me to assist you in any which way you might require." The eyelashes fluttered again, like spider webs in the breeze.

Maybe she could pluck those fake eyelashes out first. And then-

"Nisha," Paul's polite voice cut through her petty revenge fantasies. "Shall we?" He was holding the door open for her, waiting for her to precede him into the main office space.

Nisha stared at him as Shiny Hair stared at her. Oh God. It did. For some reason it did matter to her. The pit of her stomach hollowed out as she followed that thought to its logical conclusion.

She was attracted to Paul. She was what people called a 'hot mess.' She was what she called 'the biggest idiot in the world.'

Call it or her what you want but she was in trouble. Big Trouble.



TWENTY

## PAUL

NISHA WAS ACTING WEIRD. Every time he leaned over to check something on her laptop, she leaned away. If she went any further to the other side of that chair, she was going to topple over and land on her head. Which might knock some sense back into her and get her to behave normally again.

Irritation surged as he watched her studiously ignore him. They'd gone through four employee interviews now and she hadn't looked at him once. He didn't know whom he was more annoyed with – her for ignoring him or himself for noticing.

He forced his mind back on to the job. Mr. Bharucha had come to them with a suspicion that he had a mole in his organization. Every time he'd pitched or bid for a project, his closest competitor was outbidding him by a marginal amount. It had happened too many times to be dismissed as coincidence. Rahul and Paul were working with Mr. Bharucha to devise a foolproof organization protocol that left confidential information in fewer hands making leaks easier to track. That didn't however help with identifying the past perpetrator.

Agam's skill in cyber tracking had been useful but had thrown up no suspicious calls or emails from any of the staff so far. Which brought them to today and their attempts to get a bead on the staff.

“And then what did you do next?” Nisha asked the junior accountant sweetly, her slender fingers poised over her keyboard ready to input any data the employee would give her.

The man looked at her with a faint hint of lust shadowing his gaze. The same fucking gaze that dropped to her lush breasts before sliding up to her face. Paul bit back a snarl and forced himself to stay on his side of the room and not slam the other man's face into the table between them.

"I sent the completed bid to my manager for screening. After that," the douchebag shrugged his toothpick like shoulders. "It's not in my domain anymore."

"I understand," Nisha smiled prettily. "When is your next promotion due, Mr. Ashish Shukla?"

The man frowned, discontent pulling his lips downward. "I should have got it last year, but you know how it is."

Nisha uh hummed under her breath, a genuinely sympathetic sound that had Paul eyeing her with respect. She was better than he'd imagined at this.

Ashish the idiot leaned forward eagerly in his chair. "They gave it to Vidya because you know..."

Nisha leaned forward too. "Could you explain it to me?" she asked innocently. "I'm not sure I'm getting this right."

Ashish the asshole stared at her breasts, looking a little dazed. Paul wanted to scoop his eyeballs out with a spoon.

"Ashish?" Nisha prompted, cupping her chin with one palm and staring at him. "Why did they give your promotion to Vidya? I'm assuming that's Vidya Reddy?"

Excellent phrasing of the question, Paul thought as anger cleared the lust from Ashish Shukla's eyes.

"Yeah. That one only. She's sleeping her way to the top," Asshole Ashish said scornfully. "Everyone knows that."

"Do they?" Nisha widened her eyes, even as her foot started tapping an irritable rhythm under the table. "Wow, imagine that."

"Yeah. Typical." He snorted. "Flash some tit, lick your lips, and steal a promotion from hard working people like me."

Paul stared at the other man, his eyes flat and devoid of the emotion that churned inside him. This creep had been ogling a woman's breasts for over ten minutes, breasts that weren't being flashed in any way and now wanted to judge another woman for what... having breasts? Existing? Daring to do a job better than him?

"So, she's sleeping with..." Nisha checked the sheet of paper on the table in front of her. "Your boss, Mr. Narula?"

"Narula?" Ashish giggled, a high-pitched sound. "Narula is too scared of his wife to do anything with anyone, including his wife."

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

Nisha's foot was busy under the table. Paul was surprised the idiot sitting across from her couldn't hear it.

The door swung open and the receptionist walked in. Paul heard the briefest hitch in the tapping of the foot before it resumed at a faster pace.

"Can I get you all some tea, coffee?" the receptionist asked, her friendly gaze chilling as it landed on Ashish.

Interesting. Clearly, their friend here wasn't popular.

"No, thank you," Nisha responded, her tone frigid.

Paul glanced over in surprise. What was she being chilly about? His gaze travelled from one woman to the other as they stared each other down. Some form of wordless communication happened. He tried to translate it but the best he came up with was...that they were declaring war? But why?

Being the shit stirrer that he was, he cleared his throat and said, "I'll have a coffee please. Black, no sugar."

A blast of cold vibes hit him from Nisha while the receptionist, whatever her name was, beamed at him like he'd just crowned her Miss Universe.

"Coming right up," she smiled coyly.

Paul blinked. Oh fuck! Maybe this particular pot of shit hadn't needed stirring. Too late now...

“So, Mr. Shukla,” Nisha’s icy voice cut through his scrambled thoughts. “Ms. Vidya Reddy is having an affair with Mr. Narula-“

Again, a high pitched giggle. Paul glared at the other man. This fucker was annoying.

“Not Narula,” Ashish giggled. “She’s not sleeping with him.”

“Then whom?”

“Bharucha, of course. The big boss.”

TWENTY-ONE

## NISHA

“HE’S a pathetic runt of a man with the self-confidence of a toddler on steroids.”

Paul blinked at her. They were standing on the pavement outside Mr. Bharucha’s office building. All around them people marched along, their busy lives taking up too much mind space for them to notice the strange couple and their stranger conversation.

“And he probably has a dick the size and shape of a wet noodle,” she announced, still furious at having had to sit through another man tearing down another woman. And for what? Because the woman had the gall to be successful, to be smarter, to be more capable than noodle dick?

“So you didn’t believe him?” Paul mused now, looking thoroughly entertained by her.

“Did you?” she asked, outrage making her squeaky. “Typical. I should have known. All you men always stick together.”

“No.” All amusement fled his face as he stared at her, his face stony and his eyes furious. “Don’t do that. It’s beneath you.”

Shame pulsed beneath her skin and she opened her mouth to apologise but Paul was already marching off towards the car, beckoning her over to follow him. She went quietly, her mind still whirling even as her regret kept pace with her thumping heart.

Paul hadn't deserved her snide barb. Neither did so many of the men she knew. Rahul, Agam...she'd met some wonderful men who'd been nothing but good to her and she'd ... she'd been a shrill, bitter shrew.

Was this what Aman had turned her into? Was this whom she wanted to be? Who did she want to be? She certainly didn't want to be the old Nisha, the one who'd fallen for a man like Aman, a man filled with evil and armed with the shallow depth and charm of a puddle. So, if not that Nisha, and not the Nisha his betrayal had forged, who did she want to be?

She slid into the car, her mind everywhere but there. Paul slid the car into gear and pulled into traffic.

"Thoughts?" he asked.

"I don't want to be Nisha anymore," she blurted out.

Paul's hand tightened on the gear shift as he glanced at her before turning his attention back to the crowded road ahead of them.

"Okay," he said eventually.

"Just okay?" she asked. "No comments. No advice. No grand speech?"

"Just okay," he confirmed. "You should be whomever you want to be and do whatever you want to do."

"And there's the speech," she muttered to herself, staring out of the window. She was being a brat. Nisha sighed, turning back to him to apologise. But before she could, he spoke.

"But I was actually asking for thoughts on the staff interviews we conducted. Other than Mr. Ashish Shukla. You made your thoughts about him amply clear."

Work. Yes, of course. He'd been asking about work and she'd been ranting about her issues. Embarrassment had her cheeks flushing as she pulled her notebook out of her handbag and flipped through her notes.

"Other than Mr. Shukla, the person I found strange was the receptionist."



“Of course,” Paul said dryly. “Your instant fondness for her didn’t go unnoticed. Do you have a valid reason for finding her strange?”

Nisha shifted in her seat, not looking at him. The uncomfortable attraction she was battling flared to life. She used all her mental energy to squash it.

A sudden clap of thunder had her jumping, startling her out of her thoughts. She glanced up at the overcast sky. When had that happened? Before she could form another fragmented thought, fat drops of rain started to pelt their car. She pressed down on the lever on the door and put her window up.

All outside sound cut out except for the incessant drumming of the rain on the car, leaving them in a cocoon of their own. A silent, pulsing cocoon.

Nisha swallowed hard. “Mrs. Desai in Human Resources wasn’t ready to relinquish her files. It could have been maintaining confidentiality or-“

A squeal of tires had her jolting as Paul swung the wheel of the car and got them out of the way of a madman in a Porsche.

“Fucker,” he muttered.

Nisha agreed but didn’t voice it. Silence descended in the car as Paul inched forward, the visibility outside the windshield next to nothing at this point. A frosty silence at that.

“Can you dial Agam for me?” he asked now.

Nisha pulled out her phone and dialed Agam, putting it on speaker so Paul didn’t have to take his hands off the steering wheel.

“Hey.” Agam’s rich baritone came through the speaker. “I wanted to call and tell you how much I enjoyed the butter chicken last night.”

Nisha wouldn’t have thought it but the temperature in the car seemed to drop even further. He seemed to have a problem

with the fact that Agam and she had got dinner together the previous night.

“Can you run deeper dives into the following people in Bharucha’s company?” Paul cut in before Nisha could answer. He rattled off a list of names. Nisha frowned as she realised he had a lot of names she hadn’t even considered. So much for supposedly having a talent for reading people.

*Aman’s laughter sounded in her head. She could almost hear his drawl too accompanied by an amused chuckle. “Did you really think you would be good at it?”*

She shrank further into her seat, her hand still holding the phone extended towards Paul so he could continue his conversation with Agam.

“And also Ms. Vandana Mukherjee.”

Her gaze flashed to meet Paul’s at his inclusion of the receptionist’s name.

“Front office? Why?” Agam asked puzzled.

“Nisha didn’t like her,” Paul said, his gaze holding hers. “That’s reason enough.”

Nisha barely heard Agam’s goodbyes and the phone line clicking off, silence once again their companion.

“Why?” she whispered, as Paul brought the call to a slow halt in their office basement parking. Why did he have this confidence in her? Why did *he* when no one else ever had?

“Just told you.” He unbuckled his seatbelt, leaning against the headrest, his hands running through his hair, tugging at the longer strands. “Damn, I need to make time for a haircut.”

“No.” Her denial was instinctive, her hand reaching for his hair, the rough silk of it flowing through her fingers before they encountered the calloused ones of his own. “Don’t.”

Paul froze, his big body going still. “Don’t what, Nisha?” he asked, his voice a hoarse rumble.

“Don’t cut it.” Her hand was still in his hair. What was she doing?

“Nisha.” Her name was a breath of sound on his lips. A breath that she needed to feel, to taste, to soak in.

Nisha reached up, her lips finding his. And then even that breath of sound was gone.

TWENTY-TWO

## PAUL

HEAT SWAMPED HIM, a heat so intense that he thought he would go up in flames. Every sense, every fiber of his being zeroed in on the point where her soft, lush lips met his. Without conscious thought, he deepened the kiss, his tongue slipping through the narrow gap she offered him.

It felt like a glimpse of paradise and yet, it also felt like coming home. Sensation slammed through him and his hands itched to palm her lush figure and haul her closer but he forced himself to stay in his seat, letting her control the pace and intensity of the kiss.

Nisha's soft palm came up to cup his cheek, cradling his face and trying to pull him closer. Eyes shut, he followed her lead, leaning into her and allowing her tongue to explore his mouth in return.

She moaned, a breathless sound that had him hardening impossibly more than he had been a second before. His hand slid through her loosened braid, escaped locks of hair tumbling over his fingers, strands of the softest silk. A desperate groan tore through him as his control frayed and he tumbled her into his lap, her legs sprawling across the gear shift and into the other seat.

The plump curves of her bottom landed on the painfully hard length of him and he gasped, tearing his mouth from hers, his forehead pressed hard against hers.

“Fuck!” he panted. “What the fuck?”

It was like the heat of the moment was doused with a bucket of ice. Nisha froze in his arms, her entire body turning to cold, immobile stone. And then with a pained, incoherent cry she tore herself out of his arms and scrambled from the car, her flailing hands and legs banging painfully against the car door as she threw it open.

He stayed in the car, watching her carefully as she ran for the stairs, not bothering to wait for the elevator to make its slow way to the basement. He breathed deeply as he thumbed open the cctv app on his phone. He exhaled as he saw Nisha make it past the threshold of the office door and fall into her seat at her desk. He watched as she dropped her head into her hands, her shoulders shaking with suppressed sobs.

His heart clenched as he stared at her bent, broken frame. His hands vised around the steering wheel as he forced himself to stay where he was and not take the fucking stairs two at a time to get to her, to comfort her, to....to do what? Make what he'd already done worse?

The last person Nisha needed in this moment was him.

He considered calling Aayushi but as he watched, Nisha straightened, swiped roughly at her face and marched off to the washroom at the end of the hall. Paul exhaled. She'd be fine.

He could go up now. He had work to do. There was a new client coming in tomorrow and he was supposed to be running a background check on them. But he couldn't get himself to move. He couldn't get himself to get out of the car and make his way up to the office they both worked out of.

On his phone's screen Agam strode into the office, glanced around at the empty space and then went into the conference room. She had company. And if Paul wasn't around, she had space. It was the least he could give her after trying to devour her like an animal.

He slammed the car into reverse and sped out of the basement. He needed to get out of here and get his head on straight. What the fuck had he done?

The question circled his brain as he drove aimlessly through the crowded roads of Mumbai. Even the whiff of ocean air as he took the Bandra – Worli Sea Link did nothing to clear his head.

He'd fucked up and he didn't know how to fix it.

Fix it?

You fixed mistakes. God help him, no matter how conflicted he felt about what had happened, it felt like anything but a mistake. It felt right. It felt beyond right. It felt perfect.

But this was Nisha. Aman's Nisha. Aman was an asshole, a fucked up asshole criminal but he had once been his friend, his teammate, his brother-in-arms. And Nisha was his wife. Ex-wife. Soon-to-be ex wife, he amended. Fuck! The divorce hadn't even come through and he was mauling her in cars.

One car, one time, he told himself. 'So, do you want a medal for that?' his conscience whispered snidely.

His phone rang and he glanced down at the display.

Nisha.

He couldn't talk to her, not right now. He needed to get his head on straight before he went back to the office, before he faced her and apologised.

But what if she was not okay? What if she was calling because she needed him? Was Agam not being there for her?

He was about to swipe up on the call but the screen went blank as she disconnected. A second later, it pinged with a message.

*I'm sorry.*

Paul gaped at the phone. *She* was sorry? He pulled over into a mall and parked the car in one of its basement parking bays.

His hands shook a little as he typed out a reply.

*For what?*

Three little dots appeared as she typed back an inordinately long response. He watched and watched as they appeared and disappeared for an age. And then...

*For kissing you without your consent.*

The phone slipped from his nerveless fingers and into his lap. Was that what she thought? Paul buried his face in his hands, his thoughts tumbling over each other in a wild, chaotic mass. She thought she'd taken advantage of him? That he hadn't wanted what had happened? She was torturing herself over *that*?

He stared at his now-silent phone. He should let it rest at that. If Nisha thought he wasn't interested in her, she would move on from today a lot faster. He should let her continue thinking that.

But she would also be humiliated. And that Paul couldn't stomach. He would never let her feel less than the warrior that he saw her as. He picked up his phone and typed out a reply he should never have sent. A reply he should never have even thought but one that was, nevertheless, burned into the very heart of him.

*You had my consent. You've always had my consent. Always will.*



TWENTY-THREE

## NISHA

“So, let’s toss everyone’s ideas into the pot and we’ll work out a schedule of tasks before we leave for Goa.”

Rahul glanced around the table, his brow furrowing as his gaze landed on Nisha. Not that she noticed, she was busy staring at the pen in her hands.

“Nisha?”

She jumped. “Yes?” she squeaked, her eyes darting around the table and snagging on Paul, who was staring back at her like she held the world in her palms instead of a ballpoint pen worth five rupees.

*You’ve always had my consent.*

She felt like she was drowning in his dark, intense eyes. He didn’t look away. And she *couldn’t* look away.

Rahul cleared his throat pointedly. “Ideas,” he snapped. “For the Goa trip.”

Paul took his own sweet time looking away from Nisha and towards his friend. “About that,” he said, his voice a gravelly rumble that had goosebumps erupting all over Nisha’s body. “I don’t think I’ll be able to come to Goa. You should take point on this one and pick your team.”

Rahul stared at him. “What the fuck do you mean? You’re the local. If there was ever a project for you to take point on, it is this one.”

Nisha looked from one startled face to the other blank one. The tense vibes had goosebumps of a different sort erupting,

her trauma antenna starting to vibrate.

“No,” Paul returned flatly breaking the silent standoff. “Agam’s referral is due in office today.”

Agam made a pained noise. Nisha glanced down at him, anxiety twisting inside her at the strain on his normally calm face. What was that noise?

“Her credentials are impressive,” Paul continued. “If she lives up to them, then she’ll make an excellent right hand for you. I’ll handle the new personal security assignment that just came in. I don’t need a team for it. You can have everyone else.”

“No.” Rahul slammed the file he was holding down on the table. Nisha jumped, her heartbeat accelerating. Her hands started to tremble and she jammed them together under the table.

“Goddammit,” Rahul swore. “I don’t need this shit, Paul. I need you to step up on the Goa wedding because you have the knowledge that-“

“I have no knowledge that will help,” Paul replied crisply. “Nothing that you and the team you put together can’t get through research.”

Nisha honestly thought the top of Rahul’s head would blow off and steam would pour out of it.

“What the fuck is going on with you?” Rahul growled, his fists coming down on the table with a thump.

“I could ask you the same,” Paul shot back. “But I have the sense to keep that for when we’re alone.”

An awkward silence descended around them as Nisha’s erratic heartbeat went crazy in her chest.

“I really wish you’d get your fucking head out of your arse.” Rahul pushed away from the table, his entire body tense and rigid.

“Likewise, bro.” Paul got to his feet.

“Both of you need to get your fucking heads out of your arses,” Nisha yelled.

She honestly didn't know who was the most surprised at her sudden outburst but if she had to bet on it, she would have put her money on herself. But now that her dam had burst, she couldn't have held back the flood for anything.

“You started this business.” She stood up, pointing her finger at Rahul. “You.” Her finger swiveled to Paul. “And you.”

And then for added emphasis, she stamped her foot. “Together. And you'll work your issues out *together*.” She was dimly aware that she was screaming now. “You hired Agam and me, gave us jobs and purpose and .... And hope. You can't lose your shit. You just fucking can't. Because if you do, then what are we supposed to do?”

She gestured wildly towards Agam. “Tell them!”

“Well, technically,” he demurred. “I always had hope.” He took one look at her furious face and added hastily, “But yes to everything else. These two hormonal pmsy guys need to get their shit together.”

Nisha turned on him like the very essence of hell itself. “Hormonal? Pmsy? You think them being assholes is the same as the hell of menstruation that women live through every single fucking month?”

Agam opened his mouth and then shut it. “I'm sorry,” he said finally. “What I said was wrong. I was wrong. I should be punished for eternity for my heinous crime.”

Her heart was pounding in her throat now. “All of you,” she said, more calmly. “Sort your shit out. Because you're not going to let your baggage and your egos tank this company. If I can keep it together, so can you.”

Was she truly keeping it together? As much as her hands shook and her heart raced, she thought maybe, just maybe, she was on the track to doing it.

Paul and Rahul were both staring at her, partly in shock but also with a newfound awareness. Or maybe that was just

wishful thinking, she didn't know.

A slow round of applause sounded through the room. As one, they turned towards the entrance to the conference room.

She was stunning. Nisha couldn't think of another word to describe her. Tall and lean, with endless legs encased in tight denim, a simple, black tank and a leather jacket that hit her at the waist, she looked dangerous and devastating. Her boots were something Nisha thought she might sell her soul for...but what would she wear the boots with? Her kurtas?

"You and I darling." The newcomer pointed at Nisha. "Are going to be great friends." Then she smiled at the room, her red lips parting in a grin that sliced like a blade. "Hi everyone. I'm Layla."

Agam made the pained noise again. This time Nisha thought she figured out what it sounded like. A dying pig.

TWENTY-FOUR

## PAUL

THE STRESS SAT like a rock in his gut. He shouldn't have been a dick in the team meeting today. He should have spoken to Rahul in private and explained his reasons for not wanting to be on the Goa project.

Paul leaned against the window ledge, tossing a paperweight from one hand to the other, his mind still working on the puzzle of what to do about Goa. In the next cabin, Rahul was talking to or rather interviewing Layla.

Paul should have been in there with him but he wasn't interested in that. He already knew Layla was perfect for the role. No point in wasting time on questions like 'Where do you see yourself in five years?' It wasn't like they'd interviewed either Agam or Nisha anyway. So why was this meant to be any different? They went with their gut and they hadn't gone wrong with that strategy so far.

The door opened behind him and he braced for confrontation. He honestly didn't have the energy for it but if Rahul wanted to go another round, he'd have no choice but to oblige. But it wasn't Rahul at his back. God wasn't willing to be that kind.

"I brought the pen drive with the deep dives Agam did on Bharucha's staff."

Nisha's hesitant voice was a direct contrast to her previous banshee performance. Although Paul could admit that the banshee had been damn effective. She'd silenced all of their male posturing in a second.

“Thanks,” he answered, not turning around to look at her. “Just leave it on my desk.”

He heard the soft click of the pen drive touching his desk. He waited but he didn't hear her footsteps as she left his cabin.

“Did you need anything else?” he asked, still staring out the window.

“Do you?” she asked softly, her voice coming from directly behind him.

“Do I what?”

“Do you need anything?”

Her hand came to rest on his back between his shoulder blades. Paul tensed but he didn't turn. He couldn't. There were lines he'd drawn in his life, early on. And he couldn't, he *wouldn't* cross them. Not if he could help himself. And he could always help himself. Until Nisha.

She tested his every boundary, the limits of his self control, and at the heart of it, she prodded at the very foundation of what he'd thought he wanted from life. For he was fast realising, that what he wanted from life, more than anything else in the world, was this woman.

This one woman who was standing behind him and asking him if he needed anything. You, he wanted to tell her. He needed her.

He needed her splayed on his desk, legs spread wide and his face buried between them. He needed her under him, in his bed with his dick buried so deep within her he didn't know where he ended and where she began.

He needed her, by his side, holding his hand, and walking into his family home in Goa. He needed her lying beside him, his face buried in the curve of her shoulder as they slept off the weight of another long day. He needed her at her desk, in his workspace, working with him, arguing with him, laughing with him.

He needed her. Just her.

“No,” he answered now. “I don't need anything.”



Her hand clenched in the fabric of his shirt briefly before releasing it. The sense of loss he felt at the removal of that brief, generic contact had him closing his eyes.

“Layla’s interview is done. Rahul wanted you to speak with her before she left.”

He nodded, eyes still clenched shut. “I’ll be out in a minute,” he rasped.

He expected her to leave but instead, her arms came around him from behind. She wrapped herself around him, her soft body pressed up against his back. Paul’s head fell forward even as one hand went to clasp the hand she had placed right over his traitorous heart.

“What are you doing?” he asked huskily, his fingers threading through hers.

“You looked like you needed a hug,” she whispered, tightening her arms around him.

His throat clogged with emotions he had no right to but in that moment, Paul didn’t care. To hell with right and wrong, to hell with what he should or shouldn’t do. He was going to take this moment and he was going to cherish it because whatever may or may not happen in the future, he knew that there would never be anything more precious in his life than the moment a wounded sparrow tried to heal his broken wing.

Someone knocked on his cabin door, breaking the spell she’d woven around them.

“Later,” Paul barked as Nisha released him and stepped away. Whoever was at the door thankfully went away.

Nisha was halfway to the door when he spoke. “I have a complicated relationship with my family.”

She stopped her half-walk-half-run to the cabin door and turned back to him. She didn’t speak, just held space for him to.

“I,” Paul exhaled. “I don’t go home much. I try to do what I can for them from a distance. Going home has never ended well. My family...doesn’t care for me much.”

He couldn't look at her. He didn't want to see pity in her eyes or worse, distaste.

"It's easier not to have to face the evidence of that lack in person."

Nisha came closer. Paul dropped his gaze to his feet, unwilling and unable to meet her eyes. But she wouldn't let him get away with that.

Nisha cupped his face and tilted it up, so he had to look at her. And he saw neither pity nor distaste. He saw only understanding.

"If you don't want to face them, you don't have to. But know this, Paul Alvares, Mr. Otherwise Know It All, if you do face them, you won't face them alone. You have the entire team standing beside you. You have us all."

Do I have you? The words hovered on the tip of his tongue but remained unspoken.

Nisha smiled, a sad, sweet smile.

"We all have scars, Paul. Some visible, some not. It isn't any use trying to keep them hidden. I see you. I see all of you."

With a soft pat to his cheek, she let go and stepped away again. "I'll send Layla in," she said, walking towards the door for the second time.

"Nisha," he called out.

She paused, her eyes questioning as she looked at him.

"I see you too. All of you."

TWENTY-FIVE

# NISHA

NISHA HAD BARELY ushered Layla into Paul's cabin when the front door blew open and Aarushi walked in, laden down with a laptop bag that looked fit to burst. Her friend looked exhausted, stress lining her face and making her shoulders droop.

"Hey!" Nisha hugged her, surprised at her sudden entry.

"Hi." Aarushi gave her a wan smile and looked around her like she was expecting someone to appear.

"Rahul's in his cabin," Nisha offered.

"Oh." Aarushi didn't look too thrilled with that information. "I just need a quiet corner to sit and get some work done. Is it okay if I use the pantry table to work?"

"Yes, of course. Why do you even need to ask?" Nisha ushered her into the pantry and helped her set up at the table. "Can I make you some coffee?"

"No, Nisha." Aarushi huffed out a laugh. "I know coffee is your love language but don't make me coffee right now."

"Okay." Nisha hovered around Aarushi like an aimless butterfly. Did butterflies ever have aims though? She banished the random thought and focused again. "Tea then?"

"Nishu no. I don't need anything. Thanks though. I just wanted a quiet place to work. It's something confidential and I didn't want anyone glimpsing my screen at work and for some reason, I didn't want to be home either. I just wanted to be somewhere close to you."

“And to Rahul,” Nisha added when her friend didn’t.

A brief pause and then Aarushi said, “Yes, of course.”

“I’ll let him know you’re here.”

“That’s not necessary Nish.” Aarushi’s voice was low but firm. “I just want to work now.”

Nisha stared at her wanting to probe but something told her now wasn’t the time. Instead for the second time in that hour, she asked, “Can I give you a hug? You look like you need one.”

Tears shimmered in Aarushi’s eyes as she wrapped her arms around Nisha, her grasp rib cracking. Nisha held on just as tightly.

“It’s going to be okay,” she whispered into her friend’s somewhat greasy hair. Aarushi was obsessive about washing hair, even going so far as to wash Nisha’s hair in the sink when she went one day too long without washing it herself. She would never let her hair get even somewhat greasy. What in the world was going on with her and Rahul?

Aarushi nodded; her face buried in Nisha’s shoulder. After a minute, she took a deep breath and stepped back.

“I should work now,” she announced with a watery smile.

Nisha nodded and wiped her own damp face. “I should too. I’m already skating on thin ice here.”

Aarushi paused in the middle of sitting down. “You are? Why?”

“I screamed at my bosses.”

Aarushi’s mouth dropped open. “You did?”

“And I told them to get their heads out of their arses.”

Aarushi let out a gurgle of laughter.

“I do believe,” Nisha said thoughtfully. “I told them to get their *fucking* heads out of their arses.”

Aarushi was roaring with laughter now, clapping her hands together. “Welcome back, Nishu. Welcome the fuck back.”

Nisha grinned. She couldn't deny the fact that this morning had felt good. And it had felt right and in a weird way, by speaking her mind, even as loudly as she had, it had been like the last piece of the jigsaw sliding into place.

"Work now," she said, her smile almost splitting her face in half. "Talk later."

"Work now. Talk later," Aarushi affirmed.

Nisha spun on her heel and almost crashed into Rahul.

"Oh my God," she squealed. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Just came in," he said, his granite face softening at the obvious happiness in hers. "We have new clients coming in within half an hour. Could you get the conference room ready for us please?"

She nodded. "I'll make the coffee fresh when they get here," she told him, ignoring the rueful shake of his head.

She heard him murmur a quiet hello to Aarushi but didn't hear her friend's response. Nisha shut the pantry door so they had some privacy.

Across the large hall, Layla exited Paul's room and gave her a wink and a thumbs up. Nisha smiled. She had a feeling she was going to enjoy working with the other woman.

She spotted Agam watching Layla, his brows lowered, big, beefy arms crossed over his muscular chest. Why had he referred her to the firm if he disliked her so much? And why would he dislike her? From whatever Nisha had seen so far today, Layla was awesome.

And yet, Agam was her friend, one of her closest friends these days. So, she sidled up to him.

"Hey you!"

"Don't offer me coffee," he groaned, wrapping a huge arm around her shoulders and making her knees buckle a little with the weight.

“You will never get another sip of my coffee again,” she sniffed, affronted.

He laughed, a rumbly sound that made her giggle.

“You were magnificent today,” he told her, and then over the top of her head, he added to someone else, “Wasn’t she?”

“Magnificent,” Paul agreed quietly, from where he leaned in the doorway of his cabin, his gaze on Agam’s arm resting on her shoulder. “But then she always was, in my eyes.”

TWENTY-SIX



## PAUL

AGAM AND NISHA had left for Bharucha's office. Agam wanted to cross check something with the firm's CCTV footage and he'd taken Nisha along to teach her the boring minutiae that accompanied most of their jobs.

The celebrity client he was supposed to be bodyguarding for a prominent event next week had pushed their meeting to two days later. He hoped the lady wasn't going to cancel on them. It was light work at a decent pay packet and would go a long way towards keeping their balance sheet healthy.

He flipped through the actress's file, the stalker threat sparsely described in it. He was going to need a lot more information if he was going to do his job well. Frowning, he started making notes as he read before turning to the internet to see what he could find.

Raised voices from the pantry had his head shooting up.

"I don't want you doing anything that puts you in danger!" Rahul roared, the sound carrying through Paul's shut door.

"You don't get to decide what I can or cannot do." Aarushi's voice was a lot lower but the frost in it had Paul wincing. He had a feeling Rahul's balls were going to freeze and fall off if she kept that up. "And it's not like your job is free of danger."

"I am not telling you what to do!" Rahul sounded like he was grinding his teeth to dust.

"What the hell are you doing then?" Aarushi cried.

Silence fell in the other room and Paul debated whether he should make his presence known or not. Option A would be to pop his head out and ask if he could help in any way. Option B would be to hunker down in this foxhole of a cabin and stay here until the war outside either ebbed or one of the warring parties left.

He went with Option C and pulled his phone out, typing quickly.

*You need to get back quickly. A and R are having a fight.*

“I am trying to keep you safe,” Rahul said now, exhaustion lining each word. “This undercover work you keep doing is not worth it. It’s the worst.”

Oh no, my man, Paul tried to send him a telepathic message. Stop talking. Just stop talking. Clearly Paul’s telepathy skills were sadly lacking as Rahul kept digging his own grave.

“And who decides whether the work I am doing is worth it or not?” Aarushi asked, her voice getting even quieter. “My boss who commissioned the work, me the person actually doing it, or you, someone who has no knowledge or expertise in the field?”

*Maybe it’s good for them to get it out of their system.*

Paul stared at Nisha’s practical reply as it lit up his screen. What the hell? This was not the time for her to be mature and reasonable. She was supposed to rush back to the office to rescue him.

“What do you get out of this? Glory? Fame? A byline? Is it worth it Aarushi? Is what you do worth it?”

“The news, and the unbiased reporting of it is always worth it. It’s worth everything,” Aarushi hissed.

“Even this? Hiding out in a different place and working so the people you’re working to expose don’t find you and harm you? It’s worth this?”

“I thought I’d be safe in my boyfriend’s office,” she said, her voice sounding tearful. “But maybe I was wrong. I didn’t

realise I wasn't welcome."

*Mayday! Mayday!*

Paul was starting to sweat now. This was not good. What the fuck was going on with these two? This was no ordinary fight.

*Listen child, when mommy and daddy are fighting, it doesn't mean they don't love you anymore. It just means they need to communicate properly.*

Now? Now she discovered her sense of humour?  
Now?????

"I'll leave." A clattering noise told him Aarushi was collecting her things.

"No, no you won't." Some rustling noises and what sounded like her moving away from him. "Please Aaru, don't go like this."

"You know, Rahul," she replied, sounding defeated. "You shouldn't tell someone that you forgave them unless you truly did."

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Paul should have gone out before this then things wouldn't have gotten so bad. But then, this sounded like a fight that had been festering for a while.

He heard her walking away, her footsteps heading to the door. Why the fuck wasn't Rahul stopping her?

"Aaru?"

Finally! The dumbass would grovel now and everything would be fine.

"Has it ever occurred to you that the problem isn't me forgiving you? Maybe the person who hasn't forgiven you is... you?"

Paul dropped his head into his hands. That was not groveling. That was flicking a lit match on dry tinder. But the explosion he was waiting for never came. Instead, all Paul heard was the front door of the office opening and shutting quietly, the click it made sounding a lot like a heart breaking.

*You need to get to Aarushi.*

He typed out the message, tossed his phone and went to his cabin door and cracked it open. Rahul stood in the middle of the room, his hands on his hips and his gaze on the shut door.

“How much did you hear?” he asked Paul, not looking in his direction.

“Everything,” Paul admitted. “What can I do?”

Now Rahul turned to look at him, devastation lining his face. “Nothing. I don’t think there is anything anyone can do.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

## NISHA

THE TINY BEDROOM she shared with Aarushi was in darkness when Nisha finally got home from work. She glanced in and saw a mound under the blankets but nothing else. She was pondering her next move when Ma came out of her own bedroom.

“She’s been in there all day,” Ma murmured as Nisha dropped a kiss on her head before studying the door to the Room of Doom. “Didn’t come out even when I made butter chicken.”

Oh! That was serious. There wasn’t much that could keep Aaru away from Ma’s butter chicken.

“I’ll check on her. You have your dinner and go to sleep.” She kissed Ma on her forehead. “Goodnight Ma.”

“You also won’t eat my butter chicken?” Ma sounded massively put out.

“I’ll eat it in the morning for breakfast,” she promised, her stomach revolting at the thought. Her mother wandered into her bedroom looking slightly mollified. Taking a deep breath, Nisha rolled her shoulders and entered the bedroom.

She dropped her handbag on the floor and crawled under the covers, wrapping her body around Aarushi’s slighter frame. Aarushi just tucked herself into a smaller ball. At this rate, Nisha could cover her twice over.

They lay in silence for a while and then Aarushi whispered, “I hate him.”

“I hate him too,” Nisha said loyally.

“He’s such an ass.”

“The biggest,” Nisha agreed, silently apologising to Rahul in her head. She truly did love the guy.

“He hasn’t forgiven me.” The words were a soft wail.

Nisha hesitated. She honestly wasn’t sure whether there was any truth in that sentence. “Okay,” she said, going for the most neutral statement of support she could think of. But Aarushi wasn’t done...

“He said I haven’t forgiven myself for what I did to him,” Aarushi sniffled.

Nisha opened her mouth to agree and then paused as the words sank in. “Have you?” she asked cautiously.

“Have I what?”

“Forgiven yourself?” Guilt twanged inside Nisha. Everything Aaru had done, she’d done for her. And now two lovely people who were made for each other were struggling to find a new normal.

“I-I-I,” Aaru sputtered.

Nisha stayed quiet.

“He’s the one who hasn’t forgiven me!” Aarushi growled now, turning to face Nisha in the dark under the cover.

“Uh huh.” Nisha cast her mind around for something safe and supportive but found nothing. “The thing is honey...”

“No!” Aarushi sat up suddenly headbutting Nisha on the chin in the process.

“Ow!” Nisha saw stars as she caught her chin with her hands and sprawled flat on the bed.

“Oh shit sorry.” Aaru scrambled towards Nisha and managed to poke her in the eye.

“OWWW!” Nisha screeched.

“Fuck!” Aaru shouted. “What the hell is wrong with me?”

“Nothing,” Nisha gasped, blinking her streaming burning eye furiously. “There is nothing wrong with you. The problem is that you don’t see that.”

“Look who is talking,” Aaru retorted like the three-year-old she truly was.

“Yeah. Look who is talking. Your depressed, suicidal, broken loser of a friend.”

“Don’t call yourself that.” Aarushi’s voice got deathly quiet. “Don’t you dare call yourself that?”

“Why not?” Nisha asked. “Isn’t that what had you running off to Vizag to find proof of Aman’s crimes? Me trying to kill myself?”

They’d never spoken of it, not in so many words but maybe it was time. It was time for Nisha to face what she had done to the people she loved and who loved her. By breaking, by shattering the way she had, she’d broken them too.

“Nishu-“

“You know what my therapist said?” Nisha interrupted.

“What?”

“She said the greatest strength comes from knowing that you’ve been weaker than you ever thought possible but still had enough gas in the tank to keep going.”

“I think my tank might be empty, Nishu.”

“Well baby girl.” Nisha wrapped her arms around Aarushi again. “Then you just need to let us fill you up. Let Rahul fill you up the way he wants to.”

“He does fill me up,” Aarushi agreed with a giggle.

“Eww.” Nisha shoved her. “Don’t be an icky teenage girl.”

“Eww yourself. You’re just jealous that I’m getting some.”

She was, Nisha acknowledged. She truly was. Her mind flashed back to Paul and a car parked in a dark basement. Her thighs clenched involuntarily. There were some things she needed to keep in a vault, the code buried in her very soul.



“So,” Aarushi said. “Paul huh?”

That was a weak ass vault she had, Nisha thought, a groan escaping her.

“Go back to moping Aaru.”

“Maybe,” Aaru said, cuddling up to her. “I’m not the only one who needs to forgive herself.”

Maybe. Maybe not. Only time would tell.

TWENTY-EIGHT

## PAUL

“THE EVENT STARTS at seven in the evening but, of course, Anjaliji won’t reach there before eleven.” Anjali Mundra’s secretary, the formidable Shameema Begum marched ahead of them in better formation than any drill sergeant Paul had trained under.

“Of course,” Paul murmured, his gaze tracking all the entry points in the large beach facing mansion in Bandra as they walked through it. Behind him, the new intern Rahul had hired, Mayukh trailed them like a starstruck gremlin. Paul was tempted to tap his chin to shut his gaping mouth.

“There was a new letter today,” Shameemaji announced. “I have handed it to your secretary.”

“My secretary?” Paul stared at her.

“The young lady in your reception.” The other woman waved her hand around. “I gave her all the files like you told me to.”

“Nisha isn’t my secretary.” Paul felt obliged to point out. “She’s our associate.”

“Whatever. She has the latest note as well.” Shameemaji led the way up a winding staircase to the first floor of the bungalow.

“What did it say?” Paul asked even as he typed out a quick message to Nisha asking for a picture of the note.

“The same as before. I love you and will have you or no one else will.”

Before Paul could respond, a screech from the room ahead of them echoed through the house. He was running even before his mind could sort through the various options. He barreled through the door of the room, his gun in his hand, a smooth extension of his body when something slapped him straight in the face.

The peach bra slipped off his nose and landed on his foot even as he spun in a slow circle taking in the entire room. He couldn't see anybody else. He did a quick check of the room, securing the windows and looking behind the furniture.

It was only when he was sure the room was secure that he turned to confront the naked movie star. Very naked.

“Mayuk!” he snapped. “Out!”

He had a feeling the intern would faint any second now if he didn't get him out of the room. He heard the door close behind him as he picked up a silk robe draped over a chair and held it out to the actress, who'd lit a cigarette and was watching him contemptuously.

She yanked the robe out of his hand and flung it to the ground, stepping over it and closer to where he stood. Her magnificent, fake, melon sized breasts barely moved as they brushed up against him.

Shameema fluttered over to her side. “Anjaliji, let me get you something to calm you down. We need you to be fresh and ready for tonight.”

“Fuck off.” The words were a soft husky drawl filled with venom.

Shameema flinched. “Anjaliji-“

“Get out or I'll fire you.” Again, the words were said with total calm but there was no mistaking the intent.

Shameema stilled but said, “Of course, Mr. Alvares please follow me.”

“No.” The boobs came still closer. “He stays.”

Shameema didn't bother arguing. She left without a backward glance, the door shutting with a decisive click.

“You’re the bodyguard,” she said, one hand trailing down his chest tracing his abs through his shirt.

“Ms. Mundra,” he said, forcing himself not to flinch out of her grasp. “If you want me to work with you, you’ll need to keep your hands to yourself.”

Her hand slipped lower grabbing the front of his pants, cupping him through the fabric. You would have thought that having one of the most beautiful women in the country grope him would turn him on, but he felt...nothing. Her practiced strokes didn’t have anything on the innocent kiss Nisha had laid on him.

The memory of that kiss, one that had seared his soul, had him stepping out of her grasp, his hand gripping her wrist firmly and removing it from his body.

She licked her lips, eyes gleaming. “And will you keep your hands to yourself too?”

“Always Ma’am,” he said, handing her the robe again. This time she took it.

He sat down in a chair that was placed to his right as she shrugged into the robe and took another drag of her cigarette.

“Now what?” she asked.

“Now you tell me everything.” He switched on his recorder and watched her as she watched him, her gaze like a cobra’s, wickedly intelligent and lethal as hell.

She took a last drag of her cigarette and blew the smoke in his face, perfect concentric circles of cancer smoke.

“Ms. Mundra,” he said carefully. “If I need to be effective, if I need to keep you safe, I need to know everything. Knowledge is what will keep you safe.”

“What use are you then? If you need my knowledge to keep me safe.”

“It’s what I do with your knowledge that makes the difference. Why don’t you trust me and see?”

“I don’t trust anyone.” She sat down on the edge of her bed and crossed her legs. “I never have.”

“Now would be a good time to start,” he said briskly. “There’s a first time for everything.”

“You’re the first man to turn me down. Everyone else jumps into bed with me.”

“Like I said, Ms. Mundra, there is a first time for everything.”

TWENTY-NINE

## NISHA

*“You’re the first man to turn me down. Everyone else jumps into bed with me.”*

NISHA STARED at the microphone as if it was a live snake rearing back to bite her. He’d turned her down she reminded herself with a vicious stab of satisfaction. There was also the fact that he’d given her this interview to transcribe. This time the vicious stab was one of anger. He didn’t need to rub stuff like this in her face.

She stared at the slew of photographs in the file. It wasn’t like she didn’t know what Anjali Mundra looked like. Everyone did. And yet, there were over fifty photographs in the file. As if they needed to be reminded of her physical perfection. The wicked witch.

Raised voices came from the conference room. Nisha stared at the shut door. Would you look at that, she marveled? She hadn’t flinched at the angry sounds. They were planning the Goa celebrity wedding.

Minakshi Dave was no Anjali Mundra but she wasn’t chicken shit either. And she’d decided on a wedding that was going to cement her brand in the media’s eyes. A wedding that was fast turning into a security nightmare. And though Paul was still holding strong on not leading the project, he was in that room right now helping out with the backend logistics before the team headed to Goa for on the ground reconnaissance of the venue. Nisha was even picking up the lingo of her new job. She was very proud of herself.



After another muffled argument sounded through the door, she sighed and put on her headphones, settling in to transcribe the rest of the evil witch's interview. Why someone would want to stalk her was beyond her imagination, Nisha thought disgruntledly. And why Paul had to be the one to guard her was even more perplexing. They could send Rahul or Agam no? Or Layla? Her eyes lit up at the thought. Layla would take the witch down a peg or two.

The front door flew open and Anjali Mundra blew in like a tornado on steroids. Her hot pink bandage dress wrapped around her body like a caress and her sparkly heels had her towering over Nisha. She looked like she'd walked right off the sets of the new Barbie movie.

Her hassled looking manager stood behind her looking like she'd been to war and lost. She probably had. Her bodyguard in a safari suit waved a useless hand around in the air in front of her. Nisha's eyebrows shot up. What was that supposed to do? Vanquish invisible enemies?

"How may I help you?" she asked, pulling her headphones off and politely getting to her feet.

Anjali strode over to her desk, took a deep drag of her cigarette and then tapped ash on to Nisha's paperweight.

"Get Paul," she ordered, blowing a smoke ring in Nisha's face.

Nisha stared at the ash decorating the whimsy carnelian paperweight that Aarushi had gifted her a few years back on her birthday. And then looked up at the superstar staring at her.

"Say please," she said evenly.

A harsh intake of breath from the assistant was the only indication that anyone in the room had heard Nisha speak.

One perfectly arched eyebrow rose. Nisha felt a brief moment of envy for the other woman's eyebrow game but she squashed it and met the flat gaze boring into her. When Anjali said nothing, she sat back down and pulled out a tissue from her box and started cleaning out the paperweight.

Nobody spoke for several seconds. Nisha started to count them down in her head. She was at fifteen when the door to the conference room opened and Rahul strode out.

“Nisha, I need-“

Whatever he needed went unspoken as he took in the standoff in his reception area.

“What’s going on?” he asked Nisha.

“I was waiting for Ms. Mundra to do something.”

“Do something?” Rahul glanced from one tight face to the other.

“She needs to be fired,” Anjali said, her dulcet tones frigid enough to cut glass.

“Ms. Mundra,” he interjected smoothly. “Why don’t I help you with what you need? What can we do for you today? Was it something important that brought you to our office? What do you want?”

“Paul,” she said, still looking down her straight perfect little nose at Nisha. “I want Paul.”

Of course she did. Nisha rolled her eyes. Maybe she could try to sleep with him again. Maybe this time she would succeed.

Clearly drawn to their voices, the rest of their motley crew streamed out of the conference room. Mayuk, the new intern, squeaked at the sight of Anjali. Nisha hoped the idiot wouldn’t wet his pants in excitement.

Agam, bless his heart, was his usual stone faced self. Layla smirked, a taunting challenge, if ever there was one. And Paul...Paul looked at Nisha. Not Anjali. Nisha. Only Nisha. Worry in his eyes, he raised an eyebrow at her.

She smiled, her heart lightening as she nodded in response to his unasked question. She was fine.

When she glanced back up, it was to see the actress glaring at her, her eyes shooting daggers. Nisha smiled sweetly and continued to polish her paperweight. When she was convinced

she'd removed every last trace of the cigarette ash, she placed it back on her table with a definitive thunk.

Every else in the room stayed frozen in place, watching this weird moment play out.

“I was attacked today,” Anjali said tonelessly. “Thought you should know.”

And the room sprang into action.

Nisha sat back in her chair and watched as the men, Paul included, hovered around the woman, asking a million questions as they escorted Anjali into the conference room. But the only thing that held her attention was the triumphant look Anjali tossed her just before the door shut on her lying ass.

Honestly, Nisha felt sorry for anyone who tried to attack that viper. Poor fellow would be drilled into the ground with the heel of her stiletto before he could even try the ‘a’ of attack.

The door opened again and Paul came out. He walked over to her desk and leaned down.

“Did she say something to you? Do something?” he asked, his gaze roving over her face.

Nisha beamed up at him. “No, Paul. Nothing that I couldn't handle. Go do your thing. Be James Bond.”

He grinned. “James Bond was a spy. I'm more Kevin Costner from Bodyguard.”

Nisha scowled. “Costner fell in love with the celebrity he was guarding.”

“Which is why I'm smarter than him. I have no intention of making the same mistake.”

He walked backwards towards the conference room, his warm eyes on her. “You know what else is different between Costner and me?”

“What?” she asked, smiling as she cupped her chin and stared at him, a little worried she had cartoon hearts streaming

from her eyes.

“I’m sexier.” He winked at her and with one last rakish grin disappeared into the conference room.

“You sure are,” Nisha murmured, one hand patting her chest in a vain bid to get her silly, racing heart to slow down. “You sure as hell are.”

THIRTY

## PAUL

ANJALI MUNDRA HADN'T BEEN ATTACKED. An overly zealous fan had grabbed her for a selfie and she'd played the encounter up for the paparazzi who had been in attendance. The incident had nothing to do with her stalker and she'd known it even before she'd escalated the situation.

Paul rubbed a tired hand over his neck as he squinted at his laptop screen. This day felt never ending. A knock on the door had him looking up. Layla entered looking as fresh as she had when she'd walked in that morning. How the hell did she do that? Paul felt like he'd been run over by a truck which then reversed over him to get away. He probably looked like that too.

"You called for me boss?" she asked, sauntering over to his desk and dropping into the seat in front of it with a loose-limbed grace that was deceptive. He'd seen this woman move and there was nothing loose limbed about it. She was a sheathed blade at the best of times and he pitied the fool in her sights when the sheath came off.

He handed her the file he'd been riffling through. "I need you to go through this and tell me what jumps out at you."

"The Bitch Queen's stalker?" she asked with a laugh. "I can tell you what I think now without looking at the file."

"Go ahead." Paul leaned back in his chair and waited.

"There is no stalker." Layla tossed the file back on the table. "It's all her. This makes good press and she's milking it."

Paul agreed but they didn't get paid to make assumptions. So, he shrugged and answered, "It's one possible answer. But we still need to explore all options."

Layla nodded. "Sure boss. I'll get on it. How much time do I have?"

"Her premiere is this Friday. I'm set to be her date for the night so I can also be on hand for anything that might happen. One of the threats specifically targets the premiere."

"So two days," Layla mused. "I always did like working under pressure."

"You've come to the right place then," Paul told her dryly.

Another knock sounded on the door and they both glanced up as Nisha poked her head in. "Mr. Bharucha is here to meet with you."

Paul groaned as he got to his feet and stretched. "I'll be there in five minutes."

"You have something to wear for the premiere, boss?" Layla asked, glancing through the file in her hands. "You can't be a movie star's date without the right threads."

"Date?" Nisha asked.

Paul caught the edge to her question, his eyebrows rising.

"Oops," Layla grinned, an impish grin that told Paul this had been no mistake. He shook his head at her as she strode out of the room, fanning herself with the file he'd handed her.

"My cover," he told Nisha, fighting the smile tugging at his lips. He didn't need to irritate her further but her little show of jealousy did marvelous things to his ego.

"Why do you need a cover? You could just go as her guard."

"You tell me," Paul replied, spotting a teaching moment. "You know the bare bones of the case."

He could practically see the wheels in her head turning.

“Because,” she finally said grudgingly. “The stalker claims to be in love with her. He wants to propose to her at the premiere. Her showing up with a date is a taunt and will hopefully goad him into making a mistake.”

“Well done,” Paul said softly.

“Why does it have to be you?” she asked with a little pout that he wanted to kiss.

“You want to send Rahul? Aarushi would have a fit. Or Agam?” That made her smile. “Imagine Agam posing for the media with Anjali on his arm. He’d probably have a stroke by the time the evening winds up.”

Nisha opened her mouth to say something, but Paul forestalled her, “Bharucha’s waiting for us.”

She preceded him out of his cabin, leading the way to the conference room.

“I have never slept with anyone in my employ,” Bharucha announced as soon as they walked in.

What had brought that on? Paul glanced at Nisha but she just shrugged.

“We didn’t say you had Sir,” Paul replied mildly.

“I heard all about the slander and lies being spread when you came to do interviews. I wanted to set the record straight.”

“We didn’t believe it for a minute,” Paul assured him. “I have some news for you.”

He slid a folder across the table. Bharucha picked it up leafing through the papers in it.

“Have you completely lost your mind?” he asked, shock morphing into rage as he took in the details in the papers in his hand.

“All the proof you need is right there.” Paul nodded at the file the other man was holding.

“How dare you?” Bharucha got to his feet, fury making his face turn an inexplicable shade of red. “How dare you?”



Nisha moved closer to Paul. He wanted to reach out to comfort, to reassure her but he knew that now wasn't the time for that. He also knew that Nisha would be fine. She was a warrior rediscovering her own strength.

"Mr. Bharucha," she said, surprising them both by speaking. "Please sit down so we can discuss this calmly."

"Calmly?" Bharucha looked at her like she'd lost her mind. "He's accusing my wife of selling my business secrets to my competition."

"He's doing his job," Nisha said gently. "You asked him to find the culprit. He did. The proof, like Paul said, is in your hands. Please sit down so we can see what to do next. You need to figure out damage control."

Bharucha laughed, a disbelieving sound. "Damage control? How do I control this damage?"

Nisha looked at him, a wealth of empathy in her eyes. "By taking it one step at a time." She glanced at Paul and smiled sadly. "And by asking for help when you need it."

Bharucha collapsed into the chair behind him, his head in his hands, the folder falling to the table.

Nisha squeezed his shoulder gently, in comfort. "I'm going to make us all some coffee. And then we'll talk."

THIRTY-ONE

## NISHA

SHE CARRIED the tray laden with coffee and cookies into the room, setting it on the table. The men were deep in conversation over dummy accounts and shadow transfers.

“I’m going to get the CCTV footage Agam retrieved,” Paul said, pushing away from the table and striding from the room.

“One spoon of sugar, Mr. Bharucha?” Nisha asked him as he stared blankly at the table. “Or do you prefer stevia?”

“Adel please,” he said. “After today, I can’t possibly be Mr. Bharucha to you. And stevia would be great.”

Nisha spooned in the stevia and stirred the cup. Her heart went out to him. The shame she’d lived with for so long reflected in the other man’s face. And nobody knew better than her what it felt like to be destroyed by the person who was supposed to love you the most.

“Adel,” she said softly, handing him the cup. “You do realise that the shame is hers, not yours.”

“Is it?” he asked bitterly. “Clearly I wasn’t a very good husband if she needed to resort to insider trading and to selling me and my company out to make a little extra shopping money. How did I not see this? How did I not know?”

The words were an echo of her own bitter thoughts from not so long ago.

“My husband was forcing himself on his subordinates,” she whispered. “I didn’t know either.”

Adel froze, his gaze slowly rising from the table he'd been glaring at and meeting hers.

"I'm so sorry," he said.

"Don't be," Nisha replied. "The shame is his. Not yours or mine."

"Truer words," Paul murmured from the doorway.

When had he come back? How long had he been there? Her hand shook as she fixed another cup of coffee, black, no sugar. Just the way he always drank it.

Paul ran his hand over the top of her hair, dislodging the ponytail it was pulled into.

"Nisha's one of the bravest women I know," he said, wrapping a strong hand around her trembling fingers. "And she makes the best coffee in the world. You should taste that." He pointed at the cup in front of Adel.

The other man rubbed a hand over his face and picked up the cup. He sipped once and then stopped, an arrested look on his face.

"Told you," Paul chuckled.

"Marry me," Adel told her. "Rumour is that I'm going to be single very soon."

Nisha laughed. "Me too."

Paul stiffened beside her, darting a questioning look in her direction. She shook her head. Now wasn't the time for updates on her epic saga of a divorce drama.

"We should form a club." Adel toasted her with his cup. "The broken-hearted coffee drinkers."

"Ehh." Nisha shook her head. "The Marriage Survivalists. And our tag line can be, one coffee bean at a time."

Adel threw his head back and laughed. "I think I might be in love."

"Get in line," Paul muttered darkly, plugging in the pen drive he clutched and tapping at the laptop on the table.

Get in line? Nisha's stupid heart did a drunken hop and twist as she examined those words in the darkest recesses of her mind. Did that mean that Paul felt something for her? Her mind shied away from trying to put the thought in words.

"I should call my lawyer," Adel exhaled as he watched the CCTV footage of his wife having coffee at a Starbucks with the Head of Finance of Vigero, his closest competitor.

"You should," Paul agreed. "You have enough to bury her in court, Mr. Bharucha."

Nisha noted that Paul didn't get the 'Call me Adel' line. Instead, Adel sighed and shook his head. "No. I don't want to bury her. I just want her gone, out of my life and out of my sight."

"You're a better person than I was," she told him, refilling his now empty cup. "I wanted to and did bury him, professionally and personally. I also took a lot of innocent bystanders down in the process."

Paul didn't look up or at her. She didn't blame him. This would forever be her biggest regret. Her quest for vengeance had dragged a lot of people through the mud. People who'd done nothing but be themselves, going about their regular lives, being a friend or a lover. People who'd been hurt and were still hurting.

Then she hadn't cared about their pain. All she'd wanted was to destroy Aman. Now, she saw nothing but the wreckage she'd left behind.

"You should be proud of yourself," she told Adel. "Don't be me."

"He should be lucky enough to be you," Paul answered. "You earned your vengeance. And Adel will get his. There is no one size fits all. The method doesn't have to be the same but the end result will still be justice."

"True," Adel glanced appraisingly at the papers strewn all over the table. "I don't want to bury her but maybe I'll get a little creative with that vengeance after all."

Paul stood up as Adel pulled out his phone and dialed his lawyer. He came to stand behind Nisha, leaning so his lips were a hairsbreadth from her ear.

“Don’t run yourself down, Nisha. You owe yourself more than that.”

The words sounded like permission to be happy, to lay the guilt down and to live fully. Maybe, this time she’d allow herself the grace to accept it.

THIRTY-TWO

## PAUL

HE GLANCED at the clock hanging on the wall across from him. Shit it was late, almost midnight. Between wrapping up Bharucha's account and finishing a sit-rep on Anjali Mundra's case, he'd been swamped all day. He'd also had to avoid Rahul's glowering disapproval and loud comments about how complicated the Goa wedding security was turning out to be.

All in all, he was exhausted. He'd heard the others leave a while ago. He'd kept his headphones on and worked through the chaos of their exits.

Through her exit.

His heart ached as he remembered her conversation with Bharucha, call me Adel. He'd wanted to wrap her up in cotton and tuck her away into a safe house that only he had access to. But he knew better than most that there was no keeping someone safe unless they worked towards it themselves.

On cue, almost like he'd manifested her, his phone rang.

Paul sighed as he answered, "Hello Ma."

Soft sobs filtered through the phone. Alarm and dread speared through him as he asked harshly, "What happened Ma? Are you okay? What did he do?"

"Nothing," his mother sniffled. "Nothing at all. Listen Paul, I want you to send some money now. I need to buy something."

"What do you need to buy at midnight?" he asked, his eyes going back to the clock.



Fatigue settled over him like a cloak. He leaned back in his chair, his fingers finding the light switch and plunging the cabin into darkness. Some parts of his life were better left in the dark.

“Just send the money Paul.” His mother sounded as tired as he felt. “Don’t be difficult.”

“Let me help you Ma,” he said softly. “I will send you money, a lot more money than what you want but only if you leave. If you walk out of that house and-“

“I took vows in church!” his mother exploded on the other end of the line. “I have made a promise to the Lord to honor and-“

“What kind of God asks something like this of you?” Paul’s voice was a bitter rasp.

His mother’s outraged gasp was the only answer her got. Before he could add to his blasphemy, the line went dead.

She’d hung up.

As always, when he asked her to choose, she never chose him.

He opened his desk drawer and pulled out the hip flask he had there. Rahul wouldn’t countenance alcohol in the office but Paul had a stash in his desk for nights like these. He took a large swig, the whiskey burning a trail down his throat.

The door to his cabin swung open and he was on his feet, hand clutching a paperweight, even before a thought could form in his head. He relaxed when he saw the soft curves of Nisha’s body fill the doorway, her messy ponytail falling over one shoulder.

“You’re still here,” he said stupidly, staring at her. Was she really? Or was he manifesting this also?

“I forgot my wallet,” she replied, coming further into the small room. “I came back for it. Why are you sitting in the dark?”

Because you took the light with you when you went, he wanted to reply like the sap he was but he bit his tongue until

he drew blood to keep the words inside.

“Is everything okay, Paul?” Nisha asked, stopping in front of him. “Are *you* okay?”

She was wearing the same kurta and leggings she’d had on earlier today. Soft cream and canary yellow. He knew the shades, the embroidery, and the sequins in it. Hell, he bet he could have even described the shape of each flower along the hem of it, if he had to. When it came to Nisha, he knew everything but said nothing.

Not because he didn’t want to but because he couldn’t.

Her hand came up to cup his cheek, the soft touch unravelling him like nothing else could.

“Talk to me,” she whispered.

He opened his mouth to say something, but no words came out.

So, instead, he kissed her.

He expected her to flinch, to pull away, to run for the door. Instead, Nisha moaned, her mouth opening to his willingly.

Heat exploded between them, an inferno that raged unchecked. Her hand slipped through his hair clenching and tugging, pulling him closer even as he wrapped his arms around her and lifted her onto his desk, seating her on the edge. He tipped her head back as he deepened the kiss, his tongue discovering the sweet cavern of her mouth.

Her legs wrapped around his waist, her core sliding against him, causing a low, burning friction that almost had him coming in his pants like a teenager.

He groaned, ripping his mouth from hers and burying his face in the crook of her shoulder. His entire body shook as he fought for control, the desperate need to strip her and claim her for his own, making it almost impossible.

Nisha turned her face and nipped his ear, her tongue sneaking out and tracing a line against the contour of his jaw.

“Behave,” he gasped, even as he turned into her caress.

“Why?” she asked, her voice shaky. “Don’t you want me?”

Her hesitant insecurity killed him. He caught her hand and placed it on the hard, throbbing length of him.

“Does that seem like I don’t want you?”

Nisha’s hand closed around him, her fingers stroking softly. A desperate groan slipped through his clenched teeth.

Paul dropped his forehead to hers. “I have never wanted anyone the way I want you Nisha,” he said hoarsely. “There is no world, no universe, no atom of space in existence that isn’t filled with my desperate need to have you for myself. You are the sun that I want to orbit for eternity. You are what I never knew I needed, what I never thought to want, what I never hoped to have.”

“Oh!” She kissed him, soft, sweet and frantic. “Then why?”

He kissed her back, unable to help himself. “I’m not saying no. I’m just saying not now.”

“Why?” she asked again.

“Because you are just out of a hellish relationship.”

“My relationship was over long before I walked out,” she whispered. “You know that. I don’t love Aman. I don’t think I ever truly did.”

‘But do you love me?’ he wanted to ask, the desperate, needy words burning like a brand on his tongue.

Instead, what he said was, “And because you’re still married.”

THIRTY-THREE

## NISHA

SHE COULDN'T STOP THINKING about him. The kiss, his declaration of desire for her, *her* desperate need to feel his lips against hers, all of it...

*Because you're still married.*

She hated those words. They held no value and yet, they held the truth. She was married. She was in the process of being un-married but it wasn't done yet. He was right. She was wrong.

But bloody hell, she didn't care. What did that say about her? She pulled that thought out and examined it from every side but no matter how long she worried at it, what she felt for Paul didn't feel wrong. Maybe their timing was off. But *they* weren't.

The front door opened and Paul and Rahul walked in. Nisha's head shot up, her gaze going directly to him. The heated, intense look he sent her had her feeling like she was melting into a puddle where she sat. She cleared her throat and stiffened her spine. She was not going to be a damn jellyfish just because the man *looked* at her.

"Mr. Bharucha cleared his bill today."

She handed Rahul the printed statements, making it a point not to look at Paul. She could feel his eyes boring into her right cheek but she kept her face averted. She knew he was looking at her and if she looked back, she wasn't sure she could stay on this side of the table.

“Great,” Rahul said, oblivious to the fact that she was going up in flames in front of him. “Have Agam and Layla checked in yet?”

Nisha nodded. They were both off doing legwork on different projects and the office had a strict check in policy given the nature of their work.

“Mayukh’s working on the contractor costing for the Goa wedding.”

She saw Rahul glance over at Paul but she couldn’t check to see if Paul had any reaction to the Goa wedding reference.

“Ritika, the wedding planner, called,” she added. “They’ve finalized a seaside resort in South Goa. They’re going to book the place out.”

“That’s good,” Paul murmured, his rough baritone feeling like a feather being stroked over her skin. Goosebumps broke out all over her body and she shifted uncomfortably, trying not to let it show. “If it’s booked out, there are only staff and wedding guests on the premises. Crowd control gets easier.”

“It would be easier if you’d-“

Rahul never got to finish what he was saying because the door opened again and Aarushi walked in with Vaani in tow.

“Rahul Anna!” Vaani exclaimed. “You are not going to believe what happened.”

“Did you blow up your set?”

“No.” Vaani perched on the side of Nisha’s table, her pink ballerina clad foot swinging in the air.

“Did you give Aditya a heart attack?” Rahul was flipping through the papers Nisha had handed him. He didn’t look at Aarushi who was, in turn, looking at her phone like it held the secrets of the Universe.

Nisha glanced away from them and her gaze clashed with Paul’s who was most definitely *looking* at her. Her skin started its heated goosepimple thing again. Damn the man.

“NO!” Vaani exclaimed. “Rubbish you talk!”

Rahul exhaled. “Okay. What happened?”

“My show’s renewed for a second season!” Vaani was in perpetual exclamation mode.

“That’s fantastic.” Rahul’s face broke out into the largest grin Nisha had ever seen. He wrapped his arms around Vaani and rocked her.

“Watch the hair!” she squealed.

For extra effect, Rahul grabbed a long lock of hair and pulled. Vaani punched him, ineffectually but Nisha had to give her an A for effort. Aarushi watched brother and sister, a sad smile on her face. Nisha’s heart ached for her. She was about to go to her when Rahul’s free hand snaked out and grabbed her. He pulled her into the hug with his sister, his arms going around both the women in his life.

And the world righted itself.

Before she could even manage a relieved breath, strong arms came around her waist, pulling her back against a wall of muscle that masqueraded for a chest.

“What-what are you doing?” she mumbled, twisting her head to look up at him.

“I was feeling left out,” he said loudly as he grinned at her. And then he dipped his head and brought his lips to her ear. “And I was missing the feel of you in my arms.”

“Alright,” Rahul said loudly. Nisha practically flew out of Paul’s arms and landed on her desk. She crossed her arms and tried to act like she’d meant to be sitting there all this while.

“We need to celebrate.” Rahul clapped his hands together like he was calling them to order. “Dinner is on me. Text Layla and Agam and ask them to meet us at - ”

They never got to hear the rest of the plan because for what felt like the thousandth time that day, the front door flew open.

Anjali Mundra sauntered in with her safari suited guard. No manager this time, Nisha noted.

“Anjali.” Vaani sprang forward and the two women air kissed each other. “How are you darling?”

“Horrible,” the witch replied with a little quaver in her voice. “You don’t know what it’s like to be stalked. It’s terrible. You’re so lucky that you’re not popular enough for people to lose their heads over you like this.”

OH THAT BITCH!

Nisha could feel Aarushi vibrate with outrage on Vaani’s behalf beside her. But Vaani just smiled. A genuinely happy and peaceful smile.

“I’m the luckiest girl in the world,” she said. “I have a career that I enjoy, family and friends that I adore and a man whom I love to the moon and back.”

Anjali’s cold smile slipped a bit at that and for a second, she looked lost. But in the blink of an eye, her mask slid back into place.

“Lovely,” she said crisply. “But I’m not here to chill.”

Chill? The Ice Queen wanted to chill? How much more chilling could she be capable of? She was an Alaskan Iceberg already.

“I’m here for something else.”

“How can we help you, Ms. Mundra?” Rahul asked, his polite voice on full display, barely masking his irritation with her rudeness to Vaani.

“I want him.”

Nisha’s eyes followed Anjali’s pointing finger to where Paul stood behind her. Would it be bad form to break a client’s finger? It would be, wouldn’t it?



THIRTY-FOUR

## PAUL

“YOU CAN’T HAVE HIM. I’m keeping him.”

The muttered oath that only he heard had Paul smiling even as he moved towards the client. He wrapped his hand around Nisha’s fisted one and squeezed, uncurling her stiff fingers.

“I’ve got this,” he whispered, letting go of her hand unwillingly and following Anjali Mundra into the conference room for her latest delusional conspiracy theory.

An hour later, he left the conference room with a throbbing headache but a very satisfied client. He escorted Anjali out under Nisha’s gimlet eye.

“Where’s everyone?” he asked, shutting the door behind the actress and looking around at the space empty of everyone but Nisha.

“Out celebrating,” she said, looking down at her system as it pinged.

“You didn’t go?” he asked, leaning against her desk and looking down at her.

She looked in his general direction, face averted and not meeting his gaze. “No,” she said softly.

“Why?”

She shut her system down, one careful, methodical step at a time. “I didn’t want to go anywhere without you.”

He stared at her down bent head, the curve of her flushed cheek all that was visible to him. And his heart tipped all the way over into love. Hell, it didn't just tip. It swan dived off the top of a building and landed with a splat, no safety net in sight.

"I don't want to go anywhere without you either, Nisha," he said, the honesty ripped from him on the heels of that realization.

Her cheek went rosy red and suddenly he couldn't wait to see her face, all of it.

"Look at me," he commanded softly.

She shook her head, her braid swishing from one side to the other. He wanted to wrap that thick tail of hair around his hand and yank her head back and...

He took a deep breath, scrubbed his hands over his face and stepped around the table. And then he dropped to his knees in front of her, burying his face in her lap.

Nisha stilled and then slowly, hesitantly, she raised one trembling hand to his hair. Gently stroking, she tangled her fingers in the slightly longer strands of his hair.

Paul groaned, the sound muffled by her kurta. He was never cutting his hair again, not if she would just keep doing whatever she was doing right now. Her nails scraped his scalp and sensation shot through him. He bit back a moan, fisting his hands to keep from reaching for her.

Slowly, aching slowly she moved those magic fingers to the nape of his neck, kneading, massaging and unravelling all the knots of tension he was building like skyscrapers in his shoulder muscles.

"I don't want to go anywhere without you either," he whispered again.

Her fingers stopped moving for an agonizing second before she resumed stroking, unraveling him completely.

"Because of the massage?" she asked, laughter in her breathless voice.

“Because of you.” He tipped his head back looking at her, looking into her, into her beautiful dark eyes and her even more beautiful soul.

Her hands curved around his skull, gently holding him. “What are we doing?” she whispered.

“Whatever you want,” he whispered back. “Whatever you want.”

The phone rang, a shrill jangling sound that broke the moment and pulled them back to the present.

Paul swore under his breath when he realised it was his phone and not the office’s or Nisha’s.

“Hello?” He sat back on his haunches, his fingers still playing with Nisha’s, his body refusing to break contact with her completely.

“Paul?”

He froze. If his sister had made time to call him, the shit had truly hit the fan in Goa.

“Yeah,” he said gruffly.

“I have only a few minutes. I’m at work.” Her crisp, hotel manager voice was both familiar and frighteningly strange at the same time.

This was the same sister who’d rocked him to sleep when his mother couldn’t, the one who’d helped him with homework, who’d turned up at his parent teacher meetings, who’d mothered him until ... she hadn’t. His mind shied away from the past. He ached to lay his head on Nisha’s lap again but he forced himself to stand and step away from her instead.

“Are you there, Paul?” his sister asked.

“Tell me,” he replied, equally crisply.

“You need to come home.”

“Why?” He stared blindly at the wall in front of him. A deep royal blue the wall was, part of Nisha’s rebranding effort. “Tell me how much to transfer and I’ll do it.”

“It’s not about money, Paul.”

“It’s not?” He was genuinely surprised. When was the last time any member of his family had reached out for anything else? Well, that and his mother’s random attempts to get him married to girls in her church. It was her hope that their God-fearing lives would rinse the sin out of his.

“No, Paul it’s not.” His sister’s impatient voice cut through his meandering thoughts. “You need to come home.”

“You keep saying that,” he replied warily. “I still don’t understand why.”

“He’s dying.”

The world around him went silent, like the silence that came in the immediacy of a bomb blast. The seconds before the deafening sounds of catastrophe rushed in.

“You need to come home Paul. If you don’t, you may never get to see or speak to him again.”

And there it was, the sound that broke through his calm, bringing with it rubble and chaos.

“No.” There was no other response. There never had been.

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” His sister’s voice rose sharply. “He’s dying!”

“Good,” he answered, his voice even and calm. “About fucking time.”

THIRTY-FIVE

## NISHA

“PAUL?”

His frozen silence felt like what she imagined a dormant volcano would feel like. Quiet, calm and oozing impending doom.

“We should go join the others,” he said, his voice still eerily calm.

“Sure.” Nisha was confused but trying not to show it. She grabbed her purse and checked that everything was in order at her desk before following him to the door.

“Are you okay?” she asked, as Paul inputted the code to lock the front door.

“Yes.”

The clipped answer didn't reassure her. A burst of giggles from the marriage bureau across the hall had Nisha glancing over. A young girl and her mother were laughing over some photographs in their hands. For the first time as she watched, she felt nothing but happiness at the other girl's open excitement.

“Is he cute?” she called out.

The girl glanced over, eyes dancing. “Very didi. But he has a big moustache.”

“You don't like moustaches?” Nisha wandered over, Paul following like a giant wordless guard.

“No.” The younger girl giggled. “Too poky.”

“Tu kay bolet aahes,” her mother admonished, looking embarrassed. She continued to scold her daughter in Marathi, telling her not to talk rubbish to strangers.

Nisha laughed, a freeness to her spirit rising inside her and taking flight. “That’s easy enough to fix.” She winked at the girl. “Just get him to shave it off.”

Paul and Nisha took the steps, leaving the chattering mother-daughter duo to their excited plans. They walked together, down the crowded pavement. Nisha bent to drop a few notes into the steel plate an old beggar held out to her. Paul stopped immediately, waiting for her. For all that he was marching along like a silent monolith, she knew he was aware of her every move.

She straightened and turned towards him but he spun on his heel and started walking. Nisha knew a lot about what hurting looked like and right now, Paul was hurting very badly.

She caught his hand, twining her fingers with his. He tried to jerk back but she wouldn’t let go. And eventually after a little tug of war of stubbornness, he finally left his hand in hers.

“Should we hail a cab?” she asked, looking up and down the crowded road for an available taxi.

“I’ll check the app for available cabs,” he said, pulling his phone out.

“Or we could walk it?” she suggested. “Isn’t the restaurant they picked only a ten-minute walk from here? No cab will take us that short distance anyway. Maybe an auto would...”

She bit her lip and looked around but obeying the laws of Auto Gods everywhere, there wasn’t an auto in sight.

She tugged at Paul’s captured hand. “Come on. Let’s walk. It’s a pleasant evening.”

It wasn’t actually. It was a muggy day compounded by a dusty, crowded sidewalk but Nisha wouldn’t be deterred. Sometimes a good, bracing walk helped clear the brain. Her therapist kept rattling on about endorphins and exercise and



fresh air and whatnot. This would be some mish mash of those things.

They walked a little longer before Nisha said, “Have you ever considered counseling?”

Paul tensed, his muscles bunching under her arm. “No.”

“I didn’t like the idea either initially,” Nisha prattled on. “But Aaru pushed me into it and my mom nagged me into going regularly and it helped. It really helped.”

“Nisha,” he exhaled forcefully. “I said no. We’re not doing this.”

“Why not? It helps to talk. Okay, don’t talk to a counselor. Talk to me.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he said tersely.

“But Paul-“

“I don’t want to fucking talk about it!” The words exploded out of him. Several passersby stopped to stare, waiting for whatever drama was happening to develop.

A small part of Nisha shriveled at his tone but she held her ground.

“I’m trying to help.”

“Did I force you to talk about your issues?” He glared at her, a lock of hair blowing into his eyes with a sudden gust of dusty breeze. He shook it out of his face, thrusting his hands through his hair and tugging. “Did I?”

Nisha shook her head, a giant knot of emotion clogging her throat. “No, but-“

“Then let it go,” he warned. “I don’t need you meddling in stuff you know nothing about.”

His words lit a kernel of anger in her chest. A kernel that flared into a raging bonfire within seconds.

“YOU. MEDDLED. FIRST.”

She punctuated each word with a slap to his chest. He didn’t move, just stood there and stared.

“Ever since I started working at J&A, you have meddled in my life constantly,” she seethed. “You’ve been poking, prodding, giving advice, pontificating-“

“Pontificating?” His eyebrows shot up.

“Don’t interrupt me when I’m talking!” she yelled, placing both hands on his chest and shoving. This time she took him by surprise and he stumbled back a step. “And yes pontificating!”

“You have made my business your business. You have made my pain your pain. You have made my life your life. You have made me yours.”

Paul shut his eyes, the lines on his face deepening at her declaration.

“You don’t get to push me away now, Paul Alvares. Because if I am yours, then you are mine. And I take care of what’s mine. If I need to meddle, I’ll meddle. And if I need to kick your ass to do it, I’ll do it wearing stilettos.”

THIRTY-SIX

## PAUL

HER CONCERN and affection warmed his heart even if it came with the threat of poking holes in his butt. But Paul just couldn't...he couldn't go there with her. Nisha had seen enough ugliness and his wasn't anything he wanted to air.

He hadn't told anyone so far, not even Rahul who was his brother from another mother. When he'd left Goa to join the Navy, he'd left that life behind and he refused to track its mud through his new life. He just couldn't.

"Nisha please." He tried to scrub the exhaustion from his voice, but it felt impossible. "I need you to leave this alone."

"No, I –"

"Enough," he snapped. He dug his hands into his hair and tugged. Definitely cutting the fucking thing soon. "I can't do this anymore. I'm going to drop you off at the restaurant and then go home."

Nisha went very still, very silent.

Paul sighed. "I'm sorry. I just need some space. It's not–"

"Fuck you," she replied, very quietly. "Don't patronize me."

She turned on her heel, hefting her massive bag onto her shoulder and marching off.

"Where are you going?" he jogged after her, catching up easily.

“I don’t need you to drop me anywhere. I am a fully functioning adult.” She hefted her handbag again as the straps started to slip off her shoulder.

Paul caught one strap and tugged. He did *not* expect it to come loose in his hand. Nisha’s bag slipped off her shoulder and went flying, its contents splattering all over the pavement. A threadbare wallet, a ballpoint pen, tampons, keys and a well-used notebook lay between them.

“Fuck!” he muttered, crouching and starting to collect her stuff.

Nisha got down on her haunches and silently crammed everything back into her handbag. When he handed her the box of tampons, her fingers brushed against his and he caught them with the tips of his.

“Nisha-“

“I think we both need a little space from each other, don’t you?” she said.

His fingers slipped away from hers. He stood slowly, feeling like every joint creaked in his body.

“Yeah,” he said, rubbing a hand over his chest right where his stupid heart ached. “That’s probably for the best.”

She nodded, looking a little lost. He wanted to grab her, squeeze her in his arms and keep her there forever.

Instead, he shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. She wanted space. He would give her space.

Nisha didn’t know it yet but there was nothing in this world she could ask for that he wouldn’t give her.

Except for the truth of his past. Not right now. He just couldn’t go there yet. Not with *his* death looming on the horizon...

Nisha flagged down an auto and miraculously, it even stopped in front of her. Even more miraculously the driver agreed to the ride. Clearly, even fortune and the Gods weren’t on his side today. They were helping Nisha escape him as fast as possible.

She got in without looking in his direction.

Just as the autowallah pulled on his lever and revved his engine, Paul caught the metal side and popped his head into the auto.

“I’m not saying no, Nisha. I’m just saying not now.”

She looked at him, tiny tears shimmering in her eyes.

“I’m not ready to talk about it,” he said hoarsely.

She nodded, swiping at one tear that slipped down her cheek. The auto driver made an annoyed noise in the back of his throat.

Paul cupped her cheek, gently wiping away the second tear that escaped.

“Take as much space as you want,” he told her.

“You too,” she said. “And I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to push.”

“I’m glad you did. Pushing means you care.”

A torrent of irritated Marathi from the front seat had him stepping back.

“Message me when you get home,” he told her.

Much later, hours later, he got a message from her.

*I’m home.*

His thumb swiped over the screen as her words lit up his display. He glanced around his tiny studio apartment. When he’d rented it, he hadn’t cared too much. It had been a space to store his stuff, to shower and change, to fall asleep at night. Nothing more, nothing less.

And then Nisha had stepped into his life. And now...now everything about his life looked inadequate, felt inadequate.

He didn’t want her texting him that she was home. He wanted her home with him. But this home...

He looked around again. His home wasn’t ready for her. His *life* wasn’t ready for her. He wasn’t ready for her.

But he wanted to be.

THIRTY-SEVEN



## NISHA

“I NEED you to pretend to be my girlfriend,” Agam announced.

Nisha shook her head even as Paul’s cabin door banged open, his looming presence appearing in the doorway. She didn’t look at the Thundercloud of Doom.

“Why do you need me?” she asked, focusing on Agam. “Take Layla.”

“She’s on another case. Also, this is good training for you.”

The answer came swiftly, telling her he’d been rehearsing it. Agam had become a master of evading any task that involved him working closely with Layla.

“Training?” she smirked. “Pretending to be your girlfriend?”

“It’s undercover work,” he told her loftily.

Nisha shook her head, smiling. “Look, I really need to finish the monthly expense tracking sheet for Rahul. I don’t have time for spy games today.”

“But they’re fun spy games!” Agam protested. “Nisha please.”

“I have to finish-“

“I’ll wait. Pretty please with jam on top.” He clutched his bald head dramatically.

“Fine.” Nisha laughed, giving in. “Give me half an hour.”

Paul harrumphed from the doorway. Both of them ignored him. Nisha was determined not to let his gloom and doom mood affect her days. They'd decided on space, they could have space. There was no need for the space to be all morose and broody.

It had been a week since their confrontation. A very long week. She ached to put this distance behind them but in the core of her heart, she knew it was necessary.

Sometimes healing couldn't be a joint effort. Sometimes it was a solitary journey. If at the end of it, they found their way back to each other it would be wonderful. And if they didn't, she knew she would still be okay and that was enough for her. She was enough for herself.

A strange feeling flooded her. It felt warm and safe and...it felt peaceful. It was such a foreign concept for her that she savoured it, her body opening to that feeling of calm like a flower in the sun.

"Okay," she told Agam, beaming up at him sunnily. "I'll be your girlfriend."

Paul growled, a feral sound that had them glancing towards him.

"Down boy," Agam said mildly. "Fake girlfriend."

Paul disappeared back into his cabin, slamming the door behind him.

"He's the easygoing one," Agam said with dismay. "What did you do to him? You broke him Nish Pish."

A little pang of worry and guilt had her frowning down at her computer. Had she done that? As someone who'd been broken, she'd hate to think she'd done the same to Paul.

"Hey," Agam said gently, tipping her chin up. "I was joking. Growly Bear in there is fine. He just needs to get his head out of his ass."

Nisha glanced back at the shut door, her heart still squirming with anxiety. Her wonderful moment of peace

disappeared as she wondered if she should go in and check on Paul.

“Should I-“ she began.

“No.” Agam shook his head. “He’s a grown, functional adult. He can take care of himself and if he needs help, he’ll ask. You finish your work and let me know you’re ready and then we’ll head out on the new project.”

She nodded, tapping out some numbers in the spreadsheet she was working on. Agam disappeared into the pantry and her gaze wandered back to Paul’s shut door. Should she? Paul had never left her to worry or mope alone. Shouldn’t she check on him?

She stayed in her seat, forcing herself to complete her work. But the minute she typed out the last column of numbers, she was out of her chair and heading to Paul’s cabin. She knocked and entered before he could respond.

He looked up from the photographs he was looking at, his eyes burning a hole through her.

“Yes?” The word was distant, the tone formal...but the way he looked at her. Dear Lord, the way this man looked at her. Words couldn’t describe the emotion that swam in those intense, dark eyes.

Nisha didn’t need the words. She saw the intolerable craving in her heart reflected back at her in his gaze.

“Are you okay?” she asked huskily.

“Am I okay?” he repeated. “Am I okay?”

“Yes, I believe that is what I asked,” she told the belligerent ass.

Nisha could love someone and still know when they were being an ass.

Love.

The word stopped her in her tracks. Was this love? She’d thought she’d loved Aman when she married him. But anything she’d felt for Aman had been a pale imitation of the

violent, intense, colourful emotion bursting through her right now.

“I’m fine,” he said tersely, dragging her from her chaotic thoughts.

“Liar.” The word slipped out without conscious thought.

“Okay Nisha, you win,” he bit the words out. “I’m not fine. I can’t look at you without wanting to kiss you. I can’t eat a meal without wondering if you’ve eaten yours. I can’t work without asking myself if I can roster you on the same project. I want to give you space but I find myself also wanting to fill that space with-“

“Ready to go?” Agam appeared beside her.

Fill that space with? What had Paul been about to say? Nisha threw him a wide-eyed glance but Paul had already gone back to the many pictures of Anjali Mundra on his desk. She waited but he didn’t look up again.

“Yes,” she told Agam finally. “I’m ready to go.”

“Let’s go girlfriend,” Agam announced cheerfully.

A crackling sound filled the air. Nisha watched as Paul tossed a crumpled picture into the bin.

“Have fun,” he told them with a tight smile. “And be safe.”

“We will,” Agam assured him.

Oh fuck space! Nisha took a step toward Paul. He noticed, his hands whitening around the corner of his desk as he watched her.

Her phone rang before she reached him. She glanced down and her blood ran cold. Her lawyer was calling her and there was only one reason why she would call.

This was about her divorce.

THIRTY-EIGHT

## PAUL

NISHA'S FACE WENT WHITE. Whoever was calling her, it wasn't someone she wanted to hear from. He was halfway out of his seat when she muttered, 'Excuse me' and ran from the room.

He looked at Agam who shrugged in response. A few minutes later, Nisha reappeared.

"Ready to go?" she asked Agam, not looking at Paul.

"Are you okay?" he asked her, grabbing for her arm before she marched off. He only managed to grasp the tip of her dupatta instead.

It felt like Nisha and he spent a ridiculous amount of time asking each other if they were okay. There was something both reassuring as well as worrying in that dynamic.

"Yes," she smiled briefly, a close-lipped tight smile. And then she looked away. "Shall we go Agam?"

She walked away without waiting for a response, her dupatta slipping through his fingers. He stared down at his hand and then at the empty doorway. So, this was where he was at then? A sappy B-town mopey hero type grabbing for the heroine's dupatta.

He shook his head at himself, a wry smile breaking through his bad mood. His phone started ringing and his smile disappeared as he glanced at the display. Shit.

"Good morning Ma."

He leaned against his table, bracing himself for what the call would bring.

“God bless you,” she responded making him blink. Was it a Sunday? His mother usually got extra religious on a Sunday. But no, he was pretty sure this was a Wednesday.

“Umm thank you,” he murmured still feeling a little blindsided.

“The money is very helpful with Jonathon’s treatment.”

Right of course, the money he’d sent. The world righted itself as his mother’s priorities slid back into focus. Jonathon. Always Jonathon. He waited but he didn’t hear a thank you but maybe the God bless you was that?

Silence fell on the phone line and Paul found himself casting around for something to say. Should he tell his mother that he’d met someone? She’d been after him for years to settle down but if she knew Nisha wasn’t Christian...he had a feeling she’d consider his soul headed for the bowels of hell itself.

“Are you okay?” He fell back on Nisha’s favourite question to him.

“Of course,” his mother snapped back defensively. “Why wouldn’t I be? Now Jonathon-“

“I didn’t ask about him,” he interrupted curtly.

This time the silence on the line was tense. And then his mother said, “Don’t be like that. He’s your father.”

“He is not my father,” Paul gritted out, wanting to put his fist through the wall. How was his mother so blind to everything that had gone on in their lives?

“There is no need to be an ungrateful brat.” His mother’s stiff tones reached him through the phone.

Maybe he could smash the phone too. Then no one would be able to reach him. Ever again. Now *there* was a life goal, if ever there was one.

“I want you to come to Goa.” His mother abruptly changed conversational gears.

“Why?” He had no intention of visiting the invalid. He could send money but that was all he could do.

“Juney was saying that her niece is coming from Delhi for a holiday end of this month. She is very pretty, a lawyer and all. You also come.”

“Ma,” he groaned. “You need to stop.”

“Why? You want to die alone?”

“Everyone dies alone,” he muttered. Except, apparently for fucking Jonathon. Now that guy had the luck of the devil.

His mother let that pass, moving on to her next form of torture. “I sent your picture to Juney to send to the girl. You know that one in your navy uniform? You look so handsome in it.”

“I’m not in the Navy any more Ma!” Really? He was worried about accurate representation now? This was the hill he chose to die on?

“Okay man.” His mother waved that off. “What is the big deal? You were in the Navy, no? It’s not a lie.”

“Stop sending my pictures to random women!”

“Why? How will you get married if they don’t know what you look like? One thing you have is a nice face, that also you don’t want to show them?”

Apparently, all his mother thought he had was a nice face. Wonderful.

“Ma just stop please.”

“Paul, you stop. What is this behaviour man? You are already so old and-“

“I’m in love with someone,” he blurted out, desperate to shut her up.

Silence and then... “WHAT???”

The outraged maternal screech was deafening. Sometimes he wondered if his mother’s ‘Get Paul Married’ drive came from the fact that she hadn’t bothered with ‘Get Paul Fed’ or



‘Get Paul clothed’ while he was growing up. Was this level of overcompensation required though?

“Who is she? Which church does she belong to? Is she catholic? What does she do? Send a photo? When are we meeting her? Come to Goa! Bring her!”

“No.”

“No what?” his mother demanded.

“No to everything.” His temples throbbed and he dug his thumbs into them to still the pain. “Just no.”

His mother took a deep breath. “Paul, he won’t last long. Come to Goa no? One last time man.”

His chest tightened, the oxygen seeming to leach out of his body. “No,” he said again, simply. And then he hung up.

THIRTY-NINE

## NISHA

“THIS FRIDAY?” Nisha asked, relief and anxiety churning in her stomach and making her nauseous.

“Yes.” Her lawyer smiled encouragingly. “This is good news Nisha. You’re going to be free of this marriage in two days.”

“Will he be there?” Nisha waited for the stab of fear that always accompanied the thought of coming face to face with Aman.

“I doubt it.” The lawyer’s mind was already on something else. Nisha watched her distracted face for a second before standing. “I guess I’ll go then.”

The lawyer nodded without looking up at her.

“Do I need to bring anything with me on Friday?” She stopped at the entrance to the office to ask.

“Just yourself.” The other woman looked up and smiled. “We’re going to be done with all this soon.”

Nisha nodded, anxiety and relief swarming through her and making her feel shaky.

“And Nisha?”

She stopped, turned around.

“Can you pay another twenty five thousand to my admin person? That should settle all bills unless something comes up on Friday.”

“Sure.”

Nisha's hands were slick with sweat as she fumbled in her handbag for her debit card. Thankfully, her salary had hit her bank account just yesterday or this transfer would have been tricky.

She finished paying up and then stepped out into the bright sunlight, blinking a little as she allowed her heartrate to settle before looking around for an auto. There were none in sight so she walked a little further down, looking around for any stray autos but today, it didn't look like luck was on her side.

A man jostled her arm and she staggered a little.

"Sorry didi," he said before walking off hurriedly in case she caused a scene.

A shop window caught her eye and she froze, A long pale blue maxi dress hung on the mannequin in the display. It was pretty and like something she would have worn before she got married. It was something she hadn't worn since. It wouldn't have been becoming of what was expected of an officer's wife. Or so Aman had always told her.

She glanced down at the brown and cream kurta she was wearing. She hated it but it had been one of the gifts her soon-to-be-ex mother-in-law had gotten her. And she hadn't really had disposable income to revamp her wardrobe. She still didn't. She'd just emptied out her account at the lawyer's office.

She stared at the dress, her mind turning over temptation she hadn't felt in a long time. Her phone rang and she pulled it out of her handbag.

"Hi Agam."

"You're ready for this evening?" he asked.

Right. That evening when she was pretending to be his girlfriend at dinner at a fancy party in an even fancier restaurant.

"Not yet," she said, her eyes on the dress in front of her. "But I will be."

“I’ll pick you up from the office at eight,” he told her. “Dress fancy.”

She twirled the phone in her hands after Agam disconnected, her mind still going in circles. Dress fancy. Fancy wasn’t a cream and brown kurta.

“Aaru?” She held the phone to her ear. “Can you Gpay me a little money? I’ll pay you back next month.”

She told Aaru how much she wanted and then noted ruefully that her friend had sent her a lot more than that when her phone pinged.

She took a deep breath and shoved her way through the boutique door. It was time to rack up a little debt. Hopefully, it would be worth it.

A little more than an hour later, she walked out laden down with shopping bags and enough endorphins coursing through her to have her levitating off the pavement.

She typed out a message on the office group telling everyone that she was going to be out of office for the remainder of the afternoon but would meet Agam there at eight that night for the evening assignment.

And then she marched home, her agenda for the day set. She had two days before true freedom beckoned but wasn’t freedom what you made of the moment?

And she had accumulated a lifetime of moments in the last year of her life. A lifetime that she’d crafted out of the shards of her broken life. A lifetime that she was now going to finesse into something more.

She didn’t want to be the Nisha she’d been before her marriage. She definitely didn’t want to be the Nisha she’d been during her marriage.

But who was the Nisha she was going to be now? She didn’t know. This Nisha was a work in progress. And today, she was determined to take large strides in the direction of that progress.

“Back home so soon?” Ma asked as she walked into the flat a little while later.

“Ya Ma.” Nisha dumped the bags on the table in front of her mother. “Want to see what I bought?”

Ma looked at the bags and then back at her. “You chose these clothes?” she asked softly.

Nisha nodded.

“Then I love them already.” Ma blinked her suspiciously shiny eyes. “Come show me everything.”

FORTY

## PAUL

PAUL GLANCED AT THE CLOCK. Seven forty eight. This evening was going painfully slowly. He'd wrapped up work by six that evening but Nisha's message in the office group had kept him glued to his seat all day. He hadn't seen her all day and if she was coming in at eight, he would damn well be here at eight.

The front door opened and he glanced up but it was only Agam. The idiot was wearing a three piece suit that looked like it would burst at the seams. The women were going to cream themselves over the fool's muscles.

He took a sip of his black coffee and grimaced. He couldn't figure out what he was doing wrong but the coffee he made never tasted like the ambrosia Nisha dished out.

"Working late?" Agam sauntered over, shooting his cuffs.

Paul grunted. He'd always been the one with the words. Glib, easy, careless. Words had come easily to him until Nisha had blown through his life and reduced him to animal noises.

"Take care of her," he muttered to Agam.

"It's just surveillance, man. I'd never take her out on something truly dangerous." Agam came to lean beside him on the table.

He knew that. Paul's lizard brain, however, was having a tough time accepting it. He didn't want Nisha out in the field unless he was right there beside her. He exhaled hard, took another sip of his shit coffee.



“Have you told her how you feel?” Agam asked, rubbing one massive paw over his bald head.

Paul slid him a sideways glare. Agam just shrugged and grinned.

“Have you told Layla how you feel?” Paul asked.

Agam stopped grinning. He scowled. “You mean the fact that I think she’s the most irritating woman in the world?”

“Ya right!” Paul hooted. “Sell that shit to someone else.”

The door opened and they both turned towards it. Rahul strode in, his leather briefcase in one hand. He stopped short at the sight of them.

“What are you guys supposed to be? My welcoming committee?”

Paul and Agam snorted in unison. Rahul grinned, dropping his briefcase on the couch in the reception and saying, “Off to the Prabhas shindig?”

“Yep.” Agam shot his cuffs again. Paul wondered what he’d do if Paul cut them off his wrists.

“Nisha’s going with you?” Rahul loosened his tie and rubbed the back of his neck with one hand.

Agam nodded in reply. “Tough meeting?” he asked.

“Minakshi Dave’s wedding in Goa.” Rahul flopped down on the couch, his head falling back against the backrest. “It’s a fucking nightmare.”

Guilt twisted Paul’s insides. He could make his friend’s life a lot easier but he was being selfish this time. So fucking selfish. And still, he couldn’t bring himself to take over on the Dave project.

“What’s the problem?” he asked, wondering if he could help in the backend.

Rahul opened one eye to glare at him. “Do you care?”

“I care,” Paul replied. “I just –“

“He doesn’t want to tell us how he feels. Just like he doesn’t tell Nisha.” Agam butted in. He grabbed Paul’s coffee and took a big, slurping sip. And then said, “This coffee is crap.”

“Then don’t drink it,” Paul muttered irritably, swiping his mug back. He made it a point to not look in Rahul’s direction.

“That’s a thing?” Rahul asked, his quiet voice pulling Paul’s gaze to his.

“It’s not a *thing*. She’s not just a thing.” Paul’s voice stayed quiet, the intensity in it screaming through. “She’s – “

The other men stayed silent, waiting for him to finish.

“She’s everything.”

The door opened. All three of them looked over. The world stilled. Paul could have sworn that every thought, every word, every feeling slipped into a meaningless void. There was only her. Only ever her.

She wore a sleeveless yellow dress that molded her ample breasts, flaring out from her waist to end in a soft drape right above her knees. Her hair, that black brown mass of waves cascaded down her back ending in the small of her waist. Her makeup was flawless, her big, doe eyes dramatically lined with black eyeliner and complemented by her nude lipstick that left the faintest shimmer on her lips. The nude pumps she wore on her slender, tiny feet brought her up the slightest bit to perfect kissing height.

He wanted to bury his face in her hair and breathe in her scent. He wanted to kiss that shimmer off her lips and taste her sweetness. He wanted to drop to his knees and worship her.

Instead, he took another sip of his fucking awful coffee and said, “Hey.”

Her expectant smile dimmed a little and she said, “Hey.” A soft mumble that made him want to gabble out a million apologies.

Beside him Agam wolf whistled. “Hello gorgeous,” he crooned. “Every man in the room is going to want to be me

tonight.”

Nisha blushed. “You said dress fancy.”

“I did. Consider it the office dress code from tomorrow,” Agam announced.

Kill him now. If Nisha dressed like this to office every day, Paul would be a walking heart attack waiting to happen.

“You look beautiful, Nisha.” Rahul rose to his feet, hugged her and bent to kiss her cheek. Paul wondered if he should stab his best friend in the neck.

“Time for us to leave,” Agam said, holding his arm out for Nisha. She took it with a giggle. And with a little swish of hair and sway of those delectable hips of hers, they left.

Paul stared at the door as it swung shut behind them.

“Dude you’re fucked,” Rahul observed.

Yeah. Yeah he was. And if he wanted to get un-fucked, then Paul had some work to do.

“I’ll help you with Goa.”

Rahul’s smile broke through, a slow, relieved beam.

“You will?”

“I will,” Paul confirmed.

FORTY-ONE

## NISHA

“I NEED THE DAY OFF.”

Nisha shuffled her feet in front of Rahul. Paul was leaning over the conference room table, his strong forearms braced against the wooden tabletop. The two of them had been going over plans of the Goa resort in preparation for the meeting with the security consultants who were due to come in any minute now.

“Sure,” Rahul said distractedly, making broad strokes with his pen against the banquet hall floor plan. “Go ahead.”

She was about to leave when a gravelly voice stopped her. “Are you sick?” Paul eyes were scanning her body like he had x-ray vision.

Nisha adjusted her dupatta. She was back in her old kurta sets, her bravado of the last few days fleeing her in the harsh reality of what today held for her.

“I’m fine,” she mumbled, looking away from the temptation of him. “I have some personal work.”

“What personal work?” Paul was annoyingly persistent. “Anything I can help with?”

“No,” she said backing away, desperate to get out of the conference room. Her nerves were a million, live bees stinging their way through her bloodstream.

“Nisha!” Paul was rounding the table now, walking towards her, reaching for her. “What-“

“Paul, I asked for space!” The words were curt, defensive and borderline rude. She worked to moderate her tone. “I’d appreciate it if you’d give me some.”

He stopped walking, his outstretched hand falling to his side.

“Of course,” he said stiffly, backing away from her.

Nisha fled the room before she threw herself into his arms and begged him to come with her, hold her hand and help her face the misery and grief waiting for her that day. She’d booked a cab for herself knowing today wasn’t a day for praying at the altar of the auto Gods.

She stopped long enough to grab her purse and then stumbled out of the office. Thankfully, the taxi was waiting and she could get in without hanging around on the pavement, giving any of the super spy/security consultants/James Bond types she worked with time to track her and catch up with her.

The car pulled away from the kerb as she wiped the endless tears streaming down her face. Why was she sad? The man had been the worst of humanity and her marriage had been stale before it had descended into the dregs of depravity and unhappiness. Today was just a stamp on a paper ending it long after it had already ended. So why was she sad?

Why did it feel like her heart was breaking again? Why did it feel like she was losing everything, all over again? Why did it feel like everything was ending and she couldn’t see the other side of that end? Not through this stream of tears. She couldn’t see anything through these damn tears.

She paid the driver and got out of the cab. She wiped her tears, patting her cheeks dry with her dupatta before walking into the crowded corridors of the court. Her lawyer beckoned her over and she went to join her.

“You didn’t bring your family?” The lawyer clicked her phone off and looked over Nisha’s shoulder.

Nisha shook her head. “I need to do this alone.”

“You should have brought your family. He’s out on bail,” the lawyer informed her without preamble. “So, the chances of

him appearing today are high. You shouldn't be alone."

Her broken heart pieced itself together, one shard at a time. She wouldn't let that man take any more from her. No more. Not now. Not ever again.

"Let him come," she replied.

Her lawyer gave her an approving nod before turning away to confer with her assistant. Nisha walked towards the metal chairs in the waiting area and took a seat. All around people sat, some fought, some cried, some spoke in hushed whispers...and a few like Nisha, sat in silence, an island of their own.

The court's clerk stood by the door, shouting out cases as their number was called. Nisha couldn't figure out what he was yelling, it was all garbled noise to her ears. And then he was there.

A thinner, paler version of the robust, jovial man she remembered. The demon of her nightmares, risen from her past seemed strangely diminished.

"Nisha." He still stood with that military bearing that she'd fallen for when he'd come to her house to 'see' her.

"Aman." She stood to face him, unwilling to give him even the miniscule advantage of his greater height.

"May I sit beside you?"

The memory of his hands in her hair, dragging her across the living room and throwing her to the floor slammed through her. Nisha took a shaky breath and straightened.

"I'd prefer you sit somewhere else," she told him, her voice holding only the barest quaver.

He'd been about to lower himself into the seat next to her but paused, surprised by her response.

"I prefer this though," he said after a beat of silence. She stared down at him, seated there in all his confidence, all his composure, and she felt her own falter.

"Then I'll sit somewhere else," she said, moving away.

“Everywhere else is taken.” He didn’t look at her, scrolling through something on his phone. “You’ll have to stand.”

He looked up now, holding her gaze in challenge.

“Then I’ll stand,” she told him quietly. “I’d prefer it.”

He caught her hand as she went to move away. She stared at his fingers pointedly and after a second, he removed them from her wrist.

“I wanted to say, I’m sorry it had to end this way. It really wasn’t necessary.” He glanced around the crowded room, avoiding her gaze.

Incredulity bubbled up inside her. “Wasn’t it? This was the only logical ending Aman.”

“It’s all your fault really. If you’d just been a bit more understanding, I wouldn’t have had to look elsewhere for my needs.”

“You drugged and raped young boys. Boys who were in your care, your students!”

His gaze met hers and skittered away. “The case hasn’t been closed yet. It’s their word against mine. I can still be proven innocent.”

“But are you?”

He made her sick. Fear and anxiety were replaced by a disgust so deep she didn’t think it would ever leave her.

“Fine.” He waved a dismissive hand in the air. “Take your prudish outrage and go stand somewhere. I don’t know why I bother with you.”

“I really wish you never had bothered with me,” she told him honestly before walking away. She almost made it to the back of the room before she heard the clerk yell something and then her lawyer was gesturing her forward.

She stood beside Aman, for the last time, and faced the judge as he passed their divorce decree. A bang of the gavel, her signature in an old, tattered ledger and it was done.



She watched Aman stride out of the court without a backward glance. Her lawyer shook her hand, congratulated her and marched off with her assistants in tow.

It was over. She was free. She was alone.

It was surreal. The feeling of being disconnected, being disjointed and just the slightest bit dizzy wrapped itself around her. And then she looked up and saw him, standing just outside the gates of the court, looking back at her.

Oh God. The way this man looked at her.

She was running before she knew it. She flew through the chattering crowd, the handcuffed criminals and, finally, the broken gate of the courthouse. She flew through it all and straight into his arms. They closed around her, the strength of his grip holding her, anchoring her, bringing her back.

And just like that, the world righted itself.

FORTY-TWO

## PAUL

“HOW DID YOU KNOW?” Nisha asked, her face buried in the hollow of his throat.

Paul pressed a kiss to the top of her head, her gorgeous hair braided back so tightly it made his own head hurt to watch it.

“Consider it part of my spy games.” Actually, Aarushi had told him. She’d also told him that Nisha wanted to do this on her own. So, he’d come to be there for her but had stayed outside. Space. She’d asked for it and she deserved to get everything she asked for.

He’d watched Aman leave, the asshole’s shoulders slumped and rightfully so. He’d lost the most precious person in the world today. His life would never sparkle the same way again.

Nisha’s arms stayed locked around him and Paul made no move to change their current position. There was nowhere he’d rather be than standing here with this woman in his arms. His woman.

After an age, she sniffled and lifted her head, looking up at him.

“Want to go to Juhu? To the beach?”

“The beach?” he asked, eyebrows raised.

She nodded, her smile spreading across her face like the slow dawn of a summer morning. “I could use some time in a beachside café, drinking coffee and snacking on junk food.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” he told her, his hand already raised to flag down a black and yellow taxi driving by. The guy drove right past them without even deigning to slow down.

“And I think you could use some ocean today,” she added quietly.

His heart flipped over in his chest as he looked down at her. How could she tell? “You are something else.”

“Something good?” she grinned cheekily, holding out her hand for another taxi. It came to a screeching halt in front of them.

“The best,” he replied but she missed his answer because she was busy haggling with the taxi driver.

Once Nisha was satisfied with the price they were paying to get to Juhu, she slid into the seat, making space for him to follow. He sat down beside her, his arm curving around her shoulder and pulling her in. She came willingly, snuggling up beside him, her head resting on his shoulder.

“Are you okay?” he asked, their code phrase seeming set in stone now.

“I think,” Nisha said slowly, seeming to think it over. “I’ve never been better. It feels like a mountain has been lifted off my shoulders. Everything seems brighter, shinier, clearer. Almost like I’ve suddenly discovered I need glasses and only now that I’m wearing them, I realise how little of the world I saw before I put them on.”

He squeezed her shoulder in comfort but didn’t say anything, content to listen to what she had to say instead.

“You know, I spent most of my life thinking I needed marriage, a man, children, a family of my own to be happy. That was literally my only ambition. I never thought about work or an education or any of those other goals, not like Aarushi. She pursued that with single minded devotion. Instead, I just wanted to be married, be loved, and spend the rest of my life taking care of my family.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Paul said, his grip tightening on her as the taxi driver swerved to avoid a rogue cyclist.

“No. But I’ve realised that being married doesn’t necessarily mean being loved. It’s possible to have one without the other.”

“It’s also possible to have both,” he pointed out, dropping another kiss to the top of her head.

“Hmm,” she murmured. “I hope Aaru has them both... forever.”

“Have they set a date then?” Paul asked, surprised he hadn’t heard about it from Rahul.

“Not yet,” she snickered. “But I don’t think they’ll last in separate homes much longer. Not if their steamy late-night calls are anything to go by.”

Paul laughed, a loud bark of sound that had Nisha dissolving into helpless giggles. The unfettered sound filled the stinky taxi and made Paul want to bottle this moment into a memory that he could brand into his brain.

They reached their destination and got out after paying the cab driver who still looked disgruntled by the watered-down fare he’d received.

Nisha led the way onto the beach directly, taking off her slippers and carrying them in one hand. Her toes dug into the sand and she exhaled hard, her face tipped up towards the humid breeze that gently wafted past them.

“It’s a good day,” she murmured.

“The best.” Paul went to stand beside her, his own shoes in his hand now, his gaze on the woman beside him. “Tell me what you want, Nisha. Tell me what you need.”

“I’m still figuring most of that out.” She opened her eyes and looked at the ocean, a sparkling clarity in them. “I think I’m going to enjoy that the most.”

“Want to get your feet wet?” Paul asked, holding his hand out to her.

“Yes!” She rolled the bottom of her salwar up to rest below her knees. “Let’s go.”

They walked to the edge of the ocean, the waves kissing their feet. He linked his hand with hers, fingers twining as he took a deep breath, the ocean filling his senses.

“Paul?” Nisha stood on her toes to whisper into his ear. “I haven’t figured out much but I am clear on one thing that I need.”

“What’s that?” He turned his face to kiss her forehead absently.

“You.”

He stopped walking.

She laughed, twirling away from him, her hand slipping out of his.

“I need you. In my life, in my heart, in my bed. I want you. Just *you*.”

FORTY-THREE

## NISHA

HIS FLAT WAS SMALL, sparse and meticulously clean. He had the bare minimum furniture, no family pictures, no pictures at all for that matter, and even less in the way of belongings. She bet he could pack and move from here in less than an hour.

“Would you like to freshen up?” he asked, his voice a little rough and a lot hoarse. “Wash the sand off you?”

“Do you want me to wash the sand off me?” she asked, turning to face him. She dug deep and found the courage to walk over to him, put her hands on that annoyingly sculpted chest of his.

He made a harsh sound before his lips landed on hers, his mouth devouring her even as he backed her up against the wall. Sensation, glorious sensation flooded through her as Nisha gave herself up to the moment.

The rough friction from the wall against her back and the heated wall of muscle in front was a torture she didn't think she'd survive. Paul hoisted her up in his arms, her legs wrapping around his waist instinctively. He carried into his tiny bedroom, almost rapping her head against the doorframe.

Nisha giggled. This place really was tiny. Paul dropped her on the bed, following her down, his arms coming to brace on both sides of her, his forehead resting on hers.

“Do that again,” he ordered, his breath a warm wash of air over her lips.



“Do what again?” Nisha snuggled into him, wanting all those hard muscles pressing against her, pushing her into the bed.

“Laugh,” he said huskily, the sound of his voice sending a shiver through her.

“Say something funny then.” Nisha combed her fingers through the lock of hair that fell over his forehead.

“I love you,” he whispered.

Nisha froze. “That’s not funny.”

“No.” He kissed his way down her face, from her forehead to her chin, her shocked lips getting a brief moment of attention.

“Paul!” She cupped his face, stopping him from going further. “Say it again!”

“I. Love. You.” He punctuated each word with a kiss that had her muscles turning to jelly and her mind turning to mush.

His lips burned a trail of fire down her body, loosening her clothes and slipping them off her. She did her bit by struggling with his t-shirt and almost strangling him with it while trying to get it off. He pulled it over his head and tossed it to the side before she could kill him. She watched as he ripped his jeans off, his boxers the only thing covering him from view.

When he lay back down and his skin finally touched hers, Nisha thought she would weep with the pleasure of it. Her breasts crushed against his hair roughened chest and she planted an open mouth kiss on the corded muscle of his neck, her teeth nipping at him and drawing a deep groan from him.

He unclasped her bra, baring her breasts to his gaze. She flushed, a deep red, as his hot, fevered gaze took her in. He bent to take one brown nipple in his mouth even as his calloused fingers kneaded and rolled the other. The scrape of his callouses against her sensitive skin was almost painfully pleasurable.

Nisha moaned, her hips arching, her weeping core rubbing against his thick length, craving the friction it offered.

“Easy sweetheart,” Paul murmured, transferring his attention to the other breast, one hand sneaking down to remove her sopping panties and draw a finger through her arching center.

Nisha returned the favour by gripping him through his boxers and stroking. His hips thrust into her hand, an involuntary movement that had her husking out a laugh.

“Again,” he commanded, his hips moving against her grip in a motion as old as time. In response, she slipped her hand into his boxers, closing over silk and heat like she’d never felt before.

Paul turned his face taking her mouth in a kiss that swallowed her moan. He pulled her panties off and kissed his way down her body before stopping at her navel, his hot breath against the sensitive spot making her quiver.

He spread her open, wide open, his gaze focused on the most sensitive part of her. Nisha closed her eyes, the intimacy of the moment more than she could bear. His mouth closed over her, licking, sucking and gently nipping until she saw stars, her breath coming in short, raspy pants. Her fingers caught at his hair, tugging and pushing, sending the most contradictory signals ever.

Need clawed through her, a coil that wound tighter and tighter.

“Paul,” she gasped when she thought she was going to explode.

In answer, he slipped one finger into her, his mouth closing over her clitoris at the same time. Nisha exploded, her vision whitening as sound emptied out of her world.

Paul continued to lick and pet her, softer, soothing touches that helped calm the hypersensitive skin. She heard the crinkle of foil wrapper as he sheathed himself.

Always so responsible, she thought, her mind still foggy from her release. And then he slipped into her and she stopped thinking. He filled her, her body stretching and

accommodating his until she couldn't tell where he ended and she began.

His forehead resting on hers, he started to move, slowly, each withdrawal leaving an aching emptiness that she knew only he would ever fill again. She looked down at where they were joined, watching as he disappeared into her. The sight filled her with wonder, the rightness, the singular completeness that encapsulated the moment...it was perfect. Paul followed her gaze and he smiled, sweet sin dripping from his every pore.

She tipped his face up so he wasn't looking at them but at her, meeting her eyes.

“I love you too,” she whispered.

Paul froze, stopped moving inside her.

“Say it again?” His voice broke on the last word.

“I love you, Paul Alvares.”

His lips dropped to capture hers in the slowest, sweetest kiss ever. And then he went wild. He grabbed her hips, held her open and slammed into her, his body using hers in the most delicious way possible.

Nisha held on to him, her senses exploding and her heart bursting. And when she fell off the cliff of pleasure again, he followed right behind.

This was life, her life. And she was never letting go of it.

FORTY-FOUR

## PAUL

“COFFEE, GRUMPY PANTS?” Nisha handed him a Starbucks coffee and sat down beside him.

He took the coffee. “Thanks. Doesn’t hold a candle to your coffee though.”

“True words.” Rahul held up his own coffee from the seat across from him in airport lounge. Beside him, Aarushi frowned ferociously at her laptop as she typed away, glasses perched on the end of her nose and messy hair tangled in a bun on top of her head. It was just the four of them on this trip, with Agam and Layla holding down the fort in Mumbai with the intern.

“I hate it when flights are delayed.” Nisha slumped in her seat, her jeans and tank top a startling and wonderfully welcome diversion from her regular dress code of salwar kameez’s. She seemed to have taken work trip to Goa to mean partial holiday in Goa.

In comparison, Paul’s stress was only ratcheting up. He hadn’t told his family he’d be in their city for a few days. He was putting off that unpleasantness for as long as possible. Because while he was going to be in the city, he was certainly not going home.

Nisha pulled out a fat book from her humongous purse which he privately thought should have been checked in given its size and settled down to read. Paul settled down to drink his coffee and brood. Fucking Goa.

Nisha slipped her hand into his, squeezing gently, her eyes still on that ridiculously large tome she was reading. He glanced over, his heart warming at her gesture, her nonverbal ‘Are you okay?’. When he turned back to the front, his gaze snagged on Rahul’s whose eyebrows were floating near his hairline.

For the briefest moment, Paul wanted to snatch his hand back. But then he thought, ‘Fuck it’. He was not hiding what Nisha was to him like she was a dirty little secret. She was his biggest treasure and the pride of his heart and he wanted to shout that fact from the rooftops.

So, he raised his eyebrows back. Rahul smiled, a small smile but one that spoke of approval and reassurance. Aarushi was muttering to herself now, but Rahul didn’t seem particularly concerned.

He heard their flight being announced and they stood and gathered their things. Actually, Rahul and he stood. Aarushi grumbled about being pulled away from her work but shut her laptop and shoved it into the backpack she was carrying.

And Nisha...Nisha gathered her giant purse, her pink and blue strolley, her plastic bag with books and chocolates from the airport shop and another doggy bag of food for the flight. Because, apparently she did not believe in airline food. He wasn’t sure what that meant. She didn’t believe it existed or she thought the food was crap or it went against her principles to eat it...the list was endless. Personally, Paul loved those peppery cashew nuts they sold on the plane.

But all the delicious peppery cashew nuts of the world fled his mind when he saw Nisha put on the single, largest hat he’d ever seen in real life. Where had that thing come from? His mouth opened and shut without making a sound.

“You’ll get used to it,” Aarushi told him with a snicker as she walked past hefting her *single* backpack on her shoulder.

“I don’t think that thing will fit on the plane,” Paul told Nisha as he took her strolly and plastic bag from her.

“What thing?” she asked from somewhere beneath that hat. He honest to God needed a tracking device to find her under there.

“That Princess Diana monstrosity you have on your head.”

“My hat is the height of fashion,” she retorted.

“Uh huh.” Paul didn’t quite agree but then what did he know about fashion? He glanced down at his shorts and t-shirt. They’d both been washed into frayed and distressed looks that were purely accidental. They were old but he was sure Vaani would call them vintage.

Paul shrugged and followed The Hat through the airport terminal, apologizing to the people it poked and the old man whose eye it almost took out.

They made it to the aerobridge before the air hostess stopped them to inform Nisha that she’d have to stow The Hat. The thing had now taken on its own identity in Paul’s mind. It probably had its own pin code too.

Nisha sighed, emerging from under the thing he would not discuss. She plucked it off her head, folded it neatly into a tiny square and popped it into her massive purse. So, that’s where that had come from. Paul eyed her purse as he followed her onto the plane. What other wonders did it hold? Until today he didn’t know a foldable hat existed. An ugly, massive, foldable hat.

His phone rang as they settled into their seats. He clicked his seatbelt close and pulled out his phone. A groan escaped him as he realised who was calling.

“Not now Ma,” he said tersely.

Nisha glanced at him, surprise at his tone written all over her face. If only she knew...

“Then when?” his mother retorted. “Listen Paul-“

Just then the air hostess made an announcement regarding their flight.

His mother’s strident voice went silent and then, “Are you on a plane to Goa?”

Fuck. She had to hear that part. What timing!

“Yes,” he said grimly, unable to tell an outright lie.

“Dinner at home tomorrow,” she replied, equally grimly. He noticed it wasn’t phrased as a question.

“It’s a work trip Ma.”

“Then bring your colleagues. Even when you work, you eat no man?”

Paul sighed, staring up at the ‘Do not smoke’ sign above his head.

“I’ll make sorpotel,” his mother wheedled. “You’ll come for that, no?”

“I want prawn recheado also.” He was going to suffer through a meal at home, he would be damned if he’d eat anything less than his dream meal.

“Okay.” His mother’s triumphant glee made his head ache.

“Make sure he’s not there,” Paul added, as the hostess started down the aisle to tell him to put his phone on airplane mode.

“Paul!” The outrage was shrill. “He’s a sick man. Where will I send him?”

“I don’t care,” he replied, his tone hard and unforgiving. “It’s either him or me. Choose who is sitting at your dinner table tomorrow night.”

“Okay,” his mother muttered. “It’s one night. I’ll speak to him. You come. After that who knows when we’ll see you again.”

He took the meagre victory for what it was and bid his mother goodbye before clicking off the call and switching to aeroplane mode under the gimlet eye of the unamused airhostess.

His head fell back on the headrest as the plane started its slow taxi down the runway.



“Are you okay?” Nisha asked from next to him, leaning her head on his shoulder.

He rested his cheek on her soft hair, minus the ugly hat. “Now I am,” he murmured. “Now I am.”

FORTY-FIVE

# NISHA

THE CLIENT HAD PUT them up in the same resort that was hosting the wedding. It was perfect for the reconnaissance and planning that needed to happen in the next three days. It was also perfect because it was the most beautiful hotel Nisha had ever stayed in. And she was here with her best friends and the man she loved.

This life that she'd fought for, struggled to build from the wreckage of her past, was worth every second of pain and grief. It was all worth it and the person she was becoming, the one she'd formed from the broken remnants of her very self was everything she could have imagined and more.

And she'd done it herself. Painfully, torturously and slowly but she'd done it. She still had a long way to go but where she was, it held all the hope and love in the world.

The room door opened behind her and Paul walked in. He came to an abrupt stop when he saw her and her suitcases in the middle of the small but plush room.

"Umm, I umm," he stumbled over his words. "Think I've got the wrong room."

"No, you haven't." She sat down on the side of the bed and tried to look seductive. She probably looked like a clown on steroids.

"I thought I was bunking with Rahul."

That had been the plan as far as the client's bookings had been concerned. The guys in one room and the girls in the

other. But...

“I swapped with Aarushi,” she said, sitting up straighter. Had she got this all wrong? It had seemed like a good idea, a wonderful idea in fact. “I thought-“

A slow smile spread across Paul’s face as he advanced on her. “You have the best thoughts,” he said, dropping one knee to the bed next to her and looming over her.

Nisha fell back against the bed, holding her arms out for him to follow. He did. She sighed, peace washing through her, as the weight of him settled against her.

“I do have the best thoughts,” she agreed, her eyes fluttering shut as his lips trailed kisses against the line of her neck. “You didn’t honestly think I was going to let you sleep with Rahul, did you?”

He laughed, his breath a puff of air against her skin. She shivered, the best sort of tingles running through her body.

“I don’t think I was thinking at all.” His tongue sneaked out to taste her cleavage peeking out of her tank top.

“Nisha, would you do one thing for me?”

“Hmm.” In this moment, Nisha would do anything for him. Come to think of it in any moment...

“Would you wear your hat?”

Her eyes popped open. “Say what?”

Paul blushed, an adorable rosy red under his tanned skin.

“Could you,” he cleared his throat and tried again. “Wear your hat? And umm, nothing else.”

A giggle bubbled up inside Nisha. “I thought you didn’t like my hat.”

“I had safety concerns from an aviation perspective,” he said loftily. “It had nothing to do with your ridiculous headgear.”

“And now you’d like me to wear my ridiculous headgear and...” she prompted.

“And nothing else,” he completed with a wolfish smile.

“You weirdo!” Nisha was laughing too hard to comply with his request.

“Your weirdo,” he said with a satisfied grin. Before he could add anything more, there was a knock on the door.

Paul groaned. “We didn’t put the Do not Disturb sign up, did we?”

Nisha shook her head, still smiling. Paul heaved himself off her and went to open the door. She sat up as Rahul and Aarushi walked in.

“Ohh, I love your dress,” she told Aaru.

The white, cotton chikankari dress fell to Aarushi’s knees and looked wonderful on her. Aaru was experimenting with her hair again. It was now at shoulder length and with streaks of deep red that glowed when the sun hit it. Aaru glowed too. Rahul and she seemed to have worked out whatever roadblocks they’d hit in their relationship. Nisha was happy for her friend. She deserved every second of happiness that was coming her way.

“Take it,” Aarushi said immediately.

“Shut up.” Nisha rolled her eyes.

“Fine. We’ll share it.” Aaru shrugged. “Want to hit the pool while the guys work?”

Rahul cleared his throat. They looked over to where the men had finished their serious, intense conversation.

“You can hit the pool,” he told her. “Nisha is on a working trip. She comes with us.”

Aarushi pouted like a toddler heading into full blown tantrum mode. “You’re going to leave me all alone?”

“Yes,” Rahul said equably, dropping a kiss on her sulky mouth. “We’ll see you at dinner time.”

Paul looked up from his phone. “The external consultants are here. Let’s go. Nisha, bring the laptop with you.”

She nodded, grabbing for it and checking its battery strength. The devil on her shoulder had her brain turning over an idea.

“Ready Nisha?” Rahul called from where he and Paul stood by the door. Aarushi had plopped herself on the bed with the television remote in hand.

“Ready,” Nisha replied, plopping her hat on to her head. Sometimes, the devil had some good ideas.

FORTY-SIX

## PAUL

HE HAD no idea how it was possible to be nostalgic about a place and yet, hate the sight of it. Paul stared at the humble little bungalow that he'd been brought up in, or rather dragged up in and felt everything and nothing.

“Are we going in?” Rahul asked. “I can't wait to taste your mother's famous sorpotel.”

Yeah. They should go in. He laced his fingers with Nisha's and led the way, Aarushi and Rahul following close behind. Paul knocked on the door and waited. He could have tried the doorknob. He was fairly sure it would turn. The door had always been unlocked, in all his memories. But then things changed. He'd changed. He didn't want to barge into his childhood home anymore. He wanted to enter as the guest he was now.

The door opened and his mother stood there. She wore trousers and a shirt, looking the same as before with just a few, extra strands of grey hair.

“Hello Ma.”

She stared at him, no expression in her face for the longest time. And then, “Paul.” The word was a bare breath. “You came.”

“This is Nisha, Rahul and Aarushi.” He gestured towards the others.

She looked beyond him at his friends and flashed a polite smile. “Please come in. Sammy will be here soon.”



Paul's eyes scanned the house as they walked through, his shoulders relaxing as he realised his mother was alone. It looked like she'd honoured his wish. For once.

"Would you all like something to drink?" she asked as she led them into the drawing room. "I have wine and Feni."

Paul threw himself on the same couch he'd grown up sleeping on. His mother didn't believe in new furniture or new upholstery. He traced one of the large pink flowers on it with one finger.

"Can I help you with anything?" Nisha asked, standing up when his mother started to bustle off towards the kitchen.

"No, thank you." Ruth Alvares did not condone meddling in her kitchen. "Please sit. I'll be back in a minute."

"Can I top up your Feni?" Paul asked Rahul who was drinking it far faster than it was meant to be drunk.

Rahul shook his head, trying to clear it perhaps. Paul stifled a snicker. He was about to say something when he heard the front door open.

Sammy's heels clicked against the old, tiled floor as she made her way through. It sounded like she'd come alone. She appeared in the doorway, her hotel issued saree immaculately pleated and pinned, her hair in the regulation bun with not a single strand escaping. It wouldn't dare. Nothing ever defied the iron will of Samantha Alvares.

"Hello, I'm Paulie's sister," she said, coming into the room. "Samantha."

The room did a round of introductions as Paul came to his feet and waited his turn with the woman who'd been more mother than sister to him.

"Paulie," she said, her voice cool and composed as always.

"Hi Sammy." He held his arms out and after a second's hesitation, she walked into them. He hugged her tight, memories of their shared shitty childhood running through his head. Sammy had been his mother, his best friend, his only ally in a world gone mad with violence and pain.

His sister clenched her hand in his shirt just once before patting it straight and stepping out of his embrace.

“You are well?” he asked her.

She shrugged, smiling the tiniest bit. “As well as possible.”

What did that mean? She had the dream life, right?

Sammy had married her husband Thomas and escaped their hell. She’d left him behind. With ten years between them, it had been a long exile from the only person who’d ever loved him and with living with the betrayal of her having left him to his fate.

As an adult, he understood her choices. He knew she’d hit a wall. She couldn’t cope with their reality anymore. He knew she needed distance between their home and her new life for that new life to work. But the eleven year old boy who’d sat by the door waiting for his sister to come see him, *he* still held a few deeply buried grudges.

“Where are Thomas and Andrew?” Paul thought her husband was a boring religious zealot but he adored his nephew. Four year old Andrew was a riot and would break the awkward nightmare that was this evening.

“On their way,” she said, her smile stiffening. “I came straight from the hotel.”

“Dinner is served.” His mother appeared like a ghoul from failed Halloweens past. Wasn’t she even going to let her guests finish their drinks? He saw Aarushi chug her wine like a champ before putting the glass down and standing up.

Sammy led Rahul and Aarushi into the dining room, asking about their trip to Goa so far.

Nisha moved up close to him and whispered, “Are you okay?”

He glanced down at her, his gaze softening. “Yes,” he murmured, kissing her forehead.

He turned and saw his mother watching them, her eyes narrowed.

“It’s her?” Ma asked, tilting her head in their direction.

He nodded, bringing their clasped hands up to his lips and kissing Nisha’s knuckles.

Ma’s gaze turned to stone as she took Nisha in. But when she spoke all she said was, “Nisha is not a Catholic name.”

With that she turned on her heel and walked into the dining room.

“Well spotted Ma,” Paul muttered, holding tighter to Nisha’s hand as they followed.

FORTY-SEVEN

## NISHA

IF THIS WAS what having a larger family meant, Nisha was quite grateful that her little family had only consisted of her mother and Aarushi.

*Paulie* had gotten quieter and quieter as the meal progressed. His brother-in-law and nephew had arrived with the little fellow chattering enough to fill the awkward silences. Then his mother had glared at him, and he'd gone his uncle's route and chosen to turn into a monosyllabic statue.

But while the company was sorely lacking, the food was exceptional. Nisha forked in some more sorpotel as her gaze roved round the home. Shabby but clean furniture, water stained walls with patchy paint, and a dining table that was large enough to seat everyone but rocked a little with each bit of use.

It was a home that had seen hard years but was still loved. She slipped her foot out of her sandal and ran it along the beautiful, chipped terracotta floor tile. She'd always loved the earthen rustic look in home décor.

"Where is –" Thomas, the brother-in-law, started to ask but his wife, the terrifyingly intimidating Sammy, cut him off with a fierce glare. If she'd turned that look on Nisha, she was sure her soul would leap from her body and flee the room.

"Out," Paul's mother, Ruth, answered. Now, that lady, she of the you-are-not-Christian-fame, did not get intimidated easily.

The other man's florid face looked a little confused but he shut up.

Nisha snuck a look at Aarushi and Rahul but it looked like they were not going to look up from their plates. They were doing a good job of licking those plates clean.

After some more torturous eating and cutlery clinking over now empty plates, Paul's mother served caramel custard pudding for dessert.

"Mama," the little one piped up. "I want some more dessert."

"No more. You already had your share," Ruth replied though the question hadn't been directed at her.

"But--"

"No, Andrew."

The little boy subsided, his lower lip poking out. Nisha pushed her full bowl across to him surreptitiously. When the boy's wide eyes met hers, she winked. A big beaming smile burst out of him, one that reminded her so much of Paul.

He was about to scoop the first bit of pudding into his mouth when a hand caught his. Nisha glanced up to find Paul's mother glaring at her.

Oh fuck!

She tried to look contrite but it was hard to pull it off. He was a kid and he wanted a little extra sweet. Why was that a bad thing? But it certainly looked like fun and joy were all considered bad things in this house.

"It is not the Christian way to be deceitful," Ruth said, transferring her glare to Nisha's partner in crime. The boy wilted under her glower.

"It is the Christian way to be kind and to share though," Paul replied laconically, leaning back in his chair. "Take mine too," he told Andrew, pushing his bowl of pudding across the table.

His mother all but vibrated with fury.

“Paul,” Sammy said softly, sounding exhausted.

His mother looked to say something but she glanced around the table at the many faces watching her and she shut it down.

“So, what’s next for you guys?” Thomas rubbed his hands together and dug into his pudding.

“It’s a three day work trip,” Paul began.

“No no.” The older man waved his spoon between them, sending bits of pudding flying around the table. “You two? What’s next? I don’t see a ring.”

Oh! Nisha flushed, straightening in her chair.

“We, um, we,” she stammered, searching for a tactful reply and finding none.

“We’ve just started seeing each other,” Paul covered up for her non-reply.

“And already you are in love, is it?” his mother asked caustically.

“Yes.” Paul met her gaze, seeming to dare her to say something more. There was subtext here that Nisha was missing.

Ruth laughed mirthlessly. “While that’s good for you, it’s not good for anyone else no? According to your rules. You can find love instantly like Maggi Noodles, but I cannot.”

“I don’t have small, dependent children.”

“So?” Ruth shot back. “Being a mother means I am not a woman also?”

“No.” Paul shook his head wearily. “Let’s not do this okay?”

“Okay.” His mother dragged a chair across the floor with a deafening screech. “Let’s get to know your girlfriend better.”

Oh no! Nisha wanted to dig a hole and bury herself there. No wait. She wanted to tunnel her way out of this nightmare of

an evening and end up in her fancy hotel room with the free chocolates on the pillow.

“Tell me girlie,” Ruth demanded. “What do I need to know about you? Tell me.”

Nisha darted frantic looks around the table but Rahul and Aarushi just stared back at her with mute horror and Paul was looking at his mother, a murderous look on his face.

Sammy, on the other hand, was staring at her plate contemplating a slice of tomato like it held the secrets of the universe.

“Go to the bedroom and shut the door, Andrew,” Paul said quietly.

“I’ll take him.” Thomas cleared his throat and disappeared with Andrew who was still clutching Nisha’s pudding to his chest.

“You do not get to talk to Nisha like that.” Paul spoke the minute the child was out of earshot. His voice could have sliced through steel.

“Like what?” Ruth challenged. “The way you talk to Jonathon?”

“Do. Not. Compare. Her. To. Him.”

“Why not? You love her. I love Jonathon. You are rude to Jonathon. I can be rude to her. What’s the difference?”

“What’s the difference?” Paul rose to his feet, slamming both hands on to the table, making the food jump in bowls and plates. “WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?”

“DON’T SHOUT. I CAN SHOUT TOO!” His mother screamed back, standing as well. “He was your father-“

“He was never my father.” Paul got deathly quiet. “Don’t you dare call him that. He was an abusive drunk who married you so you could work yourself to the bone supporting his worthless ass. And now, you’ve left me to shoulder that burden.”

“He loves me!”



“If he loved you, he would never have wrapped a hand around your neck and tried to strangle you. If he loved you, he wouldn’t have belted your son for making noise during a cricket match he was watching. If he loved you, he wouldn’t have tried to grope your daughter in the bathroom.”

“Did you ever stop to think, Ma?” Paul taunted. “Did you ever wonder why Sammy married the first man she could find? Did you ever wonder why she was so desperate to get away from here, from us?”

Sammy made a small noise and closed her eyes. Nisha’s heart broke in two for them. For all of them.

“He never loved you and because of him, you stopped loving us.”

FORTY-EIGHT

## PAUL

“UNGRATEFUL, THAT’S WHAT YOU ARE,” Ruth declared. “Jonnie paid your school fees. He is the reason you have an education, a career, a life.”

“Oh no.” Paul shook his head. “That shit school gave me a bare minimum education qualification but everything else, that was all me. And if anyone gave me a life or tried to, it was Sammy.”

“And look at that life,” his mother sneered. “What have you achieved in all these years? Don’t even have a house of your own.”

“That’s because I’ve been paying to make sure you can keep your own,” Paul reminded her. “So if we want to throw around labels like ungrateful...”

Nisha’s small hand snuck up his leg and caught the hand he was tapping against it. She twined her fingers through it, stilling his distress tell.

His mother’s eagle eyes zeroed in on the gesture.

“Tchah,” she said, waving a hand in the air. “Waste of breath.”

“I agree.” Paul squeezed Nisha’s hands with his, hoping this was the end of the drama.

“Mrs. Alvares?” Nisha’s sweet voice cut through the fraught silence. “Acknowledging abuse and speaking against it is never a waste of breath.”

Oh shit. Paul closed his eyes in defeat. This would not end well.

His mother rounded on her like the essence of fury itself.

“No one in this house was abused,” she hissed. “A man has a right to discipline his family when they cross their limits. Paul was an obnoxious brat who needed to be kept in line and Sammy, she thought she was too smart with her tight clothes and low necklines. Jonnie was only showing them the way of God, the path of right. And this ungrateful wretch won’t even visit him now that he’s on his deathbed.”

Nisha stood slowly to face the other woman. “Nobody should be forced to face their abuser. Being on his deathbed doesn’t entitle him to forgiveness.”

“He does not need to be forgiven!” Ruth screeched. “He did nothing wrong.”

“Yes, he did, Ma.” Sammy spoke for the first time since this whole evening had fallen apart like the pack of cards it was. “Yes, he did.”

His mother stared at her, wild eyed. “How dare you?” she whispered. “The two of you...”

“The two of us are telling you what we’ve always told you. You just don’t want to listen.” Paul’s voice was harsh. Unforgiving. “You never did.”

She shook her head, dismissing his words like always.

“You can still leave him, Ma.”

His mother picked up a plate and flung it, narrowly missing his head. The plate smashed into smithereens, shards of porcelain raining down on to the floor.

Nisha flinched beside him but held her ground. He’d never been prouder of her.

“There is no divorce in our faith.” His mother’s icy cold voice was a direct contrast to her angry plate throwing. “I took vows in the eyes of God.”

“Divorce is not a matter of faith,” Nisha said. “It’s a matter of survival, of choices, of knowing when a relationship has ended. And all of that is done down here on earth, not in the heavens above.”

Ruth stared at her.

“I should know. I’m divorced and I haven’t felt the sting of hellfire yet. What I have found is peace. After years of living my life in survival mode, I’m learning what it’s like to just live.”

“Not Christian and a divorcee’.” Ruth started to applaud. “Well done Paul. You’ve chosen the worst woman possible.”

Nisha flinched again and this time, he felt her give ground. Fury like he’d never known it rose inside him.

“If you ever speak to or about the woman I love like that again, you will never see me. Not in this lifetime and not in the afterlife you seem to be so fond of aiming for. I will stop every rupee that I’m transferring into your account immediately.”

His voice got venomously soft. “How long do you think your precious Jonnie will live without his chemotherapy treatments? How long do you think you will last without your heart medication? Or even better without electricity? Or any of those other pesky bills I pay?”

His mother’s mouth fell open. “Has the Devil truly taken you?”

“Yes.”

“For her?” His mother’s gaze cut to Nisha and then back to him. “What’s so great about her?”

Paul laughed, a harsh bark of sound. “She’s everything you never were. She’s a survivor. When her husband hit her, she didn’t sit down and take it. She fought back. She chose a life which honoured herself and her loved ones. And she chose to stand for justice against her abuser. Do you know the strength it takes to do that? Of course, you don’t. You’ve never had it.”

His mother stared at him.

“She let me help her Ma. She allowed me to support her, to put her life back together, to teach her, to heal her. She let me take care of her. You wouldn’t. You never have. You never let me help you like I wanted to. She did. She chose me. You only ever chose him.”

Exhaustion swamped him, pushing the fury out. “She allowed me to help her,” he said again. “Apologise to Nisha or you will never see me or a rupee of my money again.”

“Sammy will-“

“I can’t afford to, Ma,” Sammy said. “I suggest you apologise to Nisha.”

“That’s not necessary.” Nisha’s face was sheet white, every last vestige of colour gone. “I’m leaving now.”

“Nisha-“ Paul reached for her hand.

“No.” She held her hand out, palm up, stopping him. “No. Not now.”

FORTY-NINE

## NISHA

*“SHE LET me help her Ma. She allowed me to support her, to put her life back together, to teach her, to heal her. She let me take care of her.”*

The words wouldn't get out of her head. They went round and round and round in her chaotic brain until she wanted to hold her head and scream.

Was that what had happened?

All this time she'd spent working on herself, building her life up again and doing it on her own...Had she done it on her own?

Or had she been just building with the boosts he'd offered. Sure, Rahul had offered her a job but she'd worked her butt off to be valuable to the firm, in any way she could be. Designer, secretary, office assistant, coffee maker, spy in training...she'd done it all and she'd done it passably well, hadn't she?

She'd worked with her therapist to manage her anxiety and her PTSD. She'd worked with her mother and Aarushi to heal their relationships. She'd paid her own bills, managed her own accounts...She'd borrowed money from her friend to buy clothes.

She'd borrowed money from her friend to buy clothes to impress a man.

She swiped her keycard on the room door and let herself into a hotel room that she wouldn't have been able to afford



even if she'd borrowed from a dozen friends. Not that she had a dozen friends.

Nisha sat down on the bed, her unseeing eyes on the lush carpet her feet sank into. Was he right?

Had she only been able to do what she had because of him? Her mind went back to all the days he'd given her advice, sometimes unwanted but always well-intentioned. Or so she'd thought.

Had he been saving her because he couldn't save his mother? Had he been rewriting his history through her story? Had he fallen for her because he could save her?

All her newfound pride, sense of accomplishment...her joy in her new life vanished in a heartbeat. He'd taken that from her. She didn't know if she could ever forgive him for that.

She didn't know if she could ever forgive herself for loving a man who'd only seen her as a DIY fixit project.

The room door opened and he stepped through.

"Nisha--"

"Get out." She said the words with zero emotion, still looking at the carpet. But there was no doubting the depth of her conviction.

"Are you okay?"

She closed her eyes at the words. Their own secret love language or she'd thought but really it had been her handler managing her.

"Fuck you Paul."

"Whatever you're thinking, I can promise you it's wrong."

"Going to fix that for me too, are you?" she laughed bitterly. "My thinking?"

"Look at me Nisha."

She didn't. She couldn't.

"Please look at me."

She shook her head, blinking back furious tears.

Paul walked over and dropped to his knees in front of her, taking her cold hands in his.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking,” he repeated, his eyes holding hers. “But I promise you that there is nothing and no one who matters to me more than you do.”

“Pet projects tend to be like that.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” he asked, his eyes going hard.

“I’m not your mother, Paul. Saving me isn’t going to save her.”

He stared at her, a muscle ticking in his jaw.

“That is not what you are to me. That is never what you’ve been to me.”

“Doesn’t feel like it.” Bitterness choked her as she looked at the man she loved through a sheen of tears.

“You can’t honestly believe that of me.”

“I don’t know what to believe anymore.” She dropped her head to her hands again, the terrible pounding at the base of her skull making it feel like her head was going to roll off.

“Tell me what you need,” he told her. “Tell me and I’ll give it to you.”

“I need you to get out.”

It felt like even the air in the room stilled with the grief that welled inside her. Paul seemed to have turned to granite in front of her. Not a muscle moved.

And then he got to his feet, slowly, achingly slow. She didn’t look at him as he walked to the door. She didn’t look at him as he opened the door. She didn’t look at him as he stepped out.

But she did speak.

“Aman broke me. But I survived him. I didn’t just survive. I thrived. You took that from me. You didn’t break me. You shattered me.”

FIFTY

## PAUL

“ARE you done looking for forgiveness at the bottom of that bottle?”

Paul stared out at the ocean, his legs dangling off the lounge he was sprawled on. A bottle of Chivas in one hand and a cigarette in the other, he was determined to stay here until either alcohol or nicotine could make sense of his life.

Rahul dropped into the lounge beside him. The hotel beach shack had some very comfortable loungers.

“She’s gone. She’s on her way to the airport to catch the late flight home. Aarushi’s gone with her.”

Fuck. Nothing would make sense of his life now. She was gone.

“It’s just the two of us now. I got the hotel to cancel one room’s reservations and moved my stuff into yours.”

“Fuck room logistics,” Paul rumbled, taking another swig of alcohol straight from the bottle.

“Okay,” Rahul said agreeably. The waiter approached and he ordered himself a beer before settling back on the lounge with his hands behind his head.

“Ocean is rough tonight,” he commented after a moment. “Should calm by morning.”

“Is that supposed to be a metaphor for my life?” Paul was going to break this bottle on his friend’s head if it was.

“No.” Rahul shook his head. “Your life is not going to calm by morning. She-“

“Are you here as my friend, Aarushi’s boyfriend or Nisha’s boss and friend?” Paul interrupted. “I need to know.”

Rahul scrunched his forehead as he thought that over. “All of the above?” he ventured. “I don’t know how to separate one from the other.”

“I fucked up,” Paul said, slumping as outraged confusion swarmed through him. “I don’t know how but I fucked up.”

Rahul wisely stayed silent.

“She thinks I’m trying to save her because I couldn’t save my mother.”

“Are you?” Rahul wasn’t so wise this time.

“Don’t make me kill you,” Paul said conversationally, his gaze still on the ocean.

“Take a moment,” Rahul insisted recklessly. “Take a moment and think it the fuck through before you answer.”

“Why would you ask me something like that?” Paul roared. “I love her. I have never loved anyone the way I love her. She’s the family I never had. She’s my warmth on a winter’s night. She’s my light in the dark. She’s the breath in my lungs. She’s my everything.”

Rahul placed a calming hand on his shoulder. Paul shrugged it off. He wasn’t interested in being managed.

“You’ve always had a soft spot for the underdog,” Rahul pointed out. “You’re always first in line to help, to support, to save.”

“SO FUCKING WHAT?”

“She just doesn’t want to be your charity project, Paul.”

Words failed him. They truly did.

“Jesus!” He laugh-wept. “How the fuck can she think that?”

“You said some version of it man when you were ranting away at your mom.”

“That was-“ Paul shook his head, breaking off. “That was years of resentment and anger spilling out of me. I was hardly choosing the right words.”

“Maybe it’s time to choose the right ones now.”

“I’ve shown her in every way I can what she means to me.”

Rahul took his beer from the server and signed for it. “I think she needs the words, Paul, and they’re going to have to be the perfect ones.”

“I can’t lose her.” His throat clogged with unshed emotion at the thought. “I just found her.”

“Then don’t.”

“That fucking easy?” He drank some more liquid courage from his bottle.

“It’s never fucking easy my friend,” Rahul murmured. “But it’s always worth it.”

Paul watched the waves crash on the shore, a remnant of a life he’d lived, a life he thought he missed...but it was a life that had never had Nisha in it and he was fast realising that even a second spent without her in it was one he didn’t want to live through.

“I need your help,” he announced, getting drunkenly to his feet.

“Always happy to do that.” Rahul rose more sedately.

“Take me to the airport.” Paul threw his hands out, whiskey flying everywhere from the bottle he still held. “I have to make a grand gesture.”

Rahul eyed him as he listed and swayed. “Maybe that could wait till the morning.”

Paul pointed his bottle at him. “That’s not helping.”

“On the contrary,” Rahul replied. “I think it is. Tomorrow, you can make sane, practical decisions.”

“Fuck sane. Fuck practical.”

Rahul sighed, draining his bottle of beer.

“I have things to tell her and I need to do it now.”

“So, tell me.”

Paul blinked at Rahul owlshly. “Dude, I think I might be drunk.”

“You are,” Rahul agreed.

“No, seriously.” Paul leaned forward to whisper. “I’m hallucinating her voice.”

“No.” Rahul smiled. “You’re not. Turn around.”

Paul turned, slowly, very slowly, because it seemed like the earth was trying to turn with him.

And there she was. She looked tired, sad and lost. She looked beautiful.

He was going to puke.

“You left,” he accused.

“I did,” she agreed. “But I came back.”

He saw Rahul walk off towards the hotel that loomed over that beach shack.

“You left me,” he said again.

“No Paul. Never that.”

FIFTY-ONE



## NISHA

SHE HADN'T THOUGHT it was possible to miss someone who was standing right in front of her. She looked at Paul with his hair standing on end, his shirt buttoned wrong and his bloodshot, bleary eyes trying to bring her into focus and she knew she couldn't leave with the way things were between them.

She'd tried to escape Aman in the worst way possible but she wouldn't run from Paul. Fuck that. She was her own person and she was standing her ground.

She'd come to Goa to do a job of work and that was what she was going to do. She'd also come here madly in love with this man and she'd be damned if she would leave Goa without understanding exactly what had happened between them.

She'd made it halfway to the airport before she'd forced the taxi driver to turn the car around. Aarushi, bless her heart, hadn't blinked an eye.

"You had something to tell me," she reminded him. "I'm waiting."

He took a deep breath, tunneled his hands through his hair, tugged at it, and then spun towards the ocean. She went to stand beside him, staring out at the waves as they broke, little foamy white runners drifting towards them.

He reached for her, but she stepped out of reach.

"Please don't touch me. Not right now."

He looked stricken, like she'd slapped him, but his hand dropped to his side and he took a step away from her. Her heart ached but she held her ground. She would always hold her ground, she promised herself. Always.

"I was four when my mom met Jonathon. My father had died of a heart attack a few months after I was born. I never really knew him. Jon had...he had charisma. He had presence. He made you feel like the most important person in the world when he was focused on you."

"I know the type," Nisha murmured. "I married the type."

"Yes." Paul didn't look at her. "He had that inexplicable something. Aman too. He looked at my mother and saw a workhorse who'd sustain his lazy, wastrel lifestyle. My mother fell in love, a love that consumed her. It brought her passion, excitement, fun. At least in the beginning. And when it stopped bringing all of those things, she continued to live in hope that it would return."

"My mother," he turned to look at her now. "She doesn't have your strength."

Nisha looked at him, her heart fluttering at his expression. The way this man looked at her...

"You left Aman long before you met me, Nisha. You brought him to justice long before I even knew what he'd done. You did all those things when I wasn't even a blip in your existence."

The truth of those words was a balm to her sore heart, calming the worst of her fears. She hadn't seen that truth in her anger and fear.

"Initially, when I didn't know you," he continued. "I wanted to help you because I wanted to help right a wrong. You were right about that. I wanted to help, to support, to save because I didn't want that bastard to win. I was in your court, rooting for you, and trying to hand you any tools I could to help build that fucking life that you wanted. Because it was the right thing to do and yes, fuck it, because I could never do it for my mother. She wouldn't let me. I want to do it for every

woman who needs support to leave an abusive relationship. And I want to do it in my mother's name. But I'm not falling in love with all of them. I only ever fell in love with you."

A shaky breath escaped her, one stray tear breaking free. Paul raised a hand to wipe it away but dropped it before touching her.

"But it was always your life baby. This life was yours to make, yours to craft, yours to define. I was just along for the ride."

"And then I got to know you, really know you, and I fell so fucking hard, I never recovered."

"Did you fall in love with me because of your saviour complex?"

"Is that what I have?" he asked, a sardonic laugh escaping him. "How the fuck am I anybody's saviour, Nisha, when I couldn't even save myself? I can help, support and all of that but in the end, the only person who can save you is yourself. Believe me that's a lesson I learned early in life. Very early."

"Me sending my mother money is support. Her not leaving even when Jonathon slaps her is her not saving herself. Do you see me dragging her out of that house? Believe me, I've considered it but she'll just go back after kicking me in the balls to get away from me."

"Paul," she murmured. "Your mother loves you. She just doesn't –"

"Let's not start lying to each other now, okay?" he smiled bitterly. "My mother doesn't love me. She's had that love beaten out of her. She needs me. I'm her ATM and I'm needy enough to fulfil that role in her life."

"That's not true." Nisha moved infinitesimally closer to him. "True love doesn't disappear. It changes shape, takes on a new role, but it never goes away. I hate Aman now, but I remember when I thought I loved him. What I felt for him, it's a fraction of nothing in comparison to what I feel for you. I never truly loved him. Which is why it's so easy for him to disappear from my life."

Paul looked over at her, misery etched into every line of his face.

“But you wouldn’t disappear, Paul. Even if I tried to scrub you out of every scrap of my existence, you would always be there. I couldn’t even make it to the damn airport without you.”

“You have to believe me, Nisha. I’m not with you because of some fucked up mother issues. My issues are what they are. They’ve made me who I am, saviour complex and all but they aren’t the reason I love you. Never have been.”

“My issues aren’t the reason I love you either,” she told him with a watery smile. “I love you despite them.”

“I’m sorry.” Paul stared at her, the velvety darkness of the night blanketing them even as the hotel’s dim lights gave them enough visibility to see each other.

“I am too,” she admitted.

“You have to give me another chance,” he told her. “I’m not going anywhere and I will pester you into oblivion if you don’t.”

Nisha didn’t say anything, her heart and mind waging a wordless battle.

“I can’t live an existence that doesn’t have you in it. You are my everything, Nisha. You need to know that and if you tell me to fuck off today, I will still spend the rest of my life trying to prove it to you. There is nobody else for me. Not now. Not ever.”

She still didn’t say anything.

“Nisha, baby,” he whispered. “Tell me what you need.”

Nisha took a deep breath. “I need you to touch me now.”

# EPILOGUE

“I LOOK like I fell into a strawberry souffle,” Nisha grumbled, staring at herself in the mirror.

“Good bridesmaids,” Aarushi said from where she was sprawled on the couch flicking through a fashion magazine. “Never complain.”

“This is a Hindu wedding, yes?” Nisha demanded.

“Tamil Brahmin slash Maharashtrian wedding.” Aarushi licked the tip of her finger and flicked another page.

“Then where does a bridesmaid fit into it? Especially one dressed like strawberry shortcake.”

“This is Vaani’s wedding,” Aarushi replied. “This is the least out-of-the-box thing that’s going to happen.”

“Damn right!” Vaani twirled into the room. “I’m going to redefine the damn box, darlings.”

The guys walked in behind the bride-to-be carrying what looked like a mountain of shopping bags. Paul took one look at Nisha in her bridesmaid finery and burst into laughter.

So much for love, she thought, glowering at him. She hoped Vaani stuck him in a pink sherwani for the wedding. It would serve him right.

“You look beautiful,” he wheezed, holding his sides as he laughed.

“Nicely done dickhead,” Rahul told him dumping his bags and going to sit beside Aarushi, dragging her feet into his lap.

Aditya had Vaani tucked into his arms, his chin resting on the top of her head, his amused eyes taking in the chaos in the office's conference room.

Aarushi got a foot massage, Vaani got snuggled, and she got laughed at. Hmmphh.

Nisha grabbed the large, flouncy skirt of her pink dress. "I'm going to change. I'll be making coffee. Who wants some?"

A chorus of 'mes' followed her out of the room. She went into Paul's room for privacy, her regular office clothes tucked under one arm.

Bundling her hair into a messy bun, she twisted trying to get her hands on the top of the zipper. But no matter how hard she tried she couldn't get a grip on it.

"Let me," Paul said from right behind her, his big hands closing over hers.

Nisha squeaked, not having heard him come into the room. The zipper moved down with insulting ease, the dress falling apart to reveal her back to him. Nisha's breath caught in her chest as his knuckles traced the zipper's path down the skin of her back.

"Paul," she breathed.

"Yeah baby." He kissed her bared shoulder, nuzzled into her neck. "Tell me what you need."

From outside, a burst of laughter sounded, a distant sound in the foggy recesses of Nisha's brain.

"We're in the office."

"I know." He kissed his way down her back, stopping to nip at the curve of her bottom. "This is completely against our HR code of conduct."

"We don't have an HR code of conduct," Nisha gasped as she braced herself against the table in front of her.

"True. So does that mean this is okay?" His hand disappeared inside her voluminous skirt, finding her wet and

ready.

“Paul!” His name was a keening sound.

“Tell me what you need love.”

“I think,” she glanced over her shoulder to see him kneeling at her feet, love for her shining out of every bit of him. “I think I need you to love me.”

“Forever,” he vowed, his eyes holding hers.

“Forever,” she agreed.

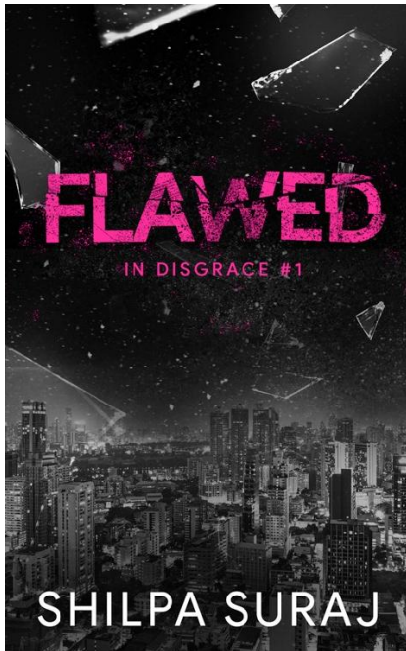


—THE END—

# IN DISGRACE SERIES



## [OTHER BOOKS IN THE SERIES]



*Why would anyone want perfection when they could have Vaani Jaishankar instead?*

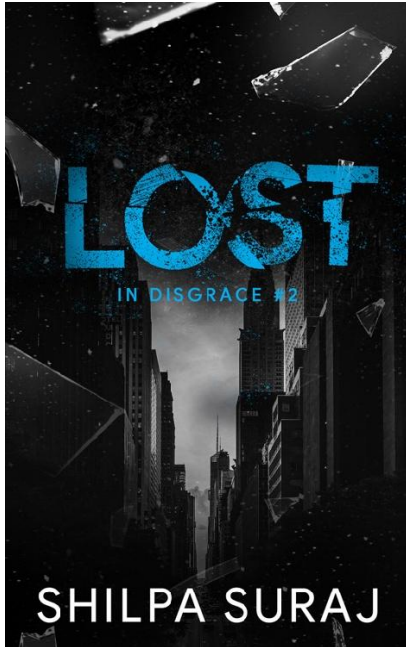
Aditya Khamankar was a chartered accountant who built his life on a bedrock of numbers. For no matter what happened, numbers and math never let you down. They stayed the same. And that fundamental fact defined many of his choices. He was the obedient son, the diligent student, the overachieving employee, the reliable friend. All he wanted in his life was routine and sensible discourse. All he craved in that

same life was peace and quiet. And then his senior partner's flighty daughter came home. And life as he knew it was never the same again...

Reality television villain and tabloid fodder, Vaani Jaishankar lived for the arclights. The notoriety, the glamour, the larger than life noise that came with it held her in thrall. Until the industry she loved and the people she trusted used and abandoned her. And now, she was back home. Darkening the doorstep of her childhood home, something she'd sworn she'd never do and working in her father's accountancy firm... Could God just take her now already? And then there was her father's business partner...

What happens when Perfection meets Flawed? Do the cracks beneath his façade show? Or is it as well hidden as the foundation of grit and ambition her shiny polish conceals?

When attraction wars with common sense and love burns a fiery rope that ties them together, Aditya and Vaani need to decide if this is enough... If they are enough for each other? For the world doesn't believe they are and the world isn't done with them yet...



Lieutenant Rahul Jaishankar of the Indian Navy is a man of honour, principles and commitment. His love for his family, his ethics, and his integrity is only eclipsed by his love for his country. He has no time or space to love anything or anyone else. Until the day Ayaana Sahni explodes into his life. Suddenly, she's all he can think of, all he can hope for, all he dreams of, awake or asleep...

But Ayaana isn't a dream he can afford to have. She's an illusion. Ayaana Sahni is actually Aarushi

Mittal. And Aarushi Mittal wants only one thing...Vengeance. And no man, not even one as deliciously gorgeous as Lieutenant Rahul was going to get in her way.

An award winning, intrepid journalist, Aarushi spends most of her life abroad working on the kind of devastating stories that the world would never hear of if not for people like her. But it has come at the cost of her personal life, at the cost of time with family, and at the heartbreaking cost of her friend's devastating tragedy.

Aarushi needs to atone for her negligence, she needs to right the wrongs done in her absence, and she needs to make the villain in her friend's story pay. What she really needs to make that happen is a way into the tightly knit community of the Indian Navy and Lieutenant Rahul Jaishankar is it. And if that means there is some collateral damage along the way, then so be it. Even if the collateral being damaged makes her yearn for dreams that don't exist. Surely, the Lieutenant would understand, wouldn't he?

Aarushi isn't built for love. She's built to burn down the world for her loved ones instead. So what if this man makes her want things she's never wanted? So what if this man makes her heart ache for something she'll never have? So what if, suddenly, this man is all she wants?

*Lost is a story of love, betrayal, honour, revenge, and everything in between. It's also a love story that sets fire to the world they live in leaving them with no choice but to rise from the ashes anew...*

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To my readers, thank you for loving In Disgrace. You give me hope that the stories of my heart will always find a home in yours.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A published author with Harlequin India – Mills & Boon India Collection and Juggernaut, Shilpa Suraj's books have hit both the Hot New Releases and Bestseller lists on Amazon. Her next novel, tentatively titled 'Wrong,' has been contracted by Rupa Publications and will release later this year. She is also part of the Flipped Anthology by Harper Collins and had an audiobook book Insta Reddy release with Storytel.

An avid reader with a passion for creative writing and storytelling saw her participating in writing competitions at school and dabbling in copy writing for an ad agency as a teenager. Twenty years in the corporate space, including a stint in Corporate Communications for Google, India, and a spell at entrepreneurship all hold her in good stead for her multiple current roles of author, mother and Head of Human Resources & Public Relations at an architecture and interior design firm.

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