



*Twisted*

**ALLIANCE**

P.G.VAN & MV KASI

# TWISTED ALLIANCE

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                   |
|-----------------------------------|
| <a href="#"><u>PROLOGUE</u></a>   |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 1</u></a>  |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 2</u></a>  |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 3</u></a>  |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 4</u></a>  |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 5</u></a>  |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 6</u></a>  |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 7</u></a>  |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 8</u></a>  |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 9</u></a>  |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 10</u></a> |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 11</u></a> |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 12</u></a> |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 13</u></a> |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 14</u></a> |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 15</u></a> |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 16</u></a> |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 17</u></a> |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 18</u></a> |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 19</u></a> |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 20</u></a> |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 21</u></a> |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 22</u></a> |
| <a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 23</u></a> |

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[CHAPTER 27](#)

[CHAPTER 28](#)

[CHAPTER 29](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31](#)

[CHAPTER 32](#)

[CHAPTER 33](#)

[CHAPTER 34](#)

[CHAPTER 35](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[AUTHORS' NOTE](#)

The sound of the closed bedroom doors reverberated inside Ishani's shaking stomach.

Her heart continued to pound as she watched Shivay Thakvar walk towards her in slow, unhurried steps. His dark eyes kept her ensnared.

When he stopped in front of her, her legs shook so much under her dress that it took a lot of effort to remain standing in front of him.

"I warned you of the consequences when you tricked and betrayed me on our wedding night," he said. A cold smile devoid of any warmth covered his darkly handsome face. "It's time for you to pay... wife."

Her legs nearly gave out underneath her, and she had to clutch the soft, sheer curtain next to the four-poster bed to remain upright.

"Y-you can't kill me," she said with a trembling voice. "M-my people won't forgive you. There will be a war between our clans if you m-murder

me.”

He didn't seem affected by her warning. In fact, his cold, terrifying smile widened slightly.

“I don't have to kill you. Death will be too easy of a punishment. There are many other ways to make you pay for your betrayal.”

*Oh God.*

# PROLOGUE

## **Zambia, Africa**

“I won’t let you get away with this, Thakvar! You will pay for your ruthlessness!”

Shivay Thakvar didn’t react to the threats. As the CEO and founder of a global corporation known for its cutthroat acquisitions, he was accustomed to hearing such threats issued by the former owners of the companies he acquired.

“I have already paid, Mr. Hendrick. In fact, I’ve paid you much more than what your nearly-dying company is currently worth. You should be thankful your family members had the foresight to accept my offer to help.”

The older man’s face reddened at the mention of his family members being a part of the acquisition. Along with his brothers, the man’s much younger wife and three adult children had also readily sold their shares.

The generational mining company now belonged to Thakvar Enterprises.

“You will fail for sure!” the older man shouted. “Just because you own a successful corporation in America, you think it’s easy running a copper mining company in Africa? Workers will revolt, and things will go very wrong. It will not be easy for you!”

At the threats, Shivay’s mouth twisted into a cold smile. “I don’t expect it to be easy. But thanks for warning me, Mr. Hendrick. I appreciate your concern.”

The older man’s face turned redder.



Shivay stood up from the plush leather chair in the conference room before he coolly nodded at the other executives seated around the table.

“Thank you, gentlemen. My team will contact you all for the next steps.”

He stepped out of the meeting room, followed by his team of executives and assistants. The building was small and close to the mining site. He stepped out of the air-conditioned building to the SUV waiting outside. There were two more SUVs, one at the front and another behind them with local security personnel.

“Mr. Hendrick doesn’t seem happy at all, Shivay,” one of his executives said while they sat in the vehicle. “He has issued threats throughout the negotiation process over the last two months. You should be careful.”

Shivay shrugged while fastening the seat belt. “I don’t expect him to be happy. None of the company owners ever were during any of our forced acquisitions.”

“This is Africa, Shivay,” another executive sitting across from him said. He was an older man who had been with Thakvar Enterprises before Shivay had taken over. “Things in other countries don’t always work as they do in America.”

Shivay had traveled enough over the last decade to know that as a fact. But most of his travels had been to countries in the Western world and other developed countries in the East. Venturing into the heart of Africa to acquire one of the biggest mines was relatively new.

“You should hire a few personal bodyguards, Mr. Thakvar. Mrs. Thakvar has always been suggesting it when you travel outside America.”

Shivay knew his assistant was referring to his mother, who constantly worried about his safety and wanted them to hire personal security. But

Shivay chose not to have armed guards following him all the time.

“I think the security we hired during the stay will do their job.” The security was mainly for his executives and assistants since he didn’t want to compromise their safety.

He sat back and sent a short message to Rishab and Nakul informing them the deal was finalized. They were also on the verge of acquiring companies in other parts of the world.

Although prominent voices in the business world often stated that the three of them were bent upon world domination with their ruthless acquisitions, there was only partial truth to it.

They did want to dominate the tech and manufacturing world, which was the core area of expertise of Thakvar Enterprises. But the latest acquisitions were for reasons other than just profits.

He looked at his watch. “Check if you can move the meeting with Dr. Hamilton and Dr. Clive to sometime earlier this evening.” He wanted to inform the head scientists that they could begin their project at the mines in a month.

Shivay’s assistant looked uncertain. “But you have a dinner event at the Minister of Local Government’s place, and you are the guest of honor.”

The minister who held the environmental protection portfolio for the local government was hosting the event to thank Thakvar Enterprises for the latest acquisition.

Shivay knew his assistant was hoping Shivay would catch up on some sleep since they had flown halfway around the world and attending meetings for the last twenty-four hours.

“I will attend the dinner event after the call. Arun will attend with me.”

“Okay, Mr. Thakvar.”

Shivay had two personal assistants to coordinate his intense schedule.

He knew his assistants and executives were looking forward to the brief break they would have the following week since Shivay would be flying back home to San Francisco. It was the anniversary of his father's death, and Shivay always ensured he was home with his mother during that time.

“Mr. Thakvar... about the event tonight...”

Shivay's assistant looked uncertain.

“Yes?” Shivay sounded curt with impatience. He didn't have time for people around him to fidget for any reason.

“The minister's office suggested a Miss Rachel Becker as your companion for the event tonight. She is a celebrity actress and the current government's star campaigner.”

Shivay understood the reason for his assistant's uncertainty.

“Tell them I will be bringing my own companion if I choose to have one.”

Although business networking is often required to make strategic connections, he drew a line when it came to his dating or personal life. He preferred to choose his companion, even for just one evening. He didn't want or allow anyone else to choose for him.

It was a huge point of contention with his mother who wanted him to get married. Had he been receptive to the idea of a bride being chosen for him, his mother would have had him married by now. Over the years, he even turned down several women his mother suggested he meet casually. He had told her he would be choosing the woman he would marry.

But marriage was the last thing on his mind. He had a lot more to accomplish.

\*\*\*

“Mr. Thakvar, it is a pleasure having you here, sir,” the minister said with a smile.

Shivay was at the dinner event hosted in his honor by the Minister of Local Government.

“Your trip is too short,” the older man continued. “You should visit us again soon... this time with your family.”

“Thank you, Mr. Mwale. I will consider that.”

Shivay knew the minister who held the portfolio of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection was grateful for landing one of the biggest investments of the decade, especially one he could display proudly on the world forum.

The minister smiled. “And also, we apologize for the inconvenience caused by Mr. Hendrick’s threats to you this morning. My government will ensure the transition is smooth.”

Shivay nodded, knowing the former owner of the mining company would be powerless to do anything without the support of the local government.

The event continued smoothly. It was held outside in the lawns. The food spread was elaborate, and the entertainment was geared to entice. But two hours later, Shivay excused himself to take a brief break. He instructed his assistant and executives to stay and continue watching the dance performances by the local ethnic groups.

Stepping into the large building, he found his way to the VIP restroom area. It was empty since most guests were enjoying the local dances.

A brief look at his watch indicated he had been awake and without sleep for nearly thirty hours. Fortunately, he had trained his body to function well, despite the lack of sleep.

Standing before the wall-to-wall mirror, he turned on the tap and splashed cool water on his face to remain functioning for another three hours. He had instructed his assistant to have another follow-up call with the two head scientists after the party.

He was just about to turn off the tap and straighten when he felt movement behind him. His eyes met with a man's reflection in the mirror. In a split second, Shivay took in the details. The man wore a black turban, and except for the eyes, the man's entire face was covered with whitish-gray paint, and his lower face was covered by a cloth. The man's hand was raised, and something shiny and sharp was aimed at Shivay's back.

Instinct made Shivay twist his body away. A sharp object sliced his upper arm before meeting with the restroom's granite counter with a sharp, scraping sound. Shivay barely felt the pain from the cut. He was focused on the man whose eyes looked shocked but determined.

He attacked again using something that appeared like three sharp metal claws.

Shivay stopped the oncoming weapon by holding the attacker's hand and kicking the man hard in the stomach.

The man grunted in pain and stumbled back, crashing against a tall standing mirror. The mirror shattered into pieces, but the man immediately took position again.

Shivay then knew the man was a trained assassin rather than a petty thief. There was no demand for money or anything else. The man was sent to him on a mission.

“Who sent you?” Shivay demanded.

The man didn't reply or say anything while he attacked.

Shivay was trained in fighting. But before he could assess his attacker's competence, he tapped his watch, activating an emergency signal before continuing to deflect the attacker's blows.

The attacker didn't hold back. It was clear from the cold rage and the way he held the three-prong metallic weapon the man's intention was to kill.

Shivay no longer deflected the blows. He went on the offense. Lunging, he attacked the man by holding his hand with the weapon, grabbing him by the throat, and pushing him up against a wall.

The man struggled hard, and the dark brown beads he wore around his neck broke apart, dropping them all over the polished marble floor.

"Who sent you?" Shivay asked, continuing to grip the man's neck in a chokehold.

The man remained silent as he struggled. Shivay noticed that the man's face was covered with ash and not paint. On his forehead, underneath the ash, there were three horizontal lines with a faint mark at the center.

"Tell me who sent you," Shivay demanded again.

The man looked determined but did not answer. Before Shivay could shift the chokehold, the man raised his free hand and blew something on Shivay's face. A dust of gray covered the air, blinding Shivay and loosening his grip momentarily. The man chose that moment to pull out of the chokehold, and before Shivay could completely open his eyes, the man ran out of the restroom.

Shivay followed the man to chase after him, but barely a moment later, a series of gunshots were heard.

*Fuck.*

By the time Shivay reached outside, he saw a dozen local armed guards surrounding a prone body, and the shots continued.

“Don’t shoot!” Shivay ordered.

The guards stopped at his command, but when Shivay moved closer, he could see that he was too late. The man lay still with his eyes open, his body ridden with bullet wounds.

Anger and annoyance filled Shivay.

“Sir, you are bleeding!” Shivay’s assistant remarked.

Shivay ignored the pain in his arm and the concern in his assistant’s voice. Cold anger filled him at the thought that someone dared to order an attack on him.

“Are you all right, Mr. Thakvar?” the minister’s worried voice asked.

“Yes.”

“I’m so sorry there has been a security breach at my home,” the minister continued in a shocked, angry tone. “I’ll find out who was behind this attack and punish the culprit severely.”

Although Shivay had no reason to doubt the minister’s words, something about the attacker made Shivay think it went beyond the capability of the local government.

Shivay looked at the body of the tall man with a black turban and clothing. The face under the gray ash didn’t appear like a local either. His eyes then fell on the man’s neck, where there were visible bruises from where Shivay had held the man in a chokehold.

“The police are on the way,” the security head announced.

“Please allow the medical team to attend to your injuries, Mr. Thakvar,” the minister requested.

Shivay didn’t want to bother about the injuries, but he noticed that the cuts made by the sharp three-pronged weapon on his shoulder were deep, and he was bleeding down his arm.

For the rest of the night, he allowed the minister and the team of local

police and medical professionals to attend to him. It was nearly dawn when he and his team headed to the private airport to fly back home.

Just as he sat back in the seat of his private jet while it prepared to take off to San Francisco, he pulled out something from his business suit pocket.

It was a small, dark brown wrinkled bead that the assassin had worn and had broken during the scuffle.

Shivay held the small bead in his palm and stared at it. It wasn't a bead. It was a dried seed and looked familiar because his mother had similar ones in the prayer room of their home. Although the particular stone fruit seeds weren't uncommon, they were usually worn by people from a particular country that wasn't Africa or America. A country he had never been to in his lifetime.

He had already ordered a private investigation to find out who the assassin was and the person behind the attack.

*Whoever you are, I'm coming after you.*



# CHAPTER 1

**Two months later...**

**India**

“The vehicle has arrived, sir. Please allow us to accompany you outside.”

Shivay looked at his assistant seated opposite him in the private jet. They had just landed. “No. I don’t want anyone with me.”

Shivay’s assistant knew him well enough not to argue.

“Don’t call me unless it’s an emergency,” Shivay instructed. “Text me. I’ll call you for updates.”

Shivay’s assistant nodded.

The jet received the necessary clearance, and soon the door was opened. Grabbing the carry-on, Shivay got up from the cushioned seat and went towards the exit.

The dry heat hit Shivay hard as he stepped out of the private jet, and the sun’s glare seemed intense. Sliding on his sunglasses, he unbuttoned his suit jacket and took the short flight of stairs down the plane before going towards the exit of the small airport.

He had been warned about the weather, but it hadn’t prepared him in any way for the intensity of the heat. Holding his compact carry-on, he walked inside the airport. Since most of the formalities were completed before his arrival, he was guided to where vehicles were parked outside.

A middle-aged man was waiting for him outside, holding a signboard with Shivay’s name.

“Sir, are you Mr. Shivay Thakur?”

Shivay gave the man a brief nod. He was deliberately using a different last name for the visit.

“I’m Kabir. Welcome to India, sir.”

The man took Shivay’s carry-on bag and led him to a jeep. While the man loaded the luggage into the back, Shivay slid into the passenger seat. The interior of the jeep didn’t seem much cooler than outside. Although the man had kept the engine running, the intense heat and direct glare from the sun were too much for the air conditioning to withstand.

Shivay opened the top two buttons of his shirt.

The man shut the trunk and came towards the driver’s seat. He was surprised to see Shivay seated in front. The rear windows were covered with dark shades to keep the sun’s rays out.

“Mr. Thakur, the agency has complimentary drinks for you in the back. You might not be comfortable seated in the front since it can get very hot and sunny.”

“I’m fine here.”

The driver looked confused and surprised, but he didn’t argue. With a smile, the older man got into the jeep and drove out of the small airport.

“Is this your first visit to India, sir?” the man asked.

“Yes.”

“I heard you are here on business. But I would love to show you around our beautiful city when you are free. I can take you to...”

Shivay listened to the local driver as he spoke about the various tourist attractions in the city. Although Shivay was visiting the place under the garb of business, it wasn’t the entire truth.

He was there for a specific reason—to accomplish one of the most important tasks. A task he never thought of as a possibility until two months ago.

*“The Sands of Singoor have found us...”*

The shock and fear in his mother’s voice as she uttered those words were branded into his mind, along with the discovery of a truth that was hidden from him for nearly two decades.

Although it had barely been two months since the attack on him in Africa, the significant change it brought in him after discovering the truth could not be denied. He was no longer driven purely by discovering the identity of the man who ordered the attack on him in Africa. His utmost priority was now to keep the promise he had made.

“Sir, the terrain will get bumpy soon,” the driver said. “And it might be safer for you to stay in the back of the jeep than sit in front. Would you like me to stop so you can sit in the back?”

“No, I’m fine here,” Shivay replied.

The man looked uncertain, but he nodded and continued to drive. There was a brief silence while the jeep took the highway exit that led them out of the city. Soon, the surrounding terrain began to change dramatically.

Shivay noticed that the roads were paved but narrow. On both sides of the road was a vast, seemingly endless sandy stretch.

“You are lucky you’re going to the Thakvar mansion, sir. Other places in Singoor do not have paved roads. It’s only because of Mihir Thakvar that there are roads. At least those that aren’t destroyed.”

There was a bumpy stretch despite the narrow roads where parts of it were covered by sand. Shivay wondered if it was due to sandstorms.

“But I’m surprised you want to do business with Mihir Thakvar,” the man said hesitantly.

Shivay frowned. “Why? Isn’t he fair or trustworthy?”

“Oh, Mihir Thakvar is the most trustworthy and kindhearted man. He is the only one who cares about these lands and tries to bring in development.

It's because of him that my daughters were able to go to school, and my aged parents have a hospital nearby rather than far away in the city."

Shivay had researched enough in the last two months to know whatever the jeep driver was saying was true.

"Then why are you surprised I'm here to do business with Mr. Thakvar?"

There was an uncomfortable silence from the man.

"Have you lived here long?" Shivay asked.

"Not too long, sir. Like most young people, I left the Singoor area twenty years ago. But I returned to my home five years ago to take care of my aging parents. My wife and daughters say they like it here, but I worry about them due to the..."

Once again, the man left something unspoken.

Shivay didn't press the man to say more. Although he found out as much as he could in the last two months, it wasn't nearly as much as he wanted. He still needed to know much more before he could keep his self-made promise.

The jeep waded through the endless stretch of sand. On the way, a brief sandstorm reduced visibility, but the man drove through it carefully.

A few minutes later, the visibility improved considerably, and there was a gasp from the man.

"My God. It must be the Kabalis. They are such savages!" the man said with a shaken voice.

The jeep slowed, and Shivay could see an open-top jeep in the distance. At first, he thought it was abandoned, but a moment later, he saw two people slumped on the seats. As the jeep got closer, he could see the people were dead or had been dead for a while with their eyes wide open. Their throats had three horizontal slit marks.

The jeep driver didn't stop and accelerated the vehicle.

"It's too dangerous to stop, and we are too late anyway," he said. "All I can do is inform the city police."

Based on the man's reaction, Shivay knew it wasn't an uncommon occurrence in the area.

"They didn't look like locals," Shivay remarked. The dead men wore formal shirts with ties and trousers.

The jeep driver shook his head. "They must be... businessmen. The ones sent by oil mining companies."

"Do all the businessmen meet such fate here?" Shivay asked.

A look of guilt passed on the jeep driver's face. "Yes. Most of them are attacked, but we shouldn't be since they would know I'm a local. I'll tell them you are a tourist."

Shivay didn't say anything.

They continued to travel through the endless stretch of sand. The jeep driver kept checking the mirrors to ensure no one was following them.

Soon, a few houses were visible in the distance. The closer they got led to a small town, but the jeep didn't stop and continued passing through. The houses were small yet neatly maintained outside. The mode of transport seemed to be two-wheelers and bullock carts. A few even had camels carrying goods. Several curious onlookers looked at him as he sat in the front seat. Shivay noticed that everyone, including the children, wore multi-colored turbans and had the distinct white horizontal lines on their foreheads, similar to the assassin who had attacked him in Africa.

A few minutes into the town, a massive, sprawling structure that looked like an old-world palace came into view. The pale reddish hue and high column structures at the four corners of the building made it appear like a fort.

“That is the Thakvar mansion,” the jeep driver announced proudly. “It was built over four hundred years ago using the Singoor sandstone.”

The driver drove towards the mansion and then stopped in front of the tall gates, bearing an insignia of tigers. There were at least half a dozen guards, and they seemed to recognize the jeep driver.

“Mr. Shivay Thakur is here to meet with Mr. Mihir Thakvar on business.”

The head guard nodded before opening the heavy gates and allowing the vehicle inside.

They continued along the paved driveway around a massive water fountain and stopped in front of the four-story mansion. A small group of men wearing the same-colored turbans and ethnic clothes waited to receive him.

“Thank you, Mr. Kabir,” he told the driver. “I will call you if I need your services.”

The driver nodded with a smile. “You are most welcome, sir.”

Shivay got down from the jeep.

“Welcome, Mr. Shivay,” a middle-aged man greeted. “I’m Rai Bahadur, Mr. Mihir’s manager.”

Shivay noticed that even the man in front of him also had the distinct three white horizontal lines with a small red dot in the center over his forehead. Although the lines weren’t as big as the one on the assassin in Africa, they were still noticeable.

Shivay was led up the large flight of marble steps at the entrance and taken inside. The mansion was a four-story structure in U-shape with a large central courtyard leading to the garden. The place looked well maintained with antique furniture, multicolored rugs, collections of paintings, clocks, and other decorative accessories. Shivay was then led to an air-conditioned room.

“Please be seated, Mr. Thakur, and avail our refreshments while I inform Mr. Mihir of your presence.”

Shivay sat on one of the ornate sofas with carvings while refreshments were served. His eyes fell on a wall that had several portraits. Based on the clothing and similarities in features, it was portraits of generations of families who lived in the mansion.

A strange tightness gripped his chest as he waited. He realized that the feelings were a combination of anger and loss.

Fifteen minutes later, the man named Rai Bahadur returned along with a tall man with greying hair whose clothing resembled that of old-world royalty. Unlike the other men, his turban was of a different color and held the gold insignia of an attacking tiger in the middle. The taller man’s regal features appeared tense.

“Would you like something else for refreshments, Mr. Thakur?” Rai Bahadur asked, seeing that Shivay hadn’t eaten anything. “We also have delicacies that are palatable to the Western tastes.”

“I’m fine,” Shivay replied.

Shivay held the eyes of the older man who didn’t greet and continued to watch in grim silence.

“I would like to speak to Mr. Thakur alone,” Mihir Thakvar finally said.

The staff began to leave immediately. “You too, Bahadur. I will speak to you later. Please give us privacy.”

The other man looked surprised, but he nodded before following the staff outside. The door to the receiving room was shut, offering Shivay and Mihir Thakvar complete privacy.

A heavy silence followed as they watched each other. The tightness inside Shivay’s chest grew while Mihir Thakvar’s face crumpled and the

older man stepped closer to hug him.

The hug was long and tight, bringing warmth as well as increasing the sense of loss.

Mihir Thakvar shuddered before pulling away. “Why did you come here, Shivay?” he asked.

“I came here to take you back where you belong.”

There was a heartbroken look on Mihir Thakvar’s face as he replied. “I belong here,” he said.

Anger and loss once again burst inside Shivay’s chest, but he didn’t let it show. “You belong with your family.”

Mihir Thakvar shook his head. “No. I can’t go anywhere. Chitra shouldn’t have told you the truth. She promised not to. It was for your own safety.”

“She had to tell me,” Shivay replied, “... after I was attacked by a man wearing this.”

Shivay took out the dark brown rudraksh and held it in his palm.

Mihir Thakvar’s face paled. “My God. This rudraksh belongs to Singoor. How did they find out? No one was supposed to know the truth!”

“I’m trying to find out the identity of the man who ordered the attack as well. But I came here when I found out about you.”

Mihir Thakvar looked guilty and worried. “I had to make that tough decision to keep you safe. Even now, it’s safer for you to leave Singoor. If they find out who you are, your life will be in danger. I will arrange for security. Leave right away and go back to San Francisco.”

There was fear and worry evident on Mihir Thakvar’s face.

“I’m not leaving Singoor without you,” Shivay stated calmly. “You are my father, and you belong with your family.”



## CHAPTER 2

It was late in the evening, and Shivay was in the guest suite at the Thakvar mansion.

He was giving instructions to his personal assistant over the phone while he looked towards the garden from the suite's balcony. It was cooler inside the suite with the air conditioning, but he preferred to remain on the balcony and observe outside.

“Have the jet and pilots on standby twenty-four-seven,” he instructed.

Although he didn't know how long it would take to convince his father to fly to San Francisco, he wanted to ensure the travel was arranged without any glitches.

“And the transportation and security, sir?”

“Have them on standby too, but ensure they are in the city with quick access to the Singoor area.”

Shivay had heard about and witnessed the violence that was prevalent in the Singoor area. But since his father had local security, Shivay didn't want to bring in outside help that would raise suspicion among the locals. The international security he hired was highly trained in combat as well as technology.

“Yes, sir. I have reserved the hotel rooms and necessary transportation in the city for the security team.”

“Good. Call me if there are any updates.”

“Yes, sir. I will.”

Ending the call, Shivay remained on the balcony as he watched the activities downstairs. The mansion was bustling with people who looked entirely unfamiliar from what he was accustomed to seeing.

Although he had traveled extensively worldwide and had witnessed different cultures, he had never been to his father's home country.

He recalled his childhood memories when his father often spoke about his native home. His father had an older brother and younger sister who were looking forward to his brother's family from America visiting the Thakvar mansion. But an untimely accident of Mihir Thakvar put an end to those plans.

Shivay had thought his father's family was indifferent and hadn't kept in touch after his father's supposed death. Only after discovering the truth two months ago, Shivay knew his uncle and aunt had been killed in an accident twenty years ago which led to his father's decision of faking his death and return to Singoor.

*"I had no choice but to return. It was the only way to keep my family safe."*

Although Shivay understood his father's anguished words and the decision to fake his death in an accident to return to Singoor, Shivay didn't think the circumstances were the same anymore. Shivay was no longer a child and was capable of protecting himself and his family.

But still, his father didn't want to take chances. Mihir Thakvar felt money and security would not stop the bloodshed and violence prevalent in the Singoor area.

A soft knock on the door interrupted Shivay's thoughts.

"Come in," he instructed. He knew it wasn't his father. After lunch, his father had excused himself to meet with village heads who had arrived at the mansion. That gave Shivay some time to think and further plan his next steps.

Shivay stepped into the guest suite and went into the living area. The door opened, and a familiar face stepped inside. It was Rai Bahadur, his

father's manager and close confidant.

“Good evening... sir,” the man greeted.

“Good evening.”

The older man's gaze lingered on Shivay's face for a moment. “You wanted to talk to me?”

Shivay nodded. “Yes, please sit.”

The older man sat on the antique chair facing the balcony. Shivay took the opposite chair.

Based on the man's expression, Shivay knew that Rai Bahadur knew the truth.

“You know who I am,” Shivay stated.

The older man didn't pretend to know what Shivay was referring to. “Yes, Mr. Thakvar told me this afternoon. I have been his close and trusted confidant for the past twenty years.”

“I see. So, you also must know why I'm here.”

The man nodded. “Yes... Mr. Thakvar. I know you are here to take your father back to America.”

Shivay looked at the man. “I need your help to convince my father, Mr. Bahadur. At their age, my mother and father need to be together. They have lost enough time being apart for over twenty years.”

The man's face fell. “I pray that Lord Shiva will bring your parents together, and I will help you and your father in every way possible, sir. But you must know your father cannot be easily convinced.”

“If it is for the family's safety, I can assure him of that.”

“Yes, his utmost concern is your family's safety, but there are other things he is worried about as well. Things here at Singoor.”

“I understand that he has a lot of responsibilities. But my plan isn't for him to leave permanently. I want him to visit my mother and for them to

fly back here together when it is safe. I would like you to assure him that you would take care of the responsibilities here meanwhile.”

Rai Bahadur, his father’s trusted man and a distant cousin, seemed to be the viable candidate to take over the responsibilities from his father during that time. Mr. Bahadur lived in the Thakvar estate with his wife and two daughters who also worked in the mansion. Shivay had been observing the older man since earlier that afternoon. Mr. Bahadur was very protective of Shivay’s father. He had stood outside the closed living room door during the afternoon meeting, and Mr. Bahadur’s eyes were more vigilant than the security guards. Even during lunch, the man cast a look at the guards to ensure the safety of Shivay’s father before joining Shivay and his father at the dining table.

Shivay knew there wasn’t a better person to take on the responsibility for everything his father was doing for the region.

“I have no problem taking on your father’s responsibilities to run the Thakvar trust organizations, sir. But no one can replace your father in the most important responsibility.”

“What responsibility is that?” Shivay asked.

“To keep the peace in the region,” the man replied. “If there is any news about your father leaving, there will be increased bloodshed and power struggles within the clans in Singoor. Your father is the thin thread who is currently holding everything together.”

After the initial investigation, Shivay knew of the prevalent violence and bloodshed in the Singoor region but not the reasons or complete history behind it.

“My father can’t be the only solution to stop the bloodshed and clan wars,” Shivay stated.

Rai Bahadur’s face fell. “Unfortunately, he is. Your father has been

the only one trying to stop the bloodshed and clan wars for the last two decades. Even he hasn't succeeded completely.”

Shivay knew his father felt responsible to stop the clan wars from escalating. Although Shivay didn't feel the same responsibility, he knew it was important to fulfill the promise he made to his mother.

“How can the clan wars be stopped and the region be united?”

Rai Bahadur's face looked pained as he replied. “A lot of things happened that began thirty years ago,” he said.

Shivay's mother had recently told him the same about a significant event happening thirty years ago that led to Shivay's father being told by his older brother not to visit Singoor until it was deemed safe.

“But twenty years ago, things escalated and went to the point of no return when your uncle and aunt were killed...”

Shivay knew Rai Bahadur was talking about Shivay's father's older brother and sister dying in an accident. Although Shivay was only nine years old then, he recalled his father being devastated after receiving the news.

“For many centuries, our region was very prosperous, thanks to our protectors, Lord Shiva and Goddess Shakti. Though the clans had power struggles, none had a reason for bloodshed due to the peace treaty they made in front of Mahadev. Soon, oil was discovered amidst the sands of Singoor, making the region even more prosperous.” Rai Bahadur let out a sigh. “Many people moved from various parts of the country for job opportunities and the high quality of life the Singoor region offered. Many foreigners and companies came in and started drilling for oil as well. And then, the unthinkable happened.”

Rai Bahadur took a deep breath like he was mustering up the courage to speak. “Our mother, our protector, our Goddess Shakti, was stolen from the temple as though she were a commodity.”

Shivay knew the man was talking about the statue that used to be a part of Singoor temple.

“Stolen by whom?” Shivay asked.

Rai Bahadur looked enraged and helpless. “No one knows who was responsible. The clans blamed each other. Since then, this land has been deemed to be cursed. Bloodshed, diseases, deaths of clan heirs... everything started after Goddess Shakti was taken, leading to the ruin of this region.”

“Our Lord Shiva’s form had been in the region for centuries in his natural form before even the existence of clans, whereas Goddess Shakti’s form was a beautiful statue commissioned by four clans centuries ago.”

Shivay had heard the same from his mother but hadn’t known that four clans commissioned the statue.

“So, if the stolen goddess statue is restored, will there be peace in the region?” Shivay asked.

Shivay would hire several teams of investigators and activate every bounty hunter out there to find the stolen statue.

The older man’s eyes lit up in hope only to be followed by a fallen face. “Yes, there is hope for peace if the statue is restored, but it has been decades since the goddess statue was taken from us. Some people still hope she will return, but most have learned to move on without her.”

“And what about the oil drilling? Why has that been stopped?”

There was anger and disgust on Rai Bahadur’s face. “That is because of the Kabali clan. After the statue was stolen, they didn’t allow anyone to drill oil in the Sands of Singoor. Every businessman or organization that tried to enter has been brutally killed over the past twenty years.”

Shivay recalled the taxi driver referring to the Kabali clan as savages responsible for slitting the throats of the two businessmen in the jeep.

“So if the goddess statue is found and the drilling of oil resumes, will

there be peace in the region?”

Rai Bahadur nodded. “Yes, I believe there will.”

Shivay knew both those tasks would take some time to be accomplished. It could take months or years, which would mean his father will have to stay in the region until then.

*I cannot wait that long.*

The memory of heartbroken tears in his mother’s eyes made him determined to find a solution to take his father to San Francisco.

“Is there no other solution to bring peace among the clans? What if I initiate peace talks among the clan leaders, especially with the Kabalis to allow oil drilling?”

Rai Bahadur shook his head vigorously. “No! Please don’t attempt that. It is dangerous, and your father will be devastated if anything happens to you. As in the past, all heirs died after one such meeting.”

Shivay picked up an underlying detail in the way Bahadur mentioned the deaths of heirs. “How did the heirs of the clans die?” he asked.

Shivay knew Rai Bahadur was including his father’s older brother when referring to the heirs.

The older man took a long pause before speaking. “After the Goddess Shakti statue was stolen, the clashes began, and all outsiders were driven out of the region. A few years later, the leaders of prominent clans met to find common ground to bring their people together. Several heirs died under shocking circumstances within a few years of that meeting. The last ones were your uncle, who died in a car accident along with his sister.”

“Couldn’t the causes be murders?” Shivay asked.

Rai Bahadur shook his head. “All of them were accidents and natural deaths, as if...” the man’s voice shook as if in fear, “... as if the land was cursed and the heirs paid the price.”

Everything that Shivay heard seemed unreal, especially about the heirs dying. However, he pushed away his pragmatic mind that refused to believe things beyond logic.

And if the people of the region believed in the curse, he would have to work around it.

Shivay had been in several dangerous situations before and had come out of them successfully. And the current situation would be well worth the risks.

“At this point... not much can be done other than what your father has been doing... unless an alliance forms within the clans.” Rai Bahadur froze and looked at Shivay with a strange expression.

“An alliance?” Shivay asked. “What kind of alliance?”

Rai Bahadur looked uncomfortable, as though he had revealed something he shouldn't have.

“I-I shouldn't have brought it up. Your father will not want you to—”

“Mr. Bahadur, please tell me about the alliance.” Shivay knew the older man wouldn't be swayed by materialistic things and had strong loyalty towards Shivay's father. “If there is any other way to help unite my parents, I want to use that opportunity. Please don't withhold that information.” And if not Rai Bahadur, Shivay could find out about the alliance from someone else. But he rather not lose time and find out from someone he could trust.

The older man looked torn but slowly nodded, seeing Shivay's determined look.

“For the regional feuds to settle down... and to bring stability between the clans... a strong alliance has to be formed between the legitimate heirs.”

“What kind of alliance?”

Rai Bahadur hesitated. “A marriage alliance,” he finally replied.



“Until now, there wasn’t a possibility of such a thing happening as the rest of the three leading clans only have daughters.”

Shivay did not show any reaction to the man’s words. It was becoming more evident why their father kept his family away and hidden from the regional feuds. The man continued when Shivay remained silent, “Ideally, we need three heirs from Thakvars to build the relationship with the three clans, but a strong alliance can be a starting point to begin the peace talks.”

Rai Bahadur held a hopeful look. “Several decades ago, such alliances between powerful clans were the norm. And it was said that the couples from the most powerful alliances had together commissioned the divine form of our goddess.”

It didn’t take long for Shivay to understand that an alliance between two prominent clans would restore the balance required in the region. It would open up the possibility of having talks with various other clans as well.

“Who are the other prominent clans in the region?” Shivay asked.

“There are many clans, but the most prominent are the Gujjars, Bhils, and Kanwars. These are the only ones that can be somewhat trusted for an alliance or having peace talks with.”

“I see.”

Right then, Shivay didn’t care which clan and who he would pick to marry. All he cared about was to unite his father and mother.

So, he went with the first clan. “The Gujjars,” he said. “I’m going to have an alliance with the Gujjar clan.”

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Mihir Thakvar was not happy with the announcement.

“I want you to leave Singoor, Shivay. Not build alliances that would tie you to this land and risk your life further! Bahadur shouldn't have told you about the alliances or the land's history.”

Shivay was prepared for his father's reaction.

“It isn't his fault. I asked him to provide the information. And if not Mr. Bahadur, I would have gotten the information from elsewhere. But no matter what, I am not leaving until you can join your family with peace of mind.”

Shivay's father looked torn. “But how can you talk about making such alliances? I married for love. The ten years I spent with your mother were the happiest in my life. I wanted the same for you as well.”

Shivay looked at the broken yet yearning expression of his father. “Ten years isn't nearly enough, Dad.”

Mihir Thakvar's face crumpled listening to Shivay. “I know, son. I have known and felt that every moment of these last twenty years I have been apart, but my family's happiness and safety were worth any sacrifice.”

Shivay understood that perfectly. “I agree that no sacrifice is greater than the safety and happiness of family, which is why I would like you to speak with the Gujjar clan and arrange for an alliance.”

Shivay's father fell silent.

Shivay looked at Bahadur listening quietly.

“Can I meet the heir of the Gujjar clan? I would like to discuss the region's state of affairs with her.” Shivay had to ensure that the woman he

was planning to marry would understand the gravity of the situation and the need for such an alliance.

Bahadur gently shook his head. “Ishani Gujjar is the heir, but she grew up in a conservative environment like the women of her clan. Her older brother, Devraj Gujjar, is the one running the clan on behalf of his sister, and he is a bit of a hothead.” He paused as if contemplating speaking. “Devraj is the first born of the clan leader, but he is illegitimate, and more than half the clan do not recognize him as the rightful heir.”

Shivay realized he hadn't expected the prospective bride to be too sheltered and innocent. He thought the clan wars would produce tough and hardened women.

But based on the information, the half-brother might be a useful link since the man was looking for ways to establish himself as the true heir of the clan.

“Then let's set up a meeting with the brother tomorrow,” Shivay said.

Shivay knew he was moving rapidly, but that was his usual working style. Although it worked well for him in business, he had never made quick decisions when it came to his private life. Even the women he casually dated were picked only after careful consideration.

Shivay's father seemed to think along the same lines.

“It's barely been twenty-four hours since you arrived at Singoor, Shivay. You must sleep on it and reconsider forming an alliance that will have lifelong consequences.”

“I'm not going to change my mind,” Shivay replied. “Whether it is tomorrow or a week after that, I want to form an alliance with... Ishani Gujjar.”

But what Shivay didn't mention was that it would be a twisted alliance.



## CHAPTER 3

The marriage festivities were done in a grand, elaborate style and traditional manner.

The ceremonies began in the early morning before sunrise at the small temple within the Thakvar family mansion. The sound of the conch shells and drums could be heard outside.

Shivay stood still while a small team worked on his wedding attire. They adjusted his long, heavy ethnic tunic. A dark red turban with the Thakvar insignia was placed on his head. Layers of pearls were arranged on the tunic with a distinct pendant and the insignia surrounded by gold-rimmed tiger nails. A ceremonial sword with a jeweled handle and an ornately decorated gold case was placed on his side.

Shivay's eyes fell on the heavy ring on his left hand with the Thakvar insignia that could only be worn by the Thakvar family heirs. His father had given it to him after publicly announcing Shivay as his son and arranging for the alliance.

"I need to speak with my son alone. Please leave." At Mihir Thakvar's command, the room emptied.

Shivay's father was dressed similarly, but unlike his son's stoic expression, the older man had a worried look.

"Are you sure, son?" Mihir Thakvar asked. The same question had been repeated dozens of times over the past week.

"Yes, Dad. I am sure."

Shivay's father continued to look worried. "It's not too late," he said. "You can change your mind even now. I can give an excuse and make the necessary reparations with the Gujjars."

Shivay looked at his father. “This marriage will take place today no matter what, Dad. This alliance will help both the region and us.”

His father’s face fell, and then he took a deep breath. “All right. I know I cannot convince you otherwise.” Mihir Thakvar’s face softened with a faraway look. “I can only pray that you will be happy in this marriage like I was with your mother.”

Shivay nodded without saying anything. He didn’t want to worry his father by revealing that the alliance wasn’t going to be a conventional marriage. Far from it.

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Shivay and his father stepped out and stood at the top of the mansion steps. Hundreds of men and women stood in rows playing the drums and blowing conch shells.

Every Thakvar clan member and people from the Thakvar villages were assembled outside. Soon, Shivay and his father sat inside an SUV while the large crowd traveled mostly by foot and camels through the desert. They were going to a temple where every heir of the Singoor clans was married.

It wasn’t until much later that the Singoor temple came into view. It was a tall, massive structure with heavy carvings on the walls. Shivay was surprised that something of that scale could be built hundreds of years ago in the middle of the desert.

Before Shivay stepped inside, a small group of older half-naked men wearing only loin cloths approached him. The men’s bodies and faces were covered in ash and had long matted hair. All of them held a long vertical stick

with a skull-shaped top. One of those men dipped his fingers into a shell that held ash and ran his three fingers horizontally across Shivay's forehead. The man then followed it by placing a red dot at the center.

"You are now a protector of Sands of Singoor," the man announced.

The tempo of the drums and conch shells increased while Shivay was led inside the temple. The inside was surprisingly and significantly cooler

He was asked to sit in front of the large form of a deity made of natural black rock with water gushing around it. Shivay noticed that the water was from a natural source underneath, and it kept the place cooler. His eyes then fell to the spot that was left vacant.

"This is where the Goddess Shakti statue used to be," one of the Thakvar clan priests informed grimly. "For the wedding, we will use another form that will not anger our God."

A goddess form was made using flowers and leaves and placed in the vacant spot.

Although Shivay had already given the necessary instructions to search for the missing goddess statue, he knew it would be hard without knowing how it looked. It would be time-consuming as he expected. So until then, the alliance was the only way to bring the warring clans to an understanding.

The sound of conch shells and drums grew louder outside, along with trumpets, before an announcement was made.

"The Gujjars are here!"

Shivay knew his soon-to-be bride had arrived.

He looked towards the temple's entrance. A large, heavily decorated box-like structure covered by thick curtains was carried by a group of men and lowered. A woman got down from it.

She was wearing a dark red traditional outfit with a lot of heavy

jewelry and was soon surrounded by a group of men and women who led her inside.

Ishani Gujjar.

Shivay couldn't see his bride's face as she wore a veil and her head was lowered to face the ground. She was led towards him by a group of similarly veiled women.

She sat beside him and a subtle scent of flowers swept over him. When the priests gave her instructions, she followed them obediently without lifting her head. All Shivay could see of his bride were her delicate hands adorned by heavy bangles and embellishments, performing the rituals in front of the deity.

When she was instructed to place her hand in his, there was a pause. Shivay tensed, wondering if his bride would ignore the instruction or maybe suddenly stand up, refusing to marry a stranger. It would lead to violence and further tension among the clans.

Just when he thought he would have to find a way to convince her, he saw her small hand being placed on his large palm. There was a faint trembling in her hand.

He felt a strange need to calm his bride.

He was surprised by his instinct to reassure her. All through his plans to form an alliance, he considered marriage and the wife he would temporarily acquire to be collateral damage. Although he had made plans to financially well-secure the woman's life when the marriage was no longer required, he hadn't thought of her as a living, breathing person with feelings.

But now, he was forced to acknowledge the fact.

He made a note to speak to his bride that night in privacy and reassure her safety and well-being. Through investigation, he discovered that Ishani Gujjar only had basic education via tutors and had never left the Singoor



region in her life. A woman like that would not be ambitious or want to leave her homeland. This meant he would need to find her a good support system to live the rest of her life securely.

The elaborate rituals continued for the rest of the marriage ceremony. Soon it came to an end, and they were asked to stand up.

“Please apply the sindoor on the bride’s forehead,” the priest instructed.

Shivay watched as his bride’s veil was lifted just enough to expose the top of her head. Her head was bent so low he could only catch sight of the traditional attire and jewels.

He took a small pinch of vermilion powder that was placed in front of the god and applied it on the spot above her forehead on her hair right under her head jewelry. He felt her shake visibly at the brief touch. She seemed terrified, and just as the veil dropped over her face, he caught a glimpse of her cherry-red lips that trembled.

He recalled that the Gujjar clan women were conservative and wondered if any other man had caught a glimpse of her except for her family.

A strange curiosity to know how she looked grew inside him, which he brushed away. His focus had to be on the alliance and what it would help him achieve and nothing else.

## CHAPTER 4

The wedding ceremony was followed by a celebration. There were several high-energy dances performed by the Thakvar and Gujjar clans. Shivay observed his surroundings keenly and made a note of the dynamics.

Although the atmosphere between the clans seemed tense at the beginning, the clans began to relax through the rituals and festivities. The rituals and entertainment were nearly similar for both clans.

Another observation Shivay made was that throughout the ceremonies and entertainment, his bride continued to sit still with her head bent downward, barely glancing at the performances or acknowledging him.

He could sense that she was tense throughout.

“It’s time,” an elderly woman announced. “We must all return before the sun sets and allow the newlywed couple to begin their life as man and wife with the blessings of Lord Shiva.”

The clans began shouting and cheering. The chants rose high in decibels before the crowd began to disperse.

Shivay’s father hugged him before placing his hand on the new bride. “May you both be happy always,” he blessed.

Shivay noticed that the bride’s brother and mother didn’t come to speak with the bride before dispersing with the rest of the wedding crowd.

Most of the clan members from the large wedding group dispersed. Only a select few, mostly elderly women, remained.

“Come with us,” one of the elderly women instructed.

They walked a good distance from the temple to a large tent. Surrounded by stretches of sand, Shivay could only see the shadowy outline of the temple in the distance.

“This is where you will spend the next three nights as husband and wife. It is considered auspicious to conceive a child in Sands of Singoor. The child born will be as strong and brave as our God Shiva or Goddess Parvati.”

Shivay didn't say anything but could sense his bride tensing even more. Her hands crumpled the fabric of her wedding dress.

“This land is protected,” said one of the heavily wrinkled skin elderly women. “No clan will dare to take a life on the holy temple lands in Sands of Singoor.”

The women waited until the bride stepped in, and when he stepped after, the tent door was closed from outside.

With soft chants, the women disappeared. All Shivay could hear was the sound of the winds outside. The lighting inside was through big lanterns hanging from several nooks across the tent.

He noticed that the interior was surprisingly spacious and well-furnished. The walls were lined with multicolored rugs and had very few openings, most likely to keep the sand from entering.

There was a couch and two heavy chairs with enough space to sit and converse and another nook to dine comfortably.

He frowned when he didn't see his bride right away.

“Ishani,” he called out, finding it strange he was now responsible for a complete stranger.

A moment passed before he heard the soft clink of metals that he now recognized as the sound of her bangles. He realized there was another area at the back separated by a heavy cloth partition.

Considering they would spend three nights in the tent, there definitely would be a bedroom and bathroom. He walked towards the back and stopped.

There was a large bed with stark white sheets on which red flower petals were sprinkled on top. But what caught his complete attention was his

bride.

She sat in the middle of the bed with her knees drawn to her chest. She looked tiny and helpless in her surroundings.

Just when he thought of telling her he wasn't going to demand his marital rights, his breath caught in his chest as she slowly raised the veil from her face to reveal herself.

The woman was breathtakingly beautiful with small, delicate features and large almond-shaped eyes that were now partially lowered. His eyes yet again fell on her cherry lips that trembled. She looked like a beautiful portrait one saw in the museums.

Her skin glowed in the night light, and he felt a strong need to touch her to see if she was real and if her skin was as dewy soft as it looked. But he held back when she raised her eyes to him. There was fear in them.

There was a visible trembling of her hands. He thought she would burst out crying or faint with the stress of spending the night with a stranger.

Moments passed as he stared at her before he processed his state of mind and body. He was strongly and undoubtedly attracted to a woman he barely knew.

The way she sat on the bed as if she had no choice but to allow him his rights made him feel strangely protective as well as possessive.

*She is mine to protect.*

Warding away the strange possessive feeling, he focused on the problem at hand.

There was no way she would get any sleep with him being on the same bed, so he planned to sleep on the floor since the couch was too small for him.

And when they returned to the Thakvar mansion after three days, he would ensure there would be a more comfortable arrangement than the floor

for him for the time they would stay married.

Bringing his unruly body under control, he looked at his bride.

“Would you like to change?” he asked. The amount of jewelry she had looked heavy on her delicate structure. Even the nose ring she wore looked huge against her small, delicate nose. He had also noticed earlier that his bride was petite, barely coming to his chest height in her bare feet.

“I can help you,” he added, knowing it wouldn’t be easy for her to remove the heavy jewelry and wedding dress.

Her eyes widened before she shook her head.

He had to remind himself again that she came from a conservative background. She wouldn’t be used to a man touching her, even if the man was now her husband.

*Fuck.*

Knowing he probably terrified his bride even more with his offer to help her undress, he tried to make her comfortable. “You must be hungry. Why don’t we have dinner?” he suggested.

He recalled noticing she hadn’t eaten any of the lavish meal during the wedding festivities.

Her eyes widened again, and he thought she would shake her head once again in fear, but surprisingly, she nodded. Knowing she wouldn’t move if he remained close to the bed, he stepped away.

Slowly, she stepped down from the bed and followed him as he led her into the dining nook.

Surprisingly, she joined next to him in the small area where a spread of fruits and other delicacies were laid out. He watched as she poured what looked like juice into a copper tumbler. Some of it splashed on the table as her hands were shaking.

“P-please have this...” she whispered, coming towards him.

He could not avert his eyes and stared at her as she held up the copper tumbler. “I-It is a tradition to drink the nectar that will increase my chances of conceiving tonight.”

He looked at the beautiful yet terrified face in front of him.

“I’m not going to touch you tonight, Ishani,” he said softly.

There was a shocked confusion in her eyes.

Hoping to relax her and make her comfortable, he took the copper tumbler from her hand and sipped the drink. “It’s very good.” It tasted like thick fruity wine. “Why don’t you have some too?”

She shook her head. “It’s only meant for the men,” she whispered. “T-to improve their v-virility. Women should not have it.”

He doubted it but didn’t push her to break the tradition. He finished the drink and set the empty tumbler on the table.

He expected her to serve food for herself, but she stood still, watching him nervously.

“Aren’t you hungry?” he asked. “What would you like to have?”

She jumped slightly, and with trembling hands, she hurriedly served a few fruits into a bowl. She held it but did not eat any of it. He knew she was too nervous and scared to eat.

“Let’s sit near the couch,” he suggested, hoping the distance between them would help her relax. “I need to speak with you about our marriage.”

But instead of taking up the offer, she froze completely and then began visibly trembling.

He frowned, wondering what terrified her. Just when he was about to ask her, he heard something.

The sound of the wind suddenly got louder. Becoming alert, he turned towards the only opening in the tent. That’s when he saw the door open and two masked men enter the tent. The two men held knives in their hands.

Shivay's first instinct was to protect his innocent bride. He looked at her.

"Ishani," he instructed her calmly. "Go and hide under the bed. Don't come out until I say so."

She continued to stare at him in frozen terror.

Knowing she was in shock, he stood in front of her, blocking any oncoming attack while she escaped.

By then, one of the masked men lunged towards him with a knife. Shivay kicked the man hard in the stomach, and the man gasped before crashing to the floor.

It was like *déjà vu* from the time he was in Africa. But unlike the first attack, this time there were multiple attackers, and two more men entered the tent, making a total of four attackers.

"Ishani, go!" he commanded.

Hoping his bride snapped out of the shock, he pulled out the ceremonial sword from his side. They were on God's land, and no one was supposed to take a life. Unfortunately, the attackers wouldn't have such scruples.

They attacked him with the intent to kill.

He fought back. Holding the sword, he slashed through the three men making them jump back.

He stepped forward, leading them away from his bride. And then, he attacked again.

"Who sent you?" he demanded as his sword met with a masked man's knife.

The man didn't reply. Shivay had to turn quickly and ward off the knife attacks from the other men. They tried to surround him, but he held the sword and continued slashing around, drawing blood from nearly all the

attackers.

He thought he had the situation in control, but a strange feeling crept into his mind. His arms began to feel lethargic, and he felt a strange tiredness that made him want to close his eyes and rest. Shaking his head, he held up the sword.

One of the men tried to get past Shivay, but Shivay didn't allow the man anywhere near his bride. He kicked the man in the stomach, making the man fall back and gasp in agony.

“Tell me,” he commanded. “Who sent you all!”

The attackers didn't reply. They stood in an attack position, and one of them spoke.

“How the hell is this city man fighting like a demon!” a man frantically remarked.

“Did you not drug him?” another man asked.

Before Shivay wondered if his wedding feast near the temple was drugged, a shaky feminine voice replied.

“I-I did,” his bride replied. “He drank an entire glass of that juice a few minutes ago. I-I don't know why he is still conscious.”

Shock ripped through Shivay.

His bride had deliberately drugged him. The drink she insisted he finish was why a haze and gloom were settling over his head and body.

Shivay whipped around and met his bride's beautiful yet treacherous eyes.

She looked terrified at the expression on his face. The split-second cost him because something hard smashed against his head.

Pain exploded. Shaking his head, Shivay held the sword and attacked once again. This time he knew he didn't need to protect his bride from the attackers because she was one among them.



He was surrounded by the men. Holding his sword, he slashed it downward, cutting off a man's finger, causing him to scream in agony. More men entered the tent.

Shivay held the sword in both hands and continued to slash around him. But with every stroke, the sword began to feel heavier. His mind began to fill with a fog. He shook his head to stay awake and continued fighting.

There were more screams of agony when the sharp end of his sword caught his attackers.

"My God," a man remarked. "He isn't falling. Call in all of our men!"

More men entered, and at least a dozen men surrounded him. He continued slashing through them until something hard crashed against his head once again. Blood seeped through his hair and poured down his eyes, temporarily blinding him. He didn't want to give up, but the next step he took, his legs gave way, and he fell to the floor on his knees.

His sword was seized, and he was held by a dozen men. He struggled violently, but they managed to hold him down.

His gaze then fell on his bride still frozen on the spot and watching him with terror on her beautiful face.

Anger erupted inside him. "You will pay for this," he growled at her. "Pray that I die because if I live, I will not spare you."

She let out a frightened sob and took a step back, even though he was held down by her men. "Y-you don't belong in Singoor," she whispered.

Before he could respond to his treacherous bride's words, another hard blow landed on his head. Pain radiated from his head, and this time darkness enveloped him completely.

## CHAPTER 5

*Ishani Gujjar was at her favorite spot in her family home. It was inside a garden by a water fountain. She often spent considerable time at the place since it offered her privacy to do her favorite things. She was currently feeding the peacocks and rabbits.*

*It was a beautiful picture-perfect day, and she wished she had a camera with her to capture the moment as she would miss it soon.*

*She looked around with a smile, soaking in the beauty. The bin musical instrument she played each morning was set on the pedestal next to the God Shiva statue. On the other side of the garden, under a shaded nook, was her recently purchased book placed on the garden bench.*

*Although she would miss the garden and the place she grew up in, she was looking forward to the new life she planned.*

*I'll come back soon to visit.*

*She had never lived outside of her home. The thought of it made her excited as well as nervous.*

*A few more days.*

*Dreaming of her new life, she continued to feed the peacocks and rabbits. She was smiling at the small white rabbit eating out of her hand when she suddenly felt cold air sweeping over her.*

*Her skin prickled, and she shivered, feeling someone's eyes on her.*

*Frowning, she looked around. Normally, no one disturbed her when she was at her favorite place unless it was an emergency with her mother or brother.*

*Rubbing her arms slightly, she tried to focus on the small rabbit, but once again, her skin prickled, and she felt a blast of cold air, causing her to*

shiver.

*“Did you think you would get away?” a deep, menacing voice growled behind her.*

*Ishani jumped violently and turned.*

*It was him. Shivay Thakvar. The man who had been her husband for only a few hours.*

*But instead of the darkly handsome face she had seen during their wedding festivities and later in the tent, his entire face was now covered and dripping with blood. His eyes blazed red while he extended his blood-covered hands towards her.*

*“You killed me,” he growled. “And I am here to drag you into hell with me like I promised.”*

*His blood-soaked fingers wrapped around her throat and pressed hard.*

*Ishani tried to scream, but her voice was cut off by the pressure he applied. Struggling hard, she tried to pry his hands away, but he didn't loosen his grip nor was there any empathy in his face.*

*Tears filled her eyes as she desperately tried to fight him off.*

*She didn't want to die.*

*Oh God, Ma...*

*She had to live as she couldn't leave her defenseless mother alone in the world.*

*She tried to beg him, but she couldn't make any sound.*

*“I'm going to kill you,” he hissed.*

*His fingers tightened even more, and the last thing she saw was his angry, accusing eyes before blackness covered her vision completely.*

*Oh God, no!*

Ishani's eyes flashed open with a loud gasp.

The first thing she realized was that it was a dream. She was lying on the stone bench under a tree in the garden nook. The book beside her made her realize she must have fallen asleep while reading.

*I'm not dead.*

She had once again dreamed of the man who had briefly been her husband. It had been three days since things went very wrong on her wedding night that led to a man's death.

*Oh God.*

She was breathing fast while her heart thudded loudly inside her chest, nearly drowning out the other sounds. She faintly heard someone's voice calling her name.

She turned to find one of the maids standing at a distance with a concerned look.

"Ishani madam, Devraj sir wants to speak with you."

Ishani blinked while registering what the maid was saying.

"T-tell my brother I'll be there in a few minutes," she told the maid.

The maid nodded and left.

Ishani continued to lay on the bench looking at the blue sky above, trying to bring her breathing under control and push away the panic.

But it was hard not to think of Shivay Thakvar.

She hadn't meant for him to be killed. Her brother was only supposed to threaten and warn Shivay Thakvar to leave the Singoor lands and never return. What she or her brother, or anyone for that matter, hadn't expected was for a city-born outsider to fight back the attackers.

Even when drugged, Shivay Thakvar fought back brutally, nearly killing her brother's men. They had no choice but to hit him hard from behind.

Knowing why her brother was asking for her and dreading the upcoming confrontation, she got up slowly from the bench.

She ran her hands on the sides of her long ethnic skirt. Adjusting the long, sheer dupatta currently trailing behind her, she pulled it over her head covering the upper part of her face before stepping into the Gujjar mansion.

The sound of her anklets and bangles echoed in the corridor while she hurried inside. Before meeting with her brother, she took a quick detour to check on her mother.

As she entered her mother's suite, she spotted her mother's nurse arranging the medications for that day.

"Is Ma awake, Kamala?"

"Yes, she is, madam."

Thanking the woman, Ishani opened the bedroom door and went inside. Even though it was nearly noon, it was dark inside. The room also smelled of medicines and stale air. Ishani went towards the windows and pulled the curtains aside, letting the sunlight stream in. She also partially opened a window, allowing fresh air in.

"Good morning, Ma," Ishani greeted in a cheerful tone.

Her heart sank seeing her mother's pale features grimace with the sunlight. Her mother's eyes were glazed as she struggled to recognize her only child.

"Ishani?" her mother's voice asked in a slurred tone.

Her mother couldn't recognize her lately.

Ishani continued to smile cheerfully. "Yes, Ma. It's a beautiful day. Why don't we go outside for a while after lunch? The marigolds have bloomed beautifully." Marigolds were her mother's favorite flowers.

Her mother's eyes widened, and there was a fearful look as she shook her head. "N-no... I d-don't want to. T-there will be snakes..."

Ishani's heart sank. Her mother often refused to step out of her room due to irrational fear. There were very few rare occasions when Ishani could coax her mother to step into the garden and enjoy the sunlight and beauty.

“I will be next to you, Ma. Snakes won't come.”

Her mother shook her head. “N-no. I-I just want to rest. I am tired.”

Ishani didn't want to insist. The doctors had asked Ishani not to force her mother as it often led to a breakdown episode.

With her heart sinking, Ishani smiled. “Okay, Ma. Get some rest. I will be back later.”

She leaned and kissed her mother's pale cheek.

Her mother nodded, slipped into the bed, and closed her eyes. With her chest feeling tight, Ishani stepped out of the bedroom.

“I'll be back in an hour, Kamala. We will finish the rest of the packing of Ma's things.”

“Okay, Miss Gujjar.”

Thanking the nurse, Ishani went to meet her brother.

She was dreading the meeting because she knew what he was going to tell her.

Although she knew what was coming up was inevitable, she hoped her brother would give her the good news that he had booked the tickets and made arrangements for her mother to get treatment outside Singoor. Ishani had been waiting for the final confirmation for a long time.

It had taken a while to convince her brother to allow her and her mother to leave. Ishani had to tell him even though she never left the Singoor area all her life, she would be able to manage a life outside on her own.

She recalled the last time she had been similarly summoned by her brother. But instead of telling her what she hoped, he made a shocking announcement.

*“Sit down, Ishani. I need to discuss something important.”*

*Hoping it was about the tickets and the rest of the arrangements, Ishani sat on one of the chairs. Her brother remained standing, fidgeting slightly.*

*Wondering why he seemed nervous, she waited.*

*“You are getting married in a week,” he announced.*

*Ishani was stunned.*

*“W-what?”*

*“I know this is sudden, but I have no choice but to agree to this marriage. It is important, especially since it’s part of the clan agreement.”*

*“W-what agreement?” she asked in a shaken voice.*

*Her brother frowned. “The agreement made twenty years ago about doing everything possible to encourage unity and peace within the clans. Wedding alliances between the clans will ensure that.”*

*She shook her head. “But you promised to let me leave the Singoor land with Ma! Her treatment will—”*

*“Yes, I know. But this is an unexpected development. I had to agree to the alliance with the Thakvar clan.”*

*She was taken aback. “I have to marry Mihir Thakvar?” she asked. Mihir Thakvar used to be a close friend of her late father. He was nearly sixty years old.*

*“No. To his son.”*

*She was shocked. “B-but Mihir Thakvar has no sons.” She knew enough clan history to know that fact.*

*Ishani’s brother looked angry. “There is a man claiming to be Mihir Thakvar’s son. And Mihir Thakvar has accepted that imposter as his long-lost son and Thakvar heir as well.”*

*Fear gripped Ishani. "I-I can't marry such a ruthless fraud."*

*Her brother looked determined. "You have to marry him. There is no choice."*

*Although she had no choice, she had hoped for a miracle to escape the unwanted alliance.*

Although barely ten days had passed since that conversation, it felt like a lifetime with too much happening.

She got married to a ruthless stranger. And she had to betray him on their wedding night to escape the unwanted alliance.

She shuddered, recalling the moments after the man she married vowed to take revenge on her before falling dead.

*"Is he dead?" Ishani asked in horror and guilt, looking at the tall, muscular-prone body of her husband lying on the tent floor.*

*Ishani's brother shook his head. "No."*

*The look on Devraj's face made her realize that won't be the case for long. "But you told me you'll only threaten and warn him to leave!"*

*Her brother didn't say anything.*

*"Devraj, please," she begged. "We are on the holy lands of Singoor. You cannot kill anyone here!"*

*Her half-brother looked impatient. "Don't meddle, Ishani. Just do as you are asked, and I will take care of the rest."*

That was three days ago. Ishani had no idea what happened next because she was taken home to the Gujjar mansion.

The people were told that her husband chose to leave the morning after the wedding night, and she had to return home. For the last three days,



she had only gotten looks of pity, but she didn't know how long that would last if the truth ever came out.

*Oh God, it can't come out!*

Sucking in a deep breath, she went to the room where her brother was waiting for her.

“What took you so long?” he asked with a frown.

“I was checking on Ma.”

Devraj continued to frown. “Ma will be fine. I will take care of her.”

Although Devraj was Ishani's half-brother, and her mother wasn't his biological parent, Ishani knew her brother would take care of the woman who brought him to the Gujjar clan when the rest of the clan members wanted to abandon the illegitimate child.

“Get your things ready, Ishani. We are leaving for the Thakvar mansion.”

Ishani shook her head. “Please. Let me be here and you go and explain to Mihir Thakvar.”

Her brother didn't agree. “No. It has to be according to tradition. We have to go to the Thakvars three nights after the wedding.”

*But there is no groom! The groom is dead!*

Ishani wanted to shout those words, but she held back.

Ishani had no idea what Devraj had done to her husband. And now, she was expected to go to the Thakvar mansion as the newlywed bride.

*Oh God.*

Mihir Thakvar was known to be a peace-loving philanthropist. But what would the older man do if he found out his supposed son went missing on his wedding night, and the son's bride played a part in it?

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The sun was just beginning to set, and the sounds of conch shells and drums filled the air.

Ishani's hands trembled as she sat inside the palanquin that was led by a group of men from her clan. A dozen camels carrying several bags of wedding gifts followed behind.

They were at the gates of the Thakvar mansion.

The mansion, which was more of a palace, was much bigger than her family home—nearly four times as big. She had read about its history in detail. Under normal circumstances, she would have been looking forward to visiting the place. But now, she trembled in fear.

The gates opened, and the palanquin was taken inside and carefully lowered in front of a huge water fountain. Taking a deep breath, Ishani got down using the silver step ladder.

Her brother stood next to her. "Remember what we discussed," he told her softly so only she could hear. She knew Devraj must be smiling, making it seem like an affectionate moment between the siblings.

She nodded in acknowledgment.

She followed her brother a short distance at the bottom of the wide, marble steps where a group of people stood to receive the newlywed bride.

A tall man with visibly graying hair stepped forward with a smile.

For the first time, she was grateful that her face was covered with a thin veil as she didn't think she could face Mihir Thakvar and lie to him about his son. She respected the older man immensely. Although she hadn't met him before, she had heard a lot about him. He was a noted philanthropist

who propagated girl-child education and built many schools and hospitals around the Singoor lands that were used not only by the Thakvar clan but also the other clans.

“Welcome, my child,” Mihir Thakvar greeted warmly.

Ishani bent forward, touched the older man’s feet as required by custom, and then stood up.

Her brother began to speak.

“Mr. Thakvar. I regret to announce that your son Shivay left my sister after the wedding night.”

The older man frowned and nodded. “Yes, I’m sorry about that. I didn’t think Shivay would do that. My son didn’t grow up here, so he is not completely aware of our customs.”

Ishani was shocked.

She hadn’t expected Mihir Thakvar to believe the lie so easily. Guilt gripped her, and she wanted to cry, fall at his feet, and beg his forgiveness.

But before she could do or say anything, she felt a shift in the air. Everyone looked towards the top of the mansion steps.

“There he is,” Mihir Thakvar said in a cheerful tone.

Ishani blinked through her tears and looked up. Even through the thin veil, she saw a tall figure standing on the very top of the marble steps.

Shock ripped through her.

*Oh God!*

She heard murmurings around her, but the buzzing sound that began in her ears felt deafening while dark spots covered her vision. Her body swayed as she nearly fainted.

*He is alive. Oh God, he is alive.*

It was worse than any nightmare she had in the last three days.

Shivay Thakvar was not only alive but he was watching her and

waiting to take his revenge as promised.

## CHAPTER 6

Ishani's legs gave out beneath her, and she felt her brother holding her upright.

"Is the bride all right?" someone asked.

The concerned murmurings continued until she was pulled away from her brother and swept up. Her head rested against a hard chest while strong arms held her.

"My bride must be tired after the long journey," a familiar deep voice stated. "I'll take care of her."

She forced her eyes open, and her body jerked when she saw the handsome profile of Shivay Thakvar as he carried her up the marble steps easily without even pausing for a moment.

Her mind tried to tell her it was yet another nightmare, but the hard jaw and familiar musky cologne felt all too real.

*Shivay Thakvar is alive.*

*Oh God.*

*He is going to kill me. But before that, he will tell everyone about how I betrayed him on our wedding night.*

Even as she panicked, he stopped at the massive doorway of the mansion. His dark eyes finally met with hers.

"Can you stand on your own?" he asked.

She didn't know if she could, but she nodded, wanting to get away from him.

He placed her on her feet outside the doorway but kept his muscled arm wrapped around her waist, preventing her from escaping. She stood on shaky legs while someone offered her water she drank gratefully.

She realized that a big group of women with smiling faces were waiting to receive the newlyweds with the traditional customs of the Thakvar clan. Forcing out a murmur of thanks, she gave the nearly empty glass to someone before standing in a daze and following the instructions of the group.

There was laughter and singing while welcoming the newlyweds into the Thakvar mansion.

Even as she went through the motions, she was half terrified and half confused about why the man standing next to her wasn't shunning her or calling her a cheat and murderer.

*Has he forgotten?*

A brief thought slipped into her mind. She didn't know what kind of drug was given to him, but she had heard of drugs that made a person temporarily lose their memory.

Hoping that was the case with Shivay Thakvar, she drew in the courage to look at him again.

He was following the instructions of the welcoming group, and his darkly handsome face didn't show anger or happiness. It was hard to read his expression.

He also didn't look at or acknowledge her in any way.

With her stomach trembling, she looked away from him.

The welcome festivities continued and were followed by an elaborate feast. Ishani's clan heads joined the Thakvars at the long table that hosted nearly fifty people. Mihir Thakvar was seated at the head of the table while the rest of the family and important clan members sat in the places allocated to them.

Ishani's brother was seated opposite her. She badly wanted to speak with her brother but didn't know if she would get the chance to do so before

the members of her clan left the Thakvar mansion.

Her brother looked equally agitated and worried as her.

“Does the new bride not like the Thakvar delicacies?” someone asked.

“T-the food is delicious,” she replied, barely tasting the aromatic food served on her large, silver plate with half a dozen bowls of various delicacies.

Her stomach continued to shake with fear and nervousness.

Shivay Thakvar looked towards her. Sensing his dark gaze, she turned. She still couldn't read his expression.

“You must try all of these dishes,” he said in a casual tone. “I recall enjoying the wedding feast, especially the interesting drink you offered to me.”

Ishani's heart jerked violently.

*Oh God. He remembers.*

Shivay Thakvar did not forget anything as she had thought. At that moment, she noticed the dark intensity of his eyes despite the unreadable expression on his face.

He not only remembered, but he was also going to make her pay.

The contents inside her stomach threatened to shoot up. Her hands trembled at the thought of what he might do to her.

“You must feed your wife, Shivay,” a woman said cheerfully.

There was good-natured laughter at the comment. A cold smile covered Shivay Thakvar's handsome face as he watched her. He then picked up a piece of buttered wheat bread and dipped it in a curry before offering it to her.

“It's not drugged or poisoned,” he said softly when she didn't open her mouth.

His words shook her even more. But having no other choice, she opened her mouth and allowed the man she drugged with the intention of

betraying him to feed her.

There were good-natured cheers at what appeared to be a sweet and affectionate gesture from a newlywed husband.

“I-I can eat on my own,” she said, wanting him to stop.

She thought he would force-feed her or announce the truth about her. Bracing herself, she waited in fear while watching him.

“Your wife is shy, Shivay.”

The cold smile remained on his handsome face while laughing and cheering continued.

Dragging her eyes away from his, she focused on her food. She glanced at her brother briefly and noticed he was quite tense as well.

She didn't know how she sat through the rest of the meal until it ended. But when it did end, she wanted it to go on forever since she didn't know what she was up against next.

A group of women with smiling faces approached her as soon as she got up from her dining chair. She knew they would accompany her to the marital room, where they would prepare her for the first night in her husband's home.

*Like a lamb to the slaughter...*

Once again, she felt the dark spots appearing in front of her. But she sucked in a deep breath, willing herself not to faint.

“I would like to speak with my sister before I leave.”

Ishani's heart thudded, listening to her brother's request. She badly hoped Shivay Thakvar wouldn't object to the simple request.

Luckily, no one objected, and they nodded in understanding, thinking it was a poignant moment between the siblings where she would bid a tearful goodbye to her brother.

A woman led them to a sitting room attached to the dining area.



As soon as the woman left, Ishani held her brother's hands and begged. "Please take me back with you. I can't stay here!"

Her brother shook his head. "You can't come back home. Not yet."

"But Shivay Thakvar will kill me! He remembers everything!"

Her brother only frowned. "Nothing will happen, Ishani. You must stay here for the sake of our people. And don't reveal I was behind the idea of drugging him on your wedding night."

Ishani's stomach sank. "W-what? How can I help our people by staying with a man who knows I betrayed him?"

"You must stay. Don't worry... I will check on you soon."

*If I am alive until then.*

She knew her brother would not take her home as she begged. To him and others, it was a matter of family honor and more.

"I-if something happens to me, take care of Ma. Please."

Even if she couldn't beg her brother to protect her, she would beg him to protect her defenseless mother.

"I already promised I would," her brother replied. "Nothing will happen to you or your mother. Just play along for a few days as his wife. I will come to you and tell you what to do next."

Ishani didn't know what to say to that. She was terrified, and her brother was planning something in the future when the possibility of her staying alive or well was less.

"I should go before the Thakvars suspect us of conspiracies," her brother said.

But he had conspired against the Thakvars. And she had agreed to do as he said, only to be made the sacrificial lamb.

Controlling the urge to run out of the mansion and escape, she stood still until the women waiting outside the room came in.

An older woman patted her hand. “It’s normal for a bride to miss her family after marriage. But don’t worry... your husband will take good care of you.”

If only the women knew how far it was from the truth.

Having no other choice, she allowed herself to be led outside the room. They passed through the long, gleaming marble hallways. She barely noticed much as her head throbbed and her eyes blurred, feeling helpless with fear.

She was taken to the top floor and into a corner wing. When the doors were pushed open, her face paled, seeing the massive three-room suite overlooking the gardens from the tall windows.

“This is your suite,” someone announced with excitement. “We have been preparing it for your arrival since the past week when the alliance was arranged. We hope you like it.”

Aesthetically, the suite was stunningly beautiful, but all she could see was the massive four-poster bed at the center.

Someone giggled. “I don’t think the Thakvar heir would prefer the satin bedding, but he needs to get used to feminine things now that he is married.”

“I’m sure he will love the feel of satin with his bride next to him on the bed.”

“You mean under him?”

The women laughed.

Ishani’s eyes fell on the white satin bedding. Although they were beautiful with handwoven laces at the edges, all she could think of was how her blood might stain them when her husband killed her that night.

She sucked in a breath, trying to stop her fear from taking over.

She stood in a daze while the women joked and talked about wedding

nights and their experiences with their husbands.

“Look at the Thakvar bride’s *mehndi*,” someone pointed. “It’s still so dark even after four days. It shows that your husband is virile.”

“Yes, you are very lucky to have such a handsome, virile husband,” someone else told her.

“My husband was not at all handsome,” another woman added. “In fact, he looks like a human toad! But it didn’t matter. Once the lights were turned off, only virility mattered.”

There was more laughter.

Ishani remained in a daze when the women quickly undressed her in the bathroom and pushed her into a bathtub with rose-scented water. She could barely relax or breathe freely while they washed her hair and scrubbed the fine sand from the journey off her body.

She was then pulled out of the tub, and her hair was dried using aromatic herbal smoke while scented oils were rubbed on her body. Although she was used to and enjoyed similar ministrations at home, she felt even more so like a lamb led to slaughter right then.

*At least I’m going to look beautiful and be clean when I die.*

She suppressed a hysterical laugh from escaping her at the ridiculous thought.

She was wearing a beautiful, long dress that carried the Thakvar colors of dark red and yellow along with simple jewelry. Her hair was left loose for the occasion, and the veil covering her was too sheer to be considered a veil.

“You look so beautiful!” a woman said with excitement. “The Thakvar heir won’t be able to resist you!”

“If you haven’t conceived a Thakvar heir from your wedding night, you will tonight in the Thakvar mansion for sure!”

Ishani wanted to laugh hysterically once again.

*I betrayed him on our wedding night. And now he will kill me!*

She wanted to shout those words, but no one would believe or support her. They would not believe her even if she declared Shivay Thakvar a ruthless businessman who was only pretending to be the heir of the Thakvar clan.

*Oh God. Please save me.*

But her prayers didn't seem to work that night because suddenly there was silence, and the air felt charged. All the women gasped and looked in awe towards the door.

Ishani didn't have to turn to know who was standing at the entrance of the bedroom suite.

Slowly, she turned, and through the thin veil, her eyes met with Shivay Thakvar's. Ishani's breath froze inside her chest as her husband watched her with hooded eyes.

He had also changed into a different set of clothes and wore the Thakvar clan turban with the bejeweled insignia.

He was accompanied by a group of men laughing boisterously and cheering the groom. But she barely paid attention to the cheering or words from the men or women around her. All of her focus was on the man she feared the most—the man who would possibly murder her that night or hurt her badly.

Her heart pounded inside her chest, and her stomach trembled looking at the long, bejeweled sword he held at his side that was a part of tradition within their clans. She recalled the last time he had used the ceremonial sword to fight back his attackers on their wedding night.

*Oh God.*

She knew he planned to kill her or maim her using the same sword.

“Thank you, ladies, for helping my bride. You may leave now.”

His deeply spoken order was met with blushing smiles and giggles before the women around her began leaving the suite.

*Don't go! He plans to kill me tonight!*

She wanted to shout those words, but her voice froze. Even after the women left, the men remained, patting him on the back and cheering him on.

“Leave,” he told them.

The men didn't argue. Shouting a few more cheers of begetting a Thakvar heir soon, they left after shutting the heavy doors of the bedroom suite.

The sound of the closed doors reverberated inside her shaking stomach.

Her heart continued to pound as she watched him walk towards her in slow, unhurried steps. His dark eyes kept her ensnared.

When he stopped in front of her, her legs shook so much under her dress that it took a lot of effort to remain standing in front of him.

“I warned you of the consequences when you tricked and betrayed me on our wedding night,” he said. A cold smile devoid of any warmth covered his darkly handsome face. “It's time for you to pay... wife.”

Her legs nearly gave out underneath her, and she had to clutch the soft, sheer curtain next to the four-poster bed to remain upright.

“Y-you can't kill me,” she said with a trembling voice. “M-my people won't forgive you. There will be a war between our clans if you m-murder me.”

He didn't seem affected by her warning. In fact, his cold, terrifying smile widened slightly.

“I don't have to kill you. Death will be too easy of a punishment. There are many other ways to make you pay for your betrayal.”

*Oh God.*

“I-I didn’t betray you,” she said in desperation. “You are a stranger to me. I don’t owe you loyalty because you don’t belong here.”

A dark look passed his face at her words. “I am your husband,” he said grimly. “And you owe me your loyalty and damn well more.”

A gasp escaped her when he raised his sword. Knowing he would hurt and maim her, she ran towards the door, hoping to escape him. She might not get help, and after learning about her betrayal, she might be shunned by the Thakvars, but at least she would remain unharmed.

But she had barely taken a few steps when she felt his arm wrapping around her torso like an iron band and dragging her back. She gasped when her body crashed against his hard chest.

“Where do you think you are going?” his deep voice asked next to her ear.

“I won’t let you hurt me! I won’t!” she shouted in panic. She tried to grab his sword to prevent him from using it against her to hurt her like he did with her clansmen.

He swore darkly. And then, his hands wrapped around her waist before he picked her up and tossed her on the bed.

Her breath left her lungs when her back hit the soft mattress. Before she could suck in a breath to scream, he leaned over her.

“Don’t move,” he growled.

She froze and watched him in paralyzed fear as he lifted his sword from around his hips. But instead of removing the blade from the scabbard, he placed the entire bejeweled weapon on the long, cushioned stool at the foot of the bed.

Her heart thudded when he removed his turban and placed it beside the sword. Keeping his eyes on her, he began removing the long gold and

pearl chain with tiger nails pendant, the thick bracelets, and a finger ring that belonged to the Thakvar clan heirs.

Even through her terror, she tried to keep her eyes locked on him, but they slipped below when he began unbuttoning his long, traditional tunic shirt. Her cheeks heated when she saw the tanned skin revealed underneath. Her stomach shook when he shrugged out of the heavy, traditional shirt and threw it on top of the turban and sword, baring his upper torso.

Her eyes widened, taking in the masculine chest hair and well-defined muscles on his upper arms and abdomen. Although his hair was closely clipped, and he didn't have a significant mustache or beard like the clansmen, every inch of him looked overtly masculine. And dangerous.

His powerful body looked strong enough to kill her with a single blow or easily overpower her. She had witnessed his inhuman strength when he was drugged and attacked by a dozen men.

"Y-you have no right," she whispered.

"I have every right," he replied. "In fact, if I were to go by the laws of your land, as your husband, you belong to me until you breathe your last breath."

She trembled, knowing he was right about the old pagan laws of her clans.

"B-but you are not from here!" she reminded him desperately. "You are educated and civilized! Modern men don't hurt or force their wives!"

The cold smile on his handsome face turned mocking, making him look savage rather than the polished, civilized man she tried to make him out to be.

"Well, my dear wife..." he said in a deep, mocking tone, "... modern men don't usually have to deal with wives who trick and betray them on their wedding night and have their husband buried alive under the sand in the

middle of a desert.”

She trembled at the visual he painted.

*Oh my God.*

She didn't know he had been buried under the sand. It was truly barbaric and shocking.

*How did he escape?*

She didn't want to ask because it would only enrage him further and recall the harrowing moments. She kept quiet and watched him in fear.

He didn't keep her waiting for long. His eyes blazed as he reached for her.

“No!” she gasped.

*I will fight him.*

She knew she wouldn't win against him but would not submit to his torture without a fight. But her fight was useless against his strength. She tried to scratch his face, but he gripped her hands and dragged her off the bed.

She let out a frightened sob as he dragged her somewhere. She tried to resist, but he easily pulled and half carried her inside the large bathroom. As soon as both of her legs touched the cool marble floor of the bathroom, she tried to run out, but his hands gripped her arm and dragged her close.

“Stay,” he growled into her face.

She froze in fear and stayed still.

Slowly, he let go of her arm. Without breaking eye contact, he pointed at something with his chin.

“Open the cabinet,” he ordered.

With trembling hands, she opened the large wooden cabinet under the dual sinks.

“Take out the first-aid kit.”

She blinked, not understanding.



“Do it!” he snapped.

Jumping at his order, she took out the box with the words ‘first-aid’ written on it.

“Now open it and tend to me,” he commanded before turning and presenting his back.

She gasped in shock.

His broad back was covered in long, deep cuts. She recognized the knife wounds he had received three days ago on their wedding night. But along with those deep wounds, there were other deep cuts close to the right shoulder that seemed months’ old.

“I want you to clean the wounds and put on a bandage,” he ordered.

“B-but I don’t know how to...” she whispered.

“Then learn,” he commanded.

She waited for a moment, but fearing the consequences, she began to tend to the wounds. They appeared to be stitched close, but the cuts were still raw and swollen since it had only been three days.

With trembling hands, she took a large wad of cotton and poured the antiseptic liquid on top of it before cleaning the wounds. She had to raise her hands and eyes since he towered over her by nearly a foot.

His back stiffened, making her realize the antiseptic must have stung sharply. She froze, waiting for him to turn and hurt her in return, but he remained still.

“Continue,” he snapped. “I don’t have all night.”

Terrified and angry by his command, with trembling hands she wiped the swollen wounds again before placing fresh pieces of cotton and covering them with tape.

“I-I’m done,” she said.

She trembled and waited to see what he would do next. He turned

slightly, and threw the used cotton swab into the trash, and closed the first-aid kit before placing it back in the cabinet.

And then, he turned towards her. His dark eyes blazed with intensity, offering her no sympathy or softness.

Terrified, she ran out of the bathroom. She went past the changing area and then into the bedroom. The large four-poster marital bed looked all the more scarier.

*“Death will be too easy of a punishment, don’t you think? There are other ways to make you pay for your betrayal.”*

Oh God.

She knew what he intended that night.

With a sob, she ran towards the door. She had no idea where she would go, but all she wanted was to escape his brutality. She had barely crossed the living area when a hard arm wrapped around her midriff and picked her off her feet. A terrified gasp escaped her, and just when she was about to scream, she found herself thrown on the bed, knocking the breath out of her.

“Stay,” he ordered.

She shook her head. “No! I won’t! Let me go!”

She rolled to the other side of the bed and once again tried to escape when he gripped her leg and dragged her back.

She tried to scream, but he covered her body with his, again knocking the breath out of her. She struggled and tried to scratch his face when he caught both her hands.

“Let me go!” she gasped.

He didn’t let her go. Using his free hand, he yanked the cloth covering her hair. And then, he used it to tie her hands together at her wrists. With terror, she watched as he rolled away from her.

“If you scream, I will gag you,” he warned. “And if you try to get out of the bed again, I will tie your legs too.”

Shocked and terrified, she stared at him.

Letting out a dark curse, he picked her up and placed her on the pillow on one side of the bed. She remained frozen when he got off the bed. The lights in the room were then turned off, and she felt the mattress dip when he got in the bed.

She waited for him to grab her. Her heart thudded loudly even as she prepared herself to fight him off. With her hands tied, she knew she could do much, but she was determined to fight.

She continued to wait, but she wasn't grabbed. She knew he was probably waiting for her to let her guard down before attacking her.

*I won't let that happen!*

Even though she was physically and mentally exhausted from the journey and lack of sleep the last three days due to nightmares about him, she kept her eyes open, remaining awake.

She didn't know how long she was awake. At some point, she heard Shivay Thakvar's deep, even breathing from beside her. Although he appeared to have fallen asleep, she didn't trust him. The man was too unpredictable and ruthless.

*“It's time for you to pay... wife.”*

A chill passed through her recalling his words. She knew he would make her pay for the betrayal.

With tears stinging her eyes, she continued to stay awake, determined to fight him off.

*He's a fraud and a ruthless monster. I will never give in to him.*

Although she tried her best to remain awake, it was dawn when exhaustion caught up with her, her eyes drooped, and darkness took over.

## CHAPTER 7

*Shivay woke up to darkness. His head throbbed with terrible pain, and he could barely move or breathe freely. The air smelled strange.*

*A trickle of something fine and gritty slid into his nose, making him realize it was sand. He tried to move, but something restrained his movements. His fingers brushed against something. A cloth. He was wrapped in a cloth bag, and based on the weight he felt on top of him, he was buried under the sand.*

*Rage filled him.*

*But he controlled himself because he couldn't afford to use up the small amount of oxygen trapped around him within the cloth bag. Darkness was threatening to overcome him again.*

*His mind went into overdrive as he slowly turned his right hand until he felt the tightness on his wrist, indicating that his watch was still on him. He was glad that the attackers didn't rob him. The watch was too simple in design to be thought of as expensive. But it was quite expensive, and it also had something he needed at the moment more than any shiny, expensive-looking watch.*

*The signal he let out from his watch while he was in the tent should have alerted the standby security in the city. He had sent out the alert as soon as he saw the first attacker entering the tent. At that time, even though he felt he could tackle the attacker by himself, he didn't want to take chances because he had prioritized his innocent bride's well-being. He wanted help to arrive in case something happened to him.*

*But his bride wasn't innocent, and her life was never at risk.*

*Rage filled him again as he recalled his bride's treachery.*

*She had drugged him and led him towards death with no remorse. She was evil disguised as an innocent beauty.*

*Even now, when he lay under a sandy grave counting moments until he lost consciousness again, he couldn't help but visualize her beauty behind his eyes—her delicate features with large eyes and cherry-red lips that trembled. Her soft, alluring fragrance of jasmine could still be recalled under the dry smell of the sand.*

*The way she stood still and looked frightened had made him want to protect and cherish her at any cost.*

*All lies.*

*He lost control of his rage, and his head nearly exploded, threatening to push him into darkness again. He swallowed and brought his breathing under control. Instead of his beautiful, treacherous bride, he recalled his mother's gentle smile.*

*His breathing calmed immediately.*

*Slowly, he tried to move his hands again. The sand moved around him as he shifted. Although he still felt the effects of the drug, and it took considerable effort for a simple movement, he continued to move his fingers. He was able to find the opening of the cloth bag on the top of his head. Sand poured around his face and entered his nose while he made clearance for his hands. Knowing he wouldn't be able to hold his breath for long, he moved his hand upward.*

*Soon, his fingers met with air. The attackers must have thought he was dead to have buried him in a shallow grave. Or they must have left him in a shallow grave with an open cloth bag hoping wild animals would attack him and finish him off without a trace.*

*The thought of Ishani Gujjar condoning such a savage end to her unwanted husband enraged him. But this time, the anger drove his*

*adrenaline, and he propelled his body up until his head and shoulders surfaced above the sand.*

*Breathing in the much-needed air, he looked around to see the vast stretch of desert in the moonlight. Using the last of his energy, he dragged the rest of his body out of the sand. Just when he thought he might lose consciousness again and become prey to the wild animals, he heard something. The sound grew louder after a few moments.*

*It was a helicopter. The rescue team had arrived.*

Shivay's eyes opened.

He wasn't in the desert or at the hospital where he had spent the next two and a half days recovering from his injuries.

He was in the Thakvar mansion. The sun was beginning to rise, and the bedroom glowed with soft sunlight streaming in through the large windows. But what caught his attention was the woman asleep next to him.

Barely two feet away was Ishani Gujjar. His wife.

Despite the faint shadows under her eyes and the slight frown of worry even in her sleep, she looked breathtakingly beautiful.

He didn't have to remind himself that her beauty came with a price, and he had nearly paid with his life when he thought of her as an innocent who had to be protected at any cost.

*No more.*

She might be beautiful, but she was untrustworthy and dangerous. Unfortunately for her, he was no longer taken in by her deceptive innocence or beauty.

He recalled her reaction when she discovered he was alive. She had nearly fainted and tried to escape before he carried her into the Thakvar mansion.

She was terrified of him. She trembled during the festivities in the mansion. She trembled during the meal. She trembled when she found herself alone in the bedroom with him. She trembled when he tied her hands together to prevent her from escaping him.

But unlike the last time, he didn't feel the need to reassure her. All he felt was satisfaction and dark anger.

He would make her pay for her betrayal in every way possible.

Dragging his eyes away and pushing away the thoughts of his wife, he focused on what he had to do next in the upcoming days.

He made a promise, and he wouldn't allow anything or anyone to stop him from fulfilling it. Not even his beautiful, treacherous wife.

## CHAPTER 8

Ishani woke up to a strange whirring sound.

Her eyes felt gritty due to lack of sleep, but she opened them only to see an unfamiliar sight. Instead of her small bedroom windows, there were tall French doors with a balcony.

*I'm at the Thakvar mansion!*

With her heart thudding loudly, she sat up with a jerk and looked around frantically. Her heart slowed down a little when she saw she was in the large bedroom suite and alone on the bed.

She recalled the events of the night when Shivay Thakvar had promised to make her pay for her betrayal. She had expected him to hurt her brutally during the night, but he hadn't touched her.

*Oh God. What is he going to do?*

She knew he would make her pay as he threatened.

Shaking in fear, she hurriedly got out of bed. The only way she could remain safe was to surround herself with other people. She knew she would be vulnerable at night but during the day, her father-in-law or other Thakvar clan members would ensure her safety.

Her eyes swept around the large suite again. She hadn't taken in the details the previous night due to her terror, but now, she spotted a large couch placed in front of the other balcony in the room. Deciding to sleep on it each night, she headed to the bathroom that was through a changing and closet area.

She pushed open the bathroom door, only to freeze.

Shivay Thakvar was standing inside the bathroom in just his track pants. There was a soft whirring sound as he shaved using a small device.



Praying he hadn't heard her, she was about to run away when he turned, and his eyes met hers.

Her heart jerked at the dark intensity in them.

"Come here," he ordered softly.

Her legs remained frozen while she watched him as though he were a poisonous snake. She thought of him as more dangerous than any deadly snake.

"I don't like repeating myself," he said in the same dangerously soft tone.

She thought she would faint with shock and fear. She had hoped to stay within the safety of the rest of the household, but she found herself trapped with her devil husband.

Without his shirt, his broad shoulders and muscular torso made him look bigger. In her bare feet, she only reached the top of his chest.

Slowly, with trembling legs, she went towards him. She stopped at a distance where he couldn't grab her. Looking at him, her throat felt dry and tight as though her body could sense his fingers wrapping around her throat as they had in her nightmares.

She had to keep reminding herself that he wouldn't kill her because of the alliance between their clans, but the thought didn't reassure her.

*"There are other ways to make you pay for your betrayal."*

Her legs trembled, recalling his previous threat from the night before.

"Come closer," he commanded softly.

"W-why?" she asked.

His dark stare left her unsettled.

"Because it's an order," he replied. "And you will do everything I say without questioning me."

She was used to doing things her brother asked her to do, such as

running the household, taking care of several guests, and even marrying a stranger. She did them out of her duty. But Shivay Thakvar's command to follow his orders unquestioningly would be done out of fear.

She slowly took a few steps closer and braced herself to be grabbed.

“Take out the first-aid kit and replace the bandages.”

Recalling the previous night when he made her tend to his injuries, she slowly opened the shelf next to her and took out the first-aid kit.

He turned with his back facing her.

“Change the one that has come open.”

She noticed that one of the bandages was soaked in blood and was bleeding. With shaking hands, she tended to the wound and dressed it with fresh bandages.

“I-I'm done,” she said.

He turned and faced her. From up close, his handsome face with regal features reminded her of the brief moment on their wedding night when she had felt confused by his consideration. He had told her that he wouldn't touch her that night. And he had also stood in front of her to protect her from the attackers and told her to hide under the bed. At that time, she was too shocked and terrified about the events that were out of her control.

But that man was now gone. All she could see was a ruthless stranger who threatened to make her pay for the betrayal.

“I-I didn't mean to have you killed that night,” she whispered, hoping to explain her reason.

His eyes flashed darkly at the reminder. “So, you didn't offer me the drink, knowing it was drugged?”

“I-I knew, but—”

“Didn't you already know the attackers would be coming that night?”

“I-I knew, but—”

“So, you did betray me.”

She shook her head, her eyes filling with tears as she looked at him.

“I-I did, but I didn’t mean for you to—”

He cut her off again. “Stop,” he commanded. “Don’t think of me as a fool to be taken in with your innocent act again.”

Her lips trembled as he watched her darkly. “You will pay for your betrayal,” he said. “And if you and your brother conspire against me again, the alliance rules will not help either of you. I will destroy you both.”

Shaken and terrified by his words, she shook her head. “M-my brother is not involved,” she said. “I-it was m-my idea to have you attacked that night because I-I didn’t want the alliance.”

She took a trembling step back, watching his expression at her words.

Her brother had asked her not to reveal his involvement. But by taking the entire blame on herself, she was now the sole target of Shivay Thakvar’s fury.

She thought he would kill her right then. Letting out a frightened sob, she ran out of the bathroom and to the bedroom suite. She wanted to run outside, but she wasn’t wearing her veil and was still in the previous night’s clothes. She was about to take her chances and opened the door to run out, but she saw a group of women talking among themselves outside.

“I-I need help,” she said desperately.

They watched her with confused looks and frowns.

“I-I need help to get ready,” she said.

The frowns disappeared.

“Sure, madam.”

The group of women came inside. Although she didn’t need help to get ready since she wore simple clothes that were easy to wear, she still needed people around her for protection.

Just when she felt somewhat safe, her heart rate sped up when she saw the imposing figure of Shivay Thakvar coming into the bedroom from the changing area.

The group of women froze, and they stared at him with a combination of awe and respect.

Unlike the last two times she had seen him, he was not wearing heavy traditional clothes. He was wearing sky-blue buttoned shirt and trousers. And he looked equally imposing in the Western attire.

Only she knew that underneath the polished exterior, Shivay Thakvar was as brutal and ruthless as the clans of Singoor. She recalled the barbaric way he fought off the attackers even while being injured and blood dripping over his face.

A shudder passed through her at the memory.

His dark eyes fell on her. All the temporary safety she felt surrounded by the group of women disappeared. Her entire world shrunk to just her and the man who hated her and vowed to punish her.

A cold smile covered his handsome face. "I'm leaving on some work," he said.

Before she could feel relieved, his next words made her terrified again.

"See you tonight... wife."

*Oh God.*

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“Thakvar bridal gifts,” an older woman proudly said with a smile.

After Shivay Thakvar left, more women entered the suite. They all helped her get ready. They also brought in large suitcases that contained her clothes and belongings. She noticed a few more that she didn’t recognize.

Ishani stood still while the women put her in a dress given to her by the Thakvars as a part of the bridal gifts. The jewelry and accessories that came along with them were equally grandeur. She couldn’t refuse as she was the one who had asked them to help her get ready.

“You look beautiful, madam. Just like a Thakvar bride.”

Ishani forced out a smile. “Thank you.”

When the women left, she decided to follow them down to the breakfast table, but the housekeeper brought in a food tray.

“Oh, Mr. Thakvar said you’d be spending the day resting since you weren’t well yesterday. He asked us to send your meals upstairs.”

Ishani was shocked. “M-Mr. Thakvar said that?” She couldn’t imagine the man who hated and threatened her would say that.

“Yes, Mr. Mihir Thakvar.”

“Oh.” Ishani could imagine the generous-hearted man being considerate of her.

“Please thank him and tell him I’m fine.”

The housekeeper nodded and left.

Ishani sat near the table overlooking the balcony where the breakfast tray was placed. It was a beautiful view outside, and she was hungry enough since she hadn’t eaten much during dinner. But she couldn’t completely relax

and enjoy her breakfast.

*What is he going to do to me?*

The question constantly looped through her mind. She didn't know what Shivay Thakvar was planning to do, but she knew it would be as brutal as the attack on him.

*I have to escape him.*

She decided not to stay in the suite.

## CHAPTER 9

By the time Shivay returned to the Thakvar mansion, it was midnight. He had spent the day in the city meeting with the investigating team.

*“Mr. Thakvar, so far, no one from the Gujjar clan has recognized the man.”*

*The investigator held the picture of the assassin from Africa without any ash covering the man’s face.*

*“Keep trying and also check with the other clans,” Shivay instructed.*

*The investigator nodded. “The Kabalis and the clans on the other side of the Singoor are hard to track, sir. They are nomads and move often.”*

*Shivay knew that information already. Which is why he didn’t think the Kabalis or the other nomad clans were capable of sending an assassin to Africa.*

*It was most likely one of the prominent clans with enough resources to even use sophisticated technology to discover him to be the heir and track his movements.*

*“The Bhils and the Kanwars. Focus on them as well.”*

*“Yes, sir. We will.”*

Shivay had given more instructions. Although he was sure that someone from the Singoor lands had sent the assassin after him, he was yet to determine the motive.

One of the motives suggested was that one of the clans wanted to take over the Thakvar wealth since there were no declared heirs. However, he wasn’t entirely convinced because he wouldn’t have known the truth about

his father being alive if the Africa attack hadn't happened.

There were too many unanswered questions—the identity of the assassin, the motive behind the Africa attack, location of the missing goddess statue, and whether the alliance would be accepted by the rest of the clans.

While all those questions might take time to find answers, his primary focus would have to be on forming alliances with the rest of the clans. This meant he would have to ensure his beautiful, treacherous wife would remain beside him.

His mouth twisted into a dark smile as he entered the suite. Although he was tired from the long day and recovering from his injuries, he didn't go straight to take a shower. His eyes sought his wife.

He had gotten a brief update from the Thakvar mansion security that his wife remained inside the suite all day, seemingly recovering from the previous day's journey.

But the bed was empty.

With a dark frown, he was just about to order a search for his runaway wife when he found her. She was sleeping on the couch by the French doors.

He saw her petite form curled up and taking only half of the couch. She even had a blanket and a pillow that indicated she hadn't accidentally fallen asleep on the couch.

He watched her for a long moment.

Dragging his eyes away from his wife, he turned and walked to the changing area. He shed his clothes and stepped into the bathroom to take a quick shower. The stitches were tended to by a doctor in the city.

But he recalled the horror on Ishani Gujjar's face the previous night and that morning when he had made her dress his injuries. She was terrified but did as he ordered.

Considering she was responsible for his injuries, it was her job to fix



them.

There was a hospital within the Thakvar province that his father had built. But he didn't go there or ask a medical doctor to attend to him in the mansion as his father would not only find out about the wedding-night attack but also the person behind it.

He didn't want his father to worry that the alliance proved to be dangerous. It would stop his father from considering leaving Singoor and flying to San Francisco.

Shivay vowed to keep his promise.

Stepping out of the shower, he went to the changing area and put on track pants. He left his upper body bare so his injuries could heal faster.

The clock showed it was well past midnight, and he would only have a few hours to sleep before having to leave the mansion for another long day. Looking forward to grabbing some rest, he went to the bedroom.

But before getting into the bed, he went towards the couch and scooped up the sleeping woman. He carried her and placed her on the bed. When he slipped in next to her, he watched her beautiful sleeping face with a dark smile.

*Nothing and no one will stop me from fulfilling my promise.*

*Not even you, my dear wife.*

## CHAPTER 10

Ishani's nightmare seemed never-ending.

But unlike the previous nightmares where her dead husband was haunting her, she was now haunted day and night by her husband, who was alive and well enough to torture her.

And the torture was the worst kind. Although she knew he wouldn't kill her due to the alliance between their clans, the worst kind of torture was the uncertainty.

She didn't know what he could do to make her pay for the betrayal. Each night she barely slept, waiting for her ruthless husband to attack her. But so far, nothing had happened, and it only made her more anxious.

The last time she had slept well was on the second night when she laid on the couch. But the next morning, she awakened to find herself on the bed next to her ruthless husband. She was shocked and terrified. The same pattern repeated the next night when she slept on the couch but woke up at midnight when her devil husband carried her to the bed. She had barely slept that night, waiting for him to lash out.

Soon, she stopped sleeping on the couch because she knew she would be dragged to the bed, and it might only enrage her husband.

Even when he left in the mornings, she was haunted by his threats and couldn't relax.

It was barely a week since she arrived at the Thakvar mansion, but she was approaching the breaking point.

"Would you like anything else, madam?" a voice next to her asked.

Ishani dragged her eyes from the beautiful view outside the balcony to look at the woman who had served her breakfast in the suite.

“No, I’m fine. I-I’ll have lunch downstairs.”

There was surprise in the woman’s eyes. “Sure, I’ll inform Malathi madam.”

Malathi was the head housekeeper. She was married to a man named Rai Bahadur, Mihir Thakvar’s trusted man.

“Thank you.”

The woman left, leaving Ishani alone in the suite. For five days, Ishani had pretended to be recovering from the journey. She didn’t want to face her father-in-law because she wasn’t sure whether Mihir Thakvar knew about her betrayal and what had subsequently happened to his son.

But based on the behavior of the Thakvar household women, there was no hostility so far.

She decided to take chances and step out.

She was used to leading a busy life. Each morning she was used to playing the bin musical instrument, directing the kitchen staff to prepare meals for the household, reading books, and spending time with her mother for the brief moments when her mother was cognizant.

Staying in the suite for the past five days in fear and terror drove her crazy.

Sucking in a deep breath, she pulled the veil down, covering her face before stepping out of the suite.

The dress she wore felt heavier than the ones she was used to, and the jewelry was also more than what she wore on normal days. But since the women continued to come and help her get ready, she had no choice but to wear the Thakvar clothes and jewelry.

The sound of the heavy anklets was loud as she walked the corridors.

She tried to move quietly as she began exploring the huge mansion. Thanks to her ruthless and scary husband, she hadn’t even seen the entire

place yet, even though she had always wanted to visit it.

She was currently on a mission to find the library. Although she knew she might not find the latest academia books, she was looking forward to finding some interesting literature.

She realized the place was too big and worried she would get lost. She went down the long flight of steps.

“Good morning,” she greeted one of the women dusting the antiques on the ground floor. “Can you direct me to the library?”

The woman looked confused. “Library?”

“Yes. Where all the books are kept.”

The woman’s frown disappeared. “Oh, the books.” The woman enthusiastically gave directions.

Feeling glad to have finally found the place, Ishani followed the directions. It was a corner room on the ground floor.

Ishani pushed open the door, hoping to find the massive library she had heard about in the Thakvar mansion.

She saw a wall with stacks of books, but it didn’t look like a library. There was a huge table at the center, and two men were talking softly.

They paused and turned towards her.

“Ishani?” Mihir Thakvar asked.

Ishani froze, looking at her father-in-law and another older man seated opposite him.

“Y-yes,” she replied, realizing her father-in-law didn’t recognize her because she was wearing the veil.

She was used to wearing it when she met strangers. Only her brother and limited male household saw her without the veil.

“Come in, child,” Mihir Thakvar said with a smile.

Feeling relieved at seeing the smile, she stepped inside.

“Are you feeling better now?” he asked.

“Yes.” She knew Mihir Thakvar thought she was recovering from the journey from Gujjar to Thakvar province.

He smiled, shaking his head. “Shivay should have stayed home tending to you. Now that you are fine, I’ll insist he work from home rather than going to the city each day. He has already set up an office in the mansion.”

“I-it’s okay,” she said, hoping her devil husband would continue leaving her and going to the city during the day.

She couldn’t imagine having him around to torture her in person all day as well.

“Sorry, I... I didn’t mean to disturb you,” she said hesitantly. “I was looking for the library.”

“Don’t worry, you weren’t disturbing us at all,” Mihir Thakvar replied. “Jignesh and I were going through the monthly accounts for the trust. It’s something I hate doing but have to.”

She looked at the other man, who must be the accountant.

“The library is on the second and third floors,” her father-in-law stated. “It’s very big, but it hasn’t been updated for a while. I have donated most of the books to the schools in the province, but there are still a lot of books left that are my favorites.”

Ishani had heard about the schools that Mihir Thakvar built and ran through the trust organization, along with hospitals and many charitable organizations.

One of the many things she had heard about the Thakvar province was how the women were encouraged to shed their veils. Most of the Thakvar women didn’t wear veils in the household or villages, leaving their faces and hair uncovered.

But Mihir Thakvar hadn't asked her to remove her veil. He knew she wouldn't be comfortable shedding something ingrained into her since childhood.

He smiled at her. "I will take you to the library. Just give me a few minutes to finish the accounting. You can wait here, but we might bore you with the accounting talk."

She shook her head. "I took care of all the household accounts for my brother. I enjoy accounting."

Mihir Thakvar's face brightened. "That's great to hear. I heard that you play the *bin* musical instrument wonderfully. We have one in the prayer room. You can use it. Or I can order a new one for you."

She hadn't packed her bin instrument from home because she didn't think she would stay at the Thakvar mansion for long. But now that her stay didn't have an end date yet, she craved the serenity that playing the bin offered.

"Thank you. I can use the one in the prayer room."

"Wonderful."

He led her to the empty chair at the table before sitting back next to the accountant.

Ishani enjoyed learning more about the trust organization. Based on the conversation and accounts, she confirmed that the money donated for the school, hospital and other programs was only from the Thakvar family, even though other clans used the services.

She made a note to donate a percentage of her meager savings to the noble causes.

The meeting finished, and Mihir Thakvar led her to the Thakvar mansion's massive library. It was two stories high.

"My sister, Nandini, was an avid reader. She collected books from all

across the world. I tried to preserve the ones she enjoyed, but I donated the rest to the library where many others can enjoy the stories.”

Ishani had heard of Nandini Thakvar. She was said to be the epitome of beauty and also known for her boldness and progressive thoughts.

Even though she hadn't known or met the woman, she felt sad that Nandini Thakvar lost her life in an accident along with her older brother. It happened twenty years ago, after which Mihir Thakvar came from a foreign country and took over as the Thakvar heir.

Knowing that a conversation about his older brother and sister would lead to sadness, Ishani kept quiet. She picked up a few books she hoped to read in the garden she had seen from the bedroom balcony.

After the library visit, she joined her father-in-law for lunch at the dinner table. She enjoyed his company as he narrated the history of the mansion. He was impressed by some of the things she had read in the books about the Thakvar mansion.

“That is amazing,” he said. “I didn't know that part of the history. Where did you read that?”

Happiness burst inside her chest. “It was from my father's book collection. He was an avid reader as well.”

There was a poignant look on Mihir Thakvar's face. “Yes, I remember that about Ishwar. He used to enjoy reading even when we were children.”

Ishani had known that her father and Mihir Thakvar used to be good friends during childhood before Mihir Thakvar left abroad for further studies.

Her heart melted when Mihir Thakvar spoke about her father and their childhood memories.

“Despite the tension between our clans, most of the prominent clans' heirs were friends since we all studied in the same school in the city. Your

father was in my class, and we stayed in the same room in boarding school.”

Mihir Thakvar smiled. “Never did Ishwar or I imagine that one day our children would marry. I’m glad my son married you, and I have you as my daughter.”

Ishani simply nodded, unable to say anything. She couldn’t tell the kindhearted man that Shivay Thakvar was the devil and was torturing her.

And more importantly, she couldn’t tell Mihir Thakvar that her devil husband was not even his son.

There was no way such a kindhearted and generous man would have a son who was like the devil. Shivay Thakvar was definitely not the heir. He was just a ruthless businessman out to grab control of the Singoor oil wells and use a wealthy older man with no family in the process.

Even as she established the fact, she was determined to prove it right.



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It was close to midnight when Ishani heard the bedroom door opening and shutting with a soft click. She pretended to be asleep on the bed.

Soft footsteps could be heard coming closer until she felt his presence next to her. His familiar cologne tingled her nose. She kept her eyes closed even though her breath caught inside her chest.

She waited, expecting him to touch her or say something. For a long moment, nothing happened.

When she heard footsteps again, followed by the sound of the bathroom door closing, she could now breathe freely.

She held her breath when the bathroom door opened, and moments later, she felt a dip in the bed.

*Oh God. Please don't let him touch me.*

Her prayers were answered when moments later, she could hear his deep, even breathing.

She waited until much later when she slowly turned towards him. The lamps in the bedroom were turned off, but the moonlight falling from the large windows softly lit up the suite. She could see the broad expanse of his back and his powerful shoulders moving slightly with his deep, even breathing. The injuries on his back no longer had bandages on them, but she could see them even in the semi-darkness.

Biting her lip, she turned away from the sight she found unnerving.

Although he was deep asleep, she carefully and quietly opened the nightstand next to her and reached for the object she had placed inside that evening.

It was a pair of scissors.

She couldn't procure normal ones from the office and had to resort to using garden scissors she found lying outside the mansion.

As long as it served the purpose, she didn't really care what kind it was. It would only take a few seconds to get the job done. Holding the scissors, she carefully turned back towards him. And then, with slightly trembling hands, she looked at the hair on the back of his head.

His hair was quite thick, dark, and shiny with a closely-cropped hairstyle. She hoped to get a good sample from the top which would be enough for the purpose. She intended to send it to a lab to have DNA testing done.

She knew she also needed Mihir Thakvar's hair sample, which she would obtain somehow later. First, she needed the sample from her devil husband.

Biting her lip, she slowly angled the long scissors above his head, where the hair was slightly longer on the top.

She was just about to snip his hair, but her hand was caught.

She gasped loudly in shock and found herself pinned on the mattress underneath him.

Her heart nearly stopped in fear as she looked into her husband's enraged eyes.

"I should have known," he growled. "That a woman who tried to murder me on our wedding night would attempt to kill me again."

She was stunned by his assumption and terrified by the anger in his eyes.

"W-what... no... I..." She couldn't tell him she needed his hair for a DNA test. It would make things worse for her and her clan if he found she was questioning his identity as the heir of the Thakvar clan.

“I warned you about what would happen if you betrayed me,” he said. “I even thought of giving you the benefit of the doubt that you didn’t intend to kill me the first time. But now, I caught you in the act.”

Her body trembled in fear at his anger. She could feel his hard body pressing her down on the bed. He held her hands in one of his, and his other hand gripped the back of her hair. When he pinned her to the bed, the scissors must have fallen off the bed onto the softly woven carpet underneath.

“Y-you are mistaken,” she whispered.

“It wasn’t scissors in your hands aimed at me?”

She couldn’t deny it because he caught her in the act, and the scissors were right next to the bed.

“L-let me go,” she said instead, trying to get him off her.

The fury in his eyes remained, but a different intensity shook her. She saw his mouth twisting into a dark smile.

“Let you go?” he asked in a deceptively soft tone. “So you can finish stabbing me in my own fucking bed?”

He leaned lower until there was barely any distance between their faces. She could smell his minty warm breath. “No, my dear wife, I will never let you go. And I won’t let you become a widow so soon.”

She shivered violently at his words and proximity. Although his words were soft and taunting, she knew he was enraged. And his body burned hers. She was aware of his bare-chested heated skin touching hers along with his powerful legs lying between hers. A different kind of shiver spiraled through her due to that awareness. She also felt the hard throbbing of something potent against her stomach.

*Oh God.*

She knew he was going to demand his marital rights that night. And if she didn’t give in willingly, he would snatch it from her.

Despite the odds, she prepared herself for the fight because she would never give in to him. Tears stung her eyes even though she tried to be brave.

“You are a ruthless monster!” she whispered.

He stared at her, his eyes dark and unholy as the devil’s. “Yes, I am. Don’t ever forget it.”

She thought he would hurt her then, but she was shocked when he rolled away from her. Before she could feel any relief, his muscled arm wrapped around her waist and dragged her close until she could feel every inch of his bare chest against her back and the hard throbbing of his loins against her buttocks.

Shocked, she tried to escape, but his arm held her in place.

“Sleep,” he ordered. “If you move, I will show you how a ruthless monster behaves.”

She froze in fear.

She remained still, barely breathing because she believed he would carry out his threats if she didn’t listen to him.

Her eyes remained wide open while she tried not to move or shift in his arms. He didn’t remove his heavy, muscled arm from around her either and held her close, even in his sleep. She could hear and even feel his deep, warm breaths against her ear.

She spent the entire night held against him.

It was much later when she saw the soft light of dawn outside the bedroom windows that her eyes began to droop with tiredness. Finally, she slipped into a restless yet deep sleep.

*I hate him. I’m going to get to the truth about him soon.*

## CHAPTER 11

“Unless there is an image or description of the goddess statue, it’s going to be hard to track it, Shivay.”

Shivay was standing on his balcony talking on the phone. His gaze was directed towards the garden below.

“Yes, I know that, Nakul. But get as many leads as possible.”

“The team is collecting quite a few leads. Most of them point to some high-level bureaucrat, delegate, or even a damn monarch’s home having the statue as a part of their antique collection.”

It was harder to track something that was not a part of the public domain. Had the goddess statue been inside a museum or other public place, it would have been easily located.

“Any leads on the assassin from Africa?” Nakul asked.

Since the investigation for that was happening locally in Singoor, Shivay had more updates.

“So far, none of the locals recognized the assassin.”

“Hmm... that’s quite strange. Although, they could be lying too because of the consequences.”

Shivay knew that was a possibility. But the investigators had hired locals to gain their trust and offered enough monetary compensation if any of them found the assassin’s identity.

“Is Rishab back from Africa?” Shivay asked.

Rishab was taking care of the copper mine that was purchased in Zambia. Although it had been less than three months since he had been there, it felt much longer.

“Not yet. He is coming in later today.”

“Any security breaches?” Shivay asked.

“None so far. Although, Chitti might have noticed the additional security at her university. She called me yesterday sounding outraged and demanding to know if I have someone following her and her boyfriend.”

Shivay’s mouth twisted in amusement.

“And what about you?” Nakul asked. “I know you have security on standby at a nearby city. But are you sure you don’t need them at the Thakvar mansion?”

“I’m fine.”

The only person he needed to watch out for at the mansion was the woman feeding the peacocks and rabbits in the garden.

He watched as Ishani Gujjar moved gracefully along the garden. Soft laughter floated in the air as she let a rabbit eat from her hand. He couldn’t see her face because she was wearing the veil over it, but he knew it was her from the dress he had seen her wear that morning.

That damn dress was as contradictory as the woman wearing it. Her entire back was nearly exposed and covered with just thin strings. He could even see her small and narrow exposed waist.

Even though he was used to seeing women dressed in lesser clothes and even completely naked, the sight of her bare back and waist was distracting as hell.

Watching her made him think yet again that the woman he married was a strange combination of innocence and danger. One moment, her huge eyes would fill with tears of terror, and the next, she would be wielding a weapon against him with an intent to kill.

Unfortunately, his damn brain didn’t seem to get the message that she was dangerous and untrustworthy because each time he saw her, despite his anger, he saw her beauty, and his body reacted painfully with desire.

Ever since she had attacked him with the scissors, he held her against him and slept. Although she thought he was punishing her by holding her in his arms each night, it was more torturous to him. Because it only led to his frustration and a cold shower in the mornings.

The woman was a menace to his peace of mind.

“How is Ishani Gujjar?”

Shivay dragged his eyes away from his wife and focused on the phone call with Nakul.

“She’s fine,” he replied.

“Hmm...” There was a chuckle. “You know Rishab and I realized that each time one of us asks you about your wife, you always say she’s fine. I’m sure she is more than just that.”

*Yes, she is a maddeningly innocent, devious temptress I can’t stop desiring.*

“She’s part of the alliance, that’s all,” he replied.

“Ah, I see. So, you are still on with the plan to set her up with a house in the city of her choice and a chunk of cash and investments once the marriage ends?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm... let’s just hope the clan talks are successful soon. Then you won’t be stuck in an alliance marriage, and the poor woman will be free to lead her life as she wishes and maybe marry for love.”

Dark anger blazed through him at the thought of Ishani Gujjar marrying another man. It was irrational since he did intend to set her free from the marriage once things fell into place, but the possibility of her marrying someone hadn’t crossed his mind.

*Fuck.*

“So, when are the first alliance talks being planned?” Nakul asked.

“In seven or eight weeks,” he replied. “I’ll be reaching out to the clan heads personally.”

He gave the details about the ongoing talks with some of the clans. He had met with a few of the village heads. The others were deeper in the desert, and he planned to meet them in the coming weeks. Unless all the clan heirs came together and decided on a common peace understanding, the purpose of the alliance wouldn’t be achieved.

“Are you sure you don’t want Rishab and me to join you for the talks?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

He hadn’t told Rishab and Nakul about the extent of danger the clan wars posed. If they had the slightest clue that he was attacked on his wedding night, they would land in Singoor the next morning.

“I need you both there,” he reiterated.

“All right, fine.”

Shivay spoke for a few more minutes before ending the call. He stood on the balcony until much later, looking towards the garden.

Ishani Gujjar was gone from the garden. She was probably inside the mansion, playing the bin musical instrument in the prayer room, or reading a book in the library, or maybe chatting with his father inside the accounting room. He knew she wouldn’t come into their bedroom suite until much later when she felt she had no other choice.

She didn’t have a choice. It was something she brought on herself by betraying him and losing his trust.

His mind once again went back to the thought of her marrying someone else once he set her free. He shouldn’t care what she did once he left her. But he did.

*Maybe because she still owes me.*



He was yet to exact proper payment for her betrayal and other devious things she had planned against him.

She owed him. And until she paid the price, he wouldn't let her go.

## CHAPTER 12

“Would you like anything else, madam?”

Ishani smiled at the maid. “No, this water bottle and box of biscuits are enough.”

The maid looked at her curiously before leaving the suite.

Ishani was dressed that day in simpler clothes. She wore what she normally wore at the Gujjar mansion. The light-yellow dress enabled her to move freely, and the light jewelry didn't make much sound while she walked.

She had told the group of women who helped her get ready that she wouldn't be needing their services that day. The fact that Shivay Thakvar had left early that morning helped because she didn't need their protection from her scary husband.

Not that the women would ever go against him. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

Each morning, the women sang praises of the Thakvar heir working fearlessly and tirelessly to build alliances with various clans. Ishani was repeatedly told how lucky and blessed she was to have a handsome and loving husband like him.

The women mistook Shivay Thakvar's dark looks directed at her to be loving glances. And she was sure he was building alliances only to access and steal the crude oil from Singoor.

*He is a ruthless fraud! And he hates me!*

She had wanted to shout those words several times during the last three weeks since she had arrived at the Thakvar mansion as his bride.

But she had kept quiet because no one would believe her, and she didn't have proof.

After her unsuccessful attempt to obtain his hair sample, she became a prisoner in her marital bed. Each night, she slept while being trapped under his heavy muscled arm. She could barely move or complain. And even if she managed to slip away with difficulty, she was once again dragged back with a growled warning and held against his hard body. It was only after a few days that her tired mind and body learned to fall asleep despite the constant threat.

He was torturing her.

*Stop torturing me! And do what you want and be done with it now!*

She wanted to yell those words at him many times, but she held back. She was terrified he would do just as she said. He would either beat or violate her or do both.

So, she kept her mouth shut and endured his torture.

Unfortunately, there was nothing else she could do until it was proven he wasn't the Thakvar heir and that he intended to begin oil drilling in the middle of the Singoor desert.

It was hard to prove either. She had looked through the combs and inside the shower area in the bathroom, but nothing held his hair sample. She wished he didn't have thick, healthy hair and instead had considerable hair fall to leave her with DNA samples.

The possibility of getting blood samples from used cotton bandages was also gone since his injuries were healing fast, and most likely a doctor had attended to them.

All she could do was hope her brother was finding a way to prove Shivay Thakvar was a ruthless fraud.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, she placed the water bottle and box of biscuits into a handbag. Then taking a deep breath, she stepped out of the suite.

She looked around her surreptitiously. The corridor was empty since the cleaning was already done that morning. Keeping her head down, she took the corner stairway rather than the one in the middle of the mansion.

She went downstairs and slipped out the back entrance.

She knew she was not supposed to leave the Thakvar mansion without security, but that day, she needed to go out by herself. She was used to sneaking out even at her home for similar reasons, and her brother never found out that she did that once every three months for an important task.

She looked around and saw quite a few people outside, but all of them were busy either talking or doing their tasks. Hoping no one would pay her any attention, she headed to the side of the mansion.

There were several SUVs and jeeps parked, but she walked further towards the stables.

Camels were the best mode of transportation to places where there were no roads. The place she was going to would take twice the amount of time to drive in a vehicle than going on a camel.

Unlike the small stable area at the Gujjar mansion, the stables were vast at the Thakvar mansion.

She approached one of the stalls. All the animals appeared to be in good health. Although there was no brand on their skin to identify the clan, she saw the ones prepared for a ride had red and yellow-colored seating with the Thakvar clan insignia.

She chose the nearest one. The camel appeared gentle, and she also noticed his name was written on the seating.

“Hi, Champa,” she greeted, rubbing down the camel’s nose gently. “I hope you will enjoy the ride we are going to take.”

She sat on the camel and held the reins before leading it out of the stable. She had explored the mansion and the area outside enough to know

there was a side entrance that vendors and staff used.

She went towards it and looked at the guards at the tall gates.

“I’m carrying out a chore for Ishani madam,” she said.

“Ishani?” one of the guards asked in confusion.

“Ishani Thakvar.”

Her heart thudded, hoping none of the guards would demand proof. Luckily, they didn’t.

“The Gujjar heiress who Shivay sir has married,” one of the guards informed to the others.

The guards stood at attention, the tall gates were opened, and she was allowed outside.

She led the camel out and towards the village she had briefly seen when she was brought to the Thakvar mansion as a bride.

Hoping her mind would remember the directions, she continued to lead the camel away from the mansion. It was only when she took the detour from the village that she finally saw the vast stretch of sand.

With excitement brimming inside her heart, she pulled the reins and gave Champa the signal to start the sprint.

As soon as the camel took off, she felt the wind in her ears as her veil flew up.

Ishani laughed with excitement. It always felt liberating to be outside without being surrounded by guards or clan members.

Adding to her excitement was the meeting she was looking forward to with a man who met her every three months. He would bring her something precious.

She led the animal in the opposite direction of the sun. It was a hot and sunny day as usual, and she ensured to take sips of cooling water from the water bottle she had packed.

Nearly two hours later, she stopped next to a familiar large cactus plant.

She got down from the camel and gave it a gentle pat while waiting for the man to arrive. She hoped he wouldn't be late as she needed to return before sunset or before her devil husband returned home.

“He is the devil,” she told Champa.

But the sweet, obedient camel just chewed on the small patch of leaves next to the cactus.

Time ticked by, and when her stomach growled, she opened the box of biscuits. She nearly finished the box when she heard the familiar honking of a jeep.

Her face lit up with a smile.

*Finally!*

She pulled the veil over her face and watched as the jeep approached the usual meeting point.

The jeep stopped, and a tall, young boy driving it got out.

“Sorry, Ishani madam,” he said. “I got delayed.”

“That’s all right, Chotu.”

“I found everything on the list, madam,” he said, handing her a heavy cloth bag.

She smiled behind her veil. “That’s great, Chotu!” She reached for the small pouch she tied around her waist and pulled out a small ring. “Payment for this time and the rest of the year.”

The boy nodded, looking at the gold ring. It was one of the last ones she had, the other rings belonging to the Thakvar family. Although she was a Thakvar bride, she didn't want to use their wealth to pay for her things, especially since she didn't intend to stay married for long.

“How did you write your exams?” she asked.

The boy smiled. "I did well, madam. I passed with good marks. The study guides you suggested helped me."

"That's great to hear, Chotu!"

The boy smiled. "Thank you, Ishani madam."

His eyes fell on her camel before looking at her curiously. "That's a Thakvar camel," he remarked, recognizing the Thakvar clan insignia on the seating.

She nodded. Since Chotu lived in the city and only came to deliver her things every three months, he probably hadn't heard of the alliance.

"Yes, I live at the Thakvar mansion now. I got married to... the Thakvar heir."

"Oh." The boy's eyes widened. "Then you won't need my services anymore, madam. The Thakvars can get everything you want. In fact, I can deliver it to the Thakvar mansion too." He held out her ring. "You should take this back. Last time's payment covered this delivery as well."

"No, keep it because—" she broke off when she heard something.

It was getting louder and sounded strange. It didn't sound like a vehicle.

"A helicopter," the boy remarked.

"What?"

Her voice was drowned out by the loud whirring noise, and she had to shield her eyes as the sand blew around them.

She couldn't see clearly, but something huge landed at a distance from the sky. When the sound stopped, she turned, only to gasp aloud in shock and horror.

It was her devil husband.

She stepped back, clutching the cloth bag to her chest while he approached her. The look on his face made her shrink inwardly. Although he

wore sunglasses, the clench of his jaw indicated his anger.

“Come with me... now.” His words made her jerk and take another step back.

“I-I will come back on my own,” she said.

His eyes fell on the camel and then on Chotu, watching them with confusion.

“Do you know how to ride a camel?” Shivay Thakvar asked Chotu.

The boy nodded. “Yes, sir. I do.”

“Bring the camel to the Thakvar mansion. You can take a rest there tonight, and I’ll have someone drop you back in the morning to your vehicle.”

Chotu nodded. “Okay, sir.”

Ishani opened her mouth to protest but fell quiet when she met her husband’s dark gaze.

She felt his fingers wrapping around her arm before he dragged her towards the helicopter.

“Get in,” he ordered.

Holding the cloth bag in front of her, she got in. She didn’t recognize the two men inside, but she sat in one of the empty seats. A minute later, Shivay Thakvar came in and sat in the seat next to her.

Her stomach dropped when the helicopter flew up in the air. Although she knew what a helicopter was, she had never seen or been on one. She would have been excited or enjoyed the ride if her devil husband wasn’t next to her.

The ride was very short, and she could barely sit still when the helicopter landed and had to transfer into a jeep that took them towards the Thakvar mansion.

*What is he going to do?*



Shivay Thakvar didn't speak or address her during the short journey.  
*How did he know I was gone? And where to find me?*

She didn't dare ask him those questions yet.

The jeep stopped in front of the mansion, and she got out quickly. While he instructed the driver, she held the heavy cloth bag and ran up the mansion steps.

People looked at her curiously when she stepped into the mansion. She was glad her face was hidden behind the veil. Hoping no one recognized her, she hurried to the suite upstairs.

She had barely entered the bedroom suite and was about to hide the cloth bag in the closet when she heard the bedroom door opening and clicking shut.

A moment later, Shivay Thakvar appeared at the changing area doorway. "What is in that bag?" he asked.

She was shaking on the inside, but she managed to speak. "Nothing, just a few things I needed."

He watched her closely. "Take it out and show me."

She didn't want to. "Why?" she asked.

His face remained unreadable. "To see if you are carrying weapons."

She was shocked. "What? No! I don't have any weapons."

His eyebrow rose. "I consider scissors or knives weapons too."

Her cheeks reddened at his reminder. She shook her head again. "No, I don't have scissors or knives in the bag—"

"Show me the bag, Ishani," he ordered. "Now."

Angry and scared, she slowly pulled the cloth bag from the closet. She opened it and showed him the contents.

They were books, academic books in particular. Every three months, she asked Chotu to bring her university and research books so she could

update her knowledge in subjects of interest.

She was embarrassed that Shivay Thakvar would think of her as illiterate since she didn't have any formal education.

But he didn't say anything.

"Why did you leave the mansion without informing anyone?" he asked instead.

"I-I needed a few things." She kept her eyes on him through the veil. Then drawing up some courage, she raised her chin. "I-I didn't know I am a prisoner here and can't leave whenever I want."

Although her voice held false bravado, the look on his face was scary. He didn't look angry, but neither did he look happy. His dark eyes burned her.

"There's an active threat to all the heirs of the clans. I'm sure you are aware."

She did know it. She also knew that if anything had happened to her, the Thakvar family would be blamed.

"I-I can take care of myself," she replied.

"Can you?" he asked, stepping closer, making her heart nearly burst out of her chest.

"Y-yes."

She let out a shocked gasp, the cloth bag fell from her hands when his arms grabbed her, and she was suddenly lifted off her feet and pinned against the closet and him. Their eyes were at the same level, and she froze as his dark eyes burned into hers. Even through the veil, the intensity of his gaze made her stomach tremble. He was so close that his warm breath fell on her trembling lips.

"Show me," he ordered softly.

"W-what?"

“You said you can take care of yourself. Show me by escaping me.”

She was stunned and terrified. She had never found herself in real danger in the past to know how to protect herself. The only times she was in danger and felt threatened was because of him.

Anger burst inside her at the thought that he was the only one who constantly threatened her. Drawing in her anger, she wanted to slap his handsome face, only to realize he held her hands and trapped them behind her against the closet. She tried to kick him, but both her legs were also trapped against the closet by his muscular thighs. She struggled against him but could barely move as his hard chest and torso kept her body pinned.

He watched her with a dark gaze as she continued to struggle, trying to free her hands and legs. And in the process, she felt something hard and strange against her stomach. She froze when she realized what it was—her husband’s manhood. She often felt it against her buttocks during nights when he held her against him and slept.

She had always been terrified by what it would lead to. And now, despite his anger and hatred towards her, his body still indicated his arousal.

*Oh God.*

She watched him with terrified eyes. “Let me go,” she whispered.

“Why?”

“B-because you can’t... you can’t do this to me.”

His gaze bore into hers. “I can, and I have every right to do whatever I want with you.”

His dark eyes lowered and fell on her trembling lips through the veil. Her lips tingled strangely. When his jaw clenched, she thought he would yank the veil from her face.

She braced herself for the violence and brutality.

Suddenly, he stepped away. Her feet touched the floor, and she clung

to the closet behind her to avoid collapsing.

His dark glare blazed on her. “Next time you leave the mansion without letting anyone know, I’ll tie you to the bed each morning until I return home at night.”

With that threat, he walked away from the closet area. Moments later, she heard the sound of the suite door closing shut.

She remained frozen against the closet, her legs and body trembling hard.

She didn’t know how long she stood there, feeling angry, helpless, and terrified.

*He is a monster! I hate him!*

## CHAPTER 13

“That’s so beautiful,” a voice said.

Ishani opened her eyes to see the smiling face of her father-in-law. She was in the large prayer room and had just finished playing the bin instrument.

“Each time you play the bin, it feels as though the entire Thakvar mansion is transported to Kailash, and we are right next to God Shiva and Goddess Parvati.”

Ishani smiled with pleasure. “Thank you, Papa.”

“Have you had your breakfast, child?” he asked with a smile.

“No, not yet.”

“Then come. Join me.”

Ishani nodded. Touching her forehead to the bin, she carefully placed the beautiful antique instrument aside before getting up to join her father-in-law for breakfast.

Most mornings, she joined Mihir Thakvar at the breakfast table. When the older man wasn’t busy touring the Thakvar-run schools and hospitals, they even had lunch together. She also spent some time helping with the accounting for the trust organization. She spent the rest of her time either in the garden or library with her books.

“Is Shivay back?” her father-in-law asked while breakfast was served.

Ishani shook her head. “No.”

The older man sighed. “He needs to stay home and not work so much.”

Ishani didn’t say anything. The last time she had seen Shivay Thakvar was when he had threatened her for going into the desert alone. She had been

terrified he would tie her hands to the bed like he said he would, but he had left Thakvar mansion the same evening. He hadn't returned for nearly a week. From what she had heard, he was staying in the city due to urgent work.

Somehow, she had a feeling he was working on taking control of the oil wells in the desert. And he could do that easily after declaring himself as the Thakvar clan heir.

Once again, helpless anger filled her that he was fooling a generous-hearted old man and would be ruthlessly robbing the rightful wealth of the Singoor clans.

*How do I stop him?*

The DNA testing seemed impossible right then because she was terrified to get anywhere near him. She had to find a way soon before it was too late.

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It was much later in the night when Ishani lay on the bed, yet again unable to sleep and feeling scared that Shivay Thakvar might return soon, that she came to a realization.

The only way Shivay Thakvar was able to torture her was due to her uncertainty. She was always bracing for him to brutalize her.

*But what if I remove the uncertainty?*

Her heart thudded unevenly at her shocking thought.

*What if I seduce him first?*

A man wouldn't be able to brutalize a woman if she were willing and made a move first. She would remove the power he had over her with his constant threats. If anything, he might soften and fall under her seductive spell.

He might even reveal the truth of his identity and other plans he was setting into motion in the Singoor area.

Her terrified mind raced with all the possibilities.

The worst thing that could happen was she might lose her virginity, which many people thought was where a woman's honor belonged.

But she didn't think she would be losing her honor. If anything, sacrificing her virginity to stop a ruthless man from cheating her people was more honorable.

*Yes, it is the only way.*

Her mind felt relieved by her decision. But when she closed her eyes, and the darkly handsome face of Shivay Thakvar flashed into her mind, her body trembled in fear.

*Oh God. Give me strength to seduce that devil.*



## CHAPTER 14

Ishani woke up to the sound of peacocks.

Opening her eyes, she noticed she woke up surprisingly well-rested. Unlike most nights when she had dreams about her devil husband torturing her in terrible ways, the previous night's dream was strangely not scary.

She had dreamed that the devil tried to scare her, but she told him she was no longer scared of him and would stand up against him. It was odd and embarrassing, but she felt a strange flutter in her stomach when the devil leaned his handsome face against her and whispered the words against her lips.

*“Can you?” he asked.*

The devil's warm breath on her lips was similar to the time Shivay Thakvar had said those words a week ago when she said she could defend herself in the desert. And her lips had once again tingled with strange sensations.

“I must be going crazy,” she whispered to herself.

Why else would she feel anything but fear and hatred towards the man who was a ruthless fraud and tortured her?

With a long sigh, she pushed away the sheets covering her, got down from the bed, and headed to the bathroom. Her day was going to be busy since she wanted to explore the computers that her father-in-law purchased for the accounting room as well as the library.

She had never used one before and was looking forward to it.

Feeling excited, she grabbed her clothes for the day from the closet before pushing open the bathroom door. She was about to take a step inside but froze.

Standing bare-chested with just a towel around his waist was Shivay Thakvar. His head was lowered, and his hands were placed on the marble counter while he seemed deep in thought.

Her first instinct was to run out of the bathroom, but her legs froze when he turned his head towards her. His dark eyes clashed with hers, and the intensity made her tremble once again.

Even as he silently watched her, expecting her to run away as always, she remained frozen in place.

*Remove the threat by seducing him.*

Her mind threw those words at her, reminding her of the plan she had concocted the previous night. But right then, she was terrified to be in the same room as him, let alone attempt to seduce him.

*Oh God.*

His dark eyes continued to be trained on her.

She knew she could not run away and hide anymore. She had to show her devil husband she wasn't scared of him and had to win his trust to expose him as a fraud.

*I have to do this.*

Sucking in a deep breath, even as every alarm in her body went off, she walked inside.

He stood still with his expression unfathomable.

She stopped less than a few feet from him in front of the other sink. With trembling hands, she brushed her teeth before splashing her face. All the while, she sensed his presence next to her.

She straightened and turned, only to find him still watching her.

His hair was damp, and his chest was sprinkled with a few water droplets, indicating he had just stepped out of the shower. The familiar cologne he used tingled her nose.

She knew she was supposed to act coy and sweet talk to seduce him. But her throat seemed frozen along with her mind and body when she saw him.

She had to try harder.

Even as her stomach trembled, she stood her ground, wanting to show him she wasn't scared of him. He watched her as she looked up from his chest, her chin tilting up to meet his eyes.

"W-when did you come home?" she asked, wanting to break the heavy silence that threatened to choke her.

Although his face remained unreadable as always, she caught something in his eyes. A flicker that was barely there before it disappeared.

"Early morning," he replied.

Her heart nearly burst out of her chest as his eyes swept over her. She wasn't wearing the veil since she slept without it. When his eyes darkened, and she saw a slight clench of his jaw, an idea struck her.

*Oh God.*

It was a crazy idea, but before she lost her nerve, she turned, showing her back to him. Then, twisting her head to the side, she met with his dark gaze in the mirror.

"C-can you help me with the dress ties?" she asked. "I need to untie them before I s-step into the shower."

Even as she braced herself to his touch, there was a long, heavy silence.

"What are you doing?" he asked. She could see the clench of his jaw tighten.

With her heart thudding loudly, she held his gaze in the mirror.

"I-I need your help to untie the strings on my blouse. I can't reach them."

A moment later, she let out a loud gasp as he gripped her elbow and turned her to face him. “What. Are. You. Doing?” he bit out.

Her natural reaction was to say ‘nothing’ and run away from him, but she held her ground. “I-I told you that I need help with my ties.”

His jaw clenched even harder. “You need my help to undress you?”

Her stomach trembled at his words. “Y-yes. Since you are my husband, I have the right to ask for your help.”

She saw something sizzle in his eyes. “The right?” he asked darkly. She nodded.

He watched her face. “So, I have the right to touch you as a husband?” There was fire in his eyes that threatened to incinerate her. That should scare her, but it only ignited something within her.

“Yes,” she whispered. “You can t-touch me... as my husband.”

Before she could think of saying something seductive, she let out a gasp when his fingers wrapped behind her neck and pulled her close. Terrified, she wanted to struggle and escape. She placed her hands on his hard chest to push him away but froze when her hands met with his thumping heart.

Even as he held her still with a tight grip on her neck, she could feel the dark pull between them. Her lips began tingling like they did in her dreams and when he held her against the closet the previous week.

Terrified, curious, and determined, she ran the tip of her tongue over her dried lips.

His eyes flashed darkly, and the next moment, his mouth crashed on top of hers. Shocking heat gripped her body as his lips molded against hers while his tongue penetrated into her mouth. Shocked, she tried to jerk back but couldn’t move as he kept her mercilessly still for his invading mouth.

Having no other choice, she let the kiss consume her.

It felt as hot as the desert sun and as wild as the desert storm. His tongue ravaged and tasted her. She could taste him as well. He tasted like sweet minty toothpaste and also of something dark and forbidden.

Her legs nearly collapsed, but the grip on her neck tightened, keeping her in place for his demanding kiss. She couldn't breathe and could only feel as the sensations overwhelmed her.

With every push of his tongue into the deep recesses of her mouth, she felt a tug somewhere deep in her womb. The shocking sensations made her break into goose bumps and tremble. A deep moan escaped her, and her body swayed towards him. Her hands moved up from his chest and gripped his shoulders, wanting to get even closer.

But just as the kiss began, it ended abruptly when his heated mouth left hers. His dark eyes burned her with the heat.

"You are a damn menace," he growled before storming out of the bathroom.

She clung and leaned against the marble counter for support while her legs trembled underneath her.

With a dazed shock, she looked at herself in the mirror and brought her trembling fingers to her swollen lips.

*He kissed me.*

*Shivay Thakvar kissed me. And I told him he could touch me as my husband.*

Her body trembled. And strangely, the trembling wasn't entirely due to fear.

## CHAPTER 15

“You need to stay home more, son. You are married now.”

Shivay nodded at his father. “I had a few things to take care of at work, Dad.”

Mihir Thakvar smiled. “I see. And how are the talks going on with the smaller clans?”

Shivay hadn’t discussed or said anything to his father about the clan talks.

“Did you think I wouldn’t know about them, son?” Shivay’s father asked. “Many of the clan heads are our allies. I’ve received information from some of them that the Thakvar heir is reaching out to them to negotiate larger peace talks.”

Mihir Thakvar let out a sigh. “I’m proud of you, son. Although I would rather have you safe than going deep into the desert for peace talks and risking your life.”

“I have security, Dad.”

Shivay’s father shook his head. “The security you have might work in the cities, but if a primitive clan like the Kabalis attack, security won’t be able to tackle them.”

“I’ll be careful, Dad.”

Mihir Thakvar didn’t seem too convinced, but he nodded. “It’s been a month since your marriage. The post-wedding ceremonies were put on hold as you had requested. You wanted your bride to get used to the place. Now that Ishani is used to us and this place, we should proceed with the ceremonies.”

Shivay nodded.

“It’s important for you to stay home, son. Ishani needs to get used to you too. For all we know, if things turn bad, you and she might have to go to San Francisco soon—”

“No, Dad. I’m not leaving without you.”

Mihir Thakvar sighed. “You are quite stubborn, son. But I guess I can’t complain because you get that from me.” There was a soft smile. “My stubbornness was what got me your mother. Chitra wasn’t too impressed with me at first. According to her, a God Shiva devotee from a faraway desert land and a God Krishna devotee who grew up in the West wouldn’t have much in common, but we still fell deeply in love.”

Shivay had witnessed the love between his parents until he was ten. Even though he was a child, he could still recall the devastation on his mother’s face when she told him that his father died in an accident.

“I want you to spend more time at home,” Shivay’s father reiterated. “Make use of the home office you had set up. I know you ordered computers for the library and accounting room so your wife can keep busy, but she needs you the most at this time.”

Shivay didn’t say anything.

“All right, I’ll see you later, son. I’m going to the hospital to check on a few things.”

Shivay’s eyes fell on Rai Bahadur, who gave a subtle nod to Shivay to acknowledge that security was taken care of for his father’s hospital visit.

Soon, Shivay’s father left the mansion. As Shivay went to the home office room, his mind fell on Ishani Gujjar, his errant wife.

The act she had put on earlier that morning proved that she was up to something again.

*“Yes,” she whispered. “You can t-touch me... as my husband.”*

Those words had angered and aroused the hell out of him. He was

angry because he knew it was an act with an ulterior motive, but despite knowing it, he still desired her fiercely, making him angrier.

Her nervous seduction made him rock-hard. It had led to a kiss because he wanted to show her what allowing him to touch her would mean. Even though he wanted the kiss to be punishing, it became something more. The moment he felt her soft lips and tasted her sweetness inside, his need for her burned hotter.

It took every ounce of his self-control not to pick her up, put her on the marble countertop, and push up her long skirt before ramming into her as his body craved for so long, but the shocked gasp escaping her mouth and her inexperience stopped him. She might be untrustworthy and dangerous, but it was obvious she was innocent when it came to sex.

*Fuck.*

He should stop craving his temporary wife. Even though a part of him thought she belonged to him and owed him everything for her betrayal, another part of him held back from claiming her.

He just hoped his innocent yet treacherous wife wouldn't bring out the savage part of him with her nervous seduction.



## CHAPTER 16

“The next big ritual at the Thakvar mansion should be the celebration of the arrival of the next Thakvar heir.”

Ishani blushed under her veil at Rai Bahadur’s wife, Malathi’s words.

They had just finished a ceremony. Over the week, several rituals and ceremonies were performed at the mansion. It was to bless the newly married couple for a long and happy married life.

“What do you want to have first?” a woman from the Thakvar household asked Ishani. “A boy or girl?”

“It doesn’t matter,” another woman replied. “Both will be blessed by God Shiva and Goddess Parvati.”

“That’s true. And they will surely have both and many more to fill the mansion with several Thakvar heirs.”

As the women laughed good-naturedly, Ishani continued to blush.

“He is so handsome,” a woman said with a sigh.

“Yes, he is handsome and regal despite being brought up in a foreign land.”

Ishani sneaked a look to see him talking to Mihir Thakvar at a distance. The older man was smiling while he held the usual stoic expression. He was wearing traditional clothes for the ceremony, making him look regal.

Her devil husband might be handsome but was as cold as ice.

*No, he isn’t cold. He is hot as the desert sun.*

Her face heated as she was reminded of their kiss the previous week.

She had been too shocked and terrified of what had happened and how she responded to his kiss. So, she had once again escaped his presence and kept herself hidden in the garden and library. And at night, she pretended

to be asleep before he came to bed.

A few days later, she had tried to gather her courage and execute her plan of seducing him. She tried to catch his attention, only to be ignored by him.

Apart from the ceremonies, where they had to be next to each other for the rituals and during the meals when they joined his father at the dining table, there was no other close interaction between them during the day. And at nighttime, he came to their bed well after midnight when she couldn't remain awake.

How was she supposed to seduce her devil husband if he wasn't around?

She continued to sneak looks at him from under her veil. He nodded when his father said something. Just when she thought he would leave as he did each morning to his office room upstairs, his eyes fell on her. Her body jolted, and a strange shiver that wasn't entirely fear passed through her. She knew he couldn't see her face, but their eyes met even through her veil. He would watch her for a long moment before turning and walking away.

With her heart thudding loudly, she made a decision. If her devil husband wasn't near her, she would go to him to begin her seduction.

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It was much later at night when Ishani put her plan into action.

Her legs trembled as she climbed the stairs. Shivay Thakvar spent most of his time inside the home office set up on the topmost floor of the mansion.

She tried to think of an excuse for her to suddenly show up there but found none. Nevertheless, she gathered the courage to somehow continue.

She had to stop Shivay Thakvar by winning his trust and gathering information about him. She couldn't afford to waste time. Her mother needed her, and Mihir Thakvar didn't deserve to be cheated. Even the people of Singoor had to be protected from the ruthless fraud who became her husband.

*I have to do this.*

Sucking in a deep breath, she gathered her courage once again.

The top floor of the mansion was completely deserted and only partially lit. Looking around, she slipped into the wing where she knew the home office was located.

The suite door was partially open. She slipped in and saw a huge seating area but didn't find any desk or anyone around. She thought she was in the wrong room until she heard the deep, familiar voice coming through the closed door on the other side of the suite.

It was him.

Her heart thudded even louder as she stepped closer. She stopped outside the door to listen, hoping to get proof of his ruthless intentions towards the Singoor oil wells.

But her heart jolted when she heard a woman's voice.

“You can't have an army of guards tailing me and Rahul at the university!” The woman sounded outraged.

“It’s just for a while, and it’s for your safety,” Shivay Thakvar replied.

“Promise it’s only for a short while?” the woman asked.

“Yes, I promise.”

Ishani was shocked at how her devil husband’s deep voice sounded gentle. She had never heard him speak that way to anyone. He was usually cold and polite when he addressed the staff or spoke to people at the Thakvar mansion, except when he spoke to Mihir Thakvar. Then, his deep voice held a softer tone.

Who was the woman? She sounded young and also mentioned a university and the name Rahul.

Was she a relative? Or a friend?

Ishani’s heart jolted. *Or maybe his girlfriend.*

*Oh God.*

She hadn’t considered the possibility that Shivay Thakvar could have a girlfriend or even a wife. If the man was a ruthless fraud, he could also be duping her by marrying her even though he was already married.

“Is it true?” the woman asked. “Ma said something strange about getting the house ready for you and your wife. Are you getting married?”

There was a pause. “I’ll talk about it later.”

There was a loud feminine squeal. “Oh my God! That’s great! I can’t wait to have a sister. Who is she? How come you never mentioned anything to me!”

There was a sigh. “I’ll talk to you later about it.”

He spoke something, but it was too soft to catch the words clearly. However, based on what Ishani heard, the woman was related to him. His sister?

Ishani hadn’t heard anything about Mihir Thakvar’s family except for

his long-lost heir appearing suddenly in the Singoor province. Since no one else attended the wedding, everyone assumed Mihir Thakvar had no wife or other children.

Ishani's heart jolted once again when she realized it was significant proof that Shivay Thakvar was a fraud. The man had a family—a mother and sister.

In the coming days, she would have to find details and more proof to inform Mihir Thakvar that the man claiming to be his son was lying.

With her heart thudding, she continued to listen. The phone call ended, and immediately there was the sound of a phone ringing.

“Hello,” his deep voice replied.

“Sir, the Merrick takeover has hit a glitch. One of the partners is refusing to sign the final paperwork of the contract.”

“Tell them they have exactly twenty-four hours to sign the papers and send them back to us, or the deal with the agreed amount will be withdrawn, and the takeover will take place the way I want.”

She couldn't completely understand what was being spoken, but she caught the words 'takeover' and 'contracts' to once again verify he was a businessman. Shivay Thakvar's voice held authority as he barked out orders.

The call didn't last long, but another call was placed as soon as it ended.

Ishani stood outside the door, wondering if she would have to stay outside the office door all night. She wished she had a recording device so she could hear everything he spoke and give it to Mihir Thakvar as proof. Unfortunately, she didn't have any such device.

So, she continued to listen.

“Has the excavation resumed at the mine in Africa?” he asked.

“Yes,” a man replied. “The rest of the team is flying to Africa next

week. They finished early in South America.”

“Good. I want you to see this through, Rishab. You only have three weeks before you travel.”

“Sure, Shivay.”

“Nakul, as soon as Rishab returns from Africa, fly to New York and finalize the takeover for Merrick.”

“Yes, I will.”

“How are things in Singoor?” one of the men asked. “Are the talks still on schedule?”

“Yes,” Shivay replied. “They are going to proceed as planned.”

There was a long sigh on the phone. “I wish we had a picture of the goddess statue,” the man said. “It would make everything relatively simpler to trace it.”

Ishani let out a soft gasp when she heard the reference to the goddess statue. Based on the tone, Rishab and Nakul seemed to be Shivay Thakvar’s business partners and friends rather than people working for him. They didn’t refer to him as ‘sir’ like the other man did in the previous call.

Why were they looking for Goddess Shakti’s statue? And how did they find out about the tale of the land? And most of all, why did Shivay Thakvar care about bringing the goddess statue back?

Then the obvious reason struck her.

Shivay Thakvar wanted to find the missing goddess statue only to have the upper hand and get everyone to agree to drill for oil in Sands of Singoor like before the statue had disappeared.

She felt outraged by the nefarious plan. Sucking in a deep breath, she moved a bit closer to the door without touching it.

“So, how is your wife?” one of the men asked. “You hardly ever speak about the Gujjar heiress you married for an alliance.”

Ishani held her breath, wondering what Shivay Thakvar would say about her.

There was a pause before he replied, “She is a meddling menace...” he said in a dark tone, “... that I need to get rid of shortly.”

She stifled a gasp.

*My God. Was he planning to kill her?*

He said he wouldn’t because of the alliance. What was he planning to do to her?

Before her terrified mind could think of something, the door she was leaning against flew open, causing her to nearly fall. Before she could run or scream, his arm wrapped around her waist, and he dragged her into the office, kicking the door shut behind him.

He pushed her against the door again, pinning her with his body, his dark eyes filled with anger.

*Oh God. He’s going to kill me now.*

Her stomach and legs trembled in terror even as she tried to think of a way to escape the situation.

“W-what are you doing?” she managed to ask.

“That’s my line, my meddling wife. What were you doing outside my office?”

“I... I came here looking for you. When I heard you speaking to someone just now, I waited for you to finish your call.”

He watched her closely. “Why were you looking for me?” he asked. He was so close to her, she could feel his breath over her cheek.

“I-I wanted to... to be with you and spend some time together.” She desperately tried to make her voice less shaken. “I-I am your wife, and I have the right.”

Something flickered in his eyes. She gasped when he suddenly swept

her feet off the floor to carry her somewhere. Before she could panic, he put her on the desk. “Let’s spend some time together then,” he said.

Her body trembled when she realized how close he was standing. The familiar scent of his cologne filled her senses, and her skin broke into goose bumps. Even though her mind was terrified of the danger, and he was intimidating her with his presence, a part of her shivered with a different kind of awareness. It was the kind she had felt the past week whenever she found his dark gaze on her. Her lips tingled, and a strange throbbing grew inside her unexpectedly.

Her every sense came alive, and she became aware of her faster breathing.

He was a monster, but he was a monster she was strongly drawn to physically.

“So you came here to be my wife?” he asked.

She couldn’t let him think she was spying on him. It was not only dangerous to her, but many things depended on him trusting her.

“Y-yes,” she replied. “It’s been a month, and we haven’t been together.”

His eyes flashed darkly.

She was terrified of the look on his face, but she raised her trembling hands to his chest. Once again, she could feel the thumping beat of his heart. Feeling slightly emboldened by it, she looked him in the eyes.

“A wife belongs with her husband. I-I am yours, but you haven’t claimed me like a husband should.”

His eyes darkened even further. She braced herself, expecting him to grab and kiss her like he did the previous week when she had said similar words to him. With her heart thudding hard, she waited.

He watched her intently. “Show me what’s mine,” he said.



“W-what?” she asked, not understanding.

“You said you belong to me. Remove your clothes and show me what’s mine.”

Her body jerked with shock. “W-what?”

Slowly, his mouth twisted as he watched her in a dark challenge.

“Strip,” he ordered.

Blind panic erupted inside while she froze and stared at him like a statue. She wanted to run away, but she realized her legs were spread, and he stood in between them, trapping her on the desk.

“I’m waiting,” he said.

She stared at him. Despite the dark anger and challenge, she sensed something else—he desired her. She recalled how she had felt his hard maleness against her when he held her pinned in bed and when he kissed her. Even now, while his body kept her trapped against the desk, she could feel his unmistakable hard arousal.

She once again reminded herself she was to use seduction as leverage to make him trust her.

Sucking in a deep, shuddering breath, she reached her trembling hands behind her to untie the knots on her dress. She wasn’t able to untie them since her fingers shook badly.

He watched her. “Want my help?” he asked, a dark edge to his voice.

She bit her lip and slowly nodded.

There was flash in his eyes. She held her breath, waiting to feel his heated fingers on her back. But cool air hit her when he stepped away. She blinked, feeling confused.

She watched him as he went behind his office desk and opened a drawer before taking out something. Just when she wondered what it was, it glinted in his hands.

She gasped in shock. It was a knife.

His mouth slowly twisted, seeing the shocked, terrified look on her face as he came towards her with a knife.

Her stomach trembled. “W-what are you doing?” she whispered.

He didn’t reply. He got the knife closer.

“A wedding gift,” he said, his voice darkly casual. “Must be someone from the Gujjars presented it.”

She didn’t dare to look at the knife closely as she was too terrified. She kept her eyes on him.

She gasped when he reached behind her. Her eyes closed, bracing herself for pain when she felt the cold metal against her skin at her back.

There wasn’t any pain. She felt slight pressure on her skin as the ties of her dress were cut.

Cool air fell on her chest when her dress slipped down to her waist. Shocked, she opened her eyes. She realized, she was half naked and in front of a man.

Her face burned as his eyes swept over her body. When his eyes met with hers, they blazed darkly. She let out a gasp when he held up the knife and brought it towards her.

Her body jerked when the smooth jade-colored handle slid over her skin on top of her breasts. Goose bumps peppered her skin.

“Do you still want to be my wife?” he asked darkly.

She was terrified, and wanted to sob out a no and escape him. But something held her back.

She sensed an angry edge behind the darkness of his eyes. Somehow, she knew he was deliberately trying to scare her away.

“Y-yes,” she whispered. “I-I want to be your wife.”

His eyes flashed darkly before he began to move the smooth handle of

the knife.

The tips of her breasts hardened as the knife circled around her breast. Her chest heaved seeing his dark hunger on his face while he watched her body. Her stomach trembled when he moved the handle to another breast and circled the pebbled tip.

Her breasts tuned heavy and ached with a strange pleasurable pain.

A soft moan escaped her.

Suddenly, the cool handle of the knife disappeared from her skin.

“Damn you,” he growled.

She felt him grip the back of her neck before his mouth captured hers in a hard, punishing kiss. At the same time, his hand slipped under her long dress and she felt his calloused fingers moving up the side of her thigh.

A shocked gasp escaped her.

His kiss continued to be rough and passionate, but the touch of his hand below trembled her stomach. Just when his hand moved closer to the apex of her thighs, she gasped and tried to close her thighs. But he stood between her legs, widening them further. With her thighs spread apart, she clung to him as he touched her in between her legs.

The sensations overwhelmed her. The heat of his dizzying kiss and the calloused tip of his finger against the most intimate part of her sent shock and electricity coursing through her body. His finger circled a spot within the intimate folds below, causing her to shiver with wet heat.

Within moments, she felt something build like a wave, a spiral of pleasure erupting from deep inside. Helpless cries escaped her throat, not knowing what was coming.

Soon, she exploded.

She cried out against his mouth as every part of her body shattered into a million pieces, and heat and pleasure barreled through her. She clung to

him while the storm inside her crashed in peaks.

It was so intense that when it ended, it left her drained and limp.

The sound of his harsh breaths filled the air. A moment later, he pulled away from her abruptly, leaving her lips and her intimate core throbbing. She slowly opened her eyes, and her dazed and limp body jolted when she saw his darkly handsome face tightened in fury.

His hands fisted at his sides before he walked away without another word.

Shocked and still dazed, she tried to process what happened.

She was supposed to seduce her husband, but instead, she ended up being seduced by him. She now craved his wicked touch.

*Oh God.*

## CHAPTER 17

For the next three days, Ishani avoided her husband again.

After spending yet another restless night, she woke up late. She went about her day and stayed in the garden until she was called inside for urgent phone call.

“Your mother had another episode this morning, madam. Even Devraj sir is not here.”

Ishani’s stomach dropped, listening to her mother’s nurse. She knew what such episodes entailed. Her mother hadn’t had one in many months.

“Please give her the phone,” Ishani said. “I’ll try to talk to her.”

“She is resting now, madam. I just gave her medication to relax.”

Ishani hated the medications that were given to her mother. They made her drowsy and incoherent. But according to the doctors, if those medications weren’t taken in a timely manner, a manic episode could result in her mother hurting herself or others.

“She has been asking for you, madam. She wanted to know why you aren’t here at the Gujjar mansion.”

Ishani knew her mother most likely did not remember the wedding. Ishani’s brother ensured her mother was heavily medicated so she didn’t interrupt the ceremony.

“Can you...” Ishani’s voice broke. “Can you please tell Ma I’ll visit her soon?”

“Sure, madam,” the nurse replied softly.

Ishani ended the call feeling anxious. She wanted to see her mother, but she knew it wasn’t possible. According to tradition, she would only be allowed to go to her childhood home after six months of marriage.

Hoping she could get her father-in-law's permission and knowing he would agree, she went in search of him. She checked the accounting room and the visitor's room but couldn't find him anywhere. Just when she thought of looking for Rai Bahadur, she came across his wife, Malathi.

"Malathi, have you seen Papa?"

"Mr. Thakvar and Bahadur went out. They should be back this evening."

Ishani had forgotten that her father-in-law had a meeting with the trust board. He had told her the previous day during dinner.

Thanking Malathi, she went back to the suite. She didn't feel like spending time in the garden or playing the bin. Her mind was too upset and worried.

A thought occurred to her as she paced around the empty suite restlessly. She rushed out of the suite without taking too long to think it over.

She went up the stairs to the topmost floor and rushed into the office. Immediately, she knocked on the door even when she heard the familiar deep voice speaking on the phone.

She had avoided him since the last time she went into his office three days ago. She hadn't dared to be around him after he left her pleased and shaken. Her mind was still trying to process what had happened.

But right then, her mind was too worried about her mother to think of the discomfort she would feel facing the man who pleased her in a forbidden manner on his office desk.

"Give me a minute," he told someone on the phone. She didn't hear any footsteps, but a moment later, the office door opened.

He saw her, and his expression remained unreadable. But a moment later, there was the barest of frowns on his forehead.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

“I-I want to visit my home.”

He knew she meant Gujjar mansion.

“I would like to go now,” she said. “I’ll be back by tomorrow evening.” The journey would be long, and she would only spend half a day with her mother, but she wanted to spend any time she could with her mother.

“No.”

His single-word response made her angry.

“You have no right to stop me!” she shouted. “Your father would have allowed me to go. Since he isn’t there, I asked you!”

He watched her. She realized she had shouted at him, possibly making him angry.

She took a step closer, even though she was intimidated by his presence. “Please, let me go,” she appealed. “I will be back by tomorrow.”

He stayed silent for a long moment with his eyes trained on her. “I’ll go with you. Let me know when you want to leave.”

She was shocked. But right then, she didn’t want to think about why he was accompanying her.

“I’ll be ready to leave in an hour,” she said hurriedly. “I’ll ask Malathi to help me pack.”

He nodded. “I’ll be downstairs. Come down when you are ready.”

She felt strange listening to him being reasonable and not demanding or scary. She was still afraid of him and knew he was a ruthless fraud, but right then, he seemed like a considerate husband. Not wanting to analyze too much, she hurried to pack her clothes.

Less than an hour later, she went down the mansion steps. She expected to see a small army of men as security going along with them in the SUV, but she was surprised when she just saw Shivay Thakvar standing next to the jeep. The security stood at a distance in other SUVs.

“Ready?” he asked.

When she nodded, he took the bag from her hands and placed it in the back seat of the SUV.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

When he sat in the driver’s seat, she sat next to him in the front passenger seat. She sneaked a look at him. He was wearing sunglasses and looking ahead. As usual, she couldn’t read anything on his face.

Soon, the vehicle began moving. She realized she hadn’t notified her brother or anyone at her household about her arrival, but it didn’t matter. All she wanted was to check on her mother and spend some time with her.



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The ride was mostly silent. Soft classical music played inside the SUV, but there was no conversation.

Ishani was surprised that Shivay Thakvar listened to classical music. She had expected him to be more westernized. She had also recently observed that he seemed familiarized with most of the customs and rituals that had taken place at the Thakvar mansion.

Was it because of his mother?

Once again, she wondered about the phone call she had overheard when he spoke to a woman who was most likely his sister. There was a reference to their mother.

Ishani couldn't ask him about them since he didn't know she had spied on him outside his office. Her cheeks heated, and the buzz of awareness grew, recalling what happened three days ago when he caught her standing outside his office.

Later that night, he hadn't been there when she had returned to the bedroom suite. He hadn't come the entire night. She knew because she couldn't sleep either. Since that night in the office, she had felt restless and scared about how strongly she was drawn to him despite knowing he was a ruthless fraud.

The roughness of his mouth and the shocking intimacy of his calloused finger against her feminine core haunted her day and night.

Even as her cheeks heated and her body craved his touch, she firmly reminded herself to focus on the goal. She had to find information about him. And seducing him or giving in to him was only to achieve that goal.

Dragging her eyes away from him, she looked outside the window at the familiar terrain. They were taking the route that was longer in distance but

had better roads. But as they approached the Gujjar province, the roads turned bumpier. Her brother hadn't bothered to spend money on improving the roads or infrastructure of the province. He mostly spent considerable income on entertainment.

“My brother might not be home to receive us,” she said.

Shivay Thakvar didn't say anything.

She wondered if he still suspected her brother's role in the attack on their wedding night, even though she had taken the entire blame on herself.

Soon, the Gujjar mansion came into view, making her heart feel much lighter. Her childhood home was much smaller than the imposing majestic Thakvar mansion, but it was the place she grew up in and loved.

When the SUV rode through the opened gates, she was surprised by the people gathered outside. When the SUV pulled up in front of her house, the sound of conch shells and drums filled the air. The Gujjars stood waiting to receive the newlywed couple.

She was surprised they had been expecting her to arrive with her husband.

She realized someone from the Thakvar household must have informed her people a few hours ago.

Adjusting her veil, she got down from the SUV. Shivay Thakvar stood beside her while a group approached and led them to the mansion.

She was wearing a dress and heavy jewelry that the Thakvar family gave her. Next to her, Shivay Thakvar was standing in buttoned shirt and trousers. He looked quite comfortable when the clan members began the rituals.

Right at the top of the steps at the mansion entrance, a woman waited for them. Ishani was shocked and surprised that it was her mother.

Her mother was holding a silver platter with a small lamp on it, ready

to perform the ritual to welcome her married daughter back home for her first visit with her husband. Ishani had been worried about her mother's health, but when she saw her standing and smiling at her, the tightness inside her stomach turned into happiness.

She blinked away tears of joy as her mother performed the welcome ritual for the newlywed couple.

Once the traditions were complete, she was about to bend down to touch her mother's feet. She was shocked when Shivay Thakvar also did the same. A rush of warmth filled her heart that he valued and respected her mother. There was a rumor that Sujata Gujjar had lost her mind after her husband's death. Ishani hated that her sweet and beautiful mother was considered mad by her own people.

Her mother seemed to be shocked as well when Shivay Thakvar touched her feet because she paused before blessing them.

“May you both always be happy and together forever.”

Ishani's heart ached at her mother's words. She knew her mother was remembering Ishani's father, whom she had dearly loved and lost tragically.

Ishani got up and hugged her mother. “Ma, I missed you so much.”

“I missed you too, my child. I was so happy to hear you were coming for a visit with your husband. All of my tiredness vanished.”

Happiness burst inside Ishani's heart at hearing her mother's words.

Her mother led them inside, where the rest of the rituals were performed. After several songs and dances, a feast was offered to welcome the son-in-law and introduce him to the Gujjar delicacies.

Ishani sat at the table while her mother served her, Shivay, and the rest of the guests.

“Where is Devraj,” Ishani's mother asked. “He is missing the family celebration.”

One of the Gujjar men replied. “Devraj sir is traveling on urgent work, madam.”

Ishani wondered what urgent work her brother had. He usually didn't travel outside of their province.

Ishani sneaked a look at Shivay Thakvar to see if he was offended by her brother's absence. But as usual, there was an unreadable expression on his face.

She had told him her brother was not involved in the attack on their wedding night. But she wondered if he believed her. There was no reason for him not to since she told him the attack was motivated by her fear of marrying a stranger.

Shivay Thakvar didn't know that she or her brother suspected him to be a ruthless fraud.

Her heart jerked as she realized her mind was only suspecting him to be a ruthless fraud rather than confirming it as a fact.

*No. He is a ruthless fraud. He has to be!*

But even as she thought those words, a small part of her gave him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe it was because her mind was confused about how he allowed her mother to serve him large quantities of food without complaining and how his voice softened when he addressed her mother.

She shook her head slightly.

*I'm just being emotional due to Ma. Shivay Thakvar is a fraud. He is just putting on an act.*

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The rest of the day passed by with more celebration and merriment. Much later in the night, Ishani accompanied her mother to her suite. “I’m fine, Ishani,” her mother said. “I’m not tired.”

Ishani smiled when a small yawn escaped her mother.

“Well, I want you to rest, Ma. You have been working hard all day.”

Her mother wasn’t used to being awake for such a long time either. She spent most of the day drowsy in bed due to her medications.

Ishani made a note to remind her brother to ask the doctor to review the medications. Maybe she didn’t need such strong dosages anymore.

When her mother got into the bed, Ishani covered her with a light blanket.

“Goodnight, Ma.”

“Goodnight, my child,” her mother said with a drowsy smile. “I can’t believe you became so big that you are even married now.”

Ishani smiled.

“I like your husband,” her mother said. “I can already see he would make a strong leader for the Thakvars. And I’m happy he cares for you and brought you here when you asked him. Your father was like that too. Ishwar would accompany me each year to visit my family.”

Ishani didn’t say anything. She didn’t want to worry her mother with the truth about Shivay Thakvar and the reality of her marriage.

“Yes, I’m glad I could come and see you too, Ma.” She kissed her mother’s cheek.

Her mother’s eyes closed.

Ensuring her mother was comfortable, Ishani stepped out of the room. She instructed her mother’s nurse not to wake her mother until much later the

next morning.

“I will instruct the kitchen staff and housekeeper tomorrow morning on what needs to be done.”

“Sure, madam.”

Ishani stepped out and went towards her room. Her mind felt peaceful after a very long time. She was glad she could come and spend time with her mother, even if it was only for half a day.

With a smile, she pushed open the door to her childhood bedroom, only to freeze.

Shivay Thakvar was in her room. He was standing by the bed and looking outside the windows while talking to someone on his phone.

Her stomach fluttered nervously when he turned to look at her.

Unlike the massive bedroom suite in the Thakvar mansion, her childhood bedroom was relatively smaller, with a sitting area in the same room. The bed was also smaller.

There were other bedrooms in the Gujjar mansion that guests used, but since her trip was planned at the last moment, she couldn't have any of those readied for their stay.

She would have to spend the night with her devil husband in the close quarters of her room.

With her cheeks heating, she stepped inside.

“I'll talk to you later,” he told the person on the phone before ending the call.

He watched her as she approached the small table in the seating area where fruits and delicacies were laid out.

Her mouth dried up with nervousness, so she poured the *Bael* sharbat, the spiced juice made from wood apples popular in Gujjar province, into a copper tumbler. She looked at Shivay Thakvar.

“Would you like some juice?” she asked, deciding to offer some out of politeness.

His dark eyes flashed before his mouth twisted. “Is it a traditional drink here?” he asked.

Her heart thudded seeing him approach her. “Yes.”

“Is it a drink that only men should have as a tradition?”

She frowned, feeling confused. “No, anyone can have it.”

“I see. So, I don’t have to worry about drinking it and waking up buried under the sand in the middle of the desert?”

A bolt of realization hit her then. He thought the drink was drugged.

When he continued watching her with his mouth twisted in dark amusement, she picked up the glass and drank the juice before banging the tumbler back on the table.

“It’s not drugged!” she said angrily.

Part of her knew she had no right to be angry since she had betrayed him on their wedding night by drugging his drink and being a part of the planned attack. And she also intended to expose the truth about him soon. But somehow, she was angry by his accusation.

*Remember, you have to gain his trust. You are supposed to seduce him. Only then can you get Ma the treatment she needs.*

Sucking in a deep breath, she hid her anger. And then, she poured the juice into the same tumbler and went to him.

“I-I know you don’t trust me because of what happened in the past,” she said. “But you have to trust me now. I am your wife.” She took a few sips of the juice and offered it to him.

He watched her for a long moment before he walked away and went towards the door.

Disappointment filled her when she thought he was leaving the room,

but her heart jerked when she saw that he bolted the bedroom door shut.

*Oh God.*

He then went around the bedroom, checking the window openings, the small area of the attached closet room, and finally, under the bed.

“I don’t want any surprises tonight,” he said.

Her heart thudded when he took the juice from her hands and drank it. He then put the empty tumbler on the table next to him.

She gasped when his fingers caught the back of her neck, and his mouth captured her lips in a hard kiss. Heat exploded, and her mind swam as his tongue thrust inside her mouth. She tasted the juice he just drank and the dark, unique, and addicting taste she now recognized each time he kissed her.

But before she could savor it, his mouth left hers. A gasp left her when he suddenly swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed.

“Which side is yours?” he asked.

“L-left side,” she replied.

*Oh God. It’s going to happen. He is going to claim me tonight.*

Even though it was a part of her plan, she was terrified that it was actually happening.

He placed her on the left side of the bed. And then, he turned off the lights. The mattress dipped when he got into the bed next to her.

She stifled a gasp when his muscled arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her close. She felt his hard arousal against her back, but just when she thought he would begin touching her, she heard his deep voice against her ear.

“Go to sleep,” he ordered. “And just in case you are planning another attack with another sharp object tonight, don’t. It won’t end well for you.”

Shocked, she remained frozen.

Multiple contradictory emotions warred inside her. She was outraged



he held her trapped against him because he didn't trust her and thought she planned to attack him that night. But she was grateful he brought her to Gujjar mansion despite his lack of trust.

She was relieved he didn't claim her that night, but she was disappointed that her seduction wasn't working on him.

And finally, she felt fear. Her fear wasn't entirely driven by the thought of her husband claiming her. It was fear caused by the disappointment she felt for not experiencing more of Shivay Thakvar's kisses and touch that night.

*No! He's a ruthless fraud. I shouldn't desire him!*

Even as she repeated those words in her mind, she knew she couldn't deny it anymore. She was drawn strongly to her ruthless husband and craved his touch.

## CHAPTER 18

“I will visit you again soon, Ma.”

Ishani was standing outside the Gujjar mansion. Her people were gathered as well to give her and the Thakvar heir a sendoff.

“I’m fine, Ishani,” her mother said with a tearful smile. “I’m happy you came for a visit.”

Ishani hugged her mother again, feeling happy. Even though Ishani knew it was a temporary phase and her mother could relapse at any moment, she savored the moments she had with her.

“Be happy, my child. Don’t worry about me.”

Ishani nodded. Hugging her mother one more time, she got into the SUV, and one of the Thakvar security guards shut the door. She waved at her mother and her people through the window while the SUV began to move. Soon, the vehicle passed outside the Gujjar mansion gates, and she could no longer see them. Blinking away her tears, she straightened and sat back.

There was once again silence.

She turned to look at Shivay Thakvar, who was once again driving the SUV. Her eyes lingered on his face, taking in his chiseled profile, the prominent straight nose, strong masculine jaw, and long, thick eyelashes she could see from the side of his sunglasses.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

He turned and looked at her for a long moment before turning to look at the road ahead.

“For what?” he asked.

“For allowing me to visit my mother and coming along with me. My mother is very happy, and she said she likes you.”

Regardless of his motive, she was thankful for those facts.

He didn't say anything.

Feeling embarrassed by the sudden burst of emotion she showed towards him, she turned away to look out the window. They passed by familiar small homes in the town as they headed out of the Gujjar province.

The drive was silent.

It wasn't until much later that she noticed they were taking a different route. They were going through the middle of the desert rather than the paved road path. The ride was bumpier as it was usually a path taken by people traveling by camels.

An hour later, she was still frowning in confusion, wondering why they were traveling on that path until she saw the faint outline of palm trees in the distance.

It was the Singoor oasis.

That's when it struck her. They were going to the oasis to follow the tradition where newlywed couples took a dip in the water. She hadn't even remembered it, but she was glad someone told Shivay Thakvar about the tradition and asked him to follow it.

The Singoor oasis held several other myths over the centuries. One of the myths was for the newlywed or childless couples to spend the night in the oasis, and they would be blessed with a child within a year. Although such myths disappeared due to safety reasons during the clan wars, the other tradition of taking a dip in the water remained.

The oasis was also one of her favorite places during childhood, and it held good memories of her parents.

A short while later, the SUV pulled up to the oasis.

She didn't wait until someone opened the SUV door. She opened it herself and stepped out with excitement.

Smiling behind her veil, she took a deep whiff of the air. The breeze was cooler and slightly humid, unlike the rest of the desert where the air was dry.

She felt Shivay Thakvar's presence as he walked up to her. "Let's go," he said.

They walked down the slope of sand towards the palm trees, between which there would be a large pond.

The cool breeze got stronger and kept blowing away her veil she kept trying to pull down.

"There's no one here," Shivay Thakvar said. "I've asked the security to stay back in their vehicles."

"Oh."

She felt oddly grateful for his consideration and let the veil blow away from her face with a smile.

Sensing his gaze, she looked at him. He was watching her smiling face.

"My father used to bring me and my mother here during the summer," she said.

Feeling excited and happy, she went closer to the pond. Just before stepping inside, she removed her shoes and long veil before placing them on the sand next to the water. She turned to see that he removed his shoes as well.

With a smile, she walked into the water. The cool, refreshing water enveloped her up to her waist. Sucking in a deep breath, she took a dip inside the pond before standing up. She did those two more times.

On the third time, she came up with laughter. She felt carefree and happy. It reminded her of the time during her childhood when she and her father would compete to see who could take more dips in the water. She had

always won, but it wasn't until much later that she realized her father must have purposely lost to make her happy.

With a smile, she turned to see Shivay Thakvar standing a couple of feet away from her. He must have also taken the three dips since his white buttoned shirt was now transparent and clung to his well-defined body.

She blushed when he caught her staring at him.

Her laughter faded, and her heart began thumping when she saw the familiar heat in his eyes. She realized her clothes must be clinging to her body as well.

"I... we..." Before she could say something, his fingers gripped the back of her neck and tipped up her face. And then, his mouth met with hers.

Heat sizzled in her body even as the cool water surrounded her. Grabbing his wet shirt, she clung to him, returning the kiss. Nothing seemed to exist in her mind right then except for wanting to feel the touch of his hands on her body.

She moaned when his hand cupped her breast, and her body arched when the rough pad of his thumb rubbed against the exposed skin near her waist. Wanting to desperately touch and explore him, she slid her hand lower from his chest and touched the hardness that indicated his desire.

A growl escaped his throat, and his kiss grew fiercer. She felt drugged with excitement and need. But even as she wanted to feel him, his hand caught hers and pulled it away from his hardness. Before she could protest, his hand slid under her skirt, and a calloused finger slid into her intimate folds.

"Shivay," she cried out in shocked pleasure.

Her body trembled as electricity coursed through her body. He bent her body backward using the support of his muscled arm. She could only see his darkly handsome face watching her while he pleased her.

She gripped his shoulders when waves of pleasure rose inside her, and she felt as though she was being swept away in a storm. When the pleasure peaked, she cried and shuddered. He pulled her closer and kissed her, swallowing the rest of her cries.

She didn't know how long she trembled in his arms, but soon, she slumped against him, her legs and body weak from the incredible pleasure.

Slowly, she pulled back and opened her eyes. Her cheeks heated while his darkly handsome face continued to watch her.

She felt confused and guilty by the pleasure she felt. She was supposed to seduce him, but each time it was her being seduced by his touch and kisses.

"I... I..." Before she could think of saying something, his body tensed. And then, the next moment, his gaze snapped up and looked beyond her.

She gasped when he suddenly pushed her behind him. Her cheeks heated, thinking that someone from the security team might have come looking for them since they had been there for a long time.

Four men were coming toward them, but they weren't wearing the Thakvar colors. They were dressed in all black.

Fear gripped her when she noticed the ash on the men's faces along with the visible claw-shaped sharp weapons in their hands.

### *The Kabalis.*

Everyone in the Singoor region dreaded them since they were known for their brutality. They had turned into savages and cut all ties with the rest of the prominent clans in the region.

She frantically looked around to see if help was around. She realized the Thakvar security guards were far away to give her privacy. Even if she screamed, the wind in the oasis would drown out her voice.

*Oh God.*

She feared for her life. But she also feared for Shivay Thakvar's life. He might be a fraud, but he didn't deserve to be killed by the Kabalis.

And the worst part was he was protecting her by standing in harm's way in front of her.

*Please, God. Help us.*

Even as she prayed, the most shocking thing happened. Shivay Thakvar charged towards them.

*My God. Is he mad!*

She watched in shock and terror as he went towards the attackers. He kicked the first man in the stomach, and when the man doubled over, he ripped something off the man's hands and hit the man on his head. He wore something on his hands that glinted in the sunlight before he began tackling the rest of the attackers. He kept them at bay, kicking them, slashing at their faces and stopping them from surrounding him or reaching the oasis pond.

*I have to help!*

Unable to stand doing nothing when he was dealing with four attackers, she stepped out of the pond. Ignoring her state of undress, she tried to run and get help from the Thakvar security.

"Help!" she screamed, but the sound of the wind drowned out her voice.

One of the attackers turned towards her. Before he could come for her, Shivay tackled him as well, kicking the man and brutally slashing the man's face with the weapon.

She let out a sob, feeling helpless and terrified about her and Shivay's safety. She continued to climb up and shout for help.

Just when she was halfway up the sand on the oasis, she saw the security rushing towards them.

“Madam, are you okay?” the head of security asked. He and the other men kept their eyes averted as she didn’t have her veil.

“Yes! I’m fine. Please help Shivay!”

They nodded and rushed down. She turned to see that even as Shivay kicked an attacker, the rest of the attackers were running away on the opposite side of the oasis. Even the man Shivay kicked rolled and scrambled away. Shivay chased after him, but the man threw sand on Shivay’s face. The few seconds’ pause was used by the man to run behind the rest of his clan members.

Ishani’s heart thudded as she raced back to Shivay Thakvar. Badly hoping he didn’t suffer any injuries, she went closer.

He was talking to the head of security while the other Thakvar guards chased the attackers. “They must have come on horses, sir. It’s going to be hard to catch them.”

Ishani didn’t care if the attackers were caught or not. All she cared about was whether Shivay Thakvar was okay.

“Shivay...” she called him.

His eyes fell on her. There was cold anger blazing in his eyes.

“We are going to leave now,” he told the head of security. “You and the other men come after tracking the attackers.”

The security head nodded. “Are you sure you don’t want some of us to come with you, sir?”

“Yes. There won’t be any other attacks.” Shivay Thakvar’s voice sounded grim.

Hoping he was right, she stood, shivering. Her clothes were still damp from the dip they had taken earlier, but the shivers weren’t because of her wet clothes. The air was warm, but the attack and the terror she felt on both their behalf left her shaken. Wrapping her hands around her body, she waited.



Shivay held her arm and pulled her towards the place next to the pond where she left her veil and shoes. With trembling hands, she wrapped the long veil around her and put on her shoes.

He then led them back to the SUV.

She sat next to him, continuing to shiver. When he started the vehicle and held the steering wheel, she noticed his bruised and bleeding knuckles.

“A-are you okay?” she asked as her teeth continued to chatter due to the delayed shock.

He continued to drive. She thought he hadn’t heard her properly, but he turned his head and watched her face.

“Yes. Unfortunately for you, I’m fine,” he said before looking back at the desert.

Stunned, she stared at him.

There was dark anger on his face. Until then, she thought it was directed at the attackers. But now, she could see it was directed towards her as well. The wrath in his eyes made her shiver even more. The dark anger reminded her of how he had looked at her the night her brother’s men attacked him.

*Did he think she didn’t help him enough during the attack?*

“I’m sorry. I know I should have—”

Before she could finish, he turned on the music in the SUV. She saw his bruised knuckles clenched on the steering wheel as though he were controlling his fury. Feeling shaken and guilty about not helping him enough, she remained quiet.

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No more words were exchanged until they reached the Thakvar mansion.

Just as they drove towards the mansion's entrance, Shivay Thakvar turned towards her. "Don't mention anything about the oasis attack to my father."

Shocked and unable to still speak, she nodded.

As soon as the SUV stopped, the Thakvar household waited outside the mansion to receive them. She got down, and as she waited, he joined her. She was shocked when he held her close as Malathi and the other women performed the welcome ritual.

Ishani slowly realized that his arm wrapped around her waist, concealing his injured knuckles behind her veil and slid his other hand inside his pants pockets. He led her up the mansion stairs where Mihir Thakvar was waiting with a smile.

"I'm so glad you were able to visit your mother, Ishani."

"Thank you, Papa," she said softly.

"I hope she is doing well."

She nodded. "Yes, she is doing fine now."

Her father-in-law looked at them both. "You must be tired after the journey. I've asked the ritual feast to be moved to tomorrow."

She felt grateful for his consideration.

He looked at Shivay Thakvar. "I'll talk to you later, son."

Shivay Thakvar nodded, and then he led her up the stairs towards their bedroom suite.

The moment they stepped inside and the door was shut, he pulled away from her. She felt guilty and hurt by his angry coldness.

“S-Shivay... I’m sorry,” she said. She didn’t know what else to say. “I know I should have helped more when the attack happened. I tried to call the security, but—”

“Enough,” he snapped. He watched her with a dark look. “You know damn well I am referring to your role in the attack.”

Shock ripped through her.

“W-what?” She felt too stunned.

Never did it cross her mind he suspected her of being involved in the attack.

“We were attacked by the Kabalis,” she said. “They are not my clansmen.”

He didn’t say anything.

“Please believe me,” she said desperately. “You can ask the security head as well. Kabali clan members wear black clothes and cover their faces with ash. They also use the three-clawed weapon that is unique to them. It was the Kabalis who attacked us!”

His expression remained dark even as she explained.

He looked at her. “I guess I must credit you for the elaborate planning,” he said. “Claiming that your mother fell sick. And then, having the priests tell me it was a Gujjar tradition to visit the oasis.”

Her heart jerked in shock at his words.

“What? My mother was really sick when I received the call from her nurse! And I didn’t know that the priests told you about the oasis. I didn’t even know we were going there until we reached the place!”

She felt shocked and hurt by his accusations. Fighting back tears, she stepped closer to him and placed her hand on his chest.

“Please believe me, Shivay!” she begged.

His jaw clenched at her touch. And then his eyes flashed darkly while

his mouth twisted into a cruel smile. “Are you going to let me touch you again to distract and convince me? Even if you allow me to fuck you, I won’t believe you. But I’m open to that offer.”

Anger exploded inside her, and she slapped him hard.

His eyes blazed, and he gripped the back of her neck and pulled her close. She sensed the dark anger and expected him to hurt her.

Anger and fear warred inside her.

He looked at her for a long moment before he let go of her. And then, he stormed out of the bedroom suite.

She was left shaken, and tears of hurt and anger slipped down her cheeks.

*I hate him.*

## CHAPTER 19

The sounds of the peacocks were soothing in the garden. Although Ishani normally enjoyed feeding the rabbits and birds, she was distracted that day.

She was still upset and angry. A week had passed since the visit to her mother and the oasis attack for which Shivay Thakvar blamed her.

Although she had witnessed his dark fury that day, what followed was cold and tense silence.

*No. He wasn't always cold and silent.*

She recalled how dryly sarcastic he had been earlier that morning when he made her tend to his wounds. Her cheeks heated angrily at the memory.

*She had gone inside the bathroom when he called her name in a curt command.*

*He had stepped out of the shower and was standing in front of the marble counter tending to his injuries on his shoulder. He didn't let anyone in the household tend to them except her. He was keeping the attack a secret from his father for some reason.*

*She hadn't asked him about it, knowing she wouldn't get a reply from him.*

*I hate him!*

*Her heart thudded at seeing the intensity in his eyes as he looked at her when she went closer. Her heart thudded even more loudly as she recalled the passionate moments in the oasis before the attack occurred. The feel of his lips and the roughness of his fingers and palm were branded in her*

*mind and body.*

*The look in his eyes made her think he was recalling the same. Her heart jerked when he suddenly cupped her jaw. And then, he lowered his head until his lips brushed against hers.*

*Her eyes fell shut, and her lips tingled, craving his taste. But she opened her eyes again when his lips left hers. He was watching her with a clenched jaw.*

*“So beautiful and so dangerous,” he murmured deeply.*

*“I’m not dangerous,” she whispered.*

*Slowly, his mouth twisted. “There is a new scar on my back for each month of our marriage, my dear wife,” he said. “And it’s only been three months. I wonder if there will be space left on my back for the months to come.”*

*He had four wicked-looking scars, most on his back.*

*Her cheeks heated at his soft taunt.*

*She was only responsible for the attack on their wedding night. And that too because she was told he would only be incapacitated and threatened to leave Singoor rather than be attacked with an intent to fatally injure him.*

*“They were Kabalis! Not my clansmen!” she repeated for what seemed to be the hundredth time.*

*His eyes remained darkly mocking.*

*She dragged her gaze away from his when her eyes began to prickle with angry, hurt tears. She pulled out the first-aid kit and began to tend to his injuries.*

*It infuriated her that she was feeling hurt by the man who was a ruthless businessman pretending to be the heir of a powerful clan.*

*I should be searching for more clues of his lies than craving for his*

*kisses and touch!*

Her thoughts were interrupted when someone called her name. She turned to see a maid.

“Madam, sir has requested your presence.”

“Which sir?” she asked.

“Shivay sir.”

Shivay Thakvar was hardly the kind to request her presence. She could imagine his command to bring his wife to him right away.

She almost wanted to refuse to go to him, but she didn't want to drag the poor maid into the marital scuffle.

*I hate him!*

He treated her coldly but expected her to be an obedient wife who did his bidding.

Putting on a small smile, she followed the maid into the mansion. The maid led her to the private living room that remained unused most of the time. She had spent some time there looking at the portraits of the Thakvar ancestors. Curious as to why her devil husband was spending time there, she hurried her steps.

Masculine laughter could be heard from inside which surprised her. It didn't sound like Mihir Thakvar's laughter. The person laughing sounded younger. It was definitely not Shivay Thakvar. It couldn't be! The man could only have a mocking smile on his face and not full-blown laughter. Intrigued and angry that she was strongly attracted and drawn to a man like Shivay Thakvar, she stepped into the family suite.

She saw her devil husband first. He was with Mihir Thakvar and another man. The other man seemed slightly familiar, and Mihir Thakvar was smiling and hugging him. She was surprised when she saw her father-in-law surreptitiously wiping his tears.

“Ishani!” her father-in-law greeted her with a smile.

“Good morning, Papa.”

“Ishani, come and meet Rishab. Rishab, this is Ishani, Shivay’s wife.”

The younger man smiled at her, flashing his dimples. “So nice to finally meet you, Ishani.”

Even as she returned the smile under her veil, she recalled the name. Rishab and Nakul were her husband’s business partners. She had heard their names when she was spying in the home office.

Why was Shivay Thakvar’s business partner in Singoor? Wouldn’t that expose his ruthless intentions to drill oil in the desert?

She was shocked by the new development.

Neither Mihir Thakvar nor Shivay Thakvar mentioned anything else about the guest.

But slowly, she noticed something else. She could see a noted resemblance between the guest and Shivay. Both men also had the same defined jawline structure that resembled Mihir Thakvar’s. Was Rishab related to Shivay? A cousin or a relative?

A bolt of uncertainty passed through her.

What if her devil husband was not a fraud? What if he was truly the heir of Mihir Thakvar?

And if he was, then why did he not come to visit his father until recently?

There were so many questions that she had no answers to right then.

“Ishani has been helping me manage the trust and other organizations,” Mihir Thakvar said affectionately.

She smiled at hearing his kind words. “I enjoy it, Papa.”

She had been spending a considerable amount of time during the day going through the accounts and helping her father-in-law with the timely



decisions needed to be taken for the charitable organizations he headed.

“And she also plays the bin musical instrument beautifully. It’s like listening to the gods play.”

Ishani’s cheeks heated with pleasure at her father-in-law’s words.

“Thank you so much, Papa. I’m glad you enjoy the music.”

“Beauty and brains. You are quite lucky, Shivay,” the guest said with a smile.

Before she could say anything, her devil husband watched her with an unreadable look.

“Yeah, quite the deadly combination,” he remarked.

Her cheeks heated further in anger at his statement. He was calling her deadly because he thought she was behind all the attacks on him and was dangerous to him.

But the guest and her father-in-law didn’t seem to register her devilish husband’s subtle mockery. They continued to smile warmly at her.

Soon, they were all called for lunch. She noticed that a special feast had been prepared on the occasion of having a guest.

*Why wasn’t I told?*

She had always taken charge of the meal preparations at the Gujjar mansion and acted as the hostess on behalf of her brother when he invited guests. But she hadn’t done the same at the Thakvar mansion.

No one had stopped her from entering the kitchen and taking control. And since her father-in-law was also not the kind to expect or impose kitchen or meal duties on her, she was completely oblivious to the guest’s arrival.

Her brother had always made it a point to tell her what her duties were being born a woman and when she was lacking in them. But neither her father-in-law nor her devil husband did the same.

Suddenly, she felt guilty for not doing enough at the Thakvar

mansion. Putting on a wider smile, she began serving food at the table. There was a flash of surprise on her father-in-law's face followed by a warm smile.

“You don't have to serve us, Ishani. Please come and sit with us.”

“It's okay, Papa. I—”

A deep command interrupted her. “Come and sit next to me,” Shivay Thakvar ordered.

Her smile froze. She wanted to ignore the order, but knowing enough about her devil husband, she knew he wouldn't hesitate in dragging her into the chair next to him if she didn't comply. Sucking in a breath, she forced a smile before placing the dish back on the table and sitting in the chair next to her husband.

There was momentary silence at the table while the maids continued to serve food. The silence was broken by the guest who was seated opposite her.

“So, Ishani,” he said with a grin. “Do you have any sisters or female cousins who perhaps are like you?”

A small laugh escaped her. “No.”

“Darn it!”

She was amused by his words.

“Did you grow up here in the Singoor region?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yes, I did.”

“Oh, that's great!” He looked at Shivay. “We should definitely take Ishani's help. She must have heard about the goddess statue.”

Ishani was surprised. “You mean Goddess Shakti's statue?”

The guest nodded with a smile. “Yes. I am very intrigued about it.”

“Oh.” She wondered why. “I haven't been lucky enough to see the statue since it was stolen before I was born. But I grew up listening to the stories about it.”

She told the guest about various myths surrounding the goddess statue and the powers it held.

Her father-in-law, Mihir Thakvar, confirmed many of those myths to be true.

“Because the statue had been closely guarded and prayed to in an elaborate way with several flowers and adornments, no one knows what the original goddess statue looks like,” he said.

Ishani knew that fact as well. She had only heard the songs and poems regarding the statue’s beauty and adornments, but she hadn’t seen a picture or even a sculpture with the same likeness.

“Each clan took turns guarding the statue over the centuries,” she said.

The conversation veered to the other clans. Although they didn’t discuss it in depth, she also knew enough to add to it. She spoke mostly about the traditions of her clan and how they were slightly different from the Thakvars’.

Soon, the lavish and enjoyable meal came to an end.

“You are a walking encyclopedia, Ishani,” Rishab teased. “Even though a few facts were already known to me, hearing them from you makes it much more fascinating and interesting.”

Ishani blushed. “Thank you.”

Although she enjoyed talking to the guest about Singoor, she sensed something dark. Feeling confused, she turned to look at her husband. His face was unreadable as usual, but there was a clench to his jaw that she was now familiar with.

He was angry.

She knew he was often angry with her for various reasons, but this anger didn’t seem the usual kind. He almost appeared jealous.

Her heart jerked at that realization.

She turned to her handsome guest with a smile. Although he couldn't see her face due to the veil, she knew he would sense it. "I have a lot more stories to tell about Singoor. But I'll let you relax and catch up since you just arrived."

The guest laughed. "I'm looking forward to hearing more stories, Ishani."

With a smile to her father-in-law, she took leave, wanting to give the men privacy to catch up and talk. But even as she headed back to her bedroom suite, her heart began racing.

*Was it jealousy I witnessed?*

Maybe it was her imagination and not really jealousy. Shivay Thakvar didn't seem the kind to be jealous or possessive, especially about her.

Feeling confused, she shook her head and pushed the thoughts of her devil husband from her mind. She stepped into the room and to the changing area to change into something lighter as the heat would soon increase. She had just removed the heavy dress when she heard the bedroom door opening and shutting.

The air inside the suite suddenly felt charged, and she knew her devil husband had entered.

She was in her thin underdress and didn't have much time to put her heavy dress back on. Before she could decide what to put on, she saw him at the entrance of the changing area. She quickly held her heavy dress in front of her like a shield. Her cheeks heated at his expression. They had kissed and done much more for her to hide her body from him, but right then, she needed the barrier of clothes.

"Is Rishab going to stay here for long?" she asked.

Her husband's eyes flashed. "Why?" he asked. "Why do you want to

know?”

Her heart began racing, seeing his hard jaw clenching.

“Why can’t I know?” she asked in return. “I have the right to know how long a guest is going to stay in my home. As a hostess, it’s my duty to... entertain the guest.”

There was another flash in his eyes. And this time, he stepped towards her.

She tried to keep her breathing even when he stood so close that she could smell the spicy cologne of his aftershave.

“Entertain?” he asked.

Her stomach quivered with excitement and fear. “Yes, entertain. I like Rishab. He seems sweet and friendly.” *Unlike you*. She didn’t have to say the last part aloud because he understood it from her expression.

“Stay away from Rishab,” he said.

Her heart thudded harder as she raised her chin. “Why?” she challenged. “Are you afraid I will take his help, betray you, and plan an attack?”

She was shocked by her own words, but her simmering anger and helpless attraction she felt towards him made her want to goad him further.

His dark eyes blazed.

“Is that what you are planning?” he asked softly in a tone that made goose bumps rise on her skin.

“W-what if I say yes?” she asked, barely hanging on to her boldness.

She gasped when suddenly his fingers wrapped behind her neck, dragged her close, and his mouth crashed against hers.

Heat enveloped her and sizzled her insides. A moan escaped when his tongue swept into her mouth and captured hers. The dress dropped from her hands when she placed her hands on his shoulders. His kiss was passionate

yet dominant and possessive in every way.

When he raised his head, her entire body was trembling with passion.

“You are mine,” he growled. “Since you like reminding me that you are my wife, I want you to remember that as well.”

She couldn't get her throat to work to answer.

Despite the anger and possessiveness, his mouth twisted into a small, dark smile. “And just so you know, you won't be able to seduce Rishab. And he would never betray me. In fact, he would die for me if needed.” His eyes glittered. “Rishab is my brother.”

She was shocked. “B-brother?”

“Yes, my brother. So, if you plan on conspiring or endangering him in any way, you will face severe consequences from me. I protect my family, no matter what.”

His eyes swept over her and then lingered on her face, especially her now-quivering lips.

Clenching his jaw once again, he turned around and left.

Slowly, she touched her still-trembling lips, and strangely, the trembling wasn't entirely due to fear. She should be angry with him for threatening her to not endanger his brother, but strangely, his words about protecting his family drew her to him even more.

*“I protect my family, no matter what.”*

Did he think of her as his family?

*“You are mine.”*

He was possessive of her, but she knew he didn't consider her as his family. Strangely, she felt hurt by that fact.

She shook her head in confusion.

*It doesn't matter what he thinks of me. I need to find out the truth about him.*

She had to, or she would end up being drawn but also falling in love with her husband.

## CHAPTER 20

“Are you sure you don’t want me attending the clan meeting, son?”

Shivay looked at his father. “Yes, Dad. This meeting is between the next generation of heirs. It’s important they see it as burying the hatchet of what happened during previous generations.”

Shivay’s father nodded.

“Shivay will take care, Dad. Don’t worry. Mom is looking forward to your visit.”

At Rishab’s words, Mihir Thakvar’s face softened with intense longing.

“I crave to go back to Chitra too, son. Every moment being apart from her feels like a certain death. And I can’t wait to see her and Nandini. But I’m worried about what might happen during the clan meetings. There is always a risk of violence. If anything happens to Shivay, I won’t be able to face Chitra or myself.”

“I’m going to be fine, Dad,” Shivay replied. “I have assessed the risk and invited only the clans that are open to forming alliances.”

Shivay’s father still looked uncertain, but he nodded. The discussion then veered to the details of what topics would be presented during the clan meeting. Shivay’s father gave some input and suggestions.

“I want Ishani to feel safe,” Shivay’s father added. “She’s now a Thakvar, and it’s our responsibility to ensure her safety.”

Shivay didn’t want to tell his father that the biggest danger came from the Gujjars, especially his beautiful yet treacherous wife.

“Yes, she will be safe, Dad.”

Shivay’s father looked relieved. “That’s good. I like Ishani. She’s a



daughter to me now.”

Shivay didn't say anything.

“All right, son. I do trust you to take care of things in the best way possible.”

Shivay's father then hugged Rishab. “I still can't believe you are here too, son. And just as with your brother, I'm worried about your safety.”

“All of us are going to be fine, Dad,” Rishab replied with a smile. “We'll soon have things sorted and set right in Singoor.”

“May *Mahadev* grant our wishes, son. And may peace be restored in the Sands of Singoor.”

Shivay knew how much his father had sacrificed for the land and its people. The sacrifice had cost his father two decades of being apart from the woman he loved and not even knowing about the daughter he had. Shivay's sweet and brave mother deserved to be happy in every way, and Nandini deserved to know her father was alive.

Shivay's mind went back to when he found out the truth about his father. It was right after the attack in Africa.

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## **San Francisco, CA**

*“Mr. Thakvar, your prediction was right. The assassin wasn’t a local man. He is of South Asian descent.”*

*Shivay was standing in the backyard of his family home. The Golden Gate Bridge and the San Francisco skyline were clearly visible in the distance. The only sounds were of the ocean waves crashing against the cliff on top of which the family home was built.*

*It had been three days since the Africa attack. Although the local Zambia police were conducting an investigation, Shivay had initiated a private investigation from a top international agency.*

*“The man traveled to Zambia using several fake passports and names, sir. And the routes he took are through countries in Europe and the Middle East.”*

*“What about South Asia?” Shivay asked. “Has he traveled through any of the South Asian countries? Particularly India?”*

*“So far, we haven’t traced his movements to any of the South Asian countries, sir. But we are still investigating.”*

*Shivay knew three days wasn’t too long, but the dark anger inside him continued to simmer.*

*“Any leads on the person who had sent the assassin?”*

*“We are working on the possibilities, Mr. Thakvar. We are having Mr. Hendricks’ calls traced, and so far, nothing has led us to believe he might have hired the assassin. We are also tracing the calls of other former*

owners of businesses your company acquired and your competitors worldwide.”

Shivay knew plenty of former owners had lost their companies to him and held a grudge. He also had business competitors who would want to eliminate any competition.

“I want the name of the person who ordered the hit.”

“Yes, Mr. Thakvar. We have that as our top priority.”

Shivay ended the call.

“Did they get an ID of the assassin?” Nakul asked.

Shivay turned away from the ocean view to look at Nakul and Rishab seated in the lawn chairs in the backyard.

“They did, but he had several IDs,” Shivay replied, joining them.

“The assassin was definitely of South Asian origin,” Rishab said while looking at the bead placed on the glass table in the center of the lawn chairs. “This one does look like the beads on Ma’s prayer chain.”

Shivay had the same thought when he had first seen the bead.

“Ma has never been to India,” said Nakul. “The assassin could also be of South Asian origin but not necessarily from there.”

Shivay knew that was a possibility as well.

“It is rather odd...” Rishab said with a frown, “... that someone was able to hack into your schedule and know your exact location would hire an assassin to attack you with a primitive-looking weapon rather than a sniper gun.”

Shivay and his brothers’ schedules were accessible to only their personal assistants and senior executive staff. So far, they didn’t have a reason not to trust any of them, but the investigation was also being done on them.

“The checklist of people who hold grudges and want to eliminate us is

too damn long,” said Rishab. “But I doubt if anyone would dare, knowing the consequences of messing with us.”

The Thakvar brothers had the reputation of being ruthless towards anyone who went against them or their family.

“Security is doubled for Nandini and Ma,” said Nakul. “But we can’t keep it that way for long without them finding out the reason.”

Shivay knew his mother and sister enjoyed their freedom and didn’t like having security trailing after them. And if Shivay’s mother found out the real reason for the increased security, she would worry.

Shivay and his brothers always ensured that their mother remained smiling all the time. The only time their mother looked sad and forlorn was when she was reminded of their father who had died in an accident twenty years ago, which was six months before Nandini was born.

The sound of a bell was heard from outside the house. Shivay knew his mother must have just finished her morning prayers.

“I’m going to mention to Ma about the increased security,” he said. “I’ll tell her there is a possible low threat for a few days.”

His brothers nodded.

A few moments later, their mother stepped out of the house holding a silver tray. After her morning prayers, she usually stepped out to circle where the Tulasi plant was set up near the deck area.

Shivay watched as his mother finished the rituals. She must have seen her sons. Because later, instead of returning inside, she carried the tray to where he and his brothers were seated.

They stood up and waited for her.

All four Thakvar siblings were born and raised in America, but their mother ensured the culture and tradition of their origin country were instilled in them.

Shivay lowered his head while his mother placed a small dot of crimson powder on his forehead. When he bent to touch her feet to seek her blessings, he felt a sharp slice of pain from the stitched wounds on his back. Ignoring the pain, Shivay continued to touch his mother's feet.

*"God bless you with happiness and a wife soon."*

Shivay smiled at the words of his mother's blessing which had become a constant over the last few years.

He got up, and then Rishab and Nakul followed suit to seek her blessings. Their mother repeated the same words to them.

*"Ma, you are giving us Shivay's blessings," Nakul teased.*

Shivay's mother laughed as she sat on one of the lawn chairs. *"I've been praying for Shivay's marriage for so long that I know Lord Krishna will grant me my wish soon. Now, I need to get started on you two."*

*"Ma, please bless only Shivay for getting married soon." Rishab smirked. "Nakul and I are too young to be tied down."*

Chitra Thakvar shook her head with a laugh. *"Not that young! You two devils are barely two and three years younger than Shivay. At your age, your father and I already had three children."*

*Rishab and Nakul groaned dramatically, listening to those words.*

Shivay's mother laughed. *"I think my sweet girl, Chitti, is the only one who will meet those expectations."*

Shivay's sister was studying at a university and had a boyfriend who was also a childhood friend. Nandini was lovingly called Chitti by their mother.

*"How about this deal, Ma?" Rishab asked. "Nandini can have three children by the time she's our age. And we three can be the doting uncles."*

*"Sorry, boys," Shivay's mother said with a smile. "You cannot escape Lord Krishna's blessings. In fact, during your father's ceremony yesterday, I*

*even sought Lord Shiva's blessings to grant us all peace and happiness. And my happiness is to see my three sons getting married soon."*

*Once again, Nakul and Rishab groaned dramatically.*

*Shivay smiled.*

*Laughing, Shivay's mother placed the silver tray on the center table. She was about to serve them the sweets*

*she had made as God's offering when she suddenly froze.*

*Shivay saw that her eyes fell on the dark brown bead placed on the center table.*

*"W-what... h-how..."*

*Her voice was lost as she reached for it. The next moment, Shivay saw the blood drain from his mother's face. She was holding the bead, and there was a shocked look in her eyes as she kept staring at it.*

*Shivay and his brothers immediately moved closer to her.*

*"What's wrong, Ma?" Shivay asked.*

*"H-how did this rudraksha get here?" her voice was weak as she trembled outwardly. "This is not from our prayer room."*

*She kept staring at the uneven-surfaced bead. "Where did this come from?" she asked. "Tell me!"*

*Rishab tried to calm her down. "Shivay found it in Africa, Ma. He was just showing it to us since it resembled the one in our prayer room. It's nothing to worry about."*

*"No." She shook her head. "This is not from Africa! It cannot be! This particular rudraksha is found only in one part of the world!"*

*Shivay and his brothers exchanged a quick look at hearing that information. But right then, their mother was their top priority. Shivay didn't know why the sight of the bead upset and terrified her so much.*

*He had never seen her so shocked, frightened, and upset before. She had always been the pillar of strength to them. It was her strength that kept their family together even after they lost their father in a boating accident.*

*Shivay went to the table to get her water. When he picked up a bottle, he heard her gasp.*

*“My God!” she said. “Shivay, what happened! Why is there blood on your back!”*

*Shivay realized that his stitches might have opened from the recent wound. He could not tell his mother about the attack. “There was a small accident at the mine, Ma. I’m fine now.”*

*His mother shook her head. “No... none of this is fine. I know your injury had something to do with this bead. It wasn’t an accident, either. It is a deliberate attempt.” Tears welled in her eyes, and she started to weep. “How could this happen after everything your father and I did to keep you all safe?”*

*It was at that point, Shivay simply knew the attack in Africa wasn’t from a business rival.*

*“Ma, what are you talking about?” Nakul asked.*

*Shivay watched as his mother’s lips trembled while she spoke. “The Sands of Singoor have found us...”*

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It was on that day when Shivay and his brothers found out their father was alive and he had faked his death to return to Singoor to take on the responsibility of the Thakvar region and its people.

It was a sacrifice Shivay's parents made to keep their children safe from the brutal clan wars that had claimed Shivay's uncle and aunt's lives. Shivay's mother kept her promise not to communicate with him and didn't try to reach out to her husband even when she found out she was three months pregnant.

The truth about Shivay's father had been a shock to him and his brothers. On that day, Shivay and his brothers vowed to bring their father back to their mother.

Shivay was close to fulfilling his promise, but he also knew it wasn't enough. He had to set things right and bring peace to the Singoor region. It was the only way his parents could be together without constant threats or guilt.

He had married for that very purpose. The alliance formed with his marriage would play the biggest role in the peace talks among the clans. But whether Ishani Gujjar, the woman who hated him, feared him, and wanted him gone, would try to ruin things during the clan meetings was something he needed to determine.

He didn't trust her. She had betrayed him multiple times. And yet, he was obsessively drawn to her beauty and craved her every moment.

It was madness that he couldn't stop himself from desiring her. He wanted to see her smile. He wanted to see her laugh. He wanted to capture the soft gasps she emitted when he kissed and pleased her.

His hands clenched, recalling the events from that afternoon. He had



never been the kind to get jealous or possessive, but when his wife taunted him about using Rishab to betray him, he wanted to show her who she belonged to.

*She is mine.*

That particular thought was branded into his mind right from the time he saw her on their wedding night, and no amount of betrayal from her side could make him feel differently.

Earlier that afternoon, he had made a decision he hadn't told his brothers about yet. His brothers would be shocked by it, but it was something he decided to do because he wanted and craved it.

Ishani Gujjar was going to pay for her betrayal in a way she had never imagined. She would be tied for eternity to the man she hated, feared, and desperately tried to get rid of.

The twisted alliance he made was not going to result in a temporary marriage. The marriage would last until death did them part.

*I will not let her go. She is mine, no matter what.*

## CHAPTER 21

*Ishani was running through the desert sand to escape a devil, but even though she ran fast, the ruthless devil captured her. And instead of fighting off the devil, she let him sweep her into his arms and ravish her.*

*“Remember that you are mine,” the devil growled as he possessed her body and soul.*

*She felt conflicted even as she surrendered herself.*

*There was a dark smile on the devil’s handsome face as he took her body. “I knew you would surrender. Now, it’s time to fall in love with me,” he ordered.*

*She shook her head. “No!” she said. “I won’t fall in love with you!”*

*“You will,” he promised.*

*She kept shaking her head even as he laughed darkly while she surrendered her body, heart, and soul.*

*“No!” she whispered as she suddenly opened her eyes.*

Ishani realized she wasn’t lying on the desert’s soft, gritty sand but on the huge bed at the Thakvar mansion. She slowly looked around, and before she could sigh in relief, her heart jerked when her eyes met with Shivay Thakvar.

He was standing near the foot of the bed, buttoning his shirt sleeve while watching her. And unlike his usual Western front-buttoned shirts, he was wearing a long ethnic tunic. It wasn’t as heavy as the one he had worn during their wedding or the ceremonies that followed. This one was less festive yet somewhat formal. He looked devastatingly handsome.

Her cheeks heated in confusion due to her dream.

“Get ready,” he ordered. “We are leaving in thirty minutes.”

She blinked, trying to snap out of her dream. “W-what... where are we going? I—” Before she could finish, he turned and stepped out of the suite.

Her heart was still beating fast due to the lingering dream and seeing Shivay Thakvar’s handsome face right after.

Ignoring her beating heart and letting anger and outrage take over, she stepped out of bed and went to the bathroom to get ready to go wherever he was taking her.

By the time she was ready, she was running a little late. But luckily, her devil husband didn’t barge into the suite to drag her out.

As soon as she stepped into the dining area, her eyes clashed with his as he watched her while listening to the low conversation around him. Her heart jerked as his eyes swept over her dress.

Since he didn’t tell her where they were going, she wore a simple yet elegant dress that was comfortable to travel in. She responded to his intense gaze by raising her chin slightly since he couldn’t see her face through the veil.

She looked at her father-in-law and the guest whose conversation paused when they noticed her presence.

“Good morning,” she greeted them with a smile under her veil.

They returned her greeting with a smile as she joined them for breakfast.

“So, Ishani. What places do you suggest visiting as a tourist in the city?” Rishab asked.

She was surprised by his question. Were they going to the city for a visit?

She normally visited the city once a year at a particular time, but she

didn't visit it as a tourist.

"I'm not sure," she replied. "I haven't been to most of the tourist places. Only a few."

There was a flash of surprise in Rishab's eyes before he smiled. "Well, if you haven't visited them all, then they don't seem that appealing. I'll just stick to visiting the places you spoke about yesterday."

She nodded with a smile. Although she could now see the resemblance between the brothers, it was hard to reconcile the handsome, smiling man in front of her as the brother of her cold and ruthless devil husband.

"Will you be joining us too, Papa?" she asked.

Mihir Thakvar shook his head with a smile. "No. I'll be home finishing some important work before my upcoming trip."

She wasn't sure where he was going, but she didn't ask him about it specifically. However, there was a dark undercurrent from Shivay Thakvar she didn't understand.

Ignoring her husband's irrational anger and suspicion, she enjoyed her breakfast with the rest of the company while looking forward to the day of sightseeing.

Soon, the breakfast ended, and they stepped outside the mansion where several vehicles were waiting for them. She noticed that the security was more than usual.

"All right, I'll see you later, Ishani," Rishab said with a smile. His expression then sobered when he looked at his brother. "Be careful, bro."

She was confused by his words. Shivay nodded before placing a hand behind her waist and directing her towards one of the SUVs.

"Isn't Rishab joining us?" she asked as she sat inside, and the door closed after he got in.

“No. We are going elsewhere.”

Her heart jerked in panic. “Where?” she asked, wondering if she should ask the driver to stop and run back into the Thakvar mansion.

In Shivay Thakvar’s mind, she had betrayed him several times and tried to have him killed.

He turned to look at her, and slowly, his mouth twisted. “Don’t worry. I’m not kidnapping you to take revenge.” Before she could sigh in relief, he added the word, “Yet.”

Her heart raced in panic before realizing he was deliberately scaring her. Angry and outraged, she raised her chin. “I’m not scared,” she said.

His eyes flashed darkly in amusement. “Aren’t you?”

Dragging her eyes away from him, she refused to reply. She sat back and looked outside while the SUV went in a familiar direction.

An hour later, she realized they were heading into the desert area.

*Did he lie to me?*

*Is he going to take his revenge and bury me in the sand like he was buried? Or is he going to drown me in the oasis?*

Before she lost her courage, she turned to look at him. He was watching her, but there was no amusement on his face.

“We are meeting the rest of the clans,” he stated as if he picked up on her fear.

Shocked, she stared at him. “The rest of the clans?”

“Yes. I have asked for a meeting, and I want you to present a united front. I want the rest of the clans to think we are happily married, and our two clans are now united just like how it used to be before the goddess statue was stolen.”

It took a moment for his words to sink in. She was shocked.

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?” she asked.

He kept quiet, and there was a dark look on his face.

He didn't trust her. And he thought she might give that information to her brother or others, jeopardizing his plans.

"Is my brother coming?" she asked.

"No. It's the smaller clans. The ones on the Eastern side of the desert."

She was shocked. The Eastern side of the desert had clans who were cut off from the rest of the civilization. They were mostly considered to be primitive.

"W-what if they attack us?" she asked, feeling worried.

"There's a treaty in place. They won't attack here."

"But we were attacked by Kabalis in the oasis," she reminded him.

He watched her for a long moment. She thought he would be angry and tell her that it wasn't the Kabali clan that attacked.

"We have enough security. So, just do as I say and remain next to me."

She bit her lip and nodded.

The SUV stopped near a large makeshift tent. She could see the Singoor temple in the distance.

Hoping the clans would respect the holy land, she stepped out of the SUV. Shivay Thakvar guided her inside the meeting place.

Although she was considered to be the Gujjar clan heir, she had not attended a clan meeting. It was her brother who represented her and their clan. Her brother had told her that women weren't allowed to attend the clan meetings.

*Then why is Shivay Thakvar bringing me here?*

He could have simply told the other clans of the alliance formed with the Gujjars. Feeling confused, she scanned the room through the translucent

fabric of her veil and noticed quite a few people assembled there. Clan heads were seated on a chair surrounded by their trusted men. A small shudder passed through her when she thought of potential violence breaking out at any moment.

Shivay Thakvar's warm, muscled arm wrapped around her waist. Her fear subsided, and she unexpectedly drew strength from his touch.

She was reminded of the times he had fought off the attackers. Plus, the Thakvar security was just outside to help if needed.

Sucking in a deep breath, she relaxed.

He led her to the table and drew out a chair. Once she was seated, he sat next to her.

"I'm Shivay Thakvar, and this is my wife, Ishani. She is the rightful Gujjar heir, and our marriage has brought the Thakvar and Gujjar clans together."

Ishani's eyes widened when she heard her husband speak in the local language. It was a complete shock to her, and she could see a similar surprise in the eyes of the other clan leaders. "I'm the oldest son of Mihir Thakvar, and I'm here in front of you to discuss how we can build the alliances we need for the betterment of our people."

"There are rumors that you aren't the real heir," someone called out. "It's been said you are a businessman who is here to steal the oil wells from Singoor."

Ishani held her breath. She had the same doubts as the ones being voiced out loud—that Shivay Thakvar was a ruthless businessman who was fooling everyone to steal the oil wells.

She turned to see what Shivay Thakvar would say.

His darkly handsome face remained unfazed. "I'm Mihir Thakvar's son. I have several proofs that can be presented... DNA results, family

photos, and my parents' wedding photos in America. But most of all, to prove that I'm not here to steal the wealth that rightfully belongs to all the heirs in Singoor, I will be signing a contract with all of you as witnesses that would remove me from having any stake in the oil wells."

There was shocked silence in the room. Ishani was stunned as well.

Shivay Thakvar looked right in the eyes at each one of the clan heads present. "Everything my father has done over the past twenty years is for the betterment of our region and its people. The Thakvars are always willing to share the resources we have with the rest of the clans in Singoor. What we expect in return is to have an amicable relationship between all of the clans so we can restore peace. My father and I will ensure that once peace is restored, we will build the necessary infrastructure to connect all the clans. Your children will have access to the rest of the world, education, and modern amenities..."

Ishani's heart thudded loudly as she heard Shivay Thakvar's commanding and compelling voice as he spoke. Until then, she held doubts about him being the Thakvar heir and his intentions. But listening to him talk, she had no reason to believe he wasn't the true heir, especially if he was forsaking his stake in the oil wells.

"So, will you all agree to sign the peace treaty and secure the future of your children?" he asked.

There was absolute silence for a few moments. And then, it was followed by a roaring applause from all of the small clan members. "Yes! We will!"

Shivay Thakvar nodded. "As I have promised earlier, I will forfeit the share in the oil wells for the Thakvars. I will be signing the document, and you all can be witnesses to the contract."

Ishani watched as Shivay Thakvar held the paper that had the contract



and conditions listed for the peace treaty. He put his signature underneath before passing it to her.

“Read the contract and sign next to my signature,” he said.

With shaking hands, she picked it up and read the brief contract. It contained all the information he had stated earlier. Sucking in a deep breath, she signed next to his bold signature.

She then watched as he personally went around the meeting table and had each clan member agree to the contract by placing their initials or thumbprint. Despite his commanding nature, she watched as he patiently explained to some of the clan heads what each point in the contract meant.

Her heart thudded, watching this side of him she hadn't personally witnessed before.

One of the clan heads spoke to her. “Your husband is not from here, but the way he speaks and came to meet us in the villages, we feel he is a part of the Sands of Singoor.”

Ishani was shocked. She hadn't known that Shivay Thakvar reached out to the smaller clans in the Eastern part of Singoor deemed inaccessible and dangerous. She then recalled the initial days and weeks of their marriage when he had been away from the Thakvar mansion and returned at midnight.

*My God.*

All the while, she had thought him to be a selfish, ruthless man, but he was risking his life to bring stability to her region.

*But why?*

She still didn't know his motive, and she couldn't ask him because he didn't trust her.

Feeling confused and shaken, she continued to watch him from under her veil.

Much later, a few hours before the sun began to set, the clan meeting

ended.

“May the Mahadev’s blessings be with you!”

Ishani felt touched when the clan heads blessed them before leaving the meeting.

One of the clan heads reached for a small container in his pocket. Then dipping his three fingers in the holy ash, he pressed the blessing onto Shivay Thakvar’s forehead. “The protector of Sands of Singoor,” he declared.

Soon after, the other clan heads approached them, and took off their turbans as per their tradition, and placed it in his hands in offering. It was a sign of yield in war or a gesture of seeking help, and as if her husband knew every one of the ways, he held the turban and placed it back on the clan leader’s head.

Soon, all of the clan heads gave their allegiance before leaving the meeting. Most of them came on camels and a few on horses. Once they all left, only the Thakvar vehicles remained near the makeshift tent.

Shivay Thakvar looked at her. “Let’s go. We are done with the meeting.”

She nodded and allowed him to lead her to the vehicles.

He held open the SUV door for her, and just before he closed it, he looked at her for a long moment. The intensity in his eyes was unreadable.

Biting her lip, she waited while he sat next to her, and the vehicle began moving.

*Why is he not saying anything?*

Was he still angry with her? She expected him to say something cutting, such as not to betray the smaller clans by revealing details of the peace treaty meeting to her brother, but he was silent during the drive.

The convoy of vehicles drove through the desert. She could see the SUVs moving in a line with their vehicle at the center. Suddenly, out of

nowhere, a gust of wind blew sand on the windshield, reducing the visibility.

Even with the wipers pushing away the sand, she saw the sand rising in the air and blowing around in circles.

A sandstorm.

She had seen a few sandstorms, but they were less intense and gone within a few seconds. But the one they were caught up in had winds increasing in speed.

Her heart thudded as all the vehicles slowed, trying to wade through the storm.

Shivay Thakvar dialed a number on his phone.

“Is there a different route we can take to avoid the sandstorm?”

Shivay asked someone.

She turned to see he was listening to the other person speak on the phone.

“Let’s take shelter there until the storm abates,” he replied.

She didn’t know what was spoken, but the vehicles began diverting to a different route.

The sandstorm hit them harder, and she felt the vehicle jolt at its initial impact, followed by minimal visibility. They continued to move slowly until they came to a stop somewhere.

Ishani couldn’t see anything. Shivay Thakvar got down, and moments later, the door to the SUV opened on her side.

“Come,” he instructed.

His muscular arm wrapped around her waist while she lowered her head, pulling her veil closer to her body to avoid the spiraling sand.

His arm kept her grounded because the wind was so strong that her body swayed backward. She moved unconsciously closer to him while he led them somewhere. After several moments, they stepped inside a place and

immediately she heard the sound of a door closing shut.

She felt the loss of his muscular arm when he moved away. Immediately, she began to dust off the sand from her clothes. Knowing no one else but her and Shivay Thakvar were in the place, she pushed up her veil and dropped the long cloth.

Her eyes met with Shivay Thakvar. He had sand on his clothes and in his hair too. But his dark gaze was on her, watching her intently.

Feeling conscious without her veil and strongly drawn to him, she looked away, only for her heart to jerk violently.

They were in one of the tents on the holy land. It was the same tent they had spent their wedding night in. The night she had betrayed him.

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A shiver rippled through Ishani as she stood and faced her husband in a place that held dark memories.

“S-Shivay...” she began.

His eyes flashed, hearing her call his name.

“Go and freshen up,” he said.

She watched as he went to a corner of the tent and began lighting the lamps. Biting her lip, she went to the small changing room and attached bathroom. She removed the rest of her clothes that were dusted with sand. Using the stored cool water, she washed off the fine sand from her body. Due to her veil, her hair escaped the worst of the sand, but she still gave it a quick wash.

She used one of the long cotton cloths to dry her hair and body, but she hesitated when she had to put her clothes back on. She didn't want to put on clothes that were dusted with sand.

But that would mean being half naked in front of Shivay Thakvar.

*He is my husband.*

He had kissed and touched her. And she had seen him changing in front of her as well. *There is nothing to be ashamed of.*

With her heart thumping loudly, she wrapped the long cloth around her body and stepped out.

The sunlight was fading outside, and the tent was lit up with the soft lighting of the lamps. Keeping her eyes lowered, she went to the seating and dining area of the tent.

When she felt the burn of his eyes on her, she looked up. Her heart jerked when his eyes flared intensely while he took in her body wrapped in a thin cotton cloth and her long hair left loose.

Goose bumps peppered her skin, and she could feel the tips of her breasts harden underneath the thin cotton cloth. Fighting the need to cross her arms over her chest, she returned his gaze. Moments passed, and she felt the air crackle between them. The wind was howling outside, but the sound of it was drowned out with the drumming of her heart.

He watched her for a long moment before turning away and disappearing into the changing area and then the bathroom.

Her heart heaved, and she felt oddly disappointed.

*'You are mad,'* a voice inside her whispered. *'How can you desire his touch when he clearly hates you and expects you to betray him again?'*

But she did crave him and his touch.

Even when she thought he was a fraud and planned to seduce him to win his trust, she was strongly drawn to him. And now that she discovered the truth about him, the desire she felt turned into an intense need.

Sucking in a deep breath, she tried to distract herself. She went to the table where there was dried food under covered dishes. She could see dates, nuts, and other dried fruits. She wasn't hungry and couldn't think of food due to her fluttering stomach. So she poured a glass of the liquid that was kept in a container.

The first sip made her cough as it was strong. It tasted like herbal tea, only much stronger. She almost reached for the water jug, but she didn't. The fermented herbal drink left a trail of warmth in her fluttering stomach, relaxing her. She slowly took more sips of the strong herbal drink.

By the time she finished the glass, she felt much better. She even had some dried dates and figs with some walnuts.

The tent had no windows, but she could still hear the howling wind outside while the sandstorm continued. Her eyes fell on the lamps, and she hoped there was enough oil or wax to keep them burning until morning.

The bed behind the thick carpet partition looked the same as on their wedding night. But she didn't want to lie down on it. Despite the long day, she wasn't tired at all. Her body buzzed with restless energy. She went to the small dining area, wondering if she should have another glass of the sweet yet strong herbal drink. She picked up the empty glass.

Just when she stood by the table contemplating, she felt heat prickling her back. She turned, only to let out a soft gasp when her eyes met with a familiar dark gaze. She hadn't heard him return.

His body and hair were wet, indicating he must have taken a bath as well. Like her, he was only wearing a long cotton cloth wrapped around his hips, leaving his entire upper body bare. His muscled chest and arms glistened in the soft lighting from the lamps.

"I-I was having a drink. It's delicious. You should try some too. There are also dried fruits and nuts that are good. You should have them..." Her words trailed off when she realized she was talking too fast due to her nervousness.

His eyes fell on the empty glass she held in her hands. When his gaze met hers again, there was an unreadable expression on his face. That's when she realized she was offering him a drink, and he must be thinking it was drugged like the last time.

*Oh God.*

Her heart began thudding when he came closer to her. Her stomach once again began quivering, and she held her breath when he stood in front of her.

She had to raise her head to meet his eyes. She expected dark anger inside them, but her heart jerked when she saw something else. Desire.

He didn't touch her even as they stood with their eyes locked only a few inches from each other. She could feel the raw heat from him, and her

eyes fell on a drop of water that dripped from his hair, traveled down his muscled chest, and disappeared into the cloth at his waist. Her heart drummed faster when her eyes swept over his powerful legs and the big bulge. There was no mistaking his potent desire barely concealed by the cloth.

The sound of the wind outside was once again drowned out by the throbbing of her heart when she looked up to meet his eyes again. His eyes darkened in intensity, and she could feel the unleashed desire.

*Why isn't he touching me?*

She had told him many times that she was his wife and belonged to him. Although those words were driven by reason, they led to passionate moments that left her craving his kisses and touch.

Her lips tingled, and her stomach quivered while a low throbbing began between her legs, awaiting his passion. But he didn't move or touch her.

Her body couldn't take it anymore, so she touched him. Placing her hands on his bare chest, she trailed them up. His muscles jerked under her fingers, and his eyes flared.

She knew he desired her, and yet he wasn't touching her.

He was her husband, the man she desired and wanted. Feeling emboldened, she held his head with both hands and pulled his mouth lower.

Fire burned inside her when their lips touched. She kissed him, feeling the texture of his lips and then pushing the tip of her tongue into his mouth to get the rich, dark taste she craved.

A gasp escaped her when his fingers gripped her hair at the back. She expected him to drag her mouth away from his, but his tongue pushed between her lips and conquered her mouth.

A groan escaped from deep inside her. The need she felt became



explosive as he kissed her passionately.

But the kiss didn't last long. He dragged his mouth away from hers and watched her with dark fire blazing in his eyes. "If this doesn't stop now, I will claim you completely," he said in a rough tone.

Her heart thudded at his words. Until then, they had only kissed, and he touched her intimately, giving her extreme pleasure, but he hadn't claimed her fully.

She wasn't entirely sure of the ramifications of such an act. Earlier, she had been prepared for it when she thought of seducing him with an ulterior motive. She thought of it as a sacrifice. But now, her desire was driven by no other motive other than wanting him.

*I want this, and I want him.*

"Don't stop," she whispered. "Make me your wife."

The grip in her hair tightened with those words, and she watched as he finally lost his icy control.

His mouth met hers again in a rough, passionate kiss. Even as she was lost in the hot, dizzying sensations, her feet were swept off the floor while he carried her somewhere.

She kissed him back desperately and pulled him closer.

A gasp escaped her when her back met with soft bedding. She opened her heavy-lidded eyes to see him next to her on the bed. Her heart raced when his hand covered the knot on the long cloth she wore. With a hard tug, the knot loosened, and the soft fabric fell aside, revealing her.

Her cheeks heated, and her chest rose and fell when he watched her body with hungry intensity in his eyes. He touched her then, causing her body to quiver. The rough pad of his fingers swept over her quivering bare stomach and then on the soft, heavy mounds of her breasts. His large palm cupped the fullness of her breast before his head lowered.

A shocked cry escaped her lips when he kissed the tip of her breast, flicking his tongue over the hardened bud before taking it into his warm mouth and sucking it deeply. She held his head while her back arched, and the throbbing between her legs grew in intensity.

She could feel his hard arousal against her hips. With trembling hands, she reached for and tugged the knot on the cloth he wore around his hips. The cloth fell open, and she could feel the heat and hardness of his desire. Before she could touch him, his hand caught hers and entwined their fingers.

His lips trailed down over her quivering stomach. She felt his hair and the rough stubble of his jaw as he moved his lips in circles around her navel. His hand touched her thigh, and she shivered as his fingers brushed against her mound. She knew what was coming, and her body quivered in anticipation, widening her legs slightly. His lips paused, and his head raised slightly until their eyes met. The dark fire in his eyes made the throbbing inside her intensify.

He lowered his head again. The next moment, she let out a shocked gasp.

She had expected his finger to enter her intimate folds to pleasure her like had done before, but it was his mouth that brushed against her mound. She cried out and surged against him while his hot tongue entered her folds. She gripped his hair as he tasted and invaded her in the most intimate way.

A familiar heat began to build and burn with intensity inside her.

“Shivay,” she gasped as the heat spread through her veins rapidly and then exploded inside her.

Shocking pleasure spread over her body as she trembled and gasped with its intensity. His mouth then met with hers with a drugging kiss.

She vaguely felt a small tug before the cloth around his hips

disappeared and a heavy press of his heated body over hers. She felt the throbbing heat of his long and hard arousal against her thighs. His kiss grew in passion, and she felt his hand brushing against her thigh before the searing heat of his hardness entered her.

She cried out and dug her nails into his shoulders as blind pleasure combined with a sudden sharp pain.

He held his body still. She arched her back, her body involuntarily wanting to escape the shocking invasion, but the heavy press of his body kept her still. Slowly, her body began adjusting to him inside her, and the sharp pain turned into throbbing. He then began to move.

He moved in slow, deep thrusts while continuing to kiss her. A gasp escaped her mouth each time he pushed the thick length of his hardness into her. The burning flames that had peaked earlier began to build once again inside her. Sweat covered their bodies, and she continued to dig her nails into his shoulders, holding on to him while he kept the steady rhythm of his thrusting.

Soon, his movements increased in intensity. The corded muscles on his broad back flexed under her fingers. Her blood heated and sizzled, and the flames grew higher while he fiercely claimed her.

Her entire body throbbed as she frantically held on to him. She floated into unconquered territory as he built up a rhythm, and her head trashed from side to side as she moaned and cried loudly. His name played on her lips between her gasps as he drove her over the edge.

The shocking pleasure built in intensity and rippled through her again, making her throw back her head and cry out.

Her body trembled and shook. His movements remained fierce, and she opened her eyes to see him watching her with his darkly handsome face twisted into a harsh passion. The veins on his neck and corded muscled arms

stood out while he drove into her repeatedly. Just when she thought she couldn't take the intense pleasure anymore, he threw his head back and let out a roar. Hot liquid entered her, and shocking pleasure once again consumed her. Dark spots covered her vision at the intensity.

It took a while for her to regain her senses, and when she did, his heavily muscled body was slumped over her. She heard his harsh breathing against her ears. Just when she thought she wouldn't be able to breathe, he rolled to the side.

Cool air met the sweaty skin of her body only for a moment before he pulled her close against his hard chest. Slowly, her breathing calmed, and she became aware of everything, especially the throbbing soreness between her legs.

Her cheeks heated when her eyes met with his. She thought his eyes would look sated, but the dark intensity of his desire continued to burn.

“Ishani Thakvar,” he said softly, watching her.

She blinked, not understanding what he meant by that. A soft gasp escaped her when she felt the heat of his palm on her bare hip. The rough, calloused skin of his palm left goose bumps while moving over her hip.

Her body was sore, and she thought she was over-pleasured and wouldn't be able to feel the pleasure once again, but his slow touch left a trail of fire. Her heart picked up speed when she felt the throbbing hardness of his desire.

With a smooth movement, he rolled on top of her again. His lips met with the fluttering pulse of her throat. While the desert storm raged outside the tent, she gave in to the magic once again.

## CHAPTER 22

Ishani woke up to the sounds of men talking.

Slowly, she opened her eyes, and it took a moment to gather her bearings. She was lying on the soft sheets that smelled different, and instead of the large windows or French doors, multicolored carpets on the wall met with her vision.

She was in the desert tent of the holy land of Singoor.

She turned her head and saw that she was alone in the bed. The soreness of her body, especially between her legs, reminded her of the previous night's events.

*Shivay Thakvar made me his wife.*

Her cheeks heated as she recalled their marriage being consummated more than once. The raw passion that burned between them continued until dawn when soft sunlight filtered through the corners of the tent.

She never thought she could feel such intense pleasure. And the pleasure wasn't just from her body. She felt a soul-deep pleasure that made her heart sing each time she held Shivay Thakvar in her arms while he found his release inside her.

She missed him already and wished she had woken up in his arms. But she knew he had many important responsibilities which he had to take care of.

Smiling and ignoring the soreness in her body, she slowly got down from the bed and went into the bathroom to get ready. She took a quick bath, and then dusting the sand off the previous day's clothes, she put them on.

She stepped out and went to the sitting area where she had dropped her veil the previous night. She was putting it on when the door to the tent

opened, and Shivay Thakvar stepped inside.

Her cheeks heated when his eyes fell on her. She expected a smile, but the darkly handsome face remained unreadable as he watched her.

“Are you ready?” he asked. “Security is waiting outside.”

“Y-yes. I’m ready,” she said, unable to say anything else.

He nodded and then went around the tent to ensure the lamps were put out before joining her.

“Let’s go,” he said, leading her out of the tent.

The heat from his hand burned on her back even as coldness radiated from the man next to her. Shocked, confused, and hurt, she sat in the SUV while they prepared to return to the Thakvar mansion.

The journey was once again silent.

And with every minute, uncertainty grew inside her.

*Why isn’t he talking to me? Why is he behaving so coldly towards me?*

She didn’t understand what was happening. Her head began to throb due to lack of sleep and tension. She felt a dull ache inside her chest.

Soon, they reached the Thakvar mansion.

Luckily, the welcome group was a smaller one. It was just Malathi and a couple of other women. They put small tilaks on her and Shivay Thakvar’s foreheads before allowing them inside the home.

Mihir Thakvar welcomed them with a smile. “I’m glad you two made it safely. I was worried when I heard you got caught in a sandstorm.”

“Yes, we are fine, Papa,” she said with a small smile.

“Come. Let’s have breakfast. You must be hungry since you must not have had dinner.”

Ishani shook her head. “I am tired, Papa. I’ll have breakfast in my room.”

Her father-in-law nodded with a sympathetic smile. “Yes, of course. Take a rest.” He looked at his son. “Shivay, why don’t you also take some rest too. We can talk about the clan meeting later.”

“No. I’m fine, Dad,” he replied.

Ishani thought he would leave her and go to the breakfast room. But she was surprised when she felt his hand on her back. He led her upstairs to their suite. And once she stepped in, he looked at her for a moment before turning and leaving.

The door shut behind him, leaving her alone in their large bedroom suite.

She stared at the closed door, once again feeling hurt and angry.

Nothing had changed for him since the previous night. He still didn’t trust her and hated her. But everything changed for her. She was falling for her husband.

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Ishani woke up to a soft, heated kiss on her throat.

She thought she was dreaming of warm hands sliding over her body. Moaning softly, she arched her back when a rough, calloused palm cupped her breast and flicked the hardened tip.

“Open your eyes, Ishani,” a deep voice murmured.

Slowly, she opened her eyes and saw the darkly handsome face of her husband. Her hands reached for him and held his broad, bare shoulders. His skin was slightly damp, and a familiar cologne tingled her nose. He must have just stepped out of the shower. The hardness against her hip indicated he was aroused.

“Shivay...” she whispered.

His dark eyes flashed, and his lips met with her throat and moved around her jaw, leaving a trail of fire. His hands slipped under her back and tugged on the knots of her dress. Before she realized it, her clothes were gone, and she was as naked as him.

She didn't stop him or ask about his coldness during the day. She allowed him to touch her and claim her until she was once again lost in the magic.



## CHAPTER 23

Ishani was in the garden playing the bin instrument.

Although there was an antique instrument in the Thakvar mansion prayer room, another one was recently purchased and kept outside in the beautiful garden. Ishani suspected it was her father-in-law who had purchased it, even though he hadn't mentioned anything to her about it. She smiled, feeling grateful to the man who was like a father to her.

Her fingers moved over the strings and let the beautiful music wash over her. She got lost in the music until the notes were completed.

Then touching her forehead to the instrument in respect, she placed it aside.

She looked at the sun and knew there was some time before lunch. She had already instructed the kitchen staff regarding the meals for the day, and she didn't have to go to the accounting room since the reconciliation of accounts was done the previous day. Deciding to catch up on some reading on the new computer, she stepped into the Thakvar mansion to go to the library.

As she walked through the long corridor, she felt a certain stiffness in her legs. Her cheeks heated, recalling the reason.

Shivay Thakvar.

Her midnight lover who was also her husband.

It had been nearly a week since she had lost her virginity to Shivay Thakvar. Since then, she had a love-hate relationship with her husband.

During the day, he ignored her or was coldly distant towards her. But at night, he became her passionate lover. He claimed her until she was left breathless and content with pleasure. And then, he held her close and slept

with his muscled arm wrapped around her waist possessively until the morning.

She was alternately angry, upset, smitten, and content with the maddening man. Despite knowing the truth about him, she still thought he was a devil husband.

*Why is he so cold towards me? Why can't he at least smile?*

Letting out a sigh, she neared the library when she heard a commotion. There were shouts, and a lot of people could be heard talking in the mansion's central courtyard.

With a frown, she continued to walk along the corridor.

"What happened?" she asked one of the staff.

"There has been an accident."

Ishani's heart nearly stopped. "I-is Shivay okay?" she asked. "And Papa?"

"Yes, madam. Shivay and Mihir sirs are fine. It's the guest. Rishab sir met with an accident."

Shivay's brother. "Where is he?" Ishani asked.

"They have put him in the ground floor guest suite."

"Thank you."

Ishani hurried to the ground floor. Although she didn't spend a lot of time with Shivay's brother, she liked Rishab and enjoyed his company. He had gone for a tour of the city for a week and was supposed to return that morning. She was shocked about his accident.

She went to the ground floor and headed to the guest suite. She could see some of the staff exiting the room. As she neared, she heard voices.

"How did this happen, son?" Mihir Thakvar's voice sounded worried.

"I'm fine, Dad," Rishab replied. "I was playing around with the jeep on the sand dunes, and I lost control of the vehicle before it overturned."

“You have to be careful here, son. The roads here are not like the ones in San Francisco. We should postpone our trip.”

“No, Dad. I’ll be fine. I’ll sleep on the jet anyway.”

There was silence at Rishab’s words. A moment later, she heard Mr. Bahadur speak.

“Sir, we need to go meet with the hospital board. They must be waiting for us.”

“Are you sure you are fine, son?” Mihir Thakvar asked. There was still worry in his voice.

“Yes, Dad. Please go. I’m fine.”

There was a scrape of chairs. Ishani immediately leaned back so she would be hidden behind a thick, heavy curtain. She stood by the door while her father-in-law left with Mr. Bahadur. Just when she was about to step in, she froze when she heard Rishab speak.

“I didn’t want to worry Dad telling him it was an attack. Or he would definitely postpone the trip.”

Ishani was shocked. She continued to remain frozen and didn’t want to move.

“Ishani, come inside,” the deep voice of Shivay Thakvar commanded.

Ishani was shocked Shivay knew of her presence even though she was standing away from their view. Knowing she couldn’t leave without him noticing, she pulled her veil over her face and slowly stepped into the room.

She saw that Rishab’s arm was in a cast, and there was a cut on his forehead with stitches.

She turned to look at Shivay and saw that he was angry. His jaw was clenched, and his eyes were intense.

“How are you doing, Rishab,” she asked. “I just came to know about the accident.”

Even though she was speaking to Rishab, her eyes honed in on her husband's dark look. Unlike the cold, distant expression he usually had towards her, she could sense he was angry with her.

"I'm fine, Ishani," Rishab's friendly voice replied.

Dragging her eyes away from Shivay's, she looked at Rishab. "What happened?" she asked.

Before Rishab could respond, Shivay answered. "He was attacked in the desert."

She held her breath. *Does he think I am behind the attack?*

Just as that thought passed through her mind, her stomach sank. He still doubted her.

Would he ever trust her?

"I feel like a fool," Rishab said. "I should have expected an attack since you warned me. But I was distracted... by a woman."

Ishani sensed anger in Rishab when he said the last part.

"The women in this land are equally dangerous," Shivay said in a harsh tone. "They can't be trusted."

Anger and hurt filled her.

*How can he touch me and desire me when he doesn't even trust me? I hate him!*

Pushing away her feelings, she focused on the matter at hand. "What did they wear? The people who attacked you?" she asked.

Rishab frowned. "I didn't notice much about the others. But the woman I was distracted by was riding a horse along with the others. She wore a flowing blue dress and jewelry shaped like a snake. She also had black dots on her forehead and around her eyes, similar to the women in the Thakvar clan."

Ishani immediately knew who they were. "They are from the Bhil

clan,” she said. “They ride horses and wear snake jewelry as a way to show respect to God Shiva.”

Rishab frowned. “Bhils?” He must have realized something because he looked at his brother. “Fuck. Isn’t that one of the other prominent clans we might have to make an alliance with?”

Shivay didn’t say anything.

Ishani was shocked and looked from her husband to his brother.

“We’ll talk about this later,” Shivay told Rishab. “Get some rest as you have a long journey soon.” He then paused. “Are you sure you can travel?”

Rishab shook his head. “I’m fine. It’s not like I’m flying commercial. It’s a private jet, and I can lie down in the cabin if I want. And I’ll rest more when I get home. Ma will ensure that.”

Shivay and his brothers lived with their mother in America. She recalled their sister was studying at a university. Was Mihir Thakvar going to meet his wife and daughter?

Everyone in the household knew Mihir Thakvar was going on a two-month trip to America, but the exact details were not given to anyone. Based on what Mihir Thakvar said to his son earlier, their home might be in a place called San Francisco in America.

“Get some rest,” Shivay told his brother. “I’ll talk to you later.”

Shivay got up to walk to her. She felt his fingers wrapping around her arm before he pulled her out of the room like she was a naughty child who couldn’t be trusted. He was silent as he led her up the stairs to their suite.

When they had privacy behind a closed door, he looked at her. “I know you heard what was said by my father.” He leaned closer. “If the information leaks out somehow that my father is in San Francisco, I’ll know who is responsible.”

Rai Bahadur had been in the room next to Shivay's father, which meant Shivay trusted the older man but not her. Anger burst inside her, and she pulled her arm away from him.

"I will not endanger Papa. I like him. He is kind and generous and not a devil like you!" Her voice was louder than usual, and her chest heaved with anger.

Shivay was silent. She thought he would issue more threats, but without saying anything, he left, most likely to go to his brother.

As soon as the door shut, tears pricked her eyes, but she fought them back.

*I hate him.*

\*\*\*

That night, she woke up again to warm lips touching her throat while calloused palms glided over her body. Her eyes opened and met with his dark gaze.

She was still angry with him.

He watched her face closely. “Stop me if you don’t want this,” he said.

She felt his desire through his hard arousal, but she knew he would stop if she said the word. She discovered her devil husband was too proud to ever force a woman, especially his wife. Even though she was angry with him, her body responded and trembled, anticipating his touch and raw passion.

“I hate you,” she whispered but didn’t tell him to stop. She dug her fingers into his broad shoulders and pulled him closer.

His eyes flared at her words before his mouth met hers again. His tongue slid deep inside, capturing hers and melting her body from within. Soon, he had her gasping his name while he took her with a combination of anger and raw passion she couldn’t deny.

## CHAPTER 24

“Do you want anything else, madam?”

Ishani smiled at the maid. “No, I don’t need anything more. It’s only a day trip.”

Ishani had just finished packing a small bag. The bag didn’t contain any clothes. It only had things she had purchased as gifts.

“Please have this bag placed in the vehicle. I will be outside in a few minutes.”

“Sure, madam.”

As soon as the maid left, Ishani finished getting ready. She was looking forward to the trip.

She was going to visit her father’s mentor, Kailash Kayastha, who had been the Gujjar family’s head priest before he moved his family to the city. Even after her father died, she and her mother would visit the old family priest once a year on her father’s birthday.

And when her mother had fallen ill, Ishani continued to make those visits by herself. Her brother had tried to stop her many times, but it was one thing she did not compromise on.

Kailash Kayastha was over eighty years old and no longer visited the Singoor lands. The lands also reminded him of his son who was killed in the violence that had ensued when the Goddess Shakti’s statue was stolen.

Ishani’s heart ached at the senseless loss of life due to violence. She hoped that the new peace treaties between the clans would restore peace.

With a sigh, she pulled down her veil and stepped out of the suite. She had asked Mr. Bahadur to make arrangements for her to go to the city. She had also mentioned her visit to Shivay Thakvar the previous night. She



wasn't sure if he had heard because it was when she lay exhausted in his arms after their lovemaking.

She wondered if she should mention it again to him. Biting her lip, she hurried upstairs to his office. The cleaning staff was outside the office, and the doors were shut.

She knew he might be traveling to meet with the other clans. Hoping he would not get angry or suspicious of her trip, she headed downstairs.

She wished her father-in-law was there to be informed. But Mihir Thakvar had gone on a two-month trip to San Francisco along with his son, Rishab.

With another sigh, she hurried to the vehicle that must have been readied for her trip.

An SUV was parked right at the entrance below the mansion steps. Thanking Mr. Bahadur with a smile, she opened the vehicle's back door.

"Come sit in the front," a deep voice commanded.

Her heart jerked with shock when she saw Shivay in the driver's seat.

"W-what?" she asked, not understanding why he was inside the SUV. She had thought he wasn't in the mansion and must have left to meet a clan in the desert.

His darkly handsome face looked impatient. "Get in," he ordered. "You mentioned you have to be in the city by noon for lunch. We are already delayed by fifteen minutes."

She recalled telling him those details last night, but she thought he hadn't heard.

"B-but why are you here?" she asked.

"I'm driving you to the city."

She wanted to ask him why. Not wanting to argue, since it was getting late, she sat in the front seat next to him.

“No one can see you. You can take off your veil,” he said.

She slowly nodded and pushed it back. She felt oddly self-conscious, but knowing it was just him, she relaxed.

He put on his sunglasses before driving them out of the mansion gates. She saw the security team vehicles following them at a distance.

“Where exactly are we going to in the city?” he asked.

“I... I need to go to Kailash Ashram.”

He was silent.

She wondered why he wasn't asking her about the person she was meeting. She hadn't told him anything the previous night except that she was going to the city to meet someone.

*Does he trust me?*

*Or maybe he thinks he can catch me in the act of conspiring against him and his family.*

She felt conflicted about how she should feel. Shivay Thakvar was an enigma.

He cared about his family. He was a good leader to bring the clans together. But when it came to her, he behaved contradictorily.

He hated her and didn't trust her, and yet when he touched her in the darkness of night, he gave her unbelievable pleasure. His lovemaking was rough, exciting, and passionate. But sometimes, he also made love to her as though she was precious and something he cherished.

*It is lust and nothing more.*

She knew she shouldn't read anything else into it except for her desire for his lovemaking. He desired her the way she desired him. And even though she admired his ability to protect his family and be a good leader for the clans, she knew she shouldn't fall in love with him. Not only would he not love her back, but they also didn't have a future together.

Her priority was to get good medical treatment for her mother. For that, they would have to leave the Singoor region and be at a place with good mental health treatment.

Her mother was getting slightly better since the last visit. But it was not consistent. Sometimes her mother's sentences were coherent and sweet, but other times her mother forgot everything and was in a drugged haze.

Her brother briefly mentioned he had taken the second opinion of a doctor to change the medications, but the other doctor had also insisted they had to get proper medical treatment at a facility outside the Singoor region. She hoped to find a good facility soon.

"I'll join you soon. Wait for me at the office. Arrangements have been made for you there."

She turned to see Shivay Thakvar speaking to someone on the phone. She assumed it was the security head. She saw the convoy of vehicles following them at a distance take a detour as they entered the city limits.

Wondering why he was sending away the security, she looked at him.

"Why did you ask the security to leave?" she asked.

He looked at her briefly before turning back to the road. "The person you are visiting is your old family priest, Kailash Kayastha. I'm assuming there won't be a threat from him or his family."

She was surprised that he knew Kailash Kayastha. She then realized he might have gotten the information on his headset from security.

"Y-yes, I trust guruji more than anyone."

He didn't say anything.

Soon, they entered the small gates of the Kailash Ashram. He drove inside and then pulled up in front of the main entrance of the small home within the retreat grounds.

Looking forward to meeting her father's mentor, she wore back her

veil and stepped out of the vehicle to take the bag she had packed, but Shivay opened the trunk and held it in his hands.

“I can carry it,” she said. “It isn’t heavy. I just packed some sweets for the family.”

He didn’t hand it to her. He simply wrapped his hand around her waist and led her inside.

Her cheeks heated under the veil at his somewhat sweet gesture.

As soon as they stepped into the house, they were received by Kailash Kayastha and his family.

Ishani was delighted to see the elderly man smiling as he came towards her. She touched his feet.

“God bless you, my child,” the old man said. He then looked at Shivay.

Ishani introduced him. “Guruji, this is Shivay Thakvar... my husband.”

The old man looked at Shivay for a long moment. “Are you the Thakvar heir who is uniting the clans?” he asked.

Ishani was surprised that her father’s mentor had also heard about it.

“Yes, sir,” Shivay replied.

Kailash Kayastha smiled. “We might not have a feast fit for the Thakvar heir but do join us for lunch.”

Ishani held her breath. She knew Shivay had asked the security to wait at his city office, which meant he might have been planning to join them.

“It’ll be my pleasure, sir,” Shivay replied.

Ishani was shocked and pleasantly surprised. She was even more surprised when they were led into the small dining area where lunch was readied. An additional plate was placed for Shivay with small bowls filled

with simple curries and dals.

Ishani surreptitiously watched him from under the veil as he ate the simple meal.

“You still retain the flavors of the Gujjar cuisine, Mrs. Kayastha,” he said to Kailash Kayastha’s daughter-in-law, who was also wearing a veil.

Ishani was once again surprised that he knew each clan had its distinct flavors and recalled the Gujjar cuisine from their visit many weeks ago.

“Yes, Mr. Thakvar. Although my father-in-law lives here in the city, his heart is in the Singoor region.”

Ishani’s heart ached, knowing it was true. Kailash Kayastha left the Singoor region only because he lost his son to violence. He did not want to risk his other son’s life.

Ishani hoped all the clans would unite soon with a proper peace treaty. Knowing how determined and commandingly charismatic Shivay Thakvar was, she hoped he would succeed in his effort to unite all the clans.

Right after the meal, Shivay Thakvar thanked the family and excused himself to take a phone call. Soon after, the rest of Kailash Kayastha’s family members dispersed to perform their duties at the retreat and temple, leaving her to spend time with her father’s mentor.

Ishani wanted to ask Kailash Kayastha about an important topic, but she hesitated to ask, knowing how much sadness the topic might bring him. However, she needed to know everything she could to help with a greater cause. “Guruji, can you tell me how Goddess Shakti’s statue looked at the Singoor temple?”

The goddess statue was always decorated with flowers and surrounded by offerings from the devotees that many people in the current generation could not describe the statue. Kailash Kayastha was a priest at the Singoor temple, and as part of his daily duties, he would have taken away the

dried-up flowers and performed the ritualistic cleaning of the idol every day before the temple opened for the devotees.

The elderly man did not respond immediately. “The Goddess Shakti statue was very beautiful.” She saw tears welling in his eyes. “I just don’t know who had the heart to steal a statue that protected the Sands of Singoor.”

Ishani gently patted the old man’s hand.

“My husband is trying to find the Goddess Shakti statue, guruji. We are hoping to restore peace in the Singoor desert.”

There was surprise and hope in the elderly priest’s face. “God bless your husband, my child. I hope he succeeds.” He blinked his eyes. “All I remember of our Goddess Shakti is that she looked divine. My memory isn’t as good as it used to be to describe her in detail.”

Ishani’s heart sank. Kailash Kayastha was one of the very few people to have seen Goddess Shakti’s statue unadorned.

Her father’s mentor looked at her. “Don’t worry, my child. I will try to remember whatever I can. I will describe it to Kedar, and he will draw an image.”

Kedar was Kailash Kayastha’s son and an artist.

Feeling hopeful, Ishani smiled. “Thank you, guruji.”

Kailash Kayastha asked Ishani about her mother.

“She is getting better, guruji.”

“That is such good news, my child. I recall how spirited and intelligent Sujata was. Ishwar used to always sing praises about his wife and tell me he was blessed to have her and you in his life.”

Ishani smiled with happiness. Although Kailash Kayastha had told her many times about her father’s admiration and love towards his wife and daughter, she never got tired of hearing it. She then told her father’s mentor about the clan meetings and how the peace treaties were being initiated. The elderly

priest smiled while listening to her.

Soon after, Ishani joined Kailash Kayastha to visit the small temple on the retreat premises. She was surprised to see her husband joining her. She thought he would leave and return in the evening to pick her up.

But he stood next to her when they offered prayers in her father's name.

It was late afternoon when they returned to the elderly priest's house and bid the Kayastha family goodbye.

Her mind felt at peace when she sat in the SUV readying to head back to the Thakvar mansion.

She sneaked a look at Shivay Thakvar, and as usual, his handsome face was unreadable.

It was a silent ride through the city.

She was surprised when the SUV turned into the driveway of a tall, modern building with a lot of shiny glass around the structure. Her eyes widened when she read a name written discreetly next to the entrance.

It was a hotel, a place where people paid money to stay temporarily. She had never been to a hotel before and was intrigued.

As soon as the SUV stopped, a man in a Western suit with a tie opened the door.

"Welcome to the Palms Plaza," the man greeted.

"Thank you," she murmured after stepping out.

She noticed that the design was different from what she was used to seeing. While the Gujjar and Thakvar mansions were old-world royalty, the hotel had a modern luxury design. She could see glass elevators to the side of the hotel that moved up and down.

She was so lost in taking in everything she didn't realize when a muscled arm wrapped around her waist and led her inside the building to a

large lobby. She was surprised to see several tall palm trees inside the hotel. When she looked around, she noticed the place was bustling with people who mostly seemed to be foreigners and tourists.

As they walked through, she also noticed many people turning to look at her and Shivay.

Even through her veil, she could see how the women threw admiring gazes towards Shivay's darkly handsome looks before glancing at her strangely.

She knew they must be thinking that someone like Shivay Thakvar looked completely at odds with a woman wearing a veil. Her cheeks heated with slight embarrassment.

She unconsciously stepped closer to him.

He looked at her briefly before looking back at the person standing behind a huge desk.

“Welcome to the Palms Plaza, Mr. and Mrs. Thakvar. Your Venetian suite is ready for your stay tonight. Your dinner reservation at our Michelin star restaurant, Cinnamon & Clove, is at eight. Here is your keycard and special access card, sir.”

“Thank you,” his deep voice said before taking the card and leading her away from the desk.

Ishani was shocked.

Why were they not returning home to the Thakvar mansion? It was just late afternoon, and there was plenty of time to drive back before it got too dark.

Her heart thudded when she realized something.

“I didn't bring any change of clothes,” she told him quickly.

He turned to look at her. “You can get them here.”

She blinked, not understanding.



A woman wearing the hotel staff uniform led them through the lobby towards a well-lit corridor with a sign that read *Palms Plaza Boutique*.

Through the glass wall of a store, Ishani could see a wide variety of clothing, including ethnic wear.

They entered the store.

“Get whatever you like,” Shivay instructed.

Ishani slowly nodded. She only needed a dress for dinner, something to wear during sleep, and a light dress for the car ride the next day. She didn’t need other additional clothes because she had plenty at home.

His arm dropped, and she turned to see him walking towards the other side of the store, where she could see men’s suits. Knowing he would have to purchase clothes for dinner too, she looked around to see if she could find something she liked.

“This way, Mrs. Thakvar,” a beautifully dressed saleswoman guided her to an area.

Ishani stared at the clothes. All of her clothes were custom stitched for her, and she only selected cloth material from various vendors. She was fascinated by the racks of readymade clothes and all the styles.

“This side is our ethnic collection,” the saleswoman said. “And that is our Western collection.”

Ishani saw the familiar styles in the ethnic wear before she turned to look at the Western section.

“We have a collection from some of the best designers in the world, Mrs. Thakvar.”

She had never worn a Western dress and didn’t know if she ever could carry it well. And she had never taken off her veil in a public place.

She was about to tell the saleswoman she would choose something in the ethnic collection when her eyes fell on Shivay. Another saleswoman who

was dressed immaculately in a Western outfit was explaining something to Shivay, pointing at the suits.

A sudden pang of jealousy gripped her, shocking her.

Blinking, she turned away. Did he prefer women in Western outfits? She knew he grew up in the Western world and was used to seeing women dress in such modern clothing.

Suddenly, her heart began thumping. Biting her lips, she pushed up her veil and stared at the Western dresses the saleswoman had spoken about earlier.

“Yes, I would like to get one of these designer dresses,” she replied.

The saleswoman looked thrilled. “That’s excellent, Mrs. Thakvar. We also have great accessories to go with the dresses.”

Ishani’s heart raced with excitement as she spent the next few minutes trying on some dresses.

“This sapphire dress looks amazing on you, Mrs. Thakvar.”

Ishani stared at herself in the mirror. It was a sleeveless, sapphire-colored dress with tiny crystals all over that hugged her body’s curves.

Her eyes ran over herself in the mirror, unable to believe how different she looked.

“You look stunning, Mrs. Thakvar,” one of the women said. “We’ll have our stylist team help you get ready in your suite for your special dinner.”

Ishani nodded.

She changed into her clothes before handing the sapphire dress to the saleswoman.

“I’ll have it packed and sent up to the Venetian suite, madam,” she said before leaving.

Feeling excited and nervous, she stepped out of the changing area.

When she saw a man right outside, her heart jerked violently.

It was her brother. Devraj.

“Ishani,” he said in an urgent tone. He frowned when he realized she wasn’t wearing her veil.

But she didn’t move to cover her face. “What are you doing here?” she asked instead.

“I came here to see you.”

Even she hadn’t known she would be at the hotel. Then how did her brother know where she was exactly?

“We don’t have much time, but I need you to do something,” her brother said before taking out something from his pocket. It was a tiny object that was black in color. “This is a recording device. I want you to place this in Shivay Thakvar’s home office.”

Ishani was shocked. “What? Why?”

Her brother looked impatient. “We need to get proof he is not the Thakvar heir.”

Ishani was about to say that Shivay was the real heir when she saw rage on her brother’s face. “He is fooling all the clans. I heard about his meetings and the fake promises he is making.”

Ishani was stunned by the anger in her brother’s voice.

“The promises are true,” she said. “I was there—”

“Stop!” her brother hissed, cutting her off. “He is a liar and a fraud! He is used to making false promises. He is going to ruin our people. Listen to me and put this device in his office. Before that, put it somewhere on your dress to see who he is meeting tonight. I want to know who else is involved in conspiring against us.”

Ishani didn’t know what to say. She knew she wouldn’t be able to convince her brother right then without risking discovery. Shivay Thakvar

didn't trust her, and if he caught her brother with the tracking device, he would know about her brother's involvement in the attack on the wedding night. He might also think her brother orchestrated the oasis attack and the attack on Rishab.

“Will you do it?” her brother asked with dark rage and determination.

Ishani sucked in a deep breath. “Y-yes, I will do it.”

## CHAPTER 25

Ishani's heart continued to thud as she looked at herself in the hotel suite's bathroom mirror while a small team of stylists came in to help her with her makeup and hairstyle.

"This silver clutch looks excellent with your sapphire dress, Mrs. Thakvar."

Ishani's eyes fell on the small clutch that was part of the accessories she had purchased to wear that night for dinner. The silver bag looked beautiful against the sleeveless sapphire dress she wore, but her heart raced erratically because of what was hidden inside.

She had put the tracking device her brother had given her into the small clutch.

*Oh God.*

She wanted to remove it and throw it out the window or flush it down the toilet, but she was worried her brother would come and demand an explanation, risking suspicion on himself as well as her.

*But you are betraying your husband. Again.*

She trusted Shivay. She knew he was the heir, and was helping the smaller clans to unite. But she felt helpless to do anything right then.

"You look stunning, madam."

Ishani dragged her mind to focus on the present situation. She was ready for dinner. She was wearing the sleeveless sapphire dress. Her long hair was washed and blow-dried and then twisted into a simple knot behind her head with small ringlets of hair falling to the sides of her face. And her face had makeup that was different from her usual style. There were no small black dots on her forehead or chin. Instead, her face was left bare, with a

subtle color of blush, silver eyeshadow, winged eyeliner, and a pale pink lipstick. The only familiar thing on her face was the small diamond stud in her nose. The stylists left it as it matched her dress and clutch.

She looked very different.

“Please carry the lipstick in your clutch, madam. You can freshen it if required.”

Ishani nodded, even though she doubted she would dare to open the clutch anytime during the dinner.

“Thank you for your help,” she said to the team of stylists.

“It’s our pleasure, Mrs. Thakvar. Please visit us again soon.”

Ishani forced out a smile and nodded.

Soon, the stylist team left, but she remained seated in front of the mirror, trying to keep her panic at bay.

Knowing she couldn’t stay in longer, she breathed deeply before leaving the bathroom. Her steps wobbled slightly with the high-heel platform shoes she had on for the night.

As soon as she stepped into the living room, her eyes fell on Shivay Thakvar talking on the phone while looking outside the huge glass wall of the hotel suite.

As though he sensed her presence, he turned and then momentarily froze.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” he said and ended the call.

He continued to look at her. While his gaze swept over her, she stared at him as well. He looked breathtakingly handsome. He was wearing a dark blue suit. She had only seen him in ethnic wear and buttoned Western shirts before. But seeing him in a suit made her feel like he wore it more often than any other attire.

“I-I am ready,” she said, fighting the nervousness and heat that crept

into her cheeks.

A moment of silence later, he slowly walked towards her.

His eyes darkened in intensity. “You look nice,” he said.

“T-thank you.”

Her skin broke into goose bumps when he placed his hand on her back and led her out of the large hotel suite. Her fingers dug into the silver clutch she held at her side when they took the elevator to go down. The elevator doors opened to the lobby of a restaurant.

“Welcome to Cinnamon & Cloves,” a woman who must be the hostess greeted. “Do you have reservations, sir?”

Ishani watched as Shivay handed her a sleek card. Seeing the card, the woman’s eyes lit up.

“Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Thakvar. Your table has been readied.”

While the hostess led them inside, Ishani noticed that the place wasn’t crowded, but the tables were fully occupied. Everyone was dressed formally. The men wore suits, and the women wore beautiful dresses similar to hers. Most of the women’s eyes fell on her and Shivay.

There were looks of admiration and envy.

Feeling strangely possessive once again, she automatically moved closer to him. They were led to a table away from the others and had a view of the entire restaurant and the city.

The restaurant was beautiful, and the air held the sweet smell of spices. She took in the beautiful interior that was different from anything she had seen before. Even the group of musicians seated in the corner played different instruments that sounded pleasant and beautiful.

Had the circumstances been different, she would have enjoyed the novel experience. But the silver clutch burned against her hands. She placed it on the top of the table next to her. She didn’t want it anywhere near her, but

she had no other choice.

Her cheeks flushed when she found him looking at her.

“T-the restaurant is beautiful,” she said.

His mouth twisted. “Yes, it is. Let’s hope the food and service matches up to its reputation.”

Just as he said those words, a man in a white uniform and a tall white cap walked to their table. He was dressed differently from the other restaurant staff.

“Welcome to Cinnamon & Clove, Mr. and Mrs. Thakvar,” the man said with a different accent. “I’m Massimo. It’s my pleasure to have you both join us tonight. I’m the head chef, and I have chosen a special pairing of food and drinks for you both. I hope you enjoy the meal.”

Shivay didn’t say anything, but she forced a smile. “Thank you,” she told the man.

The chef smiled as two uniformed waiters brought drinks and food dishes to their table. A part of her was fascinated by how interestingly everything was displayed. She was used to mostly eating traditional homemade food.

She tried to listen to the chef as he explained the details about the ingredients of every dish before the portions were served on their plates. She took small bites of the food that was different yet delicious. The food experience was elevated by the soft Western music played by the musicians.

Even though everything was nearly perfect, her stomach trembled with nervousness.

“More wine?” a deep voice asked.

She looked up to see Shivay watching her. “Y-yes, please.”

She noticed that the chef and waiters had left. Shivay had asked them to leave to give them privacy. He picked up the bottle placed on the table and



poured red wine into her glass.

She realized that she was the only one drinking. There was no wine glass for Shivay.

“A-aren’t you having any drink?” she asked.

His mouth twisted. “No.”

Her heart jerked.

*Oh God.*

Did he think the wine was drugged? Did he suspect anything? Maybe he saw her brother in the hotel boutique.

Her mind raced thinking of the possibilities, but she couldn’t ask him or do anything. So she sipped on the wine. It was different from the locally brewed alcoholic beverages in Singoor, but it was tasty. The thick fruity liquid left a trail of warmth inside her, relaxing her a little.

The music turned lively after a while. She saw many couples going towards the area that was set up for dancing in front of the musicians. She found her body swaying and foot tapping while watching the couples dance to the music.

“Let’s dance,” Shivay Thakvar’s deep voice commanded.

She turned to see him standing up and extending his hand.

She was shocked. “Dance?” she asked.

His mouth twisted to the side. “Yes, dance.”

Her heart thudded. Dancing would mean moving away from the silver clutch. Will her brother think she deliberately kept it away while Shivay was meeting with someone?

She felt torn.

“No one is going to steal that purse,” his voice said with dark amusement. “We are going to be dancing right here.”

Her cheeks heated. With her heart thudding, she placed her hand in

his large palm and let him pull her closer. The other couples danced on the designated dance floor, but she and Shivay stayed in their private space and moved together. Her body was pressed against his hard one, and their eyes held each other's while moving to the music. Her body buzzed with awareness as his hands moved over her body, and his eyes turned hotter in a familiar way. Her stomach quivered, and she felt the tips of her breasts harden underneath her dress.

Their bodies were so close that she felt his hard need against her belly.

Her lips parted, and her breaths started coming faster as her heart raced. "Shivay..."

"Let's get out of here." His voice was rough as he wrapped his muscled arm around her waist and pulled her away.

"Wait!" she whispered and quickly picked up the silver clutch from the table before he led them out of the restaurant.

Her heart thudded when he led her out of the restaurant and into the elevator. The silence was thick, and heat burned her body when he watched her as the elevator took them upstairs.

Her fingers trembled against the silver clutch.

She jumped when the elevator doors opened. With her heart racing, she walked next to him as they went to their suite. He swiped a card at the suite door. It had barely opened when he pushed her inside against the wall and covered her body with his while his lips crashed on hers.

She gasped, and the clutch fell from her hands when she moaned and threw her arms around his neck. She was lost in the dizzying passion. Moments later, she jerked to awareness when his large hands cupped her breasts.

"Wait!" she said, dragging her mouth away from his.

She knew what was going to happen, and she didn't want the clutch anywhere near them.

*Oh God. What do I do?*

"I-I'll be right back," she said.

She slipped out of his hold, and he luckily allowed it. She bent down, picked up the silver clutch, and ran to the bathroom.

She shut the door and leaned against it staring at herself in the mirror.

With trembling hands, she placed the silver clutch on the counter and took out the tiny black object. She stared at it before walking to the mirror area and opening the trash bin underneath. She stared at the object for a moment before throwing it inside and closing the trash bin.

Then sucking in a deep breath, she opened the bathroom door and stepped into the bedroom.

Her heart jerked when she saw Shivay standing by the bed. He had removed his suit jacket and was watching her. She didn't know what to tell him. There was a dark look on his face, the kind she had seen when he discovered her betrayal.

"I-I was just... preparing for the night," she said. "I forgot to take the birth control pills."

She took them in the mornings, and she had taken one that morning too, but he hadn't seen her earlier.

He didn't say anything.

Slowly, she went to him and placed her slightly trembling hands on his chest. "Make me yours, Shivay," she whispered.

His eyes darkened hungrily.

She gasped when his hands gripped her hips and pushed her on the bed. Her back met with the soft mattress. Before she could take a breath, he pulled up her sapphire dress and dragged her panties down. Her gasp soon

converted to a shocked cry of pleasure when his mouth went down on her throbbing core.

With trembling hands, she clutched his hair and writhed under his seductive spell as pleasure peaked inside her. Within moments, she cried out his name, gasping and moaning. But he didn't stop. He continued to pleasure her.

Her body shuddered. "Shivay!" she said, unable to take more of it. Her sensitive folds were overstimulated. But he gripped her hips and his tongue stroked her.

Shockingly, another climax hit her, but it was too overwhelming, leaving her drained and her body shaking. She was still trembling when she watched him shed the rest of his clothes. The look on his darkly handsome face trembled her stomach and made her womb quiver.

Her body shuddered when he entered her and claimed her with a dark fierceness that set her off again. For the rest of the night, he set her body ablaze until she was consumed by him.

## CHAPTER 26

“The Merrick acquisition is completed...”

“The mines are secured, and the ecological teams are working without hindrance...”

“Operations are running well...”

“The hunt for the goddess statue is ongoing...”

“The assassin’s DNA is confirmed to be from the Singoor region, but the damn man seems to have teleported to the Middle East and Africa with no passport trail in India...”

Shivay stood near the tall windows overlooking the garden while his brothers could be heard on the office phone. The soft melodic sounds from the bin musical instrument floated in the air from below.

His brothers were providing updates.

“Mom and Dad are doing fine.” Rishab’s voice came through the office phone speaker. “They are planning a trip to Nandini’s university next week.”

Shivay had spoken to his parents the previous week when they had an emotional reunion after being apart for twenty years. He hadn’t had a chance to talk to them again as he had been traveling in the desert to speak with the clans. His parents wanted to wait until Nandini was finished with her university exams before breaking the truth that would disrupt her perception of being a fatherless child. Shivay knew it would be another emotional reunion.

“You know, after seeing Mom and Dad, we are determined to speed things up,” Rishab said. “Dad already misses his home, but he doesn’t want to jeopardize Mom’s safety.”

Shivay knew that as well.

“If alliances are the way to go, we should consider it even though Dad doesn’t want it for us,” said Nakul. “Although... hearing about you and your wife from Rishab, I’m thinking perhaps marriage alliance is not a bad thing. He also says the women of Singoor are stunning, especially your wife, whom you apparently can’t take your eyes off of even when her face is covered by a veil.”

There were chuckles.

“I’ve never seen big bro possessive about any woman like he is about his temporary wife,” Rishab teased.

Shivay knew his brother was partially right. He was possessive about his wife, but his brothers didn’t know his wife wasn’t a temporary one.

As though he had manifested her by his thoughts, he saw her walking in the garden throwing the bird food for the peacocks.

He heard her laughter as one of the peacocks fanned its feathers against her.

She wasn’t wearing the veil. He noticed she had stopped wearing it since their return from their hotel stay. His eyes took in the beautiful and seemingly innocent face of the woman who dominated his thoughts.

Nothing had changed about the way he thought of her. He didn’t trust her and had every reason to hurt and punish her, but all he did was claim her like a mad man.

After he had consummated their marriage in the same damn place where he had been drugged and attacked on their wedding night, he thought his hunger and need for her would be sated.

But it wasn’t.

Touching her and being inside her body made his hunger grow exponentially. He burned with the need to claim her constantly. Nothing

seemed to kill his desire, not even the fact she was dangerous, untrustworthy, and risking everything he was working for.

“I want you to follow a trail,” he told his brothers.

“What is it?” Nakul asked.

“A recording device. It was mailed to Devraj Gujjar from Europe. I want to know who sent it.”

“Devraj Gujjar?” Rishab asked. “You mean Ishani’s brother?”

“Yes.”

There was silence.

Shivay held the tiny black object in his hands. It was the one his wife had thrown away in a panic two days ago in their hotel room suite.

His security had seen Devraj inside the hotel lobby and had informed him. Although he didn’t know what was spoken, he had seen the footage near the changing rooms where the Gujjar siblings conspired against him.

Shivay knew his wife was terrified. She still went ahead, took the recording device from her brother, and even carried it during dinner at the restaurant.

He should have threatened her and made her confess her betrayal that night. Instead, he claimed her until she screamed his name and slept exhausted in his arms.

The next morning when they checked out of the suite, he had asked the security team to trace the device. They found it in the bathroom trash.

*What will her next plan be?*

She responded to his desire, but she was still helping her brother in ways that would risk the clan treaties and bring harm.

Which meant she desperately wanted to escape from their marriage and him.

But unfortunately, she wouldn’t succeed. She was bound to him

forever. Or until she succeeds in getting him killed.



## CHAPTER 27

Ishani was directing the kitchen staff on the meal plan.

“Everyone is talking about how the smaller clans from the east side have laid down their weapons at the Singoor temple this morning. They are saying Shivay Thakvar is responsible for the change. We are so proud of him, madam.”

Ishani looked at the excited faces of the staff. “Yes, I’m glad most of the Eastern clans have joined the peace treaty.”

“He is a godsend, madam! I can ask my brothers to return to the Singoor province once the peace is restored. I’m sure there will be a lot of jobs and prosperity like it used to be thirty years ago.”

Ishani was happy that people in Singoor had a newfound hope with the peace treaties. She knew there would be more contracts signed in the coming days with the rest of the clans as well. Shivay had told her the previous night that she would have to join him next week for another round of clan meetings.

Ishani recalled how stern and cold he had sounded then despite her being in his arms after a passionate bout of lovemaking.

*When is he going to soften towards me?*

“I’ll be in the accounting room if you need me,” she announced to the kitchen staff.

“Sure, madam.”

Letting out a small sigh, she stepped out of the kitchen to go towards the accounting room. As she passed by the huge courtyard in the middle of the mansion, sunlight fell over her. She smiled, enjoying the feeling of the brightness without her veil.

Ever since she had returned from the hotel stay in the city, she hadn't worn her veil. It was a decision she made for herself and in honor of her father-in-law who propagated participation of women in the workforce in Thakvar province.

The Thakvar household was surprised to see her without a veil, but none of the men stared and held their eyes down in respect when she passed by.

With a smile, she stepped into the accounting room to see if there were any pending reconciliations. Just as she turned on the computer, the phone next to her began ringing. She answered it thinking it would be for her father-in-law and she would need to let the person know he was away on a two-month trip.

"I would like to speak with Ishani... Thakvar," a man's voice said.

Ishani was taken aback. "Yes, I am Ishani. Who is this?"

"Ishani, this is Kedar."

Ishani was surprised. Kedar was Kailash Kayastha's son.

"Hello, Mr. Kedar. How are you? I hope guruji is doing well."

"Yes, my father is fine."

Ishani felt relieved. Kailash Kayastha was eighty years old, but he maintained a disciplined lifestyle. She hoped he would continue to be healthy and live much longer.

"Ishani, I'm calling regarding the Goddess Shakti's statue."

Ishani was stunned. Her heart began thumping with hope and excitement.

"Oh. Did guruji remember the details?"

"Yes. Baba described the statue in detail and I have made a sketch out of it."

Kedar Kayastha was a popular artist. She had seen his beautiful work

and the attention to details he had in his work was very commendable.

“That’s wonderful!” she said in happiness. “I will come to the city right away to get the sketch.”

She would have to inform Mr. Bahadur and Malathi to have transport ready.

“I can send the picture to a mobile phone or email too,” Kedar Kayastha said. “I often send early sketches to my clients before delivering the copies to them.”

Ishani didn’t have a mobile phone. No one in the household did because there were no provisions for mobile phones. Only Shivay Thakvar had a mobile phone that worked even without a mobile tower. She had seen her brother using a mobile phone as well.

Her heart thudded at the thought of asking Shivay for his phone.

“Can you email me the sketch?” She had only recently learned to create an email address for ordering books and subscribing to academic material on the internet.

“Yes, I can.”

Ishani hurriedly gave her email address.

“I’ll send it right away, Ishani.”

“Thank you, Mr. Kedar!”

Giving her regards to his father and family, she ended the phone call before going to the computer in the accounting room. She had to wait for a few minutes, but she was excited to see the email from Kedar Kayastha. She clicked on it right away.

Her heart jerked and thudded when a vividly depicted image of Goddess Shakti came into her view.

*My God.*

The statue looked absolutely divine and beautiful.

Feeling excited, she printed the image. But a moment later, she saw that the printer was not working. She frowned when she saw a red light flashing on the printer. She then quickly went to the library, where there was another computer with a printer.

A few frustrating minutes later, she noticed a similar light flashing on the printer.

*What is happening?*

She wasn't sure what the problem was as she only knew the basic use of the printer. Her heart sank that she wouldn't be able to get a printed copy of Goddess Shakti's image.

*The home office!*

She realized there was a printer in the home office upstairs. Even if Shivay was working there, she could ask him to print Goddess Chitt's image.

Feeling excited, she ran upstairs.

The corridor was empty and she entered the office suite, only to see that the door to the home office was shut. She knocked on the door, hoping Shivay wouldn't be busy. But disappointment sunk in when the door was not answered. She couldn't hear his deep voice or any sounds from inside.

With a small frown, she twisted the handle and tried to open the door. She was surprised when it opened. There was no one inside. The tall leather chair behind a large polished wood office desk was empty.

Her nose tingled with the faint smell of the familiar cologne that permeated the air. Shivay spent significant time in the office.

She noticed a sleek laptop on the desk. She could also see a printer that looked much smaller than the ones in the accounting room and the library room.

She slowly went towards the laptop. She had never used one before. Hoping it would be similar to the other computers, she pulled it closer and

opened it. It automatically turned on, but when she pressed a key, she saw a message to enter a password.

*Oh no.*

She didn't know what Shivay used as a password. Biting her lip, she stared at the screen uncertainly.

“Need help?” a deep voice asked from behind her.

She screamed and turned with her hand on her heart. Shivay was standing right behind her. There was a dark look on his face.

“I-I was... trying to...” She felt shaken seeing the anger in his eyes.

“You were trying to do what?” he asked curtly.

“I was trying to open your laptop, but it is asking for a password...” She trailed off when she saw his eyes darken even more.

It struck her then how bad the current situation looked. It was almost as if she had broken into his office and was trying to spy on him using his laptop.

*Oh God.*

“Goddess Shakti,” she blurted. “I had asked guruji during our visit about Goddess Shakti's statue and whether he remembered the details. He didn't right then, but he promised to have his son who is an artist draw it if he remembered. Mr. Kedar, who is guruji's son, called me a while ago and sent me the image he drew by hand. It's in my email but the printers in the accounting and library rooms are not working. I had to come here because I knew there would be a printer. I thought you wouldn't mind since I know you and your brothers are looking for Goddess Shakti's statue.”

As soon as she finished blurring out the long explanation hurriedly, the dark look on his face disappeared.

He reached behind her and clicked something on the laptop.

“Try now,” he said.

Biting her lip and feeling slightly shaken, she turned and saw that his laptop was no longer locked. With trembling hands, she opened a page and entered her email details. Soon after, she was able to access and open the email and Goddess Shakti's divine form showed up on the screen.

"I want to print this," she said, turning back to him in excitement.

He was looking at the image. Then reaching around her, he clicked on a key. Soon, there was a soft whirring sound as the printer began printing the image.

He had taken two copies and handed one to her. She held it and once again stared in awe.

"My God," she whispered.

It showed the golden form of the goddess covered with black diamonds on her body. She was wearing a white diamond and rubies necklace. And the goddess sat on a stool made of white diamonds and emeralds. Ishani knew that the three components of Goddess Shakti were commissioned by the prominent clans after forming alliances.

"How did you know I was looking for the goddess statue?"

Ishani's heart jerked at his question. She realized she had overheard it when he spoke with his brothers on the phone. A conversation she was listening to while spying on him outside his office.

"I-I... Rishab had mentioned about Goddess Shakti and asked me if I knew anything."

He watched her with an unreadable look. "Yes, but that still doesn't explain how you know that my brothers and I are looking for the statue."

"I-I knew you must be looking because the people of Singoor believe peace can be restored if Goddess Shakti is brought back to the temple."

He was silent, but she knew he didn't believe her.

His mouth slowly twisted. "So, you didn't find out when you were

standing outside my office listening to my phone conversations? The night you came to my office determined to be my wife?”

Her heart thudded even as her cheeks started to heat knowing she was caught in a lie. “I-I...”

He didn't look angry, and there was no darkness in his expression. But she jumped when his hand cupped her cheek. Her stomach fluttered when the rough pad of his thumb rubbed against her bottom lip.

“Innocence and danger...” his deep voice said as he watched her.

She didn't understand his words, but warmth spread in her stomach seeing his small smile.

## CHAPTER 28

“I’ll be away for a couple of hours, Malathi.”

Malathi smiled. “Don’t worry. I can take care of things.”

Ishani smiled at Rai Bahadur’s wife. “Thank you.”

Continuing to smile, Ishani went to the second floor towards the library where she planned to spend the rest of the morning. She wanted to check on some academic books.

She had been busy taking over the responsibilities of the Thakvar household and trust. Most of the work was done by Malathi and the accounting team, but they often checked with her when making certain decisions.

She didn’t mind as she enjoyed the activities, especially visiting the school and hospital run by the Thakvar trust.

Surprisingly, Shivay did not accompany her.

*Does he trust me now?*

She wasn’t sure about her unpredictable husband as he hadn’t said anything to stop her from taking over the responsibilities of the Thakvar trust. But she did notice that when he was home during day, he no longer subjected her to cold vibes.

Something had changed between them. And it began when she gave him the image of Goddess Shakti statue. Hopefully, he realized that she wasn’t going to sabotage the effort he was putting towards the peace talks between the clans. In fact, she began to actively participate in them.

She recalled the look on his face when she had spoken to the clan leaders during a meeting.



*“Remain close to me during the meeting,” he ordered as he led her inside the makeshift tent similar to the previous clan meeting.*

*Unlike the previous time, she wasn't wearing a veil. But instead of feeling exposed, it made her feel seen in a good way. When the talks began, she didn't remain a mute spectator. She gathered the courage to tell the clan heads what she had always wanted to say.*

*“I was born in the prominent clan of Gujjars,” she said. “And yet, due to the unrest in the Singoor region and many outdated practices, I did not receive any formal education. I enjoy history, mathematics and clan politics and wanted to be involved in Gujjar administration. But I had to cover my face and was told that those things were not meant for women. Had my clan listened to Mihir Thakvar and joined hands for peace and development, our region would have prospered too. Don't make the same mistake my family has made. Let your children thrive by opting for peace and development.”*

*Silence followed her words.*

*She felt nervous after her speech, thinking she might have offended many clan heads who were also conservative like the Gujjar clan. But Shivay Thakvar's muscled arm wrapped around her waist, offering her warmth and security.*

*“My wife has learned to read and write on her own despite the setbacks in life. She is now running the Thakvar trust school and hospital. We would like you to enroll your children, especially your daughters, in the Thakvar school without any hesitation.”*

*There were cheers.*

Ishani recalled the warmth and security she felt standing next to Shivay despite being among the fierce, warring clans.

Her husband continued to be an enigma. One moment she was

nervous around him because of what transpired between them so far during their stormy marriage, and the next moment she would feel safe and protected when he was next to her.

Letting out a sigh, she stepped into the library and turned on the computer. She began searching to see if there were books on Singoor region available on the internet. She wanted to learn about the history and geography of the region.

She couldn't find anything as they were only available as physical books in prominent libraries and limited book stores. The Thakvar mansion library did have some history books on the Singoor region and she had read most of them. They belonged to Shivay's aunt, Nandini.

She got up from the library computer and went to the shelf to see if there was something she might have missed reading. She wanted to see if there were any maps in particular.

She was browsing through the books when she suddenly felt her neck prickle.

Goosebumps broke out on her skin and when she turned, her eyes met with a broad chest wearing a blue buttoned shirt.

She looked up, and her breath caught in her throat seeing the look in his eyes.

"Shivay—" Before she could finish, he pinned her against the library shelf and placed his hands on both sides, trapping her.

Her heart raced and her stomach fluttered. Although he made her lose her mind with passion at nights, he had never pursued her during the day.

And unlike before, there was no coldness or distance in his eyes. There was only pure heat and desire along with something else she couldn't read.

He lowered his head, and his mouth caught hers in a passionate kiss.

She ran her fingers into his hair, gripping it to pull him closer. A rough growl emitted from him as the kiss grew fiercer.

Need burned inside her body as she felt his hard arousal against her stomach.

“Shivay,” she managed to whisper. “Someone might come.”

In response, his large hand cupped her breast and stroked. She moaned and arched as pleasure gripped her. His hands went behind her and tugged until the knots fell apart and her dress loosened. His mouth left hers, and the next moment she felt wet heat on her breast.

She cried out as he took the tip of her breast into his hot mouth and sucked, sending a bolt of pleasure directly into her womb. It had only been hours since he claimed her the previous night, but desire gripped her like a tidal wave.

“Please,” she whispered before sliding her hand and gripping his arousal.

There was another rough growl before he gripped her hips and easily lifted her off her feet and held her against the bookshelf. She cried out when his hands slipped under the long skirt of her dress and brushed against her intimate core. His thick finger slipped into the folds where her desire was evident with thick moisture.

“Wrap your legs around me,” he instructed, his voice deep and guttural.

She did as he ordered and wrapped her trembling legs around his hips. He adjusted himself and the next moment, his heated hardness entered her.

He swallowed her cry at the pleasurable burn due to his thick fullness.

His hands held her firmly as he pumped into her with a primal need that resonated inside her. The heavy wooden shelves behind her began to shudder. It felt as though he had lost all control of himself and all he wanted

was to be inside her.

A part of her realized that her anklets were making loud sounds. With each hard thrust, the small bells attached to her anklets clanged in a certain rhythm followed by small gasps escaping her throat. If cleaning staff or maids were passing by the library, they would know what was going on inside. But she couldn't say or do anything right then. He kept her pinned against the bookshelf while he drove into her.

A peak built up dangerously fast, and when it came, it was intense. She gasped and bit on his shoulder while she shattered into pieces. She felt him jerk and shudder before letting out a loud, deep masculine groan while he emptied inside her.

Her body shuddered with another climax.

She didn't know how long she was held against the bookshelf, but she felt him drawing away from, and slowly letting her feet touch the floor.

"You okay?" he asked.

Her cheeks heated, and she slowly nodded.

She wasn't prepared for the sudden burst of passion in the middle of the day. Her cheeks heated further when she felt his seed sliding down her thigh. She saw him reach for the paper tissues box on the library table. She thought he would hand them to her, but he pushed up her long skirt and began to clean her.

"I-I can do it," she said.

He looked at her. "I made the mess. So, I need to clean it up."

Her face burned at his words.

His mouth twisted in amusement. "Get ready," he said. "We need to get going."

She was confused. "Go where?"

He hadn't told her anything about going anywhere.

“You’ll see,” he said.

Her cheeks burned again when he helped her with the ties at the back of her dress and also helped her adjusting her long hair. Once she felt somewhat decent, she followed him. He unlocked the door before opening it and leading her out. At a distance, she saw a couple of maids watching them and giggling.

Her face once again burned realizing she hadn't given it more than a momentary thought about being caught in the library with her husband.

The man was not only unpredictable, he was making her lose all of her inhibitions.

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When the SUV stopped outside the town at the beginning of the desert, she saw something familiar.

*A helicopter!*

She had seen it once when he picked her up from the desert when she had gone to purchase books from Chotu. Before she could ask, Shivay placed a hand on the small of her back.

“Let’s go,” he said, leading her inside the helicopter.

As she sat, a thrill passed through her. The last time she had been too nervous about her husband’s anger when he had dragged her back home from the desert in a helicopter. But now, she could experience air travel without any fear.

Shivay placed a headset on her ears and that canceled out the noise of the engines. And soon, the helicopter took off.

Her eyes widened at seeing the view of the desert from above. It was stunning.

“I don’t think I have ever seen a more beautiful sight,” she whispered in awe.

She felt proud that she belonged to such a beautiful, awe-inspiring land.

Smiling, she looked at Shivay to see if he was also admiring the view, but when she turned, he was watching her. Her cheeks heated when she recognized the familiar heated gaze in his eyes.

Barely an hour had passed since their tryst in the library, yet she felt the familiar response tingling in her body.

*He’s turning me into a shameless wanton.*

Barely a night or a day passed when she didn’t feel the burning desire

for her husband.

*Does he feel the same way about me?*

She didn't know, and she didn't want to ask.

"Where are we going?" she asked instead.

There was a flash of amusement in his dark eyes. "You'll see," he said.

With her cheeks heating, she looked out of the window again. The helicopter flew over the desert before entering the city. Amidst the open patch of ground, it began descending.

As soon as they landed, he led her out. The surroundings looked vaguely familiar, but she knew she had never been to the place before.

"Where are we?" she asked, looking at him.

His eyes were hidden behind his dark sunglasses. "At a library."

She was confused and then she looked around until her eyes fell on the sign that displayed the name of the library she had only dreamed of visiting.

"My God... it's the underground library!"

It was supposed to be one of the largest and most exclusive libraries in the country with only limited access. Noted historians from all over the country visited it.

*I can't believe this!*

She was in a happy daze when he led her inside.

"There's also an option to purchase the books. So, pick whatever you want and how many ever books you want."

She nodded in a daze.

How did he know this was her dream library? Was it a coincidence?

For the next few hours, she remained in a blissfully happy daze. She had purchased close to a hundred books. She expected Shivay to be

impatient, but he didn't say anything. He simply pulled out a shiny card and handed it to the person standing behind the desk, and then asked the books to be loaded into the helicopter.

When they entered the helicopter, she couldn't stop herself from asking.

"How did you know?" she asked.

His mouth twisted. "You are not the only one who can spy, my dear wife."

Her cheeks heated. She had been looking up information about him on the internet. Although there weren't many pictures or private information, she read about him and his company. The latest acquisition was of copper mining companies. She had heard about it from her brother when he said that Shivay wanted to own oil wells next. But when she read that Shivay's company was engaging several leading environmental teams of scientists to make it ecofriendly and minimize water pollution, she was fascinated and impressed.

How did he know she was looking up information on him?

She tried to see if he was angry about the fact, but he didn't seem upset or angry. He was watching her with a small smile.

She realized that taking her to her dream library was one of the sweetest gestures anyone had done for her. Only her late father used to surprise her with such sweet, considerate gestures. She felt a rush of warmth at the fact.

Even though there were other people around, including security, she leaned towards Shivay and kissed him on the cheek.

"Thank you," she said softly.

Her voice was drowned in the sound of the helicopter, but his eyes flashed as he looked at her.



She placed her hand in his large one and looked out of the helicopter window, feeling giddily happy.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew she had fallen in love with her devil husband.

## CHAPTER 29

“Are you sure you don’t need help?”

Ishani smiled. “I can set up the rest of the books too.”

Malathi smiled, seeing the excitement in Ishani’s eyes. Over the past few days, Ishani spent a lot of time in the library setting up the books she had purchased from the underground library.

“All right,” said Malathi. “Do call the staff if you need help.”

“I will, Malathi. Thank you!” She leaned and kissed Malathi on the cheek

Malathi smiled, squeezing Ishani’s hand before leaving the library. Malathi and the rest of the staff must wonder why there was a constant smile on Ishani’s face.

Ishani couldn’t help the smile as she was floating in happiness. Wiping the sweat dripping off her forehead, she decided to take a short break to make her regular morning phone call.

The phone rang, and it was answered by her mother’s nurse.

“Hi Kamala. Is Ma awake?”

“Yes, madam. She is in the garden. I’ll call her right away.”

Ishani’s smile widened as her happiness grew. In recent weeks, her mother was not only getting much better in health, she was also doing things that used to terrify her before.

After a ten-minute wait, her mother came on the phone.

“Ishani?”

“I’m so happy, Ma that you are spending time in the garden.”

Her mother laughed. “Yes, me too. I was having the marigold flower bed worked on. After you left, no one took care of them properly.”

Ishani smiled. The marigold flowers were her mother's favorite. Ishani always ensured several flower beds were around the garden, especially where her mother's bedroom window overlooked the flowers. For years, her mother didn't open the bedroom curtains to look at the view outside, but now, she was not only looking, she was actively enjoying working in it.

"Your father's first gift to me was the marigold flowers. During our marriage, he would put a marigold in my hair each morning."

Ishani knew it already, but she loved hearing it again and again.

"Papa loved you, Ma."

"Yes, my child. He loved me and you too." There was no sadness in her mother's voice.

Ishani was glad.

"By the way," her mother said. "I've instructed the kitchen staff to keep things ready. I will be making a big batch of sweets. Your favorite, Mawa Kachori and also Ghewar sweet, since your husband enjoyed them during your visit."

"Oh, don't strain yourself, Ma."

"It's not a strain at all. I should have sent the sweets earlier. But it's not too late."

Ishani smiled, knowing her mother would enjoy making them. During childhood, Ishani often joined her mother in making big batches of sweets to distribute to clan members.

"When will you come to visit me, Ma?" Ishani had been asking her mother to visit her for a while. But she hadn't pushed much before, knowing the journey might tire her mother. Now that her mother was feeling better, Ishani longed to see and hug her.

"A mother shouldn't visit her daughter. It is the daughter who has to visit her childhood home with her husband."

Ishani laughed. “Yes, I know that’s the Gujjar and Singoor tradition, Ma. And Papa took you to visit your parents each year. But we don’t have to wait a year to see each other. The Thakvar family will always welcome you here, Ma.”

Ishani knew her father-in-law would welcome her mother. And even Shivay would not mind.

“I know that, my child. I’m so happy you married into such a family. Mihir Thakvar was a good friend of your father’s. Ishwar always had good things to say about him.”

Ishani smiled. “Yes, he is wonderful, Ma.”

She didn’t mention that her father-in-law was away on a trip visiting his wife and children in San Francisco. Shivay didn’t want her to let anyone know.

“How is your husband?” Ishani’s mother asked. “How come you never talk about him?”

She didn’t talk about Shivay Thakvar to her mother because she didn’t know what to tell her about him.

It was hard to describe Shivay Thakvar or their stormy, passionate marriage. Ishani couldn’t tell her mother how she used to fear him but broke apart in his arms each night. She couldn’t tell her that he was commanding as a leader and as a person, and that she reveled in that dominant nature when he made love to her. She couldn’t tell her that he seemed cold and reserved most of the time, but some of his considerate gestures melted her heart.

“He is a good leader to the Thakvars, Ma. And he’s busy with the clans.”

There was a laugh. “I hope he’s not too busy because I want to become a grandmother soon. And I want a lot of grandchildren.”

Ishani’s cheeks heated. “Ma!”

Ishani's mother laughed again. "Well, based on how strong and virile he looks and how he couldn't take his eyes off you during your visit, I'm hoping I will become a grandmother before the year is over."

*Oh God.*

Ishani's face burned even as she laughed. "Ma, stop it! You are embarrassing me!"

There was a chuckle. Ishani was embarrassed, but she smiled.

"I'm going to the Gujjar temple tomorrow morning," her mother said. "I'm praying for grandchildren and also... that the curse doesn't touch this or future generations of heirs."

Ishani's heart jerked. She knew her mother was talking about the curse that was said to be put on the heirs of the prominent clans for not protecting the statue of Goddess Shakti from being stolen.

Ishani's mother believed that Ishwar Gujjar was bitten by a snake because of that curse.

Ishani didn't believe in curses, but she knew how deeply ingrained the myths were in the minds of people living in Singoor. And all the heirs of the prominent clans dying within years of the statue being stolen didn't stop the myth from being believed as the truth.

"All right, take care, my child. I need to get started on the sweets."

"Okay, Ma. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Ishani ended the phone call with a smile and then got up to resume stacking the books she had purchased.

The feeling of happiness remained in her heart after witnessing her mother's health improving significantly. Ishani was determined to have her mother visit the Thakvar mansion. She knew her mother wouldn't come on her own, so Ishani would go and bring her.

She hoped she could go the coming week. She would have to inform

Shivay and let him know.

She had to tell him because she knew he was careful about her security. She had to take security even during the short visits to the Thakvar school and hospital. And going to Gujjar province was a much longer journey, and she would have to pass through the desert which was still deemed unsafe without the necessary precautions.

*Will he come with me?*

She knew he would, for her safety as well as for another reason. Her cheeks heated recalling how they had become accustomed to sleeping in each other's arms each night. No matter how late it was, he always came home to their bed.

Her cheeks heated even more recalling her mother's words.

*"I want to become a grandmother soon."*

Based on the frequency of Shivay's heated lovemaking, her mother's wishes could easily come true if she wasn't taking the necessary precautions.

She had been taking the contraceptive pills since their wedding night. At first, she had taken it because she was horrified about being impregnated by a ruthless fraud claiming to be the Thakvar heir. But later, when she found out the truth, she continued taking the pills as she didn't want to fall pregnant without giving her husband a choice or discussing it with him. He knew she took them because she kept the pills in the bathroom in the medicine cabinet. He had also seen her take them each morning.

*Will he be happy if I fall pregnant sometime in the future?*

She wasn't sure of his feelings. But strangely, the thought of falling pregnant with Shivay Thakvar's child didn't terrify her. Somewhere deep inside her heart, she craved it.

## CHAPTER 30

Shivay was in the home office talking on a call with his brothers.

“It is quite odd that all the heirs died around the same time,” said Nakul.

“Well, it wasn’t exactly at the same time. There were a few years in between. But yes, it is very odd.”

Shivay looked at the investigative reports that documented the details of each death.

“Unless it was planned that way to pass it off as a curse.”

There was silence at his statement.

“But who could possibly plan it?” Nakul asked. “None of the prominent clans seem to be prospering more than the Thakvars. And Dad was here in San Francisco when his brother and sister died in a car accident.”

“Yes, but Dad already had the premonition of something being terribly wrong,” Rishab added. “That’s why he faked his death to keep us safe and return to Singoor province.”

Shivay knew his father wanted to keep his family safe from clan violence. But there was also another reason his father had kept his family away.

“Dad didn’t want us to be embroiled in clan politics,” he said. “He knew if he brought us to Singoor, the people would immediately want the Thakvar heirs to be used for alliances so they could break the curse by commissioning another goddess statue.”

There was silence.

“Bro, as much as Dad’s and your sacrifice is heartfully appreciated, you must allow us to form alliances with the other clans,” Nakul stated.

“Yes. I don't see any other way. And besides, we found out about the heiresses from the Bhil and Kanwar clans. They are both meek and pliable and won't say no to the alliances. We'll ensure the women lead comfortable lives once the idol is commissioned and peace is restored.”

Shivay knew his brothers were right. Although the clan meetings were going well, there was apprehension among the clans about the curse. They now had the image of the goddess statue, which meant the statue could be commissioned after forming the three alliances, allaying the fears among the people.

“Let's give it some time,” Shivay said. “We might find the missing statue.”

The investigation was ongoing at a rapid pace by several teams in and around the Singoor area as well as across the world. The teams now had a proper image to track.

“All right. I'll talk to you both later. Call me if you need anything.”

“Goodnight, bro.”

Ending the call, Shivay got up from his office chair.

As he headed downstairs, his mind went over the call. His brothers were right. They were running out of time to make a decision about the alliances.

If the original statue wasn't found soon, his brothers would have to marry the heiresses from the other prominent clans to form similar alliances such as his. The three of them could then commission the goddess statue to place it in the temple where the original one had been. It would be a simpler path to restore peace and alleviate the concerns of the curse among the clans.

Shivay's brothers could form alliances with women who would be their temporary wives.

*But your alliance turned out to be something different.*



Shivay knew his feelings towards his alliance and wife were not that simple.

His heart already thumped in anticipation of touching and claiming his wife that night. He craved to hear her gasping out his name when he was deep inside her.

He thought of it as a dark obsession, a madness, but he knew it was something more. Because he also craved to see her smile and laugh out of joy.

Reaching downstairs, he pushed open the door to the bedroom suite and entered the room. It was way past midnight and later than usual. He could see that she had fallen asleep. He went to the bed and in the soft lighting, he saw her beautiful face. Unable to help himself, he brushed the back of his fingers against her soft cheek.

He always wanted to touch her and hold her. Whenever they were apart, he felt a part of him remained with her, craving and obsessing to get back to her.

*“Being without her feels like a certain death.”*

His father had said those words about his mother. And now, he felt the same about his wife.

He saw her eyes open, and slowly, her lips widened in a smile.

“Shivay...” she murmured softly.

Hearing his name on her lips, his body immediately became painfully aroused.

He knew she had a tiring day setting up the library and taking care of the accounts. And her next day was going to be busier as she had an appointment at the Thakvar school to discuss the expansion. She needed proper sleep and rest and not be disturbed by her husband’s demanding needs.

“Go back to sleep, Ishani,” he said softly.

Withdrawing his hand from her cheek, he decided to take a cold shower before catching some sleep. But before he could step away, her soft hand held his wrist.

“Don’t go,” she said softly in a sleep-husky voice.

He watched as she pushed the light blanket aside and sat up. Her long hair was left loose and fell in beautiful disarray around her shoulders. Her hand left his, and she got onto her knees as she watched him.

“I need you, Shivay...” she whispered.

*Fuck.* He could have ignored his desire to allow her to get proper rest, but hearing her say she wanted him too, it was impossible to ignore his rampant desire.

His hand went behind her neck before he lowered his head towards her. She tipped her face up to receive his kiss.

Her soft lips parted when his tongue entered her mouth and tasted her sweetness. A soft moan escaped from her, and he felt her hands clutching his shirt, pulling him closer.

His body roared with desire. He wanted to push up the long skirts of her dress and sink into her soft heat right then. But he held back. He had always taken her like a starving animal whose sustenance depended on her. However, right then, he wanted to show her that he could be gentle.

Raising his head, he began undressing her. Her small hands began to unbutton his shirt at the same time. Their eyes remained connected, and he could see the rise and fall of her chest while she blushed. Moments later, her temptingly beautiful body came into his view. The rosy tips of her breasts were hardened with arousal. Shrugging out his shirt and pushing down his pants, he lay her on the bed before taking a rosy bud into his mouth.

She gasped and held his head with both hands while he sucked the tip

and cupped the heaviness of the other breast.

“Shivay,” she moaned, arching under him.

Her moans increased as he sucked on the other engorged tip before kissing her throat and then moving lower. Her stomach quivered under his lips. He held her slim thighs in each hand, and then he parted and raised them until her hidden treasure was exposed to him. Knowing the small nub hidden inside would give her pleasure, he put his mouth on her and lapped at her arousal.

“Shivay!” she cried out clutching his shoulders. Her nails dug into his shoulders, but he didn’t care as he sucked on her warm essence. Soon, he felt the quivering in her thighs and tightening of her stomach before she climaxed. He continued to lap at her feeling reluctant to stop tasting her. But his body screamed with need.

Slowly, he moved up her body. Making sure he didn’t crush her, he balanced himself on his elbows while his hard arousal brushed against her stomach. He looked into her soft, glazed eyes as she tried to catch her breath.

Before he thought of giving her time, her small hand reached for his arousal and placed it at her entrance. His body automatically thrust into her wet heat. A soft gasp escaped her. He knew that despite preparing her body to soften, he was big for her small size and needed extra care to enter.

“Don’t stop, Shivay,” she said.

It was all he needed to hear. Gripping her hips and capturing her mouth, he pushed into her until he was deep inside. The tightness in his chest eased when he felt at home.

Her nails dug into his back and her legs wrapped around his hips making him go even deeper. Instinct took over and he began moving. He thrust and claimed his wife until his entire body heaved and shook before a primal cry escaped his throat, and he emptied his seed inside her.

Even before he could catch his breath or pull out of her, knowing he was crushing her small body with his weight, he twisted them until she lay on him.

It took a while before they could catch their breaths. And when her breathing slowed, she let out a soft sigh and hugged him. He could hear her breathing slowly deepen as she slipped into a deep sleep.

He continued to hold her as his body and mind along with his beating heart savored the feeling.

The twisted alliance was definitely more than he had bargained for.

## CHAPTER 31

“We might have to prepare for at least an influx of two hundred students, madam.”

Ishani was in the Thakvar school office, reviewing the extension plan for the school building to accommodate the new students coming from the clans who had signed the peace treaties.

“Please go ahead with the proposal,” she said. “I would also like the committee to come up with a proposal for a new school building on the Eastern side of the Thakvar province. It will make it easier for students coming from the Eastern clans to commute.”

The committee members nodded.

She knew it was relatively new for them to take orders from someone other than Mihir Thakvar. But they didn’t mind or oppose her since her father-in-law had called the trust board and let everyone know his daughter-in-law would be making decisions until he resumed his duties.

Ishani enjoyed being a part of the Singoor development that included children’s education. It gave her a sense of purpose.

“Thank you, everyone.”

She got up and left the meeting to head back home.

As she sat in the SUV, she suppressed a small yawn. Her cheeks heated as she recalled why she was tired. She had waited up for Shivay the previous night and fell asleep a little after midnight. She woke up to his touch. He had wanted her to sleep, but she had begged him to take her.

He had listened and made love to her. Her body still reveled in the memories of his kisses and touch. It felt different from previous times. Although it was intense and exciting as always, it also felt sweeter. She felt

cherished and safe when she slept in his arms.

A dreamy sigh escaped her, wondering if she could ever stop herself from falling deeply for her husband.

“Madam, we are home.”

She was jerked out of her thoughts when she reached the Thakvar mansion. Her cheeks heated slightly as she had to be reminded due to her daydreaming.

“Thank you, Gagan,” she told the driver before stepping out of the SUV and going up the mansion steps.

She was halfway up when her legs faltered seeing Shivay’s tall form at the mansion’s entrance talking to Mr. Bahadur and the security head.

She knew he must be leaving to meet with a clan as he was in his traditional clothes rather than the suits or buttoned shirts that he wore to the city for his business meetings. Sensing her presence, his gaze fell on her.

Her heart jerked and thumped at meeting his gaze. She had missed having breakfast with him as she had to leave early for the school committee meeting.

They rarely had lunch together because he was mostly away from home to attend clan meetings or busy with other work in the city. She didn’t mind because she knew his work was important.

Her cheeks heated as he held her gaze while she slowly walked up the steps, recalling the passionate moments from the night.

She had almost reached the top when her anklet came loose and rolled down a few steps.

Before she could reach for her anklet, she sensed his presence next to her. She saw him going down a few steps and picking up the anklet. She thought he would hand it over, but she was stunned when he bent and fastened it around her ankle. She shivered as his fingers brushed against her

feet.

Her cheeks heated when their eyes met.

“I’ll see you in the evening,” he said. “I’ll come home for dinner.”

Pleasure rushed inside her chest as she nodded.

He turned and went down the steps where security was waiting for him with the vehicles.

He was just about to get in when she called his name.

“Shivay, wait!”

He paused and looked up.

She hurried down the steps. She was nearly breathless, but she quickly removed the small thread from around her neck. And then she reached for his hand and held it up.

He didn’t resist when she tied the thread with a rudraksh bead on it.

“This will protect you when you meet with the clans,” she said.

He looked at her for a moment, and something flashed in his eyes.

“Thank you,” he said before getting into the vehicle.

With a smile, she slowly went back up the steps and into the mansion.

A group of women stood watching her with dreamy sighs and smiles. Ishani didn’t understand.

“You are so lucky, madam,” one of them said. “Mr. Thakvar doesn’t mind touching your feet in public. It’s very rare for a husband to bow in front of his wife, let alone touch her feet to fasten an anklet. Mr. Thakvar loves you a lot. And you love him too since you gave him the protective rudraksh.”

Ishani’s cheek heated, knowing some of the household members had witnessed the scene. It was a sweet gesture for Shivay to fasten her anklet, especially for a man who is known to be reserved and commanding.

*I can’t believe I’m thinking this. My devil husband can be sweet.*

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Ishani was lost in happiness and peace while playing the bin instrument. She had just finished playing when one of the maids approached her.

“Madam, Gujjar clan members are here to see you.”

Ishani was surprised and happy. Her mother must have sent the sweets she had made the previous day. Looking forward to them, Ishani smiled.

“I’ll be right there. Please bring some refreshments to the receiving room.”

The maid nodded and left. Ishani touched her forehead to the bin instrument before keeping it aside and hurrying into the mansion. She covered her hair, but not her face, owing to the tradition of the Gujjar clan.

She went to the receiving room and was surprised when she saw her brother along with some Gujjar clan members. She smiled and greeted them.

The clan members were surprised to see her without the veil covering her face. But her brother was the only one who expressed anger.

“Ishani, why are you not wearing the veil properly according to our tradition?” he demanded.

“I am wearing it according to the Thakvar tradition,” she replied softly with a smile.

Her brother’s jaw clenched, but he did not say anything further. Her eyes fell on the beautifully decorated, colorful woven baskets. Although they were covered, she knew what was inside them. It was the sweets her mother had made and sent to her.

Ishani was happy and excited.

The refreshments arrived, and Ishani served them to her brother and



clan members. “These are the Thakvar specialties,” she said with a smile. “The drink is very refreshing. Please let me know if you need a refill.”

The clan members nodded. Ishani noticed that her brother didn’t touch the drink or the snacks.

“I need to speak with you on an important matter privately,” he said. Ishani nodded.

“We can speak in the garden,” she offered.

As she led her brother outside, a part of her dreaded the conversation because she knew her brother was going to demand an explanation for not using the recording device on her husband. Her brother hated Shivay because he still didn’t believe Shivay to be the true Thakvar heir. Her brother still thought of Shivay as a ruthless businessman who wanted to gain control of the oil wells and steal it from the rightful heirs.

“Mother is not feeling well.”

Ishani was shocked by her brother’s words.

“What happened to her?” she asked in panic.

“Nothing. I meant in general. She is not getting better. She is barely out of her room and mumbles incoherently. She doesn’t even recognize me properly now. I think she won’t recognize you either. She needs treatment urgently.”

Ishani fell quiet. She knew her brother was lying. She had spoken to her mother the previous day and her mother sounded quite well.

“Here are the tickets to Australia that I booked for you and mother,” Ishani’s brother said, pulling out some papers. “I have also made arrangements for you both to stay comfortable during the course of the treatment.”

Ishani’s heart thudded because she knew her brother was going to ask for something in return.

“I feel it’s better if you leave as soon as possible,” her brother continued. “I’ll have arrangements made for mother to leave in three days. But before that I need something urgently... Shivay Thakvar’s mobile phone. The one he uses to talk to people in America.”

Ishani finally spoke out. “Why?” she asked. “Why do you need my husband’s phone?”

Her brother’s eyes flashed when he heard her refer to Shivay as her husband.

“Husband? Did you forget how you begged me not to get you married for an alliance? Did you forget that Shivay Thakvar is a fraud who is fooling people to steal the Singoor riches?”

Ishani’s heart sank as she heard her brother repeat the things he had said before.

“I have seen Shivay talking to the clans,” she said in an appeal. “I have seen him with his father. He is the real heir.”

“Stop!” her brother thundered. “Do as I say, Ishani. Or I’ll have other ways to get it done. I need the phone to prove he is not the true heir.”

Ishani’s heart thudded in panic. What did he mean by other ways? Is he going to have Shivay attacked?

“I want you to bring the mobile phone to me tomorrow before sunset. I will be waiting near the Eastern point of the Singoor temple.”

Ishani remained silent, processing her brother’s words. Her brother refused to accept Shivay as the heir. He wanted proof beyond her words or what Shivay had provided to the other clans as proof.

If her brother was looking for the possession of Shivay’s phone purely to prove Shivay as a fraud, then he would not succeed. There would be nothing on the phone to prove Shivay as a ruthless businessman who wanted to acquire the oil wells.

Maybe then her brother would calm down and accept Shivay as the heir who wants to bring peace to the land. And her brother would also stop scheming to sabotage Shivay's effort in uniting the clans.

Possessing the phone would stop any impending attack on Shivay.

Ishani sucked in a deep breath. "All right," she said. "I will get you Shivay's phone."

Her brother's eyes flashed in satisfaction. "Good. Come before sunset. I'll have a vehicle waiting for you outside the Thakvar mansion. Don't tell anyone or bring security with you. This should remain a secret."

She nodded, even as she trembled inside.

*How am I going to get Shivay's phone without telling him anything? Will he trust me again after this? What if he thinks of this as another betrayal?*

\*\*\*

Later that evening, Ishani's hands trembled as she mixed rose water in the drink she planned to serve as a part of their intimate dinner. Although a voice inside her screamed not to, she still continued with the plan. It was the only way to alleviate her brother's suspicions about Shivay.

Her brother was stubborn, and no matter who told him Shivay was the real heir, he wouldn't believe it until he saw the proof for himself. Even if she were to ask Shivay to address her brother's concerns, it would be a futile effort and only further rupture the family dynamics from the alliance.

*This is the only way.*

With a small, shuddering breath, she finished checking on the arrangements for an intimate dinner. That evening they would not be eating at the family dining table but in the privacy of their suite. The staff had already placed the silver dishes and plates on the polished granite table along with a beautiful arrangement of flowers and decorative oil lamps.

Under normal circumstances, she would have enjoyed the beautiful setting for an intimate dinner, but right then, she was too nervous.

She went into her dressing room to brush her hair once again. She would normally have her hair loosely braided, but she let it fall loose that night.

She was still brushing her hair when she heard the sound of the door opening.

Her heart began to thud loudly. Dropping the comb, she quickly got up to greet Shivay.

Her heart raced when their eyes met. She was wearing a dress that she had purchased from the city—a pale peach gown that was meant to be worn at night, and only in front of her husband. The gown clung to every curve of

her body, leaving nothing to the imagination.

Without breaking their gaze, he walked up to where she stood frozen and pulled her to him, his lips finding hers. A soft moan escaped her throat in response to his demand, but she quickly pulled back before they got carried away.

“D-dinner is ready. A-and we have a lot of special dishes.”

He watched her for a moment, and then his mouth twisted. “All right. I’ll be right back.” With those words, he stepped away from her and entered the bathroom.

She knew he was going to shower like he always did when he returned each night.

While she waited, her eyes searched and fell on the phone he placed next to the bed on a nightstand along with a small pouch. She slowly walked towards the nightstand and kept staring at the phone. She didn’t dare to touch it right then.

“It’s for you.”

Ishani jumped violently, hearing Shivay’s voice.

Her heart thudded and she turned to see him standing near the closet area in a T-shirt and shorts. He was watching her while drying his hair.

“W-what is for me?” she asked, her heart thudding sickly.

He put the towel in his hand to the side and came towards her. Then stopping near the nightstand, he reached for the small pouch.

He took out a pair of thick, traditionally made bangles. “For you.”

She recognized the handmade bangles from the Reewar clan since the craftsmanship was unique to the region. It was a small clan that had shut out every other clan for decades.

“You went into the Reewar region today?” she whispered.

“Yes.”

She knew how hard it was to penetrate that clan that shunned the outside world. But Shivay had not only gone there to negotiate unity and peace but he also bought a beautiful souvenir for her.

Her heart twisted at the fact, and she was determined to do anything to keep him safe.

“Thank you,” she said. “These are beautiful.”

She slipped them on her hands, wanting to wear them that night, regardless of whether they suited her nightwear or not.

Soon, she led him towards the small table where they sat opposite each other.

His eyes took in the beautifully set up intimate dinner, especially the sweets. “Looks good,” he said with a small smile.

“My mother sent the sweets this morning,” she said. “She made them for you because you enjoyed them during the visit.”

She knew she was speaking too fast but she couldn't slow down due to her nervousness.

He didn't seem to notice.

“Your mother is an excellent cook,” he said. “When she meets my mother, I'm sure they'll have many common things to talk about. My mother enjoys cooking too.”

She stared at him, shocked by his words. He was not only telling her about his mother, but he spoke as though there would be a time when both their mothers would meet and have enjoyable conversations.

Her heart ached imagining such a sweet, beautiful thing happening.

“Aren't you going to eat?” he asked.

She jumped slightly and noticed he had served food in both their plates.

“I-I... yes. Sorry, I was distracted.”

There was another small smile on his face.

Her heart thudded even as her cheeks heated, knowing what he was thinking. He thought she was distracted by him and what they would do after dinner.

He was right.

She watched him eat and take sips of the rose-flavored drink she had mixed earlier. Although her stomach was too nervous to enjoy the food, she still managed to finish her meal.

He finished his meal as well and took a generous serving of her mother's sweets. There was a smile on his face. "Amazing. Just like the last time." He watched her. "Aren't you having any?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I had plenty this afternoon."

While he continued to enjoy the sweets, she got up from her chair. Slowly, she went towards him.

He watched her, his eyes turning dark and hooded as she leaned into him. Her lips brushed against his while she slid her hands under his T-shirt.

Before he could kiss her back, she moved her mouth away and trailed her lips along his jawline while her one hand continued to explore his muscled chest. Although his breathing was still normal, she could feel the heavy thumping of his heart. She knew if she put her hand on his lap, she would find his hard arousal.

Her heart raced as she slowly straightened.

Watching him, she untied the sash that held her gown, letting it drop to the floor, leaving her exposed in just a thin bra and panties that matched the gown.

She saw the desire pool in his dark eyes and yet he was only observing her movements with his hooded eyes. Her breathing turned faster as she lowered her body onto his lap, her breasts crushing against his chest.

His heated gaze turned scorching hot when her fingers slid over his hardness and she held him over the soft material of his shorts. His fingers threaded into her hair behind her neck as he pulled her close and claimed her mouth.

She kissed him back, but before he could take control, she pulled back. His eyes remained dark and hooded as she tugged on his T-shirt. He allowed her to remove it. She then held his hand and pulled until he got up from the chair. He watched as she unbuttoned his shorts and pushed them down, baring his hard arousal.

Her heart beat like a drum watching his powerful, aroused body. The fact that he was aroused because of her and desired her made her feel equally powerful.

She kissed him again, but not on his lips. She couldn't reach his lips, so she kissed his muscled chest and slowly moved lower to his hard abdomen and then down to the part that gave her immense pleasure every night.

A harsh breath escaped his throat when she put her lips on his hardness. Feeling strangely excited and curious, she continued to kiss softly before tasting him with her tongue as he did with her many times.

A groan escaped him and his fingers threaded into her hair again while she kissed and tasted him. She took the smooth tip of his hard arousal into her mouth and sucked the way he did with the hardened buds of her breasts, driving her mad with pleasure.

Her body buzzed with arousal and pleasure when she felt his powerful thighs shake under her hands.

“Enough,” he growled before yanking her up. The heated look in his eyes made her body tremble in anticipation.

“I need you now,” he said before sweeping her up in his arms and carrying her to their bed.



A gasp escaped her when her back hit the mattress, and he brought his weight down on her.

Even as pleased cries escaped her throat while he claimed her, a part of her dreaded what the dawn would bring.

## CHAPTER 32

Ishani slowly opened her eyes.

Her heart was beating so rapidly inside her chest that she was worried Shivay would be able to feel it under his arm, which was wrapped around her even in his sleep.

Knowing that the light drug would keep him asleep for a while, she slowly moved away from him. She didn't have much time left to make the trip to the desert and hand Shivay's phone to her brother. She hoped to return home before Shivay woke up.

Slipping out of the bed, she went to the closet area and dressed in the clothes she had put aside the previous night. It was a dress she often used at the Gujjar mansion to sneak out undetected. She wore the same dress the last time when she had gone to the desert to meet Chotu for buying books.

Finishing tying the knots behind her with shaking hands, she returned to the bedroom. Her heart jerked at seeing the darkly handsome face sleeping.

She watched him for a few moments as guilt gripped her heart.

Knowing he would be in deep sleep, she slowly lowered her lips to his cheek. "I love you," she whispered.

For the longest time she had been fighting herself from acknowledging her feelings towards her husband. But she had lost the battle. She was in love with Shivay Thakvar.

She desired him, respected him and was in awe of him. She loved him and would do anything to keep him safe.

She knew she was risking his hatred by doing something behind his back. Her heart twisted painfully at the thought.

But she had no choice. It was the only way to keep him safe and kill

the doubt or suspicion in her brother's mind.

With her heart weighing a ton, she picked up the sleek phone on the nightstand next to him and placed it in the pocket stitched into her dress. Then taking a deep breath, she pulled down the veil until it covered her face. And then, she walked out of the suite.

She went down the stairs quietly so as to not be detected by anyone in the household. She knew most would be up by then to begin their daily routine.

She slipped out of the mansion using one of the side doors. She walked past the guards at the gate who didn't stop her, thinking she was one of the Thakvar staff.

She quickly walked down the long road before approaching the awaiting vehicle. She recognized her clansmen and got into the closed jeep. Everything about the moment felt wrong, but she stayed silent. She reminded herself of why she had to do it. She had to kill the doubts from her brother's mind regarding Shivay.

The ride remained silent as they entered the desert. Right before they entered the holy lands of Singoor, she could see a group of people waiting at a distance next to some vehicles. For a moment, she panicked thinking it was some rogue clans who attacked and killed people to prevent them from entering the holy land.

But a moment later, she realized it was her brother. He must have picked the border for relatively easy access to the road as well as to have safety in case of an attack. No clan would take a life on the holy land, but her brother still chose to bring a group of men for protection.

Why couldn't her brother understand Shivay's motive for that very reason?

Shivay was trying to put an end to the senseless violence that claimed

many lives. If Shivay succeeded, every part of Singoor would remain safe and prosper as it deserved.

She hoped her brother would discover the truth soon.

The jeep stopped next to the other vehicles. The door on her side was yanked open.

“What took you so long?” her brother demanded.

Not saying anything, she stepped out of the vehicle.

“Did you bring it?” her brother demanded. “Did you bring Shivay Thakvar’s phone?”

“Yes,” she replied.

Her brother’s face flashed victoriously before he held out his hand. “Give it to me,” he said.

Feeling sick in the heart, she reached into the hidden pocket of her dress and took out the phone. “Promise me that once you find the proof you need, you’ll put a stop to this,” she said. “

Shivay is the true heir and a good man. He’s helping us all and wants to bring peace and prosperity to the Singoor lands...”

Her brother snatched the phone from her hand and looked at her in rage. “I don’t care!” he snapped. “The bastard is trying to ruin me! He is hunting me down and ensuring I get no access to the oil wells that rightfully belong to me!”

Ishani shook her head. “That is not true. Why would he ruin you? He doesn’t even know that the attack on the wedding night was planned by you. He thinks I planned it to avoid being married to a stranger.”

“The bastard knows everything! He is too bloody smart for his own good. The only way to control him is by using his mother and sister as hostages. And to kill his brothers.”

Shock gripped her at her brother’s words. “W-what? You know about

his family?”

The look on her brother’s face made her tremble, “Yes, I know about his family. I’m going to use his phone to locate them and eliminate them all.”

Ishani was sick to her stomach. To her horror, she remained frozen as she watched her brother handing the phone to one of his men.

“Sir, there is a passcode. We cannot open it. We’ll need a special program to access it and it will take time.”

Ishani watched as her brother frowned.

“I-I know the passcode,” she said immediately.

Her breath caught in her throat as her brother’s frown grew. But he took the phone back from his man and handed it to her.

“Open it,” he ordered.

She took the phone in her trembling hands. She stared at the screen for a moment, and then, in a quick moment, she bent and picked up sand and threw it on the faces of her brother and the man next to him. There were yells as sand fell into their eyes.

She began to run.

“Ishani!” her brother shouted. “Stop!”

But Ishani didn’t stop. She ran as fast as she could with the phone. She ran towards the holy land where she would get protection. The Singoor temple was far away, and she knew it would be hard to go that far in her bare foot.

Her heart nearly stopped when she heard the sound of the engines behind her. Her brother was chasing her in his vehicles.

With a sob, she kept running. But she couldn’t outrun the vehicles and was soon surrounded by them. She slipped the phone back into the pocket of her dress and waited as dread increased inside her.

*He is my brother. He won’t hurt me. I will make him understand.*

With her heart continuing to beat in dread, she watched as her brother approached her.

He stopped a foot away from her, and then slapped her. Hard.

Ishani's face whipped to the side followed by a burning pain.

"You traitorous bitch!" her brother spat.

"Please," she begged. "Shivay is the heir. Don't harm his family."

"Give me the damn phone!" her brother yelled.

"Please listen—" Before she could finish, her brother slapped her again.

Her face burned even more and her jaw ached with intense pain.

"Give me the phone!" her brother shouted.

Tears filled her eyes as she shook her head.

"No," she replied.

He kicked her in the stomach then. Stars burst behind her eyes at the pain. She collapsed on her knees as her breath was knocked out of her chest.

"If you don't give me the phone, I will kill your child," her brother said.

Shocked, she stared at him.

There was an evil glint in her brother's eyes. "Yes, dear sister. You are carrying that bastard's child."

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"Yes, you are. The maid I put as a spy in the Thakvar household told me that you didn't get your period for two months, which means the bastard deliberately impregnated you when he began the clan meetings. He ensured there would be an heir, and I would not have any claim on the Gujjar inheritance."

Her mind spun.

She was using birth control. And she did get her period the last two

months. But doubt gripped her because she recalled that her period was light.

*My God.*

She trembled in fear, praying what her brother said wasn't true.

“Save your child instead of that bastard or his family. Take your mother and go live in a faraway country away from Singoor.”

Tears filled her eyes. “His family is innocent. Please stop and listen —” Her words broke with another kick to her stomach.

“Give me the phone!” her brother screamed.

Gasping and wrapping her hands protectively around her stomach, she begged him. “We are on the holy land. You cannot take a life, especially of an innocent child.”

Her brother scoffed. There was a dark, evil look on his face that she had never seen before.

“I killed my own father for power. Do you think your child or the rules of the land would stop me?”

Her heart jerked in shock. “W-what are you saying?” she whispered. “Your father is my father too...”

Devraj's eyes flashed darkly. “Yes, Ishwar Gujjar was my unfortunate father. The fool got seduced by a widow who gave birth to me. She kept the secret from him for the longest time, denying my rightful place as the Gujjar heir. When your mother married him, she found out about me. Before my mother died of a disease, she told your mother the truth about my parentage.”

Ishani knew her brother was brought to the Gujjar mansion when he was twelve, just months before she was born. But she knew her mother treated him well and considered him to be her own child. Even Ishani thought of him as her brother rather than her half-brother.

“I was always thought of as a bastard!” her brother raged. “A charity case your mother brought home! Even Ishwar Gujjar doted only on his wife

and newborn daughter!”

“Ma loves you,” she said desperately. “You know she treats you as her son and ensured you could take a place as the Gujjar clan head.”

Her brother’s face didn’t soften. “She didn’t do me a favor. That is my rightful place! But I could see how much my father loved his daughter. He made plans to educate you in a proper school. He wanted to groom you as his heir.”

Ishani’s heart twisted as she could imagine her father wanting her to get the best education.

“I had him killed before he could be a threat to me. I ensured there were poisonous snakes kept under the damn marigold plants. He went there each morning to pluck a flower to give to his wife.”

Tears rolled down Ishani’s eyes listening to the details of the cold-blooded murder of her father.

“With him dead, it was easy to show that your mother turned mad with grief. All I had to do was medicate her heavily and use drugs that caused her psychotic outbursts.”

“How could you...” she whispered.

The grief and shock she felt was too much to process.

“I will do anything to gain respect as the rightful heir. Other clan heiresses rejected my offers for marriage alliances calling me illegitimate. With your husband and his family dead, I will gain the power to command this land and take control of the oil from Singoor.”

He looked at her with rage. “Give me the phone.”

That’s when she knew nothing would stop him from killing her. He had killed his own father in a cold-blooded way.

She sucked in a breath. “No.”

Before he could kick her again, she lay on the sand protecting her



stomach. A heavy blow landed at her side on her ribs. Blinding pain followed.

She closed her eyes and prayed.

*Goddess Shakti. Please help me.*

## CHAPTER 33

Ishani didn't know how many blows landed on her side as her brother kicked her. She continued to pray. When she thought she would pass out from the pain, the kicks suddenly stopped.

Ishani tried to remain conscious and not give in to the darkness that threatened to engulf her.

“Sir, we can see a vehicle approaching,” one of the men said.

“Who the hell is it?” her brother asked.

There was a pause. Ishani slowly raised her head to see her brother looking into binoculars.

“Well, well,” she heard her brother say. “Looks like my luck is on the rise. The bastard is coming here by himself.”

Ishani's heart jerked.

*No, it cannot be. It cannot be Shivay. He is sleeping.*

“He might be armed and dangerous. Surround him when he gets here. Meanwhile, I will use his wife as a shield.”

She felt fingers surrounding her arm as she was yanked up. She could barely stand. “Stand up!” her brother ordered. “There is a knife against your throat. If you move, you will die.”

She desperately tried to remain steady and not move.

She heard the sound of a vehicle approaching and stopping. A door opened and shut.

Slowly through her blurred vision of tears, she saw the darkly handsome face of Shivay Thakvar.

He wasn't asleep on their bed where he was safe from any threat. Instead, he was standing in the middle of the desert, surrounded by danger.

He hadn't brought any of the Thakvar security with him, either.

*Oh God. No.*

She wanted to cry out and tell him to run, but the knife on her throat cut into her skin, stopping her from speaking.

Shivay watched her. She couldn't read anything in his eyes. He must have discovered already that she had stolen his phone. He must have come to confront her and her brother for the betrayal.

Her lips trembled, knowing she might not get the chance to beg for his forgiveness.

He turned his gaze away from her and looked at her brother. "I know you want me. Let Ishani go and take me instead."

Her heart jerked in shock, listening to him negotiate with her brother.

"N-no..." she gasped out even though the knife cut into her skin.

"How bloody touching," her brother said. "The little bitch betrayed you many times, yet you came to save her. Tie him up and put him on his knees in front of me!"

Ishani watched as one of her brother's men stood behind Shivay and tied his hands. Her eyes blurred seeing Shivay standing passively. She knew what Shivay was capable of. He had always fought and overpowered his attackers easily. But because of her, he couldn't.

The man pushed Shivay until he fell on his knees in front of her brother.

"Don't hurt Shivay!" she cried out.

There was a laugh from her brother before the knife at her neck was removed, and she was shoved away. She stumbled and fell to the ground. She immediately tried to get up and go to Shivay, but one of her brother's men grabbed her hand and dragged her away.

"Please," she begged. "Let Shivay go! He is the real heir!"

Her brother glared at her. “If you don’t shut up, I will slit his throat right now.”

Ishani stifled a sob behind her hands. She watched as her brother circled Shivay.

“Shivay Thakvar, I have to tell Mr. Tantra how easy it was to trap you,” he said. “He overestimated your power when you escaped the attack in Africa.”

“Who is Tantra?” Shivay asked calmly.

“Tantra is a powerful man. He was the one who found out that you are Mihir Thakvar’s heir six months ago.”

A gasp escaped Ishani.

Her brother turned to look at her shocked face. “Yes, dear sister. I knew Shivay Thakvar was the rightful heir even before he arrived at Singoor. But I had been waiting too bloody long to gain respect and control of the Singoor oil wells to risk losing it to a legitimate heir. So, I tried to get him killed on your wedding night and in the oasis, but the bastard escaped.”

Devraj laughed. “You willingly helped me drug him on your wedding night. But later, I had to use your mad mother to throw suspicion on you. I stopped her medication on time and had her begging for your visit. I knew she would be fine by the time you arrived. And I also ensured the Gujjar priests would let the Thakvar heir know of the oasis tradition.”

Ishani’s heart ached at her brother’s deliberate deception. She had trusted him and nearly got an innocent man killed on her wedding night. She had believed the oasis attackers to be the Kabalis.

Her vision blurred when she realized how Shivay was always in danger because of her.

*Oh God. Please forgive me.*

*I love Shivay. I will do anything to keep him safe. Please help me.*

As Ishani prayed desperately, she heard the sound of a soft plop. The man standing next to her suddenly jerked before collapsing on the ground with a cry of agony. She heard similar sounds of soft plops followed by cries of agony with the men collapsing on the ground.

Shocked, she saw that the men's legs were bleeding.

"You bastard!" Devraj yelled, raising the knife in his hand.

Ishani screamed. "Shivay!" She tried to run towards him, but she fell on her knees midway.

She tried to scramble up.

*Oh God.*

Much to her shock, she saw Shivay rise up and stop the oncoming blow from her brother. He caught her brother's wrist and twisted it at an unnatural angle until her brother screamed in agony and dropped the knife.

Shivay then picked up the knife and sliced it through her brother's wrist. Blood splattered as her brother's hand fell to the sand.

Her brother let out a scream and fell on his knees to the ground.

"That's for hurting my wife," Shivay growled.

She watched in sheer shock as Shivay let out a primal cry and grabbed her brother's throat and held him up until her brother's legs flailed below. Shivay carried her brother's flailing body to a distance and stopped.

The rising sun provided enough light and shadows to show it was right outside the border of the holy land of Singoor. Ishani watched as Shivay's hand rose and sliced through her brother's throat. A moment later, Devraj's headless body fell to the ground.

The sounds of the helicopter and vehicles filled the air, but Ishani remained frozen.

She watched as Shivay walked towards her.

His eyes fell on her while she looked at his blood-soaked face and

body. She didn't protest when he picked her up and carried her towards the helicopter. Her body trembled in shock and she couldn't hug him as he was still covered in her brother's blood.

## CHAPTER 34

Ishani continued to tremble even as steaming hot water washed away the sand and blood from her body. And also, from Shivay's.

His hands were gentle while he applied soap on her for the third time. The water that washed over them and fell on the marble tile was clear unlike before when the floor had turned red.

Soon, the shower stopped, and then she was wrapped in a fluffy towel before she was carried out and placed on the bathroom counter. He cupped her chin in a gentle grip and looked at her cheek. His jaw clenched before he opened the first-aid kit and applied a cooling cream over her cheek.

"A doctor will check you in a while," he said.

"I-I'm fine, Shivay," she whispered.

He didn't say anything. He gently parted the towel around her and his eyes fell to her sides where her ribs were beginning to bruise. The rage on his face trembled her stomach. But his hands were gentle as he applied the cooling cream over the bruises.

"Wear loose clothing," he instructed. "You won't be able to tie the knots on your usual dresses."

She nodded.

She noticed he hadn't said a single word about what had happened in the last few hours.

"I'm sorry, Shivay," she managed to say. "I-I took your phone thinking it would get my brother to stop suspecting you of not being the heir. I-I didn't know he already knew the truth and was going to use it to harm your family."

He didn't respond for a long moment. She felt his thumb running over

her cheek, wiping away her tears. "It's over now," he said.

His words didn't ease the knot in her stomach. He picked her and carried her out of the bathroom, and placed her on the stool in the dressing area. He opened the wardrobe and pulled out a dress. It was a dress she hadn't worn before and had purchased in the city. It was a long floral gown. He helped her into it and also helped her put on her underwear.

Her cheeks heated, but there was no emotion on his face.

"What would you like to eat?" he asked.

"I-I'm not hungry."

She wasn't the least bit hungry. Her stomach still trembled and churned. All she wanted was to remain close to him.

"Are you sure you don't want anything? Milk, banana or light breakfast?"

She shook her head. "No. I'll throw up if I have anything."

He paused and then nodded.

He was about to pick her up again, but she shook her head. "I can walk," she said.

He nodded. She thought they would lie on the bed, but was surprised when he led her out of their suite and led her downstairs.

She thought he was hungry and wanted to have breakfast, but she was taken aback when he led her to the family room.

"Your mother is arriving here," he said.

She was shocked. "I-Is she all right?"

"Yes, she is fine. Her nurse is with her. But she doesn't know anything about your brother."

"T-then why is she coming here?"

Her heart began to thud sickly, seeing the look on his face. She somehow knew her mother wasn't coming to stay with her at the Thakvar



mansion.

“She’s coming here because you both are leaving for San Francisco to my father and mother’s home. A jet has been prepared. Mr. Bahadur and Gagan will accompany you along with security to the airport.”

“No...” she whispered. “Please. Don’t send me away.”

She panicked when he didn’t react. She held his hand.

“Please, Shivay,” she begged. “I love you. I’ll do anything for your forgiveness.”

He leaned in to gently brush his lips over hers. “Then do as I say and leave.”

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The sounds of the private jet engines could be heard outside.

“This is so exciting. I can’t believe we are going on a holiday to America!”

Ishani blinked her eyes to stop her tears from flowing. She forced herself to smile while her mother looked excitedly out of the private jet window.

“Yes, Ma. We are going on a holiday.”

Even as she listened to her mother speaking excitedly, the pain inside her heart grew.

She had begged Shivay and told him that she loved him. And yet, he sent her away.

She lost the man she loved.

## CHAPTER 35

Shivay was seated in the conference room with his brothers. They had just finished a call with the investigative team.

“The man is like a damn ghost,” said Rishab. “He deliberately set his footprint all over the world to throw us off.”

“But why would an international businessman go through so much trouble?” Nakul asked. “We know he wants to gain control of the Singoor oil wells and has used Devraj Gujjar for that purpose, but something is definitely off.”

“Yes, it seems personal,” Rishab added. “He wouldn’t order a hit on Shivay and now on us.”

Shivay listened to his brothers discuss the man named Tantra. Although Devraj Gujjar had revealed information about the man, it wasn’t enough to track the kingpin. Devraj or his henchmen also didn’t have a clue about who or where Tantra was.

“He wants to stop the alliances.”

At Shivay’s words, his brothers looked surprised.

“Why would he care?” Nakul asked. “And how would he know about alliances when we haven’t made a final decision?”

“This is personal to Tantra,” Shivay added. “Everything the man has done points to the fact he doesn’t want the Singoor region to unify. He wants it to remain in a state of chaos.”

There was silence.

“Yes, that sounds plausible,” said Rishab. “I’m going to work with the investigators to check on families from prominent clans that relocated to countries outside India from Singoor.”

Shivay nodded.

Nakul looked at Shivay. “The Gujjars are fine for now. But we need to ensure Devraj Gujjar’s accidental death story is well executed.”

The Gujjar clan was told that Devraj had taken his mother to Australia for treatment. The people also believed that Devraj’s sister Ishani Thakvar had joined them. Shivay knew that for people to believe Devraj had died in an accident, just like how the previous generation of heirs from prominent clans had died, it was important for Ishani to be in Singoor to address the Gujjar clan.

“We have time,” Shivay said.

His brothers were silent. They knew he didn’t want Ishani to fly back to Singoor. Not yet. Or maybe not ever.

The thought of his wife once again brought sharp pain to his chest. Sucking in a deep breath, he ignored it.

He got up from the chair. “I’m heading back,” he said.

His brothers nodded.

“Nakul and I will stay and finish the rest of the calls,” said Rishab. “You better not join today.”

“Yes, catch some sleep, bro,” said Nakul. “You clearly haven’t slept well the last two weeks.”

Shivay knew his bloodshot eyes and thick stubble of his beard made that fact obvious. Despite working with the clans and controlling the aftermath of Devraj’s death in the Gujjar province, he had still chosen to work all night. He preferred the numbness that followed due to exhaustion and lack of sleep.

“I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” he said before stepping out of the conference room.

He took the elevator and went upstairs to where the helicopter was

waiting to take him to the Thakvar mansion.

But even as he sat inside the helicopter, the ache in his chest persisted. He couldn't order his body and heart to feel numb. He had spoken to his mother a few times in the last two weeks.

She said that Ishani and her mother were doing well. Sujatha Gujjar was getting the treatment of detoxing the medication injected into her for over two decades. He was glad.

But he also fucking missed his wife. It had taken every ounce of self-control during the past two weeks to stop himself from flying to San Francisco and dragging his wife into his arms.

He held back for a reason. A damn big reason.

Letting out an angry breath, he ignored the ache in his chest.

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It was close to midnight when he stepped into the Thakvar mansion. He recalled the times when his heart thumped in anticipation of getting home and going upstairs to the suite. But right then, his heart continued to ache.

Over the past two weeks, he had considered asking Rai Bahadur's wife, Malati, to have his things shifted to a different bedroom suite. He didn't want constant reminders of his wife. But he held back and continued to torture himself.

With a dark sigh, he entered the suite and went straight to the bathroom for a cold, numbing shower.

The cold water helped somewhat to numb his body if not his heart. Toweling himself dry and not bothering to wear nightclothes, he prepared for yet another torturous, sleepless night.

He went to the bedroom, his eyes falling on the full moon outside. It reminded him of the times when he saw a sweet, shy smile on Ishani's face as she waited for him at midnight.

*Stop it.*

He ordered his mind to stop torturing him with memories that ripped his heart out. But unfortunately, his mind continued to ignore his command.

Dragging his eyes away from the moon, he pushed aside the bedcover. He was about to get into the bed, but he froze.

On his bed was his wife. Her small figure was curled up and her beautiful face looked peaceful in sleep.

He blinked thinking his mind must have descended into madness and was hallucinating his wife's presence. He slowly raised his hand and brushed the back of his fingers against the softly rounded cheek. It felt way too real. His heart thudded when he saw his wife's eyes opening. He saw the familiar

sweet smile on her lips. Her eyes slowly swept over him and her smile turned sultry when she noticed he was naked.

“Shivay,” she said huskily.

He immediately turned painfully hard. It was then he knew he wasn't hallucinating. It was real. His wife was in his bed.

“What are you doing here, Ishani?” he demanded.

His voice came out harsh. Anger, fear and dark self-loathing warred inside him.

She slowly sat up and watched his angry face. “I'm home with my husband,” she said softly.

“You need to leave,” he snapped. “Whoever helped you get here is going to pay. What the fuck were they bloody thinking?”

He was about to storm away to put on his clothes, take her to the airport, and put her on a flight to San Francisco.

But her hands caught his wrist, stopping him. “Shivay wait.”

He turned to look at her.

“I'm not leaving, Shivay,” she said. Her soft voice sounded determined. “Even if you send me to San Francisco, I'll take the next flight back and come here to you.”

Anger erupted inside him. “Then I'm going to have you locked in a damn room in San Francisco for your own damn safety.”

She smiled.

His heart twisted seeing her beautiful smile.

“You need to go,” he rasped. “It's not safe here. The last time I couldn't protect you from your brother. You nearly died...”

The memories of what had nearly happened and how he had found her, haunted him each and every moment.

Her smile disappeared seeing the torment on his face. “How is that

your fault?" she asked. "I was the one who betrayed you and went to my brother."

The dark ache inside his chest grew. "I knew what you were going to do. But I underestimated that bastard brother of yours. I thought he wouldn't hurt you. I was wrong."

Devraj had slapped her, kicked her and would have even killed her eventually. The thought of it burned inside his chest.

She rose to her knees and cupped his cheek. "I'm fine, Shivay. It was only superficial injuries. Several doctors checked me, and you already know that."

He did, but that still didn't stop him from his self-loathing that he had sent her into danger. His heart ached, seeing her beautiful face watching him with trust in her eyes.

"The only thing that hurt me more than those injuries is you, Shivay," she said softly. "Being apart from you hurts me." She leaned closer. "I want you. I need you. And I love you."

Her soft lips covered his in a kiss.

Even as he commanded his mind not to respond, his body shuddered. The sweet taste of her was like sustenance to a starving man. His fingers wrapped at the back of her neck and pulled her close before pushing his tongue inside her mouth. He kissed her hungrily and possessively. He wanted to consume her and be consumed in return.

She moaned, and he felt her small hands wrapping around his hard arousal.

A harsh groan emitted from his throat. His mouth parted from hers, and he reached behind her and tugged on the ties until her dress loosened and fell apart. Her beautiful body came into view.

But even in the soft moon light, he could see the faint bruises on her



side.

His jaw clenched, and dark rage filled him. He wanted to kill Devraj Gujjar once again. He wanted to make his death drawn out and even more painful than what it was.

A soft palm touched his cheek. "I'm fine, Shivay," she said. "I need you."

His eyes lifted to her beautiful face. With a soft smile, she held his hand and pulled him closer as she lay on the bed.

He covered her body with his and stopped himself from desperately ramming into her. Clenching his teeth, he carefully slipped into her. When her tight heat surrounded him, he let out a deep groan.

The sound seemed to come out from his soul.

"I love you, Shivay," she whispered.

He could see the tears in her eyes. He lowered his head and kissed them away before he began to move.

Her soft gasps were music to his ears. Her nails dug into his shoulders while she clenched around him tightly, breaking his control.

He possessed her and claimed her until the wild, desperate and burning hunger inside him grew and then exploded. He roared out his release, his body shaking violently as he emptied inside her.

His chest heaved as he tried to catch his breath. Sucking in a deep breath, and knowing he was crushing her with his heavy weight, he twisted his body until she lay on top of him.

She clung to him, her body still shivering with the aftermath of her release.

He stroked the smooth satin skin of her back as a sense of calm and peace entered his mind after a long time.

He thought she had fallen asleep, but he felt her lips kissing his chest

where his heart beat underneath.

“Tell me what’s going on, Shivay,” she said. She raised her head and there was a heartfelt appeal on her face. “Tell me everything. Please.”

He looked at her for a long moment. And then, he began speaking.

“Six months ago, I was attacked in Africa after purchasing a copper mine...”

He kept the details of the attack to a minimum and told her about the rudraksh bead and how the assassin was killed before he could capture him. And later, how his mother found that bead and told him the truth about his father.

“While my brothers were hunting the trail of the person who sent the assassin, I came here to Singoor to take my father back to San Francisco. But my father refused. He loved my mother deeply, but he thought he would put his family in danger if the people of Singoor discovered that the Thakvar clan had heirs. My father was right, but I was determined to overcome the hurdle. So I asked Mr. Bahadur of what could be done to alleviate my father’s fears. He suggested an alliance.”

He watched her listening to him quietly.

“I picked the Gujjar clan since it was listed to me first. Right then, it didn’t matter who I picked because it was only to form the necessary alliance and bring peace to the region so my father could leave. I planned to tell you about our temporary marriage on our wedding night and send you to the city where you could live with your mother.”

She closed her eyes. “Oh God,” she whispered. “I didn’t know, and I helped my brother to drug you and have you attacked. You nearly died because of me.”

He cupped her face until she opened her eyes which looked pained with guilt. “It wasn’t your fault,” he said. “The circumstances didn’t allow

me to reveal the truth then.

She bit her lip and nodded.

Then she watched him. “How come you never sent me away as per your plan?” she asked.

He rubbed his thumb against her lip. “Because I was furious. I wanted you to pay, but the truth was that I was drawn to you.” His mouth twisted as he recalled his dark thoughts. “I thought the best way to punish you was to keep you close to me and bind you to me forever.”

Her eyes widened at his dark confession.

“B-but it was me who came to you and...” Her cheeks reddened as she reminded him of the times she had tried to seduce him and how each of those attempts ended.

His mouth twisted further, but this time in amusement. “Yes. I knew you wanted to seduce me to spy on me, but that didn’t stop me from claiming you. When you asked me to consummate our marriage in the desert tent, I knew it was too late to fight how I felt.”

“H-how did you feel?” she asked in a whisper.

He watched her face. “Like I would die if I didn’t touch you or kiss you or be inside you. You consumed me.”

She gasped, and her eyes moistened. “I was falling for you too,” she confessed. “I tried to fight my feelings, because for the longest time, I thought you were a ruthless fraud who wanted to gain control of the oil wells. But when I saw you speaking at the clan meeting, I knew you didn’t lie about being the heir.”

“Then why did you take the recording device from Devraj?” he asked.

Her eyes widened. “You knew?”

“Yes. Security informed me about Devraj’s presence at the hotel and the camera feed showed that you took the recording device from him.”

He was angry at that time. He showed it in his rough lovemaking, but she clung to him, driving him all the more crazier.

She let out a shuddering breath. “I wanted my brother to know the truth about you, Shivay. I foolishly thought that letting him spy on you would bring out the truth. I threw away the tracking device at the hotel, but when he came to ask for your phone, I foolishly went to him with it. I’m sorry.”

He wiped the tear that slid down her cheek. “A lot of things went wrong that day, Ishani,” he said. “But what matters is that there is still active danger. I want you to remain safe. If anything happens to you...”

He didn’t even want to imagine anything happening to her.

“Shivay, I know you care and feel protective about me. But—”

He cut her off. “I love you, Ishani,” he said. “I love you more than my damn life. And I would do anything to keep you safe, including ripping out my heart and staying away from you.”

There was a radiant smile on her face as she listened to his words. “You love me?” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“You’ll do anything to keep me safe?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Her smile widened. “Then keep me safe in your arms, Shivay. If you try to send me away, I’ll only come back to you. It’s easier if you let me remain here. I belong in my husband’s arms.”

He watched the determination on his wife’s beautiful face. “I should have gone for the Bhils or the Kanwars to pick an alliance bride,” he deliberately said. “I’m sure they would have listened to me and not been a meddling menace.”

She wasn’t offended. She laughed instead. “But you picked me and fell in love with me.”

He couldn't deny it. He did fall in love with his beautiful and innocent yet stubborn wife. Cupping her face, he kissed her and then showed her how much he loved her.

# EPILOGUE

*Two months later...*

**San Francisco, USA**

“That’s so beautiful, my child!”

Ishani slowly opened her eyes with a smile. She was seated on the garden deck and had just finished playing the bin instrument.

Mihir Thakvar sat on the garden chair in front of her along with his wife and Ishani’s mother. They were enjoying the music and sunset over the San Francisco skyline.

“Thank you, Papa.” She touched her forehead to the musical instrument before setting it aside.

“Mihir is right,” said Chitra Thakvar. “When you play the Rudra veena, it’s as though we are transported to Kailasa and we are right next to Shiva and Parvati.”

Ishani smiled with pleasure at her mother-in-law’s words. “Thank you, Ma.”

The bin musical instrument was a gift from her in-laws who had it specially commissioned for her. She was pleasantly surprised to see it when she and Shivay flew to San Francisco two days ago.

“Ishani gets it from her father. Ishwar used to play the bin instrument during every celebration. People from other clans used to attend just to watch him play.”

Ishani smiled seeing her mother’s proud face. Ishani’s father was the one to introduce and teach the bin instrument to her. She especially loved playing it to keep his memory alive.

Her heart twisted recalling the reason for her father's death. And his own son's role in it.

Her mother didn't know the truth or about Devraj's death. Ishani didn't want to reveal it as her mother was still recovering from years of long abuse of the wrong medications that Devraj had deliberately injected into her to show her as a mad woman.

"Oh, I almost forgot," her mother said. "I asked the kitchen staff to get things ready to make Ghewar, Mawa Kachori and other sweets."

"Sujata, please don't strain yourself," Chitra Thakvar said with a smile. "The staff can handle it."

Ishani's mother shook her head. "Nonsense. It's hardly a strain. And Nandini loved the *moong dal halwa* last time."

Chitra laughed. "Yes. Chitti and her university friends loved the sweets. She called last night asking if you were making another batch of Singoor sweets."

Ishani smiled. She had met Shivay's sister Nandini two months ago when Nandini had come to see her. Nandini Thakvar was sweet and spirited. Although Ishani was heartbroken at that time being apart from Shivay, she enjoyed Nandini's company. In fact, it was Shivay's sister and mother who had helped her return to the Thakvar mansion.

"Yes, tell her a big batch is on the way," Ishani's mother said.

Ishani laughed. She knew her mother enjoyed cooking and feeding people, especially her son-in-law who never said no to her.

"I'll come with you, Ma," she said.

"Me too," Chitra Thakvar added. "I need to learn how to make the sweets. Poor Mihir learned to love the sweets that are a specialty of my family. I never attempted to make sweets from his place."

Ishani smiled. She had seen the love and adoration her father-in-law

had towards his wife. Her heart ached at the years they had to be apart. But she was glad that they were finally together.

Ishani followed her mother and mother-in-law inside the huge, sprawling home.



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Soon, the entire kitchen smelled of mouth-watering sweets.

A big batch of sweets was made amidst lots of laughter, conversation and bonding between Ishani, her mother and her mother-in-law.

“Here,” said Ishani’s mother. “Take this fresh Ghewar to Shivay. He enjoys them when they are warm.”

Ishani laughed and held the plate in her hands.

She went to the west wing of the house where Shivay’s suite was located. The sound of her anklets and bangles was rhythmic as she walked along a corridor that had stunning views of the San Francisco city skyline and Golden Gate Bridge.

As the sunset had set, the view became prettier with the lights reflecting on the bridge and ocean.

It was very different from Singoor.

Although she missed Singoor already, she was also looking forward to exploring the place Shivay grew up in for the next two weeks.

Her thoughts came to a stop when stepped into Shivay’s multiroom suite. She looked around, and with a smile she went towards the office room instead of the bedroom or sitting room.

As soon as she opened the office door, her smile widened since her guess had been right. Shivay was seated in his office chair talking on the phone.

Her stomach fluttered when he looked up, and soon there was a small smile on his darkly handsome face. Unable to keep her hands off him, she went closer. Placing the plate of sweets on the office table, she sat on his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck.

He continued to listen to the call while watching her with a look that

fluttered her stomach even more.

It took her a while, but she realized the call was with Rishab and Nakul.

“Tantra definitely has allies from the other prominent clans as well,” Nakul stated.

Ishani listened keenly. Shivay had already told her about the man named Tantra who was behind the attack in Africa and also trying to gain control of the Singoor oil wells. Tantra had made use of Devraj. But Ishani was surprised that other clans were also in touch with the international businessman.

“And I know who it could be from the Bhils,” Rishab added. “Gauri Bhil, my soon-to-be bride’s older sister.” There was anger in Rishab’s voice. “She’s definitely the kind to side with the bad guys.”

“I have established contact with Aadhya Kanwar with a new identity,” Nakul said. “But unless I land in the Kanwar mansion, I wouldn’t be able to determine who is in touch with Tantra among the Kanwars.”

Ishani was conflicted about how Rishab and Nakul were approaching the alliances. It was similar to how Shivay had formed an alliance with the Gujjars.

Shivay’s and her marriage had been quite stormy, but miraculously, it ended well. She hoped Shivay’s brothers would find similar happiness in their alliances.

“Find the allies to Tantra among the clans, but don’t take any action yet,” Shivay instructed. “We need to know what Tantra wants. It isn’t just the oil wells. There’s something more. A lot more that he wants.”

Based on what she knew about the man named Tantra, she agreed with Shivay’s observation.

“Ishani is here with me,” Shivay told his brothers.

Suddenly, the tone of the conversation changed.

“Hey Ishani,” Nakul greeted.

“When are you returning to Thakvar mansion?” Rishab asked. “We miss your food and history lessons.”

Ishani laughed, since it had barely been a week since she last saw them when they came to the Thakvar mansion. “Soon,” she promised.

Shivay smiled.

“I’ll talk to you both tomorrow,” he said before ending the call.

Then cupping the back of her neck, he pulled her for a kiss. “Mmm... sweet and delicious,” he said.

She giggled. “I was in the kitchen tasting the big batch of sweets our mothers are making. I brought you some.”

“It’s a good thing I was going into the desert often and getting a good workout,” he said, picking up a piece of the sweet. “Or between our mothers’ cooking, I’d barely be able to move.” His mouth then twisted, and there was a wicked glint in his eyes. “Of course, I get the best workout because of you each night.”

Ishani’s cheeks heated. “Shivay!” She smacked him on his shoulder.

He chuckled and then picking up her hand, kissed her palm.

Ishani’s palm tingled as warmth spread inside her heart. She had never imagined Shivay Thakvar to be a sweet, playful, and romantic husband. She still recalled how terrified of him she was at the beginning of their marriage. She had even hated him. She had thought of him as a devil husband.

But ever since she returned to the Thakvar mansion after he sent her away for her safety, she began to see his softer side. He was still ruthless and stern at times when he thought she put herself in danger, but the rest of the time he was playful and romantic.

“You look beautiful,” he said, running his hand up her long, floral

summer dress. She had worn it that afternoon when he had taken her sightseeing in downtown San Francisco. “But I like you even better in your traditional dresses. I’m always reminded of the first time I saw you on our wedding night. I think I knew right then you were going to be trouble because I wanted to make you mine.”

Ishani’s heart fluttered.

She laughed. “When you asked me to change, I thought you were asking me to undress.”

His mouth twisted. “Subconsciously, maybe I was. I wanted to see you underneath all those layers of clothes and heavy jewelry.”

She laughed.

Suddenly, she gasped when he held her and got up from the office chair, and carried her out of the office room.

Her heart thudded with excitement. “Shivay, we’ll miss having dinner with everyone! We already missed yesterday and the day before.”

His mouth twisted wickedly. “They’ll still think we have jetlag. And besides, they won’t mind since they have been asking for grandchildren.”

She laughed when he walked towards the bedroom.

She recalled the time she had been terrified when her brother told her she was pregnant. Her brother had lied, or someone in the Thakvar mansion had lied to him to protect her thinking he wouldn’t harm his pregnant sister.

When Shivay sent her away to San Francisco, the first thing she had asked the doctor who checked her injuries was if she was pregnant. And when the doctor told her she wasn’t, she felt immense relief.

Although she was glad that she wasn’t pregnant when her brother badly hurt her in the desert, her heart fluttered each time at the thought of falling pregnant with Shivay’s child.

The topic had come up many times during conversations with her

mother and Shivay's parents, but she decided to wait until things settled down in Singoor. There were a lot of uncertainties right then for them to bring an innocent child into the world. Shivay agreed with her decision. She observed that it made him all the more determined to find the identity of Tantra, trace the location of Goddess Shakti's statue, and work towards unifying clans through alliances and negotiations.

"Finally," he said, stepping into the massive bedroom with breathtaking panoramic views. But her eyes were focused on the darkly handsome face of her husband.

She smiled, her heart beating in anticipation as Shivay laid her on bed and watched her like she was the most beautiful and precious thing in his life.

"I love you," he said, lowering his head and kissing her softly on her lips.

There was so much happening in their lives and a lot of uncertainty. But one thing she was certain of was her husband's love.

"I love you too," she said, placing her hand on his cheek. "Forever."

**THE END**

# AUTHORS' NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *Twisted Alliance*. We hope you enjoyed reading Shivay and Ishani's passionate love story as much as we enjoyed writing it!

Shivay Thakvar is quite special to us, since we narrated and visualized the *Sands of Singoor* from his point of view. I hope you fell in love with his ruthless, commanding yet protective nature, just like Ishani and we did! We adore sweet and courageous Ishani, but writing her was quite challenging because of her extremely conservative background. Her slow transformation while keeping her values intact, made it all the more exciting to witness.

We hope you enjoyed the exciting desert clans setting that is the backdrop of Shivay and Ishani's passionate romance. *Twisted Alliance* is the first book of the '*Sands of Singoor*' series with many more exciting, suspenseful and passionate love stories coming up. Stay tuned to find out the mystery of the missing goddess statue and the explosive arranged marriage alliances being formed! Coming up next are:

Rishab Thakvar & Gauri Bhil's story by MV Kasi

Nakul Thakvar & Aadhya Kanwar's story by P.G.Van

To get updates on upcoming releases, teasers and giveaways, follow us on Instagram: **@mvkasi & @authorpgvan**

Thank You

Authors P.G.Van and MV Kasi

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