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DEVIL'S
KISS

MV KASI

The Devil's Kiss

by

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DEDICATION

To all the people working tirelessly on the front lines fighting
an invisible enemy during the hardest of times.

A heartfelt thank you!

And to ALL my readers and my VIPs.

I love you all!

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PROLOGUE

I betrayed the devil. I dared to insult him in the worst possible way.

Aditi lay on the bed, shivering in the darkness. The slightly humid yet pleasant ocean breeze coming through the French doors in the bedroom didn't offer her any solace. Her mind was consumed by what consequences waited for her that night.

The dark flash of cold fury in Anirudh Shaurya's eyes when he caught her in the act of betrayal ran through her mind in a loop. There was bloodlust in his eyes that night. Whether it was directed at her or someone else, she didn't know it yet. All she knew was that she would pay in one way or another.

Her body trembled violently imagining his punishment.

She tried to draw in courage, but she couldn't. Not that night.

The soft sound of approaching footsteps made her heart almost beat out of her chest. Her breath stuck in her throat when the door to the master bedroom suite opened and shut close with a soft click.

The faint smell of familiar expensive cologne filled the air making her body shiver violently. She kept her eyes closed and tried to even her breathing, so she could pretend to be asleep. But it was of no use.

The footsteps got closer to the bed, until they stopped right next to her. And then, there was utter silence.

Even though her eyes were closed, she felt the intense gaze on her. She felt him leaning towards her, and she nearly jumped out of her skin when she felt a soft touch. The rough pads of his calloused fingers moved slowly along the length of her bare arm.

Her skin broke into goosebumps, and her body trembled even more. But this time, along with fear, she trembled with desire.

Her body recognized his touch and automatically craved him. All the intimate moments they had spent together made her body constantly at war with her heart. Even though she didn't want to, she desired the devil.

She wanted to open her eyes and shout at him to stop touching her. She wanted to tell him once again how much she hated him. That she would never fall in love with a man such as him. That she would never accept him as her husband.

He had stolen her away. Away from the life she had planned for herself. Instead of leading a simple and happy life, she was dragged and plunged into the dark underbelly of crime.

He was the devil—a ruthless, brutal devil with no conscience or humanity.

Her intense anger and sense of righteousness gave her the courage she needed. She opened her eyes and met his gaze.

“I hate you,” she whispered.

She could see him clearly in the soft moonlight spilling through the large windows. The expression on his darkly handsome face was terrifying even as he remained silent.

Her breaths came out faster as he continued to watch her and touch her. His fingers moved from her bare arm to her shoulder, and then moved to her neck where her pulse beat rapidly.

She knew it was time for her to pay. He would make her pay for the sins of her father. For all the times she had challenged his authority and refused to bend to his will. And most of all, he would make her pay for the ultimate insult and betrayal when he caught her with another man that night.

She knew her time was up. The devil would demand his dues that night.

CHAPTER 1

The cool breeze from the ocean blew over the fire while soft, rhythmic chants filled the air. The only thing marring the otherwise perfectly peaceful atmosphere was the tortured cries of a man at a distance.

“Please, Anirudh! Forgive me. I won’t make that mistake again!”

Anirudh ignored the cries while continuing to follow the rituals of the ceremony. The cool sea breeze blew over his bare chest as he made the offerings to the fire in front of him. Although he wasn’t particularly a religious man, he had deep respect towards tradition.

It was the tenth anniversary of his parents’ deaths. And as their only son, he performed the ceremony each year so their souls could rest in peace.

He looked at the picture of his parents’ smiling faces, the one he had taken when he was nine years old. They were on their family vacation at that time. He recalled how he used to look forward to those trips. It was the only time his father could pull himself away from the heavy responsibilities and spend it with his wife and son.

His parents had deliberately chosen destinations that were far away, where they were no longer the rich, powerful family that was constantly involved in power struggles. They chose

places where they could rent a small home, and their mother cooked their meals while he and his father were her helpers.

But as he grew older, the frequency of those vacations reduced while his father's responsibilities grew even heavier. And being born a Shaurya came with a lot of responsibilities.

“Anirudh! Please!” the man's voice begged once again.
“Spare me this one last time!”

The tortured cries got even louder, but the chants continued without a pause. Being the head priest of the Shauryas for decades, the sounds of a man being tortured didn't really faze the older man much. But the other two priests who were the sons following their father's footsteps looked nervous. Not that they would dare to oppose, especially since the Shauryas had paid for their education, their weddings, their home and also donated quite generously on many occasions.

By now, the two young priests must have known that the Shauryas were beyond redemption, and trying to stop them would only shift the attention to them.

Anirudh supposed he should at least feel a twinge of guilt for corrupting the innocents. But guilt and conscience were the first things to go after his parents died, and he took up the reins.

“I'm begging you, Anirudh! Call your grandfather. He'll ask you to spare my life!”

A flicker of annoyance passed through Anirudh. Although his grandfather was the Shaurya patriarch, the older man no longer held the reins when it came to final decisions. Ten years ago, Narayan Shaurya gladly handed the reins over to his

grandson after his grandson had begun a bloody carnage, killing most of their rivals who threatened their power.

Anirudh turned briefly to signal his men. He would have preferred to kill the man being tortured because of his betrayal. But since it was the anniversary of his parents' death, and his mother was gentle-natured and believed in forgiveness and peace, he decided to spare the life of the traitor.

For now.

The betrayer was going to be punished in a way that would never make him betray again.

The screams became louder while the head priest continued with the chanting.

“Weapons do not cut the spirit...” The screams turned into agony as a knife sliced through the traitor's tongue.

“Fire does not burn it...” It was followed by a blaze and the smell of burning skin.

“Water does not make it wet...” The traitor ran into the ocean to stop the fire.

“And the wind does not make it dry...” The traitor was forcibly dragged out and carried away while the wind blew over his tortured body.

“The spirit cannot be cut, burned, wet or dried.”

The ceremony continued uninterrupted while the tortured man was carried away.

Offering the last of prayers, Anirudh stood up.

The head priest stood up as well and took the generous offering made to him. “Please convey my regards to your

grandfather.”

“I will.”

“And thank you again for the generous donation. We are continuing to feed hundreds of homeless and poor in your mother’s name.”

Anirudh nodded. “That should not stop, no matter what. The temple trust I opened will ensure continuity.” Just like his mother would have wanted.

“Sir,” a voice interrupted hesitantly. It was one of his grandfather’s assistants. “Your grandfather has called many times and wants to speak to you urgently. He wanted you to call him when you were done with the ceremony.”

“I’ll call him later.”

For a split second, the man looked like he wanted to argue, but he wisely kept his mouth shut. He must be a smart man because he chose the lesser of the evils to deal with. Narayan Shaurya would punish his assistant for not following the order, but it wouldn’t be as brutal as the punishment his grandson would mete out.

Anirudh shrugged into the shirt offered by his head of security before walking towards the beach house that was built at a height, only a few hundred feet away from the ocean.

“Your grandfather is not going to be happy,” Keshav stated. Keshav was an ex-army man whom Anirudh had hired as head of security ten years ago.

“I know. But my grandfather has to deal with it.” Narayan Shaurya was the one who had personally taught his grandson how to deal with traitors, especially the homegrown variety.

Anirudh looked at his watch. It was close to nine in the morning. “Is everything going according to the plan for tomorrow?”

Keshav nodded. “Yes. Main contacts have checked in and given clearance at the airports and shipping points.”

“The Somraj checkpoints too?”

“Yes, especially them.”

“Good. Keep me posted if anything changes. And make sure there is no leak in the media or anywhere. Ask them to cover the chief minister’s rally instead.”

“Yes. I will notify them again.”

Anirudh was about to leave when Keshav’s voice stopped him briefly.

“Anirudh... there is a high threat with the main contacts being initiated. Others are watching closely too. You should let some of our men stay here with you.”

His head of security meant armed bodyguards. He did have them with him most of the time. But on that particular day, he didn’t want any. He wanted to be left alone.

“No.” With that short reply, Anirudh disappeared into the house that his father had built for his mother.

He climbed the stairs and went into the master bedroom. Pushing open the French doors, he stood outside in the balcony, watching the waves crashing on the shore.

The Shaurya mansion, where his grandfather currently lived, had around two hundred rooms. The Shauryas also

owned several penthouses and guest houses in the city, some of which were much bigger than the beach house.

He didn't live in the beach house either as he preferred to stay in one of his penthouses in the heart of the city where it was easier to control the business operations. He only came to the beach house whenever he missed his parents and wanted to feel closer to them.

They say that time heals the wounds, but the deep loss of his parents was still raw even after ten years. It would continue to be an open wound until he tortured and eliminated all those who were responsible for their deaths.

He had begun the lonely and bloody battle ten years ago. And in the course of it, he had eliminated many powerful enemies, and yet new ones emerged who were waiting to strike at a weak moment. It was a constant struggle to remain on top.

A small sting made him look at his chest where one of the stitches came open due to climbing the stairs. Just last week, he was shot at twice. He had barely felt the pain from the bullet wounds. Even now as blood trickled down, apart from the sting, he felt nothing. There was no room for such physical pain when vengeance was all that filled his mind.

But he didn't think he was invincible or could continue cheating death like he did several times during the last ten years. He wasn't God.

In fact, he was called the opposite.

He was called the devil.

CHAPTER 2

“I know my father, Rahul. He won’t say no.”

Aditi Somraj smiled at the handsome man on her phone screen. She was video chatting while seated inside a car that was taking her to her childhood home from the airport.

She knew her father would be surprised and happy with her visit. She also hoped his good mood would make him receptive to any other news she had to tell him.

“I don’t know, Aditi,” said the concerned voice of her boyfriend. “Maybe you shouldn’t have kept us a secret. You should have told him about us beforehand.”

Aditi shook her head. “I couldn’t just spring such a thing from London, Rahul. I wanted to tell him about us in person.”

“What if he doesn’t like me or agree?” Rahul asked.

She smiled in assurance. “He will like you, especially when I tell him you are the man I decided to spend the rest of my life with.”

Rahul still looked uncertain.

Her eyes briefly looked up and recognized the familiar neighborhood. “Take the next right and drive through the gates,” she instructed the taxi driver.

As soon as the familiar tall, black wrought iron gates came into view, a feeling of nostalgia hit her hard. It had been well over a decade since she last came home. After her mother had

died, she was sent to London to stay with her mother's brother and his wife who treated her as they did their own daughters. And since her uncle's family didn't visit India, neither could she. Her father preferred to visit London twice a year to check on her.

"Right here?" the taxi driver asked.

"No. You can drive through the gates and stop in front of the house," she instructed.

But the gates weren't opening automatically, and the car had to stop in front of the gates where a couple of uniformed armed guards stood waiting.

She frowned. During her childhood, there was just one security guard near the gates who also worked as the gardener. She knew her father's businesses had expanded over the years, but it didn't occur to her that he would need armed protection.

A twinge of guilt pierced her heart. While she led a normal life in London, her father was leading a life that needed armed protection.

"Who are you here to visit?" one of the guards asked.

"I'm Aditi Somraj."

The guard immediately became alert. "Mr. Somraj's daughter?"

"Yes."

He looked uncertain. "Wait here for a minute, madam." He went back to the small room near the gate and spoke to someone before getting back to her.

“Please go in,” he said. “Sorry, madam. I haven’t seen you before. So I had to check to make sure.”

“No problem,” she said as the gates were opened.

Aditi was surprised at seeing her childhood home. Although the house had always been a fairly large structure, it wasn’t the gigantic structure it was right then. Her father must have razed most of the previous structure and built over it. Even though it looked beautiful from outside, she felt a twinge of regret that it no longer looked like her old childhood home.

Memories of her mother’s laughter while chasing her in the garden area where they played together made her more nostalgic. She also recalled spending time a lot of time on their porch swing at the front of the house.

There was no swing now. And more armed guards stood outside at the entrance of the house.

As soon as the car stopped in front of the house, a few of the armed guards surrounded them.

She paid for the taxi and got out of the car. She was about to speak with one of the guards asking if he could help with the luggage when she saw a familiar face coming out from the main door.

She burst into a smile. “Uncle Prakash!” she greeted the middle-aged man who was her father’s assistant. He had been working for her father since she was a little girl.

The older man returned the smile. “Adi,” he called her affectionately using her pet name from her childhood.

Until she was nine, she had been a tomboy. She wanted to hang out with only boys, and do what they usually did—

climbing trees, rolling in the mud and playing rough outdoor games. She even had short hair and dressed up as a boy and insisted on being called Adi, which was typically a boy's name. It had been an amusing phase for her parents, until she turned nine and discovered she liked pretty dresses better and also had small crushes on boys in her school.

“This is quite unexpected. Your father was expecting you to come next week.”

“I know. I'm early. I wanted to surprise Papa. Is he home?”

Her father's assistant's smile slipped a little. “Yes. He is home, but he's in an important meeting. Why don't you freshen up and relax while he wraps up his meeting? I'll ask one of the maids to prepare your room.”

“Aditi?” Rahul's voice reminded her she was still on the call with him.

She looked at the screen. “I'll call you back, Rahul. Don't worry.” She smiled at him before ending the call.

“Who is Rahul?” her father's assistant asked with a frown.

“My... good friend in London.” She wanted to first tell her father about Rahul before announcing to anyone else. Her uncle and aunt in London knew about Rahul but hadn't mentioned anything to her father.

She followed the older man inside. Surprisingly, the interior hadn't changed much, only a few additions had been added.

“This is Durga. She's the housekeeper. She can fix you a snack or an early dinner. Meantime, let me inform your father of your visit.”

She nodded while the older man left in a hurry. She noticed he went towards the newly added addition which must be the home office area.

“Madam. Please follow me to the dining area.”

Aditi smiled at the woman who must have been hired recently. “Please call me Aditi. And I’m not hungry. I’ll wait for my father.”

The woman looked uncertain, but she nodded and left.

Aditi went towards the library wondering if her father’s home office room was still next to it.

The library hadn’t changed much. It was still the same, but the office area seemed to have expanded vastly. She frowned when she heard faint yet unmistakable screams coming from the office area. And it was her father’s voice.

“How did this happen again?” he asked.

There were other voices trying to explain something on the speakerphone.

“I need this fixed,” her father thundered. “This has been happening way too many times and for way too long. Find out if we have a leak somewhere. Do you how much this is costing me?”

Aditi didn’t know much about her father’s business. All she knew was that he had a transport business. It had started with a couple of trucks which he expanded over the years and turned it into a flourishing business.

Guilt pierced her again for not showing much interest in her father’s business. Although she had gone through the expected

route of graduating from business school as her father wanted, she preferred to work for a company than start her own business. She liked having roots.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the office room door opened. She heard multiple footsteps and then saw a few men walking past the library.

Hoping her father was free, she stepped out of the library and went to the office room.

“Aditi!” her father’s voice was sharp. “What are you doing here?”

Her stomach sank at his tone and the look of anger on his face.

“I wanted to surprise you, Papa. I missed you, so I came a week early.”

Her father’s angry, tensed look softened a little. “I’m sorry, Aditi. I shouldn’t have snapped at you. Something came up at work.”

“That’s all right, Papa. I understand.” She smiled as she went closer and hugged her father. Even though she spoke to him every other week, and he visited her once every six months, she missed him a lot.

Her father put his hands on her head gently and let out another sigh. “You shouldn’t have come without informing,” he said in a soft, scolding tone.

“Why?”

He frowned slightly as though he didn’t know how to explain to her. “Things have changed here, Aditi. They are no

longer the way they were during your childhood. There are people who want to harm me and also you.”

She pulled back. “Why? Because you have more money now?”

He nodded. “Yes, kidnappers looking for money from rich people. And also a few enemies who are my competition in business, waiting to strike back at me at any given point.”

Aditi frowned, not liking it one bit. “Maybe you should just donate most of it away, Papa. Is it worth living like this? I rather we live a simple, peaceful life.”

Her father let out a short laugh. “When you say things like that, you remind me so much of your mother. Not only do you look like her, you even think like her.” There was no bitterness in his tone.

Aditi knew that despite the circumstances, her father still loved her mother. And that sometimes, it was painful for him to look at his only daughter who resembled his late wife who had left him.

Her father was about to say something when his assistant, Prakash, strode into the room.

“Mohan.” Tension radiated off Prakash. “We have another problem.”

Aditi’s father immediately tensed again. “What happened?”

Aditi knew it wasn’t the right time. She kissed her father’s cheek again. “I’ll talk to you later, Papa,” she said before leaving the room.

Just as she was about to close the door, she heard the beginning of the conversation spoken in an urgent tone.

“Our worst fear is coming true, Mohan. I don’t think we can make this target.”

She wanted to stay and hear more, but her phone rang, and she saw Rahul’s name flashing on the screen. She walked away from the office area. But wanting privacy before she spoke to Rahul, she went up the stairs and into her childhood room which was surprisingly left untouched.

She sat on the small single bed before calling back.

“How did your father react? Was he surprised?” Rahul asked.

“He was surprised to see me. But I didn’t get enough time to talk to him about us.” She was worried about her father, but she didn’t want to discuss that with Rahul right then. “I’ll tell him about us soon. Did you reach your cousin’s place?”

“Yeah. He went out to meet with his girlfriend, and they are going clubbing together. I told him I was too tired to join him.”

“We did have a long flight. Why don’t you catch up on sleep?” she suggested. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Saying goodbye, she ended the call. She was tired too. She was just about to get to the suitcases to change when she heard a familiar, faint tinkling sound of the anklets. She turned towards the doorway and saw a short, old woman in bright, colorful clothes.

Aditi let out a wide smile. “Suki!”

The old woman's face was wreathed in smiles. "Adi."

Laughing, Aditi hugged the older woman and kissed her heavily wrinkled cheek. "It's been so long."

The woman nodded. "Yes. I missed you here."

"I missed you too." Suki was close to seventy years old. She had been her mother's nanny and also hers.

"I didn't know you were still working, Suki. I thought you left to your native place."

There was a wry smile. "Your father suggested many times that I retire and leave this place. I dared him to fire me. That's the only way I will leave this home."

Aditi laughed. "I'm so glad you didn't leave." Seeing Suki's familiar face made her feel more at home.

"I'm so glad you finally returned home, Adi."

Aditi smiled regretfully. "It's only a brief visit, Suki. I'll be returning to London in three weeks. Why don't you come and visit London with me?" she suggested. There was enough time for Suki to apply for a passport and get a tourist visa.

Suki shook her head. "No. I don't want to go anywhere. I don't think you will leave either. The devil won't let you."

Aditi laughed. "Oh, Suki. Do you still have your shells and cards?"

Suki claimed she came from a long line of fortune-tellers. Aditi recalled Suki's shells and cards that she had often used to read people's fortunes. A lot of their neighbors and even some of their family friends had their fortunes read. But Aditi's mother didn't believe in such superstition.

“There’s no such thing as knowing your destiny, Aditi. All you have to believe in is doing the right thing, no matter what.”

Although Aditi had her fortune read many times from Suki, it was only for fun’s sake. Like her mother, she was a firm believer that people and the choices they made defined their destinies.

“Yes. I still have them.” The older woman watched her with a long, sad smile. “You look so much like her,” she said softly.

Aditi’s heart clenched. She knew Suki was referring to her mother. “Uncle Suraj says that as well. You should really come visit London, Suki. Uncle Suraj will be happy to see you. He used to tell me about his and Ma’s adventures here.”

Aditi’s childhood home belonged to her mother’s brother. But when he decided to move to London, he gifted his ancestral home to his sister.

“How is Suraj?” Suki asked. “I heard he has two children.”

“He’s going great. And yes, he has a ten-year-old daughter and fourteen-year-old son. They are still studying in school.”

She told Suki about her uncle’s family, and was about to ask Suki about what happened to the rest of the maids in her childhood home when a yawn interrupted her.

She tried to stifle the small yawn.

“You are tired,” said Suki. “Let me get some food readied for you while you freshen up.”

Aditi smiled. "I'm not hungry, Suki. I ate during the flight."

But the older woman wasn't having it. "You need to eat or you won't be able to rest well. And besides, you need all the possible energy to face the devil in coming days. And he's quite the demanding one, your devil."

Aditi laughed in amusement. "Okay, fine. I'll have something. But something light."

When the older woman left, Aditi sighed. Although it was good to be home, she felt the absence of her mother who she began to miss even more.

Aditi tiptoed to the library. It was her bedtime, and usually her mother was in her room reading her a story. But since her mother didn't come up and she could hear the faint sounds of her parents' arguing, she went down the stairs out of curiosity.

She peeked into the office room and saw that her father was holding her mother's hands and begging her about something. But shockingly, her mother shook her head no.

"Vanita, please. Give me a chance. If not me, think of how this will affect Aditi."

Her mother looked sad but determined. "I've thought this through for quite a while, Mohan. Don't try to stop me."

Aditi frowned, not understanding much. But before she got into trouble, she turned and quickly went back to her room and lay on her bed. Her parents never argued or fought. Her father was a sweet and romantic man who always got her mother pretty flowers and made her laugh. So it was shocking and a little upsetting to see her parents argue.

A few minutes later, she heard footsteps, and the door to her room opened. Based on the faint smell of roses, she knew it was her mother. Even though she was awake, she kept her eyes close, pretending to sleep.

Her mother's phone rang, and she immediately answered. "Yes, Harish. Everything is fine. I'm on my way."

Aditi knew Harish was Harish Shaurya, her mother's childhood friend. Aditi liked him. Whenever she went to the Shauryas' huge mansion or their beach house, he often gave her a sweet treat knowing she enjoyed sweets.

But why was her mother going to the Shauryas' home at this time?

Even as confusion filled her mind, a gentle kiss landed on her forehead. "I love you, my angel," her mother said softly. "I hope you forgive me and understand what I'm about to do."

Aditi didn't understand what her mother was saying. But since it was late at night, she gave in to the deep sleep, only to be woken up by Suki.

"Wake up, Adi. You are needed urgently." Suki's normally cheerful face held a grieving look.

"What happened, Suki?"

"It's your mother. Vanita has been in an accident..."

Aditi woke up with a gasp.

Lightning and thunder flashed outside the window. Slowly, she blinked her eyes against the darkness and realized she was inside her childhood bedroom. She turned and looked at the familiar wooden rocking chair where her mother used to sit most of the nights telling her bedtime stories.

A slow, shuddering breath came out of her. She had just dreamt of the last time she'd seen her mother before her mother died in an accident. The dream was so clear and vivid

that grief and sadness along with several regrets filled her mind.

Why did I have to pretend I was sleeping when Ma came to kiss me goodbye?

Why did I not get up to hug her that one last time and tell her I loved her even though she chose to leave my father and me?

Those regrets had been with her for the last decade. She had lived with them since the time she heard of her mother's accident.

Letting out a heavy sigh, she tried to push away the sadness. She still had her father, even though her father kept her at a distance because she reminded him too much of his late wife who had chosen to leave him for another man.

CHAPTER 3

“Good morning, Papa.”

After a restless night’s sleep with dreams of her childhood, Aditi had woken up later than usual. Or maybe it was simply the time lag.

“Are you going out?” she asked when her father pushed his chair back and seemed to be in a hurry.

“Yes, Aditi. I’m sorry I can’t spend the day with you. Something urgent came up.”

She was disappointed. “That’s okay, Papa.”

Her father nodded in a distracted way, something obviously worrying him.

“Uh... Papa. Would you be free sometime tomorrow? I’d like to introduce you to one of my friends from London.”

Her father frowned. “Sure. But how about this weekend? I’m organizing a party at home. You can invite your friend from London and others too.”

Aditi didn’t have any friends outside of London. The few childhood friends she had, she’d lost touch with them when she was sent away. But she was excited. She could introduce Rahul to her father during the weekend party. And since it was a neutral setting, there would be no pressure on Rahul or her.

“I’ll help with the party arrangements,” she offered.

Her father nodded distractedly once again. She wanted to ask him what was bothering him, but she didn't want to intrude. All she had to focus on was to get her father's blessings to marry Rahul and continue with the life she had planned.

“By the way,” her father added, stopping suddenly on his way out. “I'll have the party organizer reach out to you. She has good contacts in the city. She can also help with suggestions for good restaurants or clubs. Just make sure you take the car, a driver and a couple of guards with you when you go out. And Aditi... Tarun is a good driver. He'll be careful and drive however slow you want him to.”

Aditi smiled at her father's sweet consideration and protectiveness. “Sure, Papa.”

Her father knew she didn't like driving or travelling in cars. Being in London, she always took the subways to get around the city. Even though she wasn't with her mother when her mother died in a car accident, cars and other closed automobiles made her nervous.

After her father left, she called Rahul. But unfortunately, Rahul was still sleeping off his jet lag. Not knowing what to do, she asked for a car and a driver to be readied. She wanted to visit the place her mother took her often during her childhood.

“Adi.” It was Suki with a frown. “Where are you off to this early in the morning?”

Aditi laughed. “Suki. It's close to nine. Hardly early.” She told Suki she was going to visit the places her mother took her to as a child.

“Go later after lunch. I wanted to spend the day with you.”

Aditi smiled. “Sure. Let me tell the driver.”

“No need. I told him already.”

“Suki!” Aditi laughed at the old woman’s cheekiness.

“Come. Let’s see what handsome man is in your future,”
said Suki.

Laughing in amusement and also wanting to genuinely
catch up with Suki, Aditi followed the older woman outside.

“It’s been three days since you arrived. It’s so surprising that you can tolerate the heat and humidity after having lived in London for so long. Unlike Rahul.”

Aditi laughed. She was with Rahul and his cousin. Chetan was taking them around the city for sightseeing. Although Aditi had been to most of the sightseeing places during her childhood, she enjoyed visiting them again.

“I don’t just *tolerate* this weather, I love it here. It’s so much better than the cold, damp and foggy weather of London which I tolerated for the last ten years.”

Rahul gave her a wry look. “I hope you don’t love this place too much. Remember, we have to be back to London in three weeks.”

She grinned, watching Rahul as he dabbed his damp, sweaty forehead with a small piece of cloth. “Don’t worry. I won’t make you stay here longer than needed.”

“How are the party preparations going on?” Rahul asked.

“Looks like there won’t be much for me to do. The party organizer is planning everything. I’m just providing a few inputs. By the way, she asked if I was interested in going to a club. She has VIP passes for tonight.”

Seema who was the party organizer, had been dropping several high-profile names, or at least they must be high profile the way the other woman spoke the names in a

reverential tone. But Aditi had been turning down offers to attend high-profile concerts or visit some celebrity's restaurant. It was driving the other woman crazy. So Aditi decided to check with Rahul's cousin so at least someone would make use of the passes which the party organizer was desperate to pass on.

"Which club?" Rahul's cousin asked.

"I think she said *The Dungeon*." Aditi was amused by the name. "I know Rahul doesn't enjoy clubs, but if you want, you can go with your girlfriend."

"Whoa! VIP passes to *The Dungeon*? Are you kidding me? Hell, yeah! Pooja would love it. And you both should come too. Can the lady give you four passes?"

Aditi was amused by Chetan's excitement. "I'll ask her. If she can't, then Rahul and I will go for dinner at a rooftop restaurant she suggested yesterday."

"That sounds way better," Rahul murmured.

Aditi laughed, knowing he would say that.

"Come on, man. Don't be such a bore. *The Dungeon* is like the most happening place in the city. People would sell a kidney to get a VIP pass to that place."

Aditi grinned at Chetan's exaggeration. Rahul reluctantly agreed.

They continued sightseeing for the rest of the day. Aditi turned to look at the two men following her discreetly. Her father had insisted she take them along whenever she stepped out of the house. She wasn't thrilled about the fact as she wasn't used to having people follow her. But she didn't want

to upset her father. He seemed quite stressed as it is, and in the last three days she'd only seen him briefly at home during breakfast.

Soon, it was close to four in the afternoon.

“All right. I'm going to head home,” she told Rahul and his cousin. “I'll see you guys tonight at the club.”

Waving them goodbye, she went to the bodyguards with a smile. “Did you guys get a chance to have lunch?” she asked. She had asked them to join her earlier for lunch, but they had refused.

“Yes, madam. We grabbed something already.”

“Oh, good.” She slid into the backseat of the car and buckled herself.

“Will my father be back home early this evening?” she asked. She knew the bodyguards would communicate with the rest of her father's bodyguards and know her father's schedule.

“No, madam. Mr. Somraj will be occupied at the warehouse until midnight.”

Aditi knew they meant the transport warehouse. She used to accompany her mother sometimes to go to the warehouse. She had heard from her uncle that her father had now expanded his transport business to not just road transport, but also water and air transport.

She was proud of him, but she was still worried about the toll his business might take on his health. She had stayed home the past three evenings hoping to have dinner with her father, only for him to call to let her know he wouldn't be home until past midnight.

She let out a sigh. She knew it would be the same that night too. So she might as well go to the club and enjoy her evening.

CHAPTER 4

“Wow!”

Aditi agreed with the other girl’s reaction as she stared at the impressive interiors of the nightclub. It was set up on three floors with the ground floor having the dance floor and a large bar area.

It was super crowded with a sea of men and women dancing to the throbbing electric music while purple and blue light flashed from a shiny ball above.

The outside of the club had been quite unassuming and blended with the surrounding buildings as though the owner of the club didn’t really care whether or not people outside were tempted to visit the place. But the long line waiting outside indicated the club was quite popular regardless of a subtle exterior.

The Dungeon was supposedly one of the best nightclubs the city had to offer. When Seema had given them four VIP passes to the club, she was super excited and sang praises of the place. Seema was right.

Aditi had been to a few clubs in London, but she was sure not many matched the ambience or the size of this place. For one, there were no private VIP booths in London. Or maybe they were, and she didn’t know about them. The only reason she visited nightclubs was because she liked to dance.

“This way please.” A well-dressed hostess guided them to the second floor and showed them a reserved VIP booth.

Aditi felt underdressed. She was wearing a loose, off-shoulder shiny black top with jeans. Chetan’s girlfriend was wearing a short, sequined dress that looked similar to what most of the women on the dance floor were wearing.

She shook off the feeling of being conscious of her clothes. It was dark enough and people would be drunk enough for anyone to care about what she was wearing.

Her eyes took in the ambience of the second floor. The rest of the VIP booths were occupied and she could hear the buzz of conversation and faint laughter.

“Is this a smoke-free zone?” Rahul’s cousin asked.

Aditi noticed only then that surprisingly there was no smell of stale smoke in the air like most nightclubs.

The hostess smiled. “Yes, all of *The Dungeons* clubs are smoke-free zones inside. However, there are designated areas outside the club where people can go for smoking.”

Chetan looked disappointed. “Dammit. Guess we need to go out shortly then. Anyway dancing or drinking?” he asked.

“Drinking,” Rahul promptly replied.

Aditi smiled knowingly. Rahul would avoid dancing and put it off however long he could.

“All right. Let’s get started on the shots, then,” Chetan’s girlfriend suggested.

Rahul laughed. “Don’t expect Aditi to join. She just enjoys watching other people get drunk.”

Aditi laughed. It was true. “Hey! Watch it,” she teased. “Don’t challenge me. Or you’ll have to carry me home and face my dad. And I’m sure his first impression of you of getting his daughter stone drunk won’t go well.”

Rahul shuddered exaggeratedly. “Easy on the drinks, then.”

They all laughed before placing their order.

When the drinks arrived, Aditi began to sip on her fruity cocktail. Unlike in London, where she offered to be the designated driver, she now had her father’s car and driver to drop everyone home.

“This drink is delicious.” It was a cocktail that had passion fruit and a subtle blend of some other tropical fruits.

They finished the first round of drinks and ordered two more before the guys decided to step out for a while.

“We’ll be right back.” Rahul didn’t smoke, but he was joining his cousin for a cigarette break.

Aditi was alone with Chetan’s girlfriend.

“Men and their cigarette breaks!” Pooja laughed. “Chetan takes them even between having sex!” The other girl was slurring slightly.

Aditi smiled, not wanting to comment on anything personal. She was feeling quite a bit of a buzz in her head because of the drinks and also because of the club’s energized atmosphere.

She was looking forward to dancing. She stared at the writhing bodies on the dance floor while her favorite music was being played.

“Oh my God!” Pooja let out an excited whisper. “You have an admirer. A super-duper hot one at that. His eyes are glued on you.”

Aditi wanted to ignore whoever it was, but she felt a strong, curious urge to see because of the prickling on her neck.

Drawing her eyes away from the dance floor, she turned slightly to look at the other booths in the VIP section. She found groups of men and women laughing and talking, but nothing out of the ordinary.

“Not here. Look up at the third floor.” Pooja laughed. “He’s a bold one. He’s not even being subtle about the staring.”

Aditi slowly looked up. She didn’t know there was seating available on the third level. When they had arrived, she hadn’t seen anyone. But now, she did. Although it was dark, it wasn’t too dark. She could see the tall, broad figure of a man leaning against the railing. A small glow of orange and a puff of smoke indicated that the person was smoking.

He was allowed to smoke inside?

Even as she wondered, her eyes clashed with the man’s, and her heart jerked inside her chest before it began a slow, loud thud.

He was indeed watching her and not the dance floor. With bold, masculine features, he was quite handsome. No. Handsome was a tame word to describe him. Magnetic. He was one of those men who drew everyone’s eyes wherever they went.

But the reason why her heart began to thud wasn’t just because of his good looks or magnetism. He looked somewhat

familiar. She searched her mind to place his face, but drew a blank.

He didn't smile or acknowledge her in any way, and neither did he draw his gaze away.

Neither did she turn away because she was unable to.

There was a girlish giggle. "Oh my God! You both are totally checking each other out. The sparks are hot enough to burn down the club. Whew!"

Those words jarred Aditi out of the strange trance, and she immediately forced her gaze away from the stranger.

Pooja laughed. "Hey, it's okay. I won't tell Rahul. And there is no harm in flirting with a super-hot guy. I do it a lot of times and Chetan doesn't mind as long as it's harmless."

Aditi shook her head, trying to push away the buzz that seemed to grow after meeting the eyes of the stranger. "I was hardly flirting." Her face heated in embarrassment because she was still quite aware of the stranger's eyes on her. It felt as though there was a live wire connecting her to him.

She got up hurriedly. "Why don't we dance? Rahul and Chetan can join us when they return from the smoke break."

"Great idea!"

They made their way down to the dance floor. She enjoyed dancing, and since Rahul didn't like it that much, she often went out with her girlfriends and loved moving to the upbeat, thumping music, letting go of all her worries.

As soon as they reached the crowded dance floor, she swayed to the music. Her neck continued to prickle as though

sensing someone's gaze. She knew it was *his* gaze. The stranger on the third floor.

Her stomach fluttered, and she realized her nipples had stiffened and felt sensitive against the material of her top. Feeling guilty and embarrassed, she blamed the alcohol for her body's strange reaction.

Thankfully, Rahul joined her on the dance floor. Smiling at him, she threw her hands around his neck and danced slowly to the thumping music. But even though she tried hard, the prickling on her neck didn't stop, and her body buzzed with awareness.

Feeling annoyed by her awareness of a complete stranger, she raised her head to glare at the third floor, only to discover that the stranger was gone.

Frowning in confusion, she continued to dance while the prickling sensation remained.

“Let’s take a break. I’m hungry.” Rahul indicated to the second floor.

Grateful at the distraction, Aditi nodded. The other couple was too busy grinding against one another to notice them. She didn’t think they would want to be disturbed, so she followed Rahul up the stairs to the VIP booth area.

Luckily, their waitress from before was already there, and Rahul could order food right away.

“If you want to freshen up, I can give you the code to the VIP ladies’ restroom,” the waitress offered with a smile.

Aditi decided to go. Although the place was air-conditioned well, she felt hot and sticky. Splashing water on her face might help remove the buzz in her head.

“Why don’t you get started,” she told Rahul. “I’ll use the washroom and be right back.”

Taking the directions from the waitress, she set out towards the washrooms. She pressed the code on the elevator which surprisingly stopped on the third floor.

Her heart thudded. Would she come across the stranger? Maybe he had left already.

You are drunk! Have some shame and get that guy out of your head!

Scolding herself, she continued to follow the directions which sounded rather complicated in her semi-drunken state. She took the first right and stepped out to a long, dimly-lit hallway. A couple of minutes later, she slowed down and frowned when she almost reached the end of the hallway. There were no markings indicating the washrooms. But she heard voices. Men's voices.

“We cannot back out now. It'll send the wrong message.”

“You are right. But the alternative is a good option too.”

“Only if it isn't a trap.”

“You think he'd stoop so low?”

“I wouldn't put it beyond him. Although I must say the lures are pretty hot. I'm tempted to be reeled in.” There were masculine chuckles.

“What do you think, Anirudh? You've been quiet all along. Don't you think the baits are hot?”

There was silence. Aditi frowned when she heard the name. It sounded somewhat familiar.

She knew she was in the wrong place and was listening to a private conversation. She was just about to walk away when the door was suddenly wrenched open.

She couldn't see much inside but the room smelled of fragrant cigars and whiskey.

She slowly blinked up at a tall, familiar form standing at the door. It was him. The stranger.

Her heart began to thump hard. She stared at him while he watched her with an unreadable look. At close proximity,

instead of his looks diminishing, the magnetism seemed to multiply tenfold. Her eyes automatically dropped to his neck where the top two buttons of his shirt were opened, and there was a faint glint of a gold chain. With great difficulty, she dragged her eyes up to his face, but it was hard to keep her eyes locked to his due to their intensity. It was like looking at the sun. It felt blinding.

“I... I...” She couldn’t get the words out. Taking a deep breath and trying desperately not to slur, she spoke. “I’m looking for the ladies’ washroom.”

He watched her for a few moments. “This is a private area.”

His voice was deep and gravelly with a hint of underlying menace that caused goosebumps to rise on her skin.

“Sorry. Excuse me,” she murmured before turning away and walking rapidly with shaky legs and her heart thudding.

Something about that man called to her. Something deeply familiar that she couldn’t place. But it wasn’t in a sweet, nostalgic way that warmed the heart. It was almost as if her mind was trying to shield her from something.

She somehow found her way back after a few minutes.

“What happened?” Rahul asked. “Why were you away for so long?”

She shook her head. “Sorry. I got lost.”

She wasn’t hungry, but she forced some food into her mouth to get rid of the buzz in her head. When the waitress returned to take a drinks order, she told her she didn’t want any.

“There wasn’t a washroom on the third floor at the end of the hallway,” she told the waitress.

The waitress looked confused. “It isn’t on the third floor, it’s on the second floor. The third floor is restricted to only the club owners and their guests.”

Aditi was stunned. Before she could question, Chetan and Pooja joined them.

“We are so famished! It’s so much fun dancing, and the music here is awesome!”

Soon, there was an excited discussion of which type of music best suited the clubs. Although Aditi joined the conversation, the stranger wouldn’t leave her mind.

CHAPTER 5

“I want her.”

The soft buzz of conversation in the room fell silent at the declaration. Anirudh was inside the club’s private office room on the third floor, along with his two friends who co-owned the chain of clubs in the city with him.

Cigar smoke hung in the air, ice clinked in a crystal glass, and the music from the club played lightly in the background. His two friends were seated on the leather couches. Shiv was smoking a cigar, and Vijay was nursing a scotch. Their loaded guns lay on the center glass table. With the lives the three of them led, they couldn’t step out of the house without either their guns or their armed guards.

Their lives hadn’t always been that way. Anirudh had met Shiv and Vijay back in the States where they had gone to college together. Despite being from similar backgrounds with families who were rivals back home, the three of them struck an unlikely friendship and formed a close bond. Shiv and Vijay were his only friends, and he could trust them with his life.

And the bond became stronger over the years. When Anirudh’s parents had died, his two friends had been his rock. They supported his decision to return right away. And a couple of years later, after graduating college, they returned as well.

By then, he had changed and taken over the Shaurya family businesses. And although he had gone after all the Shauryas' rivals, he hadn't touched the businesses owned by Shiv and Vijay's families. They abided by a strict code not to come in between and poach their respective territories or businesses.

For the first time, Anirudh was bending those rules.

Shiv got up from the couch and stood next to him with a frown on his face. "What are you talking about?"

One wall of the office room overlooked the club's dance floor with a one-way mirror. They could see people dancing, but for the people on the dance floor, the wall would appear like a huge mirror. The other wall had screens with camera feeds of different areas of the club. The third wall was a small bar area, and the fourth faced the hallway.

Anirudh was facing watching the camera feed showing the couple seated at the club's VIP section. His eyes were trained on the woman who was smiling at the man next to her.

"Somraj's daughter. I want her."

A look of shock passed on Shiv's face. They were two baits sent to the club that night. Shiv was watching the younger bait on the dance floor with her friends. But he slowly looked at the camera facing the VIP section.

"What do you mean by you want her?"

"Exactly how it sounded."

Anirudh's other friend, Vijay, got up and went to the bar section to pour more scotch. On his way, he spoke calmly having assessed the situation. "You do realize that you spent the last ten years systematically destroying and bringing down

Somraj's business. Somraj sent her as bait for *Shiv* to try and save his neck from *you*."

Anirudh knew that. But he didn't care at that point. "Nothing is going to change the course of what I began ten years ago. The only change is I'll be bringing in a new player into my game, and I want to switch baits."

Shiv continued to frown, and Vijay fell silent.

Anirudh knew he wasn't going to go back on his decision. The things he did over the last ten years and the things he still needed to do would definitely send him to hell. But he decided he was going to drag his enemy's daughter with him.

CHAPTER 6

“You look beautiful and just like your mother.”

Aditi smiled at her father. “That’s because I’m wearing Ma’s dress.” The long, flowing pale blue dress was perfect for the outdoor occasion.

A flash of sadness passed on her father’s face, making her feel guilty.

“I didn’t mean to upset you, Papa. I didn’t have anything to wear for the party and didn’t want to spend money on the elaborate gown Seema was suggesting I buy. So I thought I’d borrow Ma’s clothes and alter them slightly rather than buy something brand new.”

Her father shook his head. “No. No. You didn’t do anything wrong. I just miss her so much. She used to love hosting parties.”

Aditi remembered that as well. Her mother was a wonderful hostess who always ensured there was good food and that everyone had a great time. Aditi wasn’t used to throwing parties. But she was determined to make her father proud that evening.

“All right. I’ll see you later, Papa. I’ll have to check on the arrangements.”

Her father smiled. “You don’t have to, Aditi. Let Seema take care of it. You already did enough. Just enjoy yourself

tonight with your friends.”

Aditi smiled. “I will, Papa. But still, I want to make sure things are running smoothly.”

Kissing her father on his cheek, Aditi drew up her long dress to hurry behind the house where the party would be held.

It was a beautiful evening. The weather was cooler than in the morning, and the humidity was low. The event organizers had put up soft lanterns all over the garden area. Several round tables covered in white cloth were placed strategically so the guests could also mingle. Expensive imported flower arrangements were placed at the center. And just to make it more intimate, she had also added some wildflowers from the garden. Although the garden wasn't as beautiful and lush as it was when her mother was alive, it was still beautiful and professionally maintained adding to the ambience.

Aditi was excited and also slightly nervous. She hoped her father would like Rahul and would agree to them getting married soon. Although Rahul didn't have many common interests with her father, he was a good conversationalist.

Seema was quite chatty during the week and had informed her that although the guest list was limited to two hundred, it was a high-profile party which would include noted businessmen, a few politicians and a few longtime family friends.

Aditi wasn't surprised. Her father came from a modest background, but he had made high-profile contacts through her mother whose family, although no longer rich, was well-known.

One of those high-profile contact's face flashed in her mind, making her feel agitated. Harish Shaurya. That man was entrenched deep into politics, and since Aditi's mother came from a similar background and they were childhood friends, they spent a lot of time discussing those topics.

Did her mother feel drawn to power? Aditi knew her father was busy expanding his then modest business. Did her mother feel neglected?

No! Don't try to analyze all of that again!

She had spent enough days and years on thinking why her mother chose to leave her husband and daughter to go away with another woman's husband.

“All right,” she whispered aloud. “I'm going to enjoy myself.”

Taking a deep breath, she walked towards the musicians and instructed them to begin.

Soon, soft music filled the air. Picking her dress up, she went to the event organizer to make sure they have everything prepared as the guests would begin arriving.

Elegantly dressed men and women filled the garden. Drinks and food were served, and a soft buzz of laughter and conversation filled the air.

Aditi was introduced to a sea of people by her father. There were only a handful she recognized from her childhood, and the rest she was meeting for the first time.

“You must come to our house party next month. My daughter is the same age as you and has just graduated from business school like you. I’m sure you’d both hit it off.”

Aditi smiled at the older woman. “Thank you for the invite, but I’m returning to London in two weeks.”

The woman looked confused, and she looked at Aditi’s father. “But I thought Jaipal—”

Aditi’s father cut in with an odd smile. “I haven’t spoken to Aditi about anything yet.”

Aditi frowned, wondering if her father was thinking of setting her up in an arranged match with one of his business acquaintances.

Was that why he had asked her to visit him out of the blue after so many years?

She wanted to ask him about it, but she didn’t want to when they had company.

She held her tongue about the topic and continued to socialize until her phone rang. It was Rahul.

“Excuse me,” she said with a smile before stepping away to answer the call.

“Have you guys arrived?” she asked.

Rahul had called her earlier to let her know he was stuck in traffic.

“Yes. We are at the gate. A few cars are ahead of us.”

“I’m coming out.” She ended the call and went outside near the entrance of the house to receive him, Chetan and Pooja.

There was a long line of cars. All of them were luxury cars, and most of them seemed to be chauffeured. Aditi smiled at the guests politely as they came in, her eyes seeking the car Rahul was coming in.

She spotted the familiar blue-colored car in the middle that belonged to Rahul’s cousin, Chetan. She smiled and waved slightly, hoping they would see her. She knew Rahul would be nervous about meeting her father, and she wanted to make sure he was comfortable.

She smiled to herself, thinking about her plan to make Rahul less nervous. She was going to sneak out somewhere private and kiss him, until he forgot everything but her.

Although both Rahul and she wanted to wait until their marriage to make love, they kept their anticipation going by kissing and making out. Rahul didn’t pressure her for more. He was sweet and considerate, just the kind of man she wanted to be with for the rest of her life.

A shiny, black car came through the gates and passed by the long line of cars and stopped in front of the entrance.

Aditi frowned at the blatant rudeness and sense of entitlement of the person. She couldn't see through the dark-tinted windows, but she was sure it was definitely some entitled VIP who thought it was okay to cut through the line. She wiped away her frown and tried to keep a neutral expression on her face, since it was one of her father's acquaintances.

But as soon as a tall, familiar dark-suited figure of a man emerged from the car, her eyes widened in shock.

Oh my God! It was him, the stranger from the club.

Was he her father's acquaintance? Her face burned in embarrassment imagining having to face him or be introduced to him.

Did he recognize her?

She knew he did. Because his eyes were trained on her even while he got out of the car.

He was dressed formally like the other male guests, but there was something unpredictable and dangerous about the man. Maybe it was the way his dark eyes were assessing her in a calm, controlled way. Or maybe it was the armed guards around him.

An involuntary shiver passed through her, and she realized that her breasts peaked in strange arousal that she had felt, even at the club.

Angry and embarrassed at her body's response, she kept her gaze locked to his and gave him a cool nod of

acknowledgement to show she wasn't affected by him.

But he didn't greet or acknowledge her in any way. He simply was led away by the small army of armed guards into the house. Vaguely, she noticed there were two other men with him who were similarly dressed in formal clothes.

Who was that man? And why does he look so familiar?

She tried to rack her brain, but she knew she hadn't met him before. If she did, she would have remembered. He didn't have a face that one forgot easily.

Before she could continue to analyze, Rahul called out to her.

Feeling guilty, she forced away the strange reaction to the stranger and smiled at Rahul, Chetan and Pooja.

"Hi. I'm glad you guys could make it. Come on in." She led them inside.

A waiter carrying a drinks tray approached them. Chetan and Pooja picked up cocktails, and she took a glass of champagne. She immediately took a few sips, hoping she could relax a little and stop her thoughts from straying.

"Is your father busy?" Rahul asked.

She noticed that he looked nervous and felt even more guilty.

"Yes, but he'll make time for us, don't worry," she said with a smile, curling her free arm through his and leading him inside the house.

"You look quite dashing by the way," she teased.

He smiled. “That’s because I’m wearing the suit you picked.”

She let out a laugh. It was true. He didn’t bring any suits for their trip, since they weren’t anticipating attending any formal events. So she had picked out a dark charcoal grey suit for him.

Suddenly, another dark charcoal grey suit flashed in her mind. She realized that the stranger was wearing the same-colored suit.

Oh God!

She took another big sip of the champagne, feeling angry that she couldn’t get that man out of her head.

“So, is everyone here already?” Rahul asked.

Aditi blinked away her distracting thoughts to focus on what she had to achieve that night.

“Yes,” she replied. Smiling, she led them into the gardens.

Her smile dropped when she saw that her father was with the stranger from the club. Her father looked unusually tense while speaking to the man and the two other men who had accompanied him.

“Where’s your father?” Rahul asked, having never met him before.

She pointed at him.

Rahul frowned. “Your father looks busy. Maybe we should just wait until he’s free to talk to us.”

Aditi felt uncertain. She wanted to wait too, but at the same time, she didn’t want to delay Rahul’s introduction to her

father. And besides, her father looked like he would prefer to be rescued from that stranger who was upsetting him.

Taking a deep breath, she decided to go. “Let’s go. My father is keen to meet you,” she said, wanting to ease Rahul’s discomfort.

As soon as she got closer, her father noticed her presence and fell silent. His face seemed slightly pale, and he appeared agitated.

Ignoring the presence of the stranger, she smiled at her father. “Papa, I’m sorry to interrupt you. But I want you to meet my friends. This is Rahul, my friend from London. And this is Chetan and Pooja.”

Her father nodded. “Nice meeting you all. Do enjoy the party.” He turned back to the men he was speaking to. “Why don’t we continue our discussion inside?”

The men must have agreed because her father led them into the house. Aditi refused to look at the stranger, even though she felt the strange prickling and awareness towards him.

As soon as her father and the three men left, Pooja burst out.

“Oh my God. Isn’t he the same hot guy from the club who was watching you?” Pooja said excitedly.

Aditi was embarrassed.

“Hey! I’m right here,” Chetan scolded.

“I know, baby,” Pooja said with a laugh. “I love you, but I can’t deny that the man is hot. He has an irresistibly dangerous

aura, and you should have seen how he was watching Aditi in the club.”

Aditi didn't know whether that was true, but she did know there was definitely a dangerous aura surrounding that man. Something hot and cold slid down her spine, making her shiver as she recalled his gaze while he assessed her.

She shook away the strange feeling with another sip of champagne.

“Should I be jealous?” Rahul teased, making her blush. “Do you know him?”

“No. I don't know him,” she replied, pushing away her embarrassment. “I'm sure you guys must be starving. Let's get some drinks and food.” She led them to the table she had specifically reserved for them next to the live music.

Even as she enjoyed the live music and played the hostess occasionally, the thoughts of the mysterious stranger didn't leave her mind.

“Aditi, we are supposed to start the fireworks in thirty minutes. But I don’t see Mr. Somraj anywhere.” It was Seema, the event organizer.

Aditi realized her father hadn’t returned. But delaying the event would only make the rest of the events delayed. “He must be in a meeting. But do go ahead as planned.”

The event organizer nodded in relief before giving instructions to the rest of the organizing team.

“Your father is not going to join us tonight?” Rahul asked with disappointment on his face.

Although she was equally disappointed, she smiled reassuringly. “He will. I think something urgent must have come up. Why don’t we go inside the house? We can watch the fireworks from the roof.” She would be able to sneak a kiss in the dark, and there would be enough privacy from the rest of the guests.

Holding Rahul’s hand, she led him and her other two guests towards the house. But just as they were about to enter, a familiar older woman called her.

“Aditi?”

Aditi recognized the woman who was her mother’s friend and the police commissioner’s wife. Her mother and the woman used to organize events at the local schools. Aditi used to join them many times.

“Hello, Mrs. Pathak. How are you?”

“I’m good. Wow! You look so pretty, and you look so much like Vanita.”

She smiled at the older woman who now had liberal grey in her hair as she was ten years older. “Thank you. How is Mr. Pathak doing?”

“Oh. Sanjay has retired. We spend most of the time travelling. We just happened to be home briefly when we saw your father’s invite. I’m glad I came and could meet you. I’ve been asking your father how you’ve been faring in London.”

Aditi was glad to meet her mother’s friend too. She caught up with the older woman for a few minutes until she realized that Rahul was waiting for her inside the house.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Pathak. Fireworks are going to begin. I’ll catch up with you in a while.”

The older woman smiled. “Sure. No problem. Go on.”

Aditi hurried inside the house. The clock indicated there was barely any time left for the fireworks to begin. Rahul and the others must be waiting on the terrace.

She took the stairs in a hurry but stopped when she spotted Rahul standing in the second floor’s balcony right next to her childhood bedroom. Smiling at how he was able to identify her room, she went towards him.

She was just in time. Just as she reached him, the lighting outside shut down to prepare for the fireworks.

“Finally,” she murmured against his back, sliding her arms around his waist from behind. “I’ve been waiting to do this all

evening.”

Suddenly, her hand was caught, and she was pulled in front of him. Laughing at his playfulness, she threw her arm around his neck and pulled his head down before kissing him.

He went completely still for a moment, and then he kissed her back. His fingers dug into her hair from behind to keep her still.

She was shocked and excited when his tongue slid into her mouth. The grip on her hair tightened as the kiss deepened into a passionate kiss. She moaned out loud as heat exploded. She met the dark, aggressive thrust of his tongue with an equal amount of passion.

The fireworks outside barely registered as her body felt as though it caught on fire.

Never had she felt this level of desire before. It made her want to break her self-imposed rules. She didn't want to stop with the kiss. She wanted to demand everything that the kiss promised.

Her fingers crept into his thick hair and pulled him closer as his mouth continued to ravage hers. Their tongues continued to tangle, mating with each other.

But even as her senses were involved in the kiss, a tiny part of her mind registered something odd. The subtle cologne that filled her senses felt unfamiliar. Immediately, she noticed other things.

There was rough stubble grazing against the sensitive skin of her cheek. Her fingers were caught in much thicker and slightly shorter hair, and she had to raise her hands higher to

reach his head. And the body she was against seemed much harder and broader.

Oh God!

The man she was kissing was not Rahul.

And Rahul had never kissed her in such a forceful, passionate way before.

Panicked, she broke the kiss by dragging her mouth away. She couldn't step away because of the firm grip on her hair that held her close against the hard body. Her breath came out in fast, panicked gasps, and she stared at the man's face covered in the shadows. But when another set of fireworks exploded up in the sky, it illuminated his face in a glow.

"You!" she whispered, her heart almost bursting out of her ribcage.

The man she had been kissing was none other than the stranger from the club.

CHAPTER 7

Aditi didn't know how long she stared at the man in shock, until another firework burst into the sky jolting her out of her shock.

"Let me go!" she hissed, struggling in his arms.

The grip on her hair loosened, and she immediately took a step away.

"How dare you!" she said, shaking with anger and outrage.

The man didn't look the least bit affected. And he was watching her with a look that continued to make her insides tremble.

"How dare I, what?" he asked in a deep, gravelly tone.

"You kissed me!"

"I responded to your kiss," he replied.

Embarrassment burned along with the anger. "You know very well I thought it was someone else."

"Do I?" he mocked.

She sucked in her breath at his response. "Yes!" she spat. "Why would I want to kiss a complete stranger!"

He looked unaffected. "Why indeed," he said with a dark smile. His dark smile and nearness made her body quiver in a strange way.

Sucking in another deep breath, she turned and began to run away from the suffocating tension and presence of that man.

What was wrong with him! Was he stalking her?

She felt as though she were being hunted. But instead of running off like any sensible prey, she was unnaturally drawn to the hunter.

She ran upstairs, even as she continued to feel the kiss on her lips. She felt shaken to the core.

How could she not know! And how could she react that way!

“There she is finally,” Pooja exclaimed as soon as she spotted her.

But Aditi didn't respond. With a raging storm in her heart because of the kiss, she went straight to the man she wanted to marry.

Rahul was smiling when he saw her, but it turned into a surprise when he saw the intent look on her face. “Is everything okay?” he asked with a worried frown.

“It will be soon,” she said with determination before holding his head and pulling him down to kiss him.

There was laughter from the other couple. “Whoa! Get a room, guys,” Pooja teased.

Aditi kissed as though her life depended on it. But instead of responding with passion, Rahul seemed to be embarrassed, and he tried to calm her down.

“Aditi...”

“Kiss me!” she demanded when he tried to pull away.

He looked surprised. “What’s wrong, Aditi?” he asked.

She felt ashamed seeing the alarm on his face.

“Nothing,” she replied. “Just... just kiss me.”

He did kiss her. A simple brushing of his lips against hers. Aditi sucked in a breath as guilt warred inside her. His kiss was sweet, affectionate and respectful. It didn’t get the reactions she wanted.

This is what you want. This is what is real. You are kissed by a man who respects you and loves you and will cherish you.

She kept repeating those words in her mind, until she relaxed and returned his kiss in a similar manner. Slowly, she pulled away. Rahul continued to look confused and worried.

“We have waited long enough,” she said firmly. “Let’s go tell my father about us right now.” She held his hand and pulled him along as she marched downstairs in determination.

“I don’t think he would like to be disturbed while he’s in an important meeting.”

“We are more important.”

They reached the ground floor when Seema intercepted her. “Aditi, your father is waiting for you near the stage. He wants to make a toast on your behalf. He asked me to find you.”

Aditi was pleasantly surprised. She hoped her father’s toast would make him emotional enough to be receptive to the news she would break to him.

But as she approached the makeshift, decorated stage where the live band continued to play, she saw her father’s tense look, and was confused again by his reaction.

But before she could ask him what was wrong, he gestured for the live music to stop.

And then he smiled at the crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen. May I please have your attention!”

Although she was relieved that her father was smiling, she also detected the slightest of slur in his voice.

“Thank you everyone for coming. It means a lot to me.” Her father paused, as though pulling himself together.

“Twenty-four years ago, I met a beautiful woman whom I couldn’t help but fall in love with at first sight.” He smiled reminiscently. “I think it was first sight for *me*. But it took quite a lot of sightings for Vanita to fall in love with me.”

Aditi laughed, and there was good-natured laughter from the rest of the audience too.

“Aditi, come up here,” her father said.

Aditi smiled at him. She was mistaking her father’s sweet nostalgia to be distress. Her father was missing his wife that night, and since she was visiting him, he simply wanted to introduce her to all of his acquaintances.

“I’ll be right back,” she murmured before letting go of Rahul’s hand and going up the stage.

Her father held her hand and drew in a deep, emotional breath. “One of the best things that Vanita gifted me with was our daughter,” he continued, making her heart twist.

She badly missed her mother that night too.

“But after Vanita passed away, I sent Aditi to London. Even though I missed her, I knew she needed both a mother and

father figure while growing up.”

A heaviness settled into Aditi’s heart as her eyes prickled. She wanted to hug her father. She pressed her father’s hands in assurance.

Her father drew in another deep breath. “But today, I’m happy that my daughter has returned home. And not only that, she has found happiness and love of her own.”

Aditi was stunned. Her heart gave a happy skip that her father was not only approving of her choice, he was making it public. She looked at Rahul, who looked equally stunned.

She smiled at him while her father continued with the emotional speech.

“The man my daughter chose, and will marry shortly, is right here among us,” he declared.

There were curious murmurs among the crowd.

Her father squeezed her hand and looked at her briefly before looking back at the crowd. “The man who will soon become my son, and whose destiny will be tied to my daughter’s while uniting both our families irrevocably is... Anirudh Shaurya.”

Loud, excited cheers and clapping erupted from the crowd while everything inside her froze.

Her father turned to her once again. “I’m sorry,” he whispered softly.

Her heart began to slam inside her chest. The betrayal and shock ran deep, making her mind blank. But her mind latched on to one word—Shaurya.

“Anirudh, come up here, my boy.”

Aditi wanted to wrench her hand away from her father’s, but another shock kept her rooted to the spot. The tall stranger from the club, the one she had kissed a while ago, came up to the stage and stood next to her. She stared at him.

Anirudh Shaurya... son of Harish Shaurya.

How could she not have recognized him? She had never met him before, but he looked so much like his father that anyone would have made the connection. He was definitely Harish Shaurya’s son. The only things he had inherited from his mother were his intense, dark jet-black eyes and deep golden tan.

Vaguely she realized her father was still talking.

“Had my Vanita been alive, she would have wholeheartedly approved of this match.”

Rage and grief hit her at the same time, throwing her into further shock. She wanted to throw up, but her father wrapped an arm around her waist and drew her close as though offering comfort.

Champagne bottles were opened, glasses tinkled and cheers and congratulations filled the air. She wanted to forcibly pull away from her father and get away from that man.

“Please,” her father begged softly. “I’ll explain. Just stay for a while.”

Everything inside her wanted to rebel. She wanted to scream and cry, but she remained standing with a blank look.

She didn't know how long the party continued, but she finally managed to break free and go to the house. Nobody stopped her on the way, or maybe she didn't care enough to stop.

She just continued to walk until she reached her room. And when she was inside, she shut the door before running into the washroom where she threw up.

Her own father. How could he betray her this way? How could he think she would agree to tie herself to her mother's murderer's son?

Aditi didn't know how long she was shaking with rage and betrayal when she heard knocking on her bedroom door.

“Aditi.”

It was her father.

“Please open the door. Let me explain.”

She wanted to ignore him, but she knew she wanted to hear under what circumstances a father would betray his only child.

Wiping her tears away furiously, she got off the bed and wrenched the door open, only to see the sight of a broken man.

“I'm sorry,” her father said.

She clenched her teeth not to be moved by her father's pain.

“His father killed my mother,” she spat. “Your *wife* ran away with his father.”

He flinched at her cruel words as though they were physical blows. “I know.”

“Then why!” The words were torn from deep within.

“To save you,” he said.

She was taken aback. That was the last thing she had expected to hear from him.

“What? How can marrying my mother's murderer's son possibly save me? And save me from what?”

He looked guilt-ridden and defeated, but she could see the fear on his face too. “I’ve already told you that I have many enemies. Over the years, they began targeting me.”

She recalled her father mentioning his enemies wanting to hurt him through her.

“Many people are jealous that a nobody like me with no family background or backing was able to grow and earn a huge name in business. So... they began sabotaging me.” There was helpless anger on his face. “It began slowly. Destruction of shipments at random places. Messing with some of my transport trucks. Slowly and steadily, our losses began to grow. And now, they finally reached a point where I owe more than I am currently worth.”

Aditi still couldn’t understand his reasoning. “So you sold me to the highest bidder? Shaurya offered to pay the money? What makes you think I care for money, Papa? Declare bankruptcy, and let’s start over. I’ll find a job, or we can open another company. I’ll help you every way I can. Yes, we’ll lose our home and other things, but marrying a Shaurya is worse than anything else for me.”

Her father shook his head. “There’s more to it than just owing money, Aditi.” He looked at her with utter dejection. “My enemies are bent on destroying me. They didn’t just go after my money. They did other things that would risk my life.”

A bolt of fear pierced through her. “Risk your life? What did they do?”

“Illegal drugs and weapons.”

Her heart sank in shock. “What?”

“They planted illegal drugs and weapons in some of my shipments. And they made sure those shipments got caught, or worse, destroyed. And then they blamed me for it. Now, I’m a wanted man, hunted by dangerous criminals from all over the world. And all of my loved ones or whoever is associated with me, automatically becomes their target.”

She couldn’t wrap her mind around what her father was saying. “You are being hunted by the drug lords and criminals?”

“Yes.”

Her heart began to thud in fear. She had no idea how things operated in the criminal world, but she knew having dangerous enemies was highly risky.

“But how will my marriage to a Shaurya save us, Papa? I know the Shauryas are influential in business and politics. But how can they stop international drug lords and criminals?”

Her father looked ashamed. “Because Shauryas control the narcotics in our country. Anirudh Shaurya is known as the devil. He is one of the key kingpins in the underworld.”

Heavy disgust sat in her stomach along with a spike in her fear. “He’s a criminal?”

Her father nodded. “Yes.” He looked torn. “I know what I did to save us is wrong, Aditi. But I have no other choice.”

She shook her head in denial. “But they *framed* you, Papa. How can you not fight for your innocence? Why can’t we take police protection and leave?”

He looked helpless. “Believe me. I’m trying every possible avenue, but I’m running out of options. Until something comes up, there’s no other choice other than to use the Shauryas’ protection.”

Her stomach clenched in disgust at the thought of being bartered to a criminal. But she had to ask one of the most important questions. “Why did Anirudh Shaurya agree to marry me? What is in it for him to save us?”

Her father exhaled a sigh. “He wants complete control of my transportation business. I am one of the biggest players in the shipping lines.” His voice faltered. “But... there’s another major reason why he’s targeting you. He wants revenge.”

She was shaken. “Revenge?”

“Yes, because of his parents. He blames your mother, not only for his father’s death, but also for his mother’s death. His mother hung herself as soon as she heard of her husband’s elopement.”

Aditi was stunned. She had no idea that Anirudh Shaurya’s mother died from suicide. She thought it was a heart attack due to grief.

And Anirudh Shaurya wanted revenge by marrying his enemy’s daughter.

Will I end up being killed by a dangerous criminal?

“He won’t hurt you,” her father said, looking at her fear-ridden face.

“Why not?” she asked shakily.

“Anirudh needs complete control of my shipping line. He knows that if anything happens to you, I will withdraw my support and sabotage his plan. Over the years, he has been relentlessly ruthless and brutal in wanting to grab control over the narcotics line. He captured almost all of his rivals and killed them in cold blood, just so he could remain at the top. Having control of my shipping will make him the most powerful.”

Drugs, enemies, murders and power—everything sounded surreal and far removed from what she was used to.

A shiver ripped through her listening to what Anirudh Shaurya had done to his enemies to gain control. If the man were ruthless and brutal to kill his enemies, he would definitely come after her to avenge his parents’ deaths. He might not kill her because of her father’s shipping business, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t harm her in other ways.

Her father’s voice cut into her fear. “I know what I’m asking you to do is dangerous, Aditi. But I’m asking you to trust me. I *will* find us a way out.”

“How?” She was unable to think of a way.

“Once I get the hit on me removed, we’ll escape to London. You can apply for a divorce and marry the man you want. Just go ahead with this marriage for now.”

A chill went up her spine. “When will the marriage take place?”

Her father looked shamefaced before delivering the ultimate blow.

“Anirudh Shaurya is waiting downstairs. He wants you to sign the marriage contract right now.”

Aditi stiffened her spine and drew in courage by trying to summon righteous anger against the man who was forcing her into an arranged marriage. But as she approached her father's office room, her heart began to thud in fear.

“He captured almost all of his rivals and killed them in cold blood, just so he could remain at the top.”

She took a deep breath before her father pushed open the office room door. Pasting an indifferent look on her face, she followed her father inside.

The door shut behind her ominously. It must have been one of her father's or the Shaurya's armed guards standing outside who must have closed it.

The room was dimly lit with five or six men in suits waiting inside. Aditi kept her eyes deliberately focused on inanimate things around the room. She refused to pay attention or show any reaction to the man who was more or less bartering for her like she was cattle.

But despite doing everything to ignore the man, she felt his presence like a live wire connecting him to her across the room. She clenched her teeth and tried to shake away the feeling.

She focused her attention on the two older men sitting at her father's desk with papers in front of them. She recognized one of the men as he was introduced as her father's lawyer.

"We have drawn up the new contracts, Mr. Somraj," the other older man said.

The other older man must be a lawyer too. What did he mean by new contracts?

She heard low, deep murmurs coming from the back of the office where she saw three tall figures standing in the shadows.

"According to the contract, the wedding will take place in two weeks."

She sucked in a breath. Two weeks? Her eyes flew to her father who watched her imploringly.

Gritting her teeth, she remained silent.

The Shauryas' lawyer cleared his throat. "Miss Somraj, we would like for you to sign these documents." He held the pen on the stack of papers with legal stamps at the top.

Aditi frowned. She picked up the document on top, intending to read through them all before signing.

"Your father and I have already gone through the documents, Aditi," her father's lawyer said. "And... we only have less than thirty minutes until the offer expires."

Anger tore through her, and she clenched her teeth. Anirudh Shaurya made her feel like a worthless, inanimate object. And how dare he put an expiry on the offer as though *he* was doing *her* a favor rather than for revenge and power?

“Aditi... sign them,” her father told her softly. He looked tired and broken. And more than anything, she saw the underlying fear on her father’s face as though he were bracing himself for her to object, risking both their lives.

Biting her lip to stop it from trembling and to also stop from screaming out loud in helpless frustration, she picked up the pen. She put her signatures on the documents with shaking hands. Angry, frustrated tears filled her eyes, but she blinked them away, refusing to show weakness in front of her enemy. And Anirudh Shaurya was her enemy, no doubt about it.

“Anirudh, we’ll need your signature on the final contract next to Miss Somraj’s.”

Her heart thudded when she heard the soft scrape of a chair. She couldn’t hear his footsteps because of the plush carpeting in her father’s office, but she felt him. She even recognized the subtle cologne that had filled her senses during their kiss.

A strange trembling grew inside her stomach when she felt his presence right behind her. Refusing to acknowledge his presence, she continued to stare at the documents.

Her breath caught in her throat when an arm brushed her shoulder, and a tanned hand reached out next to her. Her eyes fell on the crisp white shirt cuffs showing under the charcoal suit with gold-colored cufflinks that shone even in the dim lighting. Her cheeks heated when she noticed the light dusting of masculine hairs behind the broad, tanned hand. Long, thick fingers with neatly trimmed nails held the pen to sign on the document.

The bold scrawl which read Anirudh Shaurya next to her signature jarred her out of the strange trance. She let go of her

breath and tried to suck in much-needed air.

But she was almost left gasping for breath when she heard the next words uttered by the man whom she was to marry.

“Change the date of the wedding. Make it next Sunday.”

“What?” her father asked in a shocked tone. “That’s less than a week.”

“I’m aware.”

“But... but...” her father’s voice trailed off.

Unable to bear hearing her father’s helplessness, Aditi turned around. She had to raise her head until her stormy eyes met with darkly intense ones.

“I would prefer if we kept the original wedding date,” she said in an angry, shaking voice.

She expected anger or smugness or some reaction to show who held the power. But Anirudh Shaurya didn’t say anything and showed absolutely no emotions on his face while he watched her calmly.

It was more unnerving.

“Miss Somraj...” the Shauryas’ lawyer’s uneasy voice cut through the tense atmosphere. “Perhaps you are not fully aware of the circumstances—”

Aditi dragged her eyes away from the man who made her tremble in fear. She sucked in another breath only for her senses to be filled by the subtle cologne. Shaking away the confusing feelings, she held on to her anger like a lifeline.

“I am aware of the circumstances,” she told the Shaurya lawyer angrily. “My father told me everything.”

“I don’t think he did,” a deep voice cut in from behind her, making her tremble once again. “If your father told you everything, you wouldn’t be arguing.”

Was that a threat? She felt a subtle shift behind her that made her freeze on the spot.

She watched her father’s face pale confirming it was a threat.

“Next Sunday.” With that order, the man standing behind her walked out of the room.

The rest of the men followed him. She remained standing looking at her father’s pale face. Resignation filled her mind along with intense fear.

In less than a week, she would be married to a dangerous man known as the devil.

CHAPTER 8

“That was quite... surprising.”

Anirudh had just stepped out of Somraj’s house.

“I wasn’t expecting it either,” Vijay echoed Shiv.

Shiv and Vijay had expected a woman who would be a sobbing mess, pleading for her freedom. They were quite surprised when Aditi Somraj swept into her father’s office room with her head held high, ready for a battle.

“I wasn’t surprised.” Anirudh had expected her to be that way.

“So, you are going ahead with this?” Vijay asked.

“Yes.” Nothing will stop the wedding from taking place—not even his rebellious bride-to-be.

But unfortunately for his bride, he rightfully held the reputation of breaking down his opponents’ will until they gave in completely.

“All right. I’ll see you both in....” He checked his watch. “... three hours.” They had an arms negotiation deal with a new international supplier.

It was already past midnight, but while the rest of the world slept, the underworld thrived in darkness.

The next morning, Anirudh entered the Shaurya mansion.

He went straight to the place where generations of Shauryas held meetings. Before they stepped into the dark underworld and got involved in multiple power struggles, the Shaurya mansion was once where people came to disclose their woes to have them solved if they were on the right side.

But over the years, things began changing. Other prominent families purchased power through illegal activities and became rivals for the Shauryas. The Shauryas could no longer win purely with people's support or through moral righteousness. So, along with solving people's issues, the Shauryas descended into the underworld to maintain the power balance. For three decades, they remained at the top.

“If you take a step back, there will be ten others waiting to destroy you and take your place.”

Anirudh recalled his grandfather's often-repeated words when he taught him why it was important to always remain at the top.

He could hear his grandfather's booming voice from outside the office wing. His grandfather was on the phone shouting at someone or rather issuing dire threats to someone.

The call ended just as he pushed the office door open.

“What the hell happened?” The older man's keen eyes took in his grandson's clothes.

Anirudh was wearing a dark suit. But having been in the underworld for too long, the Shaurya patriarch could literally smell blood.

“A negotiation deal needed more convincing.”

The older man’s lips compressed. “They are one of the best suppliers in the Asia Pacific. I had already agreed to the price they quoted. It was a good deal.”

“Good, but not the best.”

His grandfather’s nostrils flared. “They agreed to your price?”

“Yes.” Although not right away. They needed quite a bit of convincing which involved six bullets and a certain burning ship in the Pacific Ocean. “The contracts are drawn and signed.”

A glint of pride shone in the older man’s eyes before it disappeared.

“Speaking of contracts. Why the hell would you want to marry a whore’s daughter?!”

Anirudh didn’t react to his grandfather’s outburst. He went to the bar area in the office room and poured himself a drink first.

But his grandfather continued to erupt. “Somraj has a thousand hits on his head,” he blustered. “Most of them are because of you! By declaring to the world that you are marrying his daughter, you more or less protected that weasel!”

Anirudh took a sip of the drink and felt the smooth liquid sliding down his throat leaving a trail of heat

His grandfather let out a frustrated breath. “Why?” he continued to demand. “A son who truly loved his parents would have avenged his parents’ deaths by wiping away the entire family responsible. Why are you protecting him?”

The mention of his parents’ deaths got Anirudh’s attention. He smiled darkly at his grandfather. “Weren’t you the one who also taught me that when it comes to power or business, emotions have no place? And that we need to bide our time before the final kill?”

The older man looked at him in disbelief. “So, this is a calculated move? I find it bloody hard to believe.”

“Why is it so hard to believe? Somraj has one of the best shipping networks. Combine that with our supply and resources, we’ll remain unmatched for generations. Other syndicates will continue to bow down to us with no leverage. And Somraj... he’s going to suffer in other ways when I take over what he built over the years.”

His grandfather looked suspicious. “And what about his daughter? Are you saying you have no grudge against that girl? That she would survive even a night as your bride without breaking down? I know you. You are a deeply vengeful bastard like me. Everyone has heard of your atrocities and penchant for torture. Bloody hell, you even recently cut off the tongue of a man who played with you when you were a child, just because he accidentally leaked some information.” There was a hint of pride in his grandfather’s voice.

Anirudh recalled his grandfather's words nearly ten years ago when he was only nineteen.

"You are a true Shaurya. Your training is done. It's time for you to lead."

Anirudh had returned from the States after his parents' deaths. And after six months of rigorous training, he had hunted, tortured and killed the first of his enemies before his grandfather wanted him to take over the Shauryas' operations.

"Admit it. It's more than just business. You want to torture that Somraj girl, and in turn torture Somraj," his grandfather's voice cut in.

Anirudh shrugged. "Fine. I guess there are other advantages to this marriage that appealed to me."

The older man looked disgruntled. "You might have your fun in that marriage. But I had given my word to Home Minister Bhasin. We were expecting you'd marry his daughter as soon as she completed her studies. I was going to make him the next Chief Minister. The political leverage with that marriage would have made us more powerful."

Anirudh shrugged again. "We are already powerful. And the Home Minister will understand. And if he doesn't and tries to retaliate in any way, then let him know he'll be forced to understand." He took a few more sips of his drink before putting the empty glass on the table and getting up.

His grandfather stared at him. "Think about it again. I still don't think it's a good idea for you to marry Somraj's daughter. Hell, if all you want is to torture and fuck her, I can make sure she's in your bed within the next two hours to do as

you wish. Even if she dies in the process, we can manage the cover-up.”

Anirudh knew his grandfather wasn't joking and meant it.

“What is it, Grandpa?”

Anirudh was excited. It was his fourteenth birthday, and his grandfather was taking him to one of their guesthouses, saying there was a surprise birthday gift waiting for him there.

What was more surprising was that it was his grandfather making an effort to please him. His grandfather was always unhappy with him. The older man constantly complained that as a Shaurya, Anirudh needed to man up and stop being pampered by his mother.

“Is it a video game? Can I play with it right away?” Anirudh asked, hoping it was the new videogame that was quite the rage in the market. He had asked his parents for it, but his parents had promised they would get it if he topped his exams again.

His grandfather chuckled. “Oh yeah. You can play with it right away and however you want.”

There were more chuckles, and they were from the bodyguards accompanying his grandfather and him.

Soon, they arrived at the guesthouse. When they stepped in, his eyes searched the living room to see whether there was a packaged gift.

“It's in the bedroom,” his grandfather said.

Anirudh rushed to the bedroom with his grandfather following behind. He pushed open the door with excitement, only to stop short.

He gasped in shock. There was a half-naked woman seated on the bed. But what shocked Anirudh was that he recognized the woman.

“Happy birthday, Anirudh,” she said in a sultry voice that was quite different from how she sounded in the movies. She was his favorite actress, and he had seen most of her movies and even had her poster on his bedroom wall.

“Go on,” said his grandfather. “Go claim your gift. I know you like her.”

Anirudh was confused. “What?”

“Spend the night with her. She will teach you how to fuck a woman. She’ll make sure you come out of that room a man.”

His heart thudded. He only had crushes and kissed a few girls, but they were all his age. He admired a few older women but never viewed them sexually.

“Go on,” his grandfather insisted. “Prove to me you are a true Shaurya. Make her scream. I’ll be outside.”

His grandfather’s words of proving to be a true Shaurya had him step inside the room. He wanted to please his grandfather. He wanted to prove that he was a true Shaurya, and he could handle any challenge thrown at him.

That night, he remained inside the room and lost his virginity. He was clumsy at first due to nervousness, but after the woman showed him how a woman’s body worked, he made

his grandfather proud by making the woman scream in pleasure until the morning.

But by the next evening, his parents found out, and he was sent away to a boarding school in the States.

“Tell me if that’s all you want to do to Somraj’s daughter,” his grandfather demanded. “We can grab control of his shipping lines in other ways. There are other equally bigger companies. What we need is political might at this point.”

“We already have political might.”

His grandfather looked frustrated. And then, suddenly his face fell. Anirudh knew what was coming. His grandfather was a master manipulator. Unfortunately, he taught his grandson all too well.

“I loved my son, and I miss him each day,” the older man said in a calm tone. “But I also know my son was different from you and me. He took after his mother. He was controlled by his emotions, and in this line of business, having no control of emotions means death. I still feel guilty that I didn’t stop him when he began cheating on your mother because he fell back in love with his childhood sweetheart. He gave opportunity for our enemies to attack him when he was not watching his back.”

Anirudh raised his brow. “Is there a point to this rehashing of the past?”

His grandfather gritted his teeth. “Yes! I’ve seen the pictures of Somraj’s girl. And I’ve also heard rumors of the way you were watching her last night. If she manages to sway

you with her pretty face, she will lead you to your destruction like your father was led by her mother.”

Anirudh smiled wryly. “Thanks for your concern,” he said. “I have access to enough *pretty faces*. And people see what *I* want them to see. See you at my wedding.”

Not bothering to wait for the reaction or response, Anirudh walked away from the Shaurya mansion.

But as he drove back to his penthouse, Anirudh acknowledged that his grandfather was partially right.

There was plenty of burning vengeance remaining in his heart. And the only reason he held back from striking at his biggest enemy right away was because he wanted to ensure his prey was tortured before he went for the kill.

CHAPTER 9

“Your wedding is going to be one of the biggest high-profile weddings of the decade! And I can’t believe I was forced to pull it off with less than five days notice!”

Seema was chattering excitedly while Aditi sat through the makeup session.

“Politicians, celebrities, businessmen, sportsmen... you name them, and they are here. This is so exciting!”

Power of marrying a powerful criminal who most likely controls them all.

Aditi knew she was bitter. Hell, more than bitter, she was terrified and sad alternately.

Although she had never dreamed of her wedding day, she did hold dreams for her future.

She was to marry a sweet, romantic man. They were to lead a simple yet happy life. And they were to grow old together and look back at their lives with fond memories.

But now, she was forced to marry a ruthless, brutal man who built his fortune and power at the cost of other’s suffering.

She had spent the last five days asking her father about the man who would soon be her husband. And whatever she had learned so far, made her fear and loathe Anirudh Shaurya more than anyone in the world.

He was called the devil. And rightly so.

Only a person with absolutely no humanity would do the things he had done in the last ten years—intimidation, torture, murder and many other things building him a reputation of being invincible and powerful.

A sob broke out of her imagining having to live with such a man. Not just live, but also be touched by hands that were tainted by blood.

“All you have to believe in is doing the right thing, no matter what.”

She was reminded of her mother’s often repeated words.

Was she doing the right thing? She knew she would have to kill her soul to be married to such a monster. But was it the right thing to do for saving her father’s and her lives?

Over the last five days, she tried to convince her father to disappear overnight with their passports and remain in hiding somewhere until things cooled down. Whatever money her father owed, a part of it could be seized through their existing assets.

But her father insisted that it was very hard to remain in hiding from the people who were after his blood. And if she backed out from the wedding, not only his enemies but even the devil would come after them. And it was impossible to hide from the devil.

“Madam?” a voice interrupted her hopeless musings.

It was a young girl who was a part of her father's staff.

“Madam, I was asked to give this to you by your friend.”

Aditi was taken aback momentarily. Taking the plain white envelope, she thanked the girl.

Her heart leaped when she saw the initials RK.

During the last five days, while she was drowning in her sorrows, she had also tried to reach Rahul multiple times to explain what had happened. But her calls were ignored.

She knew Rahul was hurt and upset, and he most likely thought that she was allowing the marriage to happen by her choice. With heavy guilt, she opened the envelope and read the note inside discreetly.

As soon as she was done, she placed it back into the envelope and tore it into pieces and threw it into the trash.

Her heart began to thud.

Rahul was waiting downstairs, wanting to meet her. How had he managed to get into her house?

Worried and also desperately wanting to meet him and explain the circumstances, she excused herself.

“Something urgent has come up,” she murmured. “I’m needed downstairs.”

“But the photo session is going to start in another twenty minutes!” Seema complained. “And your dress might be crushed if you move around too much.”

Aditi didn't care about the dress. Since this wedding was against her wishes, and she absolutely hated what it represented, she refused to wear anything that belonged to her

mother. But if she ever got a chance to be free of the devil and marry again to a man of her choice, she would wear her mother's jewellery and wedding clothes like she had always wanted.

"The dress will be fine. I'll be back by then." Not waiting for the event organizer's response, Aditi hurried out of the dressing room and took the side stairs to go down.

The wedding ceremony was going to be held on the outside lawns, the same place where that disaster of a party was held the previous week. Thankfully, most of the guests were outdoors as the entertainment was spread over the entire five acres of land. The only people inside the house were the staff who didn't pay much attention while she quietly went down the stairs and slipped into the downstairs library room.

"Rahul..." Her heart clenched, and she was overcome with guilt when she saw the man she had wanted to marry.

"I'll be outside," Pooja said softly. Pooja must have brought Rahul along with her.

Aditi was grateful for her help. "Thank you," she told the other woman.

Pooja nodded and left the room with a click, leaving Aditi alone with the man whose heart she broke.

"Aditi," he said. His tone was soft, but she held the underlying accusation in it.

"Oh, Rahul." She ran to him and hugged him. "I'm so sorry."

"How could you do this to us, Aditi?" he asked, his broken voice reflecting his hurt.

“I had no choice, Rahul. I still don’t,” she said in a hopeless tone.

“Because your father thinks I’m not good enough for you?”

She pulled back slightly to look at his face. “That’s not the reason why, Rahul. I would never bow down to this marriage if that were the reason. There’s something else going on. My father’s life is in danger, and this marriage is the only way he can be protected.”

Rahul looked stunned. “What do you mean you are marrying to protect your father?”

Aditi understood his shock. Despite a week passing by, she was yet to digest what her father had told her. Her stomach still turned in heavy fear and disgust.

Everything was so surreal, and she had never imagined her life would be caught in between such things. She took a deep breath. “I can’t offer you any details, Rahul. That might put you in danger.”

He looked shaken. “Oh my God.”

“I know. I’m yet to come in terms with it too.”

He shook his head as though in denial. “What about our future, Aditi?” he asked. “The plans we made together. You are going to sacrifice those for your father?”

Her heart ached at his hurt. “I’m sorry. I can’t promise anything right now. I wish I could.”

“So, this marriage is not going to be real? It’s just to offer protection to your father?” There was hope in his voice.

“I don’t know if I can ever break free, Rahul. The man I’m marrying... he might not let me go out of spite.”

“Oh God! He sounds awful!”

Awful was a compliment compared to what the devil was called. But Aditi didn’t say those words aloud because it would alarm Rahul even more.

“You should leave, Rahul,” she said instead. “It’s not safe for you to be here.”

“I’m going to miss you so much, Aditi. I don’t know how I can go back to London and live a life without you. We were supposed to marry this year.”

The crushing guilt sucked her in once again. “I know. I’m sorry, and I’ll miss you too.”

She threw her arms around his neck and brushed her lips against his, kissing him goodbye.

“Goodbye, Rahul,” she whispered.

Her heart ached for their shattered dreams. He was the man she had chosen to spend her future with.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered against his lips as he let out a broken sob.

“How very touching,” a dark, masculine voice remarked.

Aditi jerked violently when she heard the voice. She swung around to stare towards the door in shock.

It was him. The devil. He was leaning against the library door and watching her with a cool look.

Her heart thundered inside her chest, and her first reaction was fear. But it was not fear for herself.

She immediately took a step in front of Rahul, protecting him from the devil's wrath.

She raised her chin slightly. "He's my friend. I called him here to meet me." Although she had a challenging tone, it came out with a slight shake.

"He has been relentlessly ruthless and brutal in wanting to grab control over the narcotics line. He captured many drug lords and criminals and killed in cold blood, just so he could remain at the top."

"People who have crossed him or cheated him didn't live to tell the tale."

Her father's words reminded her of what Anirudh Shaurya was capable of.

A sudden trembling began from inside, but she desperately tried not to show it outward.

"I didn't do anything wrong. I was saying goodbye to my friend because he's leaving today. He just came to wish me good luck for the wedding." She knew she was talking too fast and was being overly defensive.

But the calm, unreadable look on Anirudh Shaurya's face was frightening.

“Friend? Do you always kiss your friends on their lips?” he asked.

Even as fear remained, anger flared at his mocking tone.

How dare he think this was remotely amusing? He was ruining her life, snatching away her dreams and her only chance at happiness.

“Yes, this is how we greet friends in London,” she said tightly.

Her stomach trembled in fear as Anirudh Shaurya smiled darkly. She realized how foolish she sounded when she said that. The man studied abroad. He was most likely well-travelled than her too. He would definitely know that wasn't a friendly kiss he saw.

He had also seen her kissing Rahul at the club. And a few days ago, on the night of her father's party, she had kissed him thinking it was Rahul.

Her face burned in embarrassment recalling their kiss and how she had responded.

She pushed away her embarrassment and focused on the crisis at hand.

Anirudh Shaurya watched her.

“Get out,” he said softly. Although his eyes were on her, she knew the order was for Rahul.

Rahul sensed it too and shifted nervously behind her. “Aditi... I'm not sure if you'll be safe here. You should come —”

“I’m not going to repeat myself again,” Anirudh Shaurya said in a spine-chilling tone. “You have thirty seconds to leave and never return.”

At the warning, Aditi dragged her eyes away from the devil to look at the man whose life was at danger. “Rahul, please. Go now. Fly back to London. Please.”

“But—”

“Just go, Rahul!”

Sensing her fear, and more importantly sensing the dark menace emitting from the other man despite his casual pose, Rahul followed the order. He slowly walked away.

Aditi held her breath as he passed by the devil. She exhaled in relief when he stepped out, and the door began to shut behind him.

But as soon as the door shut, she tensed again when she realized she was completely alone with the devil.

Nervous at his dark, watchful stare, she immediately went on the defensive. “You had no right to be so rude with my friend. All he did was come here to wish me luck.”

“So you are admitting he came here by himself. You didn’t invite him here?”

She panicked, getting caught in the lie. “I asked him to come, and he came to this room to wish me luck.” She knew she was rambling and making no sense, but she was worried and terrified for Rahul.

The devil stared at her, making her stomach tremble.

“Your *friend* had his hands on what belongs to me.” His tone was casual, but she clearly read the underlying threat.

“We are not married yet,” she immediately returned. “And even if we were, I’m not your property. I don’t belong to you or anyone.”

It was a nerve-racking experience of not only arguing with him, but also holding on to his stare.

Her stomach continued to tremble as he slowly walked towards her. Helplessly, her eyes were drawn to his appearance. Dressed in traditional wear, he looked larger-than-life.

Before she knew who he was, she had been strongly drawn to him and found him extremely attractive. But now, after knowing who he was and what he did, she was disgusted and terrified of him.

But despite her fear, she held her ground and didn’t back away. She knew if she showed him fear, he would most likely use it to make her bend to his will as he did with her father.

Continuing to watch her, he came even closer and stopped when he was barely a few inches from her. He towered over her by nearly a foot since she was in her bare feet. She had to raise her head to hold his gaze, and the intensity in his eyes sent hot and cold chills down her spine.

He let out a small smile making her heart thump faster. She gasped out loud and startled violently when he held her hand. Her bravado vanished, and her heart slammed inside her chest when he slowly drew her hand up.

She expected him to wrench her arm violently or break a finger or some such torturous thing. But all he did was press his thumb against the wrist, feeling the rapidly beating pulse.

“Are you always this jumpy?” he asked in a casual tone.

She tried not to be too shaken. “I’ve heard about the things you did,” she said, maintaining an even tone. “The rumors of you cutting off their tongues, legs and hands... and heads because they dared to oppose you...”

He watched her closely. “Those are not rumors,” he said, brushing his thumb casually against her wrist, making her pulse rate spike even higher. “And those men weren’t punished because they *opposed* me.”

His look changed. All casualness disappeared, and he looked dead serious. “I punished those men because they betrayed me. And I don’t take betrayals lightly.”

He was not only warning her, he was threatening her with dire consequences if she ever chose to betray him. She stared at him dumbly as he slipped something cold over her ring finger.

“Your engagement ring,” he said. But before she could think it held a sentimental value, he shattered those thoughts. “If you ever take it off, I’ll consider it a betrayal.”

Shocked, she looked down and stared at the huge but stunningly beautiful diamond ring that sparkled brightly. It was more or less her shackles.

The surreal feeling disappeared finally. She realized that it was no longer a nightmare. It was happening. She was going to be shackled to the devil.

CHAPTER 10

Chants filled the air while the ceremony was held outside in the garden area.

Aditi was glad she was wearing a veil that covered most of her face as a part of the tradition. Because if anyone were to see her face right then, they would immediately know she was forced into the marriage. They would also know she hated and loathed the man she was marrying.

“Place your hand in the groom’s and repeat the chants after me,” the priest instructed.

Aditi followed the instructions blindly. But it was hard to control the urge to snatch her hand away from the large one enclosing hers in a firm grip. It also took tremendous effort to keep her hand still and stop it from trembling.

She couldn’t afford to show any weakness to the devil at this early stage.

Her father was putting on a brave front for her sake. He attended to the formalities with a forced smile to reassure her.

Soon, the ceremony was over, and she had to stand up to receive the guests to seek their blessings. Her face remained tight under the veil as people complimented on what a beautiful couple they made.

Some people gave her looks of pity, some gave her looks of pure envy, and some seemed to romanticize the hurried

wedding. No matter what, they remained polite. But not everyone was polite and nice, especially the Shaurya patriarch.

She was asked to seek his blessings by the priest. Since Anirudh Shaurya was continuing to receive the wedding guests, she had to step down the wedding dais and meet the old man in a wheelchair.

Does he blame me for his son's and daughter-in-law's deaths too?

She found her answer as soon as she saw the old man's face. Despite being seated in a wheelchair, hatred and resentment oozed out of him.

He watched her grimly. "The Shauryas have been controlling the lives and fortunes and the future of millions of people over the decades. Your mother wanted a taste of that and ended up killing my son. I hope you are not a fool to think that my grandson will forgive you or your father."

There was a sinister smile. "He's going to break you. And I will enjoy watching your father trying to pick up those broken pieces."

Chills passed through her at the blatant threat that sounded more like a promise.

The ride from her father's home was long and tense. Or maybe it felt long because she was seated next to the man she hated and feared. The luxury car felt small and claustrophobic even though there was ample space between her and the man she was married to.

And although she tried to ignore it, her senses were filled with the subtle cologne which her mind associated with danger and passion. It was a clean, masculine smell with a hint of sandalwood and musk.

She tried to breathe evenly while her heart thudded loudly in her ears.

Trying hard to ignore him and the havoc his presence played on her mind and body, she stared out of the window where the sun was beginning to set. She noticed that they were driving to the city outskirts towards the ocean.

During her childhood, she recalled going a few times to the Shauryas' beach house which was in a similar direction.

Why is he taking me there?

She had heard that he lived in the heart of the city in a penthouse which was accessible to any corner of the city. Did he think it would be easy for her to escape if she were in the city?

As if she had the luxury to escape. If she did, then she would have been long gone.

The silence was deafening and heavy with tension. She tried not to shift uncomfortably in the seat. But the man she was married to didn't seem to notice or care. He sat back casually and looked out of the car at the passing scenery.

Eventually, after what felt like a long time, the car slowed down at a private beach house where no other houses could be seen. She doubted if any of the neighbors would be within walking distance.

“Get down,” he ordered. He was holding the door open for her.

With slightly trembling hands, she held her long dress and got out of the car and followed him reluctantly.

The house remained the same from ten years ago with a mid-size, two-level structure facing the ocean. The only difference she saw was the ominous electric fence on top of the compound wall surrounding the house. The once lush garden with multi-colored bougainvillea and hibiscus trees was also replaced by a manicured garden with short, colorful flowering bushes and a huge lawn, almost as though the hiding spots for possible intruders were to be minimized.

For a prison, it was beautiful. She wondered distractedly whether she would be allowed to go to the beach or be confined within the walls of the compound.

They were received by the staff consisting of a middle-aged woman, two young maids and a small army of armed security guards.

“I'm Lata,” the older woman introduced herself. “Would you like something to eat right now or later?”

The last thing Aditi wanted was food when her stomach churned with nervousness. She opened her mouth to say she didn't want anything, but a deep voice cut in before hers.

“Send up a tray, Lata.”

“Sure, Anirudh. I'll have one sent right away.”

Aditi noticed that Lata was smiling at Anirudh Shaurya and even called him by his name. Did that mean the older woman wasn't constantly threatened or living in fear?

Did the staff not know that Anirudh Shaurya was called the devil, and he was a powerful criminal?

While those questions ran in her mind, she sensed the devil's gaze on her.

He was watching her closely. “Lata will take you upstairs.”

He looked at her for a few more moments before walking away to speak to his men.

“Please follow me, madam.”

With trembling legs, Aditi followed the older woman up the stairs.

Although the beach house was only two floors, it had high ceilings, and most of the walls were covered in glass windows that would light up the interior during the day. Since the sun was almost setting right then, only soft lighting lit up the interior.

On the second floor, they walked by a short hallway past two doors and stopped in front of the corner door.

“This is the master bedroom suite, madam.” The older woman pushed open the door.

Aditi's eyes fell on the huge French doors with fluttering white curtains that led to a large balcony overlooking the ocean. A slightly cool, humid breeze blew inside the large room, relaxing her slightly and allowing her to breathe in fresh air.

On the right side of the room was a huge walk-in closet that was almost half the size of the room. She could see a door that most likely led to the bathroom.

Reluctantly, she turned to the left, where there was a four-poster king-size bed with stark white sheets.

Oh God.

She tried hard to mentally and physically prepare herself for the night, but it seemed impossible.

Will I be brutalized?

Will he break my will for opposing and arguing with him?

Will I survive the night as the devil's bride?

Lata's voice cut in through her panicked thoughts. "As soon as your luggage is brought up, I will send someone to help you unpack."

Aditi didn't need help with unpacking. But she needed as many people inside her room for as much time as possible. Not that Anirudh Shaurya could be stopped from doing what he wanted just because his staff was inside his bedroom.

Sucking in another lungful of fresh ocean air, she somehow managed to smile at the older woman. "Thank you, Lata. Yes, I would appreciate help in unpacking. And please call me Aditi."

She knew she had to make as many allies as possible to survive her marriage.

The older woman didn't stay in the room for long. "Why don't you relax and freshen up. Meantime, I'll check on the food."

Don't go!

Aditi wanted to beg the older woman not to leave her alone, but she knew making a scene on her first night would work against her.

"Sure. Thank you," was all she could say with a trembling smile.

As soon as the older woman left, she walked to the balcony and sucked in deep breaths. She breathed through her mouth watching the beautiful sight in front of her. Slowly her body relaxed.

It was dark, but the moon shone brightly across the sky. The ocean was barely a couple of hundred feet away, and she could see the long strip of beach and hear the sound of waves crashing on the shore.

It was beautiful, and the ocean breeze felt invigorating.

She was still enjoying the ocean view when the door to the bedroom opened and banged shut.

She thought it was Lata returning with dinner. But it was him—the devil.

She stared at him as he strode to her with a menacing look. As soon as he reached her, he dragged her into the room.

"Strip."

Her heart gave a sick thud before bubbling up with fear at his order.

“What?”

There was dark anger in his eyes. “Take off your clothes.”

Oh God, it was happening.

She realized how truly helpless she was. She had tried to mentally prepare herself for this. She had even tried to fool her mind into believing that she agreed to marry him because he promised to love and cherish her.

But it was hard to fool her mind when she saw the look on his face that said he felt no tenderness or respect towards his bride. She was more or less his captive, to do as he pleased. And one of the reasons why he married her was to punish her for her mother’s alleged sins.

She shook her head. “No. I won’t do this. I need more time. You can’t just—”

“I’m giving you exactly a minute to follow my order, or I’ll do it for you. Take off your clothes.”

She stood frozen, keeping her eyes on him.

“You have less than half a minute.”

“I-I can’t. You have no right to demand such things. I don’t even know you well. I—” She gasped as he strode purposely towards her.

His hand fell on her shoulder where he grabbed the dress near the neck and pulled it downward. The delicate material tore with a loud ripping sound. He gripped the material near her chest and ripped it again. He did it twice more, until the

once-beautiful dress lay in shreds around her feet. She was shocked by his brutality. He was an animal.

She immediately took a small step away and picked up the ruined dress and held it against her chest as protection.

“Give that dress to me,” he said, extending his hand.

Her throat closed up in fear, but with great difficulty, she continued to fight back. “No.”

His eyes flared before he came to her. Then watching her with a dark expression, he gripped the torn dress and tugged it hard. She went along with it and crashed against his chest. But before he trapped her, she let go of the dress and stepped away from him.

She was left nearly naked in just her bra and panties that hardly left anything to the imagination.

She could have used her hands to cover up her body, but she refused to do it. She might not be his equal when it came to brute strength, but she refused to beg for mercy. She kept her gaze locked to his, daring him to do his worse.

He read the challenge on her face with an impassive look. Then slowly, his dark, penetrating eyes swept over her body, pausing at the lacy white bra and panties before coming back to her face.

She expected him to demand that she strip the rest of her clothes too. But he didn't. Giving her another sweeping glance, he turned and left the room along with her ruined dress and banged the door shut. She could hear him talking to someone outside.

But she couldn't hear what he was saying as the footsteps receded.

Oh God. What sort of a sick monster did I marry? And what is in store for me tonight?

.

She ran inside the large bathroom and locked herself in.

Her luggage hadn't yet been brought into the room. She didn't know if that was a deliberate attempt to torture her. Did he intend to keep her trapped half-naked inside his room? And what sort of a pervert monster tore his bride's wedding dress?

Was he sending it to her father? Her stomach twisted in worry imagining her father's pale, worried face at seeing his daughter's torn wedding dress.

Biting her lip to stop it from trembling, she searched for things inside the bathroom cabinets. She found a small scissors. She immediately grabbed it and held it in her hand.

She stood standing with the scissors inside the bathroom for a while until a knock on the door made her jump violently.

"Aditi?" It was Lata.

"Y-yes?" She hated that her voice shook. Taking a deep breath, she tried to compose herself.

"I brought your dinner, Aditi."

Not wanting to wait inside the bathroom any longer, she put on the robe hanging inside the bathroom. It was way too long and almost touched the floor. But she had no choice. Folding the sleeves, she stepped out of the bathroom. The small scissors she found were concealed well within the heavy folds of the robe.

The older woman looked at her curiously seeing her wearing the robe.

“I have placed your clothes on the bed. The rest will be delivered tomorrow.”

Aditi felt relieved. But when she looked at the clothes placed on the bed, her stomach gave a sick twist. It was pale pink lacy nightwear that looked more like innerwear.

She vaguely recalled Seema telling her that a personal shopper would buy her clothes needed for the wedding and her immediate needs. Since she hadn't been in a position to shop or care, she hadn't given it much thought. But now, she badly wished she did.

“Would you like me to serve your food right now, Aditi?” the housekeeper asked.

Aditi shook her head. “I'm not very hungry right now. I had a heavy lunch at the wedding.” She had barely eaten at the wedding. But the thought of food right then made her feel sick.

“Oh, okay. No problem.” Lata smiled tentatively. “Good night, then.”

As soon as the older woman left, Aditi wanted to call her back. She wondered if she should have simply eaten, just to have company.

“Oh God. What do I do?” she whispered.

Her hand went to the hidden scissors and wrapped around the handle to get a sense of security. She couldn't attack a six foot plus muscled man with tiny scissors. He most likely would unarm her in under a minute, and it would end up pissing him off more.

But she couldn't simply wait like a sitting duck to be attacked and brutally violated.

Deciding not to change into her nightwear, she kept her robe on and lay on the corner of the bed with her hand inside the pocket.

She waited for a long time, but the bedroom door didn't open.

She desperately wanted to be awake because she didn't want to be attacked in her sleep. But time continued to pass with the bedroom door remaining closed.

It was close to midnight, and she could no longer fight her fatigue. She had barely slept the last few days, and it finally caught up with her.

Deciding to take a brief nap, she closed her eyes.

CHAPTER 11

The faint sound of seagulls and waves crashing on the shore woke her up.

Aditi slowly opened her eyes, only to see she was gripping a pair of small scissors in her hand. Blinking slowly, she frowned when she felt a cool breeze of air on her bare hips and legs.

She sat up with a jerk when she noticed that the long robe she was wearing had fallen open.

It was the morning after her wedding.

I must have fallen asleep!

Getting down from the bed hurriedly, she pulled the ends of the robe together.

Did Anirudh Shaurya not return to the bedroom last night? Her eyes fell on the bed, and her heart leaped when she saw the dent on the pillow next to her.

Oh my God.

She must have been asleep when he came to the room. Why hadn't he woken her up? And how could she sleep through having the devil next to her in the bed?

She ran into the bathroom and locked the door before shedding her robe and looking at her body for any possible injuries or bruises. There were none. And she didn't think she

could sleep through an assault however tired and in a deep sleep she was.

The fact that he wasn't a monster enough to attack her while she was fast asleep should have relieved her. But it didn't.

What was he playing at?

She knew it must be some sort of torture. Did he think dragging this out would be more torturous?

She jumped when she heard a soft knock, but was immediately relieved when it was followed by Lata's voice.

Tying the robe tightly, she went out and answered the door. Four uniformed guards were standing outside with nearly a dozen large suitcases.

"We brought in your suitcases, Aditi. Would you like help to set up your closet?"

"Yes, thank you." She recalled her plan of having a buffer with her as much as possible.

Lata nodded. "I'll come by after breakfast. Anirudh has asked you to join him for breakfast downstairs."

Her stomach twisted anxiously. "I'm not hungry." She was starving. "Can I just have something light sent up here to the room?"

The older woman looked torn. "Anirudh has requested your presence regardless of whether or not you are hungry... or feeling well."

Aditi's face heated in humiliation. For a newlywed couple, the groom issuing such rude, blunt orders was not normal. He

more or less let his entire household know how he felt about her and what their marriage meant.

She forced out a small smile. “Give me a few minutes. I’ll freshen up and come down.”

The older woman nodded. “Anirudh is having his breakfast outside at the back of the house. I’ll come back and get you in... ten minutes.”

As soon as the other woman left, Aditi took a quick shower and pulled out the first pair of clothes she found. They were too fancy to be worn around the house, but she couldn’t search through nearly twelve suitcases.

She rummaged through four suitcases to see if her cell phone was in there. She badly wanted to call her father to let him know she was doing fine and that she was still alive. But she couldn’t find her phone.

She knew she couldn’t continue to search. If she were delayed, Anirudh Shaurya might go out of his way to punish her in front of his household staff to humiliate her further.

She was fuming in helpless anger when there was a knock on the door again. It was Lata.

“I’m ready.” She followed the older woman downstairs. The breakfast was being served outside in the backyard overlooking the ocean.

It was a beautiful, pleasant day, but she could barely relax. She tensed up even more when she saw Anirudh Shaurya seated at the small breakfast table talking to one of his men. He was dressed in a formal suit indicating he would leave the

house after breakfast. She relaxed slightly knowing she wouldn't have to face him after breakfast.

He threw her a glance when she reached the breakfast table, but he barely paused or acknowledged her before continuing to talk. There were four chairs, and she took the chair opposite to him, keeping as much distance as possible between them.

Lata began to serve breakfast. Aditi didn't want to eat because she couldn't.

She pushed the food around her plate while staring at the beautiful ocean waves, wondering yet again if her prison extended outside the electric fence near the beach.

“Eat.”

She jerked when she heard the devil's order.

The man who was talking to the devil had left, but Lata was standing by to serve them more breakfast.

“I'm not hungry.”

“I don't care. Eat.”

She gritted her teeth. She noticed how he never asked her to do things. He just passed orders.

Lata looked uncomfortable and threw her a worried glance before hurrying away.

Aditi had enough of his blatant humiliation. “If I don't eat, will I be force-fed?” she challenged.

A flash of something passed through his eyes.

“That can be arranged,” he said in a casual tone. “Although, my men are more used to the waterboarding technique and

haven't tried torture with solid food... yet. Might be a novelty for them.”

Chills passed through her. She knew what waterboarding technique was. It was called dry drowning. A slow, painful psychological torture method used for war prisoners.

Her breaths came out faster.

“Eat.”

Tears prickled her eyes as she slowly picked up the spoon to begin eating.

He's training my mind to listen to his commands by threatening me with torture, like a bloody Pavlov's dog.

He was setting the precedent of how their marriage would be.

She knew that, and yet she was helpless to stop it.

“You need to know how to pick your battles, Aditi. To fight a war, you have to lose some battles.”

She recalled her mother's gentle voice when she fought back her neighborhood bullies. Her mother had asked her not to let all the taunts affect her. Just as being involved in a physical scuffle trying to stop the bullies didn't stop the bullying, fighting to starve herself would solve nothing.

She ate quietly. After eating a few bites, she realized how hungry she was. She had barely eaten anything during the wedding lunch, and she left the previous night's dinner untouched too.

The sounds of the sea were soothing while she ate. Staring at the endless ocean, she recalled the times she had visited this house during her childhood. She had spent most of the time on the beach, picking up seashells that she eventually used to make some simple shell necklaces. She had been thrilled and excited because the busy public beaches she usually visited didn't have as many shells.

Ruby Shaurya had also given some beautiful pieces from her personal collection.

Remembering Ruby Shaurya, she threw a sneaking glance at Anirudh Shaurya, who was busy typing messages on his phone. He had already finished eating a huge breakfast.

She watched him while he was busy.

How did a kind, gentle soul like Ruby Shaurya have a son who was called the devil? Even though she hated Harish Shaurya for what he did, he had not been a monster. He wasn't sweet or charming like her father. Harish Shaurya was quite assertive, but he made people around him feel at ease, especially children. She recalled how he patiently answered her many curious questions.

Maybe the rumors of Anirudh Shaurya taking after his grandfather were true. The Shaurya patriarch was known for his cold ruthlessness and expected everyone to bow down to his power.

She didn't want to be the one bowing to the Shaurya men's power.

"I want to go near the beach," she said.

At her sudden statement, Anirudh Shaurya looked up from his phone and directed his gaze at her. Her stomach fluttered nervously. She knew asking him for permission to go to the beach would have had better chances for him to agree. But she refused to bend to his will and become the meek creature he was training her to be.

“I can’t stay cooped up inside the four walls of the house,” she tried to reason when he remained quiet.

“It’s a ten thousand square foot home. Many would find it big enough.”

“I don’t. My father’s house is bigger.” She knew she sounded like a snob, but she didn’t care as long as she got her freedom.

He continued to watch her, and this time she returned the stare without flinching.

“You can visit the beach,” he said. “But if you intend to run, you should know that there’s nowhere in the world that you could run or hide from me. I will follow you to the ends of the earth to drag you back.”

Hot and cold chills covered her spine at his dark threat. But he wasn’t done threatening her.

“And if you intend to drown yourself, be warned that my men won’t let you die. And you won’t like it when you have to face me after such an attempt.”

She was angry at his second threat. “I’m not a coward. Only cowards take their own lives.”

As soon as those words left her mouth, she froze. Her heart pounded inside her chest as his jaw clenched before a

completely blank look shuttered his face.

His mother had died by suicide.

Ruby Shaurya had killed herself when she heard the news of her husband eloping with another woman—the other woman being Vanita Somraj—her mother.

He's going to kill me now. Or worse, he's going to hurt me badly, making me wish I were dead.

She tried to put on a brave face even though she was terrified inside.

“You are right,” he said. “Only cowards take their own lives. Remember that.”

He got up from the breakfast table and walked away without looking back.

As soon as he was out of sight, she slumped in relief. Barely a day had passed, and she already felt she had been battling him her entire life.

How was she going to survive the devil until she made her final escape?

Aditi spent the entire morning, trying to unpack the dozen suitcases, but she didn't find her phone in any of them. Disappointed, she stayed out of the house and spent the rest of the day at the beach, wanting to keep away from where she might come across the devil.

She shouldn't have bothered.

“He's gone on a trip? When?”

Aditi had just asked one of the security guards for a phone and was directed to the head of the security who told her she wasn't allowed to make calls until Anirudh Shaurya returned from his trip.

She didn't care that she might sound like an idiot not knowing the whereabouts of her newlywed husband. Or that the said husband didn't bother telling her he would be gone.

“This morning, after breakfast, Anirudh gave us instructions about your security. He will be back in a few days.”

“When exactly?” she asked, wanting to know how long her relative freedom would last.

“Not sure, madam. For security reasons, sir doesn't give any of us the exact details. But he did want me to let you know that your father has been notified about you.”

“I see. Thank you.” She couldn't shoot the messenger, but she was furious that she was deprived of basic things such as a

cell phone.

She tried to feel relieved that the devil was gone, but she couldn't relax. Not knowing how long or *when* the devil would return was going to be torture.

It was truly a torture.

Aditi spent the following three days at the beach, enjoying the waves and the beautiful weather. She even collected a few shells, feeling nostalgic.

But the moment she stepped inside the beach house, her body and mind tensed. Even though Anirudh Shaurya hadn't returned, she felt his presence everywhere.

She felt him in the master bedroom. She felt him next to her in the bed where she slept alone. And even when she took shower, she imagined hearing sounds outside, making her paranoid thinking he had returned.

It was truly torture the way he haunted her even when he was away. He was the looming shadow she was bracing herself from an attack.

She stayed out of the house as much as she could. She had minimal contact with the household staff. But what little she spoke to Lata, she discovered that the housekeeping staff was from the penthouse in the city. Lata had worked for Anirudh Shaurya for nearly nine years, and she was surprised when Anirudh Shaurya had asked her to prepare the staff to move to the beach house permanently.

Lata didn't seem to be scared of the devil. In fact, she spoke rather fondly of him.

Aditi knew it would be hard to get Lata to help her if ever she needed the other woman's help. Lata would give preference to the devil first rather than his new bride.

The security staff members weren't that forthcoming. They seem to fear the devil or were left with instructions not to give out any information.

Did the devil think she would escape taking help from his men? As if she could escape. There was still a huge threat on her father.

"I would like to call my father to let him know I'm doing okay."

The head of the security paused. "I'm sorry, madam. We are still not allowed to let you make phone calls."

She tried to smile through her clenched teeth. "That's all right. You can make the call to my father. And please... call me Aditi," she said.

The security head nodded. "You can call me Keshav." With that, the man called her father to pass on a brief message that she was doing okay.

Aditi wanted to call Rahul as well, to check whether or not he had returned to London. She badly hoped he did, but she couldn't risk asking the security to call him. If they passed on the message to Anirudh Shaurya, it might set off his ego, and give him a reason to hunt down Rahul.

"Thank you, Keshav," she said before returning to the beach house.

She knew she was stuck, but she had to think of a good escape plan. Her father had asked her for time until he could

prove his innocence. But what if it took years to do that? Or worse, he wasn't able to do that at all?

She must come up with a plan to gain her freedom. Otherwise, she would be trapped with the devil until eternity.

She shuddered at the thought.

CHAPTER 12

“Aditi.”

It was Keshav, the head of the security. His two men had been following her at a distance on the beach. She was always guarded the moment she stepped out of the bedroom, and it was driving her crazy.

“Anirudh is requesting your presence back home.”

The devil had returned.

Aditi’s stomach flipped in nervousness. She had hoped he wouldn’t return for a long time. Maybe never.

She knew she couldn’t put off the inevitable, but she hoped her break from him was more than five days.

“I’m coming.” Holding the footwear in her hands, she traced back her steps to the house built at a height on the shore. The steps were narrow and made of natural stones like pebbles that massaged her tired feet.

She wondered vaguely once again why Anirudh Shaurya had not done any major renovations to the beach house. Being one of the most wealthy, influential families, he could have easily afforded to do so.

Not that she was complaining. For a prison, it was one of the most beautiful places. If only the constant threat of the devil didn’t exist, she would even think of the place as an ideal home.

She went into the house and spent some time in the kitchen, drinking water and having a light snack since she hadn't had a meal in the afternoon. It was also to kill time until she faced the devil.

When she couldn't delay it any further, she reluctantly dragged herself to the master bedroom suite.

The room was empty, making her feel relieved. Hoping that Anirudh Shaurya was in the office room with his men, she hurried towards the bathroom to take a shower and get rid of the sand in her hair.

Just as she reached the doorknob, the door was pulled open, and she was confronted with a bare, muscled chest. A bare, muscled chest that belonged to the freshly showered, nearly naked man.

She gasped and took a few steps back.

"Get ready. We are going out in an hour," he said.

"W-where?" She felt too rattled being alone with a half-naked man and seeing him after nearly a week.

"My grandfather is hosting a party in our honor." He went towards the huge, walk-in closet and opened a door to display stacks of neatly arranged suits.

"Your grandfather?" she repeated dumbly.

A chill passed through her. She had seen the older man many times before during her childhood, but had never spoken to him. During the wedding, the older man had openly threatened her saying the wedding was purely to punish her father and her.

Then why did the Shaurya patriarch want to host a party in her honor?

“Is... is it a big gathering?” She wondered if there would be witnesses if the old man decided to harm her in some way. She wouldn’t put it past his grandson either.

“Yes. It’s a big gathering.” Anirudh Shaurya was facing away from her and was drying his hair with the spare towel in his hand. She couldn’t help but stare in fascination at the play of impressive ripped muscles on his back.

He stopped drying his hair after a while and threw the damp towel in a tall laundry basket. And then, without a care, he removed the towel wrapped around his hips to throw it on top of the other towel.

Her eyes widened in shock as her heart began to pound.

Oh God!

She ran into the bathroom and shut the door before locking and leaning against it. Her heart pounded hard while the sight of his naked body branded into her mind.

How can you admire his body when you know it will be used as a weapon to hurt and humiliate you!

She cursed herself while feeling both fear and embarrassment.

She didn’t know how long she stood leaning against the door, but she jumped when there was a knock. “Thirty minutes,” the deep, curt voice commanded. “Then I’m taking you out in whatever state you are in.”

At his rude threat, she realized she didn't have any clothes with her inside the bathroom to get ready in the timeframe he dictated. But she didn't dare to open the door in case he was still naked or half-dressed.

Not risking a waste of time, she took a quick shower to get rid of the fine sand from the beach in her hair. She finished her shower quickly, but she didn't know what to do next.

Wrapping a towel around her hair and another around her body, she cautiously opened the door. There was no one near the walk-in closet, and she couldn't hear any sounds coming from the bedroom either.

She peeked in, and once she could confirm she was alone, she ran to the bedroom door and locked it.

As if you can keep the devil out of his bedroom if he wanted to be here.

It might be a false sense of security, but she felt slightly better while she got ready.

“Your father will be there.” Surprisingly, the devil held the car door for her to get in.

She was wearing a long, heavy red formal dress. Her heart began to thud as his gaze swept over her. She didn't care for his approval and didn't want his attention. And yet, each time their eyes met, a strange awareness passed through with a thick tension wrapping around them, making her aware of him as the man she had seen at the club and was strongly attracted to.

He's your captor. He has forcibly married you to punish you and your father.

She had to constantly remind herself of that.

She pulled her thoughts away from the unwanted attraction. “Where will my father be?” she asked.

“At the party,” he said before shutting the car door and walking around to get inside and sit next to her.

Aditi felt relieved at the news. Her father will now be able to see her in person and know she's doing okay, and that the devil hadn't harmed her yet.

“When can I have my cell phone back?” she asked, noticing that he was looking at his phone.

She was again careful to have worded it in such a way that she wasn't asking his permission. She was sure he noticed it too.

“You’ll have a new phone with a new number.”

That made her angry. She had photos and contacts in her old phone that she wanted. Was he trying to wipe out her past? Or was it purely a tool to show his dominance over her?

“Aren’t you worried I’ll make a scene at the party?” she threw out the challenge. “I can tell people I’m being held captive and not allowed anywhere, and that this marriage was forced on me?”

He took his eyes off his phone to look at her. He didn’t seem affected by her outburst, but having his complete attention made her stomach quiver once again. He watched her trembling lips for a few seconds before looking back into her eyes.

“And what do you think that would solve?” he asked in a scary, quiet tone.

He felt too close in the small confines of the car.

“I... I will get help,” she whispered, stopping her body from automatically swaying towards him while her mind and heart screamed at her to get away from the devil.

“Nobody will help you. You’ll give them good entertainment, though.”

Which meant people at the party already knew she was the devil’s captive.

CHAPTER 13

The car drove through tall, iron gates and went towards a well-lit, three-story sprawling white structure.

Aditi had been to the Shauryas' ancestral home a couple of times during her childhood. It was a huge estate, several times bigger than her childhood home.

She wondered vaguely why Anirudh Shaurya chose not to live with his grandfather.

Whatever the reason might be, she was glad he didn't. She didn't think she could stomach having to live with two Shaurya men who hated her and wanted to make her life miserable.

When the car stopped in front of the mansion, a uniformed guard opened the car door and greeted her. "Welcome, madam."

By the time she got out and walked towards the entrance, Anirudh Shaurya was waiting for her to catch up with him in her high heels.

Yet another time she regretted leaving her shopping to someone else.

The huge marble fountain in front of the house remained the same as did the structure of the house. She knew the party would most likely be held inside. Unlike her parents' house,

this house could easily hold hundreds of guests inside the large living room and adjoining rooms.

Dozens of armed, uniformed guards stood outside.

“Is my grandfather downstairs?” Anirudh Shaurya asked a man in a suit standing next to the armed guards.

“Yes, sir. He’s inside.”

They weren’t the first ones to arrive. Men in business suits and in long, light-colored cotton shirts which were common among the politicians were conversing in the huge room. The lighting from several large crystal chandeliers wasn’t too bright, adding to the ambience to the ongoing party. Soft, classical music filled the air from a live band performing right outside the party room in the garden area.

Aditi searched for her father, but she couldn’t find him.

“Ah. The newlyweds,” a woman with neatly styled grey hair exclaimed with a smile. “What a stunning couple you both make.”

“Thank you, Judge Dixit,” Anirudh Shaurya replied before shaking hands with the woman’s husband. “Mr. Dixit.”

A server with a tray of drinks approached them, but Aditi shook her head no for alcoholic drinks. She needed a clear head that night even though she’d rather get stone drunk to cope with her marriage.

After a brief conversation with the judge and her husband, Anirudh Shaurya excused himself. Aditi almost jumped when she felt his arm around her waist to lead her inside. Every step of the way, he was stopped and greeted. He introduced her to

many people in the process, but the names and faces blurred in her mind.

The chief minister, the home minister, the police commissioner, several bureaucrats and businessmen along with their wives were introduced to her.

Her heart sank, and she felt rightfully embarrassed recalling how he was confident that no one would help her. The Shauryas more or less knew all the powerful players in the city who were probably on their payroll or eager to help in return for favors.

For the first time, she felt utterly alone and way out of her depth. This wasn't her world, and she had never wanted to be a part of such an overly privileged and powerful crowd who felt they were above the rest of the masses.

“The Shauryas have been controlling the lives and fortunes and the future of millions of people over the decades. Your mother wanted a taste of that and ended up killing my son.”

Aditi didn't think her mother fell in love with a married man for the sake of wanting power. Her mother had always taught her to stand by what was right. There must have been some other reason for her mother to fall in love with Harish Shaurya.

Aditi's thoughts were distracted when Anirudh Shaurya led her inside a closed-door room. It was a large, private room where his grandfather sat along with twenty men or so. The entire atmosphere in the room made her skin break out in

goosebumps. Something about the men, including the Shaurya patriarch, set off warning signals in her.

“Grandfather,” Anirudh Shaurya greeted. There was no affection in his voice. It was more of a formal greeting.

Narayan Shaurya didn't seem the kind to ever be a friendly or warmhearted man, even if it were his own family. Power exuded him, and people seem to always cater to him.

Aditi knew she had to greet the older man too, but she couldn't get herself to greet him verbally. So, for politeness sake, she greeted him silently with a nod.

“Gentlemen, meet my grandson's new acquisition,” Narayan Shaurya's voice boomed. “The merger deal he made with Somraj Shipping Lines.”

Aditi's skin crawled when all the men's eyes were directed at her curiously.

“Heard Somraj isn't too happy about this union, and neither are the Jaipals,” someone from the group stated.

Narayan Shaurya waved his hand dismissively. “Don't worry. There will be no risk to our operations. Somraj will have to deal with it, especially when he's presented with a grandchild within the next nine months.”

There were amused chuckles. Aditi was embarrassed and shocked. She felt sick and humiliated too. Tears pricked her eyes for being made to feel like a piece of meat of no consequence.

“You are a lucky man, Shaurya,” one of the men addressed Anirudh Shaurya. “I wish we had options to make such beautiful business deals.”

“Indeed.” Her so-called husband’s deep voice rumbled from next to her. His hand remained wrapped around her waist, announcing his possession to the world.

She wanted to push away his arm and get out of there.

Maybe something of what she felt showed on her face because a creepy-looking man stared at her.

“If your bride doesn’t cooperate, let me know,” the creepy-looking man in a suit said. “The latest roofie that I released in the market is a super hit. The feedback is outstanding, and the best part is it causes no drowsiness or loss of memory, and the victim will enthusiastically participate.”

Aditi was stunned. Her mind desperately tried to reason what she was hearing. But Narayan Shaurya’s next statement removed any reasonable doubt she had.

“I don’t think my grandson needs the help of drugs to tame his wife. He’s like me. He likes quite a bit of fighting spirit in his bed sport.”

There was loud laughter.

Aditi wanted to throw up.

Anirudh Shaurya didn’t join the laughter. But neither did he rush to defend his bride’s honor.

“Enjoy your evening, gentleman. Grandfather, I’ll talk to you later.”

His arm about her waist tightened until she was pulled closer to him. She wanted to push his arm away, but she didn’t. Not only would it piss him off, but it would provide

entertainment to the current guests who were more or less the lowest form of criminals.

“Do you want to have dinner?” he asked when they stepped out of the room. His voice was indifferent.

“I’m not hungry.” She would throw up if she had any food right then.

For a change, he didn’t command her to eat. He led her around the room and continued to meet people and introduce them to her. She nodded blindly and didn’t even bother to keep a smile pasted on her face.

When he stopped to introduce two tall, familiar-looking men, she vaguely recognized them from her father’s party. They were inside her father’s office room when the contract was signed.

Her face burned with humiliation because she was pretty sure the three of them were close enough for the other two men to know the circumstances of the marriage.

But surprisingly, they weren’t creepy or sleazy in any way like the men who were in the room with Narayan Shaurya. In fact, Shiv and Vijay were respectful towards her.

“You must get Aditi to *The Dungeon* soon,” the man named Shiv said. “Let’s celebrate your wedding in a less boring way.”

“Perhaps in a day or two.”

While the three of them continued to converse, Aditi also realized that the two men were with Anirudh Shaurya in the club. She recognized Shiv’s voice.

Suddenly, her thoughts came to a stop when she saw a familiar face.

Her father.

He was standing alone at the corner of the room with his eyes sweeping around the room. She knew he must be searching for her.

“Excuse me,” she said. “I’m... feeling hungry. I’ll get some food.”

If Anirudh Shaurya found it odd that she had become hungry all of a sudden, when only a few minutes ago she had turned down the offer of getting some food, he didn’t let it show.

He just nodded and went back to the conversation.

Feeling relieved, she went towards the buffet table outside in the garden even though her father was in the opposite direction. She didn’t want to raise any suspicion by going to her father directly since she knew Anirudh Shaurya would keep an eye on her.

She filled her plate with a little food before heading away from the round tables used as seating while having dinner. Just as she reached a distance that was far enough from the prying eyes, she heard her father’s voice.

“Aditi!”

She put the plate down and ran to her father. “Papa!” She hugged him tightly.

He patted her back. “Aditi, how are you?”

She pulled herself together, not wanting to show how terrified and miserable she was. “I’m fine and safe, Papa. How are you?”

He nodded solemnly. “Things are the same. I’m still desperately looking for a way to get us both out of this situation.”

Even though she expected the situation to remain the same, her heart sank.

“But don’t worry,” he said with confidence. “I know I can get us out. I just need your help.”

“My help?” She had already married the very devil to help her father out. She couldn’t imagine what possibly more she could do.

“I can’t talk to you here, Aditi. I need to meet you elsewhere to discuss something important.”

The only other place she was allowed to go was the beach house, which was currently her prison.

“I don’t know if I can meet you elsewhere, Papa.”

Her father looked desperate. “It’s very important, Aditi. Do whatever it takes, but meet me at our home. I’ll make myself available all week.”

“Okay. I will, Papa,” she promised even though she didn’t know how.

She was determined to meet her father regardless of risking the devil’s wrath.

“All right. Go inside now. Let’s not make anyone suspicious,” her father suggested.

Reluctantly, she nodded and went back into the party room. There were hundreds of people inside, but as soon as she stepped in, her eyes met with Anirudh Shaurya's across the room.

Her stomach fluttered, which she immediately attributed to nervousness. She didn't want to go to him, but slowly and reluctantly she made her way back. His eyes tracked her while continuing to converse with a small group of people. But as soon as she came next to him, he dismissed her by addressing the crowd.

Almost as if he were simply ensuring his captive was back into her cage.

It was way past midnight by the time they returned home. As soon as the car stopped, she got out and hurriedly went up to the bedroom.

She pulled out her night clothes and went into the bathroom to change. She wanted to keep as much distance as possible from the devil while also buying more time however short it was.

“Oh God,” she whispered out loud while staring at herself in the bathroom mirror. It was yet another nightwear that didn’t leave much to the imagination. It would have been ideal for a newlywed bride if she were in a happy, loving and *consensual* relationship. She hadn’t noticed the skimpy nightwear the last five days because she was sleeping alone.

Grabbing the robe from the hook, she wore it again on top of her nightwear before stepping out of the bathroom. Her heart almost stopped when she saw Anirudh Shaurya near the walk-in closet, shedding his clothes.

Keeping her eyes lowered, she went towards the bed and slid in.

Less than ten minutes later, she felt a dip in the mattress. She held her breath, bracing herself to be dragged close and attacked brutally.

But nothing happened.

She knew the man next to her hadn't fallen asleep because she couldn't hear any deep, even breathing. So she waited.

She waited for some more time, and when he continued to lay awake, she couldn't take it anymore. The wait felt more torturous.

She turned towards him. "Get it over with," she burst out.

He was lying on his back with his arm under his head gazing at the ceiling when she had burst out with her statement. He turned his head to watch her. "Get what over with?" he asked.

Was he mocking her? If he was, then it was a cruel thing to do.

"Consummate the marriage. I can't sleep next to you not knowing when I'm going to be attacked and violated. If you want to take what you *think* is rightfully yours, do it now when I'm awake and can fight you back. This... this... waiting is torturous."

"You think you can fight me?" His tone was the opposite of her impassioned outburst. It held the barest hint of curiosity as though he was slightly surprised she would want to fight back.

"Yes! I might not win. But at least I'll have the satisfaction of knowing I fought for my honor."

He was quiet. And then, suddenly his hand reached out and touched her, making her gasp and startle violently.

"This is mine," he said casually, rubbing the material at the front of her robe between his fingers. Her heart thudded hard inside her chest. It sounded so loud in her ears, she wondered if he could hear it too.

“When I *consummate* our marriage, you’ll be more than willing.” He let out a small smile, but it was far from reassuring. “And by then, you’ll also discover that you enjoy torture too.”

She noticed how he had used the word ‘when’ rather than ‘if’. He was sure she would be willing at some point, which was crazy.

“I won’t,” she said.

“Won’t what?” He continued to play with the front of the robe. A small flick of his finger widened the gap, and she felt the cool ocean breeze coming from the open French doors on her cleavage, making her breaths come out faster.

“I-I won’t be willing, and I won’t enjoy torture. I don’t love you.” She didn’t just not love him, she hated him with a passion and feared him. But she didn’t say that out loud.

His finger slowly ran up from her deep cleavage towards her neck, pausing at the point where her pulse beat furiously.

“You think you have to love me to enjoy my touch?” he asked in the same tone.

Her face burned at the reminder of their kiss and how she had participated in it. Yes, she’d thought it was Rahul initially. But even after she found out the truth, and despite not wanting to, she had recalled that kiss repeatedly over the week, especially during the nights.

Each time he touched her or simply looked at her, her body responded. He might be the devil, but he was devilishly handsome. Her mind knew what he did and what he was

capable of. But her body had a mind of its own when it came to him, and was fatally drawn to him.

Even now, the slightest touch of his finger made her body quiver and her breasts peak in arousal while anticipating more.

She pushed his hand away from her. “Yes, I-I need love to enjoy intimacy.”

Another dark smile covered his face. “I’ll enjoy proving you wrong,” he said. But immediately, his eyes hardened. “I don’t need your love. Or even your respect for that matter. What I want is for you to have a healthy fear for me. I might not hurt you to leave bruises on your skin, but I *will* punish you in many other ways that will be far worse, if you ever think of betraying me.”

Her heart thudded. Why was he talking of betrayal? Did he know she met with her father? If he did, why wouldn’t he ask her?

Anger coursed through her. He had no right to keep her away from her father. And she wanted to show him that his threats didn’t scare her.

“What will you do?” she challenged. “What *can* you possibly do that you haven’t done to me already? Are you going to ruin my future? Snatch me away from my loved ones and keep me imprisoned in a life I don’t want?” She smiled bitterly. “You did those already. So what else can you possibly do?”

People would call her a fool to challenge the devil, especially when she was in such a vulnerable state and completely at his mercy. But she refused to bend to his will.

One moment she was issuing him a challenge, and then the next moment she was lifted off the bed and lying on top of him.

She gasped at the sudden turn in the situation. Her heart began to pound hard, and she was sure he could feel it as she was lying on top of him. She could feel every inch of his muscular body, including his hard arousal.

She wanted to struggle, but with great difficulty, she forced herself not to. If she tried to escape, she knew it would raise his hunting instincts, and he would chase and capture her. Right from the beginning, he had been the predator, and she was his prey.

“Y-you said you won’t force me. That you’d wait until I’m willing.” Her voice came out high-pitched and held the slightest of quivers.

“I didn’t say I’d wait for you to be willing.” His large hands were on her hips before he ran his palms along the length of her at the sides. “I said *when* I decide to take you, you’ll be more than willing.”

Along with a healthy dose of fear, a zing of unexpected pleasure shot through her. She stifled a moan that threatened to escape her mouth when his hands brushed against the sides of her breasts.

“I won’t ever give in to you,” she said shakily. She tried to roll away from him, but his strong hands kept her firmly in place.

“Tell me something,” he said in a casual tone which was in contrast to what he was doing right then. “Are you a virgin?”

Or did you fuck any of your *friends*?”

She knew he was asking whether or not she had given her virginity to Rahul.

“I’m not a virgin,” she lied. “I have...” She refused to use the crude word. “I had sex many times before, so I know what good *consensual* sex feels like.”

“Really? Tell me.”

She had no idea, but she knew what she wanted it to be like and what she had imagined. “It is sweet and it... it... evokes emotions that make me feel safe and in control...”

He laughed, a deep, rich sound that vibrated deep within her.

“Another thing I’ll enjoy proving you wrong,” his voice rumbled.

Before she could ask him what he meant by that, he rolled them until he was lying on top of her. The next instant, his mouth crashed on top of hers, and his tongue plunged deep into her mouth.

The kiss was hard, almost violent, and it made her feel completely out of control. She braced her hands on his shoulders and struggled underneath him, trying to push him off even as a moan escaped her, and then her nails dug into his upper arms to pull him closer.

Her body reacted in an uncontrollable, contradictory way while he continued to kiss her, stealing away her mind and will.

But just as it began, it was over all of a sudden. He rolled off her and turned to his side with his back facing her.

She lay still, while sucking in several deep breaths of air and staring at him with her heart pounding deafeningly in her chest.

Shock, anger and fear along with something she didn't want to admit to herself coursed through her.

Desire.

She didn't just fear the devil... she now also feared desiring the devil.

CHAPTER 14

The next morning, she woke up from a restless sleep.

And when she noticed that the devil was gone from the bed, she felt immensely relieved. She got out of the bed and had barely freshened up when Lata knocked on the door. And like the morning after her wedding day, she was summoned to join him downstairs for breakfast.

Anirudh Shaurya was at the breakfast table, and unlike the last time, he wasn't wearing a suit. He was shirtless and was wearing only his running shorts. The fine sand sticking to his tanned skin made it obvious he had been running along the beach.

She took the chair opposite to him.

"I want to go shopping," she said.

The devil watched her while sipping his freshly squeezed juice, not saying anything right away.

He put the glass down and picked up the knife and fork digging into his heavy protein-rich breakfast. "You had enough clothes brought in," he remarked.

Her cheeks warmed in embarrassment. She literally had a dozen large suitcases filled with clothes on her side of the walk-in closet. She knew she was coming off as a high-maintenance brat, but she didn't care, and she wasn't trying to impress the devil.

“I need some more clothes and accessories.”

He continued to watch her with an unreadable expression. “I can have a personal shopper visit you here,” he said.

“No. I prefer to pick my own clothes.”

As soon as she said that, his eyes fell on the cotton sundress with a low, plunging neckline. Except for a pair or two, all the clothes were designed to attract the attention of a newlywed husband.

His eyes lingered on her exposed cleavage before getting back to her face. She shivered and conspicuously rubbed her arms.

“Take security with you,” he said.

She let out an internal sigh of relief.

“And get back soon,” he added, making her tense once again.

“Why?” she asked.

After their previous night’s conversation, when he told her that she won’t be forced to consummate the marriage, she had felt a false sense of security. But now, in the bright light of the day, she realized what her grim reality was.

She was still a captive. She was still a forced bride married to a man who was a ruthless criminal under the guise of a powerful, influential businessman.

He raised an eyebrow. “Should there be a reason to getting back home soon?” he asked.

She wanted to shout, *Yes! If one has to get back to their captor.*

“We are going to the club tonight,” he said.

Her heart skipped a beat. She knew he was talking about *The Dungeon*. The place they had seen each other the first time.

Why did he want to take her there? His two friends had told him they should celebrate the wedding in an informal way. Why did he care whether or not she was introduced to all his acquaintances?

“Anirudh, Mr. Gagoi is on the line,” Keshav’s voice cut in. “He wants to have an urgent video conference call right now. Another shipment got destroyed.”

A small, satisfied dark smile covered Anirudh Shaurya’s face. “Tell him I’ll call him back.”

She was done with her breakfast, but she didn’t want to be in the bedroom where he would walk in anytime to take a shower. Although he claimed he wouldn’t force her to consummate their marriage, she still didn’t want to take any chances. So she waited at the table, hoping he’d leave since the call was supposed to be urgent.

But he didn’t leave, and neither did he hurry through his breakfast.

He sat at the breakfast table reading the headlines of at least half a dozen newspapers that were put there for him. He also read something on his phone.

She looked at her wristwatch. It was getting late. She had to shop, and also sneak a visit to her father. Not wanting to waste any more time waiting for him to leave, she got up.

“I’ll get going,” she announced awkwardly.

He didn't respond and continued to read. So, she hurried inside the house and went up to the bedroom. Not wanting to take chances, she grabbed her clothes and went to another bathroom to shower and get ready for the day.

By the time she got ready and was about to head out, she could see through the large French doors that Anirudh Shaurya was still seated outside near the breakfast area, reading the newspapers unhurriedly. She frowned recalling the urgent call he was asked to make.

Then shaking her head, she pushed the thoughts of the devil out of her head and escaped the gilded prison for a short while.

Aditi was done with her shopping in less than an hour.

She got everything she needed in one store where a friendly sales associate offered to help.

With bags filled with comfortable nightwear and beach clothes, she followed the bodyguards to the parking lot.

The bodyguards weren't too happy about the fact that she decided to shop at a mall that was far from the beach house. She had also insisted on being alone inside the store.

“Madam, your bags must be heavy. Please give them to us.”

“That's okay. They aren't heavy,” she insisted with a smile. She was used to carrying her own stuff, and the shopping bags weren't heavy as they were just clothes.

She handed the bags only when they reached the dark SUV with tinted windows, asking them to place them in the trunk.

“I would like to pick up a few things from my father's house. It's close by here,” she said.

The three bodyguards looked at each other.

“Sir didn't tell us—”

“I'm telling you now,” she said softly yet firmly. “I'll let... Anirudh know later that I had dropped by my father's home to pick up a few things. He shouldn't have a problem with it.”

The guards looked torn, but when they looked at her determined expression, they decided not to argue.

Less than fifteen minutes later, the SUV drove through the familiar gates of her childhood home. She hoped her father hadn't gone out like he had promised not to.

"Is my father home?" she asked an armed guard stationed outside the house.

"Yes, madam. He's home."

"Wait here," Aditi told the bodyguards. "I'll be right back." She more or less ordered the devil's bodyguards, knowing they would respond better to authority rather than a request.

On her way inside, she asked a maid to send water and snacks to the guards, hoping they would not complain about her.

"Aditi!" Luckily, her father was in his office.

Aditi hugged her father. "I don't have much time, Papa. I told the bodyguards I had to pick up a few things from here."

Her father nodded. "Then let's hurry. Come sit."

Curious, Aditi sat on a couch while her father made a phone call to someone.

"Aditi is here with me," he told someone and then paused to listen. "Yes, but she's here only for a short time. I'll conference you in right away."

Aditi wondered who was on the other end of the phone call.

Her father ended the call and turned to her. "That was Sameera Vasisht, a CBI agent."

Aditi's heart began to thud. CBI? She recalled meeting a lot of high-level cops at the Shaurya mansion the previous night. Will the police be able to help?

Before she could let her doubts be known, her father dialed a number from the office line and put it on speaker.

“Sameera. Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” a woman’s firm voice replied. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Shaurya.”

“Call her Aditi,” her father immediately corrected with a frown. It was obvious he hated his daughter to be referred by his enemy’s name.

There was a small pause. “Sure. Good afternoon, Aditi. I’m Sameera Vasisht from the Central Bureau of Investigation, the Narcotics line. Your father has reached out to us for help.”

With her heart still thudding with doubts, she waited for the other woman to finish talking. The woman sounded older. Aditi pegged her to be someone in her forties or so.

“As you know, your father is in deep trouble. The only way you or your father can get out of the current predicament is with the help of government protection. But as you also know, your husband and his family are quite powerful. Except for a few people like me, many of my colleagues are on the Shauryas’ payroll. The Shauryas have tried to induct me many times, but I turned them down.”

“Why did you turn them down?” Aditi asked the cop, making her father stare at her in shock.

There was a short laugh on the phone. “You are quite bold, Aditi. And that’s the kind of boldness we need for your help,” the woman said. “And to answer your question, I resisted bribes because I believe in doing what’s right, even if the stakes are high.”

Aditi's heart jerked hearing those words. Despite herself, her heart ordered her to trust the other woman.

“Just to give you a brief background, let me start at the beginning,” the woman continued. “My department has been trying to gather evidence against Anirudh Shaurya for the last ten years. And even though the Shauryas have a lot of successful, legitimate businesses, it's an open secret that they head many criminal organizations. But unfortunately, the evidence always vanishes at the last moment, and the witnesses turn hostile.”

Aditi listened keenly, but she didn't understand why her father wanted her to hear about the Shauryas' illegal business. He had already told her and warned her about it. She had even witnessed it in person when one of the guests at the party last night openly discussed drugs.

“What do you want from me?” Aditi asked the other woman.

There was a momentary pause. “We want to use you as our primary witness against your husband.”

Aditi was stunned.

“How?” She was the last person Anirudh Shaurya would ever trust or give details of his illegal business dealings.

“I'll brief you momentarily with the details of what is expected. But first I'd like to know if you are willing to do this. In return, my department will offer protection to you and your father.”

Aditi was torn. Trust didn't come easily to her. Even if Sameera Vasisht gathered the evidence against the Shauryas,

there was no guarantee that the evidence would not be destroyed at the last minute. Of course, in this case, the witness would not turn hostile because the witness would be Anirudh Shaurya's wife.

She looked at her father's tense face. She knew there weren't any other options available for either her father or her. She had to do everything possible to get them out of the situation, even if it were highly risky.

"I'll do it," she said.

There was a small sigh of relief from Sameera Vasisht. "That's great. I will guide you through what needs to be done."

Over the next two hours, Aditi listened to the instructions. Her heart thudded in both fear and determination when she realized the extent of what she was expected to do.

"I know it's a lot to digest in a day, but I'll get in touch with you soon, Aditi. Use the phone that your father will give you. It's a secure line and can't be tapped. All the best."

The call ended, but Aditi continued to stare at the phone.

"I think it's too risky, Aditi." There was obvious concern in her father's voice.

Aditi closed her eyes before opening them and looking at her father with determination. "I know that. But this might be the only chance to receive help."

Her father looked defeated. "I guess you are right. So... you'll do it?"

"Yes. I'll help in bringing down Anirudh Shaurya."

She was going to betray the devil.

It was almost evening by the time she reached the beach house. She was about to hurry inside to get ready when she was stopped by Keshav, the head of the security.

“Aditi. Anirudh is traveling again for a business meeting.”

She was somewhat relieved. “When is he returning?”

“I’m not sure.”

Hopefully, never.

Anirudh Shaurya must have enough enemies, and the ‘business meetings’ he attends must be with dangerous people. What if he’s killed during such deals?

I would be free, then.

As soon as that thought entered her mind, she immediately felt bad for wishing someone’s death. She hated Anirudh Shaurya, and she would do everything in her power to bring him down, but she didn’t have the stomach to wish for someone’s death. It was just plain wrong.

CHAPTER 15

“Congratulations. I heard you got married, Shaurya.” A middle-aged man in a suit with a heavy accent smiled while saying that.

Anirudh was at a meeting in Colombia with the man who owned one of the biggest drug cartels in the world. The meeting was held in a highly secure cartel compound with dozens of armed men. Anirudh as usual had just two men with him.

“She is the Somraj heiress. My shipments can now move however fast I want.”

The drug lord looked at him suspiciously. “You know, Somraj shipments have met with too many accidents. I lost close to a hundred million in the last month alone.”

Anirudh shrugged lightly. “I didn’t control the shipments then. And with the newly revised price, you’ll make twice the amount of profit than you usually do.”

Even though the drug lord was a billionaire, a greedy look passed on his face. “Fine. I’ll sign the contract,” he said. But there was a gleam in his eyes. “But if anything happens to the shipments this time... well... I also heard your wife is a beautiful woman.”

Anirudh sat back on the couch. “Yes, she’s beautiful,” he said, not taking the bait which was to threaten him into submission. “But so is the El Chapo heiress.”

The drug lord's face tightened at the reference to his daughter. "Leave Isabel out of this. She has nothing to do with our business."

"Indeed." With a small smile, Anirudh stood up and adjusted his suit. "Take care, Estaban. Give my regards to Isabel. We ran into each other rather unexpectedly a couple of months ago in San Diego."

The drug lord's hand fisted. Estaban knew his daughter fancied herself to be in love after a brief affair. She had even told her father about wanting to marry Anirudh, but Anirudh had politely turned down the proposal which relieved Estaban.

Estaban wanted his daughter married to a man from his cartel, especially someone he could control, unlike Anirudh. One of the major reasons why the most powerful drug lord couldn't kill Anirudh was because his doting daughter would never forgive him.

"You know, if you hadn't killed all of your rivals, I wouldn't have had to agree to sign a contract despite losing so much money."

Anirudh smiled. "I could say the same to you. Had you not killed most of your rivals, you wouldn't be the biggest drug lord in Columbia, either."

A glint of respect shone in the other man's eyes. "Take care of my shipments, Shaurya."

Shaking hands with the older man, Anirudh stepped into the private jet to head to his next meeting. This one was in Mexico, and it was the last one for the week.

For the first time, he was feeling restless. He had been on the edge the entire week during the meetings. It wasn't because he was sitting opposite to the most dangerous men in the world. It was because of the woman he had married.

She was a bundle of contradictions. A rebel one moment and a frightened innocent the next.

A dark desire rose in him as he recalled the sight of Aditi Somraj on their wedding night lying in his bed holding a tiny scissors in her hands as protection. She was wearing his robe, which was way too big for her, and it had fallen open in her sleep, revealing her long, smooth hips and legs.

He wondered what she would have done if he had woken her up and demanded his husbandly rights on their wedding night. Would she have attacked him with the scissors? Or would she have submitted to the raging desire that flared between them each time they saw each other?

Even after he had told her she would be willing when they had sex, she was always bracing herself for an attack from him. And it only stoked his baser animal instinct to prove her right.

She was becoming a dangerous distraction.

CHAPTER 16

More days passed and the devil hadn't returned yet.

Aditi spent her days similar to the previous week. She spent most of her time outside, taking long walks on the beach or swimming. But this time, she ordered the security guards not to follow her around.

“I don't feel comfortable having people watch me while I swim. I need privacy.”

She knew it sounded as though she were accusing the two bodyguards following her of ogling their boss's wife in short swim clothes.

One of the bodyguard's eyes lowered in embarrassment. “But, madam, sir has ordered us to stay close, no matter—”

She cut him off. “I'll tell my husband, and I'm sure he will understand and respect my privacy.”

She knew the devil wouldn't. He might even take it as a direct defiance of his orders. But she wanted to push back and get the guards used to leaving her alone while she was within the beach house premises. She couldn't spy and observe things if she had men shadowing her all the time.

The bodyguard who was talking to her looked at someone behind her. It was Keshav, and he must have heard her order.

She expected Keshav to politely turn down her order, but luckily, the man remained silent.

“Would you like me to bring your lunch upstairs?”

Aditi smiled at the housekeeper. “I’m not hungry, Lata.”

“But you must be tired,” Lata said with a concerned frown.

Aditi had spent the day helping the staff with cleaning the house.

“It wasn’t that big a strain, Lata. I enjoy cleaning.”

During the cleaning, Aditi discovered the placement of the security cameras inside the beach house.

“Let me at least bring you a snack, then,” Lata insisted.

“Maybe after my swim.” Aditi smiled and waved at the older woman before heading upstairs to the bedroom to change into her beachwear.

After changing into a one-piece swimwear, she headed towards the beach. She had a long day. She was glad she had demanded privacy a few days ago because she was able to move about the house without having the guards shadowing her. She was also able to take walks on the beach and swim in the ocean unmonitored.

She shed the swimming robe on a beach chair. Then walking towards the water, she let out a deep sigh before stepping into the water.

The water felt refreshingly cool, and the waves were just right. Kicking her legs, she began to swim. Her mind drifted to

what she had to accomplish in the coming week. So far, she hadn't found anything useful to pass on to the police. The office area was squeaky clean with no loose papers lying around.

She had expected that. No criminal would write out important contact names on papers or leave details of illegal activities lying unsupervised in an unlocked office.

But during the cleaning session, she did see a landline phone and a laptop. The phone was the type to be used in having video conferences. She was sure that the history log on the phone would contain helpful information.

She had to figure out a way to sneak into the office during the night and make a note of those numbers.

A shift in the water pressure beneath her pulled her out of her thoughts. She frowned, wondering if a fish or a sea animal accidentally came towards the shore. But before she could investigate, something wrapped around her ankle and dragged her underneath.

She let out a gasp, which only made her swallow seawater. She kicked and pushed hard until she broke through the surface, but as soon as she gasped in a breath, something wrapped around her waist and pulled her inside the water once again.

She was being attacked. And not by some sea animal. It was definitely a human because she could feel the hard fingers wrapped around her waist, dragging her deeper into the water.

Oh God!

Her panic made her swallow more sea water. Trying not to panic, she struggled hard, digging her nails into the arm, but the vice-like grip on her didn't loosen.

She couldn't hold her breath any longer and felt faint with the lack of oxygen.

I'm going to drown.

She tried once again to struggle, but this time her struggles felt weak.

Just as she was about to give up and saw dark spots in her vision, her attacker kicked his legs and swam up dragging her along with him.

As soon as her head broke the surface, she sucked in greedy breaths of air. But her fight from the attacker was far from over. The man dragged her towards the shore. She tried to fight him off, but her hands and legs turned weak due to the struggle inside the water and having swallowed a lot of seawater.

Help.

She wanted to cry out for help, but all she could do is gasp in air.

She was thrown on the sand, and before she could suck in her next breath, a heavy weight fell on top of her.

She was breathless and could barely breathe with not just the heavy weight, but also with the panic. Her long hair was tangled around her face, blinding her from seeing her attacker.

She fought the tears that threatened to escape and tried to pull in some presence of mind to be able to scream for help.

She struggled weakly trying to push her hair away from her face, so she could at least plead with her attacker to spare her life. The attacker remained still on top of her before she felt his hands carelessly pushing the hair away from her face.

She sucked in another gasp of air before opening her eyes. When she saw her attacker's face, she was further paralyzed with shock.

The grim, unsmiling and determined look was that of a cold-blooded killer.

Was he going to kill her? The way she was attacked in the ocean, she was sure her attacker wanted to drown her.

Did he drag her out because he wanted to torture her and violate her first before throwing her into a watery grave?

A tear escaped at the thought of dying that way. Her father wouldn't even have her body to mourn.

She stared at the face of her killer. Slowly, a spark of anger lit inside her. She wasn't going to let him kill her so easily. She was going to fight.

Clawing her fingers, she went after his face with her sharp nails. But he expected that. He caught her hands easily and pinned them both together, and placed them on top of her head on the sand using just one of his hand.

She began to struggle violently under him. She tried to get him to loosen the grip on her hands so she could use those to claw his eyes out.

But his grip was hard. And he barely looked as though he was having trouble controlling her.

“Why are you not shouting?” her attacker asked her calmly.

“Because no one would help me! They are your men!” She spat out those words.

He must have found out about her snooping in the past two days. Someone from the CBI must have also informed him about how she was planning to betray him by collecting evidence and presenting it to the government.

Anirudh Shaurya raised an eyebrow. “So, you’ll just give in?”

“I’m not giving in! I’ll fight you until my death.” She struggled harder, only to collapse in exhaustion. She had tears of frustration along with fear.

He smiled coldly at her. “That’s your fight? All you managed to do is to give me a hard-on.”

Humiliation and embarrassment cut through her fear when she felt his hard arousal pressing against her stomach. She realized right then that he was shirtless and was wearing just his swimming trunks. And she was wearing a one-piece swimming costume. Only thin pieces of cloth separated them, and she felt every inch of his hard, muscular body that trapped her underneath him. All he had to do was lower his shorts and push aside her swimsuit at the bottom to take what he wanted.

Her body trembled.

She watched him as he lowered his eyes to stare at her heaving breasts before looking back at her face with another cold smile. “Do you realize you are completely helpless?” he asked.

Despite her hopeless situation, she clenched her jaw and refused to give him the satisfaction. Let him do his worst. She would fight him the moment he freed her hands.

“Why did you ask the security to stop guarding you?”

The dark underlying anger in that question caught her off guard.

A flicker of confusion and doubt entered her mind.

“I-I wanted privacy.” Her teeth began to chatter with the cool breeze even though her body was covered by his large, warm one.

“Privacy would have cost you your life,” he said in the same angry tone. “Anyone could have entered the water and killed you within minutes. Or worse, they could have abducted you. Do you know what my enemies would like to do to my wife?”

She slowly shook her head, not wanting to listen to what he would say. Her teeth continued to chatter with a delayed reaction.

“Multiple men would violate you,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone. “They would take a video of it to send to me as a way of getting back at me. You might or might not get murdered gruesomely. And because a beautiful woman like you would fetch a good amount of money, they would sell you as a sex slave to a perverted man in a faraway country.”

Her teeth chattered so loudly, she was sure he could hear it. She wanted to throw up at the visual he put into her brain.

He watched her for a few tense moments before rolling away from her in a smooth move, leaving her to feel even

colder. Her body trembled violently in fear and delayed shock.

She felt his arms before he picked her up from the sand to carry her somewhere. She didn't fight him. She even clung to his body warmth. His tanned skin felt hot against her cold, shivering body. But there was no warmth or comfort on his cold expression.

He stopped at a distance and lowered her on a beach chair before throwing the swimming robe she had placed earlier at her. She took it gratefully and wrapped it around herself.

It took her a while for the shaking and shivering to stop and for her mind and body to realize there was no immediate danger.

He didn't ask if she were okay or whether she needed anything. He just watched her as she regained her normalcy.

She hated him right then. He was the reason why she was terrified. He was the reason why the gruesome and brutal visual could come true if she were attacked by his enemies.

"I still don't want bodyguards with me when I'm home," she said.

It was foolish to challenge him, especially after what he had demonstrated. But she couldn't let his deliberate scare affect what she had to do. She would be completely shackled if his men followed her all the time.

No matter what, she would bring Anirudh Shaurya down and be free of him.

She braced herself for his anger or some sort of provoked reaction. But he only continued to watch her with a grim look.

“Each morning, starting tomorrow, Keshav will train you,” he said. “He will teach you self-defence and fighting techniques.”

She blinked and then frowned in confusion. She wanted to protest again, but she kept quiet. The look on his face indicated it would be a losing battle.

“Even if you miss a day,” he continued in a cold, warning tone. “I will double, if not triple, the men who will follow you each moment when I’m not around.”

With that cold ultimatum, he walked away towards her house, leaving her confused, angry and determined.

CHAPTER 17

The training began early the next morning.

“Get up. Keshav will be waiting for you downstairs in ten minutes.”

Aditi didn't want to get up and wanted to stay in bed for a while longer. But when she opened her eyes and saw the hooded, predatory look of the nearly-naked devil in just his sleep shorts, she sat up hurriedly.

The previous night, Anirudh Shaurya had been in his office room when she had hurried to bed and pretended to sleep. She ended up sleeping for real because he hadn't returned even when it was past midnight.

But now, seeing him in the same bed as her, more or less made her jump out of their bed.

She hurried into the restroom to freshen up before the training.

Less than ten minutes later, she wore a tracksuit and hurried downstairs. Keshav was waiting near the beach.

“Good morning, Aditi,” he greeted.

“Good morning, Keshav,” she said with a small, tentative smile.

“Shall we begin?” Keshav asked politely.

And begin they did.

Aditi thought since it was her first day of training, it would involve stretching exercises and maybe one or two demonstrations of self-defence techniques. But it was an intense, seemingly never-ending session.

She was panting and felt exhausted when Keshav finally stopped because Anirudh Shaurya came by. There was sweat on his forehead, indicating he had gone for a run along the shore.

“How is she?” he asked Keshav, wiping his forehead using the white towel around his neck.

“Fitness level is moderate, but she needs training right from the basics.”

The devil threw her a look. “Teach her everything. Don’t go easy on her. I’ll take up the training once in a while to test her.”

Keshav nodded.

Aditi felt angry and annoyed to be discussed as though her opinion didn’t matter.

Keshav excused himself. “We are done for the day,” he said, most likely sensing the tension in the air.

“Thank you, Keshav,” she said with a small smile.

He nodded before leaving her alone with the devil.

“Why should I train every day?” she asked in a challenge. “I thought you married me because you wanted me to suffer. Shouldn’t you be happy if any of your enemies captured and tortured me?”

The devil's gaze swept over her, making her feel conscious of how she must look, sweaty and exhausted.

"You belong to me," he said. "And no one will get to torture you." Before she could think he was being protective, she saw the grim, sinister smile on his face. "The right to torture you is entirely mine."

He walked back to the beach house.

She gritted her teeth and glared at his broad, tanned back.

He really was the devil. A heartless monster. She was his toy that he felt entitled to. And his ego wouldn't allow his enemies to capture his possession or break it.

Oh God. How long will I be trapped in this unholy alliance?

She knew she had to take some calculated risks and do everything possible to escape the devil.

She waited for a while on the beach even though she felt sticky and disgusted because of the sweat. She didn't want to risk being in the same room while the devil showered and paraded around naked.

By the time she dragged herself back to their bedroom, he had showered already and was dressed in a black suit and was buttoning his cuffs.

An unwanted flare of attraction shot through her which she immediately suppressed. She refused to contemplate her physical reaction to the man who was her enemy and captor.

"Be ready by seven," he ordered without looking up from his cuffs. "We are going to the club."

When she didn't respond, he raised his eyes to meet with hers. "Are you going out today?" he asked.

"No." She had to stay home and somehow get to his office to get the phone numbers from the log. She hoped he didn't give instructions to his bodyguards to keep an eye on her even at home.

Giving her another sweeping look, he walked away without throwing any orders at her.

As soon as the bedroom door closed, she let out a noisy exhale. Until then, she wasn't even aware she was holding her breath.

“Ask them to divert seventy percent of the shipment.”

“But Anirudh, it’s risky. This will be—”

“Make calls and have them prepared for now.”

“Okay. And your grandfather?”

“I’ll meet him tomorrow to inform him.”

Aditi knew she should be listening to the private conversation without making it too obvious. So putting on an indifferent look, she entered the living room where the devil was waiting for her.

They were going to the club that night. She had half expected him to leave abruptly on business travel, but unfortunately, he returned home that evening and barked out instructions for her to get ready for the club.

She was in a better mood to listen and not challenge him. She had managed to sneak into the office room and note down the numbers from the call log. She had texted those numbers to Sameera Vasisht.

“Ready?” he asked when he saw her.

She tried not to shift uncomfortably at his sweeping look. She was wearing a shiny black, knee-length tight dress. At first, she didn’t want to put an effort to look good, but after weighing the pros and cons, she concluded that she needed to

be on the devil's good side. He needed to trust her enough to be able to speak freely, either on the phone or with his men.

She nodded lightly. "Yes, I'm ready."

He waited for her to join him. She felt a flare of attraction as she neared him. He was wearing a black shirt and dark blue jeans, making him appear approachable.

Soon, she was seated next to him in a car, and they headed to the club.

It wasn't the same club where they had seen each other for the first time.

Although it was also named *The Dungeon*, this one was different.

Over the last week, she had spoken to Sameera Vasisht multiple times. Most of the conversation revolved around what the Shauryas owned and what she needed to look out for in particular.

One of those briefings she had received was about this particular club. This one was under a high-rise hotel building that belonged to the Shauryas. Until a few weeks ago, Anirudh Shaurya had apparently lived in the penthouse and operated his business from there.

The car stopped near the back entrance of the building which was heavily guarded but had no crowd. That particular night there was no crowd waiting outside the club at the front either.

As though reading her mind, the devil clarified her doubt. "The club is closed for the private event tonight."

"What event?"

"You. My acquaintances wanted to meet my wife."

Biting her lip at the sudden nervousness she felt, she got out of the car and followed the devil. He led her inside through a private entrance. A hum of thumping music could be heard

as they walked through a luxurious hallway with thick carpeting, gold-colored light fixtures and crown moldings. They got into a private elevator that took them to the third floor.

She realized the set-up of the club was similar to the other club. The elevator opened to a private area on the third floor which was currently crowded, unlike the other club which had been almost empty as only the club owners and their guests were allowed there.

Based on the information she had, the other two men who were with Anirudh Shaurya on the night she had seen him for the first time were Shiv and Vijay. They had been friends for as long as they knew each other from college in the States. And now, they co-owned the chain of clubs together. All three of them were apparently called the devils.

But in Aditi's mind, only one man earned the title. Anirudh Shaurya was truly the devil.

Sameera Vasisht had told her that there were investigations going on the Anirudh Shaurya's other two friends as well, but Sameera wanted her to focus only on Anirudh Shaurya for the time being.

Aditi's eyes sought the waiting group, trying to make a note of them, even though the lighting was dim.

"Ah. There they are, finally!" Shiv greeted her with a smile. He was with a beautiful woman who appeared drunk with the way she was plastered around him and giggling.

Aditi smiled back at him.

The devil's other friend Vijay didn't have a woman next to him. He gave her a single nod in acknowledgement which she returned with a small smile.

She was introduced to a few more people whose names she tried to remember. She knew she didn't have to because she had a small recording device that she had strategically placed inside her dress.

"Is this your first time in *The Dungeon*?" a woman who was introduced as a popular actress asked.

"To this one, yes. I've been to another one." There were three *The Dungeons* in the city.

"Nicee... I love this place. There's always so much privacy, and nothing that happens at *The Dungeon* ever gets out. We all can let our hair down." The woman was slurring.

Aditi felt a twinge of guilt. She wondered if she should delete a part of the recording. But she realized it wasn't her call. What if celebrities were also involved in drug trafficking?

"All right! Everyone, bottoms up for the happy couple!" someone shouted.

A uniformed waitress came by with a large tray of alcoholic drinks. Aditi didn't want to drink because she needed to be alert, but she picked up a cocktail and took a small sip from it to not raise any suspicion.

She was standing near the railing. When she looked down, she noticed that the entire club was transformed. The second-floor VIP booths had slightly brighter lighting where groups of people were either playing cards or getting drunk or having

conversations. She also noticed people were allowed to smoke inside that evening.

She followed Anirudh Shaurya down the stairs to the second floor where she was introduced to dozens more guests. Most of the women were dressed in glittering, tight and short dresses. Some of them were celebrities, some were aspiring actresses or models, some were socialites and some even held influential positions in the government. The men were mostly businessmen.

Are some of these people criminals too? With every person she was introduced to, a doubt of suspicion crossed her mind whether or not that person was a drug lord, arms dealer or other form of criminal.

She noticed that all the guests were relatively young compared to the guests who were invited to the Shaurya mansion.

Food and drinks continued to be served on trays. When she noticed white cigarettes and cigar pipes with snuffboxes on some trays, she wondered if they were drugs. But the smell of smoke was like regular tobacco. She didn't notice any strange packets or powders. Yet.

She recalled hearing somewhere about recreational drugs offered in most high-powered parties. So she was sure there would be drugs involved when the host was one of the biggest drug lord.

She was led to different booths for introductions by the devil. Although she didn't intend to drink, she continued to take tiny sips of her drink to not appear suspicious.

Just like in the Shaurya mansion, women stared at Anirudh Shaurya. Married women, single women—it didn't matter. Some of them even flirted with him, but he was polite yet distant with them all.

She wondered if any of these women knew him intimately. She had heard that despite keeping his private life away from the public, he was known to have dated a lot of well-known women across the world. A strange burn settled into her stomach at the thought of him with a beautiful woman.

She reached for her drink to get rid of the burn and confusing feelings. But her drink was surprisingly over. She blindly picked up another glass and took a huge sip of it.

Fiery liquid slid down her throat and exploded into heat inside her stomach, making her cough out loudly. Blinking back the moisture in her eyes, she noticed that there was an odd look in the devil's eyes seeing her face. And there was laughter from his friend.

Shiv grinned at her. "That isn't how you are supposed to enjoy a hundred-year-old single malt scotch, Aditi." He held his hand out to her. "Since your husband hasn't bothered to ask you yet, would you like to dance?"

Not wanting to be rude, Aditi placed her hand in the other man's. "Yes, I would love to dance."

She followed Shiv down to the dance floor.

After a few minutes, she was surprisingly enjoying herself. Shiv made her feel at ease. He twirled her and made her do some ballroom steps that were silly and fun. She laughed, feeling free for the first time that evening.

But even as she enjoyed herself, her eyes wandered discreetly.

The devil was nowhere to be seen. *Is he with a woman in one of the private rooms?*

The very thought of it made her feel the strange burn once again. She should be relieved if he was venting out his animal desire and passion on some other woman who was willing rather than coming home to her. Then why was her stomach clenching in a sick way at the thought?

Forcibly pushing those confusing thoughts away, she smiled at the man in front of her and continued to dance.

Shiv held her waist and dipped her low in a dramatic manner before swinging her back up and twirling her around.

She laughed breathlessly. “You are quite good at this,” she said, enjoying herself.

Shiv gave a mock shudder. “My mother made me take dancing lessons during childhood along with my sister.”

Aditi laughed and was about to ask him where he grew up when a deep voice cut in.

“Excuse me. If you don’t mind, I’d like to dance with my wife.” There was a hint of sarcasm in the devil’s voice.

Shiv laughed. “Don’t worry, man. I’m not trying to steal her away. Although, technically you stole her away from me.” He winked at the devil.

A flicker of confusion passed through Aditi’s mind. But before she could think what Shiv had meant, the devil filled her vision and all her senses.

She blinked seeing his dark, intense look. He pulled her closer before they began to dance.

But unlike the dancing with Shiv or with any of her friends, dancing with the devil was a nerve-racking experience.

Thick and heavy tension filled the air. She was aware of every little thing around her—the rhythmic beats of the throbbing music, a sea of bodies writhing sensually to the music and the burn from the intense gaze of the man in front of her.

Her breasts peaked, and electricity coursed through her. Her breaths came out in shallow, fast pants. It took a tremendous effort for her to stop her body from gravitating towards the devil and rubbing herself against him.

Soon, she couldn't take it anymore. "I'm tired and thirsty," she said, wanting to put a stop to the self-torture.

"Come with me." He led her off the dance floor. But instead of heading to the bar area to request for a bottle of water, he led her towards the elevator.

The crackling awareness continued. She barely noticed where they were going. When the elevator stopped, they walked silently through a dimly-lit hallway.

Aditi's face burned in embarrassment when she saw a few couples making out and kissing passionately in the shadows. Quite some time had passed since the party had begun, and most people were drunk even when she was introduced to them.

Her heart thudded when Anirudh Shaurya stopped in front of a door and opened it using a code before holding it open for

her. As soon as she stepped inside, the door shut behind her, leaving her alone with him inside the private room.

To distract herself and push away the heavy tension, she focused on the room. There were a couple of leather couches. One side of the room was made of glass and overlooked the dance floor. Another side had a small bar area with bottles of various sizes and crystal glasses. The third wall was filled with television screens which were currently turned off.

Turning slightly, she saw that Anirudh Shaurya had gone towards the bar area and opened a sleek door that appeared to be a refrigerator door. He took out a chilled water bottle from inside and handed it to her.

“Thank you,” she whispered and drank half the bottle of water to cool down.

He was silent as he watched her.

“Are those camera feeds?” she asked, pointing at the screens on the wall.

“Yes.”

She squirmed, feeling uncomfortably hot and bothered. Tearing her gaze away from him, she looked at the glass wall overlooking the dance floor.

“Does your other club have a room similar to this?” she asked.

“Yes.”

His reply made her look back at him. She recalled feeling his gaze when she had danced with Rahul even though she

couldn't find him anywhere. She had a strong feeling that he was watching her through the glass on that day.

How long did he watch her that day? Did he know who she was at that time?

Instead of fear, something dark and primal slid through her, making her body throb.

Sucking in a small breath, she gulped down the rest of the water from the bottle. But the burn coursing through her body didn't disappear. It only seemed to increase to a blaze.

He continued to watch her with an unreadable look.

You hate him, remember? He's a dangerous criminal, the man who trapped you into a marriage with him.

Even as a part of her mind reminded her of who and what he was, the sizzling awareness and attraction towards him didn't diminish.

"I hate you," she whispered, hoping to put out the flame inside her.

Something flashed in his eyes, and he stepped closer. She took a step back, but he continued to come closer. Soon she was against a wall with him trapping her.

He lowered his head. "Do you?" he asked, his hot breath against her lips.

Her lips tingled, and images of their two kisses flashed in her mind along with the violent contradictory feelings she had felt during them.

"Yes. Why wouldn't I hate you?" she whispered the challenge.

Her breath caught in her throat when his hand crept into her hair from behind and held her head.

“Then hate me,” he said. The next moment, his mouth captured hers.

Unlike his other kisses, this particular kiss wasn't aggressive even though it was demanding. His lips captured hers while his tongue slid inside. She let out a soft gasp as her heart thundered inside her chest.

The gasp opened her mouth for further invasion, and his tongue explored her mouth sensuously. A strange and surreal feeling filled her. His hands moved over her aching breasts, cupping them and rubbing against the peaks through the material of her dress. Lightning streaked within her, and the deep need she felt became intense.

She trembled.

As soon as he lifted his mouth from hers, “More,” she begged, pushing her aching body towards him.

She was not drunk. But something was happening. Something she couldn't seem to control.

“Shh,” he whispered when she writhed against him.

The lights and thumping music continued outside while they were enclosed in their cocoon inside the private room. His hands held the straps of her dress and slid them off her shoulders. Since she was wearing a thin-strapped dress with soft padding, she didn't have to wear her bra. Cool air fell on her bare chest making her shiver. Or maybe it was his hot, hungry gaze on her that made her tremble.

She didn't have to beg him again, he lowered his head, and his mouth closed over her breast.

His tongue stroked her aching nipple softly before sucking on it hard. She let out a cry, her fingers clutching his thick hair when she felt the greedy pulls of his mouth all the way to her womb and aching core.

Electricity crackled around them, and the painful need she felt only seemed to increase rapidly. She moved around restlessly. "It hurts," she whispered.

She wasn't talking about the red marks his mouth left around her breasts.

He knew that too because his hands tugged her dress down even further, until it pooled around her feet. But when his fingers brushed her panties, she automatically stiffened.

No one had touched her there with the sole purpose of pleasure, not even her.

His fingers left her panties on while he kneeled before her and laid soft biting kisses around her stomach. Slowly, his lips moved lower and brushed over the thin, lacy material of her panties. Her heart pounded, and she trembled in need and clutched his shoulders to stop her legs from collapsing.

Using just one hand, he pushed aside the thin scrap of material. Her breath caught in her throat, and she gasped and cried out when she felt his tongue on her core. With a few more swipes of his tongue, her legs gave in.

But before she could collapse, he held her hips and stood up and swung her up into his arms. He carried her to one of the leather couches and lowered her on it.

“No one can see us. The wall is a one-way mirror,” he said.

She could see a part of the crowd dancing downstairs, but at that point her body didn't seem to care. She just wanted him to put out the fire he started inside her body.

His eyes swept over her with a hunger that increased the flames inside her. Kneeling next to the couch near her legs, he dragged her hips closer to his face before his mouth captured her core. This time, his tongue wasn't soft or tentative or remotely considerate.

She cried out loudly in shock as a rush of feelings along with pleasure slammed hard inside her. The sight of the devil's dark head between her legs feasting on her shocked her even more.

Loud moans of pleasure along with hoarse cries emitted from her throat. Thrashing uncontrollably against his hard grip, she pulled at his hair while his dark, intense eyes held hers watching her unravel completely.

A huge tidal wave of pleasure shot through her entire body, making her muscles seize up. She screamed when it burst inside her and spread through all of her nerve endings.

She gasped for breaths, trying to regain control of her body, but the waves of pleasure continued to wash through her.

She didn't know how long she lay panting while her body continued to tremble in aftershocks. But the sound of a phone ringing jerked her out of her stupor.

The phone rang a few more times before it was answered.

“Yes?” the devil's deep voice was harsh as he tried to catch his breaths.

Blinking slowly, she watched him in a daze while he listened quietly to whoever was speaking on the phone. A frown covered his face before he stood up and went towards the glass wall and watched the dance floor.

“Fuck! Handle the situation. I’ll be there shortly,” he ordered.

He ended the call before turning to look back at her.

The fact that she was completely naked with her legs wide open while he was fully dressed burned her cheeks. She crossed her legs and covered her breasts with her arms. And the large crowd she could clearly see made her even more conscious.

A flash of something passed on the devil’s face along with hunger. Anger? Satisfaction? She didn’t know.

“I have to leave. I’m needed urgently downstairs,” he said.

She nodded and waited for him to leave, so she could get dressed and join him downstairs.

But he didn’t leave right away. He went towards the bar counter and picked up her dress lying on the floor before coming back to her.

“Get dressed.”

Fighting off another wave of embarrassment, she sat up and took it from him. Turning away from the crowd and him, she put her dress back on with trembling hands. She smoothed her dress and turned around, searching for her panties. She saw it lying on the floor next to the couch.

She picked it up, only to notice it was ripped at one side.

“Give it to me,” he said.

Her face flushed. She didn't have a purse to stuff it into, and she didn't want to throw it in the trash bin inside the room for the cleaning staff to find. So she gave it to him so he could dispose it for her. He put it inside his pant pocket making her cheeks burn.

“Let's go,” he said, leading her out of the room.

Her legs were shaky and the soft material of the dress now felt rough against her sensitive breasts and stomach. Her core continued to feel a dull throb between her legs as she walked along the hallway.

When they got into the elevator, awareness continued to hum between them. And seeing the dark hunger in his eyes as he watched her, she felt her body throb even more.

She sucked in a breath when the elevator stopped, and the doors opened. She expected to find the dance floor, but she was taken aback when she saw a marbled foyer and a thick, polished door.

She followed him as he stepped out of the elevator. He entered a code on a lock pad next to the door before pushing it open. The lights turned on automatically, and she realized it was his penthouse.

“Stay here. I'll be back.”

But he didn't leave right away. He watched her for a few moments before jerking her toward him. Cupping her head, he gave her a toe-curling kiss before dragging his mouth away.

And then, he left.

She stood trembling in the foyer as need and confusion warred inside her.

Will she stop him when he returns?

She didn't know if she would stop him. If she didn't, then he would take her virginity that night.

She knew he wouldn't force her. But she was more terrified that he didn't have to.

All that was required was a kiss. One single kiss from the devil, and she would be more than willing.

Oh God!

To distract herself from the raging want she still felt inside, she slowly stepped further into the penthouse. The place was huge. The combination of wooden and marble flooring gleamed even in the dim lighting. Circular couches were placed in the middle of the living room, and there was a large glass wall at the end of the penthouse overlooking the city. She could see part of the dining area to the side.

A yawn escaped her. She hadn't slept well the previous night, and with the rigorous training that morning, her body was still slightly sore and exhausted. The large clock on one of the walls indicated it was past midnight. So, not bothering to even look for the bedroom, she settled on one of the couches and closed her eyes, waiting for the devil to return.

Something woke her up. She tried to open her eyes, but she was too exhausted. Her subconscious told her she should be

alarmed and fight the hard arms picking her up and carrying her somewhere. But before she could get herself to open her eyes, she was settled on something softer before being pulled against a warm, hard body. Murmuring a small sigh, she slipped into deep sleep again.

CHAPTER 18

The bright sunlight hurt her eyes. Squinting slightly, she frowned. There was a massive window with curtains to the side instead of French doors leading to a balcony. There were no sounds of seagulls or waves crashing against the shore either. Then she remembered.

The penthouse.

The events of the night flashed through her mind, making her heart thud and cheeks burn hotly. She recalled the devil's kisses, the feel of his mouth on her body, especially between her legs.

Oh God!

She tried not to think or feel anything related to what she did the previous night, and instead, she tried to recall how she ended up in the bedroom. Her last memory was of curling on the couch and falling asleep.

Anirudh Shaurya must have carried her to the bedroom.

Slowly, without moving much, she turned her head to the other side. Her heart leaped when she saw the sleeping form of her husband. Like her, he was in his previous night's party clothes.

She stared at him. He looked quite different with his eyes closed in a deep sleep. He didn't look like the man who terrified her.

You weren't terrified of him last night.

Her face burned yet again in embarrassment at the reminder of what she had begged him to do the previous night before he was called away urgently. She almost lost her virginity to the devil in the private room of his club overlooking the crowd.

Oh God!

She had been too consumed by him. The attraction she had felt since the first time she had seen him flared into undeniable flames the previous night.

Suddenly, a thought entered her mind. She sucked in a deep breath as her heart thudded with sickness at that thought. But it made sense of why she had behaved that way.

At the sound of her soft yet harsh breath, Anirudh Shaurya's eyes shot open and they were instantly clear and alert as he watched her.

“Was I drugged last night?” she asked in a whisper.

His eyes flared, and there was unrestrained anger on his face. “No,” he bit out.

Then turning away from her, he sat up. “We are leaving in a few minutes. Freshen up and be ready.” His tone was curt.

He walked out of the room and banged the door shut.

She blinked at his sudden anger. She had never seen him angry before. Even when he terrified her, he was always calm and in control.

She realized she had hit the devil's ego. She had insulted him by asking whether or not drugs played a role in what had happened between them the previous night.

Biting her lip in uncertainty, she got up and went to the attached bathroom to freshen up.

When she stepped out of the bathroom and then the bedroom, she saw him waiting outside near the hallway, checking his phone.

His eyes met with hers. "Let's go."

He turned and walked away, making her follow behind him. She almost had to run to keep up with him.

"We are coming down in five minutes. Have the car brought to the back entrance," he barked out the instructions, striding towards the penthouse entrance.

She could barely register the interior details of the penthouse. There was a long hallway outside the bedroom, and it had three more doors, most likely other guest rooms. When the hallway ended, they were back in the huge living room with high ceilings.

He held the door open, and she walked out. He punched in a code, which she observed without making it too obvious. Then turning back to her, he pressed the button that opened the elevator doors.

The elevator ride downstairs was tense. Anger radiated off him in waves making her nervous.

The car was waiting downstairs next to Keshav. And as soon as Keshav looked at Anirudh Shaurya's face, he became instantly alert.

"The hospital," Anirudh Shaurya bit out.

"Which one?" Keshav asked.

“Any damn one that wasn’t built by the Shauryas.”

Keshav nodded.

The car ride was tense too. Anirudh Shaurya ignored her completely even as his jaw remained clenched.

She continued to feel nervous.

When the car stopped in front of a hospital building, he got out and pulled the door open on her side.

“Come,” he bit out curtly.

Worried and confused, she followed him inside.

He stopped at the hospital reception desk. “I want tests conducted on my wife to check for any drugs in her system.”

The nurse at the reception gave Aditi a speculative look. Aditi felt her face flush in embarrassment. The woman probably thought she was a drug addict.

“We would need her blood and urine samples,” the nurse said evenly.

“How long until the results come out?” he asked curtly.

“Negative results will be given in under two hours. But positive might take anywhere between two days to ten days.”

“Fine.”

Aditi’s face continued to burn in embarrassment. She didn’t protest because she wanted to know the truth as well, so she went ahead and gave the required samples.

“We’ll call you in a few hours with the results, sir,” the nurse assured.

Soon, they were headed back to the beach house.

The moment the car stopped in front of the house, Aditi got out and went inside before hurrying up to the bedroom. She was desperate to get away from the cold anger of the devil.

She went into the other bathroom to take a shower and freshen up. Taking her time, she tried to wash away the previous day's memories. But despite the scrubbing, she still felt the burn of the devil's stubble on her breasts and in between her thighs.

Shaking with confused feelings, she stepped out of the shower and dried herself before putting on a fresh set of clothes. She decided to go for a walk along the beach to clear her head and pull herself together.

But as soon as she stepped out of the bathroom, her heart stopped when she saw Anirudh Shaurya sitting on the guestroom bed, obviously waiting for her.

“Your drug test results,” he bit out. “You can go to any other lab of your choice in the next twenty-four hours if you don't believe these results.” With that, he placed a sheet of paper on the bed and walked out of the bedroom, slamming the door shut behind him.

Slowly, she went towards the bed and picked up the paper and saw the results.

Negative.

She knew the results would come out the same even if she were to take a dozen more tests.

She wasn't drugged. Anirudh Shaurya's anger made it obvious. His ego was hurt by her accusation that he needed to drug her to make her willing.

Or maybe it was her ego that made her throw in the accusations in the first place. Because she didn't want to acknowledge that she desired the devil on her own.

She was the devil's willing victim.

CHAPTER 19

“Is this her?”

Aditi was at her father’s office. Sameera Vasisht was showing her various pictures to identify.

“No. I recall seeing someone younger.”

“Ah. The other Soniya then.”

A different image that Aditi identified came up. “Yes, that’s her.”

Sameera Vasisht stopped the presentation on the screen and sat back in her chair with a satisfied sigh. “We have identified most of the names that were heard in the recording. My team will place surveillance on some of these people.”

Four days had passed since the party held at *The Dungeon*. Aditi had sent the recording to Sameera Vasisht after which she was called to confirm the people who had attended the party. It was dark, and Aditi hadn’t interacted much with people, but since she made it a point to note faces, she could identify most of them.

“I guess it made sense to stop the recording after three hours. We couldn’t hear much during the dance,” the policewoman stated.

Aditi tried to control her blush. She had to lie to the policewoman that nothing significant had happened when she took to the dance floor. Technically, since she hadn’t been

introduced to anyone new, she wasn't lying. Although the main reason was because of the time spent in the private room at the club was personal.

“For someone with no training or experience, you are doing a great job, Aditi. Keep it up.”

Aditi's father looked worried. “How is this going to help?” he asked. “Apart from some leads from the call logs, there is not significant information about his suppliers or what Shaurya is planning.”

Sameera Vasisht looked composed. “We need to exercise caution and move at a steady pace, Mr. Somraj. It's barely been a week. If we push for more, it might put your daughter in danger.”

Aditi's father looked guilty and worried. “Yes, that's true.” He turned to look at Aditi. “I don't want you to risk too much. The man you are married to is too dangerous.”

Aditi smiled at her father. “I'm being careful, Papa. Don't worry.”

Even though her father nodded, Aditi could sense desperation and panic in him.

Later that afternoon, after spending some more time with her father trying to reassure him she was fine, she headed back to the beach house.

Even though her father pretended to be fine, she felt guilty that she couldn't do much for the investigation. The last four days were quite frustrating.

She woke up early each morning for her training, had her breakfast, and spent significant time with the staff to help them

with either cleaning or with meal preparations. But during the course of the day, she couldn't get any useful information as she couldn't listen to any conversations or snoop around the office anymore.

Anirudh Shaurya was mostly home during the last four days. But he actively ignored her.

The cold anger that continued to emit from him made her even more tense and frustrated. And her frustration was not only because she wasn't able to get any significant information, but it also stemmed from the fact that the awareness and attraction she felt for him was like a live wire waiting to catch a flame. She had restless and sleepless nights the last four days, lying next to him thinking of those intimate moments in the club. She even had dreams of them together in which the devil wasn't interrupted and they had sex on top of that couch in the private room of club. She had been an eager participant in those dreams.

Letting out another frustrated breath, she stared outside the SUV window.

She should be spending time thinking of a solution to be able to make Anirudh Shaurya lower his guard around her, so she could spy on him, rather than dreaming about the man.

Suddenly, a memory from those dreams flashed in her mind, making her heart rate spike. In all of her dreams the last four days, after making love to her, Anirudh Shaurya didn't look angry.

Her heart began to pound as an idea took shape. There was a way to earn Anirudh Shaurya's trust. If not his trust, it would at least make him lower his defences towards her.

To do that, she would have to be willing to bend the rules of morality.

She didn't know if ends justify the means. But what she knew was that she was willing to go to any end for the ones she loved.

So, she was going to do it. She would seduce the devil.

“You need to react faster, Aditi. Block the blows to your stomach again.” Keshav was training her near the beach. It was evening and almost dark. Whenever Keshav was free, he sometimes trained her during the evenings too.

Aditi followed Keshav’s instructions and blocked the rapid blows aimed at her stomach.

“That’s much better. But what happened? You were doing well until this morning. You seem distracted now.”

Aditi tried hard not to turn and watch Anirudh Shaurya swimming in the ocean only a hundred feet away.

“Sorry,” she told Keshav. “I have a small cramp in my leg.”

Keshav nodded, seeming to buy her excuse. “All right. Just continue to practice more stretching. Your body will get used to the training soon.”

“Sure. Thanks, Keshav. See you tomorrow.”

After the training session, Aditi hurried inside the beach house with her heart thudding.

She freshened up before going into the kitchen where Lata was busy with the dinner preparations.

Lata smiled at her. “You barely touched your food this afternoon, Aditi. Would you like something special prepared for dinner?”

Aditi had been nervous that afternoon because she had made a decision to proceed with her plan that night.

She smiled back at Lata. “No. The food was good, Lata. I wasn’t that hungry. But now I am.”

The older woman smiled. “The food is ready. Where would you like me to serve it?”

“At the dining table inside.” Aditi hoped that Anirudh Shaurya would prefer to have an early dinner considering he had been swimming for nearly an hour in the ocean.

A couple of hours later, the household staff left early as soon as they were done clearing the dinner dishes. Keshav had left too, and the only people were the guards patrolling outside the beach house.

Before Aditi lost her nerve, she changed and wore her robe before going downstairs.

Her heart pounded in anticipation and fear.

I’m doing the right thing. It’s the only way.

She kept repeating those words inside her head while going down the stairs.

She stopped when she stood in front of the office door. There was only faint light coming from under the door, and she couldn’t hear anything.

She knew he was inside as awareness connected her to the man inside like a live wire.

Taking a deep breath, she held the doorknob and pushed the door open. She was once again thankful that there were no cameras inside the office room, or the security staff would have gotten an eyeful of what was going to happen inside.

Anirudh Shaurya was seated on a leather couch looking at some documents. He raised his head when he felt her presence. And when he saw her, his eyes slowly swept over her.

Goosebumps erupted over her skin, and her breasts peaked in arousal. Her entire body heated up instantly at his dark, merciless yet undeniably masculine stare.

How can I fear him and yet want him?

She knew he was dangerous, but it still didn't stop the fierce attraction she felt towards him. Until him, she had never imagined she could want and fear someone at the same time.

“Yes?” he asked in a cold and indifferent tone.

“I've decided—” Her voice caught in her throat unable to say the words. But she knew if she backed away right then, she would never be able to do it again. So, she cleared her throat. “I've decided that I want to consummate our marriage.”

His eyes flashed darkly, but he eased back on the large leather couch. “Really?”

“Y-yes. I'm willing.”

She was willing, and yet her stomach fluttered like crazy, and warning bells rang inside her head to run out of the room to save herself from the havoc he most likely would unleash on her.

He watched her silently, twirling the pen between his fingers in a casual manner. Everything about his body screamed casual, but his eyes were watchful.

“Come here.”

Her heart began to thump at his command, and she slowly went towards him. She stopped when she was a few feet in front of him.

“Repeat what you just said,” he ordered softly.

She sucked in a breath. “I said I’m willing, and I want to... consummate our marriage.”

“Consummate?” His tone was slightly mocking, and she was quite aware he knew what the word meant. “Make it very clear what you are trying to say.”

She hated him for making her spell it out. But she had no choice. “I’m ready to have... sex with you.”

He watched her for a few moments, his eyes taking in the way she was unconsciously and nervously crumpling her robe.

“Show me what’s under your robe.”

Her heart almost stopped beating at the order. She had not expected it. What she had expected was for him to pull her towards him and take over as soon as she had made her intent obvious.

“When I consummate our marriage, you’ll be more than willing. And by then you’ll also discover that you enjoy torture too.”

She recalled his words, which had sounded more like threats on the first week of their marriage.

Was he going to torture her by making her beg and then reject her?

She was definitely not going to enjoy that. Then why was he prolonging the torture?

Biting her lip to stop it from trembling, she untied her robe. She wasn't bold enough to completely shed it, so she parted it, revealing a pair of matching lacy white bra and panties.

A flicker of satisfaction passed through her when she saw the stark hunger on his face. But soon all thoughts disappeared, and she shivered with nervousness when he got up and stalked towards her.

He stopped right in front of her. He towered over her by at least half a foot since she wasn't wearing heels or any footwear.

Slowly, he smiled. It was a dark, predatory smile, completely opposite of the cold, indifferent looks he had given her over the week.

She gasped loudly when he suddenly held her hips and carried her to the large office desk at the centre of the room. Placing her on the top of the desk, he stood between her legs. He cupped her neck and raised her head until she had no choice but to look at him.

“Tell me something, *dear wife*. You told me you hate me, and that you'd have to be practically drugged to be willing to fuck me. And now, you suddenly want to consummate our marriage? What brought along this sudden change of heart?”

She couldn't think clearly. He filled her senses completely with his close proximity, and she even found his dark voice hypnotic. A part of her knew she had to tread carefully, and that she couldn't afford to say the wrong things. So, she decided to stick to the truth.

"I want you," she said. "And I'm tired of fighting this attraction between us. I-I know you want me too."

She saw his mask of control slip at the truth of her words. The grip on her neck tightened.

"Do you really want this?" he growled.

"Yes," she whispered.

As soon as that word escaped her mouth, he buried his face into her neck and let out a deep, satisfied groan. She felt his groan all the way to her throbbing core.

Her thinly-clad breasts brushed against his hard chest, and she felt sparks sizzle from every little contact. She shivered when his nose ran up and down her neck, and he took a large inhale.

"Your smell drives me crazy," he growled. "It's so damn addicting. I barely stopped myself these last few weeks from stripping you and rubbing my nose all over you."

Her breath caught in her throat at the raw hunger in his voice. She gasped and yelped when his teeth bit into her skin lightly as though he wanted a taste of her. Tugging her hair back and exposing her throat, he slowly kissed and bit his way over the length of her neck.

His large hands cupped her breasts and stroked the stiff peaks, making her throw her head back and moan.

Her hands clenched as lightning bolts zipped through her. She had placed her hands on the office desk at her sides, but her hands flew to his shoulders, and she gasped when he suddenly held her hips and dragged her to the corner of the desk.

The only thing keeping her from slipping off the desk was his hard body pressed close in between her legs. She could feel his arousal—long, hard and demanding against her throbbing core. Her breaths came out in gasps as he ground his arousal against her.

Would he rip her panties off again like he did in the club, before pulling down the zipper of his pants to take her on his office desk?

A bolt of fear ran through her even as the raw visual called to an unknown deep animal instinct inside her. She wanted to be claimed. She wanted to give in to the hunger and the hunt he had put her through right from the beginning.

He let out a growl of satisfaction when he felt the wetness seeping through her panties from her core. Her face heated even as her heart pounded hard in anticipation. Her core throbbed with emptiness, wanting him and craving him.

She bit her lip to stop herself from begging him for more.

A gasp escaped her when she felt his finger brushing her core. She shuddered when he slid it inside an inch while pressing down on her sensitive bud using another finger. Her hips shot up and pleasure exploded in her core and travelled through all the nerve ends in her body.

Slowly, he withdrew his fingers and put them into his mouth deliberately tasting her and making her body shudder even more.

With a dark, feral look, he swept her into his arms before carrying her out of the office room.

Her breaths came out in pants, and she put her head against his chest. Climbing the stairs effortlessly, he strode into the bedroom before kicking the door shut.

He lowered her on the bed before straightening and beginning to unbutton his shirt.

Her body heated to a fever pitch while watching him in helpless fascination. His shirt was hanging open, displaying his powerful muscles. Her heart thudded in both fear and anticipation when he kept his eyes locked with hers and removed his belt buckle.

Soon, his shirt and pants were gone, and he slowly stalked towards her—completely naked. Everything about him was scary and beautiful at the same time, including his hard arousal.

She stifled a gasp when he climbed over her. One of his hands went behind her back. With a smooth, practiced move, he unclasped her bra before pulling it away from her body and throwing it to the floor. His hand tugged her panties next, tearing the delicate fabric before dragging it away and tossing it on the floor.

Soon, she was completely naked like him.

She felt self-conscious when he looked at her bare body.

“This is your last chance to stop me if you don’t want me to take you,” his dark voice rasped.

Her heartbeat pounded hard, and every inch of her body burned with heat. She slowly raised her hand and brushed her palm across his cheek, which made his body tense on top of hers.

“I want you,” she said in a soft yet firm voice.

He watched her for a few more tense moments before exhaling a harsh breath.

She held his shoulders when he pushed her legs wide apart until his hard arousal nudged at her opening. It felt huge. She sucked in a breath and bit her lip, trying not to cry out when he slid in deeply.

It hurt. Even though she was aroused, it hurt. She took deep breaths until she could relax and get used to the foreign invasion inside her body.

He was completely still and was watching her with a harsh frown and clenched jaw. She felt the tension vibrating in his body as though it took a tremendous effort for him to remain still.

He kissed her again, a deep, possessive kiss that had electricity coursing through her. She gasped into his mouth when he began to move slowly.

The pain which had dulled when he was still, came back with each thrust. But along with the pain, she could feel the pleasure.

He raised his head and watched her with intense concentration as his thrusts increased steadily.

The pain continued to war with the pleasure, but the strange connection she had felt when she saw him the first time began to grip her again. And this time it was stronger.

The connection grew so much that she felt a sudden spike of fear.

She had never craved another human as much as she did with the man above her. Making love and sharing bodies was supposed to be a commitment of love. But now, when she craved the devil and submitted to his possession, it felt like betrayal.

No. This isn't betrayal. This is just sex. It's just my body I'm letting him have. It doesn't mean anything.

But it did. Her heart and mind were getting involved even as she surrendered her body.

She tried to block out the feeling of utter rightness and instead tried to focus on the pain.

But the strong thrusts pushed her steadily over the edge with waves of pleasure.

Bracing her hands stiffly on his shoulders, she tried to block out the pleasure coursing through her while the devil invaded her body, mind and heart.

Remember, he's a monster. The devil. He destroys lives. He even forced you into this marriage. You are doing this because you have to.

“Stop fighting me,” his dark voice rasped out a command.

She wasn't pushing him away or fighting him in any physical sense. Then how did he know she was fighting him

inside her mind?

She gritted her teeth and tried to keep still, so she wouldn't feel the pleasure that was confusing her mind into thinking they had a true connection.

But it was of no use. Her body refused to obey her wishes. Her hips began to move, and met with his hard thrusts to feel him deeper and deeper within her to become one in every sense.

His movements turned fiercer, almost like he wanted to break through whatever barriers she was trying to put up between them. She cried out and clung to him, digging her nails into his arms and wrapping her legs around his hips.

Pleasure began to build. It coursed through her body, heart and soul until it burst apart in a violent explosion. She cried out, shuddering and pressing her face against his slick shoulder, biting his skin to muffle out her cries.

He gripped her hard, and his body stiffened before he let out a harsh groan and burst inside her with his own release. His body trembled and shook violently on top of hers making her tremors spike once again.

Their shudders seemed to go on forever.

Much later, when the tremors finally subsided, she was filled not only with shame and embarrassment but also fear.

It was no longer pretence. Along with craving the devil's touch and presence, she also felt a connection to him.

She felt shaken by the realization.

I have to get away from him.

As though sensing the storm in her mind, the devil raised his head from the crook of her shoulder and stared at her. She lowered her lashes, not wanting to meet his eyes.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked, pushing her slightly damp hair away from her forehead in an unexpected tender gesture.

That gesture scared her even more.

She desperately wanted to run away. To end the game which might cost her more than she had bargained for. It wasn't just her body at stake. Her heart and soul felt threatened.

Even though her eyes were lowered, she was aware of him watching her, waiting for her response.

“N-no, you didn't hurt me,” she replied. She pushed at his shoulders, wanting him to get off her so she could clear her mind and reason with herself.

He didn't budge. “It's hard to believe I didn't hurt you when you are so eager to get away.”

“I'm not eager to get away. I... I... enjoyed it.” Her world literally blew apart, and she was breaking into pieces, but she couldn't let that be known to him.

“Enjoyed?” He said it as though it was the most disgusting word. “If you merely *enjoyed* it, then I guess I didn't do my job right.”

Her eyes flew to his. She didn't know whether he was mocking her or not because his face remained passive as always.

“No, I—” she broke off with a gasp when he suddenly lowered his head and drew her nipple into his mouth.

Her body that she thought was exhausted and sore and could no longer feel anything more, roared to life again. She groaned helplessly, unable to stop him while also not wanting him to stop.

“When you remember our first night together...” he began to murmur. “...you’ll remember it as more than just being *enjoyable*. You’ll remember it as the night I made you mine.”

She felt his deep murmurs all the way to her womb. The last part of his statement sounded like a dark promise.

She wasn’t prepared for what she had unleashed by deciding to sleep with the devil.

It was a complete possession.

And by the time she finally slept at dawn, she knew she would never forget the night the devil possessed his bride.

CHAPTER 20

“Have the car readied,” Anirudh instructed Keshav. “I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

Drying his hair, he threw the damp towel aside and began to get dressed.

He was almost done dressing, and was putting on his tie when he walked out of the walk-in closet and stopped. His eyes fell on the sleeping form of his wife, who had more or less passed out in exhaustion on their bed. He should have been exhausted too by their marathon sex, but all he felt was invigorated.

He stared at his wife.

Her long hair was a tangled mess around her face and body, her hands were clenched, and there was a small frown on her face. She looked rebellious even in her sleep.

He knew she hadn’t come to him last night because of a sudden change of heart about their marriage. He knew she had ulterior motives apart from just desire. He should have turned her attempt of seduction down as it was the right thing to do.

But he didn’t want to do the right thing, even though he knew what would happen, the consequences of his actions—on her as well as on him.

Despite that knowledge, and despite knowing he would burn in hell for his decision, and despite knowing there would

be no going back after, he still went ahead and took her and made her his in every possible way.

But was she truly his?

Ever since he married her, he had been fighting a two-front war. The first one was the long, ongoing war with the grim, harsh world to remain constantly on top. To not be killed by his enemies and instead take them down before they could get to him.

The second war was equally tough, if not more. A more intimate war. It was a war with the beautiful, rebellious woman he had forced into marriage.

Shiv and Vijay had warned him from the beginning about his fixation on her. They called it an obsession at best and dangerous at worst.

It wasn't love for sure. Love was a softer, selfless emotion. He had witnessed love between his parents. And what he felt towards his rebellious wife was definitely a dangerous obsession.

He knew he shouldn't and couldn't afford to obsess about any woman, let alone obsess about the woman who loathed him because of his name and their families' intertwined history. But his obsession went beyond logic. The kind that might make him lose control and get himself killed.

"Will you kill me?" he asked, running a finger along her bare arm.

Even in her sleep, her body responded to him. Her skin broke out into goosebumps, and her swollen, reddened lips

parted in a soft sigh as she shifted, revealing the tempting peaks of her aroused breasts.

With a harsh groan, he forced himself to step away, even though his body screamed at him to join his wife in bed to make her his again. Fighting for control, he finished securing his tie and then checked whether he had his gun in the concealed holster. He needed every bit of his concentration on the upcoming meeting which was as dangerous as it was important. With half a billion of losses, people were out for blood. A small slip-up and he would end up dead.

A grim smile passed on his face as he looked at the rumpled bed. The woman he married would most likely prefer his death, rather than him returning to her bed and demanding she give in to their base animal desires.

Unfortunately for her, he was determined not to die any time soon.

CHAPTER 21

Aditi woke up with a soft groan. There was only dim lighting in the room, but she knew it was way past morning because by the time she had finally gone to sleep, the sun was just about to rise.

Someone must have drawn the curtains closed as she could only see the thin ray of light from the window slits. She tried to turn so she could see the time on the nightstand, but the slightest movement of her body made her groan once again. She was sore from top to bottom.

And also deep within, a wicked voice inside whispered.

The memories of the night rushed through her mind, making her groan out loud for a different reason. All the deep murmurs and demanding commands of the devil resonated loudly in her head.

“Touch me.” “Hold on to me tighter.” “Stop fighting me. Let me in.” “Don’t hold back. There’s no one to hear your screams.”

She had listened to and followed all of his commands. She recalled how she had behaved like an animal in heat, grabbing and clawing at him, begging and screaming, seeking the thing that only he could give.

Oh God!

Ignoring the aches of her body, she sprang up from the bed and hurried towards the bathroom with a slight limp. She had to get rid of the touch and feel and even the smell of the previous night.

Stepping into the shower, she took a hot and then a cold-water shower, trying to wash away the night. Shivering slightly, she rubbed her body with a thick towel before wrapping a robe around her and stepping out of the bathroom.

The sight of the badly crumpled bedding and the bunched-up pillows strewn around the room made her face burn. Ignoring it, she sat in front of the dresser and tried to comb her hair. Her hair was a tangled mess, and the roots were slightly tender. Her face burned yet again recalling how she had moaned and enjoyed whenever her hair was tugged hard while he drove into her, making her his.

No. No. I'm not his. I slept with him because I had to.

But you didn't have to enjoy it.

I didn't enjoy it!

You are right. It wasn't merely enjoyment. You reveled in his possession.

She hated the voice that called her bullshit and told her exactly what had happened the previous night.

A knock on the door interrupted her internal conflict. Grateful, she opened the door.

It was Lata.

“We were instructed not to disturb you,” the older woman said with a cheerful tone. “But since it’s nearly noon, I wanted

to check if you would like your lunch served.”

She was famished. “Yes, please. I’ll come down for lunch. Is... Anirudh home?” she asked, praying he wasn’t. She was not in a position to face him right then. She didn’t know if she could face him ever.

“Oh. Anirudh went out early morning.”

Aditi was relieved.

Lata smiled. “All right, I’ll see you downstairs.” Before the older woman left, her eyes swept the room and smiled knowingly. “I’ll send someone to straighten the room,” she added.

Trying not to blush or grit her teeth, Aditi nodded. She hoped the entire household wouldn’t think that the devil and his bride had a wild night of passion.

CHAPTER 22

“Some of the critical shipments are continuing to be destroyed. Despite promising not to, Shaurya is still hell-bent on sabotaging me!”

Aditi watched her father seething helplessly.

“Mr. Somraj. Some of those shipments had illegal products. So that can’t be used as a case against Anirudh Shaurya. That would build a case against you.”

At Sameera Vasisht’s calm, matter-of-fact tone, Aditi’s father began to pace restlessly.

“They are not allowing me to visit my warehouses anymore. The company I built from scratch with hard work and sacrifice is now under the devil’s control.”

“Mr. Somraj, I hope you already understand that even if Anirudh Shaurya is arrested, you won’t be able to regain control of your company? You’ll have to take on a new identity for you and your daughter and start over.”

Aditi watched as her father’s face fell. “Yes, I know,” he said.

Aditi hated that for no mistake of his, her father was being hunted and punished, and the company he had worked so hard to build was being cruelly taken away from him.

“You know what I find quite interesting in this whole thing...” Sameera Vasisht looked thoughtful. “That your

daughter's marriage does not have a prenuptial agreement.”

Aditi was shocked. “What?”

The policewoman smiled. “I have copies of the contracts you had signed before your wedding. Apart from taking over your father's company, there's nothing to stop you from claiming Shaurya's assets in case of a divorce... or his death.”

That couldn't be right. And it was strange.

“It's not that odd,” her father cut in with a frown. “Anirudh Shaurya is arrogant enough to think he is invincible, and that no one would dare cross him, let alone his wife.”

Her father was right. The devil was arrogant to think she wouldn't dare cross him.

“What you are saying might be true, Mr. Somraj. So for now, let's just focus on what Aditi has to do the coming weeks.” Sameera Vasisht put up a calendar. A click of a button displayed events on each day.

“These are the high-profile social engagements that are coming up in the next few weeks. My team and I have decided to focus on the ones we feel Anirudh Shaurya will attend.”

“How are you so sure he was invited to all of these?” Aditi asked.

The older woman smiled. “I don't think any businessman, politician or bureaucrat worth his salt would choose to ignore the Shauryas when they host a high-profile gathering.”

Maybe it was true. But it didn't mean that the devil would take his wife along to those social gatherings. Before he left, he hadn't even bothered to let her know he was leaving or

when he'd be back. Only Keshav had let her know that Anirudh Shaurya had to travel on some important business work.

“All right. Tell me what I need to do to help.”

The next hour was spent looking at faces, getting some high-level information about them, what she had to particularly look out for and who she should try to socialize with.

After the meeting at her father's place, Aditi headed back to the beach house.

She had been simmering all week.

An irrational part of her felt hurt by the devil's indifference, especially after they had spent a night together.

Did that mean their night didn't affect him in any way?

She was angry at herself for caring. The night they spent together meant way more than it should have.

It was supposed to be just meaningless sex for him to let down his guard in front of her. But instead, her guard was badly dented. She even began to miss him and crave him. Her body felt empty lying on the bed alone without him next to her.

She sucked in a deep breath. She couldn't afford to sleep with the devil again. When he returns, she was going to tell him that.

She only hoped he would understand and not go back to his cold, angry demeanor again.

Meanwhile, she needed to think of another way to remain close to the devil.

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A badly tortured and injured man was hanging from a chain by his hands. “Screw you all!” he said, spitting out blood.

Anirudh was seated in a warehouse with Shiv and Vijay. He was tired and irritable. He had expected to be finished with the operation of capturing the shackled businessman and drawing out critical information within a couple of days.

But it took much longer. The bastard was wily and hard-headed, and it took nearly a week for Shiv, Vijay and him along with a whole army of men to track the man who somehow received the information of being hunted by the devils and tried to hide. And when they finally captured him, he refused to give them information despite being tortured for the last two hours.

Shiv shook his head. “You know for a dead man, he sure is committed to protecting his secrets.”

The injured man struggled, trying to break free of the chains, but all that the struggle did was make his wrists bleed even more.

“The three of you think you are invincible, but you are not. It’s a matter of time before you devils are taken down.”

“And who is going to do it? You?” Shiv laughed mockingly. “Are you going to hire three *Angels* to take us *devils* down?”

The injured man sucked in an angry breath at the taunts. “You think people won’t miss me? I rule the goddamn city. The police and my men must be sweeping the entire city looking for me. And they know my biggest rivals are you three.”

Anirudh cut off the man’s ranting. “Used to. You *used* to rule the city. But after your unfortunate death, your people will learn to move on.” He let out a dark laugh. “If you want to die a clean death, tell us where your shipment is headed.”

“No, I won’t tell!” The injured man slowly smiled showing his bloodied teeth. “And Shaurya... I already ordered my people to hunt down your wife. While you were hunting me, ten of my men are having their way with her. They told me the bitch screams quite loudly, and she seems to be enjoying it. They are capturing everything in a video for you to see when you get back.”

Anirudh got up and walked to the man. “You know, I stopped torturing people by myself a while ago. I let my men do it these days because I don’t like getting blood on my expensive suits. But I think I’ll make an exception. And no, you can’t trash talk your way into a clean death.”

An hour later, and a missing foot on the tortured man, they got the information they wanted.

While the body of the man was removed and the place was getting sanitized, Anirudh made a phone call asking his men to track a ship.

“When you find the ship, turn it back. Don’t let anything happen to the ship or the shipment inside. And make sure there is enough food and other supplies for the return journey.”

As soon as he finished giving the instructions, he joined his friends.

Vijay rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Do you miss the days when cries for mercy or the sight of blood would have moved us?” he asked.

Shiv, who had helped Anirudh with the torture, was rubbing his hands on a clean cloth which was now a bloodied rag. “What’s up with you suddenly?”

Vijay shook his head. “I don’t know. I guess I’m feeling strangely nostalgic tonight. After all it’s been ten years.”

Shiv laughed. “Well, if you are thinking of jumping the line after ten years of planning, that’s not possible. Remember our deal. It’s Anirudh who has to go first.” Shiv’s smile turned into a smirk as he looked at Anirudh. “Or maybe not. Looks like Anirudh wouldn’t mind prolonging our plan to a few more years or letting you or me jump ahead in the line.”

Anirudh didn’t react to Shiv’s teasing. He knew his friend was fishing for information.

Between the three of them, they had never held any secrets, even about their private lives. But so far, he hadn’t spoken anything to them about his marriage or his wife.

“The plan is still on track,” he said. “I’m not making any changes to it.”

“Are you sure?” Vijay pressed.

“Yes.”

Even though Anirudh told his friends he would be sticking to their plan, a part of him wondered if he could really do it.

Because following the plan would mean that in two or three months, Aditi Somraj will no longer be in his world.

CHAPTER 23

“Are you sure you’ll be okay? I can stay with you during the nights.”

Aditi smiled at the housekeeper. “I’m fine, Lata. You know the place is guarded, and I’ve been alone at home for the past ten nights already.”

Lata nodded reluctantly. “All right. Let me at least stay until you are done with dinner.”

“I’ll just grab a sandwich now. I’m super hungry. Keshav made me train for two hours straight.”

Lata laughed. “Fine. Your sandwich is ready. Let me bring it.”

Aditi sat outside. Her training workouts were getting longer and more intense by the day. They made her hungry, and Keshav wanted her to eat a lot of small meals that were high in protein.

“Here.” Lata placed an oversized sandwich in front of her.

Aditi laughed. “I don’t think Keshav meant something this big when he said sandwich for dinner tonight.”

“You should eat. You are already too skinny, and Keshav is making you control your diet. I don’t think Anirudh will be happy about it.”

Aditi smiled, not arguing. Lata reminded her of Suki. She had been meeting Suki each week when she went to her

father's house. The old woman was spry as before and regaled her with old memories of her mother.

She felt a twinge. She wondered if she could get Suki to live at the beach house with her. Being with Suki made her feel close to her mother. And despite having people in the beach house, she felt lonely.

Especially during the nights.

Shaking her head, she brushed off the thought immediately. She felt a spike of anger at herself for feeling that way about a man who didn't deserve anything from her.

"Would you like anything else? Juice or fruit?" Lata cleared up the dinner plate.

"No. I'm fine, Lata. Remember, no fruits after six in the evening."

The older woman frowned and grumbled, most likely at Keshav.

Aditi laughed. "All right. I'll see you tomorrow, Lata."

Waving at the older woman, Aditi headed upstairs.

She was tired. All she wanted to do was take a long, hot shower and crash on the bed.

Shedding her clothes, she stepped into bathroom. She turned on the shower and adjusted it to a warm setting before stepping under the water.

She let out a groan of relief.

She still felt weird about the self-defence training. Why did Anirudh Shaurya marry her? One of the main reasons was to

take revenge on her father whom he held responsible for the deaths of his parents.

Then why wasn't she tortured or harmed in any way?

At first, she had thought he was drawing it out, so he could strike when she was least expecting it. But now, doubts began to creep into her mind.

What was his agenda? And why did he blow hot and cold, confusing her?

He was truly the devil and was way too unpredictable. Thank God she had decided not to continue with her foolhardy plan of seducing him into lowering his defences towards her.

She let out a sigh and was about to turn off the water when she suddenly felt the cold air on her body, followed by hot, wet skin at her back.

She let out a shriek and was about to hit her attacker using her elbow before she went for his eyes. But strong arms held her arms at her sides and spun her around quickly.

She was facing the devil, and he was completely naked.

Her heart pounded and spikes of adrenaline rushed through her bloodstream. It took a few moments to realize there was no immediate danger, but her adrenaline was still high, and it changed into anger.

"I was about to hit you before gauging your eyes out," she bit out at the naked man.

He was also a naked man who was completely aroused.

She was angry that Anirudh Shaurya thought he could simply take off without a word and come to her as though the

past ten days hadn't happened.

"Were you?" he asked while his eyes slowly swept over her wet and equally naked body.

Her body broke into goosebumps, and her breasts peaked. Dark, sensual images of their night together played in her mind like a torrid movie, but she pushed that aside and focused on her anger.

"Yes," she challenged. "Weren't you the one who asked me to be prepared for the worst in case your enemies attacked me?"

He looked at her angry face and smiled darkly. "You were good, but not good enough. Your reflexes need to be faster. I'll train you tomorrow."

She was about to protest, but her voice was stuck in her throat when he took a step closer. Her heart pounded even harder and her body hummed at the proximity. They were standing so close that the tip of her breasts brushed against his chest.

He was watching her face as though daring her to object or say something.

But she couldn't speak. Her voice continued to be stuck in her throat. She let out gasp as he pushed her against the bathroom wall and covered her body with his before burying his nose between her neck and shoulder.

Her breaths came out faster. His mouth sucked on her neck as though he wanted to taste her before devouring her. She bit her lip to stifle a loud moan that threatened to escape her. She

also held her trembling hands at her side to stop them from touching him.

Despite the raw need that coursed through her body, she didn't want him to know she missed and craved him.

He didn't seem to care that she wasn't actively seeking him out like the last time. He held her hips and lifted her effortlessly. Her hands flew to his shoulders. A reluctant thrill passed through her, and her eyes fell shut when she felt the head of his arousal at the entrance of her core.

Without a pause, he slid deep into her.

Nearly ten days had passed, and even though her soreness had vanished, her body was still not used to him. The tight fullness remained even though she was wet and completely aroused.

But unlike last time, he didn't hold still. Instead, he was persistent and demanding. He kept thrusting in shallow strokes until her body accepted him.

She dug her nails into his back as he joined their bodies together. Even though pleasure coursed through her body, she didn't relax. She felt wound up tight as if very little would shatter her. And she didn't want to shatter. She was determined to fight off the pleasure that would confuse her mind.

"Look at me," he commanded.

Reluctantly, she opened her eyes. His face was unreadable. He suddenly leaned closer to capture her lips in a hard kiss. Even though the kiss was possessive and demanding, the intimacy of it made her body soften.

Sensing her surrender, he raised his head and watched her. And then, his movements changed. He raised her hips higher and drove into her faster and deeper. She gasped and clung to him. The barriers she erected against him shattered, and she tried to call out his name, but she couldn't speak.

Harsh and helpless sounds of pleasure escaped her throat. She was no longer in control, and she couldn't fight off the pleasure.

The tension and the pleasure coiled tighter and tighter until there was a burst of explosion. She cried out loud and bit hard into his shoulder. She felt his fingers tighten on her hips before his body stiffened, and he exploded inside her with a harsh groan.

She didn't know how long the world spiraled madly around her. But when it stopped spinning, she noticed that their breaths sounded heavy inside the shower which was still running. Slowly, he let her down on her shaky legs.

Then he tugged her under the water along with him. Her face flamed in embarrassment when he began to wash away the result of their encounter from between her legs.

"I-I can do it," she said, taking a step away from him. She was glad the shower was huge with enough room for both of them.

She didn't wait to see his reaction. She squeezed the shower gel into her palm and took a quick second shower. He was still washing off the soap from his body when she took the opportunity to escape. Wrapping her body in a thick, fluffy towel, she ran out of the bathroom.

Not bothering to wait for her hair to dry, she wore the thickest and longest cotton nightwear she had and slid into the bed. She even shut off the lights and closed her eyes, pretending to be asleep.

It was childish of her, she knew. But her head was too messed up, and she felt consumed by the devil, who not only possessed her body, but was also getting into her head once again. She wanted some time to recoup and begin erecting her defences against him.

Barely a few minutes later, the door to the bathroom opened. Her heart thudded as she listened keenly. She knew he would go to the walk-in closet and put on his sleep shorts and slide in next to her. She only hoped he wouldn't want to hold her while falling asleep. She didn't think she could handle that kind of intimacy.

She almost jumped out of her skin when the bed dipped. He had come directly from the shower to bed. She opened her eyes to see her stark-naked husband reaching for her. She opened her mouth to protest and lie that she was tired or had a headache, but the look in his eyes had her heart thumping.

When his mouth captured hers, she moaned, and her arms went around him. And less than a minute later, her nightwear was gone.

Her wish of him not holding her through the night while she fell asleep came true. Because it was almost dawn before the devil left their bed and allowed her to fall into an exhausted sleep alone.

CHAPTER 24

“This is wonderful information, Aditi.” There was a gleam of excitement in Sameera Vasisht’s eyes.

Aditi had just repeated what she had heard the previous evening.

“I couldn’t understand most of the things,” Aditi added. “So, I just took down notes and texted you last week.”

“Yes. My team is decoding most of them. This is truly helpful, especially the pictures you sent.”

During one of the house cleaning sessions, Aditi had found some documents and papers lying on the office desk. It was quite risky, but she had somehow sneaked out her secret phone and took pictures of those documents and sent them to Sameera Vasisht.

“Don’t you think Shaurya will begin to suspect my daughter if his shipments are intercepted by the police?” Aditi’s father looked worried.

“As you mentioned before, Mr. Somraj, Anirudh Shaurya thinks he’s invincible. And like most men, especially the ones who are drunk with power, he most likely considers his wife non-threatening and would never suspect her. Aditi is able to manage getting us information using whatever resources she has. She should continue doing it unless she feels there’s a threat.”

Aditi controlled the burn in her cheeks and tried not to show anything on her face.

She wasn't ashamed of what she was doing to make the devil let his guard down around her and not consider her threat. But at the same time, she didn't want her father to know she was sleeping with his enemy.

"Can I look at the Home Minister's mansion's blueprint once again?" she asked, trying to divert the topic.

"Sure." Sameera Vasisht put up the image on the screen and went over what had to be done and what Aditi specifically needed to look out for. "And make sure you are the one handing over the gift to the Bhasins," the policewoman reminded.

Aditi nodded. "I will. And I will keep you posted either tonight or tomorrow." She picked up the medium-size figurine which was gift wrapped and kept ready for her.

Going to her father, she kissed his cheek. "I'll see you next week, Papa."

He nodded, even though there was worry written on his face.

Letting out a sigh, she stepped out of her father's office room to head home. But before she left, she visited Suki.

Suki hadn't been feeling well. A twinge of fear and sorrow pierced Aditi's heart at the thought of losing the lively old woman who had been a part of her mother's and her life since their births.

Passing through the side yard, Aditi went towards the staff quarters. Suki's home was the brightly colored house which

was kept separate from everyone else's.

Aditi knocked on the door.

"Come in, Adi," a frail voice called out.

Opening the slightly rickety door and making a mental note to send someone to repair it, Aditi stepped in. "How do you always know it's me?" she asked with a smile.

The old woman was seated on the bed knitting something colorful. The wrinkled hands were shaking, but still there was determination in her bright eyes.

"I recognize people by their auras. You and your mother have similar auras."

Aditi laughed and sat next to her on the narrow cot. "How are you feeling now, Suki?" she asked. The previous week Suki was down with a bad cold.

"I'm fine. Just a touch of a cold and people think I'm already half in the grave."

"You are close to eighty years, Suki. You need to take it easy and rest." She gently held Suki's frail hand. "I already told you that you don't have to work inside the house anymore. Papa deposited money into your account, and you will receive a pension each month."

Suki shook her head. "I'm not going to rest until I fulfill your mother's promise to take care of you and see to that you have a happy life."

"I am happy," she lied.

"No, you are not. But you will be soon." Suki reached for her colorful cards and shells. She threw the shells on a small

table until some settled up and some down. She drew a card and watched it in fascination.

“You let the devil possess your body. He’s not going to stop there. He’s going to demand and steal your heart and soul too.”

Aditi’s heart jerked in surprise, but she shook her head with a laugh pushing away the ominous words. “Suki! Stop saying such things to scare me.”

Suki gave her a sweet smile, displaying her several missing teeth. “There’s nothing to be scared of, my love. Let destiny take its course. Your happily-ever-after is not going to be a smooth sail, but unlike your mother, your heart will belong to the right man.”

“Well, I hope so, Suki,” she said and diverted the topic.

Aditi stared at the passing scenery as the SUV took her back to the beach house.

She closed her eyes briefly and opened them again with a loud exhale.

“Your heart will belong to the right man.”

Although she had managed to divert Suki from the topic, Suki’s words continued to resonate in her head.

Will her heart ever belong to the right man?

Nearly two-and-a-half months passed since Anirudh Shaurya had forced her to marry him. But so far, she had no clue about her future. She knew she would somehow secure her father’s future, no matter what. The information she was passing would ensure that her father would be in safe hands when things came to a showdown. But it was *her* future that appeared bleak.

She knew she couldn’t go back to Rahul. She also couldn’t imagine marrying someone after getting her freedom. Her mind was so consumed by the man she was married to that she knew he would haunt her until eternity.

She knew she should fight the devil harder.

But each night when she let him into her body, he not only possessed her will, he also stole a part of her soul. She came apart in his arms while his dark eyes held her captive. She told herself she clung to him as a part of the act, but when he drew

away from her arms and left their bed, the empty, hollow feeling persisted for a long time after. She had to repeatedly remind herself that he was evil and had no soul or humanity, and all that mattered to him was power.

“He’s going to demand and steal your heart and soul too.”

Suki had predicted wrong. The devil had already made it very clear early on that he didn’t care for her heart or love. All he wanted was her to fear him and not betray him.

A sudden shiver passed through her at the thought of him finding out her betrayal.

“Tomorrow morning we’ll be going to the shooting range.”

Aditi blinked when she heard Keshav’s voice. She realized they had arrived at the beach house.

“Shooting range?” she asked.

“Yes. Anirudh wants you to learn how to shoot. Have you used a gun before?”

“No.” She didn’t want to either. But she knew she wouldn’t have a say in it. Anirudh Shaurya was very particular that her ongoing training didn’t stop, no matter what the reasons were.

And most of the reasons were him keeping her awake until late. But each morning, he pushed her out of their bed to train near the beach with Keshav while he swam in the ocean or ran along the beach.

She knew he watched her and got updates on her progress from Keshav. Sometimes, he even took over the training. And when he did, it was terrifying.

Unlike Keshav, who was a professional, Anirudh Shaurya attacked her like a true assailant. He pushed her limits so much that sometimes she froze. But he continued to do it many times and in such unexpected ways that she could now keep a cool head, despite the terrifying fear and circumstances.

“All right. See you later, Keshav.” She got out of the car and headed into the house.

There was an important social event that night. She had been accompanying Anirudh Shaurya quite a lot lately. Most of them were social gatherings thrown by some high-profile person either in their homes, resorts or even clubs.

Sameera Vasisht and her team gave her a heads up most of the time, but sometimes she ended up in places she didn't expect. But no matter which event she attended, she played the role of a meek, subservient wife while she observed and gathered every piece of information she could. She continued to do it mostly through recording devices.

“Would you like something to eat or drink?” Lata asked.

Aditi was about to climb the stairs. “No, I'm fine.” She smiled at the older woman. “How was your trip?”

“My grandchild is due in six months.”

“That's great. Hope your daughter is feeling better now.”

“Yes. Now that the first three months are over, she's recovering from the morning sickness.” The older woman's eyes lowered and fell on Aditi's stomach.

Aditi's stomach clenched involuntarily at the speculative smile.

“Will you be out for dinner tonight?” Lata asked.

“Yes. Do let the staff know they can leave early this evening.”

“Sure. Have a great time.”

As soon as the older woman left, Aditi continued up the stairs while reminding herself of the appointment she had the coming week to get the refill of her birth control pills.

She couldn't afford to miss taking the pill. Each morning after breakfast, she put an alarm on her phone to remind herself to take one.

Anirudh Shaurya saw her taking them too. It wasn't as though she was keeping it a secret from him. She kept them in the medicine cabinet inside the bathroom she shared with him. She knew he didn't care as long as he had complete access to her body and her father's shipping line.

With a tired sigh, she was about to open the bedroom door when she heard him talk on the phone. Slowly, without making much sound, she pushed the door open.

He was standing near the open French doors leading to the bedroom balcony and talking on the phone.

“No,” he commanded. “I don't want anything to happen to that shipment. Let it pass. Pay them whatever they are asking. We need them as our allies. And alert the coast guards stationed there well ahead of time in case there's a need to change shifts.”

She stepped in and shut the door softly behind her. It was breezy enough for him to miss the sound of the door.

And yet, as though sensing her presence, he turned and his eyes met with hers.

“All right, Rudra. Keep me posted on the updates. I don’t want anything going wrong with this one.”

His voice was sharp and precise while he ordered his men. But still, she had to struggle to keep her mind alert and listen to what he was speaking. Her mind was diverted by him. He looked devastatingly handsome in a suit.

Soon, he ended the call and put his phone into his pocket. “Done with your shopping?” he asked, his eyes sweeping over her lazily.

“Yes.”

His face was unreadable as always, but her heart began to thud as he came closer.

Stopping in front of her and keeping his gaze locked on her face, he reached for the small shopping bag she held in her hand. He pulled out the thick, comfortable cotton nightwear she had bought in her ten-minute shopping spree that morning.

“For someone who barely wears clothes during nights, you sure do have a lot of nightwear.”

A blush covered her face. He was the one who didn’t let her wear clothes at night. Even if she wore them, they were thrown away carelessly within minutes of him inside the bed.

“I wear them when you are away. You are gone most of the time.”

There was the barest hint of amusement. “Is that a complaint?”

“No. Just an observation.”

He did travel a lot. And she still had no clue when he would return because he never informed her. She only knew when he came back home.

“How is your father?” he asked.

Her heart gave a sick thud inside while she struggled to keep a neutral face. Although there was no change in his look, she knew he was observing her like a hawk.

She felt like a cornered prey. “My father is doing fine.”

Surprisingly, he never demanded an explanation of why she visited her father often. Even though she didn’t tell him of the visits, she was sure the bodyguards would have informed him.

And yet, she felt the need to cover up those visits under the pretext of shopping. Maybe it was because of fear or guilt of strategizing his downfall during those visits.

“You should invite your father here for dinner sometime.” He began to unbutton her top.

“W-why?” she asked. Her voice trembled and her skin broke into goosebumps as his fingers brushed over her heated skin.

“Why not?” he returned. “After all, he’s... my family now, isn’t he?”

She trembled once again. She wasn’t sure if it was because his mouth met with her bare shoulder or because of the way he said the word *‘family’* in reference to her father.

There was a dark undertone to it.

She knew her father absolutely hated and feared Anirudh Shaurya. But she didn't know how and what the devil felt for her father. She knew there was a personal grudge and enmity towards her father because of the past. But did it get satisfied by marrying the enemy's daughter and stealing the company?

Neither she nor her father had answers to those questions.

Despite the intimacy, Anirudh Shaurya was still a complete enigma to her. She couldn't predict what he would say or do next. She had to be constantly on her toes to keep up with him and his mind games.

He was a master manipulator. Over the weeks, she had seen and heard how he manipulated people around him. High-powered businessmen, politicians, bureaucrats or even criminals, it didn't matter. They always did his bidding, either due to greed, fear or respect.

Sometimes, she wondered to what extent she was being manipulated by the devil.

Her thoughts scattered, and she gasped when his mouth met her throat where her pulse thundered.

“W-we are going to be late,” she whispered, placing her hands on his chest to stop him from turning her mind into a complete puddle. She needed to be alert that night. “You are already dressed. And I still need to shower and get ready.”

The heated look in his eyes got her heart pumping faster. She knew her excuses weren't going to work. “Anirudh,” she gasped, trying to reason with him. “We are going to be late. I —” Before she could complete her sentence, his mouth crashed on top of hers.

She moaned and kissed him back. His dark hunger made her body instantly melt.

Her heart pounded as he got rid of her clothes in record time, until she was completely naked. He carried her to their bed and dropped her on it before attacking his clothes. The dark look in his eyes as he shed his clothes made her stomach tremble—both in need and in nervousness.

Did he suspect anything? She didn't know, and neither could she think rationally right then. But her fear dumped a ton of adrenaline in to her bloodstream, spiking up her arousal and thrumming her body with need.

He stalked towards her, naked and completely aroused. He stood next to the bed, waiting and watching her. She held his eyes, trying to keep her breathing steady, but anxiousness and intense arousal made her breaths come out faster.

He finally moved to lay on top of her, balancing his weight on one elbow. And then, without any preliminaries, he buried his face into the crook of her neck and pushed deep into her, joining their bodies completely.

She gasped as her body received him greedily. It was hard, fast and with a strange underlying emotion that she wasn't able to decipher. She kept her eyes open to stop from feeling the connection that became stronger with each joining. But like each time she tried, it failed. The man who possessed her body, continued to steal a piece of her heart and soul.

She cried out her release as it ripped through her and made her shatter in his arms. She heard his harsh grunt as he gave in to his own release and exploded inside her.

Barely a few moments later, before she could completely catch her breath, he brushed his lips against her forehead and pulled out of her and stood up. She struggled once again to come back to her senses.

He bent down and scooped her into his arms, and carried her to their bathroom. A flash of amusement passed on his face while her cheeks burned in embarrassment realizing they were going to shower together.

He invaded her shower or pulled her into one many times, but still she couldn't get used to the intimacy it offered. Unlike her, he was uninhibited when it came to intimacy or his body. He paraded around his perfectly chiseled body in naked form inside their bedroom while she always tried to hide her body while changing.

“We have to hurry,” she reminded breathlessly while he squeezed the shower gel on top of her breasts and slid his hands all over her sensitized skin. “We will be late,” she gasped when his hands lingered on certain places.

Thankfully, he listened and it turned out to be a quick shower.

“I didn't know you were so eager to attend the Home Minister's anniversary party,” he commented.

He was stark naked while he took out a fresh set of clothes to wear from his closet.

She tried not to blush when she got ready along with him, trying to keep her towel on while she slipped on her underclothes.

“The Home Minister’s wife and I became good acquaintances,” she replied.

She was stretching the truth. She had met the Home Minister’s wife a few times during social events, but had barely spoken to the woman. The only reason she had to attend the party that night was because she was given a task to do.

“Really? Bhasin’s second wife is known for her peculiar tastes and spending. I didn’t think you’d have much in common with her.”

The Home Minister’s young second wife was known to be a drug addict. She was also known to have indulged in sexual affairs in exchange for money. There were rumors that her husband got the minister post because of one such favor.

“She is... friendly.” The reason sounded lame even to her. Her heart thudded when he fell silent.

But before he could analyze or grill her further, thankfully his phone began to ring. Giving her a brief look, he went to answer it.

Meantime, she hurried to the walk-in closet and grabbed the clothes she had kept ready for the evening. It had a tiny recorder stitched near the seams.

“Ready?” he asked, watching her as she smoothed her dress.

She forced out a small smile. “Yes.”

She picked up the gift that she received from the CBI to plant it in the Home Minister’s house.

“Mrs. Shaurya, how radiant you look tonight. Must be the newlywed glow.”

Aditi ignored the Home Minister’s creepy statement and returned his creepy smile with a small, fake smile of her own. “Thank you and a happy anniversary to you both.”

They were standing outside the Home Minister’s mansion, and his much younger wife was busy ogling Anirudh Shaurya. The other woman didn’t even make an attempt to hide the blatant lust in her eyes.

Aditi felt a bolt of annoyance.

“Mr. Shaurya,” the Home Minister’s wife said in a breathy voice. “Thank you for coming, and thank you so much for such a thoughtful gift.” The woman more or less caressed the packaged figurine.

“You should thank my wife,” Anirudh Shaurya replied in a cool tone. “She was the one to pick the gift... since you both seemed to hit it off so well.”

Aditi felt a sudden rise in panic, but she continued to paste a smile on her face, badly hoping the other woman won’t contradict that statement in any way.

“You have a lovely home... Monica,” Aditi cut in, recalling the other woman’s name on time. “I hope you find a good place for the figurine.” Hopefully in the living room or in the office room where the surveillance would yield better results.

The Home Minister's wife looked at her curiously as though wondering how Aditi knew her name. "Of course... it's so beautiful. I'll probably put it in my bedroom so I can stare at it as soon as I wake up and just before I sleep." The last part was said staring at Anirudh Shaurya rather than at the figurine.

Aditi felt another bolt of annoyance.

The Home Minister smiled fawningly. "Mr. Shaurya. If you don't mind, can we have a follow-up discussion tonight of our last week's meeting? The rest of the members will join us too."

Anirudh Shaurya responded with a cool nod. And then, he led her to the outside gardens where the party was being held.

Like always, within minutes of arriving, he ignored her. He didn't include her in any of the conversations or refer to her beyond introducing her to new people.

Cold indifference radiated from the man who had made passionate and mind-numbing love to her only a couple of hours ago.

The first time he had behaved in a cold and indifferent manner with her, she had felt hurt and confused. But soon, she realized it was his weird and twisted way of protecting her.

"I have many enemies waiting to attack at any possible weakness. I don't want you becoming one."

When he had said those words, she had initially thought he was referring to *her* as his possible enemy wanting to target his weakness. But slowly, she realized he'd meant he didn't want her to become his *weakness* to the outside world.

To the outside world, he behaved as though she was merely a commodity, a trophy wife who was easily replaceable and held no emotional value to him.

But do I really matter to him in any way?

As soon as that thought came into her mind, she pushed it away. She couldn't afford to think of their marriage in an emotional way. If she thought emotionally, she wouldn't have the stomach to do what was right and betray the devil.

"Excuse me," she said, leaving his side.

He threw her a brief look before dismissing her and going back to conversing with a group of people.

Meanwhile, she stepped into the Home Minister's house, pretending to search for a bathroom.

She had to go to the office room. And since Sameera Vasisht had provided her with the blueprints of the place, it was easy to find.

She tried to look confused, so no one found it suspicious that she was going in the wrong direction. The cameras in the common living areas would capture her, and it would seem like she had lost her way.

When she finally found the place, she pushed open the door and went in. A small lamp was left on, providing her with enough lighting. Slowly, without making it too obvious, she

banged into the office desk and stuck the recording device under the heavy table.

Just as she was about to go towards the attached bathroom to not raise any suspicion, the door to the bathroom opened.

Her heart began to thud and she held her breath.

A young woman dressed in heavy, ethnic wear stepped out. Even in the dim lighting, Aditi could see the faint purple bruising on the woman's cheek.

The young woman looked at her with a frown.

Aditi smiled awkwardly. "Sorry. I was trying to look for an unoccupied bathroom. The ones at the front were full."

The younger woman shook her head. "That's all right. You can use this one. It's free now."

The woman let out a snuffle and rubbed her cheek angrily before grimacing when her hand touched the purple bruise.

"Are you all right?" Aditi asked. It was obvious that someone had hit the woman.

"Yes," the other woman gritted.

Aditi didn't want to butt into anyone's personal business, but it was obvious that the woman was abused.

"Your cheek is bruised and swollen," she said softly.

The other woman looked at her in surprise as though she expected her not to mention it and ignore it. "A token of affection from my father. I'm used to it now."

Aditi felt angry at the person who had abused his own daughter. She couldn't imagine her father hitting her or hurting

her in any way even if he was furious. “That’s terrible. I’m so sorry. Would you like me to help you in any way?”

The other woman let out a bitter scoff. “Unless you can make the Home Minister and his current wife disappear from the face of the earth, I don’t think you or anyone can help me. But thanks for the offer to help.”

Aditi felt helpless that she couldn’t do much to help the woman.

“Who are you?” the woman asked.

Aditi hesitated. She knew she couldn’t lie because if the video was ever caught and the Home Minister’s daughter was asked to identify her, the truth would come out.

“I’m Aditi... Shaurya.”

The woman’s eyes widened. “Oh my God. You are Anirudh Shaurya’s wife?”

Aditi nodded.

“But... but... you seem fine. You don’t look abused or nervous.”

Aditi frowned, not understanding. “What do you mean?”

The woman laughed bitterly. “Until Anirudh Shaurya married you, my father used to threaten me saying he would marry me to the devil as soon as I was done with my studies. And that the devil would beat me into submission, driving out my rebellion.”

Aditi was shocked.

“I’m glad he married you.” Then immediately there was a frown. “No. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way. Does he...

hurt you?”

It was a personal question, but Aditi answered it truthfully. “No. He hasn’t hurt me.”

Anirudh Shaurya had never hurt her or abused her in any way. She did have minor bruises on her body sometimes, but they were the result of rough yet passionate sex which she enthusiastically participated in.

Aditi fought a blush trying not to recall all the times she begged and reveled in his animalistic passion.

“Hmm... looks like you like the devil,” the other woman said with a small laugh.

Aditi fought another blush and tried to focus on the woman’s problem. “Why did your father hurt you?” she asked.

A flash of hatred passed on the other woman’s face. “He wants me to marry some man. Someone rich and powerful and most likely perverted, cruel and much older than me. Someone who will help my father become the next chief minister.”

Aditi frowned. She felt empathy towards the woman.

“Why don’t you run away? Escape to a place where he can’t find you?” Aditi knew she was risking a lot by making that suggestion. But she knew it was the right thing to do. “I can help you with money if you want.”

The other girl looked shocked, and her face softened. “You would help a stranger?”

“Yes. I know how it feels to be trapped. If you have a choice, get away.”

The other woman was about to say something, but the door to the study opened. A small group of men, including the Home Minister and Anirudh Shaurya entered.

“What’s happening here?” the Home Minister asked with a suspicious frown directed at his daughter.

Aditi’s heart began to pound trying to think of a reasonable explanation.

“I was talking to... Aditi, Papa,” the Home Minister’s daughter replied.

The older man frowned. “You met Mrs. Shaurya before?”

“No. Today was the first time. We were discussing the designer of my dress. Aditi apparently knows the designer.”

Aditi’s eyes flew to Anirudh Shaurya who was watching her with an unreadable look. He knew whatever the Home Minister’s daughter was saying was a lie.

“I see,” the Home Minister said with a small frown. “If you don’t mind. Please excuse us, Mrs. Shaurya. We have an important meeting here.”

“Of course. Not a problem at all.” Aditi walked out of the office room while the Home Minister’s daughter followed behind her.

“I’m Sunaina,” the other woman introduced herself.

“Hello, Sunaina.” Aditi shook her hand. She wondered if Sunaina Bhasin would help the police gather evidence against her father and stepmother.

But Aditi didn’t want to risk raising suspicion by asking that question herself. Instead, she decided to pass on the

information to Sameera Vasisht that Sunaina Bhasin might be of help.

“If you decide to do what I suggested, there is a person who can help you.”

“Who?”

“I’ll ask her to contact you.”

“Her? It’s a woman?”

Aditi nodded. “Yes.” She knew that Sunaina Bhasin might be more receptive to taking a woman’s help.

“Naina! My dear,” a sweet yet shrill voice called out loud. It was Monica Bhasin.

Sunaina threw a look of disgust at her stepmother.

Monica Bhasin pasted a fake concerned look. “Where have you been, Naina? I’ve been looking all over for you?”

“Why?” Sunaina Bhasin’s tone was blunt and hostile.

The fake smile flickered on Monica Bhasin’s face. “To introduce you to my friends, silly,” she said. “Come. Everyone is eager to meet you.” The woman threw a glance at Aditi. “Mrs. Shaurya. Come join us too.”

Aditi smiled. “I would love to.” She wanted to see who were the ‘friends’ and make a note of it and pass on the information.

A few mind-numbingly boring hours later, Aditi felt Anirudh Shaurya’s presence next to her.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Feeling grateful, she followed him out of the gardens. But before she left, she caught Sunaina Bhasin’s gaze and gave the younger woman a reassuring nod.

The ride back home was quiet.

But when they stepped into the privacy of their bedroom, the silence was broken.

“You seem to have struck quite a friendship with the Home Minister’s family.”

“Sunaina’s designer is the same person who designed one of my dresses.” She crossed her fingers behind her, hoping he wouldn’t ask the name or even whether the designer was a man or a woman.

Anirudh Shaurya was removing the cufflinks of his suit, but his eyes were on her, watching her closely. “Why were you at the Home Minister’s office room in the first place?” he asked.

“I had to use the washroom.”

“Guest washrooms were right at the back of the house, closer to the party. The office was at the front.”

“The bathrooms were occupied, so I went in search for one that wasn’t.”

He continued to watch her with an unreadable look that had her heart pounding.

Biting her lip, she unzipped the back of her dress and slowly slipped it off until it fell at her feet, leaving her standing topless and in lacy underwear and also a long pearl necklace.

His eyes flashed, and hunger filled them like she hoped.

He might be the most powerful and dangerous man in the country who controlled the lives and futures of millions of people. But at the end of the day, he was still a man. A man who wanted her.

He stalked towards her and his hands gripped her elbows before dragging her close and covering her mouth with his.

There was no more conversation for the entire night.

CHAPTER 25

The persistent alarm ringing at a distance woke up Aditi.

She groaned. She knew it must be six thirty in the morning, which meant it was time to train with Keshav.

Why did the devil insist on it so much? Why couldn't she take a break for a day or two in between to recover from her sore muscles?

And her muscles were quite sore, thanks to the said devil's insatiable appetite the previous night.

But even though her body was sore, a satisfied smile covered her face. For a change, she was able to manipulate the devil. She was able to successfully navigate away from the sticky situation of having to explain why she was at the Home Minister's office.

Maybe she was getting the hang of things. And maybe the devil and their marriage were not as hard or unpredictable as she thought they were. She had the upper hand the previous night without even the devil knowing about it.

The alarm continued to ring next to her. Groaning and stretching lightly, she turned to shut it off.

She then opened her eyes to look at the beautiful sunrise she saw each morning. But when she looked towards the bedroom balcony, she froze.

Her heart gave a sick thud, and she froze in terror at the sight. A masked man dressed in black was pointing a gun at her.

Sweat broke out on her skin, and she tried to cover her naked body, but she couldn't get her hands or legs to move due to the fear. She tried once again, but she couldn't scream as her throat locked in fear.

The masked man began to walk towards her, until he stopped right next to her. He lowered his weapon until the cold metal of the barrel sat right between her breasts.

When she continued to lay frozen, he inclined his head watching her from behind the mask.

“Are you going to keep lying there frozen? Or will you at least attempt to reach for the gun to save your life?”

As soon as she heard the deep voice, complete shock followed.

The black stretchable cloth was pulled away, revealing the devil's face. He watched her while she was hyperventilating in shock and fear.

“You are a sick bastard!” she gasped out, finally finding her stuck voice. The man she was married to was truly psychotic and crazy!

“Most of the armed assailants are sick bastards, too.” He smiled, but his smile was far from reassuring, and it made her heart thud faster in fear.

He was totally unpredictable.

“Do you know what an armed assailant could do when he finds such beautiful bounty waiting to be devoured?” he asked.

The gun was still pointed at her. But now, the cold tip of the barrel moved from in between her breasts. Her heart pounded as the barrel slowly circled her breasts, causing the tips to peak into hardened buds.

The devil’s smile grew slightly watching the sight of her arousal despite her paralyzing fear.

She was angry and terrified by his horrible stunt, but her body recognized him.

She pushed away the gun violently from her and sat up. “How could you scare me like this! I thought I was going to die!” she shouted her accusations.

Suddenly, his smile dropped, and he looked terrifyingly serious.

“No. You didn’t think you’d die,” he said in a dark tone. “If you thought you were dying, you would have fought for your life in every way you could. You just froze again.” He sounded angry and frustrated.

She was taken aback by his reaction. She remained silent because what he was saying was true.

“Go to the shooting range with Keshav today. Train there until you are sufficiently proficient. I’ll get you a gun you can carry with you all the time for self-defence.”

Her immediate response was to rebel.

She knew she shouldn’t oppose him. He had put such genuine fear into her that she did want to know how to shoot a

gun and protect herself in case she was attacked.

But her pride took a bruising. Barely a few minutes ago, she had been more or less gloating about how she was able to manipulate the devil the previous night. She thought he was turning predictable. But the damn man was still so unpredictable and held the upper hand in everything.

She drew her chin up. “Aren’t you worried that I’ll turn the gun onto *you* someday?”

His eyes flared before taking on a familiar hooded look as his gaze swept over her. Her cheeks and body heated when she realized she was still completely naked while he was dressed in his black assailant clothes.

“I’ll be looking forward to you pointing a gun at me,” he said in a deep rumbling voice that reverberated inside her stomach, making her quiver.

“I’m still angry with you,” she said when she saw him removing his all-black clothes.

“Then fight me,” he challenged with a dark smile that made her heart thud with anticipation. “Show me what you learned so far.”

She did put up a fight. She used all the tricks she had learned in her training. She even fought dirty using her nails and teeth.

But it took the devil exactly ten minutes to overpower her. It was still much better than what it would have taken him without her being trained. He would have overpowered her under less than a minute then.

“You cheated!” she gasped as he rubbed his hard, aroused body against her again.

“Everything is fair in love and war, my dear wife,” he said with a dark smile.

Soon she became the gun-wielding assailant’s willing victim.

“You need to relax, Aditi. Aim the gun slightly higher. Recall the important spots we already discussed during our combat sessions. Aim at any of the vital organs.”

Aditi was at a shooting range with Keshav. It was her third week of practice.

Standing with her feet apart, she held the gun with a good grip and aimed it at the dummy in front of her and shot the target four out of six times. She shot at the liver, stomach, heart and lungs.

Keshav looked at the target with a small, proud smile. “Not bad. Anirudh is going to be quite satisfied with your progress. Starting tomorrow, we’ll begin practicing with the target moving.”

Aditi nodded and handed the gun to Keshav before removing her eye and ear protective gear.

He put the safety latch back on the gun and placed it in a holster before tucking it neatly into a bag. All of his movements were precise, and he was quite disciplined during the training or any other task he was given.

Keshav was in his mid-forties. He was a handsome man, and she spent quite a lot of time with him the past four months. And yet, apart from friendly affection, she felt no spark of attraction towards him.

In fact, she realized that she wasn't attracted to any other man apart from the devil. And she had been introduced to quite many in the past four months, some of whom even included movie stars.

The man she was married to possessed her mind completely. She was kept constantly on her toes with either thoughts of him or with him in person.

Shaking off her thoughts yet again from the devil, she focused on the man in front of her.

“Do you miss the army?” she asked.

Keshav smiled. “Most of the time, yes. But there are a few things in the army I'd rather forget.”

Sometime during the first week of her training, she had asked Keshav if he had a military background because of his rigid discipline. She was surprised when he said he did. He was a retired army man.

“Being an ex-army man, why did you choose to work for the Shauryas?” she asked.

She also knew she was taking a huge risk by asking him that question. But she felt it was worth the risk as Keshav wasn't the kind to deliberately get her into trouble with the devil, if she didn't do anything that put her life in danger. Keshav was way too rigidly principled, which was why it was even more puzzling that he chose to work for the Shauryas.

She was sure Keshav knew what the Shauryas did. And even if there were the remotest chance that he didn't at the beginning, he would have found out pretty quickly about their criminal activities.

“I don’t work for the Shauryas. I work for Anirudh.”

It was one and the same thing in her mind. The Shauryas dealt with illegal firearms, drugs and many other criminal intimidation activities. And Anirudh Shaurya was the head of that dark empire.

“Anirudh *is* a Shaurya. Nothing is done without Anirudh’s explicit permission or order. And I’m sure you know what he does.”

“Things are not always black and white, Aditi.”

“I think they are to most extent,” she argued.

He fell silent, and there was a distant look on his face.

“When I was in the army, things were black or white because we had a definite enemy whom we had to destroy. But real life works much differently. There are no definite good or bad people.”

She frowned. “What do you mean? Are you saying what the Shauryas do can be justified as right? What they do is morally wrong.”

Keshav smiled. “Everyone thinks they are justified in doing what they do, including the bad guys... or the ones we think are the bad guys. And we can debate morality as much as we want, but when there’s a gun to your head, or you are fighting for your sheer existence, morality becomes quite fluid.”

Aditi knew what Keshav said was right to an extent. People are sometimes driven to do things they wouldn’t do under normal circumstances. She herself was a prime example of that.

CHAPTER 26

“Where are we going?” Aditi asked.

She turned to look at the backseat of the SUV with dozens of packed gifts. Anirudh Shaurya had come to her two days ago with a strange order.

“Since you like shopping so much, buy these items and have them wrapped as gifts.”

Annoyed by his arrogant command, but at the same time intrigued that he wanted her to buy gifts, she had taken the list from him. They turned out to be children’s gifts.

“We’re almost there,” he replied.

He was driving, and surprisingly they had no bodyguards accompanying them that morning.

The car stopped in front of a large, familiar temple.

“I used to come here often during my childhood,” she said softly. “I came here a few months ago too.”

She had often accompanied her mother to the place. First, they visited the temple at the front, and then they visited the huge orphanage that was built behind the temple grounds.

“My mother built the orphanage fifteen years ago,” he said.

Aditi was surprised. She knew that the land belonged to the Shauryas, and they had donated it to the temple trust. But what

surprised her was that Ruby Shaurya was the one who had built the orphanage. She assumed it had been long before.

The temple was quite crowded. A huge crowd of what appeared to be lesser-privileged people were served lunch. As soon as they went inside, the head priest received them with a wide smile.

“Anirudh. You are just in time. I have everything readied.”

Aditi was surprised and mildly taken aback. She hadn't pegged Anirudh Shaurya to be a religious man. But soon she understood the reason why.

It was Ruby Shaurya, his mother's birthday.

Aditi sat next to Anirudh Shaurya and performed a small ceremony that the head priest directed.

After the ceremony was done, they went back to the car and drove towards the orphanage.

Children's shouts and laughter could be heard from inside.

A middle-aged woman received them with a wide smile.
“Good morning, Anirudh. How are you?”

“I'm fine, Miss Bharati. This is my wife, Aditi.”

The woman smiled. “Nice to meet you, Aditi. And a hearty congratulations on your marriage.”

Aditi smiled at the woman who had a genuinely warm smile. “Thank you, Miss Bharati.”

“Come in. The children are waiting for you inside. They know they are going to get their gifts today.”

“Anirudh!” the children all shouted in excitement.

A small girl came rushing towards him. But before she could crash into him, Anirudh picked her up and then carefully put her down.

“Seema!” Miss Bharati scolded. “You would have hurt yourself. I asked you not to run inside. Running is only for outside.”

“That’s fine. Seema must be excited about her gifts.”

Aditi was shocked. She almost expected Anirudh to be mildly annoyed with the little girl. The comforting smile he gave the little girl to let her know she wasn’t going to get into trouble because of running, shocked her. It also completely melted her heart.

Who was this person, and what had he done with the devil?

Was he putting on an act? Her gut instinct and heart said no. Her practical mind also made her realize that he had no reason to put on such an act. In fact, most powerful men equated kindness and empathy to weakness, even it was directed towards children.

And then, she recollected that his father, Harish Shaurya, was like that too. Harish Shaurya had been a larger-than-life commanding figure, but he was always kind to her and answered her questions patiently.

“All right, children. Time for your presents. But remember to wait for your turn.”

Aditi smiled seeing the small, excited faces. And their faces brightened even more when they opened their gifts.

“Thank you, Anirudh!” a chorus of shouts erupted.

“You are welcome. But it was Miss Bharati who told me what each of you wanted, and it was Aditi who went shopping to buy your gifts.”

“Thank you, Miss Bharati and Aditi!”

Aditi smiled at the children. “You are most welcome.”

They spent the next two hours at the orphanage. They even had their lunch along with the children.

But all through those hours, Aditi threw discreet glances at her husband. She stared at him so much that he caught her couple of times, and she had to look away hurriedly.

It was quite hard to reconcile the man who scared the shit out of people—and most of the time even her—to be gentle and considerate with children.

After lunch, they waved goodbye to the children and their guardian before leaving the orphanage.

Aditi remained quiet. She was unable to control and handle the mixed feelings inside her. She recalled her conversation with Keshav a few days ago. He had claimed that no one was completely good or bad, and there were a lot of grey areas why people did things.

Did that mean, the devil was actually an angel at times?

Aditi knew Anirudh Shaurya was far from an angel. But despite knowing what he did and who he was, she also knew that he was kindhearted to children and continued with the philanthropy his parents began.

“It was a wonderful gesture,” she said. “The children were happy.”

He was looking ahead at the road while driving. He gave her a brief look before turning back to the road.

“Maybe I’m simply atoning for my sins as you’d like to think,” he said with a straight face.

Aditi knew he was baiting her, but she kept quiet. What she saw that day was genuine and real.

“I like children.”

As soon as he said that, Aditi was shocked by her body’s reaction to his simple statement. Instead of panicking or feeling trapped, her womb fluttered and her mind threw visuals of her nursing a baby with dark, intense eyes like his.

“I-I’m only twenty-three,” she said shakily. “I’d like to wait longer before having children.”

A small smile played around his mouth. “I just said I like children. I wasn’t asking you to have mine. But it’s intriguing that you mentioned children instead of a child. So you plan to give me more than one?”

She blushed in embarrassment at the misunderstanding.

“No. I... I... didn’t mean it that way. I just meant that being an only child, I’ve always wanted to have more than one. I’m sure you felt lonely too, being the only child.” She didn’t know why she added the last part. It was almost like she was building a case to convince him to have more than one child with her.

Embarrassed and flustered, she fell quiet, not wanting to prolong their discussion on their future children. But the devil didn’t let it go.

“Will you love your child even if it’s mine? The *devil’s* spawn?”

Her heart jerked inside her chest. Did he know she referred to him as devil inside her head? But before she could analyze, her mind latched on to what he said before that.

“Of course, I’ll love my child!” she said, feeling outraged. “And regardless of who the parents are, I like all children. I don’t pin sins of a parent on innocent children.”

He turned towards her again. “Really?” he remarked.

Her cheeks burned hot again as she recalled all the times she had hated him because of the actions of his father. She had blamed him for his father being responsible for her mother’s death.

She was wrong to do so. She admitted the truth to herself.

That night, something changed inside her.

Even though she knew what Anirudh Shaurya did for retaining power and influence was wrong, she acknowledged that she liked the human side of him. And that played bigger havoc with her heart and mind.

That night, when they were in bed, instead of treating their intimate time together as purely sex, she initiated the kissing. She held his head and pulled him closer before she kissed him deeply. But the kiss got hot and heavy quickly, and he rolled on top of her and pushed her legs apart about to join them in mind-numbing, passionate sex.

But she wrenched her mouth away from his.

“No. Stop,” she whispered, pushing at his shoulders.

He froze on top of her, and they stared at each other with heavy breaths. When she pushed his shoulders again, he moved from her and lay next to her.

Before he thought she was rejecting him, she rolled on top of him. His body tensed beneath her, and he watched her with an unreadable look.

She didn't know what to say, so she showed it instead. She explored him. The hard, muscular body which had been the object of her fascination and which gave her a lot of pleasure each night was now hers to explore.

She used her hands, her lips, her tongue and even her teeth to explore him. He groaned, and his hands gripped her hips hard as though controlling himself from not rolling her underneath him again.

She bit his hard, flat nipples and licked her way around the hard ridges of his abs before moving her tongue lower. His breaths came out harsher and faster when her mouth landed at the place which fascinated her the most.

Even though she was inexperienced, she was determined to make it good for him. Her instincts guided her, and she kissed him, tasted him and took him into her mouth. With harsh groans, his hand gripped her hair while she pleased him.

Her body hummed and throbbed. Giving him pleasure and watching him lose control, aroused her to a fever pitch. Her breaths came out in gasps of anticipation of the unknown. But before she could taste him, he pulled back her head, and then gripping her hips, he put her on top of him.

Their breaths came out harsh and loud as they again watched each other.

With her heart pounding, she stared at him. He was watching her, but he didn't make a move. Keeping her gaze locked to his, she slowly took him into her body and began undulating on top of him.

She had to close her eyes momentarily when there was a sudden prick in her eyes. She felt overwhelmed by the change happening inside her heart. She continued to move, wondering desperately if she should go back to making it just animal attraction and desire once again.

But she couldn't even if she wanted to. The man she was making love with filled all of her senses, including her heart.

As though sensing the turmoil in her, his hands went from her hips to the back of her neck. He pulled her head towards him and locked their lips together in a deep, passionate kiss.

And then, he took over. Gripping her hips, he guided her, joining them together, until he filled her body, heart and soul.

Much later, when she slept that night, she knew she couldn't avoid the truth anymore.

She was falling in love with the devil.

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CHAPTER 27

“What do you mean by a deal, Aditi? Have you gone mad!” Aditi’s father was more shocked than outraged.

Aditi looked at her father and then at Sameera Vasisht determinedly. “All you need is information. I will continue to do the operation you assigned to me.”

Sameera looked at her levelly. “But in return, you are asking for a plea deal for Anirudh Shaurya. You are asking the government to let a dangerous criminal go.”

Aditi held the woman’s gaze steadily. “I’m not asking you to let him go. All I’m asking is to reduce his sentence in return for information that will implicate other major players. The information you would have never gained without my help... or his.”

Aditi’s father shook his head. “Anirudh is not going to forgive you once he finds out *you* were the one to implicate him. He’s going to kill you, Aditi! Hunt you down and kill you like an animal! Have you gone mad seeking mercy for that devil?”

Aditi knew her father’s fear was warranted, especially when the devil’s torture and atrocities for those who betrayed him were known by many.

“He won’t hurt me,” she said calmly. She tried not to betray the faint trembling of her hands.

“You are a fool! I don’t know how he managed to brainwash you into thinking he is harmless, but you are making a huge mistake!”

Her father tried to convince her. He alternately begged and scared her, but she remained firm in her decision.

She was sick of having her heart and mind being constantly at war. She was still quite shocked at how her feelings towards the devil had changed so quickly, especially when she had hated him and was frightened of him until recently.

The devil was still flawed. She would continue to spy on him to get the information that would implicate him. It was the right thing to do, even if she had to betray the man she was falling in love with.

But despite that, she couldn’t imagine him harmed in any way. It would hurt her too. So she wanted to do everything in her power to protect the man she deeply cared for.

Sameera Vasisht watched her quietly. And when the policewoman finally spoke, Aditi felt relieved.

“Fine. You got yourself a deal, Aditi. In exchange for the information you pass to us, we will ensure Anirudh Shaurya’s safety and reduce his prison sentence.”

CHAPTER 28

“Truth or dare?”

There was a slight slur to Aditi’s voice. It was her birthday, and somehow the devil found out and wanted to take her out to celebrate. But she wanted to stay home and have a more intimate celebration with him.

They were seated on the bedroom balcony overlooking the ocean. Lata and the staff had made a special meal which even included a small birthday cake.

After devouring the delicious meal paired with a couple of glasses of wine, she felt like she was on top of the world.

“Truth,” Anirudh replied in amusement.

“First kiss. Who, where and how?”

It was a silly game, but she wanted to know everything about the devil.

“I don’t remember. It was too long ago. What about yours?” he asked in return.

She smirked. “Definitely not you,” she teased.

She shrieked and laughed when she found herself lifted from her chair and landing on his lap.

“I may not be your first kiss, but I know I’m your first,” he murmured into her ear.

She turned to look at him in shock. “How did you know?”

A flash of regret passed on his face. “I didn’t know until the next morning.” He cupped her cheek. “You should have told me. I could have been more careful not to cause you pain.”

She shook her head. “No. It was perfect.” It was. And like he had promised that night, she would never forget the first night the devil made her his.

“What about yours? When was your first time?” she asked. She felt a bolt of jealousy imagining him with a beautiful woman, most likely during his college years. With his good looks and the way he carried himself, she was sure he could get any girl he wanted.

He fell quiet.

“Hey! That’s cheating! You know my first time, and surely you remember your first time!”

A grim look sucked away the easy atmosphere. “It wasn’t romantic. It was just fucking, and I was quite bad at it.”

Something about the look on his face made her want to ask more. “How old were you?” she asked tentatively.

He was silent. But the dark look remained while he gazed at the ocean.

“Anirudh?”

His eyes returned to her face. And he watched her silently for a few moments before replying. “It was on my fourteenth birthday.”

She was stunned. “What?” He was a schoolboy then. “Was she... your classmate?”

He let out a dark laugh with no humor. “No. She was twenty-seven.”

A sick feeling twisted in her stomach. “Oh my God. Your teacher? That’s predatory on her part. You were just a boy!”

“She wasn’t my teacher and neither was she a predator. She was an actress I used to admire during my childhood. My grandfather saw her poster on my bedroom wall and decided to gift her to me on my fourteenth birthday.”

Her stomach turned at the visual. “That’s sick!” she whispered.

He nodded grimly.

“But why did that woman agree? She must have known you were under-aged!”

He smiled seeing the outrage on her face. “At fourteen, I had already grown to my full height. And she was young and ambitious. Her career depended on whether or not she pleased the right people.”

The sick feeling remained inside her. “What about your parents? Why did they allow such a thing to happen?”

She couldn’t imagine the confusion a child of fourteen would have to go through after such an incident. It would kill their innocence.

“My parents didn’t know my grandfather did something like that until the next day.”

She was stunned. “What did they do when they found out?”

“They sent me away.” He smiled grimly. “It was the first time my mother ever shouted at someone, and that too at my

grandfather. She gave my grandfather an earful.”

Aditi was glad his parents protected him from further corruption at such a young age. “You left for boarding school in the United States at fourteen?”

“Yes.”

It explained why she didn’t recall seeing him during their childhood. She was only seven when he was sent to boarding school.

Another thought occurred to her.

“Who is that actress?” She wondered if she spoke or came across the other woman in any of the recent social gatherings.

He didn’t answer.

“Are you... in touch with her still?” *Oh God. Please say no.* She didn’t know how she would react or feel if he were still seeing that woman. She would probably blast that other woman and call her sick and perverted to her face.

He looked at the dark expression on her face. “No. I’m not in touch with her,” he said softly. “My grandfather’s help got her better roles, and she went on to become a successful actress. But she left the movie industry a few years ago and got married before settling abroad.”

Thank God! A huge relief passed through her.

“Before it turns midnight, let me give you your birthday gift.” She felt him shift as he reached under the table and drew out something.

“What is it?” she asked in excitement.

He smiled, seeing the excitement in her eyes. He raised a small red, velvet box.

She knew it was jewellery. And although she wasn't much of a traditional gold or diamonds jewellery person, she was excited that it was a gift from him.

When she opened the box, she saw an antique silver chain with a medium-sized pendant. There were small multi-hued corals inlaid into the silver pendant.

"It's beautiful," she said softly. She straightened and pushed her hair aside, wanting him to put it around her neck.

He drew the necklace out and put it around her neck. "It was my mother's. Like you, she enjoyed collecting shells and wearing jewellery made out of nature."

Her heart skipped a beat that he had noticed. And she was far more touched that he gave her something so meaningful, when he could have easily afforded and bought her the biggest and flashiest diamond there was in the world.

She turned in his arms and kissed him. "Thank you," she whispered against his lips.

He cupped her face and kissed her deeply. She let out a soft moan. And soon, their kiss became more urgent and passionate.

Wrapping her legs around his torso, he got up from the chair and carried her into their bedroom.

Much later that night, even though her body was completely exhausted and sated with their passionate lovemaking, she lay awake in his arms. She couldn't fall asleep. Her mind kept thinking about the conversation they had.

She knew he was awake. His breathing wasn't deep and even, and the muscled arm wrapped around her waist felt possessive.

“When your parents... passed away, why did you return home?” she asked. “You could have stayed back in the States, away from... all of this.”

With his parents gone, he didn't have to return. From what she had seen and understood, there wasn't much affection between him and his grandfather, who was known for his ruthlessness and brutality.

“I didn't have to return. But I wanted to.” Something about his tone broke her skin into goosebumps.

She knew she shouldn't probe a sensitive subject that might open some old wounds, but she wanted to know more. “When you returned. How did you fit in... to your new life after such a long absence?” she asked.

“It wasn't easy,” his voice murmured from behind her ear. “I wasn't brought up the way my grandfather wanted me to be. So he doubled my training to fit in as the Shaurya head.”

“What did he make you do?” she whispered.

“He didn’t make me do anything. Not at first. He made sure things were done to me.”

She knew she wouldn’t like what she would hear. And yet, she continued to probe. “What was done to you?”

“Torture,” he replied. “I was put through different kinds of torture for weeks.”

Her heart clenched, and tears pricked her eyes. She couldn’t imagine a teen grieving his parents going through torture that was ordered by his own grandfather.

“Luckily for me, I didn’t break,” he continued to say. “I had enough grief and vengeance in my mind to withstand any kind of torture.”

Aditi’s breath stuck in her throat when he said vengeance. Vengeance against whom?

She knew he held her father responsible.

“I killed,” he stated softly.

Shock bolted through her at his sudden statement.

She swallowed until her throat could begin to work again. “Killed who?” she managed to ask.

“My enemies. The rivals who wanted my family dead, so they could rise in power. Within six months of my return, I captured and eliminated the first of my enemies. My grandfather was proud, and he began to hand over the reins to me.”

He must have been barely twenty at that time. Her heart went out to the teenage boy whose innocence was lost once

and for all with the gruesome torture and murder. She shuddered to imagine the influence of Narayan Shaurya on a grieving nineteen-year-old. Far from comforting or consoling his grandson, he had deliberately pushed him into the dark, murky criminal world. He was used as a tool to seek and demand power, turning him into the devil.

“Don’t you ever feel the need to leave all of this to lead a normal life like others?” she asked.

Her heart thudded, waiting for his answer. His hand moved from her waist to cup her breast possessively. She was sure he could feel the rapid beat of her heart.

“There is only way out of this life... and that is death.”

At his quiet answer, her heart jerked in pain at the thought of losing him.

“Why?” she whispered.

“Because the moment I give up the power, all of my enemies will unite and strike me down. Doesn’t matter whether or not I’m a threat to them.”

Oh God.

Fear overwhelmed her. She knew it wasn’t going to be easy after she betrays him and gets him arrested. He would never believe her if she told him that she loved him.

He would hate her.

A stab of pain pierced into her heart at the thought.

She didn’t know how long she had, but she was determined to cherish their days together. Because soon enough, the man she loved would end up hating her.

CHAPTER 29

“Aditi, Mr. Shaurya is here. He’s asking for you.”

Aditi was at the beach, returning from her walk. For a moment, she was thrilled thinking that Anirudh had returned from his trip after nearly two weeks. But slowly she realized that Keshav had referred to Anirudh by his last name. Which only meant one thing.

“Anirudh’s grandfather?” she asked, feeling stunned.

“Yes.” Keshav had an unreadable look. Tension vibrated from his stance.

Aditi knew Anirudh’s grandfather wasn’t a pleasant man. And his visit to his grandson’s wife was in no way a paternal one. Bracing herself for an unpleasant encounter, she nodded before heading back into the house.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Shaurya,” she greeted the old man in a wheelchair.

Aditi cringed inside at her greeting. She had to address him formally because she couldn’t call her husband’s grandfather by his name. And he wouldn’t take it well either if she called him grandpa.

The man hated her.

“Would you like something to drink or eat?” she offered politely.

But he didn't even look at her. "Get out," he ordered, looking at Keshav and the two bodyguards.

Despite his rude order, the men remained, which made the old man appear as though he would explode with rage.

"Please wait outside," she told Keshav. She didn't want them to be the brunt of a vengeful old man's wrath that was directed at her.

Keshav hesitated, but giving her a small nod, he and the other two bodyguards went outside the room.

"I see that you've already taken over and turned my men against me."

She wanted to say Keshav worked for Anirudh and not him. But she held her silence, not wanting to be dragged into an ugly argument.

"What did you do for them to turn into such faithful dogs? Do you fuck them whenever my grandson is away? After all, you are Vanita Somraj's daughter. Being a whore must run in your genes."

Aditi clenched her fists at the old man's ugly taunts. "Is there a reason for your visit? I'm sure you already know Anirudh is away on a business trip."

The old man's face tightened at her question.

"Yes," he spat. "I wanted to let you know that your countdown has started."

A chill passed through her at his threat.

"I know you think you are able to lead my grandson by his cock. But you are only living in a fool's paradise. Men like my

grandson are not made for one woman. Even his father who apparently loved his wife wasn't. My grandson is only pretending. He will use you up and strike when you are least expecting it. I'm eagerly waiting for that day, which is coming quite soon."

Bile rose in her stomach listening to the old man's filthy, disgusting words.

"Are you pregnant?"

She wanted to shout, *none of your business!* But she gritted her teeth. "No."

"That's good. Because then I might have to order my grandson to wait until you deliver his child. But now, he needn't wait."

She had heard enough. "Why do you hate me?" she demanded.

The old man looked taken aback by her tone for a moment before he returned to his vileness. "Is there a reason not to? A whore and a bastard's daughter."

"Stop calling my mother that vile name. Your son was as much at fault in falling in love with a married woman. And why are you blaming my father for it? What has he done to you to warrant such hatred against him?"

Rage flashed across the old man's face. "Don't talk to me like that. I can snuff your life right away if I want to. But since I promised my grandson that he will get to kill you and your father, I'm keeping quiet. And your father *is* a bastard. Maybe not literally, but his actions speak louder than words. He's nothing but a low-life bastard."

Aditi still didn't understand the vitriol directed against her father. Men like Narayan Shaurya blamed men whose wives fell out of love with them. They considered them weak men who couldn't control their wives.

“Count your days, girl. My grandson will decimate you. By the time he's done with you, you'll beg for mercy and beg for death.”

Chills passed through her once again at his threats. She was reminded of her father's words.

“Anirudh is not going to forgive you once he finds out you were the one to implicate him. He's going to kill you, Aditi! Hunt you down and kill you like an animal!”

She felt paralyzed with fear. And it was a fear that the man she loved might kill her.

Anirudh was halfway across the world when his phone rang. It was Keshav. And unless it was an emergency, Keshav never called him.

Anirudh answered his phone immediately. “Yes?”

The call lasted barely a minute.

As soon as he ended the call, he looked at Shiv and Vijay.

“It’s time,” he said in a soft yet deadly tone.

Shiv and Vijay simply nodded in understanding.

CHAPTER 30

“Congratulations, my boy!” Narayan Shaurya’s voice boomed. “I knew right from the beginning that if anyone could do the impossible, it would be you. You proved me right. This is the biggest deal we have ever made!”

Anirudh was seated across from his grandfather at the Shaurya mansion. He had just returned from a two-week-long trip, during which he had signed exclusive deals with ten of the biggest narcotics suppliers across the world.

He didn’t go to the beach house yet and hadn’t spoken to his wife in two weeks. He wanted to first see his grandfather.

“Let’s celebrate!” Narayan Shaurya said with a proud, satisfied smile.

“Why not.” Anirudh got up and took out the special scotch his grandfather enjoyed.

Pouring the scotch into two crystal glasses, he put their drinks on the table before sitting across from his grandfather. His grandfather picked up his drink and took a long sip before letting out a satisfied sound.

“There’s nothing quite like having the best scotch in the world after winning over our enemies.”

Anirudh remained quiet. He held the crystal glass in his hands and turned it to watch the golden liquid shine in the lighting.

Taking another sip, and letting out another satisfied sound, Narayan Shaurya put the drink on the table. “You know, Anirudh. I have never told this to you before, but I’m very proud of you. You went beyond what even *I* could have done in making Shaurya one of the most powerful names.”

The older man puffed up his chest. Even at the age of seventy two, he felt invincible.

“What about my father?”

Narayan Shaurya frowned at his grandson’s question. “What?”

“You said I made the Shaurya name proud beyond what you could have done. But what about your son? My father? Didn’t you think he could have accomplished the same?”

The frown remained on the older man. “Of course, I was proud of him. And maybe Harish could have accomplished something... if only he hadn’t allowed a woman to become his weakness, which led to his early death.”

Anirudh watched him. “Do you think my wife is turning into my weakness?”

A flash of anger passed through the older man’s face. “It’s not about whether or not I think that, Anirudh. It’s our enemies who think that too. Nearly six months have passed since you married that woman, and not a hair has been harmed on her head. And neither is fear visible in her eyes. It’s obvious she has gotten her claws into you like her mother did with your father.”

Anirudh watched his grandfather with a grim look. “Is that why you went to my house yesterday and threatened her?”

There was pin-drop silence.

Narayan Shaurya picked up his drink and took another sip. “Ah, I see. So your wife must have called you last night to cry into the phone prettily, complaining about how rude I was to her.” He let out a laugh which turned into a light cough. Clearing his throat, he looked at Anirudh, who was silent.

“Look, Anirudh. I know she is beautiful and innocent looking, and you probably even think you love her. But even if you do want her, she won’t remain with you for long. She is not used to our world filled with violence and blood money. Before she betrays you with another man, the right thing for you to do is to let her go.”

Anirudh smiled grimly at his grandfather. “Since when do you care about doing the right thing?” he asked. “Weren’t you the one who taught me that all that matters is being on top? Being the most powerful player in the game?”

Narayan Shaurya’s face tightened. “What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying you view my wife as a threat. You think she’ll make me want other things apart from money and power.”

Anirudh’s grandfather opened his mouth to answer, but a sudden bout of coughing came over him. He tried to wait for it to stop, but it continued for a while.

“Your wife is a—” The cough turned more intense.

Soon, the older man’s breathing turned into wheezes.

“S-something is... wrong with me. Call the... doctor,” he choked out.

Anirudh didn't stir from his place. And neither did he get his phone out to call for help. He watched his grandfather as the older man struggled to breathe.

Narayan Shaurya continued to cough and gasp. "Anirudh... call for... the doctor..."

"No."

At the soft word, the older man's eyes widened. Slowly comprehension dawned in his eyes that the previous day's visit to Aditi Somraj had not gone well with his grandson. "I made a mistake. I... shouldn't have... threatened... your wife. I promise... you... I won't hurt your wife." He clutched his chest as pain deepened. "P-please... help me... I'm having... a heart... attack." He collapsed from the chair and fell on the ground, choking and gasping, a slight froth forming around his mouth.

"Why wouldn't you hurt her?" Anirudh asked casually. "A man who ordered the death of his own son for the sake of money and power can easily kill his grandson's wife. Don't you think so?"

For the first time, there was real terror in Narayan Shaurya's eyes. "Y-you... know," he gasped out.

Anirudh smiled grimly. "I have always known. I knew it the moment you called me to let me know my mother killed herself. I knew it was you who had sent your goons to finish her off too."

There was utter shock on Narayan Shaurya's face. He continued to spasm while his skin turned into a bluish tinge

while tears streamed out. “I was... wrong. Please... forgive... me. Save... me. I’m your... family... your blood.”

Anirudh smiled coldly. “Because you are family, you are dying an easy death. But I hope your soul rots and never attains peace.”

Anirudh got up from the chair and walked out of his grandfather’s office.

Keshav was waiting outside. The gasping and choking noises could be heard from the office room.

“Make arrangements and send out the news tomorrow morning that Narayan Shaurya had a massive heart attack late tonight and died.”

Keshav nodded. “I will.”

While Keshav made arrangements, Anirudh remained standing at the top of the marble steps near the entrance of the Shaurya mansion. He stared at the huge water fountain, recalling the last phone call he received from his mother.

“How are you, my little baby?” a cheerful, feminine voice asked.

Anirudh laughed at the phone camera. “Ma, I’m six-foot-two-inches tall.”

His mother smiled. “So what? Even if you were a hundred feet tall, you’ll always be my little baby.”

He threw up his hands in mock surrender. “Okay. Okay. Fine!”

His mother laughed. "By the way, did you like your surprise gift?"

Anirudh was quite surprised and excited by what he saw outside of his student dorm early that morning. "The car arrived today. Thank you so much, Ma."

"You earned it, son." His mother beamed at him proudly. "Papa and I promised to buy you a car if you topped your exams. So we kept our promise." Then she scowled sternly at the screen. "But don't think there are no restrictions on how fast you can drive it!"

He laughed at his gentle, petite mom trying to be stern. "I'll be careful, Ma. I promise."

"Good." Then there was a naughty grin on her face, and he knew what she would ask before she even did. "So any special girl yet?"

He laughed. "You don't give up, do you? I'm just nineteen, Ma!" He dated a lot because of his raging teenage hormones. But he was hardly going to tell his mother about his casual hook-ups.

"So what if you are nineteen?" his mother asked. "Your dad fell in love with me when he was seventeen, and I was only sixteen!"

He knew their love story as both his parents had told him often.

"You know what?" his mother said. "I'm glad there's no other girl who has caught your heart yet."

"Other girl?"

There was a naughty yet eager sparkle in his mother's eyes. "Yes. Because I already have someone in my mind for you. Vanita's daughter. I've been seeing her since she was a little tyke. Now that she's close to thirteen, she's so pretty with a promise of turning into a beauty like her mother. But more than her beauty, she's so sweet and kind-hearted. I was just teasing Vanita last week that in ten years, I'm going to have my son marry her daughter, so we could turn our friendship into a relation."

"Gross, Ma!" He shook his head with a laugh. "Can you please not fix me up with thirteen-year-olds!"

His mother laughed.

"So have you booked your tickets yet?" he asked, changing the topic.

Suddenly, there was worry on his mother's face. "We don't know whether or not Papa and I can visit you next month, Anirudh."

He frowned. "Why not?" Although his life revolved around girls, parties and studies, he looked forward to his parents' visits twice a year. He missed them. In fact, he tried to coax them into relocating to the States permanently so they could be with him.

"We can't, Anirudh. You know Papa's dream. He is taking Vanita aunty—" She broke off when the doorbell rang. "Must be your Papa. I'll call you right back, son."

Anirudh recalled how he didn't think much of it when his mother didn't call back that night. He was supposed to take his

friends for a spin in his new car.

It wasn't until the next day that he received a call from his grandfather saying that his father had died in an accident while eloping with his mistress, and that his mother hung herself due to the shame.

He had known right away that his grandfather was lying. Even though his parents had sent him away from home at the age of fourteen, they always treated him with respect and as an adult. They told him about their family business and what his father's dreams were.

It took a great effort to stop the burning urge to get swift revenge by killing his grandfather right away. Instead, he turned his vengeance around and channeled the rage to accomplish his father's dream.

Over the last ten years, he did what his father had wanted. Although, he was sure his father hadn't thought that his son would try to achieve his dream through a ruthless, brutal way with the blood of his rivals on his hands.

“Anirudh?”

It was Keshav, and he looked worried.

“Yes?”

“We have a situation.”

CHAPTER 31

Aditi was walking along the narrow hallway of a luxury hotel.

Her father had called and asked her to meet him to pass on an important message. Aditi found it strange that her father didn't want her to meet him at the house like always.

Room 201.

Spotting the room number that was texted by her father, she knocked on the door. A strange foreboding filled her, and her arm automatically slipped into her purse, where she felt the muzzle of her small handgun.

She trusted her father, but she knew how fast things could easily go wrong.

Someone might have placed a figurative or literal gun on her father's head asking him to summon her here.

Aditi's heartbeat got faster when she heard footsteps approaching from inside the hotel room. Holding her breath, she badly hoped it was either her father or Sameera Vasisht who would answer the door. But when she saw the person who answered it, she was more than stunned.

"Rahul?!" she whispered in shock.

"Aditi!" Rahul pulled her hurriedly into the hotel room and shut the door.

Aditi frowned and stared at the man she never thought she would see again.

“Rahul. What are you doing here? And why did my father call me to meet you?”

Rahul looked nervous. But he inhaled a breath, looking determined. “I’m here to take you home, Aditi.”

“Home? What do you mean?”

“Your father wants me to take you back to London. He even bought us tickets.”

Aditi shook her head, not understanding. “But why? And why didn’t my father say anything when I last spoke to him?”

“He thinks his phones are tapped, and his house is being monitored closely.”

Aditi knew that already. But what she didn’t understand was why her father was asking her to go to London all of a sudden, especially when they were so close to what they set out to achieve.

Not that she would ever leave the devil’s side and go to London or any other place. She would stand by him and wait for him however long it takes for him to serve his prison sentence.

“Let’s go, Aditi.” Rahul held her hand and tried to lead her out of the room. “There’s a taxi waiting downstairs to take us to the airport.”

Aditi freed her hand from his. “I’m not coming with you, Rahul,” she said softly.

There was shock on his face. “What?”

“I don’t want to go, Rahul. London is no longer my home. I belong here.” She belonged next to the devil, wherever he was.

Rahul stared at her. “Oh my God. It is true then.”

“What is?”

“He drugged you.”

Aditi frowned in confusion. “What?”

“Anirudh Shaurya put you on some mind-altering drugs. Or maybe you went into shock because you were kept hostage and constantly violated by a criminal.”

Her heart gave a sick jolt. “What? Who told you that? I’m not drugged. And you know nothing about my marriage or about the relationship I have with my husband.”

Rahul looked at her in disbelief. “Your husband? That man practically holds you hostage, Aditi! And he is a criminal. A drug lord. Are you discounting any of those facts?”

A twinge of annoyance passed through her, which she promptly pushed away. It wasn’t Rahul’s fault that he didn’t understand her change of heart. Hell, most of the time she didn’t either.

All she knew was that she had fallen in love with the devil despite his dark side. And she would stand by him, even if she were the one to implicate him for the crimes he had committed.

“I’m sorry you wasted your time, Rahul,” she said gently. “I’ll compensate you for your time and money.”

“To the hell with the money!” Rahul said in angry disbelief. “Aditi, please, look at me,” he urged.

And she did. She looked at the man who at one point she had wanted to marry and build a life together. Her heart gave a nostalgic jerk as she fondly remembered the times they had spent together.

Had she still been with Rahul, she would have been fulfilling her dream to lead a simple, content life.

Then you wouldn't have met the devil.

Aditi agreed with the words her heart whispered. Although the circumstances were less than ideal, she didn't regret falling in love with Anirudh Shaurya. She loved him unconditionally, and he consumed every part of her—body, heart and soul. Whatever her future may hold, she knew she would never be able to love someone else.

“Aditi, please,” Rahul's voice cut in. “You have no idea how helpless I felt when you were taken away. I want you to come back. Let's build that life we planned together.”

Aditi's heart went out to him. She didn't want him to nurse a broken heart because of her. She did care for him, even though it was only as a good friend.

“I can't, Rahul. This is the life I chose. Anirudh is the man I want to be with.” She didn't add that she loved Anirudh. That would be too cruel to the man whose heart she was breaking.

“How can you say that!” he said in a broken, agitated voice. “He doesn't deserve you. He's a criminal. He just managed to brainwash you using chemical drugs and other ways.”

She let out a gasp of surprise when Rahul pulled her closer.

“Let me remind you what we meant to each other,” he desperately said before he kissed her.

Aditi was stunned. Her first instinct was to push him away and wipe the feel of his mouth from hers. It felt wrong, and every cell in her body was disgusted by the kiss. But she didn't push him away violently. She knew it was his hurt and anger making him behave that way. Rahul was otherwise a gentle soul.

Freeing her mouth, she tried to calm him down. "Rahul," she said gently. "Please, listen to me. I cannot be with you anymore."

Rahul let out a broken sob. "Please, Aditi." His arms went around her as he tried to hug her. But the momentum pushed her and the back of her legs hit the bed, making her fall on it.

The wind was knocked out of her as Rahul's weight fell on top of her.

She tried to catch her breath even as she tried to console the man holding her tightly and sobbing into her neck. She patted his back awkwardly while wet tears flowed on her neck. She was about to hold his shoulders to push him away from the top of her, so she could breathe and talk to him.

"How very touching," said a deep voice in a cold, dark undertone.

Jerking violently, Aditi's eyes flew towards the door.

Her heart almost stopped when she saw Anirudh Shaurya standing near the door and watching her. His face was completely devoid of emotion, but she saw the cold rage burning behind his eyes.

Aditi's first instinct was to push Rahul away from her, and run to Anirudh, and tell him what had really happened. But she resisted the instinct of self-preservation.

She couldn't risk an innocent's life to save herself. It wasn't Rahul's fault that he was caught in the crossfire between her father, the devil and her.

And the look in Anirudh's eyes spoke volumes. He wanted Rahul's blood.

Fear gave her strength, and she pushed Rahul away from her. She sat up hurriedly, and with shaky legs, she got off the bed and stood between the devil and an innocent man.

"Nothing happened," she whispered. "I came to know he was here on vacation, and I wanted to visit him... as a friend."

It was stupid and dangerous, but she could find no other excuse. Anirudh knew the past relationship between Rahul and her. She had given him the same excuse when he had caught Rahul and her kissing on their wedding day. At that time, she had been genuinely kissing Rahul to say goodbye.

But now, even though nothing had happened between Rahul and her, the circumstances appeared completely damning.

Anirudh watched her while she stood in a protective stance in front of the bed.

“I warned you,” he said in an eerily quiet tone. “I warned you about not betraying me.”

“It isn’t Rahul’s fault,” she said desperately. “I called him here. We were talking... and... and... we just got carried away. But nothing happened.” Her lips trembled as she lied. She knew she was making it worse for herself, but she couldn’t risk an innocent man’s life.

“We love each other,” she heard Rahul’s voice saying from behind her, making her freeze.

Oh my God. Please, Rahul. No.

But God or Rahul didn’t heed to her request.

“Aditi is coming with me,” Rahul continued to say in a challenging tone. “We are flying back to London tonight. You can’t stop us.”

Aditi’s heart almost stopped beating seeing the utter rage on Anirudh’s face. She saw his hands form a fist. And Keshav entered the room holding a gun in his hands.

Before Anirudh could crush Rahul’s throat or order to shoot him in cold blood, she ran towards Anirudh and threw herself on him.

“Don’t,” she begged, clutching his shirt.

He lowered his eyes to look at her. “Don’t what?” he asked in the same eerily soft tone.

“Don’t hurt him, Anirudh. I’ll come with you, and I’ll promise to never meet him again. Just let him go.”

He continued to watch her face. When he saw the fear and worry written on it, something unreadable settled in his eyes.

“Don’t you think you should worry about yourself, and not beg for your boyfriend’s life?” he asked.

“He’s innocent,” she said desperately. “He is no longer my boyfriend. Do what you want with me. I’ll take whatever punishment you decide. But please, let him go.”

He kept his eyes locked on hers while he ordered Keshav. “Get him out of here.”

Keshav walked into the room towards the bed to get Rahul.

Her heart pounded in fear. When there were no sounds of struggle coming from behind her, she tore her eyes away from Anirudh’s to look at Rahul who was passing by her.

Rahul’s face was pale and shaken because Keshav’s gun was pointed at him.

“I’m sorry, Rahul,” she whispered. “Please go. Fly back to London tonight.”

Rahul didn’t say anything. He followed Keshav out of the hotel room, leaving her alone with the devil.

“Anirudh, please. Promise me he won’t be shot on his way to the airport.” She knew Keshav wouldn’t kill an innocent man. But if Anirudh ordered him, then Keshav would have no choice but to follow the order.

When Anirudh didn’t reply, she clutched his shirt once again. “If anything happens to Rahul, I’ll never forgive you. I’ll hate you until the day I die. Promise me you’ll let him go!” she shouted in desperation.

Anirudh’s eyes flashed at her threats. “Let’s go home,” was all he said.

CHAPTER 32

I betrayed the devil. I dared to insult him in the worst possible way.

Aditi lay on the bed, shivering in the darkness. The slightly humid yet pleasant ocean breeze coming through the bedroom windows didn't offer her any solace. Her mind was consumed by what consequences waited for her that night.

The dark flash of cold fury in Anirudh Shaurya's eyes when he caught her in the act of betrayal ran through her mind in a loop. There was blood lust in his eyes that night. Whether it was for hers or someone else's, she didn't know it yet. All she knew was that she would pay one way or the other.

Her body trembled violently imagining his punishment.

She tried to draw in courage, but she couldn't. Not that night.

The soft sound of approaching footsteps made her heart almost beat out of her chest. Her breath got stuck in her throat when the door to the master bedroom suite opened and shut closed with a soft click.

The faint smell of familiar expensive cologne filled the air making her body shiver violently. She kept her eyes closed, and tried to even her breathing, so she could pretend to be asleep. But it was of no use.

The footsteps got closer to the bed, until they stopped right next to her. And then, there was utter silence.

Even though her eyes were closed, she felt the intense gaze of the devil as he watched her.

She felt him leaning towards her, and she nearly jumped out of her skin when she felt a soft touch. The rough pads of his calloused fingers moved slowly along the length of her bare arm.

Her skin broke into goosebumps, and her body trembled even more. But this time, along with fear, she trembled with desire.

Her body recognized his touch and automatically craved him. All the intimate moments they had spent together made her body constantly at war with her heart. Even though she didn't want to, she desired the devil.

She wanted to open her eyes and shout at him to stop touching her. She wanted to tell him once again how much she hated him. That she would never fall in love with a man such as him. That she would never accept him as her husband.

He had stolen her away. Away from the life she had planned for herself. Instead of leading a simple and happy life, she was dragged and plunged into the dark underbelly of crime.

He was the devil. A ruthless, brutal criminal with no conscience or humanity.

Her intense anger and sense of righteousness gave her the courage she needed. She opened her eyes and met his gaze.

"I hate you," she whispered.

She could see him clearly in the soft moonlight spilling through the large windows. The expression on his darkly handsome face was terrifying even as he remained silent.

Her breaths came out faster as he continued to watch her and touch her. His fingers moved from her bare arm to her shoulder and then moved to her neck where her pulse beat rapidly.

She knew it was time for her to pay. He would make her pay for the sins of her father. For all the times she had challenged his authority and refused to bend to his will. And most of all, he would make her pay for the ultimate insult and betrayal when he caught her with another man that night.

She knew her time was up. The devil would demand his dues that night.

“Tell me you didn’t kill an innocent man,” she whispered.

His finger curled around the top button of her top and tugged until the buttons fell open. He watched the rapid rise and fall of her chest as her breaths came in faster with fear and desire.

“I killed,” he declared, making her heart almost stop. But before she could go into full-blown panic mode, he continued. “But the man I killed wasn’t innocent. He claimed way too many lives and was evil. You would approve his death,” he added at the end.

She wanted to ask who it was, but her voice got stuck in her throat.

It must have been one of his rivals.

Was that why he had bloodlust in his eyes when he came into the hotel room? Not because he saw her in a compromising position with her ex-boyfriend?

“Nothing happened between Rahul and me,” she urgently whispered when his hands pushed her top apart.

His finger slid across her bare, quivering stomach before he spoke in a gravelly tone. “It would be a lot better if you don’t say another man’s name while you’re in our bed.”

She bit her lip to stop herself from saying anything more. She tried to sense his mood, but he was way too unpredictable. All she could read in his eyes was intense hunger.

The devil wanted her.

She wanted him too. She wanted to appease his hunger until the bloodlust disappeared in his eyes and until she could convince him that she wanted no one else but him.

“Make love to me,” she whispered.

His exploring finger paused. “I want to. But I don’t know if I should,” he murmured.

A small lump of fear formed in her throat. “W-why not?” she asked with great difficulty.

“The way I feel. The way I want you. I might hurt you.”

She sucked in a breath, her body quivering in need at the dark, underlying threat. Their lovemaking had always been rough and passionate. The fact that he spelled it out and warned her about it, made it ominous. But she didn’t want to back away.

“I don’t care. Take me,” she whispered.

His eyes flared, and a dark need that resonated deep inside her reflected on his face. His fingers curled behind her neck before he dragged her up until their lips were less than an inch apart.

“Don’t think that this will get you out of trouble for what happened tonight,” he whispered before crashing their mouths together.

She wanted to protest her innocence again, but she moaned as their teeth scraped against each other’s lips in a violent kiss. She tasted the light metallic taste of blood which made her moan.

She reached for his shirt and tried to rip it open, but he stopped her. Dragging his mouth away from hers, he attacked her clothes first until she was left completely bare and exposed to his eyes.

“On your hands and knees,” he growled as he ripped open his own clothes.

With her heart thudding, she did as he asked. Her body thrummed with awareness and anticipation as he filled all of her senses.

The sound of him unbuckling his belt, the sound of him lowering his pant zipper, the feel of cool air on her aroused breasts and the deep ache inside her core—everything felt magnified.

She gasped when his hands gripped her hips hard, and she felt his hard arousal brushing her core. She knew she had woken up the monster. But instead of getting scared, she embraced it.

She wanted to be consumed by the devil that night.

Anirudh tried to control the animal that came unleashed inside him. The animal which drove him to claim his wife until she wanted no one but him.

He heard her soft moan when he gripped her hips hard before slamming into her wet heat. Then moving over her, he planted his hands next to hers, trapping her body with his large one. “Say you are mine,” he growled into her ear.

Panting softly, she bit her lip before turning her head until she met his eyes. “And if I don’t?” she asked in challenge.

Despite being trapped and cornered, she fought back. She always fought back. She fought him. She fought their marriage. And she even fought the growing feelings between them for the longest time.

Unlike him.

He had never fought what he felt for her. The moment his eyes met with her hypnotic ones, he knew he wanted her. He embraced his dark desire that made him want to capture her the way she had captured him.

He raised a hand and wrapped it around her delicate throat before pulling her head closer to kiss her hard. “Say it,” he growled again, slamming into her hard.

“Oh God,” she groaned when he hit a spot deep inside her that he knew would make her body shake in ecstasy.

“Say it. Say you belong to me.”

She bit her lip, fighting back the words to drive him even crazier.

He missed seeing her face fully. He knew she was close to shattering and wanted to see her beautiful face contorting in pleasure while he made her his.

“Don’t stop!” she begged when he pulled out of her.

“Never,” he rasped before pushing her on their bed and climbing on top of her to join their bodies.

She groaned and dug her nails into his back. Unable to control himself, he held her in a bruising grip before ramming into her. A part of him was worried that he might be hurting her, but the nails that dug into his shoulders pulling him closer and the raw noises of want emitting from her throat urged him to go on.

She came with a muffled shriek against his shoulder, and he did too immediately when her body squeezed out his release. Grunting harshly like an animal, he poured into her.

When every drop of his essence filled her, he collapsed on top of her. He wanted to remain inside her heat, joining their bodies until eternity. But the soft gasps from her indicated that he was crushing her. Holding her hips, he rolled them until she was lying on top of him.

Her breaths evened out. He thought she slipped into a deep sleep. But she slowly raised her head.

“I am yours,” she whispered, kissing where his heart thudded. The utter sincerity of her tone and love shining in her eyes shook him to the core. “I will always belong to the devil,”

she added. And then, with a soft smile, her beautiful, hypnotic eyes closed as she slipped into a deep, exhausted sleep.

Even though his body was exhausted, he couldn't sleep right away. His heart and mind continued to race with various scenarios of what if's pouring through his mind.

Finally, when he decided to give in to sleep, there was one thought that ran through his mind.

She didn't belong to the devil. It was the devil who belonged to her.

CHAPTER 33

Aditi was woken up by the persistent knocking on the bedroom door. Opening her still sleepy eyes, she noticed that she was lying on top of her husband with her head resting on his chest.

Her grogginess vanished when she felt him tense under her.

“Who is it?” she asked in a whisper.

“I don’t know,” he replied.

He kissed her on top of her head before rolling her away from him until she lay on the bed.

He got out of bed and opened the nightstand drawer and pulled out a gun before loading it.

“Get dressed,” he told her softly before looking at the door. “Who is it?” he asked in a loud, firm voice.

Aditi heard the familiar voice reply from outside the door.

“It’s Keshav. I have urgent news,” he said.

Anirudh lowered the gun with a frown and placed it on top of the nightstand before slipping into his underwear and walking towards the door to answer it.

Aditi scrambled out of bed and went to the closet. Taking out fresh clothes, she slipped into them while trying to catch the conversation outside.

“What happened?” Anirudh asked.

“We have been compromised, Anirudh. I just got news that a CBI team are on their way to arrest you.”

Aditi’s heart gave a sick lurch.

Oh my God. No.

With shaking hands, she scrambled and pulled out the hidden phone in her closet and turned it on. She saw the messages, and her heart almost stopped.

Operation devil. Tonight.

The messages were sent only a few hours ago. Why wasn’t she informed earlier? Her hands trembled while trying to see if there was more information sent, but there was none.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to her. Her father must have known about the operation. He knew the CBI was going to arrest the devil that night. That was the reason why he had sent Rahul, hoping Rahul would take her away, and she wouldn’t come in between.

“Aditi?”

She jumped and shoved the phone inside the closet when Anirudh called her. She closed the door of the closet to see his visibly tense face.

“We need to leave in ten minutes.”

“W-why?” she asked, trying to stop the quaking inside her.

“The government has gathered evidence against me, and they are sending a police team to have me arrested. We don’t

have much time, so just gather clothes for a couple of days. That's how long it should take for us to come out of this mess."

He didn't wait for her acknowledgement, mostly because he didn't expect her to oppose it. He opened his closet to get dressed.

Oh God. What do I do?

Her mother's gentle voice washed over her, giving her the strength to do what she had to do next.

"All you have to believe in is doing the right thing, no matter what."

She inhaled a deep breath. She loved the devil, but she would always stand by what was right. With her heart thudding loudly in her ears, she went towards the bed.

Aditi heard Anirudh's voice as he shut the closet door before coming back into the bedroom.

“Aditi, are you ready. We have to—” his voice broke off all of a sudden.

He froze momentarily, and then his face turned completely unreadable. In her visibly trembling hands, Aditi held a gun, and it was pointed at him.

“It was you,” he said calmly. “You are the one to pass on information about me.”

Her hands shook even more violently. “Yes,” she whispered.

His jaw clenched. It was the first indication of how her betrayal affected him.

Soon, there was a bitter smile on his face. “So you let me fuck you tonight to keep me home. And not just tonight, you even let me fuck you for nearly six long months, just so you could earn my trust and betray me. Congratulations, you succeeded in fooling me.”

She flinched at his crude words. They hurt her more than she had imagined they would.

“I-I didn't know the CBI were coming tonight,” she whispered. “Yes, I... I did sleep with you initially as a means to help the government gather evidence against you. But what

we have between us and what I feel for you is real. I love you.”

He clenched his hands into fists. “You betrayed me,” he spat.

She sucked in a breath. “Anirudh...” she pleaded for him to understand. “I had no choice—”

“Were you blackmailed by someone?” he demanded.

She shook her head. “No. I did it willingly because it was the right thing to do. What you do... the selling of illegal drugs... it destroy lives. I know you did it for your grandfather and for the Shaurya name to be in power, but you need to stop it now. If you surrender, the government promised they’ll offer you minimal punishment. And I... I... I’ll wait for you however long it takes for you to come out of prison.”

He laughed. The sound of his bitter amusement made her heart jolt in an ugly, painful way inside her chest.

“And why would you wait for me, my dear wife?” he asked mockingly. “You’ll be a billionaire with me rotting in jail. Or if you are lucky, a super-rich widow.”

“They promised me you won’t be hurt. They’ll keep you safe.” She had made it a point to get written confirmation that he won’t be hurt in any way. Or she would withdraw her support and testimony. “And I will wait for you, Anirudh. I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Anirudh laughed once again. The cruel sound made her stomach tremble with sick dread.

“If you really love me as you claim, you wouldn’t have betrayed me. You would have learned to accept me as I am.”

She stared at him unflinchingly. “I love you,” she told him again. “But I also stand by what is right. I can’t allow you to destroy lives.”

Bitter amusement disappeared from his face and he looked frustrated. “I don’t force people to buy drugs. And even if I stop my illegal drugs business, people who use illegal drugs will find a way to buy it from someone else. And *that* someone else will get more powerful than me and use that power to destroy me. We need power to survive in this grim world. You will get used to it soon.”

She shook her head. “You might not force people to buy drugs, but drugs kill people and destroy families. And I’ll never get used to being okay living on money or power that came at the cost of destroyed families.”

He watched her quietly, and then his eyes lowered to the gun in her hands. “Are you going to shoot me to stop me from leaving?” he asked. “Go ahead. Stop me if you can. Because the only way I’ll surrender or give up my power is when I stop breathing.”

Her hands trembled around the cold metal of the gun in her hand.

“You might want to *do the right thing* for now,” he taunted softly. “But if you lead a life as the wife of a powerful man for some more time, you’ll learn not to care. I can give you anything that your heart desires. Most women in our dark world learn to tell themselves that family and love are everything, and as long as *their* families are happy and they love their husbands, nothing else matters. They will continue

to support their powerful husbands and later they'll extend that support to their sons who will rise to power like their fathers."

Her heart jerked at the mention of children. He didn't miss seeing her reaction.

"You told me you wanted children," he continued in a haunting tone. "You can fill up our house with as many of our children as you want. But remember, if you betray me now, that dream will never come true."

Her eyes filled with tears. He was manipulating her emotionally and pushing her to a corner.

"Yes, I want to have your children. But not if you remain a criminal who destroys lives. I want my sons or daughters to have a role model they can look up to. A father who teaches them right from wrong."

His face tightened. "Stop living in a fool's paradise, Aditi. You are married to one of the most powerful men in this country. Yes, I'm a criminal. Deal with it," he added cruelly.

He was about to get closer, so she aimed the gun at his heart. "Stop!" she whispered.

He let out a laugh. "Put that away, Aditi. It's not a toy. It's real. You already know what it can do."

Her hands trembled. "Anirudh, please. I'm begging you. Just stop. Give up this life. We'll find a way to be happy with one another. We don't need blood money or power."

His eyes flared. "I'll never give up power. The only way I'll give ever give it up is when I die." He came towards her with determined strides. "Put that away and come with me. It's getting late and we have wasted enough time."

He was getting closer. And in a few seconds, he would snatch the gun out of her hands. He was less than ten feet away from her when a loud shot rang out.

Aditi was shocked. She looked at the small hole in Anirudh's shoulder that began to turn red as he bled out.

"Fuck," he said, watching himself bleed.

The door burst open. Aditi expected it to be Keshav or one of Anirudh's men. But she was shocked seeing Sameera Vasisht entering with a small team of men and women who were armed.

"What happened?" the police woman asked.

"I-I was trying to stop him from leaving. I didn't mean to shoot him, but he wouldn't stop or listen."

There was blood all over the Anirudh's stark white shirt. He sat on the bed while he watched her with glazed eyes.

"Oh God. I hurt him." Aditi tried to go to him, but she was stopped.

"Aditi, you have to leave now! We'll take care of him. His grandfather will kill you if he finds out about your role in his grandson's arrest."

"I don't care. I don't want to leave his side."

But Sameera's team didn't allow her to get close to him. She was forcibly held back.

Aditi began to struggle. "No! No! Let me go to him!" Her screams echoed off the bedchamber.

Her worry and shock gave her the strength to fight them off. She was almost free and was about to go to him when they

caught her again. And this time, she felt a small prick in her arm.

She struggled and continued to shout. “Let me go to him! Anirudh!”

Her struggles slowly weakened, and her vision blurred. “Anirudh...” she whispered.

The last thing she remembered before darkness took over was of the man she loved watching her with glazed eyes while Sameera and the team tried to stop the heavy blood flow in his shoulder.

CHAPTER 34

Aditi was caught in a never-ending nightmare.

That's what she told herself when she woke up yet again inside a beach house at an unknown location. There was constant police protection. And they even refused to leave her unmonitored in case she decided to harm herself.

It had been two months since she had shot the love of her life. Two months of constant hell after hearing that the love of her life, the man who was larger than life and invincible, had died because of a single bullet wound.

Died. Gone. Snatched away from her in the cruelest of ways.

She still felt numb with shock, pain and grief.

"You should eat something," the familiar voice of an old woman prodded.

It was Suki. The police had brought Suki to the beach house two weeks ago, thinking the older woman would dissuade her from starving herself to death.

"I'm not hungry."

There was a clucking of tongue. "Come on, have at least a little. You need your strength to face the coming days."

I don't want to face the coming days. I don't want to face any day.

Aditi didn't say those words aloud.

"Your mother wouldn't have starved herself like this."

Aditi closed her eyes at the words. Suki had used those words constantly to get her to eat something. Aditi tried to resist those words that felt like barbs.

"My mother wouldn't have shot the love of her life, either," she said in a dead tone.

"Believe me, Adi. Vanita would have done exactly what you did," Suki said softly. "Your mother always stood for what's right. She taught her daughter the same."

Tears ran down Aditi's eyes. "She wouldn't have killed the man she loved."

"You didn't kill him, Adi. You shot him in his shoulder as a warning to stop him."

It was a flesh wound to the shoulder.

She had even seen the bullet exit from the back. She had been trained for several months by Keshav and sometimes even by Anirudh to learn how to shoot. She was taught which places were to be aimed at for warning and which places with intent to kill.

She shot at Anirudh's shoulder to warn him off.

"Heavy loss of blood and then a blood infection. We tried our best, but we couldn't save him."

When Sameera Vasisht told her that a week after, Aditi couldn't digest the news.

She remained in denial for the longest time. Even now, she somehow refused to believe the man she loved was gone. The bond and the connection she felt between them still thrummed with life. She expected to see him walking into the cottage and pull her into his arms.

“Oh, Adi.” She felt Suki's gentle hand on her head. “What you did was right. And I wish Vanita also shot the man she loved. That would have saved her life, and ended the evil, selfish bastard then and there.” The last part was said with dark conviction.

“Harish Shaurya wasn't evil or selfish,” Aditi replied. She was mildly stunned that she defended the man. But it was the truth. He was kind to her, and she knew from Anirudh about the various philanthropist initiatives Harish Shaurya and his wife began.

“I wasn't talking about Harish Shaurya.”

Aditi was stunned. “What?” she asked in confusion.

“Here, have some soup. I made it especially for you.” Suki fed her a spoonful.

Shock and confusion made Aditi swallow down the food. After a few spoonfuls, Aditi realized that Suki was using a distraction technique to feed her.

“Suki,” she scolded weakly.

The older woman smiled innocently making Aditi laugh.

After finishing the bowl of soup and being coaxed into eating a few bites of rice, Aditi stared outside the small cottage at the beach.

“I know my mother would have been strong under these circumstances, Suki. But I don’t know if I ever can. I miss him so much.” Tears filled her eyes again.

“You are strong, my love. Give it time. Things will be right again.”

Aditi didn’t think it was possible for things to become right again.

Suki cleared up the dishes. “Why don’t you rest? You’ve barely been sleeping at nights.”

Aditi nodded, even though she didn’t want to rest.

After Suki left, Aditi spent the rest of the afternoon staring at the waves and recalling her moments with the devil. She fingered the coral pendant hanging around her neck, the one he had gifted to her on her birthday and which had belonged to his mother.

She had requested Sameera to bring the necklace from the beach house. It was the only thing she had wanted.

“Aditi?”

She dragged her eyes away from the hypnotic waves of the ocean that beckoned her.

“How are you, Aditi?” Sameera Vasisht asked.

The policewoman looked at her with a concerned frown. Aditi supposed she did look quite a sight. Her clothes which used to fit her well two months ago were now hanging loose

on her body. And her face looked drawn and tired with shadows under the eyes.

“I’m fine,” she replied. “How is my father?”

The frown melted away on the other woman’s face, and an unreadable look took over. “Your father is fine. He has been shifted to another high-security prison.”

Aditi closed her eyes and nodded. Although she felt guilty, her body and mind were too drained to pile on more worry and shock.

Two months ago, when she shot Anirudh, his grandfather died of a heart attack the same night. With the death of two powerful Shaurya men, things blew apart.

Details of the biggest illegal drug networks, which included many prominent names around the world emerged with proof. Many people were arrested, and some were killed during capture.

Illegal drugs worth billions and large amounts of black money made from drug trafficking were confiscated. But while this was happening, the criminal world blamed the major crackdown all on one person. Mohan Somraj.

Aditi’s father had willingly surrendered and was arrested by providing proof to the government of his role in the drug smuggling. Aditi initially thought he had done that because he thought he was much safer being under police protection. But she was shocked to learn that in his desperation of losing money, her father had knowingly transported illegal drugs and weapons using his company’s transportation.

Her father was a criminal too.

“Here is your passport and identity cards.”

Aditi took the small envelope, but didn't bother opening it. She was told that she could return back to London and lead a normal life. Since Anirudh Shaurya was gone and his property and assets were seized by the government, there was no danger for his widow. Most of the underworld knew that the marriage was an arranged one with the bride being unwilling.

So far, Aditi hadn't decided yet, and wanted to remain in the current unknown beach house which made her feel close to the devil.

“Aditi... whatever you did, the government will always be indebted to you. You have no idea how many lives and families you saved from being destroyed.”

Aditi nodded. A voice inside her head screamed at her saying that in the process of saving everyone else, she also destroyed her heart and soul.

“I'll be in touch,” Sameera Vasisht said softly. “Call me if you need anything. But please, take care of yourself.”

“Thank you. I will.”

“You betrayed me,” the devil accused. “I loved you, but you betrayed me.”

“I’m so sorry. I love you so much. I didn’t mean to hurt you.” Aditi desperately tried to stop the flow of blood on his shoulder, but she couldn’t.

Soon the whole floor was filled with blood, and Anirudh Shaurya’s lifeless eyes stared back at her.

Aditi woke up with a loud gasp, sweating and shaking. It was the middle of the night, and she was having her recurring nightmare.

She blinked her eyes rapidly to stop her eyes from seeing blood flowing out of the man she loved.

Slowly and painfully, her vision cleared. Instead of the polished marbled floors filled with blood, she saw the wooden floors of the small beach house she was currently in.

She was lying down on the living room couch where she slept each night. The beach house had a bedroom, but she refused to use it. It was too painful to lie on a bed without him next to her.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. I love you,” she whispered out loud.

She missed him so much that she imagined feeling his presence and touch. In her sleep, she felt his arms surrounding her and kissing her on her forehead to comfort her. She could even smell him, the subtle smell of his cologne.

Sometimes she wondered if it was worth living a life without ever being able to touch him or feel him. She might have pressed the trigger that killed him eventually, but she had killed her soul along with him.

She took a deep, shuddering breath as sorrow threatened to double her over in pain once again.

“I miss you so much,” she whispered. “I want you and need you. I love you.”

She was seeing him again. He was seated on the opposite couch, watching her quietly. He was wearing a black shirt and trousers, looking so devastatingly handsome.

“Will you haunt me like this forever?” she whispered, hoping that he did. She never wanted to let go of his memories.

“You haunted me since the moment I met you,” his deep voice answered. “So it’s only fair that I haunt you even longer.”

In her pain and sorrow, her mind was conjuring up even his voice.

“I betrayed you and killed you. I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“Don’t be sorry,” the deep voice replied. “You did the right thing. I’m proud of you.”

She stared at the vision with her slowly widening eyes.

The vision looking back at her looked every bit like the devil. But unlike the devil's last look, this vision's eyes were not accusing her of betrayal. In fact, it looked exactly like how the devil did when he gave her his mother's beautiful pendant. He looked at her with love and desire.

With her heart thudding, Aditi got up from the couch and walked towards him. The vision watched her quietly as she stopped in front of him.

With trembling hands, she reached out and touched his face. Warm skin met her hand, and she could feel the prickly thickness of his stubble.

He turned his head and laid a kiss on her palm, and she felt every bit of it too.

"You bastard," she whispered in shock. "I hate you!"

CHAPTER 35

Anirudh flinched at the words his wife threw at him.

He had broken into his parents' beach cottage that night. And as soon as he had seen her sleeping on the couch, he wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her all over. But he knew he couldn't do that.

He didn't want to scare her with shock. So he waited until she woke up from her disturbed sleep. But then when she had cried out his name in her sleep, he couldn't resist holding her and kissing her forehead to comfort her. And when she began to stir awake, he forced himself to move away from her and wait on the opposite couch.

He saw the shock slowly subsiding from Aditi's face. Comprehension dawned in her beautiful, hypnotic eyes.

"I hate you! I bloody hate you!" she began to scream.

He pulled her into his arms, but she struggled. She began to shake and cry hysterically.

"Shh. Calm down. I'm sorry, baby." He tried to kiss her, but her outrage gave her strength to avoid his lips.

"How could you!" she shouted.

"I had to," he replied as calmly as he could. "Even though I knew it would hurt you, it was the right thing to do."

Hearing to those words, she stopped struggling. She gave up fighting him but she was still trembling with shock. He

wrapped his arms around her tightly, passing on the warmth of his body to hers.

He kissed her softly on her forehead, and then at the corner of her eyes where he could taste the salt of her tears. He couldn't stop from wanting to touch her and kiss her.

He had missed her a lot. He could barely stop himself from rushing to her the last two months. But the things he had begun ten years ago were at the final stages, and he had to see them through.

“Why?” she asked when she pulled herself together.

Before he answered, he shifted her in his arms until she could lie against his chest comfortably. His heart ached when he noticed that she was much lighter than what she was before. She must have lost quite a lot of weight.

“I did it to fulfill my father's dream,” he replied. “My father wanted to destroy the Shauryas' illegal operations. The day he was killed along with your mother, he and your mother were going to the Chief Justice to expose those details.”

“Oh my God,” she whispered.

He held her tightly as she slowly put the pieces together.

“My grandfather ordered the hit on his son to stop him from destroying the Shaurya name. Narayan Shaurya didn't care who had to die as long as the Shauryas could retain their power. He even had my mother killed because she knew the truth about what my father was about to do.”

“How did you find out?” she asked, her arms hugging him tightly as though she was trying to protect him once again

from the devastating truth that had killed both his parents and also her mother.

“My parents told me what my father wanted to do. They wanted me to be prepared because I would be asked to give testimony as to what I had witnessed during my childhood. On the day of the accident, I was talking to my mother on the phone when my grandfather’s men arrived and killed her.”

A soft sob broke out of her, and her hug got tighter. “Oh God. I’m so sorry.”

His heart ached even now as he recalled his mother’s last call. But he drew comfort from Aditi’s arms. “I was nineteen at that time,” he continued. “Although I knew my grandfather was responsible, I didn’t want him arrested or killed right away. I wanted to fulfill my father’s dream first, and find out who the rest of the major players were, and take them all down.”

“Your grandfather died the day I shot you,” she whispered.

He watched her face unflinchingly. “I know. I was the one who killed him by poisoning him.”

She looked shocked but soon her eyes filled with righteous anger. “He deserved it,” she said softly.

“My grandfather wasn’t the first person whose life I had taken. I killed men who were involved in my parents’ deaths in cold blood. The man whose tongue I cut off, he was the one to tell my grandfather about what my father was about to do. I killed many drug lords too. I destroyed my own shipments and other’s shipments that contained illegal drugs and blamed it on my rivals. I used it as a pretext to kill those drug lords.

Everyone believed I was eliminating my rivals. And the more brutal I was in killing those men, the more people believed in my reasoning. I did it for ten years, all the while expanding my network, until I knew every major player involved in the illegal drug trafficking. Two months ago, I set off the final bomb that denoted the illegal drug mafia across the world. The crackdown that is happening will bring down all the major players.”

Even though she heard him quietly, he could see the hurt and confusion beneath the understanding.

He cupped her cheek as she stared at him with hurt-filled eyes. “I know I used you in this whole operation without letting you know the truth. I’m sorry for that.” He rubbed her trembling lips gently with his thumb. “Even though you were already a pawn in this whole game, I didn’t mean to drag you in it.”

“What do you mean I was already a pawn?” she asked with a small, confused frown.

“Your father was going to get you to marry Shiv, just so he could stop me from going after him. His plan was also to partner with Shiv’s illegal weapons’ business.”

She sucked in her breath in shock. “I know that my father wanted me to marry someone. B-but I don’t think he would have forced me to do it had I told him about Rahul.”

The blind trust she still held towards her father made his heart ache.

“Y-you think my father would have forced me into a marriage?” she whispered.

He nodded. “Your father was desperate at the time. He might not have forced you to do it in a violent way, but he would have emotionally blackmailed you to marry Shiv.”

Her eyes looked shocked as comprehension dawned. “Like he did to me when it came to marrying you. He told me if I didn’t marry you, his enemies would hunt and kill us.”

“Yes.”

She tried to process that as hurt filled her eyes once again. “My father might have had his reasons. But why did you want to marry me?” she asked.

“I wanted you,” he said simply. “I saw your pictures when Shiv showed them to me. Your father had sent them to him along with the marriage and business proposals. I was fascinated by you and what I had heard of you. And when I saw you at the club, I knew your father had sent you as bait so that Shiv would agree to the marriage proposal.”

“My father sent me to *The Dungeon* as bait?” she asked in shock.

“Yes. Whoever gave you the VIP tickets, did it on your father’s orders. The person researched and found out which days Shiv, Vijay and I are at our clubs.”

A look of disgust along with betrayal passed on her face.

“I hated your father for using you as a pawn to save himself. But I hated myself even more because I wanted you. I had heard about you before from my mother. She had even teased me saying she wanted me to marry you, so she and your mother could change their close friendship to a relation.”

Aditi looked shocked.

“I wish I could say I wanted you because you were my mother’s choice. But the real reason I wanted you was because you were not only beautiful, but I also knew you were raised by a mother who taught you to do the right thing, no matter what.” He brushed his thumb softly on her cheek. “Despite Shiv and Vijay’s warnings that I was completely obsessed with you, and it would be dangerous for me to marry you and involve you in our operation, I still went ahead and married you.”

She let out a shuddering breath. “What was the operation? What was my role in it?” she asked.

“Your role was to legitimately pass on information to the government about my illegal activities. To build a case against the biggest drug kingpin in India. You were to bring down Anirudh Shaurya.”

She closed her eyes before opening them with accusation in them. “You knew all along that I was betraying you?”

“Yes. Sameera Vasisht approached your father on my orders.”

Her lips trembled. There was fear in her eyes along with a denial which slowly crept through. He knew what she was going to ask before she even opened her mouth.

“Why do you hate my father?” she asked in a whisper.

Aditi's heart pounded as the devil's arms tightened around her as though protecting her from a devastating blow.

"There was another person who ordered the death of your mother..."

She jerked hard in his arms. She tried to push him away, but he didn't let her go. "Stop!" she shouted. "Don't say anything more! I don't want to know!" Hurt twisted inside her heart.

But deep inside her, she knew the truth already. "Oh God! No," she whispered. "No! No!"

He rocked her gently as the devastating blow of her father's betrayal hit her completely.

She could have forgiven her father's greed, but not this. Never this. Her father took her mother away from her. He let her believe that her mother had chosen the love of another man over her husband and child.

"Your mother was going to meet the Chief Justice along with my father to provide proof of her husband's illegal activities."

Aditi recalled her recurring dream of the argument between her parents.

"Vanita, please. Give me a chance. If not me, think of how this will affect Aditi."

Her mother looked sad but determined. "I've thought this through for quite a while, Mohan. Don't try to stop me."

Her father wasn't begging her mother not to leave him for another man. He was begging her not to expose him to the police with proof.

"I love you, my angel," her mother said softly. "I hope you forgive me and understand what I'm about to do."

Aditi still felt the gentle kiss on her forehead that her mother gave her before leaving that night.

"I love you," Anirudh's voice broke into her pain. He continued to rock her gently.

She realized she was crying. Silent tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Sameera Vasisht was the contact your mother had already reached out to before the accident. Sameera knew your father was responsible for your mother's death. After my parents' deaths, when I returned, Sameera worked closely with me. She gave me the information that I needed, telling me who I needed to target first. Your nanny, Suki, and your father's assistant, Prakash, were also passing information about your father to Sameera and me. Suki and Prakash knew the truth about your mother."

“You mother fell in love with the wrong man which cost her life.”

Suki wasn't referring to Harish Shaurya. She had always meant her father, Mohan Somraj.

Aditi closed her eyes. Oh God.

Why didn't Suki tell her the truth before?

Aditi knew she wouldn't have believed the old woman and would have thought they were random predictions of destiny like the ones Suki usually made.

Aditi took a deep, shuddering breath, her heart and mind unable to digest the information. But she couldn't control her hurt. She broke into loud sobs, mourning her mother who lost her life while fighting for what was right.

Anirudh's arms held her and rocked her gently while she broke apart.

She was not only mourning the loss of her mother, but also the loss of the loving father who existed only in her imagination. Mohan Somraj didn't love either his wife or his daughter. To him, his wife and daughter were only tools used for social climbing or to save him from being ruined.

Aditi didn't know how long she cried, but when she had stopped crying, she noticed it was dawn.

“Let me bring you some water.” Anirudh tried to get up, but she clung to him, not wanting to let him go.

“Don't leave me,” she begged, not caring how needy and desperate she sounded.

“You need to drink some water. You are dehydrated.”

Reluctantly, she let him go. He went into the small kitchen area and filled a glass of water and brought it to her.

She drank it slowly. Her throat hurt due to crying for so long.

“Finish it. I’ll get you more,” he said.

She finished it, but shook her head not wanting any more.

When he returned to the couch, he pulled her back into his arms until her head lay on his chest once again.

Raising her head, she touched his face, marveling how such a miracle could have happened. That he was back into her life.

“Why did you take two months to come back to me?” she asked.

His eyes flashed with deep regret and pain.

“Because I didn’t want you to find out I was alive. I didn’t intend to return.”

CHAPTER 36

Aditi stared at the man she loved, calmly letting her know he had intended to abandon her by letting her think he had died.

He looked torn as he spoke. “You were supposed to think I was a criminal and that I’m dead. And you were supposed to move on. But Sameera and Suki let me know you were grieving. They were worried that you would waste away and might even take your own life. So, I decided to return to let you know the truth before begging you to move on.”

“You don’t love me?” she asked in a whisper.

He held her face and looked into her eyes. “I love you more than anything in the world. But my life is still dangerous. No one knows I’m still alive, but they might find out somehow. You deserve happiness and security. I stole your dreams to fulfill mine. So I wanted to give back your dreams to you. I want you to live a happy, fulfilling life.”

She stared at him. She could see his hurt. And although she understood what he was saying, her heart was furious. It rejected his great big sacrifice.

“You want me to lead a happy, fulfilling life? Even if it’s with another man? With Rahul?”

Something flickered in his eyes. “Yes,” he said softly. “I want you to be happy. Even if it’s with another man.”

“I like children. I’ll have to lie under Rahul each night, letting him make love to me, letting him impregnate me with his child. Will you be okay with it too?” Her voice rose with each word.

Even though he tried to hide it, she saw him flinch hard as though the visual she put in his head hurt him physically.

“Yes. Anything that would make you happy and lead a content life.”

She hated him right then. Hated him for wanting to sacrifice his happiness for her.

So she hit him at the most vulnerable spot. “What if I’m not safe anywhere else?” she demanded. “What if your enemies somehow find out about me even with my new identity and kill me?”

His eyes flashed dangerously. “I won’t let anything happen to you. I’ll destroy anyone who intends harm to you. But if for some reason I’m unable to protect you, and my enemies somehow reach you, I will slaughter them all, avenging your death before joining you.”

She sucked in her breath. “Before you join me? In death?”

“Yes,” he said quietly as though it was obvious.

“Only cowards take their own lives! You agreed with me when I said that. How can you talk about getting killed just because I’m gone!”

“I am a coward when it comes to you,” he said calmly. “I might not take my own life, but I’ll not protect myself from taking dangerous risks. I’m not strong enough to live in a world knowing you aren’t there.”

Hot tears prickled her eyes. “Then why do you want us to be apart! You are my world too. I barely survived these two months thinking you were gone. Do you think I love you any less? That your love is somehow better and the only one that should matter? How could I *ever* possibly be happy with anyone else? Or anywhere else but next to you!”

He tried to wipe away her tears.

She pushed his hands away. “Tell me you won’t ever leave me!”

“Aditi...”

“Say it!”

He looked tormented, but he slowly nodded. “I won’t ever leave you.”

Her heart wouldn’t calm down from the sick thudding due to fear.

“Promise me you are speaking the truth,” she desperately demanded. “That I won’t wake up one day to find you gone.”

He cupped her face and gazed into her eyes. “I promise that I won’t ever leave your side.”

Her panic still didn’t subside. She pulled his head down and kissed him.

Their lips clung as they kissed each other desperately. When his hand crept into her hair and tugged hard in desperate passion, she relished the pain. It made her feel alive. It reminded her that he was alive and back into her arms.

He carried her inside to the bedroom, and laid her on the bed that she had never used these last two months. The bed

which felt lonely before now was the place where she could show the man she loved how much he meant to her.

Their hands and mouths were frantic while they got rid of each other's clothes. The moment they were completely bare, she spread her legs, wanting him inside her right then.

Two months of constant grief while missing him made her revel in his hard invasion.

"I love you," he said over and over as he rammed into her body.

She welcomed the pain and pleasure. She dug her nails into his shoulders and pressed her ankles into his hips to pull him even closer and deeper.

She wanted to keep him inside her for as long as she could. But despite trying hard to stop, release ripped through her body, and she cried out in pleasure.

She heard his harsh groan as he followed right behind her. She clung to him, not wanting to lose their connection even for a moment. She didn't care if his weight was heavy on top of her. All she wanted was to hold him in her arms, feel the beat of his heart against hers, and never let go.

For the first time in two months, she slipped into a deep, peaceful sleep.

“This was my mother’s house. She grew up here, and she fell in love with my father here. The three of us used to come here often to spend our family vacations.”

Aditi was lying on top of Anirudh while he spoke about his parents.

“My father had come to this country to make a business deal. Unfortunately, he gave the head of the drug cartel a piece of his mind about what they were doing was harming people. And so he was attacked and thrown out of a car and left to die. My mother saw him and rescued him by bringing him here. She saved his life.

“They fell in love, but they were too young and my father knew that my grandfather would never allow him to marry my mother. So, he kept her a secret and only visited her a few times on the pretext of business meetings. Only your mother knew the truth about them.”

Aditi was surprised. “*My mother?*”

“Yes. Your mother was my father’s family friend’s daughter. Even though your mother’s family didn’t have money, my grandfather didn’t mind the influence your mother’s family would bring him. My father and your mother let everyone think they were childhood sweethearts. It stopped my grandfather from wanting to look for a powerful family to marry his son into. But when my mother turned twenty-one

and she lost her parents in drug cartel violence, my father married her and brought her back with him.”

Aditi felt a pang. She knew that if her mother had been alive, she would have shared a lot of things with her. Aditi had only been thirteen when her mother died to have any adult conversations together.

Anirudh continued to tell her more about his life. He told her about his time in boarding school and how he had met his two friends in college.

“All three of us belonged to the most powerful crime families, and we hated it. After my parents were killed, and Shiv and Vijay lost their loved ones too, we made a pact together. It was to use our family’s power and leverage to bring down as many crime organizations as possible.”

Aditi continued to listen to him in fascination as he explained their detailed plan.

They were suddenly interrupted by the sound of the doorbell.

Anirudh stilled under her. “Let me check,” he said.

“It must be Suki to check on me,” she said.

Aditi expected it to be Suki but it was Sameera Vasisht.

“We need to talk,” said Sameera, but she was looking at Aditi.

“Your father will be implicated in your mother’s murder.”

Aditi was quiet. Sameera Vasisht had provided all the details of what Mohan Somraj had done over two decades.

What hurt Aditi was discovering that her father had always been a social climber. He had deliberately manipulated her mother, a beautiful heiress from an influential family, to fall in love with him using his charms.

“Do you want to save him?” Aditi heard Anirudh asking her softly.

Aditi’s heart clenched at Anirudh’s generosity. The man who had killed his own grandfather for avenging his parents’ deaths was giving her a choice whether or not another murderer who was responsible for his parents’ deaths could live or not.

“I-I don’t want my father killed.” She might be feeling betrayed, but the wound was still too raw and new to hate her father and have him murdered in cold blood.

“He’d still be a hunted person,” Anirudh told her softly.

“Mohan Somraj will most likely be sentenced to the death penalty,” Sameera Vasisht added.

Aditi felt her heart clench. “Let the law take its course. I... I would also like to meet my father.” She wanted to look her father in the eye and demand to know why he had chosen money and power over love. And whether or not he had

regretted that choice, since it not only took away his wife, but it also had made his daughter motherless.

“I’ll make the arrangements,” Sameera Vasisht replied softly.

A sudden memory came into her mind. “Why did your grandfather hate my father?” she asked Anirudh. “Especially when your grandfather and my father had planned the accident together?”

“Your father began blackmailing my grandfather. He told him that he would tell me the truth about my parents’ deaths. He used the blackmail to grow his business.”

Aditi bit her lip, trying to numb the pain and disgust she felt towards her father.

She sat through when Sameera Vasisht updated Anirudh with the rest of the details on the illegal narcotics crackdown.

Aditi understood some of the details because she happened to hear those names when she was spying on Anirudh. But she didn’t understand what Sameera Vasisht said next.

“Thank you Anirudh for your help over the last ten years and also for the help you extended for the coming years.”

Anirudh nodded with an unreadable look.

“All right. I’ll get going. If you or Aditi need to be in touch with me, call me anytime. I’ll be available.”

“Thank you.”

A few minutes later, after seeing Sameera off, Aditi and Anirudh returned to the beach house.

“What did Sameera mean by extending help for the coming years? What help?” Aditi asked.

Anirudh didn't reply right away. He took her hand in his and guided her to the couch and made her sit.

“You are scaring me,” she said. “Tell me now!”

Anirudh sat across from her on the opposite couch and watched her face closely. “I offered to help the government at an unofficial capacity.”

She was stunned. “To do what? To catch the rest of the criminal heads?”

He nodded. “Yes. It's only for a year or at most two, until Shiv and Vijay bring down the rest of the kingpins in arms trafficking and human trafficking. When I put in this offer, I assumed you'd consider me dead, and you wouldn't be impacted by my work. But now...”

Her heart thudded. “Will the job be risky?” she asked.

He didn't hesitate in replying. “At times, yes.”

There was a long stretch of silence.

Aditi's heart and mind raced, feeling conflicted.

She knew she might be risking heartbreak if anything were to happen to him while hunting down dangerous criminals. But she also knew that the man she fell in love with was filled with the burning desire to complete what he began ten years ago. He might give it up for her if she asked him to. But he would always feel a part of him was missing because of the work he left unfinished.

“You should do it,” she said softly. “I’ll stand by you and support you every way I can.”

His eyes flared and he cupped her face in his hands and looked into her eyes. The deep love and devotion she saw in his eyes resonated with what she felt inside.

“I love you,” he said with an unshakeable conviction. “Even if I cannot immediately give you the life you dreamed of, I promise I’ll do everything in my power to keep you happy.”

She smiled as her heart filled with incredible happiness. “I’ll be happy as long as I have you in my life.”

He took a shuddering breath and kissed her softly. “I cannot believe I’m agreeing to this despite knowing the risks. But I cannot stay away from you.”

She laughed softly. “Didn’t the devil once warn me that there’s nowhere in the world that I could run or hide from him?”

“I wasn’t lying,” he replied in a dead-serious tone. “I’ll follow you to the ends of the earth... and beyond.”

With that statement and a deep, passionate kiss, the devil turned what she had once considered a dark threat into a promise of forever.

EPILOGUE

London, UK

“The bartender told me that man moved here recently, and that he most likely would be the new owner of this nightclub.”

Aditi didn't turn to see who her friend was talking about. And yet, Susan continued to offer information. Aditi was visiting her favorite nightclub with two of her college girlfriends.

“His name is Arjun Rana, and he's one of those .com billionaires from the States who are extremely private.”

“Never knew billionaires could look like that,” Rita said with a low whistle. “I expected pasty faces or paunches. But... whew! This guy... looks more like a hot assassin or something.”

Aditi took a sip of her sparkling water while stifling a laugh imagining the reaction of the man being discussed at being called a hot assassin.

She turned to look. Her friend was right. Despite the expensive casual clothes, the man looked downright dangerous because of his intense look which was directed at their table.

She turned back to her friends and squeezed the rest of the lemon into her sparkling water before sipping it. Meanwhile, her friends took another round of shots.

“You know, Aditi...” Rita began. “Since Rahul is with Sheila now... and you are a widow... you must get back to the dating pool, love. And I did catch that gorgeous man’s eyes falling on you quite a few times. He’s watching you even now.”

“Yes. We know you went through a lot, but think of it as a nightmare. You have us, and your uncle and his family and also your childhood nanny. Time to move on, love.”

When Aditi returned to London nearly a few weeks ago, she had told Rahul and her uncle the truth. The devil wanted her to tell them because he felt she was safer in London than any other place since she had family and friends around her. And the devil visited her in secret in between his operations.

But her friends didn’t know the truth. Although Aditi felt guilty for not telling them, she didn’t think she could blurt out saying she was married to a powerful Mafia kingpin who had faked his own death.

“I’m not interested in any man right now. And a .com billionaire seems too boring. He probably counts his money during his leisure time or brags about what he owns during all his conversations.”

There were gasps.

“I assure you, I’m not boring,” a deep voice said from behind her.

Aditi slowly turned, and her eyes met with dark, intense eyes.

“May I have this dance?” the man asked, extending a hand.

“Go on. Say yes,” Susan whispered to her.

“I’m sorry. I’m here with my girlfriends, and I’m not interested to—” Aditi could barely finish when her other friend cut in.

“She would love to!” Rita more or less pushed Aditi on the man.

The man caught her and spun her lightly until she caught her breath. By the time she released her breath, he was leading her to the dance floor.

“I’m going to spank you tonight for calling me boring,” his deep voice murmured the soft threat into her ear, making her shiver lightly. “And you didn’t sound *bored* last night or early this morning in the shower. In fact, you were quite loud and were begging me to go even—”

Aditi quickly put her hand on his mouth and blushed. Despite being married to the devil for quite a while, she wasn’t used to his dirty mouth. And the man deliberately tried to make her blush like a newlywed bride.

“I don’t think you’ll spank me,” she challenged. “You’ll be too worried about your son or daughter.”

The devil’s eyes instantly softened. His large hands held her waist and cupped her stomach where their child was resting.

Luckily, the club was crowded enough that Aditi’s friends couldn’t see what was happening. Or their eyes would be as wide as saucers thinking that she was allowing a stranger to touch her, when she had barely spoken to any of the men they tried to hook her up with the last few weeks.

“Soon,” he growled. “You’ll be mine to claim in public.”

They had recently hatched a plan of a whirlwind romance where Arjun Rana, an enigmatic .com billionaire would sweep the not-so-grieving widow off her feet and they would marry in a small civil ceremony a few months later.

Their original plan was to marry a year later, when Anirudh was done with the operations. They had even picked a couple of places as options to settle down where they would begin their family.

But life had other plans.

Aditi had no idea about her pregnancy until Suki's words that put a doubt in her mind.

"The devil put his baby in you. And your daughter will arrive soon."

Aditi still didn't believe in destiny, but she realized that her last period had been unusually light. So when the doctor appointment showed that she was six weeks pregnant, strangely or not so strangely enough, she wasn't shocked. She was excited. As was the devil. In fact he looked quite pleased and proud.

"We are getting married," he announced.

The devil wanted to marry right away. But Aditi had teased him saying she wanted a proper courtship.

"You bullied me into marrying you the first time. This time I'm going to make you work for it."

And so, their courtship dance began. This was only their first day, and as expected the devil was trying to bend her will.

“Marry me,” he whispered wickedly in her ear, making her shiver again.

“Sorry. I don’t agree to strangers’ proposals.” She tried to sound offhand but it came out in a breathless whisper.

But the devil was relentless. When he wanted something, there was no stopping the man.

He pulled her closer until the length of her body was flush against his hard, muscular one. She even felt his blatant need.

“Aniru... Arjun!” she warned in a stern voice which again sounded too breathless.

He moved a tiny step away, but immediately, her body missed his warmth and touch. And the devil knew it.

He smiled wickedly. “Marry me,” he asked again.

She broke into a laugh. “This is hardly the romantic courtship I envisioned, Mr. Rana,” she said. “You are supposed to take me around the city, cook for me on date nights and then propose to me with a sweet poem or two.”

He pulled her closer again. “I’ll take you anywhere you want in the world. I’ve already cooked dozens of meals for you at our beach cottage, and I’ll continue to do it for the rest of our lives. The poem... well... I think whatever compliments I’ve given you during the course of our marriage were quite poetic. If you want me to write them down...”

She shook her head with a laugh. “Good God, no! Those filthy things are hardly poetry!”

“But you enjoy listening to those filthy things,” he whispered, making her shiver. “You enjoy them so much that

you always—”

She put a hand on top of his dirty mouth yet again.

“Marry me,” he whispered against her fingers.

She finally relented. “Fine. I’ll marry you in a month. But you are taking me out on a romantic date tomorrow. This better be a good courtship story we can tell our children. Not *Daddy bullied Mummy into marrying him, twice.*”

The devil grinned. “Sure, sweetheart.”

Much to her friends’ excitement, later that night Aditi told them she agreed to a date with the mysterious Arjun Rana.

One month later...

“Everyone said it was a beautiful wedding.”

Anirudh heard his wife sigh out dreamily while he was busy trying to remove the knots at the back of his wife’s heavy wedding dress. They were standing in front of their bedroom mirror multitasking. She was taking off the heavy jewellery while he was undressing her.

“I’m glad you invited Keshav, Shiv and Vijay,” she continued to say. “But I literally had to shoo away my friends from them. Keshav is fine, but imagine my friends’ reaction if I told them the truth about what the other two devils did.” She chuckled softly.

Anirudh was still trying to untie the top of her dress which had the tightest of knots that got tighter in his haste. So he tugged hard hoping something would give.

“Hey! You better be careful. This is my mother’s wedding dress!”

“I’ll be careful, I promise.” He tugged again but with less force.

His wife let out a small huff. “You weren’t careful with my first wedding dress. You tore it off me, remember?”

“I told you why,” he murmured, running a finger on her almost bare back, making her shiver and break into goosebumps. She was always responsive to his touch and it drove him even crazier.

“Hah. So what if there was a recording device?” she demanded breathlessly. “You could have waited until I changed and taken it. I think you enjoyed scaring me that night and many other nights that followed. You were trying to prove to me that you were truly the devil.”

Anirudh smiled. Aditi saw his smile in the mirror and shook her head with a tiny suppressed smile.

She looked so radiant with the beautiful pregnancy glow, that he was impatient. He wanted to make love to his wife.

In a careful move, he lifted the dress up and thankfully it slid off completely from the top of her head. “See, the dress is safe,” he murmured.

She was almost naked with only two tiny lacy scraps covering her.

She looked stunning. Her breasts grew larger because of the pregnancy and her body was beginning to show other changes. She was still fit because he made sure she continued with her defence training over the last year. Whenever he was with her, he always taught her tricks to attack or protect herself. He only stopped recently after finding out the news of her pregnancy.

He stopped himself from attacking the tiny strips of cloths. Instead, he stood behind his wife and cupped the small bump on her stomach that was beginning to show.

He was reminded yet again that he needed to be careful with her when he made love to her even though she loved his animalistic passion.

Kneeling down slowly in front of her, he kissed the bump where the tiny life he and his wife created rested inside. “How do you feel?” he asked, raising his eyes.

Although she didn’t have morning sickness, she did feel light nausea at times.

“Much better. Haven’t felt anything since last week. Suki thinks our first one will be a girl.”

“First one? How many does she think we are going to have?”

“She says three. Only because she already knows I wanted three children. But just to prove her wrong at least once, I’m going to have two kids.”

He laughed before standing up and sweeping her into his arms and carrying her to their bed.

“Wait! I totally forgot! I have a wedding-night dress that I want to change into.”

He laughed. “You know I won’t like having clothes between us in bed. You’ll probably wear it for less than a minute.”

“Still!” she insisted.

Reluctantly he let her down. “Fine. Don’t keep me waiting for long.”

Before he changed his mind and captured her, she ran out of his arms, grabbed a shopping bag placed at the corner of the

bedroom and went into the bathroom.

Meanwhile, he stood near the large window overlooking the city lights of London.

This was going to be his home until his daughter or son was born. And then, he would let Aditi decide where she wanted to settle down. He didn't really care where they lived because for him home was where she was.

But he knew Aditi still held a strong bond to her birthplace. She had even travelled to India a few months ago on his mother's birthday, just so she could visit the temple that continued to run with the help of the Shaurya trust and distribute gifts to the children at the orphanage in person.

He recalled how angry he had been at her for taking such an unnecessary risk even though he was beyond touched by her gesture.

She hadn't visited her father yet as it was still too painful for her. And he didn't want to push her either because he knew how long such feeling of betrayal from family lasted.

Even though he continued to hunt down powerful criminals, he did with a cold precision rather than in a burning revenge. He had made peace with his parents' deaths. He knew they would have wanted him to be happy. And the woman he loved made him beyond happy.

The sound of the bathroom door opening, made him turn. And then, he almost drooled at the sight.

"I thought you said you didn't care what I wore to bed." There was a small smirk on her face seeing the blatant lust blazing in his eyes.

His wife was wearing see-through red lingerie.

“You are three months pregnant, and I need to be careful with you,” he gritted more to himself.

He had planned to make slow, sweet love to her. But his wife had other ideas. She walked seductively towards him. “Says who?” she demanded softly.

She stopped in front of him and undressed him slowly. He groaned at the tease.

She smiled wickedly. “Don’t worry. You’ll learn to enjoy the torture. In fact, you’ll crave it.” She repeated what he had told her during the initial days of their marriage.

They had come a long way since then.

She pushed him on the bed and climbed on top of him. He let her because he loved watching her. With her long hair spilling over her back and hypnotic eyes locked on his while she slowly moved on top of him and joined their bodies together, she looked like a goddess. His goddess.

Even though he was the devil, he could somehow earn the love of a goddess.

Sometimes, he still couldn’t believe that life had given him a second chance with the woman he madly loved. She was his past, present and future. She was everything he ever wanted and everything he ever craved.

And he was willing to break any rule and do anything to make her his and keep her happy.

“I love you,” he said.

Her soft eyes looked back at him with love shining in them.
“I love you, too.”

Cupping her neck, he pulled her for a deep kiss, promising her forever before making her his bride for the second time.

The End.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for reading *The Devil's Kiss*.

I love writing dark lead characters with several shades of grey. But Anirudh Shaurya is my first antihero who is on the wrong side of the law as a powerful Mafia kingpin. Dangerous, powerful and handsome, I found the devil absolutely mesmerizing!

It was quite challenging to pair him with a character like Aditi who has unshakeable moral standards. But I'm glad that the angel found the devil irresistible and fell in love with him. :)

Hope you enjoyed reading Anirudh and Aditi's passionate love story as much as I did while writing it!

Please do provide me your feedback by rating and reviewing on [Amazon](#) and [Goodreads](#).

Thank you and stay safe!

MV Kasi

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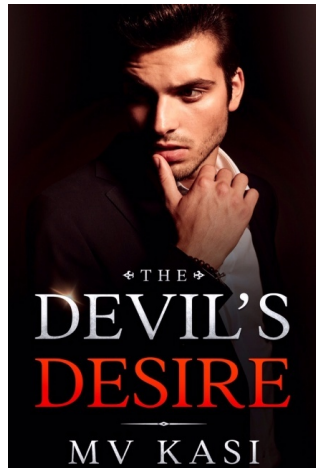
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And when he vowed to possess her body, heart and soul, why did she fear he might succeed?

Will she continue to fight the devil? Or will she give in to his desires... even though she knows she is going to escape him no matter what?

THE DEVIL'S DESIRE is a passionate contemporary romance.

BOOK EXCERPT

She heard the click of the bedroom door shutting and swung towards him. He was watching her with an unreadable look.

She didn't let her fear show, only allowed her hate and anger to show on her face.

"If you touch me, I will kill you," she warned.

She quickly took a few steps away from him. And then, with trembling hands, she took out the small pen-knife she had hidden inside the folds of her wedding dress and pointed it at him. She always carried it with her for her personal safety. Never did she think she might have to use it one day against the man she married.

The odds were against her. Shiv Jaipal was nearly a foot taller than her, broader and way stronger. The only thing she had as an advantage was her determination.

He didn't show surprise or anger or even alertness of having a knife pointed at him. He watched her with hooded eyes before beginning to take off his cufflinks.

Her hands trembled as she watched his smooth, unhurried moments. He placed the cufflinks on the nearest surface under a large mirror. And in an equally unhurried manner, he began unbuttoning his suit jacket. But this time, he slowly began to stalk towards her.

Naina's heart almost beat out of her chest. She backed away a few more steps while keeping her knife pointed at him with trembling hands.

"Stop!" she said desperately. "Don't come near me. Or I will kill you!"

He finished unbuttoning his jacket and shrugged it off, throwing it on a nearby chair. He then proceeded to unbutton his shirt. A flash of tanned skin and hard, ripped muscles came on display.

Her breaths splintered as she recalled touching and feeling those well-defined hard muscles a long time ago when he had kissed her. His hard, aroused body and his passionate kiss had constantly haunted her dreams.

"Come here," he ordered.

At his soft command, she was yanked back to reality. She looked at him disbelievingly. "I'm not joking! I'm serious! I'll kill you if you come near me or touch me!"

He smiled slowly and darkly. "Will you?"

"Yes!" she said in desperation and panic. "I will stab you and kill you!"

Continuing to smile darkly, he slowly stalked towards her. She continued to take a few steps back. But soon, her back met with the cold, glass wall of the bedroom.

She was cornered.

With her breaths coming out noisily and her heart thudding, she stared at him, at his stunningly handsome face which was now intent on claiming her as his wife.

A lot of time had passed since the last time they met as strangers. So much had happened in her life since then. And yet, she clearly remembered each and every moment she spent with the handsome stranger over a year ago.

She regretted it all now. She wished she had never gone to the club. Never seen him. Never met him. She wished she had never allowed him to make her feel the strong, undeniable pull of desire between them.

“I hate you,” she whispered before raising the knife higher and aiming it towards his chest.

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