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PRESENT

CHAPTER ONE

Akshara

Don't ask me how the hell it occurred to me.

I am sprawled out on my favorite black couch in the living room in the evening, wrapped in a soft blanket that feels like a hug, binge-watching a show where the protagonist gets over her devastating breakup by indulging in a wildly reckless one-night stand. I can easily blame it on the show and the almost-three-fourths-empty bottle of wine sitting judgmentally on my coffee table that I decide...I need to do something *different*.

Something bold.

Something that says—I am a strong, independent woman who is totally fine and definitely over the

worthless assholes who happen to fall in my exes' category.

I had taken a half-day off from work today because I was drowning in murky waters of introspection on my not-so-successful love life on loop. Even my elder sister, *Samaira*, was also in the same sinking boat till about a week ago—until her pathetically unromantic and un-harmonized boyfriend tried to propose to her on her birthday in front of almost twenty people. And the stars bless her, she couldn't say yes! Honestly, a bold move. Almost cinematic.

Samaira has always been the composed, level-headed one between us. But even she had limits, and the sheer absurdity of her boyfriend's proposal had been the final straw after what their relationship was going through. I hope she puts an end to it tonight and finally acknowledges that there's only one person for her, who once made her heart race.

And here I am, considering my own bold move.

This is a terrible idea, my sober brain warns.

This is a genius idea, my wine brain counters.

And fortunately, or unfortunately, the wine brain is winning. It's giving my body some kind of chemical release that's already making me feel lighter.

My pulse flutters with a mix of nerves and excitement as I open my contacts and call my only friend, other than Samaira, whom I can trust with this kind of situation. Shrishti, who is *mostly* (okay, partly) responsible for my current mess, picks up on the first ring.

The moment I share my plan—finding a hook-up to cure my post-breakup blues—her voice practically drips with mischief. Apparently, a few months ago,

she was the one who pushed me to believe that Avinash was the one.

She agrees to be my designated rescuer, waiting right outside the elite club we've shortlisted, just in case I need a quick getaway from whoever I might end up fucking tonight. Because, let's face it, my life doesn't exactly have a history of smooth, effortless plans.

But tonight? Tonight, I am rewriting the script.

This is actually happening. I am about to go on a random hookup hunt. My first time.

I prefer unusual if it's fun. And honestly, it feels like the universe has given me the perfect nudge after I've spent *days* moping over Avinash. Or, to be precise, moping over my own foolishness and blunders.

And speaking of blunders...let me throw some light on the recent one.

I was sleeping with my *ex*-boss, Avinash, until about two months ago.

The fateful day when we were making out in my bedroom, and I insisted that he stays back for the night. He kept murmuring that his Mom was waiting for him at home for dinner and he should leave, which he said every time I thought he would stay.

Of course, it irked me. So, in a moment of playful mischief, or divine intervention, depending on how one sees it, I grabbed his phone and dialed the number saved as *Home*—the same number that always seemed to ring when we were together.

What I wasn't expecting was for the person on the other end to snap in a very *un-motherly* voice, 'What the fuck, Avinash? Where the hell are you?'

He froze; the voice was loud enough for Avinash to realize that his *Home* was indeed calling him.

The next morning, I walked into the office, handed in my resignation, reported Avinash to the Internal Complaints Committee, said goodbye to my colleagues, and never looked back.

Honestly? It was only partially because of him, *not entirely*. It was because I was so done being an assistant at NBTv. I had been a ghost, working my ass off but never truly seen—digging for facts and writing stunning editorials in the background—only for editors to shine under the spotlight.

Ironically, I was anyway planning to quit. That had been *our* plan, actually. Since announcing our relationship while working together wasn't an option, we had devised this neat little arrangement where I would find another job, resign from NBTv, and then—ta-da!—we would finally go public at my farewell party.

The guy had the audacity to keep reassuring me, *'Just a little more patience, darling. We'll announce our relationship soon, promise.'*

Point to be noted: I don't know why, but I always *hated* it when he called me darling.

And let me give you a spoiler, the plan didn't work.

I had no job when I resigned. But I wasn't scared of not having a paycheck at the end of the month. I had *bigger* dreams—distant, mockingly unattainable dreams. And I had my sister, who could afford a couple of struggling siblings like me with her generous paycheck and a big heart.

But things happen for a reason, right?

I launched my own short-news cum social-issues channel on Instagram, and, surprisingly, it's the *one* thing I am actually proud of. I even have—wait for it—good number of followers!

Then, the stars finally decided to cut me some slack. Within few weeks, I landed a job at SBP News as an on-ground reporter—closer to my dream of being a real journalist. Though I haven't still gotten any on-ground reporting done. But I've always been an optimist. That explains a lot.

And as my Mom likes to say, *careless*. That explains a lot, too.

Now, as I get ready for what promises to be a *sassy* night, I keep circling back to the same mortifying question: How the hell did I not know I was fucking a married man? A father to a seven-year-old, no less!

And the answer is, no one in the entire company knew. So it's ok.

What hurts more is that I wasn't even attracted to him in the first place, but I reciprocated to his advances because he was good on paper, seemed mature, he had a perfect resume—a good degree, AVP at a media firm, good-looking (okay, maybe *average*-looking, but the job title boosted his rating).

But even that doesn't justify it. How come my so-called smartness that I always had cupped against my ass; forgotten that it existed?

Shrishti picks me up, along with her boyfriend, who, by default, has also become my friend now. Well, I didn't have any option.

On the ride, we firm up the plan for the night: they'll stay back in the car, parked safely in the lot,

utilizing their liquor stock, while I march straight up to the top floor of *Club Six* and begin my *hunt*.

Fair enough.

I climb the stairs instead of taking the elevator, mostly to avoid getting stuck with couples already getting gooey before they've even had their first drink. But just as I mentally prep myself for the task at hand, I overhear a conversation near one of the intimate booths.

I had been too lost in my own thoughts to notice how close the voices were, probably just two feet away from me, separated only by a sheer curtain, a man and a woman are in what sounds like a *very* interesting exchange.

I pause, curiosity overriding common sense. I've never been privy to a woman *pleading* with a man for sex before.

Through the curtain, I catch a glimpse of them. The man—tall, broad-shoulders, and a stiff posture. The woman—leaning into him, tugging at his collar with a mix of desperation and confidence.

Is that... a real-life model I have seen on some poster?

Holy hell. She looks like one. Tall, lean, small waist. Ok, the smallest waist I have seen. High cheekbones, symmetrical features, short-skirt, long boots and extraordinary makeup.

'Please,' she murmurs. 'Just once, for old times' sake.'

The man exhales, his voice gentle but firm. 'Listen...'

She doesn't let him finish. Her fingers press against his lips, silencing him.

‘Shhhh...I know what you’re going to say. That we can’t do this. But why not? We’ve done it before.’ She insists.

I press my lips together to stop any accidental sound from escaping. I *should* leave. I should not be eavesdropping. But...

The girl continues, her voice low, persuasive. ‘No one would know. Not even your new girlfriend. I promise I’ll never say a word.’

The man—I can only see his back—lets out a sigh, but his words are unwavering. ‘Lara. I am not worried about you telling anyone. Please understand. I *won’t* cheat on my girlfriend. I thought you knew me better than that.’

Damn.

Now *this* is interesting.

She sounds heartbroken—there’s a hiccup in her voice that suggests she’s on the verge of tears.

But then she proves me *so* wrong.

‘Please baby...you give such a *good dick*... just once.’

I swallow hard, fighting the laugh-wail expanding in my throat. This level of filthy sex talk? I’ve only heard it in porn videos before. And honestly? It’s funny—far from sexy right now.

My curiosity wins over logic. I take a step forward, wanting to see this goddess of desperation and worship the man actually saying *no*. I already respect him.

And then I hear him again.

‘I am sorry, Lara...let me drop you at the porch. My girlfriend could be here any minute now. And please, will you *stop texting me*.’

Lucky her, I think. Whoever his girlfriend is.

From my view behind the curtain, I can see his strong hands resting carefully on Lara's arms, urging her to step back. She, on the other hand, is still gripping his collar, still reaching for his lips, still holding on.

Huh. I didn't know the world was *this* cruel to men, too.

'You know what? I think you're just making up a story,' Lara challenges. 'I haven't even *seen* her picture yet. I need proof that she's real.'

She's back on her feet—ready to *fight* for this man.

And maybe it's the urgency of the moment. Or my undeniable urge to help a man in distress. Or maybe it's the fact that I am wearing a damn hot dress with heels that make me feel invincible.

Oh, and let's not forget the *wine*.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I clear my throat and step into the scene.

'Honey, what are you doing *here*?'

Dramatic? Hell yeah. But *fun*? *Even more*.

If my parents weren't so strict, I could've been an actress. But in India, a girl choosing acting is the equivalent of tossing away her family's hard-earned *respect*. So instead, here I am, starring in an impromptu drama for an audience of two.

The broad shoulders turn.

And... *Holy. Freaking. Hell.*

I see the hottest man that has ever walked the planet earth.

And just like that, I *get* it.

I get why Lara is begging for another round.

This man has the capability to give a woman an orgasm just by standing naked at the edge of the bed.

I mean, let's talk about *looks*, shall we?

Tailored suit jacket, crisp shirt slightly unbuttoned at the top, teasing a glimpse of his chiseled chest. A neatly trimmed beard framing a square jawline. And those *eyes*—intense, calculating, and currently locked onto me.

God help me.

For a second, his expression is unreadable. And then, just like *that*, his face lights up.

Smart and sexy. The *deadliest* combo.

'*Sweetheart*,' he says, stepping toward me. 'Why didn't you call me when you arrived?'

He plays along so effortlessly. Well, Lara was right that he was making up the story about his girlfriend.

Lara steps back, arms crossing, and suspicion all over her stunning sharp face.

My new *boyfriend* wastes no time. He pulls me into an *oh-my-god* embrace—one that's all firm muscles, crisp cologne, and enough warmth to make my knees weak.

And then, in a hushed voice only for me, he murmurs, 'Thanks for saving me.'

He turns back to Lara, voice perfectly casual.

'Lara, this is my girlfriend.' Then he looks back at me, flashing *that* damn smile. '*Sweetheart*, this is Lara. I told you about her, remember? We explored the opportunity of an ad campaign together last year, but it was a shame that things didn't work out.'

I nod, smiling so wide my jaw is starting to ache. But let's be honest, who cares about a sore jaw when this work of art is looking at me like that?

A tiny thought crosses my mind—*what are the odds I could turn this fake-boyfriend situation into a real one-night stand?*

To keep up the act, I go all in.

‘Of course, baby! Lara, why don’t you join us for dinner?’

I immediately regret it. I have gone overboard trying to act like the unaffected cool girlfriend.

Luckily, Mr. Greek God is quick on his feet.

‘Actually...’ He cuts in smoothly before Lara can respond. ‘She has to leave, she has plans. I asked her to stay because I wanted her to meet the most *important* person in my life.’

Damn. He’s *good*.

Lara lets out a reluctant sigh. With a fake *Hi-how-are-you-and-bye*, she disappears.

And that’s when *he* turns back to me—this time, taking his sweet time studying my face.

And then...*the smile*.

His real one.

It’s even better. *Hotter*.

‘Do we know each other?’ he asks, his voice polite, but his eyes—are full of intrigue.

I swallow. ‘Umm...actually, no. We don’t know each other. But I just couldn’t stop myself from helping a damsel in distress.’

A slow, amused smile spreads across his lips. ‘Huh. I see. And how do I thank my *savior*, Prince Charming?’

Did he just call me *charming*? Or was he just completing the saying.

Either way, I need to play this cool.

‘Well,’ I say, tilting my head, ‘Nothing *too* complicated. Just follow some simple rules for the night. No names. No personal questions. And let’s keep things... strictly fun.’

His lips twitch, his gaze dipping to my lips for a millisecond before meeting my eyes again.

‘Ah,’ he muses, voice dropping to a delicious husky tone. ‘This is getting *very* interesting.’

And just like that, he *agrees* to the rules.

We move past the polished crowd and settle at the high-chairs at the bar. Maybe it’s the disco lights, maybe it’s the deafening music, or maybe—just maybe—it’s the way his fingers just *barely* brushed my thigh.

Whatever it is, something has triggered a chain reaction in my body, traveling straight down past my stomach and landing—well—exactly where you’d expect.

He orders *the* most refreshing vodka cocktail I’ve ever tasted, one that might just become my new favorite drink.

‘Umm... wow. What *is* this?’ I ask, intrigued by his choices.

‘It’s a screwdriver, vodka and orange juice. You can order something else if you don’t like it.’

‘Oh no, this is perfect! Now tell me more about turning down *Lara*.’ I ask him, almost teasing.

He leans back slightly, lips quirking up in a half-smile. ‘No, I wasn’t turning her down tonight. We broke up months ago. It wasn’t really going anywhere.’ He shrugs, then exhales with something that sounds like relief. ‘Honestly, I don’t think I have

any of the necessary *ingredients* to make a relationship work...So, I try to stay away from them.'

'That's sad...' I say, but then quickly correct myself, 'I mean, *wise*.'

It *is* wise. Relationships are exhausting. Soul-sucking. And while we're on the topic, I declare.

'You should *never* do relationships. They suck you dry and leave you *wrecked*. I've pledged to stay away from them too.'

His eyes flick to mine, amused. 'Must've been a real moron who made such a beautiful girl heartbroken.'

'Cliché much?' I smirk. 'You just left a beautiful girl heartbroken minutes ago.'

'Trust me, there wasn't any *heart* in it, let alone be broken.' He says simply.

'Hmm...' I tilt my head, watching him. 'That's so common these days. I think I am also suffering from the same syndrome. Can we call it no-heart-in-it-relationships?'

'You want to talk more about it? I have actually been wondering what brings you here tonight, that too, alone.' he adds, voice dipping in curiosity.

I swirl my drink, debating, 'Now that's a loaded question. And against the rules of sharing anything personal.' I raise a finger. And announce, 'I may need a shot first to modify the rule—one shot, one question.'

His grin spreads slow and wicked. 'I like the modification.'

And just like that, we're knocking back tequila.

The burn spreads through my throat, straight down to my stomach, making my head *just* light enough to stop thinking.

‘Alright, so...’ I say, licking the salt off my lips. ‘To start with—I had to give my sister privacy so she could dump her *almost-ex*...whom I never liked, by the way.’

He nods, encouraging me to continue.

‘And then there’s *this* tiny thing—reporting my ex-boyfriend for sexual harassment.’ I let that land. ‘Who also happened to be my *boss* at the time. And I found out after three months of dating that he was married and had a son.’

His brows lift slightly.

‘And realizing, that I’ve never been in *love* with any of my boyfriends to actually experience a heartbreak. Which makes me wonder...if I am a *bitch*?’

Instead of looking alarmed, he looks... impressed. He whistles low. ‘Wow, that’s solid. But it’s not your fault.’

‘Thanks, but let me tell you more facts...I mean...I *did* make an embarrassing scene at the office before exiting. Called him a *pigfucking bastard* at the top of my lungs. He had to resign, too.’ I pause, biting my lip. ‘And honestly? Sometimes...I feel bad about it.’

Now *this*—this is the expensive vodka talking. And it’s *hitting* fast.

He’s hitting fast too. He has taken off the jacket and his shirt perfectly fitting his biceps is hitting another level.

He chuckles, shaking his head. ‘For the record? He *deserved* it.’

Which makes him—great. Fantastic. *Cute*, even.

‘Alright, *your* turn now,’ he says, suddenly energized. ‘Shots, please!’ he calls to the bartender, who eyes me with suspicion like I am definitely going to puke my guts out tonight.

Joke’s on him. I have *more* tolerance than this.

I distract my *sinfully attractive* drinking partner with not-so-serious conversations, things that make him laugh—*really* laugh, the kind that shakes his chest and lights up his whole damn face. And, apparently, I am laughing too.

I used to think those girls—those ones, the ones who giggled at every stupid word their boyfriends said—were so *fucking silly*.

But here I am. Giggling. Like one of them. Why everything a hot guy says sounds funny.

And then it happens. Our legs brush—unintentionally—under the bar.

But that single point of contact?

It sets off *fireworks* within me.

CHAPTER TWO

Devesh

The club pulses with energy, a kaleidoscope of flashing lights and music that vibrates through the floor. But nothing holds my attention the way she does.

I stare at her expressive dark brown eyes lined with thick kohl; her plush lips painted a deep shade of wine—an exact match to the slinky dress hugging her curves. Sharp cheekbones, waves of honey-brown hair

cascading below her shoulders, and those long, toned legs perched on sky-high heels; everything about her is a study in temptation.

She's *beautiful*, clearly witty and fun, and *familiar*.

What are the chances?

What are the chances that the girl I saw in a picture just days ago—the one I couldn't get out of my head for nights since then—has materialized in front of me. And now, she's effortlessly stolen the spotlight in a club full of dazzle.

She's the best kind of contradiction—raw yet classy, fun yet intense. And that dress with tiny straps? Total distraction. And the neckline? Don't even get me started. Everything about her is pulling me in.

We make a toast to our excellent (and entirely *fake*) performance back there. But then, in a twist I don't see coming, the conversation veers from casual flirting to liquor distribution in *Gurugram*, the city of bachelors. She's actually discussing the logistics of bootlegged alcohol with the same ease that most people gossip about celebrity breakups. And suddenly, I realize—I've never met a woman with legs this long and a brain this sharp, at the same time.

I should remind myself that I am nearly thirty, too old for these kinds of reckless, no-name, no-history encounters. But when she offers the game of secrecy, something inside me stirs. Maybe I'd forgotten that my younger self once craved this kind of excitement. Maybe she's woken up the part of me that I thought was long gone.

I don't remember the last time I sat in a club wanting to listen to a girl. I clearly remember wanting

to do other things, finish them as soon as possible and then finish some of my work back home.

And for the first time in years, I want to listen. And talk. Talk to *her*. And let myself be *distracted*.

‘So,’ I lean in, ‘what can I possibly do to repay the favor?’

She blinks a few times, opens her mouth and closes it, as if deciding against saying what just popped into her mind, but then shaking her head again, as if deciding she still wants to say it.

‘Let me be honest with you, because you feel *safe*...’ she says.

‘Safe?’ I arch a brow in question.

‘I mean, I literally saw you deny sex to an exceptionally hot woman.’

I nod and she continues with a deep breath, ‘I came here for a hook-up, and I just got a confirmation from the hot girl that you give a good dick.’

I snort laugh. I do. Yes.

‘In that case, I think we need to amend the rules a little, I would like you to call my name when I give you...you know...the good...’ I halt.

‘Wait, are you not allowed to say the word *dick*?’ She narrows her eyes in playful assessment and continues.

‘Oh my God. Are you, like, super religious? Is that why you turned down the offer? That actually explains a lot.’

I laugh again, shaking my head. ‘No, and No. I am just trying to be decent in front of a girl I just met for the first time.’

‘And the last time,’ she adds with a wink.

She has no idea how wrong she is.

‘And wait...What do you mean? I am not decent if I am saying dick in front of a man I am meeting for the first time? That’s the problem you know, people don’t think it’s decent to say the names of their body parts.’ She is furious.

‘Ok...let me say it. *Dick*. We are now evenly decent or indecent. I am not agitating my savior with those sexy legs.’ I don’t know what came over me when I actually said that. But thankfully it helped control the situation.

She gapes at me, lips parted. Every bit sexy.

A few more exchanged confessions, a few more times of leering at her legs and her leering at my forearms, I take another shot and finally ask her. ‘Ok, tell me who is waiting at home for you?’

‘Just my sister, I stay with her. Our parents are not in this town. How about you?’

‘*No one*. Parents are not in this world anymore.’ When I mention my parents, the usual dull ache surfaces, but I don’t stop myself.

‘Oh My God.’ She goes silent and stiff. ‘I can’t even imagine your loss. I am so sorry.’

‘Hmm, it was indeed unimaginable. It still is, at times. But life must go on.’ I take a big sip of the cocktail.

‘How did it happen, if you are comfortable sharing?’ She seems genuinely invested in this conversation.

‘It was a brutal accident, a collision with a truck, it was January, and the fog was really bad.’

I don’t know why I would tell her such a personal thing and the details of the accident but I still tell her.

‘They were travelling back from a charity event at *Chandigarh* with an NGO that sponsors life care for orphan children. I was supposed to go there but Mom insisted that I rest on that weekend, and they could go and cover for me. I shouldn’t have agreed.’ I can feel the pain resurface, that’s the thing with alcohol, you are high and laughing in one moment and you go all the way to the other extreme in seconds.

I expect her to offer the usual apologies, the sympathetic nods and move on. Instead, she leans forward with one hand rubbing the length of my arm, and her worried eyes looking at me, really *looking* at me, and says something that makes my chest tighten.

‘Do you think your parents would have been able to survive your loss, if you wouldn’t have agreed?’ Her eyes locked with mine and glistening.

‘I don’t know why, but it feels like you’re here, breathing for a reason. No parent would ever trade their child’s life with their own. Think about it. Your parents would be at peace knowing they could take your *death*. And trust me, they would do it all over again if needed.’

I swallow hard. It’s an unusual thing to say. And yet, for the first time in years, what she just said makes the grief a little *lighter*.

Before I know it, she’s hugging me. A stranger who feels like a long-lost friend, who can make you feel better just by being there for you. I feel *better*.

We pull back, exchanging a look that lingers a little too long. The kind of look that makes everything else around you fade into the background.

‘I never thought I could find peace with it.’ My voice’s probably cracking up now, and my Mom is

probably smiling down at me in this moment. I know my parents would do it all over again. She is *right*.

‘You seem to a good human being, I haven’t ever seen a vulnerable man so close up.’ It feels like she’s seeing me exposed, raw and naked. And the strange thing is that I don’t feel any discomfort.

‘You have helped me with something really important, I don’t know how to thank you.’ I say and I really mean it.

There’s silence for a while and we regain our bearings by just looking out towards the huge dance floor as people dance their wits out.

She takes out her phone and takes a quick tour to the restroom, responding to some texts it appears.

She comes back all charged and offers me her hand.

‘Let’s go dance.’ We gulp down the remaining drink and I follow her like the college boy under the spell of a hot chic.

I don’t know if it’s alcohol, or her beauty with that edge, or her thighs that I can see in her short flowy dress, or those curves swaying with the beats, or the loud music. I don’t know but it feels like every cell in my body is a compass and she’s magnetic north. There’s a pull so strong that I almost step forward and my hands go around her waist while her hands rest on my arms.

She doesn’t hesitate. Her fingers grip my shirt, pulling me closer.

We dance in a rhythm so perfect; I am aware my eyes flick to her lips more than they should, our bodies pressing closer, it takes only seconds before our mouths crash together.

I kiss her. And she kisses me back. And it feels like the most natural thing in the world.

It starts with soft caresses but doesn't take much time before it becomes fervent and rough, her hands going around my neck, my one hand sliding behind her waist to hold her still, while the other sliding up her thigh, that makes her breath hitch.

Under normal circumstances, I would have held back a little. After all, we are in a public place with people looking at us. But now that I have touched her skin, there is no holding back. I want to rip her clothes off, and it feels like she wants to do the same with me.

I don't do *this*. I don't let a woman throw me off balance. But here I am, letting it happen.

We break apart, *breathless*.

She doesn't know how gorgeous she is.

'Where are you parked?' she asks, her voice husky.

I lead her through the crowd to the side door, the cool night air doing nothing to cool the fire between us.

She stops short when she sees the 'Reserved' sign on my parking spot. 'Okay, maybe I should now ask, who *are* you?'

I grin. 'You'll find out, eventually.'

A beat of silence.

Then she smirks. 'Back seat.'

As soon as I slide into the back seat, she follows, climbing into my lap without shrinking. I know this is the beginning of something I won't be able to forget.

Her dress rides up, exposing smooth skin that has been tormenting me all night. The moment our mouths collide, it's urgent, desperate, messy and wet. She tastes like vodka and citrus, intoxicating in the best

way possible. Her fingers thread through my hair, tugging with just enough force to make my pulse thunder.

My hands travel up her thighs and my fingers dig in her hips, feeling the heat of her skin, the way she is grinding against my rock hard cock. She's on fire, and I don't know how to extinguish it—not that I want to, but my conscience is telling me to stop. I don't want to fuck her in the backseat of my car for the *first time*.

Fuck, I don't even know if there's going to be a next time or if I am dreaming too far ahead in the future.

She moves with purpose, pressing closer, sending my restraint into a downward spiral.

'Are you sure?' I manage to rasp out, my forehead against hers, trying to catch a fleeting moment of clarity. I don't want her to regret anything tomorrow.

She answers by pulling me back into a kiss, deeper this time, more demanding. 'Just shut up and kiss me.'

And I do. God, I do. I kiss her like I need her to breathe, my mouth trailing down to her jaw, her neck, to her collarbone. She shudders against me, ripping open my shirt, her nails biting into my shoulders. My hands grip her waist, anchoring her to me as if letting go would mean losing this moment forever.

'You're *trouble*.' I murmur against her skin, my lips tracing a path down her neck and I hit the soft flesh of her bosom.

'Yet you seem to be enjoying it,' she counters, her voice low yet teasing, breathless.

I chuckle, but it's cut off by the way she moves against me, her confidence sending a new wave of heat

through my body. This woman—she's electric. Unapologetic. And I am utterly captivated.

I can feel my ridge slipping against her wetness, even with so many layers of fabric between them, and it sends shudders through my spine.

She slides one hand down the length of my aching hard cock, I swear I haven't heard myself growl like this, and then she does it again, an untamed flash of light in her eyes.

'Oh God, I guess Lara was *right*.' She gasps and then bites her lower lip.

Well, now...it's going to get *wild*.

I slide the thin fabric of her underwear to the side and find my thumb caressing her warm folds, and she throws her head backwards, moaning, God...that sound. It does indescribable things to my body, and I want to make her come so hard that she forgets she ever had trouble with men in her life.

We kiss, strumming over and over again. Our mouths deny being parted. She tries to unbuckle my belt.

Her phone buzzes against the seat. Once. Twice. She doesn't glance at it. Third time, she pulls back just enough to look at it, her lips slightly swollen, her eyes burning with something unreadable.

Incoming call...Samaira!

'I am sorry, I need to take this.'

She picks up the phone, her voice tight with worry—then suddenly, she's furious. She promises she'll be home soon. And hearing her drop jerk, bastard, and motherfucker in a row like a pro? Oddly refreshing.

She tugs up the straps of her dress and readjusts her strapless bra, all while continuing to murmur soothing words to Samaira.

‘Is everything alright?’ I ask, the protective instinct rising fast. Whoever hurt her—I want to find him and tear him apart.

‘No...it’s not. I need to go.’ She says, the mood shifts in an instant—from charged heat to sudden worry.

‘Can I at least drop you home?’ I offer.

‘Thanks, but that won’t be necessary, I have my friends waiting right behind us.’ She texts someone, I am assuming the friends. Well planned, I must compliment.

‘Can I at least give you my number?’ I ask, the words coming out more desperate than I intended.

She opens the door and jumps out, heels clicking softly.

‘Let’s not,’ she says, catching her breath. ‘Because...I will end up calling you. And then we’ll end up hurt...probably cursing each other in front of strangers.’

She pauses, looks at me for a beat—studying, almost wistful—then shakes her head with a small laugh. ‘But hey, thanks for the hottest make-out session of my life. I wish we could’ve had *more*.’

A car pulls up next to mine.

And just like that, she’s gone. Disappearing into the night like some beautiful, impossible dream—leaving me stunned, breathless, electrified, and absolutely certain of one thing: this isn’t just a one-time thing, there has to be *more*.

I'm grinning like an idiot, knowing Samaira's finally broken up with whoever-that-guy-was and that means I'll tell Aryan to finally buckle up. And that means I'll see Akshara again. She probably thinks it's just a moment in time, a fling tucked into the past.

But I have a good feeling—this is just the beginning.

EIGHT MONTHS LATER

CHAPTER THREE

Akshara

Have you ever been to an engagement ceremony? I am sure you have.

Have you been to a North-Indian engagement ceremony? Well, let me paint you a picture.

Imagine a grand ballroom dripping in chandeliers, the scent of fresh flowers clashing against the strong perfume of a three-hundred overdressed guests, and an army of waiters weaving through the chaos, balancing trays of food and drinks.

Then add to this lively scene an enthusiastic DJ whose only job seems to be switching between *dhol* beats and remixed Bollywood tracks every five minutes, as if the fate of the entire event depends on the exact volume of *Kala Chashma*.

And finally, multiply all of this by *ten*.

That's where I am right now.

As thrilled as I am for the love birds getting hitched, I can't say I am equally excited about being

trapped in a room full of relatives whose main objective in life is to interrogate me about my nonexistent love life and wedding plans. Some of my aunts, especially the ones on my mother's side, have an uncanny ability to extract gossip from thin air. Their brains seem to function as little data centers, constantly collecting information, storing it, and then broadcasting it at the next available family gathering.

Then there's this most annoying one, my Mom's elder sister. She has an impressive talent for assessing the value of every piece of gold and diamond within a five-foot radius. Right now, I can see her eyes locked onto the groom's mother's necklace while nodding approvingly. Oh, she's already got the price mentally calculated and probably impressed by its worth.

I exhale slowly, willing myself to get through this night without snapping at anyone. Because, really, I am already tired of people asking the utterly predictable, completely *unoriginal* questions.

'How did your sister meet such a rich boy?'

'Now that Samaira is engaged, don't you think it's time for you to settle down too?'

'You're at the perfect age for marriage! We should start looking for a nice boy for you!'

Urghhh.

It takes everything in me not to roll my eyes and tell them to mind their own *freaking* business.

Because, in case they missed the memo, I am doing just fine without a man in my life.

But let's not get distracted.

This night isn't about me. It's about my sister, and the beginning of her happily ever after. It's about *Samaira and Aryan*.

It's beyond heartwarming to watch these two together, who've survived the rollercoaster of life, separated for almost a decade before finally, getting to take the plunge into *forever together*.

My childhood partner-in-crime. The one person who has been there for me through every tantrum, every heartbreak, and every questionable life decision I've ever made. She has been my unofficial therapist, my personal cheerleader, and my greatest protector in the parental courtroom dramas of our household. She's the one who hands me lemons after a crazy night out and the one who gently (or *not-so-gently*) tells me to get my act together when no one else is watching. Basically, she's been a major part of my existence.

And today, she is getting engaged to *Aryan Singh Rathore*. I mean, seriously—why couldn't our middle-class parents at least give us names with that kind of royalty?

Just a heads-up though, if I start talking about Aryan, I might not stop.

I didn't even know men like Aryan existed. A man who practically worships the ground my sister walks on.

He's so adorable; compassionate, successful, head-over-heels in love, basically so freaking devoted and so ridiculously good-looking that it's almost unfair.

And the fact that I met him for the first time only a few months ago and now he's going to be my *brother-in-law*, but he already behaves like my protective elder brother, spoils me with gifts and looks out for my safety.

And I couldn't be happier. If anyone deserves happiness, it's Samaira. And she's found it with

Aryan. Finding someone who treasures you every moment isn't usual.

Seriously, Aryan is straight out of a classic romance novel, like he is born to love like an old-school romantic hero. It's in his *Rajput* blood, I swear. The way he makes sure that Samaira's dupatta doesn't drag on the floor. The way he somehow makes *just looking at her* feel like the grandest, most intimate love story ever written.

Don't blame me, I warned you I won't be able to stop.

Good that he doesn't have a brother. Because I am *off* men.

Well, some people find true love. Others, like me, go through the laborious process of *trying*. Six different specimens of men. Hours of flirting, chatting, sexting, dating, and sexing (if that's even a word). And what did I get?

Bored. Cheated on. Judged for being too comfortable in my own skin.

By the time my last *boyfriend*—cough—ex-boyfriend was overboard all the reasons, he was married. It was ridiculous, and I was done.

Done with relationships, done wasting time on men who couldn't even spell the word *effort*, and done with heartbreaks (I am still deciding if I really had one.)

So I made a decision. A firm, unshakable, no-going-back vow: *No more men. No more trusting. No more putting my heart in someone else's hands.* At this point, the only relationship I am invested in is with my vibrator—and even that's been running on overdrive lately.

Especially since that night.

That one reckless, mind-blowing night.

When I met the hottest man, I have *ever* seen.

I would've let him into my bed—or climbed right into his—without thinking twice. But destiny had other plans. One minute we were deep in the hottest make-out session of my life, and the next, I was rushing out to be with my sister. In hindsight, I'm grateful that the night unfolded the way it did. Because it was also the night Samaira decided to meet Aryan.

Maybe things really do happen for a reason. Maybe I was never meant to see him again. Because if I'd really experienced all of him, I might've already broken the vow I made to myself.

Coming back to reality, I am the textbook definition of an overworked, overstressed, but *ridiculously* well-dressed bridesmaid. Dashing from one place to another, adjusting the train of my *most stunning* outfit to keep from tripping, I am everywhere at once. One second, I am making sure Samaira's stubborn little forehead flick is neatly tucked back into her bun, the next, I am directing the placement of all the expensive gift boxes behind the stage, making sure they don't just disappear into the mysterious abyss of an Indian wedding. And in between all this madness, I am handing out fake but convincing smiles to every nosy guest who finds it their personal mission to interrogate the couple standing on the stage.

Meanwhile, the man of the hour—Aryan—seems completely unbothered by the circus surrounding him.

Chaos? What chaos? His eyes are locked on only her, as if she is the *only* thing that matters. It's visible in the way his gaze softens when he looks at her, the

way the corners of his lips lift into that subtle, secret smile only for her. The kind of smile that tells you everything without saying a word.

And my sister—the same ass-kicking, no-nonsense, independent force of nature I have admired my whole life—is actually *shy* tonight.

Shy and blushing.

All soft and sweet, trying to avoid eye contact with Aryan because she knows the moment she meets his gaze, she's done for.

I swear, it's adorable.

And just like that, it hits me.

A sharp, sudden wave of emotion crashes into me like a Bollywood slow-motion scene, except nobody is dramatically running in the rain—just me, standing in the middle of an extravagant ballroom, about to absolutely lose it in front of more than three hundred guests.

Because, holy hell, my sister is getting married in a few months. And she's leaving. She's going to move out, pack up her life, and snuggle into the arms of her perfect husband.

What on earth am I supposed to do without her?

Sit alone in our apartment like an abandoned pet?

Oh god, I am *not* ready for this. I can't believe we have grown up so fast.

I need to get out of here before I start ugly crying in front of a bunch of aunties.

So, I do the only thing I can think of—I step down from the stage, pretending to casually get some water, but in reality? I am just desperately trying to buy myself a moment to breathe. And to keep my perfectly lined mascara from turning me into a tragic raccoon.

Out of nowhere, my eyes land on a tall, broad-shouldered figure pulling Aryan into a tight hug.

And just like that—my heart skips a *freaking* beat.

No. No way. That silhouette is way too familiar.

Before I can even begin to process the gut-punching realization, Samaira turns to me and gives me a wave—the signature *get your ass here* wave. As the best bridesmaid ever, I jump into action, suddenly buzzing with enthusiasm, and rush toward the stage as fast as my multi-layered cage of a dress will allow—praying to every higher power that I don't face plant.

But just as I take that final step onto the stage...

He turns.

And BAM.

I freeze.

I swear, my heart thuds like the dramatic beat of a drum just before the dance break. I stare at him like I've seen a ghost—except ghosts don't usually come with smoldering eyes, a criminally sharp jawline, and a body sculpted by the gods themselves.

And then—he does it.

That slow, *sexy smile*.

The one that made my stomach flip, the one that made my brain turn into cotton candy, and the one that made my knees dangerously close to giving out. The same smile that made me willingly climb onto his lap, wrap my arms around his shoulders, and—

Nope. Not going there. Not thinking about it.

I inhale sharply. *Please don't recognize me. Please don't recognize me.*

But of course, that's wishful thinking.

Because how do you forget the girl who almost pushed you into a scandalous make out session in the backseat of your black Range Rover?

How do you erase the memory of half-naked bodies, tangled fingers, breathless whispers, and lips that tasted like temptation and very, very bad decisions?

Spoiler alert: *you can't*.

And isn't it just hilarious that I thought I'd never see him again?

That I haven't spent an *embarrassing* amount of time thinking about that night?

That I definitely haven't replayed that backseat scene a hundred times in my head on loop? Every time my vibrator took the credit.

Nope. Not at all.

I kept telling myself it wasn't me who was sweating, moaning, and gripping his biceps like my life depended on it. It wasn't me who lost every ounce of self-control with the most *attractive* man I've ever met. It wasn't me whose tongue refused to come out of his mouth, or vice versa. I don't know.

And now.

Here he is.

Standing right in front of me.

At my sister's engagement.

His eyes hold mine a few seconds longer than they should, something dark and amused flashing in them, and just as I start contemplating *actual escape routes*—

Samaira, in her infinite enthusiasm, introduces us.

'Akki, this is Devesh. Aryan's best friend. I was so looking forward to you two meeting!'

I can handle this. But I can't handle her calling me with my *stupid* nickname in front of him.

The best man & the maid of honor.

Rings a bell?

Hot make outs in silky gowns after the wedding ceremony...yeah, yeah. It's a classic scenario. But in this case?

The hot make out has already happened.

And now, all the oh-so-indecent images come rushing back in my mind, full force.

I can still feel his hands sliding up my thighs on the dance floor, his fingers digging in my skin, way too high for innocence at a public place. The heat of his touch on my skin like he owned every inch of it. And *the kiss*—God, that kiss. How do I erase it from my mind?

But here's the real kicker—he doesn't show a flicker of recognition.

And I don't know whether to feel relieved or deeply offended.

Because let's get one thing straight—he was the one whispering things like '*You're so fucking beautiful.*' He was the one *insisting* we exchange numbers, saying we had to meet again.

And now?

Nothing.

Then, he does what's expected in such a scenario, he extends his hand with a polite, charming smile and says, 'Hi Akshara! I've heard so much about you, it's so great to finally meet you.'

Oh. My. God.

I want to grab him by the collar and ask him, 'Really? You've heard a lot about me? Because I am

pretty sure you've already heard me moaning against the leather seats of your car!'

But instead?

I just stand there like an absolute idiot, my brain short-circuiting at the sound of my name dripping from his lips.

And that voice? Husky, smooth, unfairly seductive.

Just like I remember.

Oh, and that adoring smile? The same damn smile he had when I was riding his hardness, writhing and panting.

Suddenly, I am not standing at an engagement party anymore. No, my unfaithful brain yanks me right back to that night—the heat, the reckless hunger, his mouth on my skin, his fingers gripping my hips like he never wanted to let go.

I am feeling things. Very *inappropriate* things.

This is not what I need right now.

I am not the type of girl to get flustered by men. I've been around their kind for my whole life, and I do not get nervous. Ever.

That's my thing—*confidence*.

I need to channel that. Like, right now. Calling all my inner powers to activate.

But then...

My cheeks flush. Because my body is an absolute traitor, and my mind is still reliving every second of his lips sucking on my neck and shoulder like he was starving for me.

And now I have to somehow act normal.

So I clear my throat, force a casual smile, and take his hand.

‘Hi Devesh, likewise. Pleasure to meet you.’ I stutter, shouldn’t have said *pleasure*.

But it was indeed a pleasure to meet him.

And it is still a pleasure, just looking at him.

He’s dressed to kill in a charcoal grey suit—cut to perfection over his broad chest. Paired with a bone-white shirt, the collar slightly open.

Scratch that—he could wear anything. Or nothing at all.

And he’d still look like he has just stepped off the cover of *GQ: Heartbreaker Edition*.

His hair is different from the unruly curls that fell over his forehead the last time I saw him. Now, it’s slicked back, wet-looking, and every bit irresistible.

And the beard? Perfectly trimmed, dangerously sexy. It’s like he took one look at the world and thought, *let’s make it even harder for women to focus on anything but me*.

Mission accomplished, *sir*.

He is exactly the kind of man your mother warns you about. Which is why it is shocking to see *my* mother giving him that chimpanzee smile—you know, the one she reserves for diamond jewelry and five-star buffets.

And when he does that chivalrous *Namaste*, she looks like she just won a damn lottery.

But oh, wait. She’s not alone.

I scan the room and, yep—there are more lottery winners. These are all our very *happily married* women, practically drooling.

Honestly? I can’t even blame them.

Because standing here, looking like sin wrapped in expensive fabric, is none other than devilish looking Devesh.

I am sure he knows exactly what effect he has on women.

And yet, he remains calm, composed, utterly unbothered.

Like women swooning over him is just part of his daily routine.

Like he expects it.

But his eyes? They're locked onto mine. He's smiling.

And that just makes everything worse.

Thankfully, Aryan's Mom—Nita aunty sweeps in.

She hugs him, warm and motherly, like she's greeting a long-lost son.

'Devesh...how have you been, *beta*? I've been asking Aryan to call you home, but he keeps telling me not to bother you until the IPO is done.'

IPO – Initial Public Offering.

Of course. We're talking investments. Stocks. Wealth.

Of course, this man isn't just a pretty face and an *obscene* amount of charm—he's also loaded.

Devesh, ever the perfect gentleman, touches her feet in respect, apologizing for not making time recently.

Nita aunty beams, clearly overjoyed, and continues, 'Uncle has been waiting to meet you...come with me.'

And just like that, she whisks away the most eligible bachelor in the ballroom.

As he follows her, down the small set of stairs, offering polite nods to his *still-in-awe* fan club.

And me?

I turn on my heels and march straight to the bar.

Because, damn it, *I need a drink*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Devesh

‘Akshara! Mind if I join you?’ She jolts, spinning around just as she’s about to tell the bartender her order.

Her reaction makes me smirk. She, clearly, wasn’t expecting me.

And damn, I wasn’t expecting her to look this...*breathtaking*.

She looks stunning in this outfit, a soft beige base, shimmering with delicate golden accents that catches the light with every movement. The fabric clings to her curves in ways that should be illegal, and the cropped top effortlessly draws my attention to her toned waist.

My breath catches, but I mask it with a friendly smile. She’s the kind of beauty that doesn’t need to try hard, the kind that simply exists.

Raw. Elegant. Effortless. And way too tempting.

The same as I remember.

I catch a glimpse of her features up close, those full, expressive lips, and I am suddenly tempted to taste them *again*, her almond-colored eyes that sparkle in the lighting. Her hair flows down her back in loose, effortless curls.

‘Of course,’ she says, stepping aside with an easy grace, her dress swishing gently.

I glance at the bartender and order, ‘A screwdriver for the lady and Whiskey sour for me.’

She blinks. I catch the flicker of surprise in her eyes.

Was she expecting me to not remember? That would have been *impossible*.

That night.

Our glasses clink softly, the noise swallowed by the chatter around us.

‘Of course you remember me’ She says, the corners of her lips curling into something that could cause serious cardiac damage.

I lean in just a fraction, enough to watch her pulse quicken at her throat. ‘How could I forget the most beautiful woman I’ve met?’

Her lips twitch like she’s trying not to smile. ‘Isn’t that a little too cheesy, *Devesh Oberoi*?’

The way she says my name—soft, smooth, just the right amount of teasing—sends a ripple of heat through me.

God! She is getting under my skin so easily. What if she’s this stunning, enigmatic and intelligent woman I’ve been thinking about non-stop since our last encounter? In all appropriate and not so appropriate ways.

‘So, you’ve heard about me?’ I ask, letting the words roll out casually, like I haven’t rehearsed this scenario in my head a dozen times.

She tilts her head, mischief lighting up her eyes. ‘*Of course*. I’ve heard about the youngest CEO, and used his app like a hundred times. PlanMyTrip is my

travel BFF. And yeah,' she pauses dramatically, 'I've followed the IPO news too.

And then she gives me that look. That same playful, trouble-making look that knocked me off balance the first time.

'So, you are like...a real-life tech giant CEO?' she says, pointing a finger at me accusingly.

'It's hot, right?' I say, dropping my voice just a touch lower.

For a beat, she just stares. Her lips part slightly. Her hands come up like she's trying to will them into stillness.

'I mean...' she blinks, 'sort of... yes.'

And just like that, she's laughing, shaking her head at me like I'm some glorious mistake she's half-tempted to make again.

'But to be fair,' she adds, sipping her drink, 'you didn't *look* like a CEO that night.'

I chuckle. 'Oh yeah? What does a CEO look like, exactly?'

She gestures at me. 'Like this. Tailored suit...perfectly combed hair. The whole *I-own-half-the-world* vibe.'

I laugh. 'I don't think I should take the latter part as a compliment. And how did I look, exactly? If you would like to throw some more light on that.'

A beat of silence. I can see her guard starting to slide, layers of armor coming right up.

'Well, you looked like someone who is *used to* women melting when you walk into a room.' Her gaze lingers on mine for a second too long, too challenging.

I am not sure why would I accept it so easily, but I do, ‘I don’t think that’s true...because here I am...just trying to get past your ten layers of armor.’

She chuckles, ‘You can save yourself from the effort. I built them myself. No user manual included.’

‘By the way, you look beautiful,’ I say, simply.

‘Oh... okay... well... thank you,’ she replies, like it was totally unnecessary.

‘You look fine yourself,’ she mutters, trying to sound casual. But I catch it—the flicker in her eyes. The one that says it landed exactly where I wanted it to.

I want to tell her more, just a little nudge. ‘Thank you. Well, I was looking forward to meeting you.’ I say, with the tiniest grin.

Her eyes widen instantly.

‘Oh. My. God.’ She steps back slightly, pointing her finger at me. ‘You KNEW me. You clearly knew me!’

I smirk, lifting my glass. ‘Technically, I didn’t know you. I had just seen a picture of you.’

She narrows her eyes. ‘Excuse me? Truth out. *Now!*’

I shrug, taking a slow sip of my drink.

‘You see that guy standing on the stage?’ I dramatically point my finger towards Aryan. ‘Completely obsessed with the girl next to him. So we were having a chat and I guess...I was challenging him to make a move, and he happened to show me pictures of Samaira with some random guy to prove that she had a boyfriend. But all I could see...was the bright, gorgeous third wheel in the frame.’

‘Why didn’t you say anything?’ She demands.

‘Well, I wanted to tell you.’ I pause. ‘But you made some rules. And you swore by them.’

She arches one brow in suspicion. ‘Okay, got it... my *fault*.’

I grin. ‘Can I say thank you for doing the *fault*?’

‘Oh, wait a minute,’ she cuts in, ‘It was your fault too! You plied me with vodka cocktails and tequila shots all night.’

I chuckle. ‘I hope it wasn’t just the alcohol that made you do it. I wouldn’t want it to be just that.’

I am pushing my luck a little, but I can’t help it.

She’s...*different*.

And I don’t just mean the killer looks, the sassy comebacks, or the way her lips curve slightly when she’s trying not to smile.

I mean *her*. The way she talks, unfiltered and unbothered. The way she moves, with effortless confidence.

And the way she made me feel that night—like I was *actually* living, like the weight of the world wasn’t sitting on my shoulders for once.

I had convinced myself that I had no time for relationships; my company was my life. My work was my priority and all I ever wanted was to be the fastest growing in the industry, thinking ahead of everyone and claim the world. But she made it all look like a *lie*. Just like that. Without even trying. How was that possible?

I never smiled this much in years. Hell, I am pretty sure I was grinning like an idiot the entire time we spoke. And when she sat on my lap? Let’s not even get started.

But tonight, I am realizing something else too.

There's more to her.

And maybe—just maybe—I underestimated just how much she'd get under my skin.

She shakes her head, snapping me out of my thoughts. 'Let's not pretend like we're long-lost lovers reuniting by fate.'

Ah. There she is. Sassy, sharp, impossible-to-pin-down Akshara.

'No fate, huh?'

She smirks. 'No fate.'

But the way her eyes flicker to my lips for a split second?

I am willing to bet she doesn't quite believe that. Because there was definitely some amount of fate.

'You got to trust me on this one,' I say, my voice dipping a little lower without meaning to.

I clear my throat, forcing myself to keep it light. 'I was eagerly waiting to meet you.'

I feel it. That same pull I felt when we locked our eyes on the dance floor that night. The unspoken, electric connection that neither of us acknowledged, yet couldn't ignore.

I remember the way she looked at me then—how her lips parted slightly, how she held my gaze like she was *daring* me to do something about it. I remember cupping her face, the way she exhaled when I pulled her close, and then—

That kiss.

That stupid, incredible, mind-wrecking kiss on the dance floor.

She's looking at me now, and for a moment, I swear she remembers it too. Her mouth opens like

she's about to say something, but then she closes it again. A flicker of hesitation, an internal war.

Déjà vu.

That was the exact moment something *shifted* in me that night, something I hadn't even realized had been locked away.

And now? Now, she's looking around, like she's searching for an escape route. 'Alright, well, I appreciate your honesty. And if I am being honest... I am off dating...and relationships. Like I told you the last time we met.'

I should have expected that. But somehow, the words still land like a punch I wasn't braced for.

She's so close. Just inches away. And I can smell it—the same spicy, sandalwood scent that I remembered from that night. Except this time, it's free of the vodka and sweat.

'Yeah, I remember.' I nod, keeping my expression unreadable. 'I am not even going there...I am just saying that I was genuinely looking forward to meeting you. Is that a red flag?'

She lets out a sarcastic laugh. 'No...it isn't. But trust me, you wouldn't look forward to meeting me if you meet me a few times.'

My heart clenches at that but she continues.

'Well...I would just say one thing...let's deal with it like mature adults and not let it get awkward.'

That's not the same woman I met that night. That woman had let her guard down. Had trusted me with things she swore she'd never told anyone.

Now, she's trying to slip away. And I don't want to let her.

‘Okay...’ I say slowly, watching her carefully.
‘Sounds like being friends.’

The second I say it, I regret it.

Friends? That’s the absolute *last* thing I want.

But I have a feeling that if I push too much, I’ll lose her entirely.

She nods, the tension breaking just a little. ‘Yup. Friends is good.’

And then, as if she needs to put even more distance between us, she shifts gears completely. ‘By the way, congratulations on the big milestone. When are you getting listed? I am planning to apply for the IPO and be your shareholder.’ She winks.

The safe topic. The one thing she knows won’t lead us back to *us*.

I run a hand through my hair, letting out a small exhale. ‘Just a few weeks. Pretty close now.’

I should be excited. I *am* excited. This is the biggest moment of my career. But right now?

I don’t care nearly as much as I should.

‘Must have been a journey,’ she muses, tilting her head. ‘It’s a big deal.’

I nod. ‘Hmm, yeah. Incredible and crazy. I didn’t anticipate such a grind.’

She hums thoughtfully. ‘Well, I am sure it’ll be worth, and you’ll have a great response. I mean, I am no financial expert, but I know your proposition has a lot of potential. Investors will see it.’

Something about her confidence in me—especially when I hadn’t even asked for it—makes my chest tighten.

‘Thanks,’ I say, giving her a nod. ‘I really hope so.’

‘I will have to go; the ring ceremony is about to start.’ She says.

‘Yeah, sure. I will see you around.’

She just nods, ‘All the best for your big day.’

I watch her walk away, her dress swaying with every step, and I hate that I let her go so easily.

Friends.

Because nothing about what happened between us felt friendly. Nothing about the way my body still reacts to hers, the way my pulse hammers when she looks at me, is remotely *friendly*.

And yet, I let her play it cool. I’ll play along.

For now.

Because I see it—the way she carefully constructs that distance, the way she guards herself. But I also see past it. I can’t shake the feeling that she’s not entirely uninterested in what might come next.

I congratulate Aryan and Samaira once again and seek blessings from Uncle- Aunty before I prepare to step out of the banquet hall.

I should leave. I have piles of work waiting for me, my travel itinerary waiting in my inbox for review, a few other legal documents waiting for my signatures for submission tomorrow, a few unexpected issues probably on fire. The IPO filing is a lot of work, mere documentation is a havoc, and I should be focusing on that.

But for some reason, I can’t seem to walk away.

At least until I catch her eye one last time before leaving.

I watch her laughing at something Samaira says, her head tilted back slightly, the soft glow of the chandelier making her look even more radiant.

She turns, spotting me.
A smile...and a quick wave.
That's all.
But it's enough.
Because I decide right then—
Next time, I am not letting her slip away so easily.

CHAPTER FIVE

Akshara

It's Samaira's b'day and we are celebrating at Aryan's house. Thank God Samaira's ex-boyfriend is officially out of the picture, who planned last three of her birthdays at the same restaurant and called it a *surprise*. One less encounter to worry about.

But there's still Devesh. And if I haven't completely misread him during our last meeting...which was also the first official meeting, he's definitely going to be there.

Not that it matters. I mean, this isn't a Netflix rom-com where the rich, ridiculously attractive tech company CEO, who casually dates models, just happens to be my one-night hookup and—against all logic—falls madly in love with me. Nope. That's not how my life works.

So, my plan? Stay composed. Keep my head high. Act like absolutely *nothing* ever happened between us.

Simple. Totally manageable.

I head straight to Aryan's place after work, where Samaira immediately shoves a dress into my arms. It's her birthday, and apparently, she's taken the liberty of styling me for the night. Is she switching roles with

me? Which would have been fine—except I am pretty sure she’s trying to set me up.

There’s no other explanation for *this* dress.

An emerald-green, short sequin number with an off-shoulder cut on one side and a dramatic frilled sleeve on the other. It’s the kind of dress that screams *main character energy*. The kind that makes it impossible to fade into the background. And right now, I’d really prefer to be the background material.

I groan, but Samaira just winks and practically pushes me toward the mirror.

‘This is perfect,’ she declares, satisfied with her matchmaking efforts. ‘Trust me, you’ll thank me later.’

Unlikely.

But whatever. She’s the birthday girl, and I am not about to kill her buzz. So, I do a quick touch-up of makeup, swipe on some lip color, and brace myself for the night.

And then—because fate loves making things difficult—I spot *him* the moment I step outside the room.

Devesh Oberoi.

Standing in the foyer. Looking every inch irresistible, wrapped in a black shirt and denims.

Seriously, who gave him the right to be this attractive?

His hair is slightly tousled, like he just ran a hand through it. His sleeves folded up just enough to hint at the kind of arms that belong on a Calvin Klein billboard. And his jawline? Let’s just say it’s sharp enough to cut through my self-control.

I swear I don't mean to stare. I *don't*. But then his gaze snaps at me.

And he stops in his steps.

Just for a second.

His dark eyes lock onto mine, his expression unreadable, except for the slow, unmistakable curl of his lips. That stupid, stupid, heart-stopping smile.

Oh, no.

I feel my heart do something traitorous—like *skip a beat*—which is unbelievable, because it never happens with me. I have had boyfriends, in plural, and it doesn't happen to me.

The only thing I need to do right now is walk down the hall like nothing is happening.

Like my knees aren't threatening to betray me.

Like I didn't just feel an electric current zap through my body at the sight of him.

Like Devesh Oberoi is just another guy at this party.

Spoiler alert: *He's not*.

The freaking hot billionaire whom I have been googling for two entire weeks and probably know everything about him that's on the internet, and about his family.

I've watched every single interview he's ever done—on PlanMyTrip's socials, tech panels, travel boards, you name it—and yes, I've scrolled through all the comments too ranging from '*You are a genius*' to '*I want to marry you*'.

And from the way his smirk deepens, he knows *exactly* what I am thinking, I have a feeling this night is about to get a lot more complicated.

He greets Samaira with a warm hug, a perfectly wrapped birthday gift in hand, and then, his gaze finds mine.

‘Akshara,’ he says, his voice smooth as ever.

‘Devesh.’ I nod back, keeping my expression neutral.

A brief pause. A charged silence.

He doesn’t look away. And I refuse to be the first one to blink.

I can feel the heat creeping up my neck, my cheeks burning, but I keep my face impassive. *Keep your head high. Stay away from him. You can do this.*

And then—because he’s *Devesh freaking Oberoi* and the universe enjoys making my life difficult—he runs his tongue over his bottom lip.

It’s a completely innocent gesture, but my body has other ideas. *Betrayal*, my brain screams, as my stomach does an actual flip. Because I *know* what that tongue is capable of.

I *know* how it feels to have those strong thighs under me, how my body trembled with pleasure when his hands gripped my waist, his brooding jaw clenched beneath my fingers. And the strangest part, nothing happened, and it still feels like *everything* happened.

Nope. Abort mission. Do not go down that memory lane.

Samaira clears her throat, loud and exaggerated, clearly trying to break the tension. But I won’t be the one to crack first. He might be a billionaire, but in *this* moment? I hold the power.

Luckily, Aryan chooses that exact moment to come up from behind and pat Devesh on the shoulder.

And just like that, the spell is broken.

I take the opportunity to escape, heading straight for the bar counter. A drink sounds like a great idea. A snack? Even better. I am *definitely* not stress eating—I am just hungry.

That's my story, and I am sticking to it.

But then, of course, he is suddenly right there.

Towering over me, even in my heels.

Looking every bit like a problem I don't need.

I suddenly *really* wish I didn't know how he looks with his shirt buttons open, or how strong his arms are, and how big he probably is down there. Ignoring him would be so much easier if I were blissfully unaware of those facts.

He reaches for the bottle, offering to pour me the wine in my empty glass.

His voice is casual, but there's something underneath it. Something unreadable.

'I wanted to thank you for something.'

I frown, glancing up at him. 'Thank me? For what?'

And just like that, my pulse is racing again. Because knowing him? *Whatever* he's about to say is going to be trouble for my self-restraint.

'You helped me with something I was struggling with,' Devesh says, his voice steady but laced with something softer, something... unexpected.

I blink. 'What are we exactly talking about?'

His eyes hold mine. 'I saw your video...the one on...umm...asking for help.'

Oh.

I didn't know I lived for his approval, but *there it is*. A warmth spreads through me.

‘Wow, you saw my IG video posts? Didn’t know you had time for that.’

He leans slightly against the counter, casual yet composed. ‘Of course I did. I’ve been following you for a while. And I really appreciate your work. You always find a way to present such deep messages with just the right amount of humor.’

I fight hard to keep my face neutral, but inside? *Spiraling.*

It really means a lot when someone sees my work for what it is. Coming from *him*, it’s like a morale booster I didn’t even know I needed. Most people assume my rants are just for engagement, and for getting more followers.

He actually *gets* it.

‘Thanks.’ I clear my throat. ‘So...whom did you ask for help?’

He exhales, rolling his whiskey glass between his fingers. ‘My board. I am hiring a COO now to take some load off my shoulders.’

Wait, *what?*

‘I have watched all your videos. But when I saw this one, I don’t even remember the exact count of how many times, but it felt like you were speaking directly to me.’

Wow. That video helped a *tech multinational CEO?*

I never expected that.

‘That must be difficult for you,’ I say, studying his face. ‘Sharing responsibility. Letting go of control.’

He chuckles lightly. ‘Yeah, a little for sure. And how about you? Is it difficult for you too—sharing

your personal experiences online? Once you say something, you can't take it back.'

I smirk. 'Wow, how dark are your secrets?'

His laugh is low, genuine. 'No, I mean—I am not that open when it comes to talking about personal things.'

'Hmm,' I say, swirling the last sip of my drink. 'That's the thing, though, isn't it? We shy away from talking about the most important things in life, and then we end up, stifled.'

'Hmm...I agree. But isn't there a point where, you know...you draw the line.' He asks, curious.

'That's the problem.' I cut in, smiling slightly. 'What's *that* point? We always move the point, push it further, pretend it doesn't matter. But the truth is, *it does matter*.'

His eyes search mine for a beat, like he's actually considering my words.

'The point of my handle,' I continue, 'is to make people feel empowered. To say things they want to say, without the fear of judgement.'

He nods slowly. 'Well, I see the point. It takes *courage* to be able to think like that.'

I pause, his words settling into my chest in a way I don't quite expect.

'I don't know,' I say, laughing softly. 'That might just be the quickest any man has agreed with me on this point. They generally don't seem to get the reason.'

He grins, taking a sip of his whiskey, 'You definitely haven't met the right man yet.'

And just like that, the air shifts.

The conversation doesn't feel like a game anymore.

It feels like something *more*.

Aryan's cousin Ishika and her husband join us, and we chit-chat for a while. She is one of the coolest married women, in fact a mother, I have met. She is kind of inspiring in a way how she manages things in life. Aryan is really fond of her as a sibling, and I get along well with her.

Aryan's parents and a few more friends also arrive. There's a round of meet-and-greet before we all settle into the cozy living area with our drinks. Everyone's chatting, laughing, and talking about the wedding preparations.

Aryan's parents seem to be genuinely nice people, completely opposite from the in-laws' vibes.

And their love story? Picture this: It's the 80s, full of intense family drama, but—against all odds—they eloped from a *super* possessive royal family just to be together. *Iconic*. And even today, they're still that perfect, fit-as-ever, good looking couple who somehow don't even look old enough to have a son getting married.

Talk about a legacy of love and good genes.

It's no surprise Aryan grew up with this idea that love should be *epic*. That when he found the one, he wouldn't just fall in love—he would make it his life's mission to win her. And now, here he is, doing exactly that.

This whole family feels like a *developed nation* in front of mine—still stuck somewhere between progress and tradition, still struggling to find its footing.

From our side of the family? It's just me and Samaira. Like always.

Probably my parents don't believe that driving five hours from *Dehradun* for attending *just* a birthday party is worth the effort, but Aryan's family? They're here, present, invested. It's... jarring.

I try to divert my mind with the sumptuous food that is being served by the caterer hired for this party, despite having enough house help who could have done it with some extra tip.

Which world is this?

Of the riches, I remind myself.

I watch as Nita aunty clinks her glass with her husband and casually chats with Samaira about upcoming shopping plans. She doesn't bat an eye at the alcohol. No judgment, no whispered remarks.

I've seen my Mom despise women who drink, judge them for being bad influences, for setting the *wrong* example. Not that it's entirely her fault—she's a product of her own environment, just like I am.

This feels different. It's unsettling in the best way possible.

Being away from work for a few months has changed *so much*.

I got my first-ever reporter stint covering the *Maharashtra elections*, which was a *huge* deal for me. But somehow, the timing felt...odd.

Because the last thing that happened before I got this offer? *He* touched me.

Like some kind of *lucky charm*, he was the last lingering memory before I got swept away into political rallies, breaking news, and long nights

writing reports. And now, coming back? Everything feels different.

Samaira practically moved in with Aryan while I was gone, meeting his parents almost every weekend. She filled me in on *everything* through our mandatory night time calls—but still it feels like I missed out on things.

Devesh also joined them for a few dinners.

But the strangest part? The guy Samaira's been talking about as Devesh on the phone and the real Devesh I know? They don't seem to be the same person.

I should be happy that my sister has found a new friend in him. But there's this... *tiny* part of me that feels a bit sore.

The classic scenario when your best friend becomes friends with other people and you don't like it. Anyway. It's not a great idea to confront your best friend, which I would have done if I was twelve.

Samaira wasn't accepting a drink today—she's recovering from a viral infection—and Devesh, of all people, offered to make her *chai*.

From my spot on the couch, I see him in the kitchen, sleeves rolled up, hair slightly messy, completely at ease. Like he *owns* the damn place. The way he effortlessly moves, smooth and controlled.

Okay. *Let me breathe... you handsome devil.*

I tell myself *not* to watch. *Not* to care. But my feet have a mind of their own.

I find myself excusing from the couch and slipping into the kitchen to pick up something to munch, and land up right next to him.

I don't know *why*. Because I have had three drinks when everyone else is still at their first.

'You seem to know everything about this house...and the kitchen, surprisingly.'

Devesh glances at me, then back at the simmering *chai*, his fingers casually adjusting the flame. 'Yeah, I've spent a lot of drunken nights here, cooking breakfast the next morning.' He pauses, his jaw tightening just slightly. 'After my parents...I couldn't stay alone in our house in Delhi. It kind of...haunted me. So, this place became like a second home to me. Or maybe it was *first*.'

There's something raw in his voice, something unguarded.

The rich, spiced aroma of ginger fills the kitchen, wrapping around us like an invisible thread pulling me closer. Before I can stop myself, I blurt out, 'Do you really know how to cook?'

He smirks, reading my expression. 'Is it so unbelievable? A man knowing how to cook?'

'No, it must be a necessity, for every human being to know basic cooking...but it's just...you know...you must have house helps. And a crazy schedule. It's unlikely for someone as wealthy as you to *need* to cook.'

He chuckles, stirring the tea. 'You're right. I don't really need to cook. But, I like to. My Mom was an amazing cook. I got a bit of her passion, I guess. And it helps me stay connected with her.'

His words hit me somewhere deep, making my chest ache. The urge to *hug* him—to comfort him—rises out of nowhere. It's irrational, and reckless.

Although I've never been known for doing the right thing, I am *not* the same now.

Thankfully, before I can react, he turns to me, his tone shifting.

'Can I thank you properly with a dinner this weekend?'

I blink. 'Sorry, what?'

'I am asking you out for dinner.' He says as if it's completely normal for him to ask me out.

'That's...umm...fast.'

His lips curl into a slow, teasing smile. 'Do you like it slow?'

Oh God. The glint in his eyes, the way his tongue runs over his lower lip—he's *too* good at this.

I raise an eyebrow, keeping my expression cool. 'Well, it depends. On the circumstances. But right now, I don't want to...fast or slow. Nothing.'

His smirk falters at my response. 'I know you're strong headed. But I would still request you to reconsider your decision.'

'That's really chivalrous of you...but the thing is that I am trying to stay away from *all things male*. I hope you can understand.'

Then he tilts his head, 'Alright! I'll respect your decision...*until I can change it.*'

Something stirs in my stomach. Excitement? Annoyance? Both?

He seems like a man who is used to getting things the way he wants. I am pretty sure I am not ready to jump into the game of dating and getting hurt again, then why do I desperately want him to change it.

Before I can overthink it, he steps closer, casually picking up the tray with a cup. ‘Come on, the *chai* is ready.’

I follow him back to the living room, where laughter fills the air. Aryan and Samaira seem to be in a deep conversation and the way Aryan is looking at her. For the first time, a strange pang of longing hits me.

I’ve never been *looked at* like that.

Devesh hands me a plate of appetizers, his fingers brushing against mine for the briefest moment. Once again, our eyes meet.

And my heart does something *stupid*. Against all my counselling and reprimands.

A sharp plunge into something dangerously close to hope. A possibility of something special, just like the warmth in his gaze.

CHAPTER SIX

Devesh

The first chill of winter settles over North of India towards the end of November, casting a dull grey over the city skyline. From my cabin on the top floor, I take in the view, the weight of the title outside my door—CEO & MD—settling heavily on my shoulders. Under different circumstances, it would have thrilled me. But not like this.

Dad always dreamed of setting up an office in this very building in cyber hub. And now, here it is. But he’s not here to see it. And I am not sure what to feel about the confusing outcomes of the investigation of

Dad's untraceable transactions, my head always jumps to conclusions, while my heart says it's not possible.

And what if that's *true*. What if Mom was aware of it?

The past tense still feels wrong when I think about them.

I push the thought away, but it lingers, creeping into the silence. Work should be my escape; the IPO is just three days away. I need to focus. But the only thing that's keeping me sane is thinking about...*her*.

Akshara Sharma – the fire ball.

For the past few days, she's been haunting my thoughts in the most inconvenient yet pleasant way. I try to focus on things—trust me, I try—but all I can think about is the way she looks at me. Like she can see straight through my carefully curated world. Like she is about to demolish the walls where I kept my true-self locked.

Like she is about to make everything right in my life. Like she is about to crash my idea of being sufficient without love; the idea of not having time and energy to invest in a relationship.

It's downright cliché because I have met her just three damn times.

But is it? Because for the first time in a long time, someone isn't impressed by my title or my money. Someone isn't giving in just because I want it.

Because it was what she said—something so simple, yet it settled the storm inside me just enough to make a little peace with the loss. I used to be haunted by those images—my parents' bruised bodies covered with blood, the wreckage of the car that needed to be cut open just to pull them out. For years,

I'd wake up to that nightmare like clockwork. But that was before her.

Now, I sleep thinking about her, and wake up thinking about her.

And I want to meet her. Really *bad*.

Before I can stop myself, I grab my phone and type out a message, my first text message to her.

Me: *Have dinner with me tonight.*

A few seconds later, the screen lights up with her reply.

Akshara: *Hi Devesh, I am good, thanks for asking. How are you?*

I smirk. She's impossible.

Me: *I really need to see you.*

There's a long pause before her response pops up.

Akshara: *That's... intense... for a second text message.*

Akshara: *Aren't you supposed to be buried in work with the big day coming up?*

Me: *Trying to put that aside for a while.*

Akshara: *Just to clarify again, this isn't a date!*

I groan. The friend-zone strikes again. But right now, I'll take what I can get.

Me: *Alright, have dinner with me... as a FRIEND. Better?*

Akshara: *Yes, better.*

I raise an eyebrow.

Me: *So, is that a yes?*

The three dots appear, teasing me. Then they disappear. I exhale, running a hand through my hair. When did I start holding my breath over a text message?

And finally, the answer comes through.

Akshara: *Ok.*

A slow grin spreads across my face.

I might not have won the battle, but at least I am still in the game.

I sit at the table, tapping my fingers against the surface, my glass of water barely touched. I don't get nervous. And yet, here I am, checking my watch like a lovesick teenager.

And then, she walks in.

A simple mustard color cotton kurta, sleek black leggings stopping just at her ankles, a tiny black *bindi* sitting perfectly between her brows, and silver dangling earrings that sway gently with every step.

I swear to God, I never knew a black dot on a woman's forehead could be this sexy.

I stand up instinctively as she reaches the table, pulling out her chair.

She lets out a soft laugh, shaking her head. 'Oh God, Devesh, you really don't have to do that. I can get my own chair.'

I smirk. 'I know you're a strong, independent woman. But I am also a gentleman.'

She rolls her eyes but takes the seat, adjusting the delicate silver bracelet on her wrist.

'So...' she says, all nonchalant, as if we don't have any history. As if I haven't spent sleepless nights replaying every second of that damn backseat encounter. 'What exactly are we doing here?'

I narrow my eyes, trying to figure her out. Is she pretending there's nothing between us on purpose? Is this some twisted game to make me beg for her attention?

I lean back in my chair, keeping my tone casual.
‘The plan is to eat food.’

She raises an eyebrow. ‘That’s it?’

‘For now.’ I shoot her a slow, knowing smile.
‘We’ll see where the night takes us.’

Her lips curve into a smirk, but she doesn’t say anything. Instead, she picks up the menu, her fingers casually trailing over the pages, still shaking her head in disbelief.

‘What?’ I lean forward, resting my elbows on the table. ‘You’re not satisfied with my answer?’

Akshara tilts her head, giving me that skeptical, no-nonsense look that’s already becoming my favorite.
‘Nah... spill the truth.’

I exhale, debating whether to keep playing it cool or just lay it out there.

Screw it.

‘I am well aware that I have invited you here as a friend, but here’s the thing. I’ve been wondering...what is it about you that’s consuming me so much.’ I admit, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

She lets out a soft laugh. ‘Wow. You’re really pulling out the moves tonight, huh?’

‘There’s no pressure on you to reciprocate,’ I say, shrugging.

She chuckles, with a playful edge to it.

‘Good thing is that I don’t need to remind you of the friend-zone again.’

The word *cute* flits through my mind. One Moment, I find her sexy; the next, I find her adorable. Am I not too old to call a woman cute?

‘That would be too much to take in one day,’ I joke.

‘You know,’ she says, finally breaking the silence, ‘It’s so weird having a high-profile friend who happens to be the mind behind one of the most utilized apps in the country.’

I raise an eyebrow. ‘You like calling me your *friend*, don’t you?’

She smirks. ‘A little.’

‘Sadist.’ I tease.

She laughs, a real, throaty laugh, and damn if it doesn’t make my heart skip.

‘I really got quite a thunder out of friend-zoning a billionaire.’ She grins, clearly enjoying herself.

I shake my head, exhaling a laugh. ‘The billionaire can give you better thunder if you agree.’

She tilts her head. ‘Yeah, I know...we had a good time at the club, and we had barely started.’

The drinks arrive but I can’t just let the last sentence go.

‘Oh, wow. Thank God you said *good time*.’

‘Well, I won’t lie just to act cool. I’ll rather say whatever the truth is.’ Her words settle between us, lingering longer than they should.

‘And...the truth is?’ I ask.

‘The truth is that we had a really amazing time. And it still gives me goosebumps... and I don’t want to give you the *hard-to-get* vibe...I find you attractive, of course, because you *are*...and I’ve been struggling not to think about you. But...it has the potential of becoming messy and we can’t afford messy. The wedding is in two months. We just can’t.’

‘Akshara,’ I say carefully, ‘I really *like* you. I know it’s too early to probably say that and I don’t know where it will go in long run...but I want to give it a

genuine chance. Can we say that once the wedding is done, you'll give it a chance?'

A beat of silence.

I don't move. I don't breathe. I just wait for her to speak.

Just like that, her playful expression shifts—turning serious, voice steady, 'Devesh...It's not that I don't like you...but I don't think I can give anyone a chance now. After everything I have experienced with men.'

She continues, 'If this would have happened a year ago, I would've jumped onto you at this very moment. I was fine with being the *stupid one*, the girl who made reckless choices. But I've learned my lesson. And I can't afford to be stupid again.'

I don't like the way she says that. Like she's been hurt before—badly. Like someone took that reckless, loving version of her and crushed it.

I clench my jaw. 'What if it's not reckless? What if it's *real*?'

'Trust me, it's very appealing, a *fling* with the billionaire who looks...umm...well who looks hot. But I know too well how these things end. What if it turns ugly? We have Samaira and Aryan—our lives are tied to theirs. We can't risk it. Not for their sake.'

Her words hit hard, especially *fling*.

'What if it's not just a fling?' I ask, my voice thick with frustration.

She gives me a small, sad smile. 'It always starts like that.'

'Tell me the longest a relationship has lasted for you.' She asks.

‘Eight months,’ I exhale, rubbing a hand down my face.

She nods, like she expected that. ‘Six months for me...we both know how this ends.’

I hold her gaze, determined. ‘Can I defend myself by saying I knew I couldn’t get deeper into those relationships?’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she says simply. ‘What matters is that it didn’t last.’

I don’t like her answer.

‘You’ll have to give me a chance to prove you wrong.’

She leans back, the skepticism clear in her eyes. ‘Why do you want to waste your time? We’re very different people.’

I pause, ‘What kind of differences are we talking about?’

She gives a wry smile. ‘You date girls like Lara, models, skinny, polished, probably rich. And I walk in the dust on the streets for days getting the truth out to the world through news. I don’t come home smelling like flowers.’

I meet her gaze, letting her words sink in. ‘That’s a description of two women I’ve dated for brief periods of time in last few years. But that doesn’t mean that’s what I want. I’ve never felt this *comfortable* with anyone. What if I tell you I don’t like skinny and polished...I like *raw*.’

I pause, but I can’t stop now. ‘What if I like passionate and brave woman who can challenge me and challenge the world, just like *you*.’

She is seldom short of clever comebacks, but she's silent for a moment, blinking at me, her wide eyes absorbing my confession.

I know it's a lot, but I couldn't hold it back.

'I appreciate your generous description of me,' she says after a pause, a faint smile tugging at her lips. 'It's flattering. But here's the thing—I've only just started finding my footing in my career. I need to travel, focus on my work, my passion. I'm not ready to risk it all. Maybe...I'm just not ready to trust anyone yet.'

I nod, doing my best to understand, even as the word fling lingers in my mind, sharp and unwelcome.

I rest my elbows on the table, leaning forward. 'Okay. I get it. And I'm really sorry if it felt like I was imposing.'

'No, you weren't imposing, you are just sharing how you feel. And it's okay.' She replies, gently.

'I hope we can still be friends? I won't make a move.' I say, desperation leaking into my words. I don't want to let her go.

She arches an eyebrow, skeptical. 'Really?'

I nod, holding her gaze. 'I won't chase. I won't push. But...if I manage to impress you enough that you make the first move...' I let the words hang for a beat, and sink in. 'Then all bets are off.'

A slow, reluctant smile curves her lips—equal parts amusement and warning. 'Since the chances of that happening are close to zero, I think we're safe.'

'I negotiate for a living,' I quip.

She raises her glass. 'To self-control.'

'And loopholes,' I add, clinking mine against hers.

What the hell did I just promise? I instantly regret saying it.

Sitting across from her now, I can't remember the last time I wanted something this badly. Not a business deal. Not a win in the boardroom. Just... *her*.

Just then, our food arrives, breaking the moment.

We dive in, the conversation flowing between food, the great ambience, my upcoming D-Day, her travel plans to *Maharashtra* and her live reporting experience from the field, my travel plans to Dubai and then Spain after the IPO party, and upcoming wedding preparations.

The ride to her apartment is short but we get more time to talk because it seems there's a lot to know about each other.

We reach her apartment building, and I kill the engine, turning to face her. She doesn't move to step out immediately, instead studying me with an expression I can't quite place.

'Let me know if I can be of any help. And you can call me if you need to talk.'

It's a simple statement, but there's something comforting about it, the softness in her voice, the way her eyes meet mine—makes my chest tighten —like she is the only women in my life who really *gets* me. I want to make it worth for her to be able to invest herself in a relationship with all her heart.

She lingers for just a second longer before stepping out and shutting the door. I watch as she walks up the steps, disappearing into the building.

A sudden realization hits me, I had forgotten for a while that I was busy or sad or lost or had an IPO in three days. It feels like I live a little more when this girl is around.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Akshara

I stare down at my phone, re-reading the message for the tenth time since afternoon.

Devesh: *I need your help tonight. Emergency. Be my date for the IPO party.*

Emergency. That's what he called it. Like the fate of the stock market depended on my presence beside him.

I had called him immediately after his text to say *no*, but he explained the emergency too well to deny help, saying his board members are trying to set him up with someone and Lara is going to be there on his rival's arm, and then he clarified all my other operational queries.

This isn't equivalent to acknowledging that I can't stay away from him. Right?

That I was waiting for his invitation, hoping—maybe even craving—to see him again?

And dare I admit it? I watched the live streaming of the entire ceremony for PlanMyTrip IPO and his speech at the dais of National Stock Exchange in *Mumbai* was *mesmerizing*. The way his voice softened when he talked about his parents, the way his eyes held that rare vulnerability when he said that this wasn't just his success, it was theirs and his teams'.

And now that I have agreed, why the hell am I nervous? I've been to corporate events before, the famous media house parties, off-sites—I've handled them all effortlessly. But this? This is different. This

isn't just another event. This is a gala. A high-end, billionaire-filled, camera-flashing spectacle.

And I won't just be a journalist covering the event. I won't be another guest blending into the crowd.

I'll be there as his *date*.

I have just reached home and my phone pings again.

Devesh: *Dress sexy.*

My heart stumbles in my chest.

The immediate thing I do is call Samaira, whose phone has recently turned into a hotline for her fiancé. Seriously, the girl is either on the phone with Aryan or off the phone with Aryan. And honestly? I can't even blame her. The cuties have missed out on their prime years apart, and now that they're together, they deserve to be inseparable for eternity.

She finally picks up, and before I can even breathe, I spill my dilemma.

'I need to be at a party, and I need to dress sexy. I don't know what to wear.'

Instantly, she switches to a video call.

'Are you going to Devesh's party?' she asks, grinning wide as soon as I accept the call.

I narrow my eyes. 'Is it that obvious?'

'Don't forget who the elder sister is.'

This is new. No lecture on how she *already* hates the guy. No long speech on what time I should be back home. No listing out all the ways hot boys are walking red flags. She jumps straight to the point, almost like she's helped Devesh set this up.

'Open my closet and bring out the red dress,' she commands.

I pause. 'Red??? No way, that's too much.'

Samaira just grins, 'Are you kidding me right now? You made me wear a red dress to my farewell party. And now you feel it's too much?'

I smirk, 'And you looked drop-dead gorgeous that night. And I am sure Aryan would have been floored.'

She laughs, 'Yes, that's the point. By the way, we *kissed* that night.'

'Oh God, diiii...you're such a liar. Why did you never tell me anything?'

'Alright, save this for later and stop wasting time and call me once you're ready. Trust me, you're going to own the night. I'll tell Aryan to pick you up on the way.'

'Oh no, that won't be necessary. Devesh is sending his driver to pick me up, and I have—' I glance at the clock and nearly shriek. 'Fifteen minutes to get ready! I swear, I wish you were here, and we were going together.'

I blow her a flying kiss before hanging up and sliding into the dress. The strapless, form-fitting gown clings to my body like a second skin, and the high slit up my thigh? I already feel half-naked. But there's no turning back now.

I rush through my makeup, years of practice making it second nature. A sharp wing, flushed cheeks, and the final touch—a thick, rich red lipstick. I tuck the tube into my little black clutch before I forget.

I smooth out the silk fabric, running my hands down from my waist to my hips, staring at my reflection. *Is this a good idea?*

Before I can spiral, my phone rings again. Another video call from Samaira.

I prop my phone on the dresser and step back to give her a full-length look.

Her eyes widen, and then she whistles, ‘Wow... you look stunning!’

I smile, relieved—until she smirks. ‘And now, don’t argue with me if you’re in a hurry, but the panties have to go. I can see the line.’

‘What?’ I gasp, scandalized.

She folds her arms. ‘Do you want a visible line on your perfect ass?’

‘What the fuck has happened to you?’ I gape at her. ‘Since when did we switch the role of *the slutty sister*?’

Samaira just throws her head back and laughs, full-hearted and unfiltered.

I swear, *love changes people*. And I’ve seen it firsthand. She likes to call it *The Aryan Effect*.

Oh God, I miss her when she’s away for work. What will I do without her after her marriage?

But I don’t want to start this conversation right now.

I blow her another kiss, and she grins. ‘Knock him dead, my girl!’ she shouts before disconnecting.

I huff out a breath. Knock him? No, I am trying not to get knocked *by* him, and it’s becoming more difficult by the day. My heart is thudding so loud in my chest, I can *hear* it. When was the last time a boy made me feel this way?

My phone buzzes again.

Devesh: *Driver has reached.*

I stare at the text for a moment, then take a deep breath.

Okay.

I hike the dress up, shut my eyes, and—before I can overthink it—I yank my panties down.

Holy. Hell.

I’ve done bold all my life, but this? This is a different level of *bold*.

My thighs clench involuntarily, and a shiver runs through me. My skin feels extra sensitive, my pulse a little too fast. Is this what power feels like?

There’s this thing people say—*fake it till you make it*.

My heart is still racing as I sit in the back seat of his car—the same back seat that had witnessed the kind of moments that still give me goosebumps. The kind that made me come just thinking about it, without much effort, for many a nights after.

I shift in my seat, pressing my thighs together as I type a few texts to Devesh.

Me: *I am on my way.*

Devesh: *Great! How distracting do you look by the way? I will prepare myself.*

Me: *We’re friends.*

Devesh: *Who said we aren’t?*

Damn him.

The car pulls up in front of the Four Seasons Convention Center, where the event is picking up the swing. My breath hitches the second I spot him.

Devesh is standing *right there*, in front of my car door.

And oh my god—his looks and his chivalry. He is wearing a black tux, straight out of a telenovela. I can’t *survive* this.

He reaches for the handle, opens the door for me like we're in some old-money romance show. I wish this damn dress didn't have such a high slit because as I swing my legs out, I can feel the cool night air against my bare skin. I *know* he sees it too.

His eyes sweep over me—slow and thorough, like he's memorizing every inch of skin I've just exposed.

I swallow.

He takes my hand and leans in *closer*—so close I can feel his breath against my cheek.

And then—soft, warm lips press against my skin.

'Thank you for coming,' he murmurs with a peck on my cheek.

I want to say that this is not *allowed* but before I can say anything, he pulls back, runs a hand over the stubble on his jaw, and adds.

'You look...breathtaking...and...distracting.'

I just happened to breathe his cologne, and now I can't breathe at all.

I have had enough men flirt with me—from school to office, from the poetic types to the cocky ones. But I have never had a billionaire with those looks say something like this to me. He looks absolutely ravishing. *Too good to be true.*

And I have *no idea* what I did to deserve this man wooing me to be his date.

Maybe he didn't have any other options. Maybe every other woman he could've called had their own plans, their own priorities, and I was just the one who *happened* to say yes.

I cross my arms, tilting my head. 'Thank you...well, you made it sound like a real emergency,

so I had to come.’ It takes a lot of effort to maintain my calm in his proximity. But I do.

Devesh grins—this slow, knowing grin that makes my stomach flip. ‘Yes, yes... it is indeed an emergency. One that only *you* could handle.’

Devesh nudges me forward, his palm resting lightly on the small of my back as we step into the grand ballroom. The chandeliers cast a warm, golden glow over the elegantly dressed crowd. The air buzzes with conversations, the soft clinking of glasses, and the occasional burst of laughter.

It’s *his* world. The world of billionaires, tech moguls, and people who make headlines.

And somehow, tonight, I am a part of it.

I take a steadying breath. ‘So, just to clarify, I have to behave like your date in front of everyone we meet, or only the board members and your ex?’ I ask, keeping my tone casual.

He smirks, ‘Of course, everyone.’ Then, with an annoying amount of confidence, he adds, ‘And technically, you *are* my date in real for tonight. Aren’t you?’

I narrow my eyes at him. ‘Don’t try to act smart, Mr. CEO. And am I Akshara or someone else?’

His brows furrow, as if the question genuinely confuses him. ‘Of course, you’re Akshara. Why would you be anyone else?’

I shrug, feigning nonchalance. ‘I don’t know. Maybe you would have told people about someone else...’

He stops walking, turning fully toward me. His voice is firm. ‘There’s no one else.’ His gaze locks

onto mine. ‘And there was no one else whom I have ever introduced to people I work with.’

Well, damn. Ok.

I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. I am not used to this side of him—the one that speaks with quiet certainty.

His voice softens. ‘You have to trust me. I feel fortunate that you’re here with me tonight, on this special day.’

My heart does that stupid flipping thing again.

I hate it.

I hate that I *like* it.

But I still don’t get it. Why would he want me? An ordinary girl with average marks, an average degree, and an average job. Yes, extraordinary dreams. But why would he care.

Just as I am about to spiral into the *oh-this-is-so-dreamy-but-why* thoughts, I spot Aryan and his parents approaching us, and I am so glad he’s interrupting my inner monologue.

Aryan congratulates Devesh enthusiastically and embraces him in a bear hug while I share pleasantries with the coolest parents one could have, keeping it a little distant, mostly to avoid any awkwardness if they ask me how come I am here. But Aryan makes it comfortable when he says he is glad to see me. If it were my nosy relatives, they would have dissected the mystery of why was I invited.

We move past the crowd, and I suddenly feel like I’ve stepped into the world of the celebrities. People gather around us with pleasantries, and we all behave like the close family.

Devesh is holding my hand like it's the most natural thing in the world, leading the way, shaking hands, accepting compliments so humbly, and talking with effortless grace, like he was *born* to be here while I try my best not to act like I am in a pressure cooker.

I remind myself that one day I'll stand in front of millions and deliver the news on national television—this is nothing compared to that.

But really? The *small of my back*? Why did Mr. CEO have to put his hand there? Is it just me, or can people see the flames rising through my body?

Breathe, Akshara. *Breathe.*

I sneak a glance at him. He's focused, responding to some high-stakes business talk, but his thumb? His damn thumb just moved. The slightest brush against my back. A little lower than expected.

Is this some psychological experiment?

Does he *know* what he's doing to me?

Because if this is his way of testing my self-control, let me tell you, I am *failing* spectacularly.

I would have been better prepared if I could gulp down a few sips of alcohol before we meet Mr. Sethi, along with his wife. With big smiles and hugs. He is the chair of board for PlanMyTrip and looks like exactly how Devesh had explained during our briefing call this afternoon. One of those rare men who have seen too much of life and yet remain untouched by arrogance. He holds his wife's hand with tenderness, and she looks at him with equal warmth, a silent conversation passing between them.

Everyone here seems to know Aryan and his family, of course, they are the only family Devesh has, so yeah, the limelight is on *me*. They ask me about my

work and I am completely fine in talking about it for hours without a break.

We laugh and giggle like long lost friends and I feel a little better. Because these people are rich in etiquette too and they have made me so comfortable. Or maybe because I just looked at Devesh, and he smiled at me.

Devesh introduces me to the other board members too, mostly men in forties and a few women, with perfect auras. I can feel a lot of eyes on my dress too. I told Samaira it will be too much.

I shake off the thought as a server approaches us with flutes of champagne. I grab one quickly. I take a sip, hoping the cool, fizzy liquid will somehow settle my nerves.

It doesn't.

So, naturally, I take another one, as quickly as it would be decent at such a place.

A few more minutes of *smiling till my face hurts*, nodding politely while industry legends discuss numbers, and contributing wherever I can.

Aryan excuses himself for a phone call—*obviously* it's Samaira. I bet she's checking if I am still alive in this overwhelming world of suits and million-dollar handshakes.

Meanwhile, Devesh is playing the perfect gentleman, making sure Uncle and Auntie have a comfortable place to sit and enjoy the food.

Then he catches me off guard, leaning in slightly, his gaze amused yet impressed.

'You're doing great! Killing people with such confidence.'

I blink at him. ‘Dude, you have no idea how *nervous* I am right now.’

He smirks. ‘Nervous and you? Really? Nervous girls don’t attend parties without wearing...’

My brain short-circuits.

Did he—

Does he—

Wait.

Fuck me.

I open my mouth, a retort forming on my tongue, but what could I even say when this man knows?

I force my expression into something resembling composure. ‘You wanted your pretend girlfriend to show panty lines to these old men?’

Devesh chuckles, low and wicked. ‘Hmm, well, that would’ve been difficult for them. They already have their balls blue by now.’

I choke on absolutely nothing.

I clamp a hand over my mouth, trying—failing—to hold back laughter.

‘I am so glad I wasn’t drinking anything when you said that.’ I gasp, between giggles. ‘Because I definitely would’ve choked.’

Devesh gives me a look. The kind that makes me feel like I am either the most fascinating person he’s ever met or just utterly ridiculous.

‘Are you really not aware that you’re jaw-droppingly beautiful? Or do you just like playing it cool?’

I scoff, rolling my eyes. ‘Okay, now you’re just messing with me.’

‘Messing with you?’ His lips twitch, but his voice is steady. ‘I am just speaking the truth.’

I narrow my eyes at him, searching for the punchline, but there isn't one. Just that same unreadable expression that flickers between playful and serious, teasing yet sincere.

Then he adds, almost offhandedly, 'This makes you even more beautiful, you know. *Not knowing it.*'

My breath hitches.

It's sweet. I would have taken the compliment if it weren't dangerously close to dangerously sweet.

'It's my duty to tell the truth to my unaware friend. Right?' His voice dropping into a mock-offended tone before he dramatically looks away, like some over-the-top theater actor.

I bite my lip, resisting the urge to give in. I take a step back, mentally pulling up some emotional barricades. No matter how many sweet words he throws my way, I can't let him think I am not serious about keeping boundaries.

I am *indeed*, determined to keep boundaries. That's a different matter that my determination is melting away with his persuasion.

Fuck, why isn't it boring? It would have been easier.

His playful energy is contagious. And annoying. And way too charming for my own good.

A few more introductions with his CXOs and investors, and finally, the crowd starts to shift their focus to food and music. The pressure to be the perfect *date* eases up. I think we've made it past the hardest part.

But as the evening drags on, I catch him *stealing glances at me*.

Maybe I don't get it completely—why he's interested in me, why did I even agree to be here tonight—but one thing is for sure; there's something about him that makes the insecure side of me feel...a little less insecure.

And that is starting to feel like a *camaraderie* I might not want to lose.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Devesh

I am having a really hard time right now, trying to keep my focus with her standing so close. The fabric of her dress clings to her so perfectly, and I can't stop my mind from wandering. What makes it impossible to not be distracted is that I know how the bare skin beneath that silk looks.

Every curve, every movement, it's like she's effortlessly taunting me with the way she looks. It's thrilling, but also...testing. And the frustrating part? I can't say anything that I feel. Not when she is claiming us to be friends.

I am relieved that our chair of the board is so impressed with my girlfriend, reality check, *pretend girlfriend*, that he is already giving me blessings for a lifetime with her. It means a lot to me as Mr. Sethi has been a mentor to my Dad and now to me as well. And he was genuinely concerned for me for a while that I was getting too drowned in work for my age. And I feel, he is right. I finally have some *motivation*.

And then I see Jayant, the arch-rival of my business, we are in a war to snatch each other's market share of travelers every day.

He walks in swaggering in with Lara at his side, thinking he can show me up in front of everyone, with my ex, who is now doing an advertisement campaign with his company. Little does he know, Lara is just playing a game to get under my skin. But that's not what I am focused on right now. I want Akshara to feel comfortable in meeting them.

I quickly realize that I should have rather worried for the other party.

This girl is a *tigress*, hunting down their heads with her witty comments, cutting through the tension like a knife. When she speaks, you got to listen to her, that's how it is.

Well, my enemy and her date are left baffled thinking they can never catch up with me in this game. It's hard not to be impressed by her, but it's going beyond that, I can feel my cock throbbing with every intellectual line she is saying.

She is complimenting my hard work and the potential my company has, how the share subscription above one hundred and fifty percent is commendable by our industry standards. And she has numbers, she is talking about all other IPOs that have happened in last two years in technology space. Woah!

It kind of makes things a little more complicated for me...because it means that she is not someone who will just fall into my arms, not someone I can easily win over.

But at the same time, I am elated that she isn't untouched by this *undeniable* thing between us.

Otherwise, she wouldn't be here. Akshara wouldn't do anything if she didn't really *want* to.

Lara hasn't been able to contribute much—mostly because no one's asked her who her designer or make-up artist is. And Jayant wraps up the interaction by congratulating me again on the success and adding, 'Great choice, man!' with a wink. Whatever *that* means.

I glance at Akshara, genuinely curious. 'Did you prep for this one?'

She shrugs lightly. 'Well, it was kind of expected that travel and tourism would be a safe topic here. I'd done an editorial recently on the rise of tourism post-COVID, and I guess I remembered a few data points.'

Like it's no big deal.

'Wow. That's impressive,' I say.

She grins, her tone playful. 'Don't get too impressed.'

We just stand there, catching sight of Jayant and Lara slipping out through the side exit. His hand is low on her back, and she's clearly not objecting. Akshara tracks them with her eyes, lips tugging into a smirk. I'm not even pretending to watch them anymore—my attention's locked on this girl, just inches away.

'What's brewing in your head?' I ask, already sensing the mischief behind that look.

She takes a slow sip from her glass, then tilts her head toward me.

'Did any of your girlfriend got to fulfill the classic boardroom fantasy? You know...' she says casually, **'Power suit. Closed-door meeting. A little consensual HR violation and all that.'**

I nearly choke on my drink. **‘What...God...No.’**

I glance at her, my jaw tightening and blood instantly rushing south. **‘Do you have a fantasy list?’**

Fuck, I won’t be able to stop thinking about her bent against the table in my boardroom now. *God help me.*

She raises an eyebrow, savoring her sip before answering. **‘Why? You planning to take notes?’**

‘Depends,’ I say, eyes locked on hers.

She hums thoughtfully, then leans a little closer, just enough for my imagination to start spinning. ‘Not sure if you can handle what’s on it.’

I can handle it. Hell, I want to *be* the only one to handle it.

‘Try me.’ I challenge.

She shrugs, exhaling slowly. ‘Well...Mr. Oberoi, maybe we should slow down a bit.’ But I can see it—the way her body reacts to the heat in the air between us, to *us*.

‘We’re definitely not at the sharing-fantasy-list stage.’ She adds.

‘Then I’ll work harder to get to that stage.’

There’s a beat of silence.

I step a little closer. Or maybe she does. Either way, we’re in dangerous territory now, dangerously close. Her lips are so close to mine, will she stop me if I move a little ahead? I can’t stop my imagination transport me into another world. I can feel the hair on my neck stand up in anticipation.

She looks at me, eyes narrowed in curiosity. ‘Why would you do that?’

I don’t hesitate. ‘I don’t know...I just can’t stop thinking about you.’

She scoffs lightly, ‘Maybe it’s all hyped in your head. I literally jumped you while I was drunk, remember? You’ll stop thinking about me eventually.’

Of course, I remember, that night meant something unique that is *hard to explain* or compare with anything else.

‘And what if the opposite happens?’ My voice is quieter now, steadier—like I’m not asking a question, but stating a possibility.

‘I thought you said you won’t chase, won’t push.’ Sarcasm dripping from her luscious lips.

‘True, I won’t. I am just trying to impress you with my intentions?’ I confess.

‘Then keep trying...but I’m being honest—this isn’t going to help,’ she says, voice softer now, almost resigned. **‘I might not know exactly what I want from life, but I’m sure I don’t want another relationship. Not another fling.’**

‘Got it. Your second favorite word is *fling*.’ I try to tease, just enough to ease the tension.

She laughs, and her laughter is infectious.

I’m grinning before I even realize it.

‘Ah, I should leave before I let myself have another drink,’ she says, brushing her hair back, like she’s reminding herself to stay in control.

And right on cue, Aryan walks up, finally off his endless call. ‘What did I miss?’ he asks, glancing between us with mild suspicion.

‘Nothing, just a few drinks and some food.’ I say casually, masking the electricity that was crackling just moments ago.

‘Samaira definitely needs to join us for our next get together.’ I genuinely wish she was here tonight.

Aryan nods, his expressions fond, ‘Of course, she is sulking now for missing it. When are you coming back from Spain?’

‘Right before the wedding, I will join you all directly in *Goa*.’

He narrows his eyes. ‘No way. You’re not getting out of helping me finalize my wedding outfits before you leave.’

I laugh, shaking my head. ‘Rathore,’ that’s what I call him when we are jovial, ‘I’m leaving you in the capable hands of the topper. She’ll make sure your *sherwani* is perfectly coordinated with her *dupatta*.’

He grins, and we all laugh—genuine, easy, the kind that comes only with true friends.

We finish our drinks, exchange goodbyes, Aryan offers to drop Akshara home, and she couldn’t say no because he exudes the aura of a mature yet protective elder brother; who is caring and liberal, but won’t leave her with an almost stranger when she is buzzed.

I reach home a bit later, feeling terribly tired yet relieved that the IPO is formally done and I can now focus on other business priorities. That’s when my phone chimes.

Akshara: *Thanks for inviting me, I had a great time tonight.*

I smile. Immediately.

Me: *I’m the one who’s obliged here. Thanks for coming.*

And just like that, the conversation doesn’t end. We chit chat till three in the morning.

I get to know a lot of other things about her. That she thinks I am her lucky charm.

That her favorite comfort show is an old travel documentary series

And she thinks I could have invited someone else to be my date.

And she is naïve to think that we can pretend to be friends for long.

CHAPTER NINE

Akshara

It's been a crazy, whirlwind of a year. Life has been happening at full speed with big milestones, starting with my first real reporting job, lots and lots of travel and my sister's wedding. I've never felt more anchored in life.

But the last six weeks were surreal. In a different way- brutal yet so rewarding. I was out on the field through and through—sweating it out in the heat, dodging noise and chaos—covering election rallies across Mumbai, Pune and Nashik. Sleepless nights, early mornings, and the authentic *vada pav*.

There were days when I felt like I was barely staying afloat—with work, and worrying about the dresses to be picked up after alterations, and trying to keep the thoughts of a hot irresistible man who kept sending platonic texts every once in a while.

All while knowing the wedding was barely days away.

All while aching to be home. With Samaira.

All while hoping to meet him again. Err...error.

Nope. I wasn't.

He was anyway away too, in Spain. Finalising the acquisition deal and ensuring their travel portals get integrated in three weeks.

And dare I say, we didn't stay in touch.

It started with a few friendly messages from him. Very neutral. Very polite. And then some *oh-so-subtly-flirtatious*, dangerously well-timed texts that required all of my self-restraint to not fall.

The man really knows how to say a *Don't forget to eat & Stay hydrated* in hundred ways and leave me sleepless with a damn winking emoji.

I, of course, replied with all dry *Yes, I will & hope your meeting went well* texts. I kept my promise. No swooning and no men.

Though I stared at my phone like a fool for ten full minutes after every conversation, re-reading the texts like a weirdo. But what counts is that I kept my promise.

Honestly, our time zones also had a role to play, because my *good night* texts landed in his mornings, and his *sleep well* messages showing up right when I should be sleeping. (*Should be.*)

And now... we're here.
For the wedding.
No anticipation to see him.

Not even a little. Not even to see *that smile*.

We arrive with an entire trousseau packed into our suitcases—cocktail dresses, *lehengas*, jewelry, and heels that will kill our feet but are totally worth it. Three days of celebrations, fun, laughter, and probably a few emotional breakdowns in between. But more

importantly, keeping my mouth shut and not hurt any relative, and keeping my face expressions in check that come with the subtitles.

And the venue? Oh. My. God.

Aryan *owns* this breathtaking luxury resort in Goa—a sprawling heritage-meets-modern property with grand courtyards, infinity pool, and suites so lavish they make five-star hotels look basic. The entire place is booked *just* for the wedding, meaning one hundred and fifty odd people; close friends and family members have this paradise all to themselves.

After settling into our suites—on the top floor and knowing that all other guests are not on the same floor, I feel a little less stimulated. We all gather for lunch. The restaurant is buzzing with excitement. Conversations flow from *mehendi* designs to outfit colors to dance performances and who’s coordinating the *baraat entry*. The kind of happy chaos only an Indian wedding can bring. And surprisingly, I am doing very well so far in accommodating all the relatives, most of whom, I hate to my core.

Also, side note: I will be wearing *Sabyasachi* for the first time in my life.

The madness has officially begun.

The evening arrives...and so does *he*. *The best man*.

Not that I was *waiting* for him. It’s just that Aryan has been calling him every ten minutes for the last two hours, and Samaira has been asking if he has reached—so technically, I am not the *only* one who was glancing at the entrance every once in a while.

And my heart did that annoying little skip every time my phone pinged. That’s all.

When I see him, it's *ridiculous* how my heart lurches.

Tall—umm, very tall and sharp in his perfectly tailored navy blue shirt, sleeves rolled up just enough to show off those forearms, paired with a beige trouser. Simple yet classy. And the way his hair looks just slightly *tousled*, like he's been running his fingers through it all day?

Unfair.

He hugs Aryan, pats his back like *brothers* do, then greets everyone around with hugs and smiles and chats.

And then...he turns to me.

His eyes flicker with something unreadable before he pulls me in for a hug, brief but firm. I tell myself I don't feel anything. It's a simple, friendly embrace. He has literally hugged everyone.

But my *entire freaking body* registers the press of his warmth, the scent of his cologne, the way his hand lingers at my waist just a fraction of a second longer than necessary, does *not* make my stomach do that stupid little flip.

'Missed me?' he murmurs low enough that only I can hear.

'Not even a little,' I lie.

It's the first day of the wedding shenanigans, and the energy is already *electric*. While the elders enjoy their grand sit-down dinner at the hotel—all of us being referred to as *kids* (basically, anyone still young enough to dance till sunrise without breaking a bone) are heading off for something way more fun:

A private yacht party on the Goan coastline.

Yes. You heard that right.

A night on the open sea, under the stars, with music, drinks, and enough drama to rival a Bollywood wedding movie.

Tomorrow is going to be a full-blown *Mehendi* ceremony, followed by a glamorous cocktail night.

And then will arrive the big day. The wedding. And *I can't wait.*

We all pile into the luxury coach that takes us to the private yacht, and I see the seat next to Devesh vacant, but...I can't just slide into it, right beside Samaira and Aryan, and make it feel like a double date.

I don't think I am ready to resist his physical presence yet.

Thank God there are cool people in groom squad and Aryan's cousin, Ishika waves at me enthusiastically and I settle right behind the man I am avoiding. Yes, I have my own cousins on board too. It would have been helpful if I didn't know that I don't like any of them.

I wish Shrishti could have made it to the wedding if it wasn't for her real brother's wedding on the same day. And why is everybody getting married? Well, better leave that aside.

The cool Goan breeze sweeps through my hair, the city lights twinkling in the distance as we arrive at the *joint* bachelor's party. Who does that?

Well, people who are *so* in love that they refuse to spend a single moment apart. Honestly, it's just labelled a bachelor's party; there's nothing like the wild ones I've attended before—you know, *the ones with strippers and all.*

The *kinkiest* thing tonight?

The cake. Yes, the one Devesh and I spent hours debating over the chat, I kept sharing obscene pictures of dicks and vulvas while he kept sending me the laughing emojis in abundance, we finally settled on *suggestive* design; it'll have people blushing, but not jerking.

And *the dancers*. A little surprise addition that Devesh suggested.

Let's just say, this party might not be *wild*, but it's definitely going to be *memorable*.

We start with our first drinks...conversations flowing freely, laughter and clinking of glasses.

Samaira and Aryan get pulled into conversations almost immediately.

And me? I move towards the bar, that's my safest bet right now. I ditch the cocktail I had picked under peer pressure and pick up a neat scotch with ice, that goes down smooth, burning just enough to distract me.

The thoughts of what happens after the wedding hitting me, my sister won't be waiting for me in our apartment anymore.

No more late-night talks in the kitchen.
No more morning *chai* gossip.
No more Samaira barging into my room, demanding I try on something that looks too short on her.

And like a *good* big sister, she tried to convince me into staying with them.

No, thanks. I have self-respect.

I refuse to be the baby sister busting their honeymoon bliss.

I look around to see a few more handsome men, but my eyes don't settle until I see Devesh again, like I haven't noticed all of him just a while ago.

Changed into a jacket suit, looking every bit effortlessly rich that he is. Hair neatly slicked back, the breeze adding to his charm, I see him chatting with Aryan's business friends—his usual charm in full force.

And just then his gaze catches me, staring at him.
Fuck me.

Standing across the deck with that devilish smile, like he knows *exactly* what he's doing to me.

I swirl the amber liquid in my glass, staring at nothing in particular, when he walks up.

God help me—it suddenly feels like the party has *actually* begun.

Devesh leans against the bar, casual yet calculated, and points to the empty seat next to me.

'Is this seat taken?'

A nearly inaudible whisper escapes my lips—

'Do I know you?'

He shakes his head, smirking. 'Not yet.'

Damn him.

I exhale through my nose, trying not to let that stupid grin of his get to me.

'Thank God I have some company,' I say, feigning boredom. 'I was getting sleepy.'

Devesh chuckles, low and smooth.

'I missed you too,' he murmurs, just loud enough for me to hear.

And we laugh. For no reason. This man has the capability of making me laugh out of nowhere.

The party has started to build momentum, but not too loud yet—we stand at the father corner in the quite, just the two of us.

The waves crash gently against the yacht, the salty breeze playing with my loose strands almost cinematically. I lean against the railing and Devesh stands close, too close, his forearms resting beside me on the cool metal.

He turns slightly, watching me. ‘Looks like something is bothering you.’

I thought I’ve gotten pretty good at putting on a happy façade. So how does he know?

‘Are you some sort of mind-reader?’ I tease.

‘Yup...and I read your mind when you were looking at me right across from the bar.’

I laugh; to dismiss what he just said. I can’t possible ask me what did he read. Because I had some filthy thoughts I should never have for a friend.

Friend? Really?

‘Now, tell me...what is it about?’ he probes.

‘Ugh...it’s no big deal, I guess I am just coping with the fact that my sister will no longer stay with me and I will also have to vacate the house we’ve been living in.’

‘Oh...Ok...well that can be tough.’ He doesn’t push for more. Just stays there.

‘Technically, it was Samaira who was playing the role of a responsible *one*—while I played the role of the clueless younger sibling. Let’s just say... I was *being taken care of*.’

‘And now? That’s all about to change?’ He asks, curious.

‘Yes, and I haven’t told anyone yet about moving. So keep it to yourself.’

‘Oh, ok...but why? Do you care what people will think?’

‘No...I have never cared for *people*. It’s my own parents. So, I’ll keep quiet.’ I say.

‘Your secret is safe with me.’ He gently places his palm on my hand. ‘Tell them whenever you are ready.’

I just nod.

‘I was thinking if I can get the cheerful Akshara back there. It’s time to make this place fun. Don’t forget *we are* good at this.’ He winks and we finish the drinks in a breath like reckless teenagers and head back to the bar.

Why does it feel like I am ready now. Like I was waiting for him to come and have this moment before I could feel ok.

I have worked really hard to become independent. Sometimes suppressing my feelings, and some other times, exerting myself physically to be equal to men. Am I getting dependent on him to have fun? *Hell no*.

We pull Samaira & Aryan as the Bollywood music starts playing, and just like that...the party gets into full swing.

We down our drinks like we’re about to be stranded on a deserted island with nothing but coconut water for survival. Which is ironic, considering the next two days are practically an open invitation to a *drink-till-you-drop* fest.

There’s this girl, I don’t know her name yet, but for now it’s Poo, she is brushing her hand intentionally against Devesh’s shoulder while dancing. She looks like a kid in college or something.

Devesh casually moves behind me to avoid the *kid* I believe, but she is too impressed to bother.

We get away for a moment for another round of drinks.

‘So, do you generally get a lot of attention from women?’ I ask him, half-curious, half-looking for entertainment.

Devesh leans forward, resting one elbow on the bar, to make it audible in the loud music. ‘Nope, not really,’ he says smoothly. ‘I am a straight-faced, no-nonsense business boss to most of the women in my life. I can be *boring*.’

I scoff. ‘Yeah, sure. And I am a *nun*.’

He laughs. ‘You are definitely *not* a nun. And I am *definitely* not the same with you as I am with others.’

‘Oh wow. Do these lines work with women in general, or am I just lucky to hear them firsthand?’

He tilts his head, amused. ‘Clearly, they aren’t working with you. And in my defense, I am not even trying right now.’

He takes a sip, his gaze lingering on mine. ‘And just to clarify, I am no Casanova if you’re assuming it. I have had three girlfriends in total and let me give you a spoiler, none could last. I am sure that helps as a data point.’

I huff a laugh. ‘Yeah, yeah. You are short of options.’

I can’t tell if it’s just the alcohol or the fact that Devesh is looking at me like I am the only thing worth his attention tonight that’s making me feel *high*.

The four of us—Samaira, Aryan, Devesh, and I—move like a close-knit circle, arms thrown around each other, twirling, dancing, the world has shrunk to just

us before the sizzling dancers hijack the floor and we all hoot and spin with them.

Today happens to be the first day in history when I lead the group to wind up a party. I am the one convincing everyone that it's time to head back to the resort. I feel *good* about being the responsible one for the first time.

Samaira rolls her eyes but doesn't argue.

By the time we board the coach back to the hotel, my feet ache in the best way, and my head buzzed.

We reach our lavish suite, and I take over the responsibility of settling Samaira in our room. My Mom is up to ensure that Aryan doesn't enter his bride's room, which is an ill omen as per her.

'You should sleep on time,' I tell Samaira, tucking her in. 'You need to be a fresh bride. We drunkards can afford a headache tomorrow.'

Now everyone is finally off to sleep.

It's already past midnight. And I can't seem to even think about sleep.

My phone vibrates in my hand.

A text.

Devesh: *After-party at the beach?*

I stare at the screen, my heart skipping a beat.

And he said he's boring.

Fuck me.

I text him back, 'Give me 15.'

Then, I rush. A quick shower to wash off the night's sweat and lingering scotch, a fast towel-dry of my hair, a dab of lip balm—nothing too extra. Just a cotton tank top and shorts. Simple. Casual. But as I

step into the hallway, heart racing a little faster than it should, I know this is anything but casual.

When I reach the lobby, he's already there, a scotch bottle in his hand, waiting. His posture is effortless, like he owns every space he stands in. And maybe he does. It's literally his friend's place.

We stride together, making our way across the resort's stone path, past dimly lit gardens, until the soft crunch of sand replaces the pavement beneath our feet. We settle at the beach loungers, just the sound of the waves and the flickering lanterns.

I feel his gaze before I turn to meet it.

Devesh is gawking at me. On a moonlit beach. And it's *intimate*.

It's the kind of setting romance novels romanticize to death, the kind that would make any girl's heart stutter. But this is not romance. This is just... an after party. Right?

'You look prettier without makeup,' he says, his voice quieter now, rougher, as he rakes a hand through his wet, uncombed hair.

I shake my head, not trusting my voice.

Because *he* looks like sin.

Grey sweatpants hang low on his hips, and the white, impossibly thin T-shirt clings to his torso, leaving *nothing* to the imagination. Sculpted, effortless, and picture-perfect.

And before I can stop myself, I murmur, 'Well, you look...great...too...without all the layers of your jackets.'

His lips quirk up, just slightly. 'Just be mindful, I am recording all your compliments, and I will put my plea application after the wedding again'

I roll my eyes and snatch the bottle from his hand.
'Let's drink.'

'How much do you hate your relatives exactly?'

'Hmm...you can say I don't have very good relationship with them.'

Thankfully, he doesn't push further on this topic but takes the bottle from my hand and takes a sip, from the bottle.

'I am doing it for the first time in my life.' He is exhausted but excited, just like me.

'You said you're boring, *don't* prove it otherwise.' I didn't intend my voice to turn sensual. I promise.

He smiles, slow and knowing. My heart melts. So do my panties.

I shift on my seat, pretending I didn't just have that very inappropriate thought.

'What's with the...' I gesture vaguely at his torso, trying to keep my voice casual. 'I mean... how do you do this?'

This is alcohol *talking*. Not me. And I am still drinking more.

Devesh raises an eyebrow, amused. 'Are you asking how do I work out?'

'Well, yeah,' I say, attempting nonchalance while taking a sip straight from the bottle. 'Because this...' I wave my hand at his obscenely well-defined chest, '...this doesn't happen from just running to board meetings.'

He chuckles, leaning back slightly, the movement making his t-shirt cling even more to his muscles. 'A little gym. A little swimming.'

Of course, he does.

‘That explains the whole broody billionaire aesthetic,’ I mutter, mostly to myself.

He tilts his head. ‘What?’

‘Nothing,’ I say quickly, looking out at the waves, trying very hard not to imagine him shirtless, sweat-slicked, and lifting weights. Nope. Not going there.

But then he leans in, his voice dropping just enough to make my stomach flip. ‘Do you work out?’

I turn to glare at him, but his expression is way too smug.

‘Umm...I walk a lot,’ I say, pointing a finger at my feet. ‘In heels. That’s practically a sport.’

Devesh grins, shaking his head. ‘Of course. It’s keeping you in great shape.’

‘Are you making fun of me just because you have a sculpted body?’

I lift the bottle again, needing another sip to cool off whatever this tension is.

Because if I don’t, I might just ask him for a personal training session. And I have a feeling that it would not be the wisest decision tonight.

‘Making fun? Really? I am buzzing after knowing that you at least like my body,’ he says, smirking as he takes a swig from the bottle.

I scoff. ‘I mean... it’s impressive. Not sure about *liking* it.’

Devesh puts a hand over his heart like I’ve wounded him. ‘Ouch. Brutal.’

I roll my eyes. ‘You’ll live.’

‘Alright, since we’re discussing bodies,’ he says, stretching his legs out on the shack, ‘I was the fat kid in class till about tenth grade.’

I raise an eyebrow. 'Samaira told me you were chubby. Don't seek empathy.'

He chuckles. 'Ah, so you have discussed me with your sister. Progress.'

I narrow my eyes. 'No, I didn't discuss you. She happened to tell me.'

Devesh grins like he's enjoying this way too much. 'Still. Means you were *talking* about me.'

I shake my head, fighting back a smile. 'You're so full of yourself.'

'Not entirely,' he muses, tilting his head. 'But yeah, if you ever want proof, I can show you some truly awful childhood pictures. You'd die laughing.'

'Everyone's childhood pictures are worth laughing,' I admit, nudging his knee with my foot. 'But I'd need *real* proof. Not some 'I just found a slightly bad angle' kind of picture.'

Devesh smirks. 'You must have been beautiful even in childhood, I bet.'

I just shake my head and sigh, 'You're impossible.'

'Yeah, I get that a lot.'

And just like that, I realize that this is comforting, talking to him. Two people sitting on a moonlit beach, trading childhood secrets and pretending the air between us *isn't* charged with something.

'So how did it change, so drastically?' I ask.

Devesh leans back on his elbows, shaking his head with a grin. 'So, I happened to develop a huge crush on a girl in school. I gathered all my courage and asked her to be friends. Not even out on a date, just *friends*.'

I tilt my head, intrigued. 'And?'

'She rejected me.' He exhales dramatically

I gasp, mock-offended. ‘The audacity of the girl to reject *this* boy.’

‘Right?’ He laughs, shaking his head. ‘Anyway, good that I took it as a challenge. I first started walking, then gradually running, then the gym. And, well, once I fell in love with it, there was no going back.’

The mention of *love* makes the air shift. Just slightly. Just enough to notice.

I clear my throat. ‘Oh, by the way, this reminds me of a *hilarious* story. I once joined a gym because I had this gym fantasy.’

Devesh lifts a brow. ‘A *gym fantasy*?’

I nod, dead serious. ‘Yep. And obviously, I picked the first trainer who flirted with me.’

‘Of course he flirted with you.’ His nostrils flare.

‘And he *did* have a great body...’ I pause, dramatically, letting the suspense build.

Devesh crosses his arms, narrowing his eyes. ‘Go on.’

‘But *dude*, he just *couldn’t* speak properly. Like, he would stutter and look everywhere else but me when we started talking. And I ended up laughing on his face.’ I know I am laughing right now.

His square jaw clenches *just* a little. Oh.

I smirk. ‘You don’t need to feel jealous.’

‘I am not.’ He says.

‘All six of my boyfriends put together couldn’t compete with you anyway.’ That’s my weakness, I don’t lie.

He squints at me. ‘Is this gym trainer one of the six?’

‘Gawd, no!’ I laugh. ‘Listen, I may not be a billionaire like you, but I *do* have standards. This was a short fling.’

He exhales, like he’s disturbed. I am sure this word *fling* doesn’t fit him well.

I continue, ‘I stopped going to the gym after a week and blocked his number. Kind of rude, I know.’

Devesh shakes his head, a lazy smirk tugging at his lips. ‘Remind me never to cross you.’

‘Oh, darling,’ I grin, leaning in just enough to be teasing. ‘That’s *entirely* up to you.’

I tell him about all my boyfriends. And how *unsuccessful* each of these relationships were.

And I just told him that I never felt like I was looking for love. I always looked for just *validation*, and it felt empty. I don’t know why I spilled it, it was supposed to be my *secret*. But he knows more secrets than he should have known.

He tilts his head, watching me like he’s figuring out a puzzle. ‘Hmm...I can understand why you keep your guard up? I am sure men would have thrown themselves at you. It’s not easy.’

I shift slightly, the sand cool under my bare feet. I don’t have any words to respond.

His voice is low, almost knowing. ‘And what happened to the gym fantasy?’

I try to brush it off with a laugh, but it’s *really* difficult to focus when he’s sitting so close. The air between us is thick with something unspoken, something dangerous.

‘Do you have a gym at your house?’ I ask, to change the topic. ‘I am assuming *yes*.’

‘Guilty.’ He accepts without hesitation. ‘And...’ He leans in just a little, enough to make my pulse stutter. ‘I *would* love to know more about this fantasy of yours.’

I roll my eyes. ‘I dropped it, obviously. The bucket list is a *bullshit* concept.’

He smirks. ‘That’s a strong opinion.’

I shrug. ‘I mean, let’s be real. Who actually ticks off those things? Life happens, responsibilities take over, and before you know it, you’re just making peace with the *should-haves*.’

Devesh watches me for a beat, his expression unreadable. Then, he says, ‘Or maybe... you just need the right person to do them with.’

I groan, my forehead falling against Devesh’s shoulder, ‘I shouldn’t accept, but you might be right. I haven’t ever found a single right person.’

The vibration of my phone pulls me out of the moment.

‘My sister loves me.’ I mumble, half-annoyed, half-breathless.

I sigh and answer the call.

‘It’s four in the morning. *Where* are you?’ Samaira’s voice is firm, laced with concern.

I open my mouth, but before I can come up with something remotely convincing, she continues, ‘Tell Devesh to get some sleep. Come back right away.’

I glance up at Devesh, who’s watching me with a lazy smirk.

‘Bossy much.’ I mutter into the phone and hang up with a sigh. ‘Looks like our little adventure ends here.’

Devesh leans in one last time, his lips brushing against my temple before he pulls back, eyes glinting under the moonlight. *‘For now.’*

And just like that, I know this isn’t over.

CHAPTER TEN

Devesh

Last night was unlike any other night. It wasn’t just about flirting, teasing, or toeing the line between playful and dangerous. It was different. The kind of different that sneaks up on you, wraps around your ribs, and settles somewhere you can’t quite name.

We sat there for hours, the waves whispering a few feet away, the moon our only witness. Talking. Laughing. Letting the night stretch endlessly between us like a secret only we understood. We were just *us*.

And here comes the morning, I don’t remember being so desperate for the sun to rise so quickly after sleeping or rather, trying to sleep.

I pull myself out of bed, my body heavy with exhaustion but my mind still replaying snippets of last night and looking forward to meeting my newly found *buddy*. The way she listens—really listens—when I talk. And the way I want to keep listening to her.

Shaking the thoughts away, I set about handling the damage control. A bunch of sleep-deprived, hungover wedding guests means one thing: *lemon squeezers*.

I get ready and get trays of fresh lime juice arranged before anyone even stumbles out of their rooms, already anticipating the groans and complaints. Samaira gives me a knowing look as she walks into the

breakfast lounge, her bride glow slightly dimmed by the remnants of last night's cocktails, but still radiant and looking gorgeous in her *Mehndi* attire.

'You're up early,' she says, taking a glass from the tray.

I shrug, sipping my own drink. 'Yes I am. Did you sleep fine?'

Her eyes flick to mine, sharp, assessing. 'Yes Devesh, I slept just fine. But I know that you didn't.'

I groan, throwing my head back. 'Alright, just drink your lemon water, *bossy bride*. And don't say anything to Aryan.'

She smirks. 'Mmm-hmm.'

'Where is your lover boy, how is he not within a foot of your radius?' I tease her and change the subject.

But even as I brush it off, I know last night was special. And no amount of lemon water can wash that feeling away. Aryan walks in just in time to prove my point. And a lot of others from the groom's squad.

And then *she* walks in.

I could sign it on a stamp paper—I haven't seen a woman more beautiful than her. And it's not just about how she looks, though that alone is enough to make my thoughts derail. There's something about her, something electric, something that makes it impossible to look away. She stands out, even in a room filled with people, laughter, and glittering fabrics.

And my *focus*. It's entirely on her.

She's wearing a delicate blend of tradition and modern elegance, a vivid mix of deep colors—yellow, blue, and soft pinks. The lehenga skirt flares around her, layered and bright, swirling with every movement she makes. And she moves *a lot*, like a little girl

twirling in excitement, soaking in the joy of dressing up, of being alive.

Her crop top clings to her, just enough to accentuate her graceful figure, the mirror work at the borders catching the light in flashes.

Wait...am I actually noticing the tiny mirrors on her dress?

I take a slow sip of my drink, willing myself to act normal. To be the self-controlled man I usually am. But it's hard when she's right there, spinning, laughing, glowing in a way that makes me feel something I haven't in a long time.

Younger.

Happier.

Like a part of me I lost years ago is waking up just by being in her orbit.

The *dhol walas* gang suddenly charges up in the courtyard, as if they've been waiting for her to arrive. And honestly, I get it. She brings the kind of energy that makes people want to follow, to match her rhythm, to get caught up in the whirlwind she creates just by being herself.

And, unsurprisingly, she's good at this too.

I am not much of a dancer. I have never been. But—I join in. Not because I suddenly love dancing. Just because it's with *her*.

I stand behind her, close enough to feel the energy radiating off her, like her personal bodyguard. Not that she needs one, but let's be honest—I am enjoying the view.

She spins around, her lehenga flaring, and our eyes meet for a fraction of a second before I break away to pull Aryan and Samaira into the center.

And then, in a move I don't quite think through, Akshara and I grab the *dhols* from their real owners and sling them around our necks like we've been doing this all our lives. The first beat lands, and the entire group erupts into cheers. The rhythm takes over, loud and powerful, the air thick with excitement.

'Hoye!' someone shouts.

'Hoye!' the entire crowd echoes.

It's infectious. The kind of raw, unfiltered fun I don't usually let myself have. And yet, here I am, standing beside her, moving in sync like we've always been a team.

It's an *unsettling* realization.

After a round of dancing that leaves our heartbeats racing past a hundred, we finally settle down for breakfast before the Mehndi ceremony begins. The air hums with chatter and laughter, the scent of fresh flowers mingling with the aroma of hot coffee and buttery croissants.

Akshara is sitting across the table—happily devouring muffins, her fingers dusted with tiny specks of sugar. Chocolate chip, blueberry, banana walnut. She's clearly in her element.

I smirk. 'Your favorite?'

She nods between bites. 'Hmm, I love muffins, and all foods with calories. Unlike certain people with their chiseled bodies and suspiciously healthy diets.'

I chuckle. 'You're doing a great job maintaining yours, despite all that calorie love.'

She raises a brow. 'Are you implying I eat too much?'

I raise my hands in mock surrender. ‘Nope. Just saying you have a talent for enjoying food without a shred of guilt.’

‘Shouldn’t everyone?’ she counters, licking a stray crumb off her thumb.

I lean in slightly, lowering my voice just enough to be playful. ‘Maybe. But for some of us, temptation is dangerous.’

She pauses, her fork hovering midair, before tilting her head. ‘Is that so? And what temptation are we talking about here?’

My lips curve into a slow smile. ‘May be muffins? Or...something else? Let’s just say both can be equally addictive.’

She holds my gaze for a second longer before pushing a muffin toward me. ‘Here. Try it. Live dangerously for once.’

I take a bite, the rich chocolate melting on my tongue. It tastes indulgent and reckless. It tastes like *her*. And God knows how bad I want to taste that crumb off her lip.

I watch as she reaches for another. ‘Are you seriously going to eat only muffins?’

‘Yes,’ she says matter-of-factly. ‘I am on vacation, my only sister’s wedding.’

‘Vacations don’t mean throwing all nutritional value out the window.’

She gasps dramatically. ‘Devesh, are you trying to ruin my happiness? First, you don’t eat sugar. Now, you’re questioning my love for sugar?’

I chuckle. ‘I am just saying—maybe add something else. A little balance never hurts.’

She scoffs. ‘You sound like my mother.’

I place a hand over my heart in mock offense. 'Ouch. And here I was, thinking I sounded like an irresistible, charming man.'

She rolls her eyes but grins. 'Fine. I'll have something else too. But only if you eat one muffin.'

'Alright.' I pick up a muffin, and she grabs a handful of fresh fruit pieces from my plate. 'There, compromise.'

In a few minutes, the focus shifts to the grand setup in the lawn outside. Samaira and Aryan sit in the middle, bathed in soft morning light, their hands extended as henna artists begin their work.

'You want to get a Mehndi tattoo?' She teases, her eyes glinting mischievously.

'No, ma'am. No one whose initials I can officially carve on my hand.' I reply.

Is she really unaware of just how much she's affecting me?

Or maybe she *is* aware. And she's doing it on purpose.

We go to the food stalls and she jumps on the first *Golgappa* stall. She takes a plate and in no time, she is gobbling on to those spicy thing.

I cross my arms, leaning slightly toward her. 'You moaned while eating it.'

Akshara widens her eyes in mock innocence, lips twitching. 'I did not. I am just enjoying it.'

I smirk. 'You *so* did. And now, you're just trying to mess with me.'

She takes another *Golgappa*, deliberately slow, and pops it into her mouth, closing her eyes for a second longer than necessary. When she opens them,

they glint with mischief. ‘You think *this* is messing with you?’

I let out a low chuckle, shaking my head. ‘You’re impossible.’

And then—because the universe is in *her* favor today—a few drops of the chili water slip from her *golgappa* and trail just above her cleavage.

She bursts into laughter, throwing her head back. ‘Shit, that is *so* not elegant.’

Not elegant, no. But effortlessly sexy? *Yes*.

I grab a tissue, instinct taking over as I lean in, wiping the droplets from her skin. A simple, innocent action. But nothing about this feels simple or innocent.

My fingers brush against her soft skin, and suddenly, the air between us shifts.

She’s still laughing, but I don’t miss the way her breath hitches slightly. I don’t miss the way her nipples harden, peeking against the thin fabric of her blouse. She can pretend she’s unaffected, but her body betrays her.

I smirk. *Positive sign*.

‘Stop looking.’ She whispers.

‘I can’t.’ I reply. Deadpan.

‘Can we pretend that this didn’t happen?’

‘Again?’ I lift a brow. ‘You’re asking me to do a lot of pretending.’

‘I don’t want you to misread the situation.’ She says, voice dead serious.

‘I don’t want to miss out on the possibility of us.’

‘But...you’re missing out on *the* best thing in life.’ She gestures toward the vendor for another round, nudging me. ‘Come on, at least try one.’

‘I don’t do spicy,’ I say, taking a step back, but she’s already handing me one, the crispy shell dripping with tamarind and spicy mint water. ‘Akshara...’

‘Nope. No backing out. Billionaires need to experience the real world too.’

I sigh, taking it from her, and against my better judgment, pop it into my mouth.

Instant regret.

The heat explodes on my tongue, and I swear I feel actual *fire* in my throat. My eyes start to water, and Akshara is already doubling over in laughter.

I try to swallow with dignity, but all that comes out is a strangled cough. ‘What the—this is *not* food. This is a survival test.’

Akshara wipes at her own tears—from laughing too hard—and pats my back. ‘Breathe, Mr. CEO. You’ll live.’ She passes me a water bottle and I gulp it down in a go.

I glare at her through the burning sensation, my pride taking a solid hit. ‘I *hate* you.’

She grins up at me, ‘No, you don’t.’

And damn it, she’s right.

I point my hands toward the next stall. ‘Shall we move on, or do you want a few more *orgasms* from the *golgappas*?’

She grins, licking her lips deliberately. ‘Oh, I’d love a few more, actually. Haven’t had one in a while.’

I groan under my breath.

This woman is going to kill me.

We return to the couple, handing them some snacks. Aryan takes a piece and gently feeds Samaira

with his hands. The crowd erupts into loud hooting and cheers as he presses a soft kiss to her forehead.

Is this what people in *love* do?

I could do this for the girl standing next to me. Would that mean I am getting hopeless with her proximity?

Akshara exhales, crossing her arms. 'You know what? I love Aryan, but I hate him right now.'

I glance at her, amused. 'Why?'

'It was always my duty to feed my sister when she had Mehndi on her hands. I was never a Mehndi person, but she always was. Now, just like that, it changes. And yet, everyone keeps telling me nothing is going to *change*.'

I nod. 'It's okay. You'll get used to it.'

She tilts her head, studying me. 'See, that's why you're good friend material. You tell me the truth instead of feeding me that *nothing will change* nonsense.'

I raise a brow. 'Wait. Did you just call me good friend material? Should I be flattered or offended?'

She grins. 'Oh, it's a compliment. A huge one, coming from someone like me. I don't have too many friends. I don't make friends with judgmental, narcissistic, arrogant people.' She nudges me lightly. 'So I am basically saying—you're none of those things.'

'Hmm,' I muse, crossing my arms. 'Just making sure you're aware—I'd like to go beyond being *friend material*.'

She sighs dramatically. 'Why are you actually hitting on me?'

I smirk. 'I think it's pretty obvious. Because *I like you.*'

'I get it, okay? I like you too, but this is not going to work. This is too good to be true scenario you should never ever dream of.' She shakes her head, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

I chuckle. 'Oh? What makes it fall under too good to be true category?'

'Of course. It's a rare combination. Two sisters with best friends, both hot and loaded. C'mon.'

'Well, brutal honesty is part of your *charm*,' I say, nudging her shoulder lightly.

I lean in slightly. 'But still, is that the only reason you are keeping a distance? Despite the chemistry here.'

She huffs dramatically, crossing her arms, 'Nope, the reason is that I have sworn *off* men.'

I exhale, rubbing the back of my neck, 'I didn't know it would be this damn difficult to charm you.'

She looks at me, eyes flickering with something raw.

And fuck, I want to do something about it. I want to pull her close, tell her she doesn't have to figure it all out in one day. That she can just exist, right here, *with me.*

Instead, I force a smirk. 'Besides, who needs mehndi-stained hands to be fed when you can literally just demand it?' I grab a piece of food, holding it up near her lips, teasing. 'Come on, eat it. I promise I won't kiss your forehead after.'

She scoffs, rolling her eyes. 'You wish you could kiss my forehead?'

I arch a brow. 'Do I?'

She freezes—just for a fraction of a second. Like she wasn't expecting me to push back. But then, her smirk returns, smooth and slow. And before I can prepare myself, she leans forward, taking a bite from my fingers—deliberately slow, deliberately sensual.

And just like that, the fire in my gut roars back to life.

She bursts out laughing, the kind that makes her whole-body shake, head tilting back, exposing the smooth line of her throat. *Fuck*. Even her laughter is tempting.

I want to make her laugh again. I want to make her gasp, make her moan. I want to fuck her in the best way possible—until she forgets her own name and only remembers mine.

I lean in, just enough for her breath to hitch. My voice drops low, rough with the weight of everything I am holding back.

'I do want to kiss your forehead.' My gaze dips to her parted lips before finding her eyes again. 'Right after I make you come so hard that you forget why you ever tried to friend-zone me.'

Her breath stutters, her pupils darkening.

Game. Fucking. On.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Akshara

The room is buzzing with a team of professionals, carefully working on brushes and palettes, transforming everyone into a vision for the night. I turn

around after my hairdo, and my heart does an unexpected flip.

Samaira looks like a princess. And me? Not bad.

We stride out onto the lawn, now transformed into a dazzling setup for the cocktail night. Tonight, we're all in black—coordinated, polished, as if we belong in one of those grand Bollywood dance sequences we've been rehearsing.

And then, I see him.

Devesh in a black kurta is the kind of visual that make you lose the last ounce of self-control. And his eyes hold mine, quietly daring.

And I realize—with humiliating clarity—that I *want* him.

My panties have been wet since the moment he said, *'I do want to kiss your forehead...right after I make you come so hard you forget why you ever tried to friend-zone me.'*

With that one sentence. I was done pretending.

Last night, when the world had gone to sleep, we sat by the sea, just the two of us. Talking for hours. And it was the most *intimate* night I've ever had. Where he didn't even touch me. And I know how it feels when he touches me.

Fuck. I want him to *touch* me.

I know I was the one who insisted we stay just friends.

But there's this irresistible temptation. Would it really hurt to give in, just once?

I move to the dance floor, thinking it would help loosen up the pent up frustration. But it doesn't. Because he joins me to dance, his presence undeniable. He's there, around me, with me.

The song changes...and we move in perfect sync, like we mean each word of the lyrics when we sing them out loud. I haven't seen him let loose so much, and we grove like no one is watching us. He finally puts a hand around my waist. His fingers brush my skin, my bare skin on the back.

I am aware of his touch, *very* much aware.

We pause for a moment, realizing all eyes are on us. Some smiling, some teasing, some worried. We put some distance between us, I step aside and gulp down chilled water to normalize the heat built up within me.

And then he's right in front of me. *Close*. Too close.

'You have to stop looking like this,' he says, his voice laced with something dark and amused. 'Plenty of men here have already imagined you—'

He hasn't looked at me directly, yet I feel exposed, desired, and completely out of control.

'Interesting, so what have you imagined?' I ask, my voice softer, breathier.

He tilts his head, eyes flicking down to my lips. 'You don't want to know what I've imagined.'

That's it.

And my needy brain has gotten all logics in place.

How long am I supposed to go without a man touching me, anyway? Not my whole life, right?

And what are the chances I'll ever have a man this *good-looking*—this *deliciously dangerous*—dying to touch me?

What's there to lose, anyway?

Here's to one more childish act on my report-card.

I lean in and tell him, 'Meet me near the gallery in five minutes.'

He doesn't ask why. He doesn't *need* to.

By the time I reach the dimly lit corridor just off the banquet hall, I feel him before I even turn. His steps fall into place right behind me, close enough that I feel the heat radiating off him. The gallery is of least interest to all the drunk or dancing relatives tonight, Aryan has designed it especially for his foreign guests who love to know about the Indian heritage.

'That wasn't five minutes,' I say, breathless.

He shrugs, his gaze again flicking down to my lips. 'Did you really think I was going to wait five whole minutes?'

I glance around. 'I didn't want anyone to suspect.' My voice drops as the inches between us turn into mere centimeters.

He exhales a quiet laugh. 'You think there's anything left to suspect after the way you danced with me?'

I roll my eyes. 'Oh, how does dancing together mean anything?'

He tilts his head, studying me like he's already won this argument. 'It wasn't the dance,' he murmurs. 'It was the way you looked at me.'

I gape at him as I scramble for a justification, an excuse, anything.

'How was I looking at you?' I challenge, my voice sharper than intended.

His eyes darken, the playful smirk fading into something deeper, something raw.

'Like a tigress looks at her prey.'

Fuck.

My pulse roars in my ears. I should walk away.
Last chance to say something smart, something
dismissive.

But I don't.

Because he's right.

And we both know it.

I pull him towards me, my lips crush against his,
claiming, demanding, our bodies aligned from head to
toe. He's already hard—I feel it, and I know he knows
that I know.

His tongue sweeps into my mouth, and I meet him
with the same hunger, the desperate urgency that's
been building inside me.

His hands slide up my bare back, fingertips tracing
the sliver of skin where my blouse meets my
waistband. Then higher—where fabric meets flesh,
where his touch becomes something more than just
teasing. His thumb strokes the sensitive spot just
below my underwire, and I gasp softly.

He squeezes me harder, pressing me against him,
and I melt into his kiss.

This is the moment. The moment *I give in*. We take
a few back steps and I can feel the cold tiles against
my back.

My fingers slide under his kurta, over his chest,
finding heat, tracing the lines of his skin. His muscles
flex and bunch beneath the black fabric, sending
shivers down my spine.

Then he palms my hips, pulling me against him, his
lips not leaving mine and I am out of breath, the ache
inside me sharpens into something unbearable.

You're giving in. Stop right now.

But I don't stop.

Instead, I grind against him, rolling my hips, feeling his hardness against my belly, my thighs, my core. A quiet, desperate sound escapes my throat as fire pools low inside me.

This is the most consuming kiss I have experienced in my life.

Not soft. Not gentle.

Devouring. Like he is hungry for days, and my lips are his food.

The one that pulls me under him completely, making it impossible to turn back. I want *more*. I want *him*.

He groans, deep and raw, his lips trailing from my jaw down to my nape.

He murmurs, 'I was dying to kiss you like this.'

And oh, *fucking* hell—he does it.

That *vibration* at my neck. It's the same vibration I have been missing for fourteen *freaking* months straight. This is the damn vibration I have thought about every single time my vibrator helped me release my pent-up desires. When I thought of him, the night, the backseat, his lips where the neck meets the shoulder.

God, why does it feel so good. The way he hums against my skin, sending ripples of pleasure down my spine.

I shudder, fisting the fabric at his back, but he's got me—one hand tangled in my hair, the other pressing into the small of my back, keeping me steady and sane when I know I am about to lose my mind.

'*Akki.*' The most familiar female voice slices through the heated air like a bucket of ice water.

I jump back so fast I nearly stumble, my breath catching in my throat. My hands—just moments ago tangled in Devesh's hair—drop to my sides like they were never there.

I school my face into something resembling normal. Calm. Unaffected.

Samaira stands at the doorway, her expression unreadable. If she thinks it's odd that Aryan's *very* hot best friend is standing just a little *too* close to me, she doesn't show it.

'I've been looking for you! It's our performance time—c'mon.'

'Yes, yes, of course! I was just coming.'

I rush toward her, but my heart is pounding so hard I am sure she can hear it from a few steps ahead. My lips still tingle, probably swollen, my body still *buzzes* from Devesh's touch.

What the hell just happened?

The night air does little to cool my flushed skin as we step onto the lawn, now buzzing with people in their cocktail-night best. I exhale sharply, trying to compose myself.

Just breathe. Act normal.

But then, I make the mistake of glancing back.

Devesh is following us, hands in his pockets, looking maddeningly amused. He's smiling silently, shaking his head like he *knows* exactly what's running through my mind.

And damn it, that devilish smirk? That devastatingly sexy smirk? Of knowing that *all bets are off*.

The dance performances start with Samaira and Aryan, and we can't stop cheering for the lovers of the decade. They move perfectly on the most romantic songs and my heart thuds with possibilities, beyond my own imagination.

And then the emcee calls out my name, I feel like the kid caught in the spot who is cheating in the classroom. All I can see from the stage up here is him, standing at the edge of the crowd, arms crossed over his impossibly beautiful torso, watching me with a look so sincere it makes my pulse stutter. Or maybe, just *maybe*, he's the perfect distraction to keep me from completely breaking down on stage.

Then comes our sister's dance, I don't know why did we chose such an *emotional* song. The melody wraps around us like a memory, the lyrics pressing against my heart, and before I know it, there are tears shimmering in almost everyone's eyes.

The song ends, and Samaira and I clutch each other, hugging through the overwhelming rush of emotions.

The next performances begin, but I barely register them. My cousins are dancing—loud, dramatic, completely over-the-top—and I should be cheering. I should be present.

But my mind is somewhere else.

On what just happened.

On the impossible heat of his mouth against mine, the way he touched me like he already knew every inch of me, the way I *didn't* stop him. In fact, the way I *started* it.

What's the justification? What's the next move?

I drift to where he's standing, pretending to clap for my *least* favorite cousin's performance. He doesn't look at me right away, but I *feel* his awareness.

'So,' I murmur, my voice barely above the music. 'What happens now?'

His head tilts slightly, his gaze steady as he finally looks at me. 'Whatever you say.'

I swallow. 'Is it that easy?'

'Of course,' he says smoothly. 'You just have to *say*.'

My breath catches. He's watching me like he already knows the battle waging inside my head. Like he knows I am weighing every possibility, every risk.

'Why are you hell-bent on making me say it?'

'Because I want to know what you *want*. I don't want you to regret it.'

Last chance to make a *good* decision.

Nope. *I want him*.

The party gets real, DJ doesn't leave a single stone unturned, pushing the night into a whirlwind of dancing and chaos. But I keep a distance, no more dancing like a duo.

By the time we finally retire to our rooms, my feet ache, my body is exhausted, and my mind... *won't shut up*.

Mom ensures I don't sneak away, her sharp eyes scanning me like she *knows* I am up to something. Or maybe I just *look* guilty. Either way, she lingers in the hallway longer than necessary before finally shutting her door.

Devesh: *Afterparty?*

I exhale, staring at the screen. *God, I want to see him*. But there's no way I can slip out unnoticed

tonight. Not with Samaira right next to me, wide awake.

‘Who are you texting this late?’ she asks, her voice thick with exhaustion as she curls up under the blankets.

‘No one.’

She hums, unconvinced. Then, after a beat, she mumbles, ‘You and Devesh...’ she drawls, flipping onto her side to look at me. ‘What’s going on?’

My throat goes dry. ‘Nothing...we’re just... friends.’

I guess she’s too tired to interrogate me properly but murmurs, ‘Hmm...friends.’

Fuck. She knows. Of course.

I glance at my phone again and reply.

Me: *Not possible tonight.*

Devesh reads the message instantly, but he doesn’t reply.

And I don’t know what’s worse, the waiting, or the fact that I *want* him to say something that will make me reckless and go kiss him again in this very moment.

Devesh: *Get some sleep, muffin. Will see you in the morning!*

Muffin? Wow. I was the *tigress* a few hours ago.

And he’s right, I should sleep. But something tells me sleep isn’t going to come easy tonight.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Devesh

Weddings can be fun, sure. But they’re mostly exhausting.

I've never been this actively involved in one in a long time, I have no first cousins, my Dad was a single child himself. Yes some distant cousin's got married but I made short appearances.

My eyes scan the lawn, decked out in gold and saffron, a sea of people draped in shades of yellows and pinks for the *Haldi* ceremony.

But I'm searching for *her*.

My mind keeps flickering back to last night every ten seconds, every damn breath. The way her eyes darkened just before she kissed me. The way she grabbed the collar of my kurta and *yanked* me closer, like she needed me to breathe. The way her hips rolled against mine, the way she *felt* pressed up against me. The passion. The *connection*. The way she looked like a sin, a temptation wrapped in a black *freaking* backless dress.

And now?

Now she's standing next to Samaira, glued to her side, head slightly bowed, avoiding my gaze like we *didn't* almost lose ourselves in the kiss last night.

Is she avoiding me?

Haldi ceremony starts as Aryan and Samaira get seated in the center of a grand setup, and within seconds, they're smeared in turmeric, their faces streaked with gold as friends and family take turns applying the paste. Laughter, cheers, and playful shrieks fill the space while everyone is trying to capture the moments in their cameras.

I try to duck behind the crowd of over enthusiastic people to avoid the mess, and take a seat on the deserted sofa. While I check my phone thinking I can catch up on some work emails, a pair of hands sneak

up from behind and smear a thick, sticky layer of yellow paste across my cheek.

I turn around, already knowing who it is.

Akshara.

She's laughing, her eyes twinkling with pure mischief, her fingers still coated in yellow.

Smug. Challenging. Irresistible.

I step closer.

She tries to step back.

Oh, no.

She just declared war, and I am about to *wreck* her.

'Bad move, *tigress*,' I murmur, a slow smirk curling my lips.

Her laughter falters just a little.

Before she can escape, I grab her wrist and *pull*.

She shrieks as she stumbles forward, but I catch her easily, my arm wrapping around her waist. Her hands land on my chest, her breathing quick.

For a second, we just *look* at each other.

She's soft and warm against me, and I want—*fuck*—I want to press my lips to the curve of her jaw, to whisper in her ear that she shouldn't have started something she can't finish.

Her breath hitches, and I can tell she feels it too—the way our bodies press, the way the air between us thickens with something *more*.

But before I can do anything reckless, a group of cousins swarm around us, laughter echoing, hands carrying a pot brimming with turmeric paste.

'Time for revenge, Devesh!' someone calls out.

Akshara stiffens in my hold, her wide eyes flicking to the approaching chaos.

I dip my hand into the golden mixture, feeling the thick paste coat my fingers. And then—deliberately slow—I reach for her.

My palm glides over her cheek, my fingers splaying across her jaw as I spread the paste in smooth, slow strokes. She sucks in a breath, her skin warm beneath my touch.

But I don't stop there. I can't stop. I know people are looking at us.

I dip my hand again, this time trailing down to her neck, smearing the turmeric across the delicate line of her throat. My fingertips linger at the curve of her collarbone, pressing in just enough to feel the rapid beat of her pulse.

Her lashes flutter.

Her lips part.

Fuck, she's *so* responsive to my touch.

'Everyone's watching,' she whispers, her voice barely audible over the chaos around us.

'Let them watch,' I murmur, my gaze locked on hers, daring her to break first.

For a second, she doesn't move. Doesn't breathe.

Then, in one swift move, she grabs a handful of haldi and *smears* it straight across my face.

Laughter erupts around us, and she slips away from my grip.

Oh, *this* is going to be fun.

The ceremony doesn't conclude before people jump into the pool and find joy in being drunk in the morning.

Everyone's retires to their rooms for a quick break and change of clothes before lunch. I am roaming around from Aryan's suite to mine with all the

preparations for the evening. We have to be at the stage by five in the evening and everything is behind schedule, like every damn wedding.

Nita aunty is stressed, like every mother at her son's wedding. I wonder how my Mom would have been, if she was around. She was very fond of Aryan. As I spiral down the memory lane, I see Akshara crossing the hallway and entering the first suite on our floor, which is getting ready for the *wedding night*. Like they are going to do *it* for the first time.

She has something in her hands, looks like a gift wrap that she is probably trying to place there.

I follow her.

When I close the door behind us, she turns around, surprised. She comes closer after placing the box on the side table.

I cross the space between us and take her face in my hands, her eyes widen.

Before she could say a word, I kiss the hell out of her. Her arms go around me. I kiss her harder, like my existence depends on claiming her right now.

I break the kiss, step away just to watch her. She looks bewildered for a moment, her cheeks pink and lips still parted and slightly puffy.

Oh, dear lord, what a sight it is. I am no longer a mountains person, or a beach person, I have become an *Akshara's-slightly-puffy-lips* person from this moment on.

She looks over my shoulder and glances at the door, moves hurriedly to check if there's anyone outside.

I assume there's no one because she pulls me back and our tongues devour each other, it's barely

restrained by the fact that the decorators may walk in on us, there might be people looking for both of us. It's ferocious and needy and it gives me satisfaction that I wasn't alone in my struggle to keep my hands off her.

It's incendiary, her one hand clutching my already-mussed hair, the other closing the front of my shirt as she stands on her toes, leaning into me. I am glad we could sneak this moment to get through the rest of the day, before the decorator knocks at the door.

This wedding has been *fun*. I don't remember being so present as long as I remember. We danced until our feet ached and hooted until our throats were sore.

The groom is the calmest person you would have ever seen, and the bride? Well, guess shining in the glow of love. *It's pure bliss to see them together.*

To watch Aryan hold Samaira's hand and take their vows in front of the holy fire in this moment. A revelation I've always known deep down but never allowed myself to fully embrace.

Maybe I wasn't averse to this idea—maybe I was just contained, locked away in my own carefully built walls, conserving my energy, holding back, to acknowledge that there's that one *person*, who is destined to be mine.

But not anymore.

I see Akshara right across from me, smiling. A happiness so pure, it radiates her face with a glow I haven't seen earlier. She is stunning in her traditional attire, a shade of pink I can't name right, but she looks marvelous, challenging every last ounce of restraint in me.

I'm ready to *spend* it all. I'm ready to make all efforts to *win* her, to *protect* her, to *cherish* her. Every day. I'm falling for her. The emotions are very strong to acknowledge. But here's another one surfacing.

I also realize a regret. Maybe I could have pushed Aryan a little more, nudged him towards Samaira before fate did it. Maybe I should've stepped in, played the role of the orchestrator instead of the bystander.

But then again, maybe this was always how it was meant to happen.

Maybe we're all just characters in a story much larger than us, speaking lines we never truly wrote. Maybe some things are inevitable, no matter how hard we try to rewrite the script.

And if that's the case—if destiny is real, if everything is pre-written—then I wish, *without a doubt*, that Akshara is written into mine.

Now, all that's left is for me to prove it to her.

After seeing off the newlyweds to their suite—after a *hell* lot of unnecessary customs—everyone finally seems to gather their wits. Most of the guests retire at the earliest possible opportunity, eager to peel off their elaborate wedding attire and sink into their beds.

I know Akshara must be exhausted too, but traditions must be honored. I send her a quick text, and she appears in front of me within minutes—like she was waiting for this moment just as much as I was.

She tries to tug off her sandals, a small frown creasing her forehead. There's no way she can walk in those heels anymore, especially on the sand.

'Hey, let me help.'

Before she can protest, I bend down, loosen the straps, and slide them off her feet, taking the delicate heels into my hands.

She watches me, amusement dancing in her tired eyes. ‘Oh God, chivalry is alive.’

‘Well, they looked *amazing* on your legs, but shoes aren’t supposed to hurt.’

She lets out a soft laugh.

‘Thanks, Einstein. Next time, I’ll wear *sports shoes* with my lehenga.’

I smirk. ‘And I’ll be the one gifting them to you.’

We settle at the nearest shack, both too drained to walk any further. The ocean hums in the distance, a slow, rhythmic lullaby against the shore.

I open the bottle of wine I carried out, and before I realize, she snatches it, taking a long gulp like it’s the fuel and she is a vehicle running on fumes.

I chuckle, watching her throat move as she swallows. ‘Slow down, tigress. I know you’re in a *rush*.’

She lowers the bottle, eyes narrowing. ‘You’re an *asshole*.’

We *try* to talk. We *try* to act normal. And we are successful, yes a tiny bit.

We don’t discuss the kiss. We talk about our pasts. And in between she is caught looking into my eyes, and looking through them. And all I can see is her lips.

This night isn’t ending without another kiss.

We finish the bottle in record time, our conversations slowing, the air between us thick with everything we aren’t saying. We walk back inside and stop in front of my suite’s door.

She shifts on her bare feet, and I glance at her, reluctant to step away.

‘Thank you for everything. I had so much fun these last three days. I haven’t talked this much in years.’ I say.

I am so damn tempted to cover the distance between us, but I won’t. I won’t tempt her, even if everything in me aches to.

She looks up, her lips curving into the softest smile.

I don’t look away either, losing myself in those sparkling pools of brown. Neither does she.

Something shifts. Her smile fades, her expression morphing into something else—and before I can decipher it, her fingers clutch the front of my *Sherwani*, gripping it tight.

And then she kisses me.

Hard. Fierce. Like she’s been holding back for *too* long.

I don’t hesitate. I *can’t*.

I surge in, cupping her face, deepening the kiss. I need this—*her*.

She slides her hands around my neck, pressing closer.

There’s no going back now.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Akshara

It’s just another way my brain is tricking me by saying: How good would it feel to close the distance, just once? One more time. Just last time.

One surrender. Would it really hurt to give in, just once? Maybe all this sexual tension will die down once you fume it. Maybe the weight of this magnetic ache will lift if I just... let go.

It might be a wrong thing to do for hundred reasons, but I *can't* stop. None of the reasons seem good enough to deny myself *this* man.

God knows that bad ideas and Akshara Sharma have always been closest of friends. But it doesn't feel bad anymore. It's confusing, what *this* feeling is?

Trust me, I tried my best to hold back, but he made me feel so *wanted*. I tried to maintain the friends' façade, but he made me feel so much *more*. I tried to not touch him again, but he made me feel so damn *needy*.

The way he kisses me back, hard and fast, is proving my point. Our bodies crush together, his hand all over my back. It's deepening as we tilt our heads to get more as if it's not enough.

I can't forget our first kiss in the club, or the one last night, or the one we sneaked this afternoon. I wanted to feel it *again*, so bad, I wanted that feeling when I didn't know that the world existed around me.

I haven't been a virgin for a long time, but I had never felt so euphoric kissing anyone. I didn't know for a twenty-seven years old adult, that there could be such vibrations in my own body.

Oh Lord! I needed this so badly.

He taps the room key and opens the door; we back walk in the foyer without parting our mouths. His tongue in my mouth, my fingers woven through his unruly strands, his body firm against mine as his

fingers knead my spine, my claws on his shoulders, trying to draw him even closer.

We cross the living room and the first spot we find in the bedroom is the grand vanity table that stands beneath an intricately framed rectangular framed mirror that stretches above up to the ceiling, just opposite the bed. How did I not realize until yesterday that the canopy bed and this space feels intimidatingly *romantic*.

My palms land flat on the polished mahogany table to get support, and a few things lying on the table, goes crashing down...which none of us give any heed about right now.

I pause for a moment to look at him and he drawls, 'Are you about to tell me why this is a terrible idea?'

I almost laugh in the midst of a sex escapade, 'I am terribly not interested in telling you how terrible this idea is...' and I kiss him back, to finish the answer with my lips, with the urgency of a woman who's tried everything to resist this and failed gloriously.

And he reciprocates with his tongue nudging mine with scorching intensity.

The gentleness is gone. I can't seem to hold back my desire, and it doesn't seem like he can either.

My heavy *lehenga* is stopping me from jumping up and wrapping my legs around his waist. He helps me get out of it in a record time and I throw his *sherwani* above his head followed by his vest, it's almost wild. The rush in each movement is a testimony of how deeply we wanted it.

Oh dear lord, the firm line of his chest and his bare broad shoulders! A sight from the heavens. But I can't see it for long because he leans in again, without

wasting time. His mouth travels down my neck and a moan escapes my lips.

‘Oh My God. Devesh...’ I didn’t know I had another G-spot where my neck meets my shoulder, fuck, his stubble beard rubbing against my skin is making me lose my wits.

‘I need to hear *this* again.’ He growls in my neck. I realize it’s the first time I have moaned his name. He spins me around and unzips my almost backless blouse with one hand. It’s a heavy embroidery fabric with in-built pads and of course, I am not wearing a bra beneath.

It falls on the floor with a soft thud.

Fuck me, this is insanely erotic. God only knows, how turned on I feel in this moment looking at our naked bodies in the mirror, entangled. My head is resting against his chest, he has come closer from behind and there’s no space between us now, I can feel his breath on my neck while his hands travel up my waist and cup my breasts.

The way his warm big palms are caressing and squeezing the flesh of my breasts is not remotely gentle, it’s urgent, rough...heated. And I fucking love it.

I can see the intensity in his eyes through our reflection in the mirror, devouring me with his hungry eyes, he moves one of his hands and land it right at the edges of the last piece of fabric on my body, my rose-pink panties, which were the only source of protection of my sanity.

I have done this so many times earlier, but never even remotely near to what it feels right now. I can’t

take this sight anymore, I am losing my control, so I close my eyes.

My chest, rising and falling with each deep breath against him. My hands travel up his neck and his hair from behind.

Moving my hair over to my one shoulder, he growls in my ear, *'Open your eyes baby, look at me.'*

I open my eyes, gasping for air as I feel his thick solid length pressing deep against my back and seeing his strong fingers teasing my already erect nipples.

'Did I tell you earlier, you're the most beautiful woman I have ever seen?' His eyes still locked on to mine in the mirror. Without meaning to, I rock my hips against him.

Devesh groans. It's not loud, but the noise traveling through my body like a symphony. I want *more*, more of that noise, more of him.

I turn around to face him, he understands my dire need for him to take my nipples in his mouth. He pulls me up to rest my hips on the tabletop, his lips landing on my hard nipples, sucking them greedily. My head rolls back, and I can only hear my own loud moans, and his name on my lips, as I run my fingers carelessly on his nape and clutch his hair.

Oh Godddd! I feel him dig his teeth on my hard nipples, one by one, ravishing them.

'This is so *fucking* good.' I hear myself whisper while he continues to devour every inch of my body.

He slides his hand up my calves and then inside my thighs, he doesn't bother pulling my underwear off, just pushes the fabric to the side and slide his long fingers through my folds. I am dripping wet and ready to burst.

My body reacts with a shudder, and he stops right there. May be this is the instinctive response of my body, worried about who is touching it.

‘Are you alright?’ His eyes shadow with concern.

‘Yes, more than alright.’ I nod and lean back on the mirror, feeling the cold surface against my fire lit body, feeling the comfort that he is still is a gentleman, the rare kind of species who keeps his hands respectfully to himself—until he doesn’t.

I wrap my legs around him, pulling him in, my hands finally reach his pants to touch his heavy bulge, and his kisses turn frantic as if I have touched the *right* spot. I swear I have thought about seeing his dick more times than I should have, and I can’t wait now.

He slides two fingers down my slick wetness, groaning against my jaw, the urgency in the movements telling me he has been dying to touch me.

‘You’re so wet. Open your legs for me.’ His voice is hoarse, needy yet commanding.

I *give in* immediately.

So *unlike* me.

His one arm still wrapped around my back, holding me still and the other hand showing its mastery with ferociously stroking me back and forth with his two long fingers.

I am trembling from the tension, using my hands to knead my breasts and trying to hold his cock fervently through his cotton pants, listening to his breath catch in his throat every time I do it.

‘Fuck, you’re *perfect*.’ He groans in my ear and then his thumb does this unexpectedly sexual thing to my clit, with the circular motions on that small, tiny bead...and I have become this helpless mess.

Oh God! I am moaning and whimpering and crying out his name.

If he keeps it up for a few more seconds, the thing he's doing, I am going to come hard and fast. He kisses me, his tongue in my mouth and his fingers not stopping from working me.

I don't remember feeling so wanted, *so needed*. And I have never felt comfort in being vulnerable. And I am so very vulnerable, at this moment, physically, emotionally, yet safe.

I wonder if this is possible in real-life to feel such a build-up, just with fingers. I have struggled to give myself orgasms all my life. And I had to help all my previous boyfriends to take me to the end point.

But within a few seconds, the pleasure is unbearable, my toes curl and butterflies swirl to my chest. I bite his lip and fist his biceps while my legs go tighter around his waist, and I launch into a volcano of pleasure and liquids.

It's like my body has been saving up for this for *years*. I can't speak.

I take my time to gather myself. I need to commit everything to memory because I have never felt this *alive* the way I do right now.

While my brain tries to tell me it's *just sex*, my heart says *too late*.

I feel like I'm floating in some kind of delicious, drugged haze. My fingers are still gripping his shoulders, clinging like they don't want to let go.

The craziest part? I didn't have to lift a damn finger to fall apart like that.

His smile says it all—he knows exactly what I'm feeling: the pleasure, the satisfaction.

Slowly, he withdraws his drenched fingers, bringing them to his mouth, savoring them like the last bite of the most decadent dessert.

‘God, your taste is addictive,’ he murmurs, his voice low, dark, and sinful. I could die with pleasure in this moment. I’m still panting, every inch of me trembling as I try to steady myself.

‘I hope you want more?’ His voice is rough, teasing.

I nod, far too quickly, unable to let the offer slip away.

He laughs softly, a sound that sends a shiver through me, before pulling me tighter against him. His strong arms hold me close, and in one fluid motion, he carries me to the bed with my legs still wrapped around him.

I have to compliment his workouts; the man doesn’t break a sweat, and I’m already spent.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Devesh

I meant to just tease her, get her close and then pull away, but then I couldn’t stop.

‘Oh God, it was...’ Akshara tries to say something, but words fail her.

My heart swells with pride knowing she has felt something special with me. The girl who has had six boyfriends and definitely high standards for men, has cried my name loud enough to wake up the newly

married couple, on their wedding night, in the adjacent suite.

God, it's satisfying to see her this flushed after fluttering around my fingers.

I climb between her legs and pull down her underwear, she immediately pulls me towards her, capturing my mouth with hers and moving her hands on my back before she decides she wants to ride me.

I lie on my back and she is sitting upright now, naked, still gathering her wits.

She pulls down my pants and my briefs to send them flying to the chair nearby, she is eyeing me with the same hunger I had felt a few minutes ago when I first saw her skin.

There's nothing more tempting than seeing her take charge, she leans in and kisses me, her hands drifting down my body. Everywhere she touches lights me up, from shoulders to stomach, down my trail until she finally wraps her hand around my cock.

She bites her lower lip while stroking me with her cold hands a few times before she finally sits up, her hands resting on my chest, she rubs her slippery folds against my shaft. I reach her nipples and pinch them, she gasps and pauses, 'Condom?'

I pass it to her from the bed stand, and she rips it open and rolls in on, not breaking the eye contact.

It's hot. And beautiful. *She's beautiful.*

She steadies herself and arches her back while guiding me to her entrance, my overtly eager cock trying to plunge in.

'You are...oh fuck...you are huge.' She takes a moment to adjust, breathing heavily, thrusting slowly a few times, and trying to take my entire length in. The

desire in her eyes, the lust, the urgency; I brace myself for the pleasure as I slide fully inside her through her tight corners. She screams with pleasure.

And the *view*. I don't think there's anything near to this sight.

She starts riding me, her head fallen back, filling herself, stretching for me and we both groan and sigh together.

'So fucking good.' I mumble as I thrust inside her to reach deeper.

I put my arms behind my head to watch her, her tits bounce with every stroke, a wild moan escapes her lips every time I hit her deeper, her eyes fluttering close. She is tight, warm, perfect, and every stroke making me growl.

She moves faster, more demanding, and I won't be able to last longer when it feels like this. But I don't want to let it come to an end. *Not yet*.

Akshara leans back to breathe, her hands on my thighs, looking exhausted. I move my hands up and down her waist, a few relaxing strokes, and then squeeze her hips.

She slides down under me, voluntarily. I wasn't aware it can be so satisfying to see her asking me to lead her in bed. We reverse the position in nano seconds, not ready to take a break from what was happening.

My cock is bare against her belly, and we're pressed together, skin to skin. She shivers with my touch and it's wonderful. She spreads her legs, wide and inviting.

I help her put her legs on my shoulders and I bury myself into her, she reciprocates with an explosive

moan, like we are animals, completely unleashed, bucking hips and slamming, my cock hitting her sweet spot with every stroke.

She throws her hands above her head seeking support at the headstand as we fuck harder, *'There...Devesh...Yes...there.'*

The whole world around us obliterated as our bodies dive into pure physical bliss, raw and hard and pleasure building my release inside me.

'Don't stop...don't stop...' I hear her say, half-whispering, half-moaning.

As if I would. Every thrust is harder than the earlier one, unstoppable, uncontrollable. I swear I can feel my cock hit her last nerve up.

'Devesh...Deve...yes...yes.' Her eyes slide shut, and she whimpers with pleasure.

And that's all it takes. I can feel her clenching as her release washes over her and I follow her with my own release two seconds later.

'Akshara...' That's all I could say as I come, *hard*.

Why do I want it to be the last time when I am doing it with someone for the first time.

I bury my face into her neck and moan, and she keeps her legs wrapped around me harder, as we rock together, her vagina squeezing my spent cock. I can feel the aftershocks still rippling through her. We slow down, our fingers interlock, I kiss her, or maybe she kisses me, we *kiss*; unhurried, slow and satiated and then I roll off and flop onto the pillow next to her.

She rolls over, toward me, her hair tickling my shoulder as she puts her face on my bicep, her lips curled into a smile, *'In how much time can we possibly do it again?'* She asks me teasingly.

I laugh, ‘Five minutes?’

But I can feel her breath slowing down, in a few seconds, she is in deep sleep.

I know it’s cliché, but I happen to kiss the top of her head. Like I promised.

I love this moment. It’s *deep*.

Is it too soon to say that *I love her*?

It might be but what I know for sure is that *I want her*, I want all of her, the tender parts and the strong parts, the fun parts and the serious parts, the confident parts and the vulnerable ones, the dominant parts and the submissive ones.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Akshara

My phone is ringing. It’s loud and relentless, drilling into my skull. I groan, squeezing my eyes shut, willing it to stop. But it doesn’t.

Wait.

It’s *not* a dream.

With an effort that feels like dragging myself up from the depths of an ocean, I pry open one eye and fumble for my phone. The bright screen nearly blinds me, but the words are clear enough to send a bolt of panic straight through my already throbbing head.

7 missed calls from Mom.

Adrenaline kicks in, and I throw off the heavy duvet—only to freeze mid-motion.

Oh. My. Dear. God.

I remember where I am instantly.

Of course, this is *not* my hotel room.

Flashes of the wild scenes from last night come flying to my hazy brain while I gather the strength to send a text to my Mom, ‘Calling back in 5 minutes.’

And then, I make the mistake of looking into the full-length mirror across the room.

A disheveled mess of tangled hair and smudged eyeliner stares back at me.

I try to slip out of bed as stealthily as possible, barely breathing, and escape at the speed of a crime scene. The last thing I need is for *him* to wake up and witness this distraught version of mine.

My dress, which was lying on the floor as per my last memory, is now neatly folded and kept on the couch. Oops. *He did it?*

I snatch up my lehenga and top, shimmying into them in record time. But my eyes keep betraying me, drawn back to the man in the bed, who is sleeping face down on the pillow, his sculpted broad shoulders on display, one of them I had bitten a few hours ago.

Heat rushes up my neck as more flashes of the night slam into me.

Me. Up against the mirror. On top of him. Withering under him. My hands were buried in his soft hair while his fingers did the magic.

Gawd!!!

But where the hell are my panties?

I am now crawling on the floor while searching for my most treasured possession I can’t leave behind. I lean down and check under the bed and then the couch, but that damn pink thing has vanished into the abyss, and I have *zero* time for this.

I tiptoe back toward the bed, my pulse hammering. Maybe they're somewhere *there*, tangled in the sheets with the man who had me pinned beneath him.

Devesh is still asleep. Still devastatingly gorgeous.

Still blissfully unaware that I am moments away from either escaping this room unnoticed or suffering the ultimate walk of shame—straight into my mother's wrath.

Because of course, she must be pounding on my door by now.

I squeeze my eyes shut. I don't know how to handle this moment of regret-laced-with desire and the ticking time bomb that is my mother.

And what the *hell* am I supposed to say to Devesh if he wakes up and catches me right now.

'*Hey, remember me?* The girl who has been swearing off men? Yeah, so about that—I ended up kissing you, and then fucking you against the mirror, and finally, your bed. Fun times!'

It wasn't me! It wasn't me who was chanting his name. It was him, it happened all because of his goddamn sexy smile.

And just as I'm about to make my move, my phone vibrates violently in my palm.

A *spree* of messages from Mom.

Mom: *Hurry up, we're waiting for you at breakfast.*

Mom: *Samaira and Aryan are already here.*

Mom: *What are you doing?*

Mom: *Where have you been?*

Panic slams into me.

Fuck.

I type back: 'Coming.'

I shoot one last desperate glance at Devesh. I wish to wake him up and tell him how much I enjoyed last night, but...I don't know what to think of last night, not yet. Not very clearly.

Please keep sleeping. I don't want to be embarrassed just in this moment, mortified.

I shut the door behind me as softly as possible, then sprint down the hallway, my heart hammering.

My hotel room is just a few doors down, but every step feels like a public indictment of my sinful night, feeling the bare-lessness beneath my heavy skirt. I am literally running through the corridor without panties.

By some miracle, I make it to my room unnoticed, fumble out my key card from under my phone cover, and dive inside.

Straight to the bathroom.

Water. I need water.

I splash my face aggressively, rubbing away every trace of last night. This is the fastest I've ever removed makeup.

Foundation? Gone.

Mascara? Erased.

The debauchery? Unfortunately, still burned into my memory.

Two full minutes of furious teeth-brushing later—scrubbing away the taste of wine, and *him*—I yank on denim shorts and a T-shirt.

I take a deep breath, trying to ignore the soreness that lingers in places I cannot acknowledge right now.

I can still *feel* him.

Like his touch has imprinted itself somewhere deep.

Is it physically possible to still feel a cock inside you, hours later?

Should I ask my newly married sister? It would be simple... ‘Hey, Samaira, quick question—did Aryan’s presence linger in you the next morning? Same pinch?’

Oh *Gawd*. NO.

I shake off the thought and rush out the door toward the buffet area, a fresh wave of guilt washes over me.

I should have said something to Devesh before leaving.

I grab my phone and fire off a quick message:

‘Hey, had to leave for Mom emergency. Didn’t want to disturb your sleep.’

Short. Simple. Vague enough to avoid awkwardness.

I will have to face him. I don’t know what he feels about last night, but I clearly remember what he said in the club when we met for the first time, *I don’t do relationships*.

And it shouldn’t feel bad, because, of course, I also don’t want to do relationships here. People decide for themselves if they want relationships or not.

Of course, it was *casual*. We were drunk, and flirting throughout the wedding.

So what? Huh? I don’t care. I tell myself.

But my stomach twists.

It shouldn’t be a big deal.

But the worst part—the part I refuse to fully acknowledge?

Something inside me has shifted.

It was supposed to be just a fun, no-strings-attached *hardcore sex session*. A way to burn through the ridiculous tension that had been crackling between us for days.

But it wasn't just that.

It was *more*. And that...terrifies me.

There was kissing. *So* much kissing—slow, deep, toe-curling kisses that had no business happening in a one-time thing.

He kissed me *while* he was inside me.

He looked at me like I was the most beautiful woman on earth.

My chest tightens, but before I can spiral into *that* particular mess, I snap back to my current situation.

From a distance, I spot our family, all of them smiling like nothing is amiss. Except my mother, whose gaze is currently attempting to shoot daggers at me.

I take a deep breath, straighten my shoulders, and prepare to act like a normal, functional human being.

I make the executive decision to *not* look in her direction.

Instead, I go straight to Samaira and give her a full hug. She's glowing—radiating happiness like the sunlight pouring in from the massive windows.

I bite my tongue. I *will not* blurt out anything inappropriate.

I pull away and turn to Aryan, giving him a quick side hug.

That's when I see it.

His knowing gaze.

The one that says he knows exactly where I was last night. Knows exactly where his best friend—his *brother-from-another-mother*—is right now.

But there's no judgment in his eyes. No trepidation. No pity.

Just a soft, understanding smile.

And for some reason...that makes my heart pound even more because - *he knows it*.

I look away before I could linger, schooling my face into a mask of neutrality as I slid into my seat.

As far away from my parents as possible.

What was I thinking?

It was my body that pushed me into it. My body, which is still humming from the orgasms (in plural) the hot billionaire gave me last night.

I snap out of my thoughts when I hear Samaira lean in and ask Aryan—practically in a whisper—

‘Where’s Devesh?’

Crap.

I stiffen as Aryan dials him, already preparing myself for the relief of hearing—

No answer.

But then, *he picks up*.

Fifteen minutes later, Devesh walks into the restaurant, when almost everyone is done with their breakfast except me.

And sweet mother of God, he looks...

Like *sin and satisfaction rolled into a butter croissant*. And I am suddenly starving.

The casual henley T-shirt with top buttons open, make him look even *hotter*.

Why does he look like that?

Aryan pats his shoulder, smirking.

They start talking, but I don't hear a word.

And I just realize that I was *waiting* for him.

I haven't even taken the food. Not because I wasn't hungry—but because *somewhere, deep down*, I had been planning to eat with my night adventure partner.

Then he looks at me.

Or rather—*through* me.

'Hey. Morning.' His expressions unreadable.

'Hi.' I try to sound casual. Unaffected. Because that is what we are. *Casual*.

Right?

'Let's get some food.' It's hard to differentiate if he is telling me or asking me.

I just nod and follow him, promising Samaira that I'll be with her in ten minutes for helping her with final honeymoon packing.

We walk towards the wide spread of breakfast, which leaves me alone with him.

I take a deep breath. *Here goes nothing*.

'I'm sorry I had to leave without saying anything. I had seven missed calls from my mom.'

'Hmm, no worries.' He says, straight-faced. *Unbothered*.

WTF?

What exactly is he expecting? Isn't this his way of doing things—casual sex, no strings, no relationships?

I fold my arms in front of my chest. 'Don't tell me you thought we'd be walking in here hand-in-hand for breakfast.'

His lips twitch, but there's no real amusement in his eyes.

'Of course not. It's a *fling*. Right? Not a big deal.' He is clearly disappointed.

Well, I acknowledge that but I don't know how to rectify it. 'We should talk.'

He raises a brow. 'I thought we were talking.'

'About this,' I say, making a small, frustrated circle between us with my finger. 'About what exactly this is.'

He doesn't blink. Doesn't smirk. Doesn't give anything away.

Just— 'Sure. Whenever you're ready.'

'Okay.' But right now, I have *nothing* to say.

Maybe *after* I've had breakfast.

Maybe *after* I've packed.

Maybe *after* I've figured out why this casual thing suddenly feels like anything but casual.

I am pretending to eat while feeling torn—physically still reeling, mentally trying to talk myself out of it, and emotionally? *Shaken*.

I had promised myself not to *fall*. I told him I had sworn off men. I was done with relationships.

They why on earth do I want him to hold my hand and look into my eyes.

When I *know* all relationships fail.

Because they *always* do.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Devesh

No, my heart isn't breaking into pieces.

I didn't think we'd come in here *hand in hand*, all smiles over breakfast like a couple on honeymoon.

But the truth?

I expected something.

A *smile, maybe*. A teasing remark. The same playful spark I saw in her yesterday.

Not this. Not the way her shoulders are drawn tight, the way she's *guarded*, as if she's bracing for impact.

Not the quietness in her body language.

I don't know why, but it bothers me. An odd twinge of disappointment working its way inward, settling somewhere I don't like.

I *should* be fine.

She was always clear. She was transparent.

She didn't want commitments. She was *off men*.

I should go back to being my old self, consider it as a *good time*, and move on, dive into work, chalk up the future plans for my business.

But instead?

I don't *want* to be fine with it.

I don't want her to panic like this. I don't want her shutting down.

Yeah, I was pissed when I woke up and realized she was gone, and all I had was a brief text from her and not her, curled up in my arms.

But right now? I just want her to relax. I want to see her *smile*.

It's bizarre that I was almost about to blurt out my feelings to her last night, guess it's going to take more than *amazing sex* to convince her.

I hear myself say, 'All right...at least don't make it sound like a low-point. I hope it was some fun.'

Her lips twitch at the corners. That almost-smile I've been waiting for.

'No... no, don't get me wrong. Of course, it was... it was good.'

I arch a brow.

‘Good? C’mon, Akshara.’

We both know last night wasn’t just good. It was *red-hot*. The kind of night that brands itself into your memory, whether you want it to or not.

Or maybe it meant nothing to her. Or maybe, it meant more to me than to her.

Maybe this is *karma* biting me in the ass for all the times I said this exact kind of thing—to avoid the clingy, post-sex phase.

And yet, now? I hate hearing it.

‘Okay, we are not talking about it.’ She whispers. ‘I don’t remember anything.’

I smirk. ‘Really? So you don’t remember the mirror?’

Her eyes widen.

‘*Devesh...*’

Fuck. My name on her lips.

I should tell her not to say it. Not when I have heard it in a very different tone about a hundred times last night.

‘*Good*,’ I murmur. ‘So you do remember at least saying my name.’

Her cheeks flush the softest pink.

‘Oh God,’ she groans, covering her face with her palms.

I chuckle. ‘Relax. We’ll talk. But for now? You should probably go back to Samaira before she starts suspecting things.’

She exhales. ‘They both know.’

I blink. ‘What?’

‘Yeah. I could read their expressions.’ She says.

I shake my head. ‘Wow. Okay. Can you read my expressions, too?’

She gives me that full smiles. Finally.

And damn if I don't feel that *right* in my chest.

I meet Aryan by the pool after breakfast. After three days of showing up in perfectly tailored suits, *sherwanis* decked with pearls and studs, he finally looks normal in his sweatpants and a plain T-shirt, the lazy Sunday gear.

There's this, *I-just-got-married* look which feels oddly comforting on him.

The guests are preparing to leave, the frenzy of the wedding winding down. Aryan was clearly busy, but he still made time to meet me alone before we part ways for a while. And thank God—at least he will be keeping his base in Gurugram now, so we won't have to wait months between our hangouts anymore.

I know what he is going to ask first, and he does.

'So, where have you been? Mom said she didn't see you at all last night.'

'Yeah, I was tired.' I hesitate for a moment, debating whether I should tell him the truth or just shrug it off.

Aryan gives me that suspicious side-eye, clearly not buying it.

'You know I am not going to believe any explanation that doesn't involve Akshara, right?'

I lean back on my chair, drumming my fingers on the table. I can't possibly lie now that he's laid it out so clearly.

'Ok. You already know it. We slept together.' I finally say.

Aryan just nods. I have never seen anyone look less surprised.

‘Do you also think it’s a terrible thing?’ I ask.

‘No, why would I think that? Because it’s Samaira’s sister?’

‘Hmm.’

‘Both of you are adults and I do trust both of your judgement. Besides, it would have happened sooner or later, you both seem to get along well.’

‘Thanks, appreciate it.’ I keep it short because I don’t want to burden him with my spiraling thoughts right now.

He observes me while sipping his coffee. After drinking indulgence in the last three days, we all need to detox, but I still settle for a beer. The old logic from college times that beer helps a hangover.

‘But there is something troubling you about it?’ That’s the thing with childhood friends, they know you too well to let go.

‘I guess she is putting us in a fuck buddies zone.’ I try to shake the feeling off.

‘And you want *more*.’ He says it like a statement.

‘Is it that obvious? Like written all over my face obvious? Or you know me too well?’

‘I mean...yeah...both of these, combined.’ He just chuckles.

‘I am going to talk to her before leaving, we couldn’t talk properly after...you know.’

After the wild sex night.

‘Yeah, that’s the best. Talk to her but don’t *push* her. Have some patience.’

‘Do you think I am rushing?’ I am a little perplexed.

‘Yeah, you always do. Once you set your eyes on something, you want it in that moment itself.’

‘No, I don’t do that.’ I defend myself.

‘Huh, yes you do. Look at your IPO. No one steers through an IPO in less than a year. No one has done it in the history. And the Euro Trips acquisition, two months for such a big acquisition with all the tech integrations. You have been slogging day and night to see it through, as soon as possible.’

Ok. He has valid points. Which means I shouldn’t rush in this matter at least.

‘She will come along, if she is *meant* to. You do what your heart says, and she will definitely see it.’ He says it with a calm in his voice that I got to believe him.

‘Hmm, I wouldn’t have taken this advice if it were a year ago. But let me take it now, now that you have finally married the girl you gave ten years to *see* it.’

We share a laugh. I needed this time with him.

He gets a call from Samaira as few relatives are ready to bid goodbye and the newlyweds must see them off. I go to my suite and text Akshara.

Me: *Hey, I will be leaving in an hour. I understand if you are busy, we can talk later.*

Akshara: *Sure.*

Now what the heck does sure mean?

I try to pack my stuff without getting mad. I open the outlook on phone and there are more than a hundred unread emails. My phone buzzes in my hand.

Akshara: *Looks like I won’t be able to excuse myself with the chaos here. All the return gifts are my responsibility.*

And emojis of a spinning head.

I see her once before leaving, of course we can’t talk about last night in front of everyone.

But we hug. She hugs me tighter than I expected in public, like I *do* matter to her, and she doesn't want me out.

'We are good, right?' she asks, taking a step back to look at me.

'Yep, we're good.' I say, ignoring the twinge.

'I will text you.' Her brows a little furrowed.

'Whenever you get free. No hurry.' I say, and add. 'Stay unworried, that suits you the best.' I take a leave with that.

I settle into the lounge, open my laptop, and—like the responsible businessman I claim to be—I start going through my emails.

Or at least, that's the plan.

This is the longest break I have taken in the last three years. Though my EA, Prakriti, kept me posted with her short texts at the end of the day to assure me there was no fire. And now, instead of focusing on catching up on work, I find myself unlocking my phone and staring at *her*. The photos we took last night at the beach...before everything that came after.

What surprises me the most is that *I* took these pictures. And the fact that I am *keeping* them.

I had never let a woman take any pictures together, never take any of mine either. Too risky. Too many ways it could backfire. Leaked photos, messy situations, and unnecessary drama.

But here she is. On my phone. On my mind.

I zoom in.

Her smile. Her eyes.

After touching her bare skin, all I can think about is touching her again.

That's all this is, right? Just *that*.

I stare at her picture for another second before locking my phone and shutting my laptop. Because let's be real—there's no way I'm getting any work done today.

I am also worried, not just about what happens next, but about what happens to *us*. The weird, easy friendship we had before this whole, *let's tear each other's clothes off* situation.

I could live with it if last night was just sex. Great sex. Insanely hot, melt-your-brain sex.

But it didn't *feel* like just that. Not when she was moaning my name, not when her body was tangled with mine, not when she kissed me like she actually *felt* something.

And this morning? The way she looked at me—like I was a mistake she was trying to erase—that didn't sit right.

Did I screw up? Maybe. I should have waited. Possibly. But I couldn't wait when she was the one who made the first move.

Well, *fortunately*, she did.

It's *complicated*. I don't really know what's on her mind.

And I can't stop thinking about it. I need to know what's on her mind.

Not that I am head-over heels in love with her, but since our first meeting, she has been on my mind. The first time a girl has ever taken up space in my mind like this. The only one who sneaks into my dreams uninvited.

It's ridiculous. I thought I didn't believe in love. After what I possible know about my own parent's

marriage, which was perfect on paper, yet God only knows the reality.

And still, I sit around the airport, staring at my phone like a lovesick idiot, wondering what *this* even is.

I can't convince myself to walk away just because she's scared to name it.

Maybe it's about time she stops running. Maybe it's about time she *accepts* it.

Us.

My phone beeps.

Akshara: *Hey, I just started for the airport.*

Her flight was in the afternoon today while her parents will be leaving tomorrow after wrapping things up.

Akshara: *Have you boarded?*

I stare at the message for exactly three seconds before making a completely rational, well-thought-out decision.

I reschedule my flight. I know the details of her flight. I also know that she will be accompanied by a few relatives of her who are flying back to Delhi, but I don't care. I am sure she'll lose them easily.

Because obviously, I need to sit next to her. And *talk* to her.

I send a reply, keeping it casual.

Me: *Not yet.*

Me: *Done your web check-in?*

Akshara: *Nope, will do it once I reach.*

Me: *Send me the ticket, I am sitting idle, will do it for you.*

I get her ticket, I get it upgraded to business class and complete the web check-in for both of us to ensure we sit together.

All set.

Akshara: *Oh My God! I got a business class upgrade.*

Akshara: *Lucky charm.*

Akshara: *Listen, I'm really sorry I panicked. I know apologies on texts are overrated, so I will say it in person when we meet again. And if it helps, I know I behaved like a confused bitch. It wasn't about you, of course.*

The emojis that she sends after every text are interesting, lightening, rolling eyes, spinning head.

I smile and reply.

Me: *Alright. I will wait to meet you again.*

Akshara: *Just so you know, last night was amazing. You we're....not just good. You we're astounding.*

Akshara: *But it doesn't change the fact that it's complicated.*

Me: *Don't worry. We'll figure it out.*

I wait at the lobby just past the security check-ins, and I spot her the moment she arrives, looking effortlessly stunning in the most casual attire. Her eyes widen when she sees me.

‘Oh My God, what are you still doing here?’ She almost squeaks. ‘Wasn’t your flight at three?’

She glances at her watch. It’s *exactly* three.

I smirk, leaning against the nearest column like I wasn’t just sitting around waiting for her. ‘Thought we could use a bit of chit-chat on our way back home.’

Her expression wavers—surprise, guilt, uncertainty. ‘You didn’t have to...’ and she goes softer.

I know this must be unexpected. I have never rescheduled things for anyone before. Haven’t waited for hours for anyone before.

We start walking towards the boarding gates, there’s not too much time to chill but we still grab coffees. She doesn’t bother where her uncles and their families pleasantly disappeared.

She turns towards me, shifting on her feet and looks up at me through her lashes that blink too many times when she is nervous. ‘I am really sorry Devesh, I behaved weirdly this morning.’

Relief washes over me. I stuff my hands in my pockets, keeping it cool.

‘That’s alright.’

But it’s not just alright. I am back to being the *enthralled by her eyes* boy.

We settle into our seats in the waiting area, her fingers absently tracing the rim of her cup, a sure sign that she’s about to say something either incredibly logical or completely ridiculous.

‘It’s just that...’ She clears her throat. ‘I feel...that we still...shouldn’t date.’

I arch a brow. ‘Right. Because emotional investment is a *fatal disease* we must avoid at all costs.’

She ignores my sarcasm and pushes forward. ‘It’s not that simple. And I don’t know what to do about how I feel about *us*.’

This word, *us*, never did things to my heart before.

‘Well, I agree with that last part.’

Her eyes flicker, ‘You get it, right? We have this...comfort...I don’t want lose our bond. Can we still be friends?’

I look at her for a second. Then shrug. ‘You know what? We will, of course, be friends. But not *just* friends.’

Her jaw drops. ‘What?’

Yep. I said it.

I continue, ‘I don’t want to be just friends. I want more. Or at least a chance at more. And then...we’ll see where it goes.’

Akshara exhales, clearly stressed. I know her head is telling her the opposite.

‘Don’t stress,’ I add gently. ‘Let’s give it time. We’ll figure it out. Like normal people, with lots of overthinking and debating and fearing.’

She nods, absorbing it all.

Some wise lover in the morning told me - Just be yourself. If it’s meant to be, she’ll follow.

My eyes wander—traitors that they are—to her lips. She is biting her lip and it does things to my body that I shouldn’t feel at a public place.

And something tells me...this is meant to be.

We walk side by side while boarding—not exactly hand in hand, but not avoiding eye contact either. It’s not the *madly-in-love* look on her face but it’s the *I-am-confused-but-I-like-whatever-the-hell-is-happening* look.

We settle in our seats, and talk through the flight, none of us taking the much needed nap, laughing about the most ridiculous wedding moments, the aunty who tried to set up her daughter with me, the uncle who danced a little too enthusiastically after three drinks,

and of course, how ridiculously happy Samaira and Aryan are.

We don't talk more about what happened last night, while I see her body isn't completely out of the pleasure stupor, because I am aware how it feels.

It's *easy* with her, like we've been doing this forever.

At arrivals, my driver is waiting. I offer to drop her home. She slides into the back seat with me, and we ride in comfortable chatter. I tell her my itinerary, I am leaving for Indonesia tomorrow and will be back in three days. We are setting up more regional offices as we are expanding business overseas.

She tells me about her plans too, she will be shifting her house the next weekend and has an important event with an NGO that's planning a gala fundraiser the next week to that.

Basically, we are busy, too busy to discuss when we shall meet next. Or shall we meet, at all?

We reach her apartment; I help her with the luggage to her doorstep.

She hesitates before asking, 'Would you like to come in?'

It's casual. No pressure. But I know better. If I step inside, I may not be able to leave any time soon.

And I'm not letting a *fuck-and-go* stamp on us. It's far more precious.

So, I step back. 'Not tonight. Some other time. You should get some rest.'

But I'm not leaving without a proper goodbye.

I cup her face, my thumb brushing along her jaw, and lean in. It starts slow, like I'm giving her a chance to pull away. She doesn't.

Then, the moment she melts into me, it's fire. It's desperate and deep, her back pressed against her front door, like we're burning this moment into memory until we do this next time, which we haven't really spoken about.

When I finally pull back, her eyes are clouded, her breath just a little uneven.

'Goodnight, Akshara,' I murmur, stepping away before she can argue.

I have a feeling she won't sleep much tonight. Neither will I.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Akshara

Did I tell you that it's one thing to act all independent, but it's a whole other thing to actually be independent? Because right now, as I stare at my spacious but ridiculously empty 1 BHK flat, all my feminist ideals are collapsing like a Jenga tower.

Seriously, who sold us this dream of 'living alone is empowering'? Because right now, all I feel is the overwhelming urge to curl up on the floor and sob.

The silence in the apartment is so loud.

Oh, and wasn't it that I always believed that I was enough for myself. The reality hits hard when it does, I have never ever stayed alone before this.

The last time I moved in—which was basically me finishing my degree and shifting into the flat Samaira was already living in—I showed up with a few wall pieces, some vases, a couple of rugs, and an

unnecessarily large collection of mugs, all in the name of ‘setting up our house.’

Maybe this is karma. Maybe I shouldn’t have acted like a smug little bitch in front of my ex-colleagues and taken those two extra days off just to flex my ‘interior decorating’ skills. And I remember boasting about it like I had single-handedly built the Taj Mahal.

I take a deep breath. No, I am not going to have a breakdown. I chose this. I wanted this. I am an independent woman. I can totally handle living alone. I tell my wrecked brain.

I wonder why I was in such a rush to shift the next week itself, oh. Because it’s end of the month. Great.

I tell my brain to shut up because the packers and movers will be here in a few minutes now. And what I have to do is just tell them where they have to place the giant boxes and other things and I can unpack as and when I get time, as per my pace, there’s no hurry. And of course, Samaira and Aryan are flying back tonight from honeymoon, and they will come tomorrow and help me. It shouldn’t be such a big deal.

Fuck, but it still is.

Alright, girlie, no escaping now. You’re here. You’re alone. Just you, your thoughts, and...oh, wait—some very raunchy texts from your new friend-turned-sex-mate.

My mind immediately latches onto the latter. Dear lord, I didn’t know I was this horny.

But hey, it’s a great distraction. Suddenly, my anxiety fades, replaced by something warmer, deeper—dopamine flooding my system and a not-so-subtle ache between my legs.

And just as I'm about to fully indulge in this delicious mental spiral, a sharp knock on the door snaps me back to reality.

I open it, and—oh.

Pleasant. Actual. Surprise.

'Hey, gorgeous!'

Devesh. Standing at my doorstep. Looking annoyingly good as usual.

'What are you doing here?' I blink more times than I should have. Did I really give him the exact location while discussing my movement plans?

He leans against the doorframe, all casual and smug. 'Thought I could be of some help today. Good thing I got here before the truck.'

'What? Noooo...I don't need your help. I told you I'll manage on my own.'

I cross my arms, trying to ignore the way his presence instantly makes my very empty apartment feel...less empty.

We've been texting like two ridiculously attached teenagers—his good morning messages somehow landing before I'm even awake, and our nights ending with deep, uh, detailed chat about our favorite moments from the wedding and *that* night. (Oh, and yes, he still has my panties. We don't talk about it. Except when he *does* talk about it. The man is insufferable.)

The past week has been chaos—work drowning me right after the wedding break, pulling up news stories one after the other till late night with the recent legislative bill, leaving me zero time to even consider a real dinner date that he's been trying to convince me for. And then the packing until midnight.

But now, standing in my doorway, grinning like he has all the time in the world, is the CEO of a tech multinational.

And why am I freaking elated that my plans to do this *alone* just got royally hijacked.

‘Oh, that’s brutal. I thought you were about to say, *Hello, Devesh, thank you so much for offering me such great company.*’

I narrow my eyes at him. ‘Umm...ok...I mean, of course, thank you for offering me whatever it is you’re offering, but don’t you have better things to do? Like, I don’t know—handling investor meetings? Sealing million-dollar deals?’

‘Nope, I don’t work on weekends, not anymore.’ He smirks, completely unbothered by my attempt to dismiss him.

The thing is, we both know what this is. *This* is different. But I don’t want it to become so meaningful that I can’t deny it anymore. And him showing up here, in my new life, makes it *almost there*.

‘I really wanted to see you in your element. Hope I can come inside your new den.’ He says, mischievously.

My mind is telling me to send him back, but my heart has already shifted gears, The next thing is that I remove my hand from the door knob and make room for his broad frame to enter my apartment, making it look tiny.

And just like that—without my permission—he kisses the top of my head.

And I hate how easily I melt. He’s got coffee and muffins. *Muffins?*

Wow. Really? And why the hell am I getting emotional about baked goods?

I am afraid to accept that I needed someone to take care of me. I want to hug him. I really do. But I stop myself. Because I know if I touch him—even a little—we’re definitely ending up on this floor.

He’s just standing there—dangerously hot—and if he decided to bend me over the kitchen counter and go for it, I’d probably let him.

And I do *not* want a scenario where the packers and movers are awkwardly waiting at the door while I’m trying to peel his sky-blue shirt and throw it somewhere that it’s not be found later.

Instead, I place the parcel on the sleek breakfast counter in my new open kitchen. I gobble down the muffin and he sips his coffee. I try not to acknowledge the warmth spreading in my chest. So, naturally, I press the wrong buttons. *Instinct. Say something to push him away. Test his limits.*

‘Somebody’s taking this fling too far—showing up at my doorstep and bringing food.’ I laugh, but I see it—the slight tightening of his jaw, the way the light in his eyes dims just a little when I say it. Maybe he’ll get it. Maybe he’ll realize this is a mistake. May be he’ll say I’m too much just like other men. May be he’ll run away.

But he says, ‘You can keep saying your favorite word. Fine. Call it what you need to, if that makes it easier.’

He takes a slow step toward me, closing the distance. His fingers graze my wrist, feather-light.

My brain is short-circuiting.

I take a step back, needing air, space, sense—
anything but him.

‘You showing up like this... it’s too much.’ I
mutter.

‘Or maybe it’s just enough,’ he says gently. ‘And
you’re scared to admit it.’

I swallow. He’s *not* wrong.
I am scared. Because this—*he*—feels dangerously
close to something real.

And real has consequences.

It feels like two people on the edge of something
that could ruin everything and fix everything all at
once.

My phone buzzes on the counter.

I flinch. The spell breaks.

He glances at it and then back at me, something
unreadable flickering in his eyes.

I pick it up. A message from the movers. They’re
ten minutes away.

Perfect.

I clear my throat. ‘Movers will be here soon.’ I try
to sound normal, like my heart isn’t slamming against
my ribcage.

Like I wasn’t about to lean in.

He nods, like he gets it.
Like he *always* gets it.

I drag the suitcase across the floor, that I carried
with me in the car, with my precious belongings, and
unzip it with more force than necessary.

I start placing things inside the bedroom cupboard,
anything to avoid looking at him, anything to stay busy
for the next ten minutes.

He's still there, quietly watching me. Not in a creepy way. In that maddening Devesh way—composed, curious, like he's waiting for me to stop pretending this is just a normal visit.

Then, out of nowhere, he says it.

'Oh, and by the way—'

I glance over my shoulder.

'I read your piece on the reservation bill proposal yesterday. It blew my mind.' He looks genuinely impressed.

I pause, 'Really? You read it?'

'Front to back,' he says, matter of fact. 'Twice.'

I let the stuff fall into the drawer and close it.

'What part did you like the most?' I ask, trying to sound casual, like the answer isn't a lifeline I didn't know I needed.

He tilts his head, thoughtful. 'My favorite part was when you said—women don't need favors, they need—'

I cut him off without meaning to. '...opportunities. That's my favorite, too.' I smile.

Our eyes meet, and something shifts—unspoken, but undeniable.

He doesn't say anything. Neither do I.

We just look at each other.

Thankfully, the truck pulls in right on time and the honking gets us out of the *locking your eyes phase*. The movers start carrying up boxes, and I go into efficiency mode—directing traffic, pointing at corners, mentally placing every item where it belongs.

And there he is.

The man who owns a tech empire. India's most used travel bookings app, fastest growing amongst his

competition. Sharp. Intelligent. The man who has written those initial codes of the website all by himself. Possibly allergic to dust. The man who has a housekeeper to manage further house helps for him.

But now? He's rolled up his sleeves—and is helping with the heavy lifting like it's his routine.

I watch him guide my favorite couch into the perfect corner, his brow furrowed in concentration, muscles doing unfair things under that sky-blue fabric.

I hate how my brain registers how *hot* this is.

I hate it even more that he's not even trying to be hot right now.

I hate it that I want to let go of all my inhibitions and let him in.

Once the last box is in, he tips the movers before they leave. I am sure the tip is generous enough because the helpers have thanked me too many times.

The door clicks shut. And we finally take a breather. My legs ache, my brain's foggy, and my stomach growls just loud enough to make things awkward.

'Food?' he asks.

I nod. 'Chinese?'

He orders, and we both slip into a comfortable silence—each of us scrolling through our phones.

Then suddenly, he's holding my heel. When did my heel land in his hands?

Before I can process it, his fingers are pressing gently into the pressure points. *Expertly*.

I clear my throat. 'Wow. What other hidden talents do you have?'

He doesn't miss a beat.

‘Ah, I am obliged you find me talented.’ And then he *winks*.

Bad move, Devesh. Very bad move.

Because that wink does things to my hormones I’m not ready to describe. Because one wild night, being drunk and dressed up, means something else, but another one at the next opportunity you get, feels entirely different.

And before I know it, his fingers are gliding from heel to the ball of my foot. A slow, casual drift that moves up to my calf. But he doesn’t move past that.

The food arrives. *Thank God.*

We dig into noodles and dumplings and fried rice, and of course, he watches me eat like he’s memorizing the way I chew.

‘You may focus on your food,’ I say between bites.

He smirks. ‘I like how you don’t talk about how many calories we’re about to intake.’

‘Isn’t one of us doing that enough?’ I shoot back—too fast, too familiar.

It hangs in the air.

A couple statement. Fuck.

He doesn’t comment. Just chuckles. Like he’s okay with me casually dropping us into that category.

After lunch, I *try* to ask him to leave.

He only raises a brow. ‘I’m staying.’

And he does.

He sets up my kitchen and stocks all the groceries he ordered himself online, and arranges the bar table while I obsess over the wall pieces, making sure everything is level and symmetrical.

Later, he leans against the kitchen counter, scrolling through emails and speaking to someone at

work, in that low, authoritative voice that I'm absolutely *not* affected by.

The day goes on.

The house is mostly done. It looks... cozy. Lived in.

But I'm tired. And a little too full of feelings I shouldn't be feeling. Because there have been men in my house earlier, but none of them have ever done household chores with me. And definitely not *this* kind.

Charming, successful, maddeningly capable...but still here. I really don't get it.

Why me? He can have anyone he wants.

I take a quick shower to get rid of the sweat and dust. By the time I come out, the room smells faintly of lemongrass and wine.

He's set out two glasses of wine. And there's a fresh bowl of peanut mix, with freshly cut veggies.

He looks up, and smiles.

We sit cross-legged on the living room rug, soft music playing in the background. He hums along and I suggest that we order pizza for dinner.

'I can cook if you prefer something home-cooked,' he offers, swirling his wine.

I sit beside him, my back against the couch, 'Don't be so nice that I'm forced to fire this wooden center table and marry you right here.'

He lets out a low chuckle, and damn that smile.

'I thought it would take a havoc of an effort to convince you for a date, and we're already talking marriage.'

‘Told you,’ I say, almost to myself. ‘All my resolves are going out the window. But let’s order first. I am starving.’

I look at him longer than I should while he finishes the online ordering thing, asking me my preference of toppings.

He notices. ‘What is it?’

‘Your smile should come with a warning. *Detrimental* to resolves to go off men.’

He goes still. The playful light shifts into something darker, slower. His voice drops.

‘I’ll keep smiling through the entire night. If you agree to go on our first date.’

I raise an eyebrow. ‘Okay, tell me—why is a date with you worth giving up my hard-earned off-men streak of almost one and a half year?’

He leans just slightly closer. ‘Tell you? Or show you?’

‘Whatever works better for you.’ I deadpan.

‘Don’t test me, *tigress*.’

‘Oh God, don’t call me names.’ I pull back a little.

I feel my cheeks warm. Flushed. He can’t say things like that and expect me to sit still.

He watches me with that same smirk. ‘You look really cute when you don’t look hot.’

‘Yeah...sure...when I’m in tank top with messy hair?’

His adam’s apple bobs. I *see* it. May be I am staring.

He’s feeling this too. The heat. The proximity. The near impossibility of staying platonic in this setup.

I ask him finally, ‘Does it happen to you? Like, you’re talking in a meeting and some woman is just...staring at you?’

He quirks a smile. ‘I don’t observe other women. There’s just one I’m obsessed with.’

That’s when I realize—I’m seconds away from making a decision that is *definitely* going to take the fling too far.

There’s this ridiculous gravitational pull between us, impossible to ignore for one more second.

And, of course, we kiss.

God, the kiss. Just me and him. Mouths colliding like its instinct, like we were made for this. Like every single kiss before this one was just practice.

Every single time his lips touch mine, it feels brand new—like I’ve never been kissed before. Like my body is waking up for the first time.

His hands are everywhere and nowhere all at once.

Every time he touches my skin, it’s electric.

A spark, a promise, a threat.

I haven’t been a virgin for a long time.

But somehow—he made me feel like one again. Not in the awkward way. In the *sacred* way. On the wedding night. Err...not our wedding night but yeah it was that night. When it was just us, stripped of labels and pretenses.

And now...

With the wine on the table, the scent of us in the air, and this tension finally spilling over—

I have a good feeling about what’s coming next.

But then...he stops.

Just like that, he pulls back. Not far—just enough to look at me. Really look at me.

My lips are swollen, my breath uneven, my heart
pounding in my throat.
His hand comes up, brushing hair away from my face,
fingers trailing down my jaw, slow.

‘I’ve never had this,’ he says quietly.

I blink. ‘Had what?’

‘This feeling...that I want to stay.’

His voice is low. Steady. Vulnerable.

‘Stay where?’

‘In your space. In your chaos. In your too-many-cushions apartment. In your laugh when you’re trying not to hold. In your world that you swear doesn’t need anyone—’

He pauses, brushing his thumb over my bottom lip.

‘But I want in anyway.’

The air shifts. It’s not just sexual anymore. It’s
more.

Something that feels terrifying and grounding all at once.

I don’t know what to say. ‘Don’t make me fall for you, Devesh.’ I murmur.

He smiles, slow and knowing.

‘I’m not making you do anything, Akshara.’ Then he leans in, so close his breath brushes my cheek.

‘But I’m *not* leaving either.’

I kiss him again. It gives me a high I can’t get enough of.

The kiss deepens, his hands doing the magic under my top, sliding along my waist, worshipful and urgent.

My breath stutters, as he kisses my collarbone, my back arches into his touch, and before I know it, I’ve climbed his lap.

Our breaths tangle, heavy and uneven. His fingers find the hem of my top, and it's gone, slipped over my head and tossed aside. I reach for his shirt, and pull it off in one smooth motion.

I will probably ask him to stay shirtless for a few hours next time and let me watch, I need time to cherish his taut muscles.

He takes a moment. Just looks at me. And then opens my bra hooks with one hand.

'It must have taken a lot of practice to be this smooth.' I tease.

'Yeah, I have a private tutor, gives me an hour's classes every day.' He chuckles.

I like his sense of humor. But I like kissing him even better. So I pull him in for more.

His hands glide up, fingers splayed wide, until they grasp my breasts. His mouth follows, warm and coaxing, as his lips wrap around my nipples—his tongue teasing, tasting, yet fervent.

He's lowers me gently onto the couch, like I'm something precious.

His eyes flick up to mine once, seeking my consent. And I just nod.

That's all it takes.

He moves with the kind of quiet confidence that makes you forget your own name. He settles on his knees on the floor and my shorts and underwear are peeled away slowly, reverently, and I'm already wet—embarrassingly so.

But he doesn't mock it. No smug grin. No question on why do I pretend as if he doesn't affect me so damn much.

Just that look... like he's starved and I'm the only thing that's ever satisfied him.

His mouth finds my pussy like he was miserable without it. He licks—slow, firm, precise—and I forget how to breathe.

‘Oh—fuck—Devesh...’ I gasp. My back arches like a bow but he doesn’t stop. Doesn’t rush.

Tongue stroking, curling, coaxing.

His fingers join in, slipping inside me like he already knows the shape of my need. And I know I am dripping wet.

‘You’re exquisite.’ He murmurs against my exposed flesh.

My hips jerk, my hands gripping his hair.

‘And eager.’ He twirls his tongue, and I can’t speak any more. I just moan and cry his name loud enough that my neighbors won’t ever talk to me if they hear it.

He is licking me, pleasing me, in ways I never knew existed.

And then—God—I come on his fingers. I shatter. Loud, unfiltered, breathless.

He looks up, lips glistening, eyes dark with something dangerous and tender.

‘You’re fucking incredible when you let go.’ He whispers.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Devesh

The doorbell rings.

Akshara startles, her hair still tousled, cheeks flushed with the aftermath of emotions we haven't even named yet.

'I'll get it,' I offer. Thankfully, I had my jeans on. I toss her my shirt, and she pulls it over her shoulders quickly, laughing under her breath but still breathless.

My shirt swallows her whole, hanging off her shoulders, and my brain short-circuits for a second at how damn well she looks in it.

But this...this is not the time to get distracted. This is the time to get the pizza delivery.

I open the door.

And—BAM.

Samaira. Grinning. But her expressions flutter a little.

Unexpected? Hell, yes.

Beside her, *Aryan*, who looks as shocked as the other two people behind him.

Akshara's parents.

Oh. Shit.

Nobody says anything. Nobody moves.

This is awkward. Damn awkward.

'*Namaste, Uncle, Auntie,*' I say, on autopilot, with both my hands folded like I'm auditioning for the best boyfriend of the year.

I shoot a helpless glance at Akshara. She's standing a few feet from the door, bare-legged, radiant in the most dangerously unintentional way possible.

I mouth *the- are-here* like I'm giving her a weather warning, but she doesn't get it.

'I'm—uh—sorry for this,' I mumble, already backing away. 'Allow us a minute please.' And I shut the door. *Fuck.*

Akshara loses it as soon as she gets the scene unfolding, we rush inside the bedroom and put on our clothes, our *own* clothes. I'm watching her move—focused, flustered, beautiful—and I'm in awe of how someone can look like a hurricane and a sanctuary at the same time. We clean up the living room at a supersonic speed.

I dump the wine glasses in the sink and she laboriously rubs the couch with a sanitizer and sprays the room freshener more than three times.

She turns back toward me, still visibly spiraling. I step forward, gently place both hands on her shoulders.

'It's okay,' I say softly, meaning it. 'I know it doesn't look like it. But it'll be fine.'

Her jaw tightens. She's not convinced. And she's not done.

'You don't need to answer if they ask if we're getting married soon, and my mom will absolutely do it.' She tells me.

There's a flicker in her eyes—fear, maybe.

She doesn't know that I've already said *yes* to her, somewhere deep in my stupid, smitten heart.

I don't answer with words. Instead, I lean in and press a kiss to her forehead.

Gentle. Quick. *Grounding*.

I am sure we have taken more than five minutes when I finally open the door. We stand there in the living room, exchanging pleasantries.

Samaira looks *way too pleased*.

Aryan, the legend, launches into a long monologue about how brutal the traffic was.

Good man.

Her dad still won't look at me.

Her mom gawking at me while I'm still recovering from the fact that she just made eye contact with my naked torso like she was ready to do a full personality analysis based on my abs.

I stand there, half-smiling, trying not to look like a man who was on his knees moments before.

Akshara stands beside me stiffly, like her whole body is bracing for war. I don't know exactly but something is *off*.

She's trying to pretend like she's not still glowing, like her mouth doesn't still look kiss-bruised and wild.

She won't meet my eyes, which is a shame, because if she did, I'd probably smile. And if I smiled, she might kill me.

I am trying to keep it together, but knowing she had her legs draped over my shoulders a few minutes ago; it's impossible.

Aryan comes to our rescue, 'Wow Akshara, it doesn't look like you shifted in today!'

And the attention shifts to Akshara who just shrugs.

Samaira, gives a dramatic applaud looking at the kitchen. 'Oh my God, look at the kitchen, all set, how cozy! Let me make chai for mumma-papa.'

Perfect.

To be fair, no Indian parents, however liberal, are quite *that* chill—seeing their daughter's guy-friend, shirtless, with hair that definitely says *someone just ran their hands through them*—and not assume a full-blown relationship status. Maybe even a wedding date.

They are all finally seated. Aryan starts chatting about work.

And her dad seems engaged. Finally. Even looking at me.

Which is surreal, because a few minutes ago I was certain he'd be calling the cops or a priest. But now? He's nodding along. Asking thoughtful questions.

Either he has no clue what just happened...Or he's choosing peace over war.

And then...her mom.

Ah, the woman of the hour.

She chuckles, the kind of chuckle that carries the weight of judgement sugarcoated in tradition. 'We didn't know we'd have to prepare for *both* our daughters' weddings in the same year.'

Akshara makes a sound somewhere between a cough and a whimper. I don't even look at her—I can *feel* the glare she's giving her mom. The room tilts just a little.

I want to clarify—I am not some shirtless pervert caught in casual sex. Am I looking for more? A future? *A forever?*

Yes.

Can I acknowledge it right now?

No.

It hits me faster than it should.

Yes, I want this messy, beautiful woman who panics when her mother smirks and who sanitizes a couch with the focus of a bomb squad.

But Akshara is horrified. Like full-on *blink twice if you need rescue* horrified.

And I don't know if it's the fact that her parents saw us together...or if it's that it's *me* they saw her with.

That bit stings, because here I am thinking too far ahead in the future.

I need to figure it out.

Later, though.

Right now, her mom's watching me like she's mentally dressing me in a *sherwani*.

So I do what any guy in deep trouble and deeper feelings would do—I smile politely, and pray that no one brings up grandchildren.

Yet.

I keep glancing at Akshara, trying to read her face like it's a language I haven't fully learned yet. And that... that's a whole different kind of need. Not desire. Not want. But *need*—to understand what's going on in her mind, in her heart.

Her dad continues, his voice warm. 'With God's grace, everything went well at the wedding. We thought we'd come surprise Akshara when Samaira told us she was shifting to a new lace today.'

I nod, smiling, trying to match the energy. This man is reasonable. Kind. The kind who probably keeps a notebook of important birthdays and never forgets to call.

And then her mom chimes in, a sharp little smile curling at the edges. 'Yes, but instead she gave *us* a surprise. That's what our younger one has always done—surprising us.'

There it is.

The weight behind her words hangs in the room like a curtain drawn too tight. It's playful on the surface, but there's a little sting hidden in the velvet.

And I feel it. A pinch, sharp and precise, right where pride should've been.

Her mom should be *proud*, not taking digs in the form of tea-time banter.

I feel a sudden, protective urge bubble up—one I have to bite back because I'm not here to ruffle feathers. Not yet. But I also can't sit here and let her feel any less. So, I will anyway say it, and be respectful.

'True, auntie,' I say, shifting slightly to face her mother directly, offering my most polite—and honest—smile. 'She is full of surprises. In fact, exceptional ones. I've met a lot of talented people in my life, but Akshara...she has this way of weaving truth and emotion into her writing that makes everything else feel—well, like noise.'

Her mother raises an eyebrow, and her dad lets out a soft 'hmm'—the kind dads make when they're secretly impressed but too cautious to show their cards.

'I haven't seen this much depth in any piece of news I've ever read before,' I continue. 'It's like she writes from somewhere deeper, like she's not just reporting the world—she's feeling it.'

There's a beat of silence.

Akshara looks... stunned. Mesmerized, almost, like she's not used to being seen this way, really seen. And that breaks something in me.

How has no one cherished her like this before?

She's standing in the kitchen, one hand loosely gripping the edge of the counter. She gives me a smile—one of those automatic, practiced ones—but her eyes? Still *sad*. Like a storm is quietly brewing beneath the surface, and no one but me can hear the rumble.

And then, Samaira jumps in like the best accidental comic relief, waving her phone and completely lightening the mood. ‘That’s true—she writes so well. And talks so well...hey...who just crossed 10k followers?’

Aryan gets up and struts to the kitchen counter like he’s about to pop a bottle of champagne, where both sisters are standing.

I glance at Akshara. She looks away quickly.

God, I want to take that sadness away. I want to bottle up every single compliment I can think of and pour them over her until they soak into her bones.

I want to hold her. Right now. In front of everyone. I want to wrap her in my arms and press my hand to the small of her back and tell her—without words—that whatever it is, I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying. I’m here.

Samaira brings *chai* and a few snacks we had stocked up in the afternoon, and everyone is trying to behave normally, but Akshara is still silent.

I walk up behind the counter and brush her hand—just the lightest touch—and lean in, close enough that only she can hear.

‘You okay?’ I whisper.

She nods, but it’s too fast, too easy.

I take her hand under the counter, away from view, and squeeze. She squeezes back—harder than expected.

She’s not okay.

But she’s trying.

She excuses herself and heads to the bedroom. I follow.

‘What’s bothering my tigress?’

She doesn't meet my eyes. I spot a tear shimmering at the edge of her lashes.

'Can you ask everyone to leave...and stay back with me?' she whispers.

I pause, then ask, 'Do you want to talk about it?'

She shakes her head. 'It'll create a scene. There's no need to surprise people—again.'

'Since when are you scared of scenes?' I tease softly. 'I thought you could handle that.'

Her voice is low, tender. 'No... I can't handle it. Let's just leave it. Please.'

'Ok...sure.' I nod, though helplessness claws at me. I wish I could do more.

'But I will say one thing...' I add gently. 'Over the last three years I've realized I could've said so many things to my parents that I didn't—and I regret it. Every single day. So if something's eating away at you, talk about it. Say it before it festers.'

I let the words hang in the air, hoping they might coax her out of the silence.

But she turns away.

She doesn't want to talk.

So, I pull out my phone and text Aryan, who's only a few feet away in the living room. Within seconds, we're aligned.

Samaira jumps in with a good pitch, 'I think we're all a little tired. Long day. We should get going. Right?'

Akshara comes out to say goodbye, the energy in the room stiff with unspoken tension.

Samaira, ever the peacekeeper, throws out a cheery, '*Lunch at our place tomorrow! Everyone has to come.*'

Uncle smiles warmly at me. ‘You too, beta.’

I nod politely.

And then—her mother strikes again.

‘Akki, please be careful. That’s all I can say.’

Here we go.

It’s never just that. It’s always laced with something else—control, disappointment, concern.

I glance at Akshara.

Her hands are shaking. Her shoulders stiff. Her breath, uneven.

And her mother—her own mother—is offering judgment instead of comfort.

I move closer to her and put my arm around her shoulder. She lets me. I hold her tight and then I hear her snap.

‘Well, Mom... one more penis inside me won’t kill me, right?’

The words hit like a thunderclap.

Akshara, who’s always been unbothered, always the firecracker who shrugged things off—is sobbing. Not a single tear, but full-on, body-wracking sobs. She covers her face, like she’s trying to disappear.

And all I can think is: What has she been holding in all this time? She’s not just annoyed. She’s *wounded*.

Her mom’s face tightens, and her voice falters, ‘I thought enough time had passed...’

‘Time doesn’t heal everything, Mom,’ Akshara snaps, her voice rising. ‘It only buries it. And now look—it’s all back on the surface.’

Her eyes don’t just have tears, they have *fire*.

‘Akshara, behave yourself,’ her mom bursts.

‘Wow, such great advice, Mom. Thanks. I *am* behaving myself. But please don’t behave like you *care*.’

‘It—it wasn’t easy for me,’ her mother stammers.

Akshara laughs bitterly, through tears. ‘Great, Mom. Well, it wasn’t easy for me either. You promised I would never see those people again. And then you invited them to the wedding. *How could you do that?*’

Her mother’s voice wavers, and she repeats. ‘It wasn’t easy for me...’

But she doesn’t look at Akshara. She stares ahead, somewhere far away, somewhere in the past.

I try to steady her, my hands firmly pressing into her shoulders wondering what is it about. Samaira is on her other side now, eyes wide, alarmed but still clueless. I can feel Akshara trembling. Uncle’s mouth partly open, Aryan completely bothered, and her mother has gone pale.

Akshara continues, wounded fury rising like a tide. ‘I was just a kid. I had barely started school. I didn’t even *understand* what had happened.’

‘This is not the time to discuss such things, in front of men, you have no shame.’ Her mother turns around to escape the room.

Samaira calls out to her, her voice sharper now, firm but still laced with confusion. ‘Mumma, let’s clear it. There’s no running away—we’re a family. What is it that I have no clue about?’

Her mother opens her mouth, but nothing comes out. She sinks into the nearby chair like her body’s given up. Silent sobs. Uncle hurries to her, bewildered.

‘Akki. Please... tell us *beta*, what is this exactly about,’ he says, worried yet gentle.

Akshara’s hands ball into fists. Her voice turns quiet—but it cuts sharper than anything else in the room.

‘I was *raped*. By Mumma’s dearest sister’s husband. I don’t even know how old I was. But I remember I had just started school. I knew what he did to me was wrong. So, I told Mom. I *told* her something bad had happened. And she told me to stay quiet. To not say a word to anyone.’ Akshara tells the room and then turns to her mother.

‘I needed you. I needed my mother to *protect* me. And instead...you protected them.’

My breath is stuck somewhere in my throat. I feel for her—I am shocked, hurt, and angry.

A gasp escapes Samaira’s lips. The room falls into stunned silence.

Akshara wipes her face, but the tears won’t stop now. Not after being held in for so long.

‘You asked me to bury it, and I did. I buried it so deep I almost forgot it ever happened. But now? Now, you act like I am in danger. No, Mom. I don’t need your safety net now. You couldn’t provide it when I needed it the most.’

Everyone in the room can feel it—the truth, laid bare.

And no one is ever going to be the same again.

I get it now, fuck. *I get it*, why was she so upset on the first day of the wedding. I get it why she hates every damn cousin of hers, I get it. But why didn’t I understand something was so seriously wrong. I wish I can go back in time and be there, kill that bastard.

It feels like the air has left the room. Uncle's hands tremble as they rest on his wife's shoulders. Samaira stands frozen, Aryan letting her lean into him, to balance the weight of the truth crashing down on her in real time.

Akshara stiffens in my arms. Her sobs are now soft, raw, and gutting. I hold her tighter. I am thankful that she doesn't flinch away.

Her mother finally finds her voice—cracked, fragile, but laced with a sorrow that's been buried for decades.

'You think I didn't care?' she says, her eyes locked on Akshara, brimming with tears. 'My sister was *pregnant* when I told her to leave that man. She *refused*. She begged me to stay quiet, begged me not to ruin her family. She said she had no one—no education, no income, no place to go. She told me if I said anything, she would be out on the streets with a baby on the way.'

The room stills again. Everyone's listening now—not just to what's being said, but to what's been carried in silence all these years.

'Tell me,' her mother continues, her voice rising with anguish, 'what was I supposed to do? Do you think I haven't lived in guilt and regret every single day since I told you to keep quiet? Do you think I haven't questioned my motherhood every time I looked at you and saw the light gone from your eyes?'

She breaks down, shaking with the weight of her words.

'I didn't have your *courage*, Akshara. I still *don't*. And if this helps—I know I have failed you. But I swear to you, I was trying to protect what little I could.'

I had a duty toward a woman who would've been destroyed by the world had I spoken up. The world is cruel to women, Akki. I've lived it. That's why I've always been so scared for you.'

'To have two beautiful daughters in this untrustworthy world...' her mother says through heavy breaths, 'I was always worried. And more for *you*, Akshara. Because you had already been *prey*. I hated—*hated*—that I couldn't do anything about it. So, I just... prayed. Prayed nothing happens to you again. Nothing happens to my daughters.'

Her voice quivers. 'You've always been extraordinary. Always turned heads, got attention—and that attention, it scared me. Shook me to my core. I wanted to protect you from it all. But I guess... I failed.'

'Mom, no,' Samaira says suddenly, stepping forward, her own eyes wet, her voice trembling. 'No, you haven't failed us. Please don't say that.'

And then she hugs her mother. Tight. Fierce. Like she's trying to hold together everything that's breaking open between them.

The whole family is in tears now.

'I have...I have failed. But I am proud of you both. When I see how strong you both are, I feel I can live with my regrets.'

Her mother gets up and moves toward Akshara. I take a step back. It's not my place to come between these two women speaking from their wounds that never really closed.

It's messy. It's painful. But the silence has been broken. And sometimes, that's the beginning.

Her mother slowly reaches out, her fingers shaking as they close around Akshara's hand—like she's scared her daughter might pull away. Her voice is barely a whisper, but it carries a lifetime of pain.

'I'm so sorry, *beta*,' she says, tears slipping freely down her cheeks. 'I know sorry doesn't fix anything. But if there's even a corner of your heart that can forgive me...I'm asking for it now.'

Akshara doesn't move at first. Her eyes are glassy, unreadable. She just stares at their joined hands—hers small but steady, her mother's older, worn down, trembling.

Then, slowly, she exhales. A breath that seems to have waited years to be released.

'I am no one to forgive you...mom' she begins, her voice barely above a whisper, 'and I know you have done so many scarifies for your daughters. I am not a stranger to your struggles. Maybe you've punished yourself enough. Maybe... you've carried this too, long inside you.'

A sob catches in her mother's throat—raw, unfiltered. She clutches Akshara's hand tighter and, in the next moment, pulls her into her arms.

No words. Just a mother's embrace, fierce and fragile all at once. As if trying to fold years of distance, regret, and silence into one long-overdue moment of closeness.

And Akshara lets her. Samaira joins them and they cry their hearts out.

But this time, it's different.

This time, something is *healing*.

I've never witnessed something like *this* before. Never experienced a conversation that rips through

you and leaves nothing behind but truth and trembling connection.

It's *powerful*.

It leaves everyone vulnerable—and oddly, more whole than they were minutes ago.

God, these women are *courageous*.

And at this exact moment, I find myself wishing men could be as brave. Not just in war, or work, or pride. But in the quiet, necessary courage of speaking truth. Of being vulnerable. Of saying *I'm sorry*, or *I didn't know how to do it right*.

I wish my father had been that kind of brave.

I wish he had spoken to me—once. Told me the things he kept locked behind his silence. Told me anything before he left for forever.

Instead, I've been left with shadows and second guesses. Filling in the blanks of a man I thought I knew.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Akshara

Everything feels too quiet after the storm.

My chest is still heaving from all the things I said—words that had been buried for years, so deep I sometimes forgot they were even mine. But now they're out.

I feel raw. Like I've peeled my skin off and stood in front of everyone, exposed.

There's a strange kind of feeling after you say something that's lived inside you for so long. It's not

peace. Not yet. But it's the beginning of it. The space that opens up when shame starts to loosen its grip.

The last hour has been... what I *needed*.

I needed to hear what my mother felt about it. Not her justifications, not her usual worry-drenched silences—but her *truth*. And I got it. For the first time, I saw her not as the mother who failed to protect me, but as a woman—flawed, afraid, trying her best in a world that never made it easy for women.

I don't forgive her completely. Not yet. Maybe not ever, not in the way she wants. But I understand her better now.

We've cried. Shouted. Blamed. And, maybe for the first time, we've also listened. We heard each other—not just the words, but the grief beneath them.

And we're better for it.

I feel like I've run a marathon barefoot on glass. But I'm still standing.

And somewhere in that exhaustion, there's relief.

I told the truth. To everyone who matters to me on this planet.

And that now, includes *Devesh*. I couldn't have done it without his nudge.

Everyone leaves eventually. I don't even remember saying a proper goodbye. Samaira insisted to stay but she was too tired to argue with me after a long flight. And Devesh practically pushed them to go back to their place and get some rest.

The door clicks shut behind them.

I stand in the middle of the living room, my legs unsteady, heart wrung out. My eyes are swollen, my throat raw, but for the first time in years, my shoulders don't feel like armor.

Devesh walks over, slow and sure, and wraps his arms around me. No words. Just warmth. Just the steady beat of his heart against my cheek.

I don't even realize I'm crying again until I feel the wetness against his shirt.

He doesn't flinch. Doesn't pull away.

'Cry if you need to.' he whispers, pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

And I do.

I cry.

Not because I'm breaking—but because I'm healing.

And it's not the graceful, cinematic kind of crying. It's the ugly, raw kind that feels like something cracking open inside my ribs.

But he doesn't move. He just lets me be. Holds me tighter when my breath stutters. Says nothing, but somehow says everything I need to hear.

I stay in his arms until the sobs quieten to hiccups, until my breathing slows.

Eventually, we move to the bedroom. I curl into his side like it's second nature, like we've done this all our lives. His hand runs lazy circles on my back, grounding me.

'Thanks for encouraging me,' I murmur into his shoulder.

'You're brave.' His voice is soft, coaxing.

'I am not.'

He pulls me tighter. 'You *are*. You just don't give yourself credit for it.

'Do you still think about it?' he asks me.

'No, not really. I forgot it and moved on.'

I tell him more, about what had happened that afternoon. When my aunt and her entire family was at our place during summer vacation. Everyone had gone out and I stayed back, I wanted to play with my new doll that my aunt brought for me as a gift. I tell him about how my aunt's husband also stayed back mentioning some work, how he muffled my mouth with his hand when I cried in pain, not even understanding what was happening.

He listens, growls, and tells me he will take care of the dead body if I decide to kill him. We laugh because I know better to kill anyone. But it matters. I didn't know having a strong man by your side doesn't make you feel weak; it makes you feel more empowered.

At some point, my eyes grow heavy. I don't even remember the last thing he said before I drift off, my cheek resting on the curve of his shoulder.

But I remember the feeling.

Safe. Known. Held.

And in that feeling, I fall asleep.

I wake up with grogginess, my eyes are still puffy. I shuffle out of the bedroom, barefoot, putting my hair into a bun above my head. The smell of something warm and buttery pulls me to the kitchen.

He's standing in the kitchen, bathed, shirtless, beating something that looks like pan cake batter. Like it's completely normal for Devesh Oberoi—the man with a net worth that could easily buy my entire apartment building—to be making me breakfast.

He looks up. That smile. God, that soft smile. He walks over, and pulls me into his arms like it's the easiest thing in the world. Like I belong there.

He kisses me gently on top of my head. 'How are you?'

I swallow a lump in my throat. 'Better. Thank you.'

'You don't know how much this means. More than I can admit out loud. Thanks for staying with me last night.' I whisper.

'I'm glad I could be with you.' He says quietly, into my hair.

And just like that, something in me settles. There's no running away.

Not anymore.

I help him with setting up the plates and we eat our breakfast before he has to leave. And I must tell him how delicious this breakfast is. I devour the pancakes.

'Your mom must really be a talented cook; these pancakes are out of this world. I wish I could meet your parents.' I blurt it like its normal. Trust me, I was not the girl who wished to meet anyone's parents.

He just pauses, like he didn't expect this to come up right now.

'I wish the same.' He just places his hand on my cheek and grazes my skin his thumb.

I am satiated. With this feeling and the sumptuous food. He has actually got fresh strawberries and bananas cut over them.

'What time is your flight?' I am aware he has a flight to catch in few hours, but he doesn't look rushed.

Instead, he wraps his arms around me before pulling back just enough to brush a kiss to my forehead. 'Four in the evening. I can change my plans if you say; I can go tomorrow morning.'

'No...no...you don't have to change your plans. Trust me, I am fine...really. I guess I am going to sleep

again for a while, I am so full with the fluffiest pancakes I have ever had. I guess I can eat healthy if it tastes like this.’ I press my lips onto his.

He just chuckles in between kissing.

‘Are you sure you will be fine?’

‘Yes...one hundred percent sure...you don’t need to worry. Whatever happened last night, happened for good. It was never that I was haunted with past. It’s probably the closure I was seeking with my Mom. So...Yes...I am fine, and I have so many things to do this week, the fundraiser on Wednesday, I have an important role there. I will send reminders today in the afternoon and make a few phone calls.’ I blabber all my thoughts.

‘There’s a reason I call you tigress. I love how you bounce back at life. And I wish I knew about your event earlier, I would have planned my travel accordingly.’

‘It’s ok. The CEO has to be present for his annual strategy meet rather than cheering his girlfriend.’

Oops. Girlfriend.

We haven’t even labelled *this*. The relationship between us. But I should be his girlfriend...right? After everything that has happened?

‘I would rather be at the fundraiser than the strategy meet, that my *girlfriend* is so passionate about. I am waiting for my COO to join and load him with some of these things.’

And he kisses me. This is not the *I-want-to-fuck-you-afterwards* kiss. This is *I-want-to-stay-with-you* kind.

His phone rings, his house manager is calling.

‘You should go, I don’t think you have much time left then, considering you need to pack for an entire week.’

‘It’s ok, I will manage it. And...sorry I’ve made sure someone’s here with you when I leave.’

I frown, about to protest, ‘I don’t need babysitting.’ But before I can argue, the doorbell rings.

It’s Samaira.

Ok, acceptable.

She walks in like a storm of warmth and love, throws her arms around me, and holds me tight.

‘I am so sorry, I don’t know what to say.’ she whispers into my shoulder.

‘Nothing, you don’t have to say anything or feel bad. None of it was your fault. Or anyone’s fault for that matter.’

Devesh is standing at the door now, watching me with those steady eyes. I can read them. And what I see there floors me.

Care. Depth. Intent.

Not the kind of man who kisses and disappears. Not the kind who runs from the hard parts, ugly parts.

‘Alright girls, I’ll see you on Saturday,’ he says, and then, softer, ‘Take care.’

Samaira nods firmly. ‘Don’t worry. I will take care of your girl, like she’s made of stardust and glass.’

He shakes his head, a shy smile twirling at his lips—and then he’s gone.

And I just stand there, held by my sister, my heart a messy swirl of emotions.

Because for the first time in my life, I have this feeling in my stomach, like something sinking while I watch him go. *I want him to stay. Forever.*

Monday is the most unpredictable day of the week—as usual. My inbox must be flooded with requests of editorial reviews, my to-do list on the fundraiser giving me anxiety just by existing, and I haven't even had coffee yet. Thankfully, I finished a few things late last night, which buys me just enough sanity to not scream into the void. Small wins.

I'm driving through the usual havoc of Gurugram to Delhi traffic. Horns, heat, and humans acting like lanes are optional. But my mind isn't on the road. It's on *him*.

It's not even been twenty-four hours since I saw him last, but I miss him. *Badly*.

I didn't know it was possible to find one man who could check every box—who could make me feel seen with a single look and completely unhinged with a single kiss. A man who made me tremble with his lips on my skin and made me feel safe in the same breath.

My façade phase is officially over.

Congratulations to self.

My no more relationships oath? Shattered. Flung out the car window like a candy wrapper.

So, I grab my phone at the red light & stare at the screen for a long minute before typing out the words.

'When are you back?'

I hit send before I can overthink it.

He's in his Dubai office which is basically the headquarters for the international side of the business. He was supposed to start his day early with his overseas sales team. He spends a few days every first week of the quarter there reviewing the results of the last quarter and planning for the next one. This one is

a full-week agenda because it's the beginning of the fiscal year too.

I know he will be travelling back on Saturday morning. Still, it doesn't make it easier.

My phone buzzes back almost immediately.

Devesh: *Missing me?*

I take a breath.

Me: *Maybe.*

A second later, he replies:

Devesh: *I miss you too, muffin. I wish I could stay back.*

Why does that nickname make my stomach do backflips?

I absorb the thrill and text again:

Me: *Alright. Talk to you later. Driving.*

Then his reply:

Devesh: *DON'T text while driving.*

(I like it when he acts bossy. The kind that makes my thighs clench.)

I type, 'Love you.'

My thumb hovers over the send button but I erase it.

Don't jump the gun.

Because even though it's sitting there in my chest, glowing like a truth I can't ignore, I'm not ready to say it yet. Not like this. Not over text. Not while he's miles away and I'm stuck in traffic and possibly breaking every road rule that exists.

But still. The feeling is there. I am falling, hard. Harder than I thought I will ever.

I reach office and dive straight into the most important work of the day—the fundraiser for the SaveTheGirls foundation. It's not just an event on my

calendar. It's a cause I believe in with every fiber of my being.

I started working with this NGO the day I joined SBP. They help rehabilitate girls who've survived abuse, and from the moment I heard their mission, it felt like a calling. I signed up instantly just after my onboarding session, no hesitation. Now, I'm leading it from SBP's end, bringing in donors—big, fat donors—through every connection I've built, professional and personal. I want this to succeed. Not for the accolades, but because I *want* to make a difference. Because they *deserve* better.

After a few intense hours, I return to my desk to find a message from reception.

'You have a food parcel waiting.'

I smile, already knowing who it's from. I text him immediately.

Me: *How could you be sure I haven't eaten?*

He replies with a single wink emoji.

Smug ass. Sweet, smug ass.

The day finally ends, and I come back home to the still-new scent of my apartment. His presence still lingers on the couch—the space where he sat, where we talked like we'd known each other forever, where he made me feel senseless. I have work to finish and also need to figure out the house help situation before I drown in my own dishes and laundry piles.

I settle on the couch with my laptop and some salad. Well, salad is also a new entrant in my life recently. My phone buzzes.

Devesh: *Back home?*

Me: *Yes, sir.*

Devesh: *All set for the event?*

Me: *Mostly. I guess.*

Devesh: *Call me if you need any help.*

Me: *Can I still call you if I don't need help?*

Seconds later, my screen lights up with his name, I have his number saved as *Mr. CEO*.

Cliché much.

My heart does a full somersault. I freeze for a beat, then answer.

‘Akshara,’ he says. Just that. But it’s enough to wrap around my insides like a warm hug.

‘Will you be up for a while?’ he asks. ‘I have one quick catch-up left before I wrap up for the day. Can I call you when I get back to the hotel?’

His voice is low and gruff, probably rough from a day full of meetings. I know a lot of people don’t notice voices, but I do. It’s one of the sexiest traits of a man.

‘Sure,’ I say. ‘I’ll be writing. Probably up for hours.’

An hour later, my phone buzzes again—video call.

I let it ring twice. Then cut it and dial him back on audio.

‘What’s with the rejection?’ he says, that smug smile basically audible.

‘You don’t want to see me,’ I mutter. ‘I look like a bear. Slobbering out.’

‘I do, actually.’

‘Why?’

‘So I can use your image later in the night,’ he says, laughing.

‘Gross.’

‘Honest.’ he counters.

‘I have no makeup on. Not even lip gloss.’

‘Perfect. I told you I like you better without makeup.’

I chuckle. ‘That’s actually... sweet. But no.’

‘Please,’ he says, all mock pleading. ‘I just want to see your face.’

‘You’re not going to stop until I do, are you?’ I ask.

‘Nope. I’m intrigued.’

Ugh. I sigh. Then hit the *video* button.

‘You look incredible,’ his voice travelling through the screen just to land in my chest.

And maybe it’s the quiet lighting in his hotel room, or the way he’s looking at me like I’m the only person on Earth—but suddenly, I forget how tired I was. Or that I meant to only talk for only a few minutes and then focus on my work.

Because somehow, minutes turns into an hour. Then two. The tiny bit of time difference between us becomes irrelevant.

We talk about nothing. About everything. I roll my eyes at his overpriced room service meal, he mock-lectures me on how a ‘bear’ shouldn’t look this cute, and we laugh at things that probably aren’t even that funny.

Until I groan, dramatically, as I glance at the half-written document on my screen.

‘Oh god. I had to finish writing this piece. You’re distracting me. See? I told you.’

He grins, unbothered. ‘Consider it a free service.’

I stick my tongue out. ‘Anyway, I did text you for a reason. Before you turned it into a FaceTime seduction attempt.’

‘Oh? Do tell.’ He says in between eating his dinner.

I take a breath, suddenly shy—and that never happens to me. ‘I wanted to check if you’re free this weekend.’

He straightens a bit, interest flickering in his eyes. ‘For you? Of course, I am.’

‘I want to take you out to dinner,’ I say, the words falling out a little too quickly, ‘to thank you properly. For being with me. It meant a lot to me.’

His smile softens—no smirk, no teasing. Just something warm that tugs at my ribs.

‘You don’t need to thank me for anything,’ he says simply. ‘But I will still take this one. Too tempting an offer to turn down.’

And I can’t help but smile too. ‘Alright then...it’s a...it’s a *date*.’

His eyes crinkle as he leans back on the pillow. ‘Wow. It’s a date. Finally, I get a date with my *girlfriend*.’

I just giggle, ‘Aren’t we too old to say such things.’

‘We’re never too old to say things that matter.’

And even after we hang up, almost around midnight, I find myself still smiling at the blank screen.

Because it’s not just *a* date. It’s the start of something. Something that feels right. A connection, more than the attraction and chemistry.

But I shouldn’t rush it. Let it take its own time and we’ll know.

Because after all, the past records of my dating life, still go against it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Devesh

We chat and video call the next day too—like it’s an unsaid rule now.

Good mornings, breakfast updates, lunch updates, a quick rant about meetings, and a video call with her face bare and radiant, with her hair tied in that messy bun that’s quickly becoming my favorite look on her.

It’s her event day today—the fundraiser she’s poured her soul into.

And somewhere between my second coffee and lunch, something shifts in me.

I *need* to be there.

Not just to cheer her on from afar or send another surprise lunch. I want to *be* there. For her. With her. On this important day.

Before I can second-guess it, I pick up the phone and call my EA. ‘Book me on the earliest evening flight back, preferable before four,’ I say. ‘Yes, today.’

I spend the next hour reshuffling everything. I coordinate with her and plan the remaining agenda out, so my team stays on track. I delegate the region-wise review to my International Sales Director, who’s happy to take the reins, knowing we’ll deep-dive into the details first thing tomorrow morning.

I have never been so excited about taking a flight. I board the flight, and settle in with a weird sense of calm.

I was never this person who believed in grand gestures and surprise appearances. Until her. Until she came in my life and changed it all.

And for the first time in a long time—I want someone to see me walk in and *know* I’m there just for her.

I call Aryan and we sync our arrival times.

Samaira’s already buzzing with excitement, barely containing her grin.

And Aryan just chuckles, ‘Someone used to tease me that love changes people.’

I just shrug, ‘Aren’t we getting ahead of ourselves?’

‘No, we aren’t. This is so romantic, Devesh.’ Samaira declares. ‘Akshara’s going to be *thrilled*. And slightly pissed you didn’t tell her.’

‘Yeah, I’m counting on it,’ I murmur, scanning the room.

And then—I see her.

Even in a sea of people, I spot her instantly. Like gravity, pulling me in.

She’s a beautiful force of nature.

Wearing a navy-blue long halter-neck dress that hugs her frame just right—elegant, powerful, confident. A little too much skin for my peace of mind, and I hate that other men can see what I want to keep just for myself. But God, she looks radiant.

She’s working the room—chatting with people, warm and animated. I can only see her side profile, but I *know* that smile. That wide, earnest smile she gets when she truly cares. When she believes.

And this—this cause—is something she lives for.

Aryan and I have already committed to donate. I told her someone from my team would be here to represent my company. She has no idea I meant *me*.

I lean back slightly, letting the moment wash over me. Watching her like this—strong, passionate, so clearly in her element—it does something to me.

She's at the front table now, greeting another group. It's the kind of table packed with men who think their money gives them permission to ogle women. The kind that drinks too much whiskey and talks too loudly, all while pretending to care about causes they barely understand.

My jaw tightens.

One of them leans in too close. Then slings his arm over the back of her chair like he knows her. Like he has a right to be that close. My fists clench on instinct. I want to walk up there, rip that arm off, and tell him to back the fuck off.

This...is not a *normal* reaction. I believed I am a calm person.

But in this moment, my chest is tight and I can feel heat crawling up my neck. What the hell is happening to me?

I shift in my seat, forcing myself to breathe.

'Did you guys tell Akshara we're here?' I mutter to Samaira, who's sitting beside me, far too calm for my current state.

She looks up from her phone. 'Oh no, I figured she must be busy. You wanted it to be a surprise, right?'

I nod. But some part of me—petty, possessive—didn't expect to come here and not even talk to her until after the event.

Before I get up and walk...she handles it. God, she's so sharp. I watch her subtly shift her posture, leaning slightly away, placing her elbow behind her on the chair. A perfect barrier. A polite redirection.

Good girl.

I know she's not going to let any man take up space she hasn't invited in.

And still, I'm burning. Because that space—I want it to be mine. Only mine.

Akshara steps away from the tables, her fingers skimming over her phone. A second later, Samaira's screen lights up with her message. She leans over and informs me, 'She's coming.'

I straighten but stay half a step behind them—hands tucked in my pockets, pretending I'm cooler than I feel.

She hugs Aryan and Samaira—quick, excited squeals, laughter bubbling up.

Then her gaze hits mine.

She freezes.

Just stares. Lips parted, like her brain can't quite process the visual.

And then she shakes her head slowly, like she doesn't believe it.

'Oh my God...Devesh!' She breathes—and walks straight into my arms.

Mission accomplished.

I wrap her up. I don't even think about it. Her arms come around my neck like they belong there, and for a second, the entire world falls away.

'You didn't have to fly back just for this,' she says against my shoulder. 'I can't believe you're here.'

I lean back just enough to look at her. 'I had to,' I say softly. 'For this'—I gesture around the room—'and *this*.' I point directly to her.

Her eyes soften, glimmering under the lights, but her smile, wide and genuine.

God, I want to kiss her right now. Claim her, tell every one of those whiskey-sipping jackasses that she's mine.

But we're surrounded by her work people too.

So I settle for brushing my thumb along her wrist and holding her gaze a second too long.

'Ladies and Gentlemen,' a voice announces over the mic, 'please make yourselves comfortable. We'll be beginning the event shortly.'

Akshara gently pulls away, her hand trailing down my arm. 'I have to get up there,' she says, voice low. 'But I'll be back right after my part.'

All three of us nod and wish her luck, but my mind is already spinning.

She didn't tell me she was speaking tonight. Damn, I would've missed this. I sink back into my chair, grateful for the last-minute flight and whatever divine instinct told me to show up.

She walks up toward the stage with that same confidence I first saw in her the day we met in the club—shoulders straight, eyes alight. The chatter in the hall dies down as she reaches the mic.

'Hello everyone,' she begins, her voice calm but clear, filling the hall. 'Thank you for joining us this evening for a noble cause. It's that part of the night where we talk about exactly why we're here.'

She smiles, not the practiced one people use on stages—but the real kind. The kind that makes people lean in.

'We're going to start with a short video. A glimpse into the lives of the girls our NGO supports. The stories you'll hear are difficult—but they're real. And they're why this work matters.'

The lights dim, and the screen behind her flickers to life.

And me? I can't take my eyes off her.

Not even when the video starts.

Because seeing her up there—owning the moment, speaking with purpose, turning a room full of wine glasses and formal wear into something that actually means something—it hits different.

She's not just beautiful. She's a *force of nature*.

And I am completely, unapologetically in *love* with her.

And I need to tell her. *Soon*.

After the video ends and the crowd applauds, she invites two girls up on stage. Teenagers, maybe a little older. They're dressed simply, holding hands like it's the only anchor they have. And then they speak.

Their voices are steady, but the words are a punch to the chest, hearing how these two sisters escaped from their village from the state of *Jharkhand* where their father—their *own father*—was the one they had to run away from. How he sold their bodies after their mother's demise. They boarded a train with no idea where it was headed, no plan for what came next. Just fear and desperation. And then...a poster from SaveTheGirls NGO at the New Delhi railway station changed everything.

Now they live in the hostel, go to school, want to be teachers, something better. Something more.

The room is silent. Except for the occasional snuffles.

My own thoughts are a tangled mess when I hear one right next to me—Samaira, quietly dabbing at her

eyes. Aryan slides her his handkerchief without a word, his eyes also glistening.

I swallow hard. I had stopped going to any NGO events after the night of my parent's accident. Suddenly aware of just how big the world is, and how easy it is to forget how fortunate one is.

And then I glance back up—at her.

Akshara is standing just a little behind the girls, hands clasped in front of her. Her eyes are shining, but her stance is strong. Proud. Not of herself—but of *them*. Of what they've survived. Of what this night stands for.

When her speech ends, and she hands the mic back to the emcee, the room doesn't clap. It *erupts*. Applause like thunder. The kind that makes your chest vibrate.

And me? I don't think I've ever clapped so hard in my life.

I am proud of *my girl*.

She walks off stage, the applause still echoing, her cheeks flushed but eyes steady. And then she finds us in the crowd. The emcee taking over the announcements and extending the gratitude to all the partners and donors. I know the drill, all donors' names are called out one by one and they are given a token of gratitude from the NGO management, and the last spot is reserved for the biggest donation. The amounts are not disclosed for any donor, but the NGO announces the total funds raised as the closing announcement.

I'm clapping politely when I feel Akshara slide into the seat beside me, her arm brushing mine.

Samaira launches in a side hug, 'We're so proud of you.' Aryan shakes hand and compliments her.

'You were incredible,' I say softly.

She exhales, still catching her breath. 'Thanks. I think I blacked out in the middle.'

'Nope. You lit up that stage.'

Aryan and Samaira get their turn on the stage and in the end, the emcee calls out, 'We'd now like to invite Mr. Devesh Oberoi, representing PlanMyTrip, for an unexpected but extraordinary contribution this evening.'

Akshara blinks. 'Wait. What?'

I shrug. 'I had no idea it was the highest.'

I extend my hand to her, to join me on the stage and she hesitates. I guess Samaira just pushed her to get up from her chair.

We quickly walk up to the stage. I am still holding her hand. It's all because of her.

The emcee hands me the mic to say a few words.

'I wasn't planning to speak tonight,' I begin, my voice calm, steady. 'In fact, I wasn't planning to be here. But something about this cause...about the purpose, these brave girls, their stories, the fight they've shown—it moved me.'

I glance sideways at Akshara, who's looking at me with sparkling eyes.

'I had asked my team to send over a blank cheque,' I continue, smiling slightly. 'And I guess I was forced to add a zero.'

A soft laughter and few gasps ripple through the audience.

'I believe in impact,' I say, eyes still on her. 'And these kids deserve more than survival. They deserve a

future. And I want to salute everyone driving this, the entire SaveTheGirls NGO team, SBP team and this gorgeous woman standing beside me. Thank you *Akshara*, for inviting me here. I feel blessed to be able to contribute in any small way possible.'

We step down, the applause is louder than expected. I look into Akshara's eyes, glistening.

She just shakes her head in disbelief. 'You didn't have to donate so much.'

'I had to,' I say, my voice low. 'It's for them.'

She just nods.

The event is wrapped up, and people make their way to the buffet.

Her team surrounds her, buzzing with energy—high-fives, back-pats, people asking for photos, some just wanting to say how incredible she was on stage.

Ten minutes later, she comes back to us, a little flushed and breathless.

'Sorry I took so long,' she says, grinning. 'I was getting a lot of attention.'

We all burst out laughing. Aryan gives her a mock bow; Samaira hugs her with all her sisterly warmth and I just shake my head like I'm not completely smitten.

She's glowing—out of joy, out of pride, and maybe a little from seeing me here.

We're genuinely happy. It's one of those rare moments that feels whole.

The newlyweds request to be excused and say their goodbyes. But me? I can't say goodbye. Not yet.

Her eyes flick to mine, warm. 'Are you sure you can wait?'

'Take your time. I'll wait.'

She gives me a nod and disappears for a few minutes more.

And the moment we step into the parking lot—away from the crowd, from the noise—she turns and kisses me, against the side door of my car.

Just her lips on mine, like punctuation on a perfect night.

When we break apart, I just look at her, dazed. ‘Okay. Wow.’

She beams. ‘Thank you for coming.’

I smile, brushing my thumb against her cheek. ‘I wouldn’t miss it for the world. You have no idea how much I am proud of you.’

We stay there for a while, kissing and making out in the dark parking lot, like horny teenagers.

I realize she must be famished. ‘What do you want to eat? Now that you have slayed the evening.’

She lights up. ‘There’s a stall near Galleria market. Works all night. Best *Maggi* in the city.’

We hop into the car, drive with the windows cracked open.

Two plates of steaming masala Maggi. Two paper cups of perfect *chai*.

We sit in the car, her feet curled up, watching the steam dance in the air between us.

‘What time’s your flight?’ she asks, her voice soft.

‘Four.’

She gives me a look.

‘What?’ I feign innocence. ‘I wasn’t going to sleep anyway.’

She bumps my elbow with hers, not buying it.

‘I’d rather stay up,’ I admit. ‘One of those nights, you know? Where sleep feels like a waste. I would rather spend every minute with you.’

She doesn’t argue, just smiles wide, ‘What are we doing then?’

Without a second thought, I invite her to my place. ‘I would love to take you home.’

‘Sounds good.’ She just smiles. Like she wants it as badly as I do.

We step into my apartment on thirtieth floor just past one in the night, she steps in and immediately stops near the door, looking around. I watch her eyes take it in—warm greys, clean lines, the skyline through the windows.

‘Wow,’ she says, under her breath. Then louder, ‘This is...wonderful...very you.’

I close the door behind her and grin. ‘Do you like it?’

‘Are you kidding me? This is absolutely stunning, gentle and sexy, a rather exceptional combination.’ She looks into my eyes, alluring. And then kicks off her heels and wanders barefoot through the living room, like she belongs here.

I chuckle at her compliment and continue to show her around the house. I show her my memory corner, our family portraits, my childhood pictures, my study, and then my bedroom. She loves the pool, and we agree to sit outside the next time she is coming here.

We go back inside, and she asks me if she could take a shower.

‘Of course,’ I say, grinning just by the thought of her being naked in my bathroom. ‘You can use my bathroom; I will use the other one.’

She gives me a dramatic look. ‘Are you sure? I can use the Guest room.’

‘Nope. You’re not.’ I guide her in. ‘Clean towels in the cabinet. Let me give you some fresh clothes.’

‘Your white shirt.’ She mutters.

‘What?’ I can already imagine how exceptionally hot she would look into it.

‘Yep, the one you were wearing on the weekend, if you were able to get it cleaned.’

I dig through my drawer and pull out the shirt, and something I never meant to keep but never could throw away; her pink panties from the first time we slept together.

She turns pink. And I can feel myself throbbing.

‘Are you always this prepared for girls?’ She raises an eyebrow.

‘Only for the girls who throws life-changing fundraisers and looks splendidly edible doing it. And I know only *one* of that kind.’

She bites her lower lip and disappears into the bathroom.

I am achingly hard and head to the Guest bath, turning on the hot water, letting it pound down my back as I try to shake off the tension that’s been gripping me all evening.

Not because I’m tired—but because I saw too many men looking at her like she was a meal. She was stunning tonight. Radiant. And off-limits. *Mine*.

I pour us some wine when she steps out. And the sight of her—

Her legs bare, that white shirt hanging loose and open at the collar, her hair damp, no makeup, just *her*.

And those pink panties hidden under the hem. I guess she isn't wearing a bra. And I am losing every last ounce of control.

She looks like every fantasy I've ever had, and yet nothing about it feels like a game.

She smirks. Knowing what she is doing to me.

I lift her onto the kitchen countertop, her legs swinging slightly, eyes still sparkling from the night and whatever this thing between us is becoming.

I brush a thumb along the hem of the oversized shirt she's wearing. 'We need to get you new clothes,' I murmur, stepping between her knees, my hands finding her waist. 'You can't go around showing this much skin to other men.'

Her eyes narrow, she leans back with both her hands resting on the counter behind her and puts her toe on my chest. It's *sensual*. In an unexplainable way and I run my tongue over my lips to control my arousal. I can see everything underneath the shirt with her leg perched so high.

'Oh, and what happens to the tigress, I thought they are supposed to roar, not be controlled?' she teases, her foot fingers digging with force into my chest, almost pushing me a little back. And then she does this low, throaty thing that's half-growl, half-mock roar.

I hold her heel in my hand and suck her thumb, she throws her head a little back and I hear a soft moan. My tongue moves along her skin through the entire length of her leg, I put it around my waist and grip her hips, pull her closer. Her thighs brush against my torso, and I'm so damn hard—no point pretending otherwise. Her presence does that to me.

I lean in, my lips hovering just over hers, my voice low. ‘All your roars...and your moans—are for me. Do you understand, *girlfriend*?’

Her breath hitches. And she kisses me, biting my lower lip.

‘God, I had no idea I would get so freaking turned on with your masculine energy...my protective, possessive *boyfriend*.’ Her palms slide up my chest, inside my T-shirt.

I kiss her jaw, and her neck, slow.

She moans my name. Fuck! Hearing my name on her lips is the most erotic thing.

She pauses and pulls back a little to ask something out of the blue, ‘What was the first thing you noticed when you saw me?’

But I *do* remember, exactly. ‘Your eyes.’

‘Not my legs? Not my dress?’ She is surprised.

‘Nope,’ I say. ‘Your eyes.’

She is intrigued, and bites her tongue.

‘Okay, your turn. What did you notice first?’ I ask her.

She presses her lips together. ‘Your shoulders.’

I raise a brow. ‘My shoulders?’

‘Broad,’ she says, mock dreamy. ‘Very broad. Intimidating, actually. And then your smile. It was...stupidly handsome.’

‘Stupidly?’ I echo, amused.

She swallows down her wine in one go.

‘They’ve gotten me into trouble,’ she says, nudging my chest with a finger.

I kiss her again—soft, nothing rushed, tasting the wine from her tongue. Just a moment of us, suspended in warm air and citrus-scented soap.

‘Good trouble, I hope.’

She wraps her legs around my waist, tighter, smirking. ‘The very best kind.’

‘By the way, you know I’ve had a kitchen fantasy too...’ her eyes sparkle.

‘I was counting on it. Why do you think you’re sitting right here?’ I laugh and tell her, ‘You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to kiss you like this?’

She barely manages to whisper, ‘Like what?’

I don’t tell her in words. I *show* her.

I kiss her, hard. My mouth is urgent, hungry now. Her hands wrapped tight around my neck as she kisses me back.

I trail kisses down her throat, then lower, over her collarbone, across the soft rise of her chest. She has unintentionally tortured me all night. I pull down the loosely tucked shirt.

She gasps when my mouth reaches the curve of her breasts, her back arching. She isn’t wearing a bra, and my hands can’t wait to touch her under my fingers.

I peel away the shirt and pause.

Just to take her in.

Curves that could undo the most disciplined man. Skin that feels like warm silk against my tongue. I run my hands up her sides and then wrap them behind her to support her as I lower my mouth again. She moans—low, deep—as I taste her. She fists her hands in my hair, anchoring me there like she doesn’t want me to stop.

And I won’t stop.

I worship both her breasts, letting my tongue drag slowly around the honey brown areolas around her erect nipples, letting my teeth graze them, not so

gently, yet taking my time. I'm deliberate. Focused. Because she deserves to feel completely adored. Revered.

Her hips shift beneath me, restless, eager. I feel the edge of her panties as I slide one hand down her waist and tease her at the boundaries the fabric, which I am seconds away from throwing out of the way.

She lifts her hips ever so slightly, that unspoken permission hanging thick in the air. An invitation to take them off.

A slow smile tugs at my lips. *'Good girl.'*

Her breath catches again, and I can see it in her eyes—that reaction, that flicker of heat and trust. Like she's letting go, bit by bit, layer by layer.

She tugs at my T-shirt and pulls it above my head and her fingers trail recklessly on my back and my biceps. Needing me as bare as she is.

I help her lie down on the tiles of the countertop and press a kiss to her navel. 'You are...' I look up at her, cupping her hips. '...the most stunning thing I've ever seen.'

Her fingers slide down, threading through mine. She squeezes once—gentle, grounding.

My fingers graze over her folds—and damn, they're soaked.

She's spread out on the kitchen counter like a dream. A goddess. Her hair wild, her lips parted, her chest rising with every breath.

I press a kiss to her calf, then higher, slowly, worshipfully, until her legs part further. Until she opens for me completely under the soft lights. Until there's nothing left between us—not clothes, not hesitation, not fear.

She smells like heaven and heat and feminine, and I can barely hold back the ache pulsing through my body. I lean in and slide my tongue where she needs me most.

‘Devesh...’ she gasps—high and helpless, her voice cracking around the edges.

I smile against her, tongue dancing again, drinking in her reaction. She jerks, hips trying to lift, and I place a firm hand on her stomach to hold her steady, grounding her. She exhales shakily at the contact.

With my other hand, I trace down her thigh and slide two fingers deeper into her, slow and teasing. Her back arches, her hands flying above her head, gripping tight the other end of the counter, like she can’t get close enough.

‘You are so goddamn beautiful,’ I murmur against her, between kisses and strokes.

There’s this deep need for me to mark my territory and I do exactly the same, I pull out my wet fingers and write my name on her bare skin. She moans and shivers as I write each freaking letter of my name on her belly, while my tongue refuses to leave its righteous place.

‘Oh God, what are you doing to me?’ Her hips begin to roll with my tongue, matching the rhythm instinctively, like we’ve done this a hundred times before.

I glance up, and the sight nearly undoes me—Akshara, *undone*. No mask. No sharp quip. Just her. Bare. Vulnerable. Soft.

It makes my blood rush harder.

‘Oh yes...yes...don’t stop...’ she is panting, and I swear, there’s nothing on earth that could make me

stop right now. And there's nothing that could make me walk away from this woman now.

She's trusting me with more than her body tonight. She's letting me in. That rare, quiet version of her—the one that the world doesn't know about—is here. In front of me, for me. And it means the world to me.

I'll give her every ounce of worship she deserves.

Her hands are in my hair now, tugging gently, guiding me closer, deeper. Her breaths come faster, scattered.

'Devesh...' she gasps again, this time softer, like a prayer.

I look up just in time to catch the exact moment her head tips back, her eyes fluttering shut, mouth parting with a sound that knocks the breath out of me.

And then—she shatters.

She arches off the counter, her back curving like a drawn bow. A broken moan rips from her throat as the wave hits her, hard and hot. Her legs squeeze around my shoulders, her fingers fisting in my hair as she rides it out, breathless, and *breathtaking*.

I hold her through it, grounding her with a hand splayed over her waist, feeling every tremble against my palm. Her skin is flushed, glistening, and radiant like moonlight reflected on water.

I kiss the inside of her thighs slowly, reverently, tasting her last tremble of release. Then I stand, brushing the hair from her face as she blinks up at me, dazed, completely wrecked—in the best way.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Akshara

‘That...was...mind-blowing.’ I’m breathless, played across the kitchen counter, my skin still singing from the aftershocks. Words feel too small for what he just did to me—how reverently he worshipped every last tremble of me, as if *my* pleasure was the only thing that mattered.

‘We’re just getting started, *tigress*.’ He says, his voice dark silk wrapped in heat.

He leans back, the muscles of his torso flexing with effortless grace. With an almost boyish glint in his eyes, he asks, ‘Can I kiss you?’

I blink, caught off guard. ‘What? Are you seriously asking permission now—after you just made me see stars and galaxies?’

He chuckles, a delicious, low rumble in his chest. ‘Not sure if you’d like to taste yourself.’

My eyebrows shoot up, my cheeks burning, but I can’t help the smirk that curls my lips. ‘Depends on how I taste.’

His eyes flash, hunger igniting in them again. His voice drops to a growl, his mouth a whisper away from mine. ‘Fucking *heavenly*.’

And then he kisses me.

Hot. Deep. Possessive.

Like I’m the most intoxicating thing he’s ever had on his tongue—and he wants more.

And I want more too. I collect myself and he helps me get down the shelf.

‘I want to taste you.’ My breath stumbles over the words, shaky but honest.

He stills, eyes dark and searching. And then he smiles.

I meet his gaze, no more room for hiding. ‘You’re the first person I’ve ever wanted like this...the first I’ve ever trusted this much.’

‘I’m honored to be your first,’ he murmurs, voice thick. ‘But I’m hoping to be your last, too.’

He strokes my cheek, his thumb lingering at the corner of my lips—his touch tender, but his eyes are anything but soft.

I answer by opening my mouth just enough, letting my tongue flick out to tease his thumb. His breath stutters, chest rising sharply, and that’s all the answer he needs.

I kneel before him—my hands resting on his thighs and then I yank his pants and briefs down. And when I finally see him, I gasp for air.

I trace my fingers along him, slow and deliberate. Holding him with a mix of reverence and bold curiosity.

His breath hitches, a low groan rising from deep in his chest as he leans back slightly, anchoring himself against the edge of the kitchen table.

I slowly bring my mouth to the tip, tasting him.

Hot, heavy, velvet over steel.

My tongue circles, teasing the sensitive ridge, before I take him in deeper.

I hear the sharp inhale he tries to muffle, but fails. ‘Fuck, Akshara...’ he groans, head tipping back, hand fisting gently in my hair as I start to move with a rhythm—slow, confident, purposeful.

I want to ruin him a little. Break apart his control. And I can feel it—the tension in his thighs, the way his

hips twitch involuntarily as I hollow my cheeks and take him deeper in my mouth.

His low moans turn into something rougher, more desperate. Each sound he makes, guttural and raw, pushes me further, makes me feel *powerful*. I match his rhythm with my hand, stroking the parts my mouth can't reach, dragging my nails lightly against his skin, just to hear him curse again.

Every strangled whisper of *fuck* between gritted teeth, sends an electric pulse straight through me. When I glance up, his eyes are glazed over, mouth parted, one hand braced on the counter behind him like he needs the support to stay upright.

He tugs me up—gently but urgently—fingers laced through mine. His mouth crashes into mine, I can taste the salt of him on our kiss and it only fuels the fire burning between us, his tongue devouring me like I've unlocked something primal in him.

His hands are everywhere—rough and reverent, gliding over my sides, gripping my hips, cupping my breasts. His mouth fastens on my nipples, teeth grazing, sucking hard enough to make me cry out. My body arches into him, aching.

And then—he spins me around, bends me over the kitchen table. The cold tiles against my belly only amplifies the heat pooling inside me again.

‘Stay just like that,’ he growls behind me, voice thick with desire.

I hear the condom tear open—swift, practiced—and then his hands are on me again, spreading my legs wider.

There's nothing gentle now.

It's wild. Frantic. Flesh against flesh.

His hips slamming into mine as he buries himself inside me, from behind. His name spills from my lips like prayer and profanity. I arch my back, giving him everything, needing more.

One of his hands finds my breast, kneading it fervently and then teasing the nipple as he angles my leg up on the table, opening me wider. The change in angle makes me cry out—it's a different kind of intensity now, I feel him hit somewhere deeper, sharper, somewhere I still don't know the name of, but every thrust at that place makes me shiver, and my toes curl. I grip the edge of the table to steady myself, moaning as he drives into that exact spot that makes my vision blur.

My climax hits like a wave crashing into shore—loud, trembling, and unrelenting. I feel him shudder behind me, his grip tightening, a groan tearing from his chest as he follows me over the edge.

We collapse together, tangled and panting.

'I love it when you come that hard.' He murmurs.

'I love it when you fuck me that hard.' I say.

I gather myself and stand up, our breaths barely inches apart.

'I will take it, I thought it was impossible to please you.' He laughs and kisses me senseless, yet again. I snuggle and graze my nose on his cheek.

He carries me to his bedroom in his arms, we cuddle for a while, and then it's time for him to make a move.

He gets dressed, still talking to me, coming in and out of his walk-in-closet, which is bigger than my bedroom. Shares his lock passwords, tells me

everything about the timings of his house keeper coming in, checking what would I like to have for breakfast, and informing me his driver will drop me home whenever I wish to go.

I sleep in his bed when he kisses me one last time and takes off.

I don't remember the last time I was so smug with happiness. Like I don't know what's the reason but I feel good, really good.

I can't wait for these two days to pass and come Saturday, for our first real date.

I am trying to pull some long lost documents of my article drafts from my drawer at office, when my boss comes beaming toward me, practically bouncing on his heels. 'You're the moderator for the election debate this Saturday,' he says.

My heart skips. My first TV appearance. Not as a reporter standing in a sea of noise but as someone leading the damn conversation.

This should feel like a win. It *is* a win. And the first instinct is to call and announce it to Devesh. And of course Samaira, and Aryan too. I am surprised her name is coming second in the list.

I am still processing, there will be a hell lot of preparation that I need to do.

I text him immediately.

Me: *I've just been told I'll be moderating the debate show this Saturday.*

Almost instantly, three heart emojis pop up on my screen.

Devesh: *Wow. That's a great news? Your first leading TV appearance?*

Me: *Yes... it is. Kind of.*

Devesh: *Why can't I hear you screaming then?*

I smile, but there's this weird thing blooming in my chest. I should be celebrating. But all I can think about is the date I was really looking forward to.

Me: *I'm so sorry. We'll have to reschedule our date.*

Devesh: *Don't worry about that. We'll work it out. What time will you be done?*

Me: *It's the late segment. I'll probably be out of the studio close to eleven.*

Devesh: *Alright. I'll pick you up from your station and cook for you. Date at my place. Fancy restaurants have to wait longer.*

I blink at my screen.

Me: *You don't need to do that. It'll be so late.*

Devesh: *Umm... but you'll still eat after work, right?*

Me: *Yeah, but you don't have to do all the prep. It's my date to plan.*

Devesh: *I want to. You can plan the next one. All by yourself.*

Me: *Ok!*

Devesh: *Now get back to work, and prep for it well. I know you will kill it.*

I bite my lip, trying (and failing) not to grin.

He makes *everything* feel easier. Warmer. Like I don't have to carry everything on my own.

I'm in the newsroom earlier than usual—trying to keep my mind sane and do one last rehearsal. Memorizing all of it by heart. SBP group is into both Print and TV media. And I was hired as a Political

Journalist initially, but fortunately, I was given an additional responsibility within six months as the Editor for News and Print –both related to Political issues. And then, the dream happened, I was assigned a mentor which happens only for top five percent of their talent.

Reema Jain is my mentor. The woman who made half the country fall in love with news in the nineties. Including me.

She steps onto the studio floor with her signature grace—saree crisp, eyes sharp, smile rare but real. Everyone steps aside when Reema walks through.

She stops right in front of me and gives me a few tips and reassurance. I have recorded and reviewed in studio three times in last two days, that's the part of the protocol before first appearance.

The lights are too bright. The AC too cold. My hair looking like it's auditioning for a shampoo ad are the biggest morale booster right now.

There's a hum of controlled chaos in the newsroom—people mouthing countdowns, makeup touch-ups happening at record speed, lights shine down on the sleek debate desk set center-stage. On either side of the desk sit two sharply dressed representatives—one from the ruling party, the other from the opposition—both tense, ready to spar.

I glance at my tablet, my notes are open in front of me. My fingers tap against the glass—a nervous tic I haven't been able to shake.

Deep breath.

The director cues me.

'Live in 3... 2...1'

Red light. Go.

I sit up straighter, ‘Welcome to SBP News. I’m Akshara Sharma—and tonight, we’re talking about a word that gets thrown around a lot, but rarely lived up to: accountability.’

‘Let’s start with the education bill,’ I say, turning to Rajeev Khandelwal. ‘Your party calls it progressive. Critics say it’s recycled. Why should the Maharashtra public believe you?’

He launches into his statement. Rehearsed, as expected.

Purna Mohol, the opposition spokesperson, lets him finish for all of ten seconds before cutting in with a jab about scholarship cuts.

Ten minutes in, and they’ve already blamed each other’s governments, dodged direct questions.

‘Public opinion isn’t leaning toward either of you,’ I say. ‘All the statements are fine, but who is going to take accountability? Of the broken desks and missing teachers in government schools. Kids walking kilometers to reach the crumbling school buildings.’

They both stare at me, a flicker of discomfort on their faces. But of course, they come up with their stories. They are used to answering such questions in their sleep.

I realize my palms aren’t sweating anymore. Good. I like this part—the pressure, the jabs, the real questions. The space where truth might accidentally fall out.

The final segment wraps, and the cameras cut to black. The red light fades. My earpiece buzzes with a simple ‘Great show’ from the control room, and the tension in my shoulders finally lets go.

I exhale. My heart's still doing this weird jazz beat in my chest, but I am so elated that my voice didn't crack, I didn't fumble a single stat, I didn't freeze.

My mentor walks back in and chuckles. 'You did well. You were calm. Sharp. Even a little ruthless.'

I grin. 'I'll take that as a compliment. Thank you for all your guidance.'

She smiles and then reaches out and pats my back—just once, but it's enough to make my inner eighteen-year-old girl do somersaults.

'You've found your voice, Akshara. Don't let anyone dull it.'

I nod, a little too quickly. 'Thank you, Reema. This means more than I can say.'

She leans in slightly. 'Go home. You've earned a glass of wine and someone telling you how brilliant you are.'

I blink. Did she just—

She smirks. 'I've seen your boyfriend waiting in the lobby.'

I flush. Busted.

'PlanMyTrip has huge potential. Smart man, and handsome too.' she winks.

'Oh My God, you recognized him?' I ask, surprised and ashamed that I couldn't recognize Devesh when I met him for the first time.

She just nods.

'You're a maverick.' I am in awe of this woman.

She laughs, 'That's what this industry does to you. Makes you a maverick if you stay this long.'

And then she's gone, a swirl of silk and wisdom.

I look around one last time before grabbing my things. The studio feels different now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Akshara

I rush out through the walking passage, still riding the nerves—only to find Devesh waiting in the lobby like he has *no better place* to be. He's leaning casually against the leather couch, relaxed in jeans and a white Polo T-shirt, his phone in one hand, a soft smile playing on his lips.

For a second, it doesn't feel real.

I slow my steps. I know he won't be waiting for me every day like this. But today? Today he is *here*.

'You were amazing, I can't tell you how proud I am.' he says, pulling me into a hug before I can even greet him.

I stiffen just a little—this is still my workplace, after all. But God, the way he says it. Like he means it.

'How do you know?' I ask, tucking my hair behind my ear.

'I was watching you live on my phone, you were blazing.' he says simply. 'Let's celebrate.'

I glance around the parking lot, confused. Devesh's black Range Rover is nowhere in sight. But then he casually presses a key fob, and click—a low, seductive sound echoes behind me.

I turn.

And nearly lose my ability to form words.

A *Porsche 911*. Metallic grey. Gleaming like sin under the lights, sleek and unapologetically sexy. My jaw may have dropped a little. Okay—a lot.

‘I didn’t know you owned a luxury sports car,’ I say. ‘Fuck...*fuck*...I...I am spectacularly impressed.’

He shrugs. ‘First date with you called for something special.’

And then, he adds, ‘Want to drive?’

Wait. What?

‘Are you serious? I’ve never driven a sports car in my life.’

He tosses me the keys like we’re in a movie and says, ‘There’s always a first time, baby.’

Alright. I take the wheel. Because he called me *baby*. And also because damn, I really want to.

He walks me through the controls—panel, automatic gear shift, and something about pressing the escalator for not more than three seconds at one time because of the extraordinary pick-up. My pulse is hammering in my ears.

And then... I start the engine.

It purrs. Not roars. Purrs. Like it knows exactly what it’s capable of.

Heads turn as we cruise out—his hand resting lightly on the gear console, my grip a little too tight on the wheel, trying not to giggle from the sheer thrill of it all.

‘This is...dangerously fun.’ I murmur.

He laughs, low and warm. ‘Just like you.’

By the time we pull into his building’s penthouse parking driveway, I feel like I’ve just driven through a dream.

Except the dream isn’t over.

Because his building? It’s not just a building—it’s a five-star hotel pretending to be a residential tower. The lobby smells faintly of sandalwood and ambition.

Polished marble floors stretch beneath my feet, double-height ceilings glitter with light fixtures that are probably imported from Spain or something even fancier.

But when he holds the elevator for me—grinning like a teenager instead of a tech billionaire—everything about this place shifts. It doesn't feel intimidating anymore.

He places a hand gently on the small of my back, guiding me through the sleek hallway and into his bedroom. 'Freshen up. Take your time. I'll set the table.' He says softly and leaves with a quick peck on my lips.

This is second time when I am entering his bedroom, and I can't stop admiring it. It minimalist and warm—neutral tones, soft lighting. The bathroom is even more impressive, with fluffy white towels, his subtle cologne lingering in the air, and a neatly folded black shirt set on the counter with matching slippers, for me.

I smile. Of course. I *did* bring a change of clothes, after all it's our first date. But something about slipping into his shirt feels...more tempting. Like claiming a little piece of him.

I shower quickly, letting the warm water wash away the adrenaline from the Porsche ride. And when I pull on his shirt, it hangs loosely around my thighs and it smells like him. Safe. Addictive.

Like something I'd want to wake up to. Everyday.
Am I ready for an *everyday*? Already?

When I step out, the entire dining area is transformed.

There's Spaghetti noodles twirled like a chef's special and something that smells delicious even from a distance- homemade arrabbiata pasta, and the aroma of freshly baked garlic bread watering my mouth. There's a bottle of champagne and two glasses, candles flickering low. There's small vase with fresh flowers in the center.

'You made all of this from scratch?' I ask, stunned. This can't be real.

'Yep,' he replies, casually, like it's no big deal.

'It's... amazing,' I say, taking it all in. 'Thank you.'

He opens the champagne cork with a thud and I giggle like an excited kid. We clink our glasses together, the bubbles rising up, and he meets my eyes, warm and steady.

'To your dreams.' He says.

I smile, 'To the man who lets me drive Porsche and cooks for me like an Italian chef.' My heart fluttering as I take a sip.

He laughs, full and unguarded, and for a moment, it feels like the whole world has narrowed to this room. To him—sitting right next to me at the table, looking at me like he already knows where this night will lead.

But isn't in a hurry to get there.

I pick up the fork, twirl a bite of pasta, and eat.

Oh. My. God.

'Mmmmm...' I mumble around a mouthful, completely unladylike. 'This is *so* good.'

He chuckles, but I don't stop—I'm too focused on shoveling in another bite. Garlic, spice, fresh basil—it's heaven. He serves me some noodles too.

Five minutes in, my plate is clean. Not a speck of sauce left. ‘This is way too delicious.’

It’s only then I realize...he hasn’t touched his food. Not a single bite.

He’s just sitting there, leaning slightly forward, elbow on the table, fork forgotten. Watching me.

I glance up. ‘What happened?’

He shakes his head slowly, smiling. ‘Nothing. Just... this is nice.’

His voice is quiet. *Honest.*

I blink. ‘You mean watching me eat like I haven’t seen carbs in years? I couldn’t stop, it was so delectable.’

He laughs. ‘It’s just...just *you* here. In my shirt. Looking like you belong.’

I go still, heart flipping.

And then—without even meaning to—I blurt it out.

‘What did I do to deserve this?’

His brows knit slightly. ‘Hmm?’

‘I mean—*why me?*’ I say quietly. ‘I don’t understand why you’re attracted to me in the first place and then this...making me feel so good about myself.’

He leans back in his chair, looking at me like I’ve asked the most obvious question in the world. ‘Umm...I have a long list for that one.’

‘Tell me,’ I whisper, setting my fork down. ‘I need to know.’

He studies me for a moment, serious now.

He refills our champagne glasses and then holds my hand.

‘You know what...’ he says, ‘When I saw your picture first time in Aryan’s phone. I couldn’t sleep for

nights. I kept thinking about you. And then I tried to stop thinking about you. I buried myself in work. You can't fantasize for someone over a picture, right?"

I just smile and nod. 'I guess.'

'And then...we met again, exactly after two weeks. At the club, pure *fate*. And I couldn't sleep again. For nights. After seeing you in real life. After touching you. After what you said about my parents. I could feel a *connection*. That instant, deep, hard to name kind of feeling.'

He continues, 'Aryan told me the next day that he was meeting Samaira, and then the next thing I knew was they were back together. So, I knew I will see you again, it had to be just a matter of time. At times, I thought I'd get your number from Aryan and ping you.'

'But you didn't.' I wish he would have.

He smiles. 'Yeah...I had to stop myself. Because when we met at the club, I felt you needed space. You were... going through things that you wanted to figure out yourself. So meanwhile, I again tried for months to stop thinking about you. Like I will realize it's no big deal. She is just another girl, maybe just a crush.'

I just smile, enjoying it more than I could imagine.

He laughs softly, then sobers. 'I didn't know it could feel like this—with anyone. That just *being* around someone could make me feel...happy. Whole. Like a version of myself I actually like.'

He pauses, looking *into* me, not *at* me.

'When you laugh with your whole heart, it does something to me. Every time I see you, I feel like a part of me heals, becomes better. And I don't want that to stop.'

I don't know what to say. Is this what I think it is? That inexplicable connection people talk about as love?

He takes a breath, as if weighing his words.

'The way you speak your mind without softening it for anyone's comfort. The way you *feel* things—deeply—and don't pretend not to.'

I blink, surprised. 'You make that sound like a good thing.'

'It is,' he says. 'It's rare. Most people are either afraid to feel or afraid to show it. But *you*...you walk around with your heart tucked in your sleeve, pretending its armor. You think your strength is in how little you need people, but I've seen the way you *care*. You care for the ones who *need* it the most. That's where your strength actually is.'

I open my mouth to argue. He doesn't let me.

'You're brilliant, a dreamer, a little stubborn at times,' he says, laughing a little. 'But I can't stop admiring you. You challenge me. You push back. You're not afraid to call me out or call me in. And you make me want to be better, *do* better—without even realizing you're doing it.'

I go still.

'And I know you don't trust easily,' he adds softly. 'But the fact that you let me in...it means more than I can explain.'

'You make me feel like I'm not just the guy with the money and plans, you don't care about who I am on paper—you make me *earn* your trust. You make me feel like... just me. And that's what I ever wanted. You see through all the noise.'

The lump in my throat rises again. I can't look away.

Silence hangs for a second, heavy and real.

'All of this is a small part of *why you*. And I have not even started on how beautiful you are. In and out. And how rare it is that you are not even fully aware of it. I haven't seen any woman so passionate...you have fire, you are brave and...you...you have a heart of gold.'

I take a deep breath, I wasn't expecting this. I wasn't even close to being prepared to hear him say all this. 'I don't know what to say.' I murmur.

He shrugs, his smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. 'You don't have to say anything. Just...Stay. That's all I want.'

And I do feel like staying. In this house. With this man. Who sees every inch of me—the strong, the scared, the soft—and doesn't flinch.

I whisper. 'I want to stay.'

'But..?'' He asks me, aware that it's not all I have to say.

'But...I'm *scared*.'

He puts both hands under my chair and pulls it towards him, then cups my face, his thumbs brushing over my cheeks like he's known them forever.

'Why are you scared?'

'Because it feels *too* good to be true. Meeting you in a club when I wasn't even thinking...and then meeting you again, I would say pure play by destiny, and realizing who you are...I thought it could be at best a fling...some fun...but then discovering that you are not just the hottest man I know, you are also the kindest, the calmest. You're steady...confident...but

not in that arrogant way most people think success looks like.'

My voice probably cracks, 'You bring sanity to my chaos. You see me in a way...no one ever has. You believe in me...like no one ever has. You don't try to distil the fire in me. You support it. You hold space for it. And I don't know how you notice things I don't say. I didn't know this feeling was even possible. But...I still don't know why you would choose me when you can have anyone.'

'I don't want anyone, it's *you*...just you for me.'

He says, gentle and assuring.

'And I don't want to mess it up. Hurt you or get hurt. What if one day you realize I'm too much to handle or what if I become too dependent on you? It scares me.' I let it all out.

His voice is gentle, grounding. 'It's normal to be scared. I am scared, too. What makes it scarier is that I want this work so desperately.'

He leans in closer. 'But I want to try. I want to give it *all* of myself. Because I know it's real. And we can't let fear steal the opportunity of our future. Let's be scared together...and still choose this.'

He smiles—soft. '*Every day*.' He whispers, brushing his lips against my forehead.

I feel my eyes well up, tears trickling down my cheeks. He sees it before I can hide it. He wipes a tear with his thumb and then kisses on my temple.

'Is this the most unattractive thing a girlfriend can do on first date?' I half-laugh, embarrassed, wiping my eyes.

He smiles, shakes his head. 'No. This is the most attractive thing about you. That you are truthful,

always. And I want *all* of it. I have never wanted anything...anyone...the way I want you in my life.'

I can still feel the warmth of his fingers on my cheek. And the way he's looking at me—like he's already seen all of me, not just the polished version I show to the world—makes it even harder to breathe.

'Also...have I mentioned I'm very into women who moan over pasta like it's a love language?' he adds.

I laugh—almost snort—and he grins like it's his favorite sound in the world.

His forehead rests against mine for a long moment. The living room hums around us—all I can feel is his heartbeat, under my palm on his chest, loud and uneven, echoing with mine like a drum.

Just when I'm thinking this moment couldn't possibly become more intimate, more *us*, and I want to say it out loud, that I have fallen in love with him.

He shifts just slightly, his nose brushing mine.

'I love you, Akshara.'

I look up, gasping for air, and then suddenly giggling like a toddler who has been ticked. 'You stole my line.'

My lips brush softly against his.

'I love you too, Devesh.'

I continue, 'I didn't know I *needed* you so badly.'

I get up and climb up his lap, my legs crossing both sides. Holding his face in my palms.

His hands slide up from my waist, slow and deliberate, fingertips skating along the sides of my ribcage. He cups my face again, reverent, his thumbs stroking the corners of my lips. 'You're the only thing

I see when I close my eyes and the only thing I want to see when I open them.'

And then he kisses me—gently at first, but it deepens with a tenderness so intense, it makes my throat close. There's no rush, no frantic hunger. Just this steady, melting ache.

'God, Akshara...' he exhales against my lips. 'You have no idea what you do to me.'

He kisses down the side of my neck, slow trails of heat that make my skin prickle and my head tip back. My fingers find the hem of his t-shirt, sliding underneath to feel the warmth of his skin, the taut muscles flexing beneath my hands.

My arms loop around his neck, and he buries his face into the swells of my breasts, inhaling my scent. I feel *good* in a way that's almost unbearable.

'In your bedroom.' I say. A need I have never known I could have, to be claimed by him.

He carries me in his arms through the quiet of his apartment. The lights are soft, golden, painting everything in warmth. The bedroom door swings open, and he sets me down on his with a kind of reverence. Like I'm precious. Like I'm something breakable he never wants to risk shattering.

'Are you okay?' he asks, his voice low, breath catching slightly.

I nod, heart still hammering. 'Just... stay close.'

He leans in and kisses me again, deeper now.

Devotional.

We are facing each other, and his hands move with purpose on my thighs; but without haste—he's not trying to rush through this, and it makes me ache more.

‘You know what,’ he whispers against my shoulder, fingers trailing down my spine. ‘Every time I thought about you, it wasn’t just this. It was...how you’d look at me after a long day. How you’d laugh into my neck. How you’d feel sleeping in my arms.’

I can barely breathe. ‘You imagined all that?’

He nods. ‘All of it. And more.’

I pull him closer, needing to feel his skin against mine, to erase the last bit of distance. And when our bare skin meets, it’s like sparks—its heat and comfort and longing wrapped into one.

The sheets are cool beneath us, but his hands are warm, grounding me. He kisses every part of me like he’s been waiting for this—not just the physical moment, but the permission to love me with his whole heart.

And I let him.

I let him see everything, every part of me that once felt unworthy.

And he worships it all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Akshara

It’s been almost two months since that night of our first date—the night that still plays in my dreams like a lullaby—where we confessed love, nothing less.

I never thought love could feel like this. Not the kind from stories, with fireworks, violin swells and dramatic pauses every day. But the *real* kind. The one that slips in quietly, softly and makes you feel content.

We started with staying at each other's place initially but now? I guess, I have moved in with him for all practical purposes. Most of the days, I stay at his place. Sometimes, on weekends, we crash at mine and finish the laundry. I've half of my clothes at his house: not that I need that many when I am here, but it's easier to go to work directly from here, while my toothbrush and my bottle of conditioner sit quietly in his bathroom.

He is travelling lesser now, with his new Chief Operating Officer (COO) finally joining. I have travelled lesser too in the last few weeks. After the debate show, Reema pitched me for a full-time news anchor, and I am into a fast forward on-the-job training for that, co-hosting every day post lunch news.

On days, he picks me up from work and we go on dates at those hole-in-the-wallet places he introduces to me and on days, I pull him in the the *chaat* shops on the streets of Old Delhi. On Fridays, we usually stay in—he cooks, we try to watch a movie we never finish because...well, because we're usually halfway into each other before the movie reaches its half time.

We do double dates with Samaira & Aryan almost every weekend. Sometimes fancy, but mostly we prefer the house parties. By the side of his pool, watching him swim and calling out each other's habits that we have discovered. And there's so much common on what both these men cry over, topping the list is how quickly we sisters fall sleep. And we laugh.

We laugh a lot. He makes me laugh so much, it's stupid.

And when I'm stressed, he knows just when to say something humorous, kiss the spot between my

eyebrows, or drag me to bed for a *mind-clearing activity*.

Yes, the mind boggling sex.

It's not just good. It's soul-bending. Hot. Intimate. Playful. Sometimes sweet and reverent. Other times raw and breathless. He reads my body like he wrote it himself. I've lost count of how many times I've clung to his shoulders, chanting his name like a prayer. And I've lost count of how many times he growls and grumps and says, '*You're mine.*'

We have fucked in every possible position, in every corner of his house, and nearly every surface. I discovered I come harder when he gets rough with me, when my wrists are pinned above my head, or when he fucks me from behind. I have also discovered the exact spots on his hair trail towards south, that make him shiver with pleasure.

I get up early these days to ogle him while he sweats out in the gym, handing me those tiny weights he has gotten especially to get me started on muscle training.

And *I do it*, I do it to get rewarded later, being bent on his bench while we are drenched in sweat as the start of my day. I don't mind exercising.

We tried oiling each other's head but the bottle was found empty in the hallway somehow, he tried fingering me discreetly in the lift another day, with people around and I moaned so loud, he decided he is never doing it again, ever.

But beyond the sex and the thrill, it's the calm, the quiet moments I didn't see coming. Like when he makes me the perfect coffee or that special chai when Samaira is around, when he gives me space to work

when I need it the most, and let me be with my sister when I need to, just like the older times. He convinced me to go back home for a few days and I actually spent some good time with my parents after a really long time.

The way he instinctively pulls me into his chest at night like he knows I sleep better to the sound of his heartbeat. I have discovered his likes and dislikes, and he is learning mine.

The way we spend hours doing absolutely nothing—arguing over who sings better, or just reading in silence, our feet tangled.

I'm still me. Still the independent, feminist Akshara who went to a club for a hook-up to figure her shit out. But this version of me...she's softer. She lets *Devesh* in.

He's helped me believe that love doesn't mean losing yourself. That it's possible to be held without being caged.

Sometimes, when I look at him—sleepy and shirtless, or laughing in the kitchen, or just humming while driving—I feel this weird ache. Like my heart is too full.

And sometimes, it still feels like a *dream*.

And honestly, I am still *scared*.

At times, I feel that I will wake up and find out this was really just a dream. What if it's too good to be true?

But I still choose this, to fall harder for him, every day.

Because I know, I'm not falling alone.

I'm sprawled across the couch in the living room on a Sunday evening, legs tucked underneath me with my phone in hand, flicking through the video clips on my camera roll to finally post something on my handle after a long time. I have not been able to post much with the hectic schedule at work, and wanting to spend every other second with Devesh.

I see him stroll out of his study. He had to review the board deck in peace and was a little stressed over the financial report status, it's their first time of publishing the quarterly results to the investors, post PlanMyTrip went public.

He's been quieter than usual since this afternoon, moving around the apartment with a certain stiffness. Normally, he would come out and kiss me after wrapping up work, but today...there's an air of tension I can't quite place.

Something feels...off.

He is looking into his phone, walking towards the balcony, his brow furrowed. The phone vibrates in his hand, and his usual warmth absent as he takes the call before slipping out.

I try to ignore the knot forming in my stomach.

It's the way he did it — the almost hurried, yet subtle way he stepped outside. Like he didn't want me to hear what was being said. His voice is low and muffled by the glass door.

I feel my chest tighten.

Normally, I'd be all about giving him space, especially when he's busy with work. I'm no stranger to the demands of a career.

But my mind starts to race.

Who's on the other end of that call?

Why is it that I've never seen him so secretive before?

I bite my lip, trying to push away the irrational thoughts flooding in. We do share every detail of our lives with each other. But the sneaky way he's acting feels...so unlike him.

Is he talking to someone else? Someone important? Someone he's more interested in than me?

Akshara, *grow up!* I scold myself.

I try to push the jealousy down. It's ridiculous. The thought of him even *thinking* about someone else feels impossible. He is not the kind of man who wouldn't keep his word. I trust him. It must be something related to work, some numbers missing in the report probably.

Finally, after what feels like forever, he walks back in. His face is neutral, but his eyes flicker toward me, a flicker of guilt crossing his expression before he catches himself.

'Everything okay?' I ask, trying to keep my tone casual, though I can't hide the slight edge in my voice.

'Yeah,' he says, voice a little too smooth. 'Were you able to edit your video?'

I nod, 'In progress.' But my mind is still racing. He kisses me on the top of my head and settles on the couch right next to me.

I try to distract myself from whatever it is. 'I may have to go back for the culmination coverage of Maharashtra elections.'

'Oh, right, the results are this Tuesday. How long you will have to be there?' He asks.

'Two weeks I guess.'

'God, I'm going to miss you.' he says, lips brushing my skin.

‘And...I got to know that Reema is pushing very hard to get me a full-time news show when I come back. Although it’s still under discussion.’ I tell him with excitement.

‘Wow! That’s amazing. I am sure you’ll get it. And you’re going to do great.’ he finally manages a soft smile.

‘Nothing is final, I will know tomorrow.’ I turn towards him, touching his cheek, my fingers training along his jaw.

He is looks tired after spending the entire Sunday with presentations.

‘Why don’t you go ahead and rest, I will finish the post and join you.’ I kiss him Goodnight.

The dilemma of nudging him more to tell me what’s exactly going on in his head versus giving him space and let him tell me himself is continuously bothering me but I try to focus on finishing my work. Creating content is draining, while on the outside it may look fancy, it takes hours to make one post-worthy video.

It’s late when I finally slide in the bed beside him without a word, pulling the covers over us. He is half-asleep, but his arm finds my waist, and he sleeps with his nose buried in the hollow of my neck.

I don’t know what’s on his mind and what is he holding back, but I just know every bit that I love him, knowing it even more that he loves me back.

I’ve just left the office, still reeling from the overwhelming excitement of getting a prime slot show on SBP, and knowing that this is probably the last longest political coverage where I’ll be away from

Devesh. Post that, life will be steadier, I have already dreamt of our schedules. And our long due vacation on his upcoming thirtieth birthday.

I'm eager to talk to him, and tell him all about it—and to feel his support, his presence by my side, which I have become used to. I'm halfway to his place, because I need to leave for Mumbai in a few hours. I dial his number.

It rings. And rings.

He doesn't pick up.

He always picks up. Always. The only time he doesn't pick is when he is at a board meeting, and I know there's none scheduled today. Even then, he texts me that he'll call me back.

I call again. Nothing.

My stomach twists into knots.

It could just be that he's busy with work, pushing his team to do better on the board presentation, or reviewing the tenth version of the financial report. I push the worry aside, telling myself I'm just overthinking, but as I get closer to his place, the unease builds. I try calling once more before I walk through the door, but it goes to voicemail. This time, my heart skips.

'Malti Aunty?' I call his housekeeper, walking toward the kitchen. 'What time did Devesh leave for work?' She is a trustworthy person, she has been with this family since Devesh was a child.

She emerges from the hallway, her gentle face lighting up when she sees me. 'Akshara beta, you're here! I am not sure about the exact timing but he asked me to come only in the afternoon today. I came about thirty minutes back.'

I force a smile. ‘Oh, Ok. Thank you.’

He never told me he was going late to work. We had breakfasts together, like every day but he said nothing. The unease lingers. Something doesn’t sit right.

I turn toward the hallway, my feet almost moving on their own as I head to the CCTV room. I never normally check it, but today...I need to.

I tap in the code, and the monitors flicker to life. The feed is a little grainy, but it’s enough to catch the view of the living room.

And I freeze.

The image on the screen hits me like a punch to the gut. I feel like throwing up.

Devesh is standing in the middle of the living room, holding a woman—her face buried in his chest, her body trembling as she cries. His hand is rubbing soothing circles on her back, and his face is soft, attentive, concerned. I can’t hear the words they’re exchanging, but the image speaks louder than anything I’ve ever known.

My breath catches in my throat, and my heart lurches with a sudden, visceral pain I didn’t know was possible.

I thought I knew him. I thought we had something that no one else could touch. But this...this shatters everything. My hands tremble as I watch the video footage, trying to make sense of it. Who is she? Why does he look so...intimate with her?

I blink a hundred times, but the fact doesn’t change.

My thoughts swirl around me, a maelstrom of confusion and hurt. All I can do is watch, helpless, as my world comes crashing down in front of me.

If it would have been anyone else, I would have called; screaming, shouting and asking for an explanation, but not with *him*. Not after what I felt this relationship was.

It's like a million shards of glass have lodged into my chest, each one more painful than the last. I can't bring myself to talk to him and hear him say what we had was a *lie*.

Tears damp my shirt, and I realise it's been a while I am standing here. I rush to grab the suitcase I had gotten here once. It's time to pack up and leave.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Devesh

I drop Ruhi at her house in Delhi, watching her disappear safely inside before I finally let out a breath I didn't know I was holding.

I check my phone. Three missed calls.

Akshara.

Shit.

My phone was on silent all this time, buried under the car seat while I was trying to calm Ruhi down after that breakdown, and trying to focus on the road with my spinning head.

I call her back instantly— it doesn't even ring. Straight to voicemail.

My gut twists.

This isn't like her. She always answers me—even if she's in the middle of work, she finds a way to shoot back a message. And she's never, ever out of battery. She plans too much for that. I try again. Once. Twice. A third time.

Nothing.

The silence is louder than anything I've ever heard.

I drive back. My mind is racing. Has something happened? Is she pissed at me for not answering earlier?

Or worse—does she know something?

I swear under my breath and slam my palm against the steering wheel.

I wasn't hiding anything from her. I was going to tell her everything tonight. About Ruhi. About Dad. About the disaster of a situation I am in...well, history catching up with poor timing.

And now she won't even talk to me? But how could she possibly know?

I need to make sure she knows the truth from me.

I call Samaira the moment I get out of the car.

'Have you heard from Akshara?' My voice comes out rushed, desperate.

She hesitates. 'Yeah, she texted. Said her battery was low and she's catching a flight to Mumbai. Is everything ok?'

I tell her I will let her know once I am able to speak to her.

The feeling tightens in my chest—she knows, she knows something that broke her. And she didn't wait for an explanation.

She's gone.

I open the CCTV app on my phone and scrub through the footage while traveling up in the lift, rewinding until I see her—entering the CCTV room.

And then—there it is—she walks out.

Eyes glassy. Shoulders tight. Face pale.

She's crying.

I close my eyes for a beat, fighting the scream building in my throat.

Fuck.

I reach home and ask my housekeeper, she tells me that Akshara left. Said it was urgent. She was in the CCTV room for a long time, then came out crying and packed everything.

She left *me*.

Without even talking to me?

I call up my EA and tell her to cancel everything planned in the second half of the day. She insists that I should attend the review meetings with my CXOs as the pre-read material to board members is to be released by tomorrow—but I don't care. None of this matters right now. I tell her I will review things on the go, but I need to catch the next flight to Mumbai.

I know exactly where she stays when she travels for work. It's past evening when I get there. Her phone is still switched off. I ask the reception to call her room. I don't care about the stares in the lobby.

It feels like an eternity, but finally—*finally*—the elevator opens and there she is.

Still in her travel clothes. Her hair pulled up, her eyes red, lips trembling.

She looks at me.

Not with anger. But with *pain*.

And fuck—it guts me.

I reach for her hand, but she pulls away.

Her eyes bore into mine. She doesn't speak.

She doesn't have to.

Because I can feel everything she's not saying—
How could you? Why didn't you tell me? Did I mean so little?

'I've been calling you. Where's your phone? I got so worried.'

She doesn't blink. Doesn't soften.

'It's perfectly acceptable to cheat on someone and then act like you care about why they didn't answer your call.' Her voice is cold, clipped, controlled. Deadlier than a slap.

'Akshara...I...I wanted to tell you everything.' My voice cracks.

'There's no need. I saw you,' she snaps. 'Hugging a woman. She was crying. You were comforting her. May be she is just a friend. Is that what you are going to tell me?'

'You saw me hugging a woman and you think I'm cheating on you?' I step forward, barely resisting the urge to reach for her. But it hurts to know that she could believe that I'd ever cheat on her, ever.

'Did you ever trust me at all?' I know I'm not the one who should be disappointed right now, but I am. She isn't a girl who will look at a picture and believe I betrayed her.

'I *did* trust you. Until you gave me every reason not to.' Her words sting.

'I don't know where to start but I wanted to tell you everything, I just didn't know the truth myself. I was waiting for meeting her today and then speak to you. And I am sorry, I know I didn't handle it right. And

you watching that CCTV footage without any context, it would have looked dirty.'

I continue while she is listening. 'And well, this doesn't look like *trust* to me...you should have maybe just once...clarified. Confronted me. Fought for us, but this...this isn't you. You don't run away, Akshara.'

'I haven't run away...ok...I am here for work. And I don't even know which Akshara you are talking about ...I guess I am just a fool who trusts people who don't even deserve it.'

'Can we just talk in private? Please. I know I haven't handled this well but I wasn't even sure what to tell you.' I request her when I see people staring at us, I know they are all SBP crew.

'Listen...' her tone brittle, almost trembling. 'You can't just storm in and create scenes in front of my colleagues. I am asking you to leave right now.' She shakes her head, already done.

'Just hear me out, just once...'

She cuts me in between, 'Don't...please...just leave.'

She wipes her tears and walks off. Just like that. No even a single glance back.

I stay the night in a nearby hotel, tossing in a hotel bed that smells like laundry detergent instead of her.

The next morning, I wait in the lobby again, hoping she would have calmed down a bit. Then I spot her, wearing her no-nonsense news anchor face. She's surrounded by her crew, the caravan is outside.

She stops in her steps, 'I told you I don't want to hear your story, please leave.' She says and starts to

walk past when I have no other option but to grip her wrist just enough and pull her into my arms to stop her.

‘I know,’ I whisper. ‘I didn’t handle it right. Please, just hear me out.’

She pushes me back. But I hold her tight, someone watching us from a distance may misunderstand the entire situation easily. But I just need a moment long enough for me to toss the truth out there like a grenade.

‘I have a *half-sister*.’ I announce.

That stops her. She stops wriggling in my arms. Finally.

‘What?’ She gapes at me.

‘Yes, Ruhi, the girl you saw in the footage, is my half-sister. And I suspected it earlier, but she denied it. I got it investigated but there wasn’t any proof. She asked to meet me, which is when she confirmed all this. When you decided that I was cheating on you.’

Someone comes from her team, ‘Akshara, are you ok? Do you need help?’

‘No, no...I will be there in a minute.’ She tells her colleague and I loosen my grip.

‘We will get delayed if we don’t start now.’ He says and disappears.

No words come out of her mouth. ‘Let’s meet later in the day. I will try to be back by afternoon.’

I take my work calls sitting in the hotel lobby until she comes back in, and we walk to a nearby quiet café tucked behind the Marine drive.

She is still guarded, but thankfully open enough to let me speak.

I tell her *everything*.

Starting with how the CFO flagged suspicious transactions when I took over the company. And it wasn't one of the transactions. There were monthly transactions for years in a personal savings account.

How I discovered that my Dad, the perfect family man, had been sending money to a woman in Delhi with two daughters—both younger to me. Which clearly meant, it wasn't even a *mistake* before his marriage kind of situation. How I assumed the worst. Because what else do you assume when your father buys someone a house and keeps her off the books?

I tell her how I tracked them down. How I met the elder daughter of that family, Ruhi—who claimed my dad was just a friend of their late father. And after her father's death, my Dad just stepped in to help.

But I couldn't simply accept it. Because how she looked so much like my Dad, like me...it made my stomach twist.

How I pushed for answers. Pushed her too hard to get a DNA test. How I am guilty of giving her lucrative offers of getting half of my Dad's worth if she is his child.

How Ruhi shut me down, threatened legal action if I pushed her further, refused a DNA test, and refused to speak to me again.

And I closed the chapter. It was over from my side. I never tried to reach out to her again.

And two days ago, she called, and said that she was ready to talk. And confirmed everything.

'So yeah...she's my half-sister, my Dad had another child after having me, with a woman who was also in a marriage at that time.' I continue. 'And I don't

know if I'm sad that all this happened or glad that my Mom isn't here to see this brutal truth.' I finish, my voice barely above a whisper.

Akshara doesn't speak. She just pulls me into a hug, like she knows I need to fall apart in her arms. For a moment, I let go. I let the pain of it all pour out—my father's betrayal, my guilt, my fear of losing that one person who makes me feel whole.

She holds me for a long time. Then pulls back, eyes fierce.

She mutters. 'You should've told me. I might not have been able to help but still, I needed to know something this big was going on in your mind. I wouldn't have judged you. But...you chose to...shut me out.' She has softened now.

'While I suspected it, I wasn't even sure of what she was going to tell me. But I agree that I should have told you the history. But I was confused, and probably ashamed of what will you think of my Dad...I know it's still not right but I will apologize to you every single day for the rest of my life.' I realize I should have just confided in Akshara.

'I empathise with you Devesh, and you don't need to be ashamed for what someone else did. And maybe there was a reason your Dad did what he did. You have no right to judge him sitting here. While I know it must be very difficult for you to process it, you need to let go of it.' She says.

I reach for her hand but she pulls back and exhales. 'While I understand that what I assumed and what it is are completely unrelated, you still don't get to fix this with an explanation. It's about...it's about hiding things. Important things. About breaking trust. After I

let you see me, raw and wrecked, you...you chose silence.'

'I'm sorry, please give me a chance' I say. 'I'll spend the rest of my life trying to earn your trust back, if you let me.'

I realise I have messed up things with the only thing person that matters right now. 'I'm so sorry Akshara. I know there's no explanation. But I didn't lie. I just couldn't say it because I could never come to terms with the possibility of my own Dad cheating on his family.'

I continue, desperate for her to consider me. 'You know that you are *everything to me*. And I will spend every goddamn day proving that to you, please...*please* just let me.'

She stares at me for a long time. Then finally speaks, voice low, shaking, 'I don't know what hurts more. Not knowing a secret of yours. Or that you didn't think me worthy of sharing it.'

Silence.

Her voice is soft, she isn't angry now, but something has broken. 'I wish you strength to come to terms with this truth. I know it's not easy, but I know you're strong enough to survive this, too.'

She continues, 'And you shouldn't be here, when you have a board meeting in forty-eight hours. You need to go back and take care of things. Go back to your work. Because I need time.'

I try to stop her in between, 'Akshara...I am sorry...please don't...'

She ignores it, and then she picks up her bag. 'Devesh...I hear you. And I am not even mad right

now, I can feel for you. But I had high expectations from you...I had because you let me.'

Her voice cracks, 'I can't promise when will I be able to come to terms with what happened between us. I will let you know when I am ready to accept your apology. You should go back now.'

And just like that, she's gone.

And I'm sitting alone, less worried about the revelation about my family, but more worried that the only woman I loved in my life might never forgive me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Akshara

It's been less than two weeks of not talking to him.

But it feels like someone took the color out of my world. Like I'm walking around in grayscale, everything dim, muffled, hollow.

I move through the days like a ghost. Don't want to laugh. Nothing tastes good. Nothing feels right.

It's depressing.

I still think of him when I wake up, when I fall asleep and everything in between.

My brain is rational, unforgiving. *He lied*, it insists.

But my heart, oh my stupid hopeful heart—it whispers, *he didn't lie... he just didn't say it*.

And maybe that's the same thing. Or maybe it's not.

I tried to stay mad at him. But I couldn't. Not for long.

Not after he showed up, again. The week after, when it was pouring in Mumbai.

He tried to talk to me. He waited for me in the lobby for hours. But I told the reception I'm not expecting any guests. We barely spoke, and I know he wasn't expecting me to run into his arms, I know he just needed to *see* me. To make sure I was ok, when the media told the world that it was dangerous to step out on the streets.

He still waited...followed me to my reporting calls, I could see him standing at a few feet distance. He stood there in the rain, stubborn, beautiful, and infuriating. He stayed till it stopped raining, and then left, without another word.

I am drained. I am done acting out. I know this isn't what I want. All I want is to just feel the warmth of being held in his arms.

But watching him hold another woman — *another woman* — in his arms?

Well...ok...I know the *truth* now. I know the woman wasn't anything close to what I assumed she was, but still, I'm angry. He should have told me.

I come back to Gurugram, to my quiet apartment.

Not the comfortable kind — the kind that weighs heavy.

I sit on the edge of his bed, arms wrapped around my knees, watching the city lights flicker through the window.

Re-imagining the entire episode.

He has apologized. Enough times. Said the right words. And I miss him.

Samaira & Aryan reach my place as soon as I finish unpacking things, with some home cooked food and my favorite muffins from the Star bakers. I hug them, tight.

Of course, they know everything. I can see it on their faces. The worry. But they still give me space to open up. We chit chat for a while, I tell them about the new show and they congratulate me, but they're not ecstatic. Neither am I.

Aryan sets up plates and opens the food boxes and I instantly know who has cooked it. *Devesh*. I know exactly, how it smells.

And because, tears and I have become best friends in the last two weeks, they show up, unannounced. Aryan holds me gently, my head buried in his chest, and I cry my heart out.

Aryan's voice is soft and understanding when he says, 'I know Devesh since we were kids, and I have seen him through all his highs and lows, I have seen him when he had success, when he built his dream from scratch. I have seen him howl through the nights when he lost his parents. I have seen him regain control and move ahead. I have seen him with all his past girlfriends, and I have seen him post all his break-ups. I have seen him enough to know that he...he is incomplete without you...and he loves you.'

'I know he should have said something, it's a mistake. But...don't let it ruin what you both were building together, it was beautiful. Don't let it all crumble because of one mistake. And he is *sorry*, trust me he is so damn sorry.'

He pauses, but my tears don't stop, his shirt is damp but he doesn't flinch.

'I consider you as my little sister, and an elder brother would never ever suggest to her sister to take a man back if he isn't sure of the intentions.'

‘I know...and...I am miserable without him.’ I barely manage a murmur.

Samaira is stroking my back with her hand, I turn to her and give in to her bear hug.

She says, sobs interrupting her. ‘I have never seen you so happy in my life, and I can’t wish anything else for you but happiness. Give him another chance, not because you were in a relationship, but because the boy deserves it. You deserve it. He loves you Akki...you know it.’

I just nod and cry, ‘Yes...I know it. Very well.’

I don’t want to stay away from him. I can’t stay away from him.

And his text from last night still pierces in my chest every time I read it.

‘I feel lost without you, please come back.’

I know he is fighting for me. And I should too.

I need to reclaim my joy, my courage, and my *love*.

I regain my wits, ‘Who all do we invite for his surprise b’day bash?’

And just like that, all of us are grinning, wide.

I call up his EA first.

And she squeals like we’re part of some secret mission.

Next, his housekeeper. She nearly drops the phone in excitement. I think she always rooted for me more than she could say.

‘I’m so happy you’re coming. He hasn’t smiled in two weeks.’ She says.

Neither have I.

But I’m about to.

It’s the first time in days that I’ve smiled.

I'm done pretending to be mad.

Maybe I'll make him do a hundred sit-ups later, just to prove he's still got it.

I reach at PlanMyTrip office at sharp four and his assistant, Prakriti greets me with great enthusiasm.

We chat a little more on our way up on the elevator—she tells me everything that she has already told me on the phone.

She tells me he's *never* celebrated his birthday in the office. Not once. But he's always generous in celebrations, always making it about the team, be it the product rollouts, funding rounds or the IPO success.

'He doesn't like too many balloons,' she adds. 'So I've kept it minimal. Classy. You know.'

She promises the third time that she has kept it discreet.

I get it girl, you can take a breath.

It's 4:30 on the dot. Friday afternoon, and people start gathering in this huge cafeteria. There's a light playlist—low beats and chill synth—and there's an energy in the air that only happens when it's a Friday *and* there's free food.

She might have been overly warm with me, but I compliment her to have pulled it off so well.

A long table is set up with cake, and a 'Happy Birthday' sign that's tasteful enough to suit Devesh's no-balloons-please personality. There's even a small raised platform—more like a step—with a few mics at the end of the table. And flowers. Subtle, elegant flowers.

I am wearing a casual knee-length summer dress—olive green with little white daisy prints. Comfortable but sweet. I know this is his office, and I don't want to

look too glam. The glam dress is tucked safely at his place for the night—we'll be having another celebration later in the evening that Aryan & Samaira are in charge of.

I blend into the crowd, standing near the back. I don't want him to see me right away. I want the moment to hit him.

And then it happens.

He walks in.

Effortless in his casual olive green shirt, sleeves rolled up, tailored khaki pants fitting like a sin. The color match is not a freaking coincidence. I checked the damn CCTV for twinning.

He's speaking to his CTO while walking inside, and nodding politely at a few others. As more people call out birthday wishes, he raises a hand in thanks, that polite CEO smile plastered on—but it doesn't reach his eyes.

Not yet.

I watch as he approaches the small platform.

His eyes scan the room.

He sees the cake. The setup. The faces of his team beaming up at him.

And then, finally—he sees me.

It's like the rest of the world slips away.

He freezes. His eyes widen just a little, like he thinks he's hallucinating.

And then that grin spreads slowly across his face.

The one he reserves only for *me*.

The way his face lights up, it's like watching the sun rise in fast-forward. That moment when something heavy lifts off your chest and your whole body remembers how to breathe again.

Oh God. *I missed him.*

Devesh closes the space between us.

He walks straight up to me and holds me into his arms. We hug. Tightly. Desperately. My face buried in his chest, breathing him in like oxygen, like a silent apology only he can hear.

He wraps his arms around me without hesitation. Like he's been waiting. Like he doesn't care that this is his company, his employees, his big public moment. He just holds me.

I tilt my face up, eyes misty, and whisper, 'Happy birthday.'

He looks at me, his smile spreading slowly, wide and genuine and entirely unguarded. 'Thank you,' he says, his voice soft, intimate despite the crowd. 'I missed you.'

Then—he slips his hand into mine. And kisses the back of my hand like I'm something sacred. Tingles rush over my skin, we are in front of hundreds of people.

That's when the entire room erupts.

Cheering. Hooting. A wave of whistles, applause, and birthday chants. Someone starts singing before the rest catch on, and suddenly the cafeteria is echoing with a raucous, very off-key version of *Happy Birthday*.

He just laughs.

It's adorable. People love him. Respect him.

And in this moment, watching him laugh again—fully, freely—I decide something.

If I have anything to do with it, I'll always be the reason he smiles like this.

He cuts the cake, and everyone cheers, clapping loudly, the excitement in the air palpable. He feeds me a bite of cake with a spoon, his eyes locked on mine, soft and amused. I take it, and then feed him a piece back, my fingers brushing his lips.

Devesh takes the mic and says, 'Thank you, everyone, for joining here,' he says, his voice warm. 'Your wishes mean a lot to me—more than I can put into words. I'm lucky to have such an incredible team, and I'm even luckier to have someone special in my life. Akshara, thanks for joining us here.'

I blush at the way he looks at me, the sincerity in his eyes sending a wave of warmth through me.

I catch the sight of someone new in the front row—radiating capable energy. I'm guessing that's the new COO, Samar. He looks exactly like Devesh had described him—charming and efficient.

He takes the mic voluntarily and addresses the crowd, 'Hi Everyone, the occasion is rather very special. So, why don't we make it more special with a rapid fire with the CEO.'

Devesh looks up at him, then back at the sea of young people- developers and product managers, now buzzing with excitement and a chorus rises around the room—'Yesss!' 'Let's do it!'

Devesh chuckles, surrendering with a little shrug, looking *cute* as hell.

'Alright. Just the first five questions. Be nice.'

Samar grins. 'No promises.'

Someone passes around another mic like it's a game night. Devesh leans against the edge of the table, mic in one hand, other hand still holding mine.

Samar clears his throat theatrically, taking charge. We can see a lot of hands up in the air. He announces, 'First question, last row, man in blue.'

'Do we get a bonus on your birthday?'

Laughter breaks out across the floor, rippling through the crowd.

Devesh raises an eyebrow, clearly entertained.

'Did I hear you ask if we have snacks on my birthday?' he teases. 'Yeah, they *must* be there.'

More claps. More hoots. Someone near the front yells, 'Smooth, boss!'

Next one: 'We need more such meetings with you—where we can ask you something *personal*.'

The crowd whistles in agreement.

Devesh chuckles, then glances at Prakriti, probably her cue to take a note. 'Ya, why not. I'm always just a ping away, but we'll try and do that. And thanks for stealing one spotlight,' he adds, half-joking.

People are clearly amused, like they haven't seen this side of him—this version of Devesh that's relaxed, humorous, fun. Not the untouchable tech billionaire, not the ever-composed CEO.

And when his gaze finds me again. He smiles softly.

It's *romantic*. To be seen by your man in front of a huge a crowd. Like I'm the only one here.

Samar turns around with a mock glare. 'Guys, you can do better than that.'

Next one: 'Your go-to way to unwind?'

I look at him and the way his tongue slides on his lower lip before answering, I know what he is thinking.

But he keeps a straight face and responds, 'Umm...well, I love to cook. It helps me unwind.'

People clap and cheer. They are loving it. I am loving it too.

'Fourth,' Samar says, clearly enjoying this.

A young girl from the front calls, 'One thing you wish people knew about you?'

There's a pause. A beat of honesty. Then he says, 'That I don't always have it figured out. But I try.'

The room softens, and cheers.

'Last one, lady in black.' Samar says.

And she yells out, 'When are you getting *married*?'

The hoots echoing off the walls in the room.

I can't help the wide grin that spreads across my face. And then I glance at Devesh—who, to my surprise, is *blushing*.

Oh my God.

What's he going to say?

Devesh clears his throat, but it's barely audible. Then, without missing a beat, he looks directly at me, eyes softening.

'Whenever she agrees.'

My heart nearly stops. Did he just—did he *really* just say that?

I freeze, my mouth hanging open for a moment.

Is he serious? I can't stop the surge of emotions flooding through me.

His fingers, still intertwined with his, move to the small of my back. The crowd around us grows louder with their cheers, but I barely hear them—I'm lost in his eyes, in the moment.

His lips curved up in that way that makes my heart race.

The energy in the office is electric as we finish the rapid-fire session. Devesh's smile still lingers, his words echoing in my chest.

Whenever she agrees.

I can't even comprehend how something so simple has left me breathless.

As everyone begins milling around the snacks, Devesh and I quietly drift toward the elevators. His fingers lace with mine like he never intends to let go again. There are others around us—colleagues I have met earlier—and some small talk. We don't speak to each other, because if we start, we won't be able to stop. Not here.

The moment we reach the top floor, he doesn't hesitate to tug me gently—into his office.

The view outside is breathtaking. But honestly? The real view is inside.

The door clicks shut, I drop the last of my restraint and kiss him.

God, I missed him. Missed the way he kisses me like the world is ending and I'm the only thing worth saving.

He kisses me like he has met me after years, like he has been to war, like his being alive in this moment depends on kissing me.

'I'm so sorry, baby,' he breathes against my lips. 'I really am.'

'No more secrets. Ever,' I whisper, brushing my thumb against his jaw.

'I promise.' His eyes are dark with guilt, yes—but also love.

'I love you,' I say, there's no fear in admitting it.

He doesn't say anything. He presses his forehead to mine and exhales like he's been holding his breath for weeks.

'I've been a mess without you, Akshara,' he whispers.

I swallow hard.

He kisses me again, slow and aching this time.

I laugh, and cry, and kiss him back because what else do you do when your powerful billionaire boyfriend starts saying things like that? And gives you the key to his happiness.

One second I'm standing. The next, I'm sitting on his desk, laptop shoved aside to the farther end. His hands are everywhere—gentle and desperate all at once—and I'm melting into him.

I murmur, 'Someone could walk in.'

He pulls back, 'They won't. But I will make sure to get a very fancy *Do Not Disturb* button installed and bring you back.'

We laugh. And it feels like I am back *home*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Akshara

We spend the evening continuing the celebrations at Club Six with our signature screwdrivers—yes, the very ones that started it all. We finally tell Samaira & Aryan about our first meeting here and they can't believe we hid it from them for so long.

Aryan has booked a private section for this small get together, the space buzzes with music, low lights, and easy laughter. The drinks keep coming, the

playlist hitting our favourites back to back, and the dance floor sucks us in, all of us are too happy to care.

I'd suggested this place to Aryan. I think, deep down, I just wanted to go back to where everything changed—where I first met Devesh and had *no idea* how much he'd come to mean to me.

We're finally on our way back from the club past midnight, both a little tipsy, a lot exhausted, and still high. Devesh is driving—and I'm riding shotgun, shoes off, head leaning slightly against the window realizing that this city is so beautiful without the rush of people, and pool of cars.

He pulls into the parking lot and shifts the car into reverse with one hand, smoothly rotating the steering wheel like he's starring in some car commercial. His sleeves are rolled up, forearm flexing, watch catching the glint of lights outside, and the whole thing is just...insufferably sexy.

'Don't do that again,' I mutter.

He glances at me, confused. 'Do what?'

'That reverse move. The one-handed turn with all that wrist action. It's—dangerous.'

His brows furrow, amused. 'Dangerous?'

'For my ovaries.' I say seriously. 'You keep doing stuff like that, and I swear, I will get pregnant.'

He bursts out laughing. 'Noted. No reverse parking.'

'Or at least not in that unbearably hot way,' I add.

He just grins and shakes his head. 'Well...then maybe, let's blame the steering wheel.'

He opens my door, offers his hand. But my mood is different. I haven't had so much to drink in a long time.

‘Blame your forearms, Devesh.’ I trail my finger along the curve of his mouth, and he stills. ‘Or blame your lips.’

That teasing smirk fades into something intense. I continue, tracing down his jaw, his neck, and then the warm, steady rise of his chest beneath the soft fabric of his shirt. ‘Or blame your shoulders...or this... your heart.’

I rest my hand there—right over it—and just stay. His heartbeat is strong and steady.

‘I missed this. Just us.’ He exhales, like I’ve knocked the breath out of him in the quietest way possible. His hand comes up to cup mine where it rests on his chest.

‘But it’s unfair,’ he murmurs, voice low. ‘Using my own heart against me.’

I look up, our faces barely a breath apart. ‘It’s your fault for having such a loud one.’

He grins, the one that always gets me. ‘Only beats this hard when it’s around you.’

My stomach flips.

Then he leans in.

A soft brush of his lips over mine. A warm, unhurried kiss that tastes faintly of oranges and vodka and everything I’ve missed. I melt into it, still curled up in the passenger seat, legs folded.

He pulls back, barely.

‘I don’t want to go upstairs,’ I whisper.

His brows raise. ‘Why not?’

‘Because,’ I murmur dramatically, ‘then the night will end. And I don’t want it to end.’

He laughs under his breath, ‘The night has just started, *tigress*.’

And before I can process, he wraps his arms around me, and—scoops me up into his arms like I weigh nothing.

‘Devesh!’ I shriek.

And he carries me through the lobby, lift and his living room before he makes me sit on the couch.

He brings two glasses of water and we’re curled up on the couch. The night’s mellowed down, but the buzz still lingers.

‘I mean it when I say sorry.’ He reaches for my hand and gives it a tight squeeze. I look at him—his hair a little messy, shirt untucked, but eyes clear.

‘I... probably know that. Hence, I’m sitting right next to you.’

‘We could have been on our first vacation right now,’ he says.

‘Only if you would’ve said something... Why didn’t you tell me?’

Devesh clears his throat, a half-smile tugging at his lips. ‘I know it won’t count for much... but I *did* start to tell you the other night. And I realised that you’d fallen asleep halfway through my sentence.’

I blink. ‘I thought the unwritten rule of communication was that both parties need to be *conscious*.’

He chuckles. ‘Yeah. I already said I know it doesn’t count.’

I sigh, already forgiving him.

‘And what about your... half-sister?’ I ask, my voice softening. ‘Have you spoken to her again?’

His smile fades a little as he nods. ‘Once. Just once. She made it very clear she wants no part in... any of it. No claims on inheritance. She told me she only

came forward because she didn't want me to be haunted by half-truths. She said...I deserved to know who my dad really was.'

There's a pause. His voice lowers. 'I offered her anything. Anything she wanted. She's his biological child, after all. She has a right.'

I nod slowly, watching the shadows shift across his face. 'Maybe she doesn't want money. Or shares. Or even a last name. Maybe she also just deserves to know who her dad really was.'

He looks at me then, eyes heavy with all the weight he's been carrying around this.

'Yeah,' he says softly. 'I don't know how to help her with that, if she doesn't want to speak to me.'

I reach out, brushing my fingers along his wrist. 'You don't need to figure it all out in one night.'

'But...we need to figure out something else...How come we have never been in shower together?' I arch one brow.

'Hmm...now that's...criminal.' He pulls back a little and looks into my eyes. 'Let's correct that situation.'

He leads in the bathroom and starts the water as I drop my clothes outside and go behind him. He's standing with his back to me, head bowed under the stream, water coursing down the lines of his shoulders, his spine. Strong. Sexy.

I wrap my arms around his waist from the back. My cheek presses between his shoulder blades, and for a second, neither of us move.

And then he turns, his eyes dark with heat and something else—I can't place. He just reaches for me, and I'm under the spray, soaked, pressed against him.

I slide my fingers down his chest, slick and hot beneath my touch.

His mouth crashes into mine—wet, hungry, needy. His hands find my breasts and his thumb slides across my stiff nipple. He takes it between his thumb and finger and rolls it. My eyelids flutter close as he does it again.

I feel him, hard and ready, pressed against my stomach, and I let my fingers wrap around him, stroking slowly. It feels electric, right, safe and holy, all at the same time.

He hisses, his hand gripping my waist, the other fisting my hair. ‘*Fuck...you drive me insane.*’

I continue to tease him, my palms sliding on his shaft and grabbing his balls.

His thumb brushes against my clit, and my hips buck against him, he turns me to face the wall, water cascading down my spine. His hands spread my thighs, and I moan, feeling him sink to his knees behind me.

His tongue finds my desperate swollen lady parts, and my knees nearly buckle.

‘Oh my god—Devesh!’

He eats me like a starved man—tongue working me open, kisses evoking the pleasure I never knew existed within my body, his fingers teasing my entrance until I’m shaking, gasping, nails clawing the tiles. I gasp, I moan, my head thrown back as I seek support on the faucet above my head.

He strokes my inner wall with his fingers and my hips move with him, pleading for more.

I pant. ‘I need you...Devesh.’

‘I’m here, baby.’ He teases me, knowing I am desperate.

‘I need you inside me. Now.’ I wince.

‘I love you like this...demanding still soft.’ He turns me around, hands gripping my hips, he slides one arm beneath my thigh and lifts it up a little, the new angle makes his tongue hit deeper inside me, my back arches further as his fingers continue their quest of making me combust, until I’m trembling.

‘Yes,’ I cry out, ‘Yes—Devesh...fuck...fuck.’

‘I love you like this too, foul mouthed and rough.’ He says as he holds me tight at the waist through the ripples of pleasure, as I tremble till my core and come on his fingers, biting my lips and my legs giving out.

He doesn’t stop there.

‘I love you like this too, undone and wild.’ He kisses my belly, my body jolts and shivers.

‘Do you want to kill me with pleasure, Mr.Oberoi?’ My fingers dig into his shoulders as his mouth continues to move down from my navel, kissing every grain of my skin, worshipping me relentlessly.

This man is on a mission to show me what being revered is like.

He looks up and winks. ‘I can do this forever.’

He stands and towers over me to turn the water off.

I give him long, hard strokes, my tongue in his mouth. He groans and leans into me, I stroke him again and he almost bites my lips.

I give him slow teasing strokes, tip to root, root to tip, it’s his turn to forget how to breathe in pleasure. The sound coming directly from his chest feels like a grunt.

‘I need you inside me.’ I pull his lower lip between my teeth before he finally reaches for towels, quickly wrapping one around my shoulders, and the other around his waist.

He dabs me dry with his sensual deliberate strokes. The towel skims across my collarbones, down my arms, behind my knees. He kneels before me, drying my calves, my feet, before placing a soft kiss on the inside of my ankle. His eyes lift to meet mine.

‘Just know that...I love you...in every shape and form. And it won’t change, ever.’ he says in a matter-of-fact tone before he carries me to the bed in his arms.

‘I have legs to walk.’ I tease him.

‘I know, they are great for spreading.’ He says, pushing my knees apart. I grab his cock again and we kiss.

I am on my back under him, he is over me, his tip bumping against my slick swollen wetness.

‘Hold on.’ He murmurs, ‘Let me get the condom.’

‘Don’t.’ I say.

He looks at me with surprise.

‘I went on the pill a few weeks ago...’

He inhales sharply, like absorbing the surprise.

‘Fuck me *bare*, Devesh.’ I whisper. My lips still parted with the sensuality of it all.

‘Say it again.’ He growls.

‘Fuck me bare.’ I murmur. ‘I want you inside me with nothing between us.’

He growls, ‘I will...I will fuck you, love. Just like you want.’

He is inside me with one thrust, my legs locking around him.

It’s beautiful, overwhelming, and perfect. *It’s love.*

‘Tell me you’re mine.’ He growls under his breath.

‘I’m yours.’ I say, breathless.

He pulls out slowly, shoves a pillow beneath my hips and I spread wide open with one of my legs placed on his shoulder. He slides back inside again.

‘Tell me I’m yours.’ I say, my eyes half shut.

‘You’re mine.’ He says and he hits it. Straight up, my sensitive spot.

He says it again, with every thrust.

Like he is chanting a prayer. We move harder, faster, our bodies hammering together.

He flips me around and I am on my knees, stretched enough to take him in, and then slides in from behind, and thrusts in with a deep, guttural moan that vibrates in my bones. Our rhythm is ruthless. Fast, hard, unrelenting. The sound of skin against skin echoes in the room, mixing with my moans and gasps, and his growls.

I want more, I need more. I know it will never be enough but I need more.

I find myself whispering *fuck me* and *love me* on loop.

It feels like it’s merged into one, with *him*. The emotional safety and physical pleasure are locked in a union.

I shout his name as I tighten around him. He explodes inside me at the same moment, his face is buried in my neck and he whispers *I love you* over and over again.

It’s cosmic. I can feel his release fill me completely and there are waves of my release, matching with his, we stay there for a while, tangled, letting the spasms pass. Soaking it all in.

He pulls out slowly, we both roll off on the pillows, next to each other. He pulls out a bunch of tissues from the bedside and passes me a few, and we both stare at the ceiling for a full minute, still panting and saying how *amazing* it was.

‘I don’t think I can walk now.’ I laugh, still catching my breath.

He grins, too satiated to complain, and quickly runs in and out of the washroom after cleaning up. I finally muster the strength to get up and clean myself, too.

I come back and crash on the bed again, against the headstand.

‘What are you thinking about?’ His gaze searching my eyes, almost like he’s reading me.

‘I can’t stop thinking about what you said today...when you answered that question about...about marriage...’

His lips curl into a slow smile. He pulls the sheets above me and rests his forehead against mine.

‘I meant it,’ he responds softly, his voice steady but laced with emotion.

‘I want to marry you. And I will do whatever it takes to convince you.’ I feel my heart skip a beat when the words are out.

This isn’t just a passing comment.

‘Devesh,’ I breathe, unable to find the words to match the depth of what I feel right now.

‘I want to spend every second of the rest of my life with you,’ he continues, his tone earnest now. ‘You don’t need to say yes right away, I know it might feel a little early...but I want you to know that I don’t want to waste any more time. Not even a minute. So, whenever you’re ready...*we’re* ready.’

I search his face, looking for any hint of hesitation, but I find none. He's completely open with me, completely vulnerable, and beautiful.

'Akshara,' he murmurs, his thumb brushing across my cheek, 'I *want* you. In every possible way. *Forever.*'

The moment stretches between us, charged with anticipation. My heart is hammering in my chest, and for a moment, the world outside fades away.

'What if I am ready?' The words fall out. Just like that. Like it's the only thing I have ever wanted in my life.

To be his. To make him mine. *Forever.*

'I am ready to share every single moment of my life with you.' I announce.

Devesh takes a deep breath and gets up, 'Ok, then we need to put on some clothes. C'mon.' He gives me a hand and pulls me up.

'What? Why? What are we doing?' He quickly slides on his lower and T-shirt and passes me a fresh shirt from his wardrobe.

I slide it on and he pulls out something from his drawer again. My eyes widen as I see a small velvet box in his hand.

'Wh...What? You have a ring? Oh my God. You can't possible have a ring.'

I stammer. It's unreal. Was he planning to propose me for marriage?

He switches on all the lights, and opens the box, revealing a stunning diamond ring. And goes down on one knee as I sit at the edge of the bed.

'Akshara,' he says, his voice trembling just slightly. 'You're the most beautiful ----Marry me?

Please. Marry me and make me the luckiest man in the world.'

Tears well up in my eyes. I can't breathe, and then, finally, the words slip out of me like they were meant to be said all along.

'Yes. Yes...Yes I want to marry you.'

His face lights up, and I feel like the world is at my feet. He slides the ring onto my finger, and nothing else matters in this moment.

I slide in front of him and he pulls me into his arms, kissing me softly, deeply, as though sealing this promise between us. It's tender, full of the love we've built, of everything we've been through and everything we still have ahead of us.

'I love you, Akshara,' he murmurs against my lips, his voice full of devotion. 'And I always will.'

'I love you, too,' I know we've found something rare—something worth holding onto forever.

EPILOGUE

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Devesh

Akshara is stretched out on the beach lounge next to mine, wearing my shirt over her swimsuit, casually knotted at her waist and a look that says she has zero intention of moving unless bribed with kisses and cocktails. The wind plays with strands of her hair as she lazily flips through a book in her hands, more invested in the view of this coral beach than the words.

I watch her, mesmerised.

And she catches me staring.

I smile.

Two years of waking up to her legs tangled with mine, she has brought madness and magic into my life in equal measure.

And *peace*.

Before her, I didn't even realize how incomplete I felt. How much noise there was in my head. The weight of losing my parents, the pressure of perfection, the loneliness that came with being seen by everyone but known by none.

She's my safe place. My anchor. My home.

I ease myself onto her lounger, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her closer. She tilts her face up and kisses me—slow, warm, teasing.

'Happy wedding anniversary, husband!'

Then she pulls back, just enough to murmur, 'Why can't I get enough of you?'

I chuckle, brushing my nose against hers. 'You're biased, wifey.'

'You love it. Isn't it?' She says, brushing her lips against my temple.

I just smile. And we lay there like that, tangled together, the waves crashing somewhere in the background, time folding into something blissful and slow.

'I was wondering,' she says, casually running her fingers along my forearm. 'What's going on with Ruhi and Samar?'

I groan. 'Don't even ask. I'm just trying to keep the office in one piece. If I leave them in a room together,

one might throw a glass on the other and the other might file a lawsuit.'

Akshara bursts out laughing. 'I don't think so.'

I raise an eyebrow. 'What makes you say that?'

She shrugs, with that smug smile. 'Because I saw the way Samar was looking at Ruhi at the annual off-site.'

'Like what?' I ask, curious now.

She shifts to look at me, her expression softening. 'Like you looked at me when we first met at Club Six.'

She's got that look again—the one that always makes me feel like the only man in the world she could care about.

I kiss her. Longer this time. Deeper. Slower.

Two years of marriage, and somehow, I want her *more* now than I did then. She's my calm and my chaos. My best friend and my undoing. The reason I sleep without nightmares, and the dream I wake up to every day.

With her, I've never been more myself.

And as the ocean hums beside us and the stars begin to blink awake overhead, I feel content knowing that this isn't just love. This is our *forever*.