



Forged By Fate

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Description: Their marriage was a lie—but her love is real. As is her heartbreak.

When Sunaina Chauhan, the lost cause and unwanted child of her family, married Viren Chaudhry, a billionaire music mogul, love was never part of the deal. Their cold, calculated arrangement with the ironclad expiry date was meant to last just long enough for Viren to retain custody of his niece and for Sunaina to escape her toxic past. For Sunaina, the rules of their temporary marriage were simple: no love, no attachment. But somewhere along the way, she made the one mistake she swore she wouldn't—she fell in love with her husband.

Viren has always controlled everything—his emotions, his empire, and the terms of their marriage. Sunaina was supposed to be nothing more than a means to an end.

For years, he's kept his distance, treating Sunaina with cold professionalism, even though her presence in his life has started to fill the spaces he never realised were empty. He's learned to live with the arrangement, keeping his emotions locked away as tightly as he holds his empire.

Until he sees Sunaina with someone else—a man who might actually make her happy. And suddenly, he realises that he doesn't want to let her go.

In this modern-day Cinderella story, Sunaina must decide whether to fight for a love that feels impossible or walk away before her heart shatters completely. And Viren must decide if he's willing to risk everything to hold onto her before it's too late.

Will the end of their marriage be their undoing—or their greatest beginning?

To find out, read *Forged By Fate*—a steamy, angsty, billionaire, marriage-of-convenience romance.

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CHAPTER 1

SUNAINA

“Itold you we should have tied nimbu-mirchi to our suitcases,” growled Sufi, leaning over the edge of my balcony.

“What’s wrong now?” I asked wearily.

It seemed like the drama with this vacation would never end. All I wanted was a peaceful family holiday. Because it was probably the last one I would ever have with my family. In a few months, we were going to be splintered into before and after. Into factions. Even if we tried to keep it civil. And the hard-won peace of the past two and a half years was going to go up in smoke.

“Guess who just swooped in on her broomstick?” he asked as he threw himself angrily onto my bed.

“Viren’s aunt and uncle have already gatecrashed our holiday,” I said. “There’s nobody else left.”

“Tahira Mundhra,” he spat. “She just drove up in a taxi.”

My stomach plummeted at his words.

Wonderful! This was all that was required to take this holiday from dismal to fucking puke-worthy.

“Aisha is going to be hopping mad,” was all I said, though.

“So should you,” said Sufi, giving me a keen glance. “The way she clings to your husband is disrespectful, Sue.”

“My fake husband,” I reminded him.

“Well, she doesn’t know that. In her eyes, you and Mr C married for love. So there’s no excuse for the way she keeps throwing herself at him.”

“She does it because he allows her to get away with it,” I said bleakly as I slapped on some makeup.

“Well, she is one of his oldest friends. And she’s related very closely to his aunt. He can’t throw her out on her ass without offending her family.”

“I know that. But I still don’t see why he has to allow her to grope him the way she does,” I grumbled.

“Sweetie, stop,” he screeched. “You’ll take your eye out with that mascara wand, and we want to scratch here eyes out. Not our own. You still haven’t learnt to do your own makeup even after three years.”

“I don’t like putting all this gunk on my face,” I said as he took the mascara wand from my hand and did his usual magic with it that made my eyelashes look thick, long and curved instead of spidery.

“Yes, I know your usual style is just lip balm and kohl, but you promised me you would make an effort tonight,” he replied, brushing some highlighter over my cheekbones and just under my brows.

“I don’t see the point,” I mumbled as he handed me a tube of Dior lip gloss in a shimmery red.

“Babe, you’re the wife of Viren Chaudhry - music mogul and billionaire. You need to look the part tonight.”

“Why? It’s just a night out with you,” I said, wondering why Sufi had insisted on playing my stylist for the night.

“Mr C is coming too,” he replied, and my heart skipped a beat.

Then I rolled my eyes at him. Viren had never joined us on our nights out. Not once in all these years.

“And pigs will fly,” I said dryly, spritzing myself with Chanel No. 5. If it had worked as a mood elevator for Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast At Tiffany’s*, it had to work for me.

I breathed in the familiar scent and waited for it to work its magic, but tonight, even my favourite perfume was completely useless. All I could think of was that Sufi and I were going partying in London, while Tahira had just arrived to entertain my husband. Had he planned it that way?

I shook the thought off and stared at myself resolutely in the mirror. Viren had the right to entertain himself in any way he wanted. As did I. Our marriage was one of convenience. Fake. In name only. And more importantly, temporary.

We had both signed an ironclad contract that set an expiry date for our marriage. This farce was supposed to end six months after Viren formally adopted his niece Aisha as his daughter. We first had to prove that we had been married for two years before we could apply for adoption as a couple. After the divorce, the contract stated that I

would relinquish all my parental rights to Aisha in return for a very hefty financial settlement, which was fair to Viren. But it was going to destroy me completely.

We had applied for adoption recently, and the social worker was going to visit us next month. Hence, the quick family vacation in London before our lives changed forever. We surprised Aisha with tickets to her favourite singer's concert at Wembley yesterday, and Viren had hired a grand English manor in Knightsbridge for the rest of the week.

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I knew that as soon as the adoption process was complete, we were going to meet with our lawyers to initiate our divorce - a process that was just as complicated as drafting the contract that bound us in marriage in the first place.

If I had my way, I'd walk away from him empty-handed without a backward glance, but there were more people involved in our relationship than just the two of us. In tying myself to Viren for almost three years, I had also tied myself to Aisha; and Sufi, who was his secretary, had become my best friend and the brother I never had. Not to mention Daya Bua, who was my father's second cousin and Viren's old nanny-turned-housekeeper. Disentangling myself from Viren might be the work of a moment, but I could never walk away from the people who had become my family.

I had lost my father six months before I met Viren, and all I had left in the world was a stepmother who made Cinderella's stepmom look like a kindhearted angel. Aisha, Daya Bua and Sufi had claimed me as family, and together, we had formed a tight unit that revolved around Viren, the way the earth revolved around the sun. He was the centre of our universe, and now, he was about to kick me out of his orbit.

And all I could do was smile and let him go because he had never promised me any more than he gave me, and he had given me a lot more than he had promised. He had given me safety, security, friendship and a family. The only thing he couldn't give me was love.

Sufi pulled me out of my reverie when he placed a dress bag on my bed.

"What's that?" I asked, staring at it like it was a cobra sunning itself on my bed.

“That’s your outfit for tonight,” he said carelessly, buffing his nails.

“Umm, no. That is my outfit for tonight,” I corrected him, pointing to the silk shirt and pleated skirt on the back of the large wingback chair by the window. “I just had it ironed.”

“I don’t care. You’re not wearing that boring outfit,” he declared. “You’re pulling out your Brahmastra tonight.”

“My twin-engine Brahmastra is as visible as it needs to be in that shirt,” I argued. “Especially when I undo the top three buttons.”

“Oh, darling. That’s not the weapon I meant,” he said with a snort. “Just do as I tell you. Don’t you trust me?”

“I don’t trust you at all,” I told him bluntly.

“And I don’t blame you. I wouldn’t trust me either. But I’m all you’ve got. Now, just do as I say. Be a good girl and put on this kickass Zuhair Murad dress,” he ordered, pulling it out of the bag.

I let out a soft gasp at the sight of the outfit and reached out to touch it gingerly. The fabric was a soft chiffon with a short, black, twirly skirt. But the star of the outfit was the sleeveless, silver, shimmering bodice that was cut almost to the waist. Sufi held the dress up, and I realised the back plunged to the waist as well.

“Umm...Sufi...babe...this dress is practically topless. How the hell am I going to hold my twin engines up?” I asked, gesturing to my ample bosom that was likely to fall out of that dress.

“We’re going to use tape and a prayer,” he replied gleefully. “The designer has sent

someone to help you style the dress. I'll send her in right away."

"I know what you're doing. And I'm telling you right now that it's not going to work. Viren is not going to fall in love with me magically just because I strut around half-naked," I hissed, as he headed to the door.

"Oh, we're not trying to seduce him, babe."

"We're not?"

"Nope. We're going to torture him," he said with a wink.

CHAPTER 2

VIREN

I bit back a curse as my aunt led Tahira into the living room. What the hell was she doing here?

It was bad enough that my aunt and uncle had gatecrashed our holiday, but why did she have to invite her niece to tag along? I knew she was trying to throw her in my path, but that was disgusting considering that I was already married.

As soon as my aunt and uncle heard we'd rented a grand manor in London for the duration of our stay, they insisted on accompanying us. I couldn't deny them the chance to vacation with their granddaughter Aisha, but I could also not deny that I was looking forward to some time alone with the people closest to me - Aisha, my niece and the daughter of my heart...Daima, who had raised me and now ran my life...and Sufi, my secretary, who was now a pillar of support to my family. I blew out a sharp breath and ignored the niggling voice in my head that insisted that my real agenda was to spend some quality time with Sunaina, my wife.

I mean, yes...life in Mumbai often felt like we lived in a fishbowl with the constant scrutiny and paparazzi trailing Sunaina and me all over the city. Every look we shared...every smile was dissected in the media and built up into something very romantic, while the truth was that there was nothing romantic about our relationship. It was a purely business arrangement, born out of sheer necessity.

And I was man enough to admit that sometimes...very rarely...I felt the urge to pick her up, throw her onto the back of my Harley Davidson, and ride off into the mountains for the weekend, where nobody would disturb us. Okay, maybe it wasn't a very rare thought. It came to me probably every other week. Or every other day. Until all I could think of was how to find some time alone with Sunaina.

But my rational brain was still in charge of me, praise the Lord. It did not allow my dick to have its way ever. Which meant that in the two years and twenty-seven days that I had been married to Sunaina, I had never so much as taken her out to dinner without Aisha and/or Sufi tagging along. There was a very clear no man's land between us. We were roommates, co-parents to Aisha, and even good friends of sorts, but nothing more.

Sure, our weekly family movie nights often left just the two of us sitting together on the big plush couch in the den after everyone else had gone to bed. More often than not, we finished the night with Sunaina falling asleep with her head on my shoulder by the time the credits rolled on the screen, but no matter how much my body screamed at me to lay her down gently on the couch and make sweet, hot love to her, I always shook her awake and sent her off to bed. Alone.

Because our ironclad marriage contract specified that ours was a marriage in name only. And it had been drilled into me since I was a child that a good businessman never broke the terms of a contract. The winning strategy lay in allowing the opposite party to mess up and break the terms in some way, which would allow me to swoop in and grab what I wanted.

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But in this case, even if Sunaina violated the contract and reached out to me physically, there was no victory for me. No matter what happened, both of us would only lose. We'd lose the precarious friendship that had grown over the years. We'd lose the trust that held us together. And we'd lose the family that we had built together. Because Sunaina was not the sort of woman with whom I could have a one-night stand to slake this inferno of desire building inside me. She was the kind of woman you loved and cherished forever. Unfortunately, I couldn't offer her the promise of forever. I couldn't even offer her 'right now'.

Life had taught me that relationships were not for me. I was much better off alone. Every single person I had loved had left me. My parents died in a helicopter accident when I was a child. And I lost my best friend and cousin, Deven, a few years ago in another horrific accident.

Deven was Aisha's father, and when she lost both her parents in the accident, we banded together like the broken souls that we were and helped each other grieve. Deven's parents, who were my aunt and uncle, were content to allow me to raise her in our family home, Chaudhry House. We would have been perfectly happy if Aisha's maternal uncle hadn't set his beady little eyes on her inheritance. He threatened to file for her custody based on the premise that she would thrive better in his house with his two daughters for company. Given that I was a single playboy billionaire with the reputation that came with the territory, there was a high chance of him winning the custody battle.

That's when I had the grand idea of entering into a temporary marriage to convince the courts that I was fit to be Aisha's legal guardian. Sunaina, who was related to Daima and in need of a roof over her head, seemed like the perfect fake wife

because she had no interest in taking on the role of Mrs Viren Chaudhry permanently.

It hadn't been easy, this marriage of convenience. But we had pulled it off. And now, we were almost at the end.

As soon as I formally adopted Aisha, Sunaina was free to walk away from this marriage. She was free to live her life however she wanted.

I always knew this day was coming, so why did it feel so wrong now that we were actually going to set our lives back to normal programming?

"You don't look happy to see me," said Tahira with a pout.

"Of course I am," I replied, forcing a smile to my face. "But I thought you were supposed to be working on the Meshri Bai album release this weekend."

Tahira Mundhra was one of my oldest friends and my Chachi's niece, to boot. She was also on the board of directors of Silver Records, a position she had earned by dint of hard work. She had recently unearthed hitherto unknown recordings of Meshri Bai, one of India's greatest thumri singers, and had convinced her great-grandson to license the master rights to our company. The album was to be released very soon, and I would have thought Tahira would be too busy to follow us to London.

"I needed a break from work," she said with a groan, throwing herself onto the eighteenth-century sofa. "I was planning a quick break in Rishikesh when Bua invited me to join you guys. Obviously, a week at an English manor trumps a yoga weekend in the mountains. Especially when it is with one of my best friends."

I restrained a snort of derision with a lot of trouble. If Tahira thought I was one of her best friends, she must have very few friends in the world. She was very close to Deven, which was why she was allowed to tag along with us when we were growing

up. It was true that we had spent a lot of time together, but that was only because Deven included both of us in all his plans. It did not explain her proprietary attitude to me. I had tried to keep her at bay since Deven's untimely death, but my Chachi was so emotionally fragile these days that I did not want to hurt her feelings by being rude to her niece.

"Tahira dear, let me show you to your room. You must be exhausted," said Chachi mistily.

"No, Bua. I slept on the flight. I just need a quick shower and change, and then I'll be ready for whatever Viren has planned for tonight," she replied jumping to her feet.

Over my dead body, I thought viciously. All Viren had planned for tonight was a bottle of the best single malt money could buy and a good book.

I wanted a quiet evening alone for once. Sufi had tried to drag me into his and Sunaina's plans for the night, but I had turned him down as always. It was getting very difficult to keep my distance from my wife, and knowing Sufi's tendency to meddle in matters that were none of his business, he'd find a way to leave us alone for the rest of the night, and I'd struggle to keep my hands off Sunaina. I knew better than anyone else that one wrong move would blow our amicable divorce plans to bits.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Tahira. But I don't plan to go out tonight," I said firmly.

"Aww, come on, baby. Don't be such a bore," she said, stepping closer to me. "Do you remember the good times we've had in London before?"

I cocked an eyebrow quizzically.

"Have we ever been in London together before?" I enquired.

“Of course we have,” she exclaimed. “For Deven’s graduation from LSE.”

“Were you there too?” I asked as if I did not remember the way she had thrown herself at me with single-minded determination the whole time.

“Yes, I was,” she snapped, turning an ugly shade of red. “I have the pictures to prove it.”

“All I remember is getting drunk with Deven and getting thrown out of pubs,” I said apologetically.

“Come on, let’s relive those days. I promise I’ll carry you back home if we get thrown out of a pub tonight,” she coaxed.

“Unfortunately, I have other plans. But Sufi and Sunaina are planning to paint the town red. So, if you’re in the mood to party tonight, you should join them.”

“Oh no! I wouldn’t want to intrude,” Tahira replied hastily. “I’ll just stay home with you. We could have a nice, cosy evening by ourselves.”

Great! I was never going to be rid of her, I thought despairingly.

“Aisha and I are planning to have a 90’s movie marathon. You and Chachi are welcome to join us,” I said, accepting defeat.

“Awesome! I’ll go and change into something more comfortable,” she said triumphantly.

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But before she could leave, Sufi entered the room.

“You look...shiny,” said Tahira, with a grimace.

“Always a pleasure to meet you, ma’am,” replied Sufi bitinglly, and I hid a smile.

“Are you guys off?” I asked, looking beyond him for a glimpse of my wife. Mytemporarywife, damn it! Why was it so difficult to remember that little distinction?

“Yes, Mr C. Sunaina’s just coming downstairs in a minute,” said Sufi, with a knowing smile that I ignored.

“Good. I hope you guys have fun. What are you doing tonight?”

“Oh, you know...the usual. We’ll probably do dinner and a nightclub. But first, we’re going to Ally Pally to watch the fireworks.”

I’d forgotten it was Bonfire Night in the UK. The fireworks display at Alexandra Palace was astounding, and I was glad Sunaina was getting a chance to watch it. That’s when she walked into the room, and I almost swallowed my tongue. I forgot what I was thinking. I forgot the people in the room. I forgot everything but the woman walking towards me with an uncomfortable smile on her face.

CHAPTER 3

SUNAINA

I was about to greet Tahira when I caught sight of the look on Viren's face. He looked as if someone had hit him on the head with that big metal vase that stood on the console table next to him.

I walked towards him very slowly because I was worried my boobs would fall out of the dress despite all the boob tape we'd used. It was all very well for Sufi to say I could wear this dress. He wasn't the one in danger of a wardrobe malfunction.

"Are you all right, Viren?" I asked worriedly.

He started and cleared his throat before he spoke gruffly.

"Yes, of course. Sufi was just telling me that you guys were planning to watch the fireworks display. I hope you're carrying warm coats. Long ones, preferably," he said, with a fleeting glance at my bare arms and legs.

"It's a warm evening, boss. And don't worry about us. The crowds will keep us warm," replied Sufi insouciantly.

"Are you seriously wearing those shoes to Alexandra Palace?" barked Viren, staring at my sparkly Jimmy Choos.

"Yes," I replied, staring at him in confusion. "What's wrong with them?"

"There's a long trek from the parking lot to the viewing point. How the hell are you going to walk in them?"

"We'll manage, gorgeous. I'll keep your wife safe," promised Sufi, hiding a grin as he moved to the door.

I followed him with a weak smile at Viren. As soon as I turned my back to him, I

heard a sharp exhale, and I realised that he had just caught sight of the non-existent back of my dress. I felt his gaze burning a trail along my bare skin, and I couldn't restrain a little shiver.

"I don't think so," growled Viren. "You're clearly out of your tiny little mind, Sufi, if you think you're taking her out dressed like that in the cold. It's November, for fuck's sake."

"It's far too warm for November, boss. Sunaina will be fine. Let's go, babe," replied Sufi, heading to the door.

I ignored Tahira's smug smile and hurried after Sufi.

"Hold on! I think Aisha would like to see the fireworks too," called Viren, and I turned to him in surprise.

Tahira's smile grew even wider, and I restrained the urge to smack it off her place. Really? He had a movie night planned with Aisha tonight and he was sending her out with us instead. All because Tahira was in town. I turned to shoot Viren a scathing look and was surprised to see his gaze fixed on me.

"Umm, sure. I do have an extra ticket," said Sufi.

"You'll need two. Because I'm coming along, too. Just to keep Aisha safe in the crowds," announced Viren, without taking his eyes off me.

All my breath left my body in one big whoosh. What the hell had just happened? And why was he staring at me hungrily, like a big, bad, grumpy wolf? The heat in his eyes almost made me melt into a puddle on the parquet flooring. Despite my resolve to treat him only like a friend, I couldn't help smiling at him tremulously.

“And what about me?” cried Tahira. “What am I supposed to do while you and Aisha go out? You made plans with me, Viren.”

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“Make that three tickets, Sufi,” replied Viren, rolling his eyes.

“Three tickets to what?” demanded Aisha, bouncing into the room.

I wondered how he was going to explain the change in plans to Aisha. She had been looking forward to her movie night with her uncle. Viren had always put her needs first, and I was worried she’d be upset.

“You can’t cancel your plans with Aisha just because something better’s come up,” said Tahira slyly, playing her trump card. “Besides, she’s too young to go clubbing after the fireworks.”

Everyone knew Viren’s niece trumped his fake wife, and that was how it should be. Too bad Tahira didn’t know that I would never try to get between Viren and Aisha. Not even for an evening.

“That’s okay, Tahira,” I said softly. “Viren can bring her home after she sees the fireworks while Sufi and I go to the club.”

“Fireworks?” Aisha piped up. “I’d love to see fireworks!”

“It will be very crowded, beta,” said Tahira shrilly. “Trust me, you’ll enjoy your movie night a lot more than the fireworks display.”

Aisha shot her a scathing glance.

“I’m almost eleven, Aunty Tahira. Not seventy. Of course, I’ll enjoy the fireworks

more! And if I'm going, Chachu has no excuse...I mean...no reason to stay home."

For fuck's sake, I thought with exasperation. Aisha knew exactly what was going to happen within the next few months, and she was doing her best to throw me and Viren together to prevent our divorce. Just like Daya Bua and Sufi. But you couldn't force a relationship where none existed.

Tahira looked like she had bitten into a lemon.

"That's settled then. You're all coming with us. Chop, chop! We need to find a vantage viewing point, so Shorty here can enjoy the fireworks. You guys have ten minutes to get ready while I scrounge up two more tickets," said Sufi, waggling his eyebrows at me meaningfully.

When the three of them raced out of the room to go and change for an evening out, Sufi turned to me.

"Told you he was going to come with us, gorgeous," he whispered, his eyes dancing with triumph.

"That's only because he wants Aisha to see the fireworks."

"Uh-huh," he replied, rolling his eyes at me as he called the limo service.

The limo ride to Ally Pally was fraught with tension. Tahira was sulking in her seat next to Viren, who sat directly opposite me and looked exceedingly grumpy. I, on the other hand, had to sit on my hands to make sure I didn't haul off and punch the bitch every time she leaned over and whispered in my husband's ear. Aisha and Sufi were the only cheerful people in the car, oblivious to the vibes coming from the rest of us.

As soon as the car pulled to a halt in the cobbled parking lot of Ally Pally, I hopped

out and stomped ahead, wanting to get away from the sight of Tahira slobbering all over my husband, who looked sinfully gorgeous in his polo-neck sweater and a pair of jeans that cupped his ass lovingly.

I had scarcely taken two steps when my pencil heel stuck in a crevice in the walkway and my ankle twisted sharply.

I let out a cry and fell on my face. Well, almost fell on my face. Because a pair of strong arms caught me before I hit the ground and pulled me upwards. I didn't need to see who it was that caught me because I could recognise that familiar mix of Versace perfume and his unique scent with my eyes closed.

"This is exactly what I was talking about," growled Viren in my ear. "How are you going to walk all the way to the top?"

He let me go before I could savour the feeling of being in his arms, although he made sure I could stand on my ankle before he let go. I tested my ankle and was relieved to find it fine.

"I'll be fine," I replied curtly, shrugging his hands off my arms.

He was okay with Tahira clinging to his arm like a limpet, but he couldn't bear to touch me for more than a few seconds. Viren couldn't have made his disinterest in me clearer, and I wanted to make it equally clear that I'd crawl to the top of the viewing point before I accepted any help from him.

"Hold on, guys," said Sufi as he caught up with us. "I've ordered a couple of golf carts to take us to the top."

Aisha came to check on my ankle, and Tahira took the opportunity to plaster herself against Viren's side for the duration of the ride to the top of the hill. The golf cart

dropped us off at the entrance to the viewing area, and Tahira made a face when she realised that we weren't going to the VIP viewing platform on the terrace, but we were joining the crowds on the hill.

“Ugh! Viiiireeeen,” she whined. “You know I can't stand crowds. I guess Sunaina is used to them since she grew up travelling by crowded local trains, but I'll get crushed by all these people.”

“Stay in the car if you're worried about your safety, Tahira. Or better still, wait in the restaurant in the Palace,” he replied bluntly, which silenced her complaints once and for all.

“Oh no! I wouldn't dream of missing the fireworks,” she said hastily as she hurried to keep up with him.

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Viren and Sufi found a nice spot for us, unencumbered by trees, and we settled down to wait for the event to begin. The place started filling up when the DJ began to play, and I held Aisha's hand firmly to make sure we weren't separated in the crowd. There was a drone show before the fireworks. Aisha and I gasped in awe at the beautiful display while Tahira glared at us from Viren's other side.

At one point, Aisha's view was blocked by a tall couple who squeezed in front of us, so Sufi picked her up and sat her on his shoulders. She was too big for that now, and I was worried his spine would telescope in a few minutes. But I knew Sufi would do anything for Aisha.

"Enjoy, princess," he said with a laugh.

She kissed the top of his head and settled down to watch the fireworks from her vantage point. They had just started when someone jostled me from behind, and I bumped into the couple in front of me. I turned around to glare at the person who had jostled me, but he gave me an unrepentant wink as he continued shoving his friends around in jest. They were little more than teenagers, and I realised they were already half drunk and weren't going to stop their fun.

I craned my neck to see if I could find another spot for all of us, but the place was packed. A few enterprising people had even climbed up trees to enjoy an undisturbed view. With a sigh, I resigned myself to an evening of being jostled and tried to focus on the gorgeous display in the sky above me.

Before I realised what was happening, Viren pulled me to stand in front of him and wrapped his big arms around me firmly. I froze in place, wondering what was

happening.

“Relax and enjoy the fireworks,” he whispered in my ear. “You’ll be safe now.”

The puff of his breath against the shell of my ear sent a shiver down my spine. I knew he felt it, too, because his arms tightened around me reflexively. But he said nothing. And neither did I.

I knew this was just his way of keeping me safe in the crowd. It meant nothing. But it felt like a big fucking deal!

The man who had taken great pains to avoid touching me for the past two and a half years had his arms around me, and it felt like heaven. I was sure he could feel my heart racing against his forearm, and he could feel the rapid rise and fall of my breathing against his chest, but there was nothing I could do about it.

I tried to hold myself upright, but the music, the atmosphere, the vibes and the glorious display of fireworks in the sky combined with the fact that I was in Viren’s arms melted my resistance away, and slowly, almost against my will, I relaxed against the hard, warm wall of his chest.

I felt Viren’s deep sigh feathering the curls at the back of my neck as he tightened his arms around me even more. Thankfully, I was wearing a light coat over my dress. If I had to feel his touch on my bare skin, I was sure I’d disgrace myself by melting into a puddle at his feet.

I half turned my face to sneak a quick peek at him and found him staring down at me hungrily. There was that big, bad wolf expression again. As if he couldn’t wait to eat me up.

“Thank you,” I whispered, and his gaze dropped to my lips.

I licked them nervously, and I could have sworn his eyes darkened. His throat worked as he swallowed hard, and my eyelids began to droop as I slowly tilted my chin up. He nuzzled the side of my face before he bent his head.

But before his lips could touch mine, we heard a familiar grating whine.

“Viiiiireeeen, this place is soooo crowded. When can we leave?” asked Tahira, shattering the moment.

My fingers flexed reflexively and it was only when Viren’s fingers caught mine that I realised I was digging them into his forearms. I let go immediately and turned to face the front, my face flushing with embarrassment. What the hell was I thinking?

Viren was my fake husband and nothing more! I had no business kissing him. And that too in front of thousands of people on top of a hill in London. I tried to pull away from him, but his arms tightened around me to hold me in place, and he grasped my fingers in his.

And I stood like that for the rest of the show, in Viren’s arms, with his fingers entwined around mine, as we both pretended it meant nothing. Even though, to me, it meant everything!

CHAPTER 4

VIREN

Fuck my life!

What was I thinking?

To be honest, the sight of that dress had rendered me incapable of critical thinking. I

had a lovely, lonely evening planned, and I had blown it all because of that bloody dress.

Sunaina was an adult. She had the right to wear whatever she liked. But the thought of other men looking at her in that dress and seeing what I saw...the sheer perfection of her curves that could make a grown man weep...the smooth bare skin that simply begged to be stroked, kissed and licked...made me want to punch a hole in the wall. For her own safety, I wanted to wrap her in layers of cloth and keep her home. Unfortunately for me, we lived in the twenty-first century, and Sunaiana was my fake wife. I had no right to tell her what to wear or where to go. It wasn't even my job to protect her. But for some strange reason that I refused to analyse, I made it my job.

And what was the thanks I got for it? My lovely wife glared at me all the way to Alexandra Palace and jumped out of the car before it even came to a complete halt. I should have allowed her to stomp all the way to the top of the hill in those teetering heels that made her legs look even sexier, but I couldn't help following her like a puppy. Luckily for her, I was right on hand to catch her when she tripped. Again, instead of thanking me, she shrugged my hands off coldly and ignored me all the way to the top.

Between Sunaina's chilly treatment and Tahira clinging to me no matter how much I tried to push her away, I was done with this blasted evening already. But those teenagers behind us began horsing around and jostled her, and I couldn't help myself. I wrapped my arms around her to keep her safe, and my world blew apart.

Sunaina fit into my arms as if she was made just for me. When she relaxed into my embrace, my arms tightened around her reflexively, and I prayed she couldn't feel my hardness against her tightly curved ass. I could do this, I told myself. I could hold my wife in a purely platonic way and not lose my head. But then, she turned her head and looked at me. I gazed into her big, brown eyes, and the rest of the world went silent. The sound of the crowd cheering, the fireworks, the loud music all disappeared, and

all I could see, hear and feel was Sunaina.

“Thank you,” she said softly, and my gaze zeroed in on her plump, red lips.

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She tilted her head upwards ever so slightly, and there was no way I could resist the invitation. I nuzzled the side of her jaw before I bent my head to kiss her. And then Tahira ruined it all.

Her piercing voice shattered the little bubble that closed us off from the world. Sunaina drew back in horror and whipped her head around to face the front. I was furious with Tahira and was about to snap at her when I felt Sunaina's fingers digging into my forearms. I couldn't tell if she was upset with Tahira for interrupting us or if she was upset about the near kiss. She tried to pull away from me, and I felt like a monster for taking advantage of her. There was no place for stolen kisses in our fake marriage and she was right to be upset. I should have let her go, but the idiots behind us were even more drunk after a couple of beers. I didn't want them to jostle her again.

So I tightened my arms around her to hold her in place, and somehow, my fingers found hers. We stood like that for the rest of the fireworks display, with our fingers intertwined, and it was pure torture. It gave me a glimpse of what it would be like if this marriage was real. I could hold Sunaina like this for the rest of our lives.

Then reality struck, and my throat closed in fear when I remembered that the rest of our lives could be very short. Forever was not as permanent as it sounded. I should know. I had lost everyone I had ever loved. Maybe I was cursed. Maybe it was fate. Maybe I deserved it. But I wasn't going to risk losing anyone else in my life ever again.

There was no place for love in my life. I'd be a fool to leave myself so vulnerable again. If I allowed myself to fall in love with Sunaina and she was taken from me, I

didn't know if I'd ever recover. And it wasn't just me. Aisha, who knew the terms of our marriage, was beginning to treat Sunaina like a mother. She had already been through hell once. I wasn't going to put her through that again. The sooner we ended this farce, the better it would be for all of us. Sunaina would go on her way, and Aisha and I would get on with our lives.

But it wasn't so easy. Sunaina might be my fake wife, but she was a real part of my family. When had that happened, I wondered. When did she become so essential to the functioning of the Chaudhry household?

Daima was perfectly capable of looking after all of us. She had done it for years. And yet, without me realising it, the reins of my household were somehow firmly in Sunaina's hands. She had become the centre of our lives.

When Aisha came home from school, she first called out for Aunty Sue, and Sunaina was always waiting to greet her. Always. No matter what plans she had during the day, she made sure she was back before Aisha got home from school. Sufi and Daima deferred to her in all matters of the household, from what to stock in the pantry to what flowers to arrange around the house. She entertained our guests as if she were born and bred to our lifestyle.

Somehow, she had my best friends, Sarang and Neil, eating out of her hand. She had even made friends with Diya, Isha and Shivina, three of the most intimidating royals in our circle. Those three women trusted nobody, and yet they trusted Sunaina and loved her enough to drag her to brunch every week.

Friday movie nights had been an institution in our house since Aisha came to live with me, but now, they were all hers. The rest of us would spend hours squabbling over what movie to watch, but she always knew exactly which one we'd all like. She made sure we didn't run out of our favourite snacks, whether it was baked ragi chips for me, Aisha's favourite candy, or even the awful matcha-flavoured crap that Sufi

liked and especially Daima's favourite ghee-fried mathri from the mathri-waali galli in Old Delhi that we all liked to steal. The den had Sunaina written all over it, from the colourful sequinned cushions that poked me in the ass to the soft, fluffy throws that softened the harsh masculinity of the room.

How the hell were we going to do movie nights without her? I clenched my jaw and blew out a breath as I realised that I had fucked this arrangement up spectacularly. This was all on me. Instead of keeping the boundaries of our fake relationship clear, I had allowed the lines to blur. And now we were all going to pay the price.

Still, it wasn't too late to correct my mistake. Starting now.

I was going to make it clear to everyone, including Sunaina, that our relationship was strictly business. Nothing more.

When the fireworks display ended with a flourish, the crowds began to move towards the exit, and I pulled my arms off Sunaina sharply. She turned to me in surprise, but I avoided her eyes and reached for Aisha's hand.

"Come on, sweetie. It's time to get you home. Sufi and Sunaina have plans for the night," I said, leading her towards the exit.

CHAPTER 5

SUNAINA

What just happened?

One minute, Viren and I were watching the fireworks with our fingers intertwined, and the next minute, he drew his arms away as if I had the plague. I had just started thinking maybe there was hope. That maybe he was attracted to me if nothing more.

But the sight of his stony profile as he pointedly avoided my gaze told me otherwise.

He hustled us into the car, and I tried not to let Tahira's smug smile affect me, but it pinched. As did the fact that my husband went back to pretending I was just a member of his staff. After I just spent a magical hour with his arms around me. Was he made of stone? Or was I a complete fool? Maybe both.

I pretended not to see Sufi's commiserating glance because I was tired of being the object of pity in the Chaudhry household. Everyone felt sorry for me, the unwanted wife. And while I had Sufi, Daya Bua and Aisha rooting for us, Viren wanted nothing to do with the idea of us. I didn't blame him. Well, not completely.

He was very clear about what he expected from this marriage. It wasn't his fault I had the misfortune to fall in love with my temporary husband. I didn't know when it began. Maybe it started when he rescued me from being sold into marriage to a cop twice my age. Or maybe it started when he faced down my nasty stepmother, who turned up at his doorstep with said cop and tried to bully me into going home with her. Or maybe it was triggered by his immense capacity for love.

This was a man who loved his cousin's daughter like his own child, who loved his nanny like his own mother, and who had treated his secretary like a brother. He had welcomed me into his circle without ever making me feel cheap. His aunt had a lot of unflattering opinions about me because I didn't belong to their social circle, but Viren made sure she never found out about our agreement because, in our society, nothing labelled a woman as a whore and a gold digger quite as much as the fact that she was a fake wife. His aunt might disapprove of me, but she was forced to treat me with the respect due to Viren Chaudhry's wife.

Viren treated me like a queen because I was helping him secure Aisha's future and safety. He treated me like his real wife in every way except the one that mattered. He gave me his friendship but nothing else. And yet, before I knew what was happening,

I was head over heels in love with him. Of course, it didn't help that he was six feet tall and built like a tank, with a hard, chiselled face and sharp, piercing brown eyes that seemed to look into my very soul.

Since I moved into Chaudhry House, I had spent many a sleepless night tortured by the idea of what could be. But the only time Viren came into my room was when I'd had a bad bout of viral fever. I was thrashing around in bed, unable to sleep because of the high temperature, and Viren spent all night in the big armchair next to my bed. He bathed my forehead with coldcloths sprinkled with eau de cologne and held my hand when I became too restless. At one point, I thought he climbed into bed with me and held me down until I fell asleep in his arms. But that must have been a fever-induced dream because when I opened my eyes the next morning, he was fast asleep in the armchair, looking like a fallen angel sent to tempt me into sin. If I hadn't been so sick, I would have climbed onto his lap and woken him up with a kiss. Alas, I was too weak to even raise my head and look at him properly.

Which was a good thing because clearly, I was prone to making stupid decisions while I was sick. Even if I did manage to climb onto Viren's lap, odds were that he'd open his eyes and push me away in horror immediately. Because in all the time that I'd known him, he had never shown any signs of wanting me on his lap or any other part of his delicious body.

Until tonight.

Tonight, for the first time, I felt like his wife. Like we were about to turn the page on our fake relationship. Like he wanted me as much as I wanted him. Until he pushed me away. Until he showed me my place.

I followed Sufi blindly towards the exit, taking short, shallow breaths, trying not to let my tears fall. I was damned if I shed any more tears over a man who didn't want me. I got jostled in the crowd and crashed into the man walking in front of me. I

apologised to him hastily and gripped Sufi's hand tightly to avoid any more accidents, but the man I bumped into turned to stare at me.

“Sunaiana? Sunaina Chauhan?” he yelped.

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I looked up in surprise.

“I’m sorry...,” I began unsurely.

“It’s Dhruv Mehta from Saraswati Vidyamandir. I was your bench partner in tenth grade,” he said.

“No! That’s impossible! Dhruv Mehta was short and skinny,” I said, shaking my head.

“Not anymore,” he replied with a grin.

Fuck me! I remembered that grin! Nothing else about the tall, well-built man standing in front of me was familiar except that grin. Dhruv and I had been best friends and partners in crime in the tenth grade.

“Ohmigod! Dhruv! You fell off the face of the earth after tenth grade,” I exclaimed as I threw my arms around him.

He returned the hug warmly before he turned to Sufi. I linked arms with both of them and introduced them as the crowd swept us inexorably towards the exit.

“Sufi, this rat bastard is my best friend from high school, who abandoned me as soon as he was done copying my answer sheets for the board exams.”

Dhruv laughed and shook his head.

“Oh, please! I was so tired of you stealing my answer sheets that I begged my Dad to move to the other side of the world.”

“Seriously, though. Where did you disappear?” I asked. “I tried calling you after the exams, but your landline was disconnected. And your neighbour told me you guys had moved away.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you we were moving, Sue. My Dad got into trouble with the local mafia around the time of our board exams, and he forced us to return to our hometown in Surat practically overnight. I was cut off from all my friends to make sure the goons couldn’t trace us. But I’m glad I finally got to meet you after so many years,” he replied as we reached the place where our golf carts were parked.

“Are you here with your family?” I asked, looking beyond him.

“No, I’m here for a conference,” he said.

“What do you do for a living, Dhruv?” asked Sufi like the nosy queen that he was.

“I’m a neurologist.”

“Ooh, very fancy,” said Sufi approvingly. “Married?”

“Determinedly single,” replied Dhruv, with a laugh.

“So what are your plans for tonight? Care to join us? Sunaina and I are off to Annabel’s.”

“Yes! You should come with us, Dhruv,” I said. “It would be lovely to catch up...”

My words trailed away as I felt a sudden menacing presence at my back. Dhruv

looked beyond me and then shot me a quizzical glance. I gritted my teeth and tried to ignore Viren, who was scowling at Dhruv.

“Mr C, you must meet Sunaina’s childhood friend,” said the Narad Muni of my life, with an evil grin.

Dhruv put out a hand and Viren took it unwillingly.

“Hi, I’m Dhruv. And you are?”

“Sunaina’s husband,” replied Viren coldly. “Viren Chaudhry.”

Dhruv’s smile dimmed a little.

“I didn’t know you were married, Sue. But the best ones always are,” he said ruefully.

“Dhruv is a doctor! And he’s coming with us to Annabel’s,” said Sufi pointedly.

Viren stiffened at the news, but he gave Dhruv a polite smile, which left Sufi visibly disappointed.

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“Enjoy your evening. I need to take Aisha and Tahira home if you don’t mind dropping us off on the way,” was all he said in reply.

“We can take a cab,” I replied promptly, not wanting to spend even a minute more with this infuriating man.

“Actually, we can takemycar,” said Dhruv quietly, shooting a keen glance from my face to Viren’s. “And I’ll make sure I drop Sue and Sufi home safely.”

“Thanks, man. Have fun, guys,” said Viren, before he walked away without a glance at me.

Why the hell had he introduced himself as my husband if he didn’t even care to say goodbye? I tossed my hair out of my face and resolved to enjoy myself tonight without giving a single thought to the asshole who liked to play ping-pong with my heart.

CHAPTER 6

VIREN

It was too late to do movie night by the time we got home, and I sent Aisha off to bed right away. Tahira followed me into the living room, even though I wished her a million miles away. I wanted to sit alone in the dark and brood over the unfairness of life for a bit.

I mean, was it fair that I was stuck here with Tahira while my wife enjoyed her night

out with another man? I ignored the insistent little voice in my head that reminded me this was my choice and mine alone.

“Vireeeen, be a doll and pour me a drink,” said Tahira in a fake little girl voice that grated on my senses.

I made her a G&T and poured myself a Scotch on the rocks. Tahira stared at me speculatively as she took a slow sip of her drink. I knew what was coming.

“Who was that guy with Sunaina?” she asked finally.

I unclenched my jaw and took a large gulp of Scotch before I replied.

“A childhood friend,” I said shortly.

“Did she plan to meet him there?”

That was exactly what I was wondering, damn it! It was suspiciously convenient that she bumped into an old friend accidentally. But I wasn’t going to admit that to Tahira.

“Does it matter?” I asked with a shrug.

She widened her eyes in fake surprise.

“Doesn’t it matter to you? She is your wife,” she said cattily. “Doesn’t it bother you that she’s out with another man?”

“And I’m home with another woman,” I said pointedly. “Get your mind out of the gutter, Tahira. We’re not living in medieval times. Men and women can be friends without it meaning anything sleazy.”

She flushed in anger and set her glass down with a thump.

“I only meant...” she began.

“I won’t tolerate any insinuations about my wife,” I told her point-blank.

“I didn’t mean any harm, Viren,” she stammered, but I stared at her coldly until she got the point.

She flounced out of the room angrily, and I settled down in an armchair by the window with my drink. To brood. And even though I didn’t want to admit it, to wait for my wife.

It was well past two in the morning when a BMW pulled up in the driveway. I stood at the window and watched as that bastard put his hands on Sunaina under the pretext of helping her over the cobblestones. Sufi swayed along behind them, merrily singing Beedi Jalai Le, the traitor. I swore I saw him wave at my window as if he knew I was watching them.

Sunaina halted by the door and waited as Sufi thanked Dhruv for the ride and went in. I heard him lumbering around the hallway before he made his way up the stairs, but all my attention was on the scene playing out in front of me. I had a clear view of the front door, and I could only watch with mounting fury as my wife leaned forward to give that opportunistic asshole a warm hug. Five. Fucking. Mississippis. That’s how long she hugged him.

He said something that made her laugh in response, and I was tempted to wipe that smirk off his face for good. My fist curled around my empty glass as I fought to control my anger. Sunaina was not my wife in any real sense. She was allowed to hug anyone she wished. My brain knew that, but my heart and every fibre of my body heartily disagreed.

She entered the house, and he stared after her longingly for a few moments before he turned around and walked back to his car. That's it, I decided furiously. The bastard had to go. Sunaiana wasn't safe around a man who looked at another man's wife like that.

I waited for her to go upstairs, but I couldn't hear any sound from the hallway. After a few minutes, I opened the door and found her sitting on the stairs, leaning against the bannister as she stared into space blankly with her long, sexy legs stretched out in front of her.

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“Missing him already?” I asked snidely.

Sunaina appeared startled to see me.

“Why are you still awake?” she asked.

“I was working,” I replied shortly. “You didn’t answer my question.”

She blinked and shook her head.

“I didn’t quite hear it. What was your question again?”

“I asked if you’re missing him already.”

“Him?”

“Yes, him! The bastard who was staring at you like a lovelorn fool,” I bit out through gritted teeth.

She stared at me as if I’d suddenly sprouted horns on my head.

“Have you been drinking?” she asked cautiously.

“That’s beside the point.”

Sunaina pulled herself up using the bannister and stomped over to where I was standing to glare up at me.

“What the fuck is your problem?” she hissed.

“Did you arrange to meet your boyfriend at Ally Pally? Is that why you were so reluctant to let me come along?”

She leaned forward and sniffed me before she wrinkled her nose.

“Ugh! You smell like a brewery,” she said.

“And you still haven’t answered my question,” I said, grabbing her by the shoulders and dragging her close. “Did you arrange to meet your boy toy tonight?”

“Like you arranged to have Tahira over tonight?” she countered, with an angry glint in her eyes.

“Fuck Tahira, and answer me, damn you! Was all this for his benefit?” I asked furiously, running my eyes over the curves left exposed by her dress. If I didn’t know better, I’d have sworn her nipples peaked against the thin fabric of her dress.

Sunaina flushed and tried to shake my hands off, but I only held her tighter. She raised her chin and glared at me even more. Damn, but my baby looked glorious in a temper.

“That’s none of your damn business, Mr C. You are not my real husband, so get over yourself. I’ll meet whomever I like whenever I want.”

“Not while you’re still married to me,” I growled.

“Then end this fucking farce soon,” she said stubbornly. “You got what you wanted. The adoption process will be over soon, which means my work here is done. Tell your lawyers to start the divorce proceedings as soon as you get the adoption

certificate.”

“In such a hurry, are you? Eager to get on with the rest of your life?” I asked snidely.

“Something like that,” she said with a sweet smile that sent my temper skyrocketing.

“The divorce will proceed according to schedule. Meanwhile, you tell your lover boy to keep his hands to himself.”

“Or what?” she challenged.

I turned her around and wrapped my arms around her as I walked her over to the big mirror that hung on the wall opposite us. I held her eyes in the mirror as I bent and whispered in her ear.

“If he touches you again, I will rip his arms off and ram them down his throat,” I said menacingly.

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“Fuck. You,” she hissed, as her chest rose up and down rapidly.

Her long, wavy hair was all over the place, and her eyes were wild as she glared at me in the mirror. That’s my girl, I thought admiringly. She would never back down from a fight.

I shot her a feral grin that made her even more furious.

“Do you want to?” I asked, and she froze in place.

She licked her lips nervously, and I followed the movement in the mirror, wishing I could do the same.

“What?” she stammered.

“Do you want to fuck me?”

She let out a bitter laugh.

“For how long?”

“For as long as you want,” I replied, nipping at her ear lobe.

She shivered in response but didn’t let her gaze drop.

“And what if I want forever?” she asked bleakly.

Her words had the desired effect, and I let go of her and took a step back.

It was as if she'd doused me with a bucket of icy cold water. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and reminded myself why I didn't believe in forever. When I opened my eyes, I had regained the legendary control I was known for. Sunaina was still watching me like a hawk in the mirror.

I gave her a thin, mirthless smile.

"Good night, Sunaina," I said as I took another step back and left her enough space to walk away.

She held herself ramrod straight as she stepped away from the mirror. When she was about to walk past me, she stopped and looked me straight in the eyes. It took all my control not to flinch at the sharpness of her gaze.

"Coward," she murmured.

CHAPTER 7

SUNAINA

I forced myself to go up the stairs calmly, aware of Viren's gaze burning a hole in my back. I refused to give him the satisfaction of knowing how much he had hurt me.

Until now, I had always thought he was a deeply decent man. But now I knew better. He was a raging asshole! An entitled bastard who thought I was okay to fuck around with but not worth the promise of forever. He hadn't even taken the time to think about it. The minute I mentioned the dreaded f-word, he had backed away in horror as if even touching me would give him syphilis.

But I had known that would happen when I said it. That's exactly why I used that word. Sufi was wrong about this dress being my secret weapon. It was the f-word that had the power to make Viren go nuclear. And that's why I said it. To bring him to his senses.

I knew Viren didn't really want me. He was just being territorial over me because he didn't like to share his belongings. And that's exactly what I was. A thing. Not a person with feelings. Dhruv had somehow triggered the Neanderthal inside Viren, and he had reacted accordingly.

He would do anything to make sure I didn't shame the Chaudhry family name in public. Even fuck his unwanted wife to keep her away from what he considered her boy toy. But I knew that if I gave in to the temptation he offered, I'd regret it for the rest of my life.

I wanted a relationship with Viren. I wanted love. Not a throwaway angry fuck that would leave me even more frustrated. Besides, it would just muddy the divorce. We had kept it very clean until now, and we were almost close to the finish line. I couldn't risk messing up our clean break just because Viren threw a temper tantrum over nothing.

Because it was nothing. I had just spent a very enjoyable evening with my friends. Dhruv was a very handsome and successful man, and more importantly, he was very kind. So why did he not make my heart pound with desire like Viren? Did I have a grumpy fetish? Maybe I couldn't get turned on until I had been growled at and scowled at six times before breakfast, I thought wryly.

I entered my room and shut the door softly, leaning against the door as I allowed my stoic mask to break down completely. I had held it together all evening, smiling and laughing with my friends as if I didn't have a care in the world, but not any more.

I threw off my heels and slid down to the ground as tears ran down my face. Viren had proved beyond doubt that he would never love me. The sooner we got divorced, the better it would be for both of us because if we kept sniping at each other, we'd find ourselves screeching at each other across the courtroom instead of signing the papers like the dignified couple we were supposed to be.

I threw off my clothes and headed straight into the shower to scrub all the gunk off my face. I only wished I could scrub the memories of being in Viren's arms from my brain as easily. I stood under the hot shower, tears streaming down my face as I relived those magical moments during the fireworks display. After a while, I dried my eyes firmly and turned off the shower. I wrapped myself in a towel and stood in front of the mirror, slathering my night serum and moisturiser on. Even if my heart was breaking, Sufi would murder me if I neglected the strict skincare routine he had drawn up for me.

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As the steam in the bathroom cleared, my eyes caught faint red marks on my shoulders. I flushed hotly at the memory of Viren's fingers digging into my skin as he dragged me over to the mirror. I shivered as I remembered the hunger in his eyes that matched the hunger in my body.

For a few minutes, I allowed myself to dream about what could have been. About what could have happened if I had taken him up on his offer. But then I remembered that no matter how many magical nights Viren allowed me, there would always be a morning-after filled with regrets, shame and heartbreak.

I threw on my Garfield pyjamas and dragged myself off to bed.

The next morning, I forced myself to go downstairs for breakfast as if nothing had happened. As if Viren and I hadn't played with fire last night. Luckily for me, he wasn't at the breakfast table when I arrived. And neither was Tahira, I noted with a frown.

Sufi had his nose buried in a big coffee mug. That boy was never a morning person, but I was sure he was also paying for that bucket of margaritas he'd downed last night. Daya Bua was fussing over him, forcing him to eat an egg at least. Aisha giggled into her bowl of triple chocolate cereal as Sufi gagged at the sight of the sunny side up on his plate.

He gave me a bleary smile as Aisha jumped up to hug me.

"Aunty Sue, who was the man you met at Ally Pally last night?" she asked around a mouthful of cereal.

Daya Bua turned around in surprise.

“What man?” she asked sharply.

“I bumped into a childhood friend at Alexandra Palace last night, Bua,” I informed her.

“He’s very cute,” said Aisha.

“And he’s a doctor,” chimed in Sufi unhelpfully. “Daima, I think we should invite the dishy doctor for dinner someday.”

“You eat your egg,” she said with a disapproving sniff.

Seriously? She was going to make me feel guilty about meeting a friend even though she knew the truth about our marriage? Daya Bua had some unrealistic dreams about our situation, I thought angrily. And the sooner she adjusted those expectations, the happier she’d be.

Sufi made gagging sounds as he forced himself to eat a few bites. But he went silent at the sight of Viren and Tahira coming into the dining room arm in arm.

“Good morning,” she said happily, and Sufi shot me a worried look.

I kept my face blank and my gaze on my toast.

“I hope you slept well, beta,” said Daya Bua politely.

“I had a lovely night, Daima,” she replied.

What the hell did that mean, I wondered irately and looked up to find Viren’s eyes

fixed on me. My heart began to race at the heat in his eyes. I dragged my eyes away from his and pulled out my phone.

“Did you have a nice time last night, Sunaina?” asked Tahira, with a smirk.

“I did, thank you for asking,” I replied warily, wondering why she was so concerned about me.

“I hope Viren wasn’t too upset you left him at home to go partying with your...friend,” she said cattily.

Ah! Now I got it!

I smiled at her sweetly before I turned to my husband, who had finally managed to extricate his arm from her clutches and sat down next to me, his knee practically touching mine.

“Viren would never be upset about such silly things because he trusts me. Don’t you, sweetie?” I asked, my eyes glittering with malice.

“Of course,” he replied, taking my hand and pressing a soft kiss on my knuckles. “I trust my wife completely.”

My heart skipped a beat, and I wondered what he was playing at. In all these years, he had never touched me, even when we were alone. And now he was indulging in PDA?

“And what about Dhruv?” asked Tahira guilelessly. “Do you trust him just as much? He looked smitten with your wife last night.”

“I don’t have to trust him,” replied Viren, still looking at me. “I know how to deal

with men who touch my wife.”

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What was even the point of all this playacting? After all these years, why was Viren pretending to be a loving husband? And whom was he trying to fool anyway? The whole household knew ours was a marriage in name only. And if this was a veiled threat against Dhruv, I could tell him where to shove his empty threats.

But I didn't say that aloud. I merely curled my fingers into his with a loving smile and dug my nails into his skin as hard as I could. Unfortunately, the rat bastard didn't even wince. He only grinned at me before he let my hand drop.

"What are we doing today, Chachu?" asked Aisha.

"How about a Charlie And The Chocolate Factory-themed afternoon tea?" he suggested.

"Awesome!" she yelled, throwing her arms around him.

"Would you like to join us, Tahira?" asked Viren, and I wanted to smack him.

"No, thank you," she said coldly. "I'm having a spa day at Harrods with my aunt."

She rose from the table and stalked out of the room and I heaved a sigh of relief.

"Can you book the tea for five people, Sufi?" asked Viren.

"Make it for four," I said hastily. "I'm meeting Dhruv at the V&A."

"No, you're not. You're coming with us," said Viren peremptorily.

“No, I’m not,” I argued.

“We always do these things together, beta. How can we go without you?” asked Daya Bua.

“Well, you’ll have to get used to it soon, Bua. I won’t be part of this family for much longer,” I said softly.

“Umm guys...” began Sufi, but Aisha interrupted him.

“How can you say that, Auntie Sue?” she cried. “Are you so eager to leave us?”

“Not at all, baby. But you knew this day was coming,” I said, taking her hand in mine.

A muscle jumped in Viren’s cheek as he glared at me. But he didn’t refute what I said because he knew I was right.

“Guys,” yelled Sufi, and we turned to him in surprise. “You need to see this.”

He turned his phone around, and I blanched in horror at the headline on his screen.

CHAPTER 8

VIREN

Trouble in paradise?

Music mogul Viren Chaudhry’s wife seen partying in London with handsome stranger. [Click to read the full story.](#)

“What the fuck is this?” I growled, clicking on the link.

“We must have got papped last night without our knowledge,” said Sufi, looking worried. “It’s a picture of Sunaina and Dhruv.”

I stared numbly at the picture of my wife balancing a cocktail on her head as that motherfucker leaned forward to place a slice of lime on the rim of the glass.

“Where the hell were you when this was happening, Sufi?” I snarled.

“Hey!What do you think happened between us?” snapped Sunaina, but I ignored her because right now, I couldn’t even bear to look at her. I didn’t even know she had this side to her. In all the years that we had been married, I had never seen Sunaian look so...abandoned. So...happy. I had never brought out thisfun side of her. But it popped up right on cue as soon as this guy appeared out of nowhere.

“I was right next to Suanaina, Mr C. They just cropped me out of the frame. Someone took this picture on purpose to discredit Sue,” said Sufi angrily.

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I stiffened in anger as I read the whole article. It mentioned that Sunaina had been seen cosyng up to a strange man, and there were references to a Reddit thread. I clicked on that and was horrified to find the details of our marriage laid out for everyone to read.

My temples began to throb as I read the whole thread before I handed the phone back to Sufi, who went pale when I showed him the thread.

“This is our personal life, Sufi. How the fuck did it land up on the internet?” I yelled.

“Language,” scolded Aisha. “You’ve been dropping f-bombs all morning, Chachu.”

“Sorry, baby. But this situation calls for f-bombs,” I said apologetically.

“What’s going on, Viren?” asked Sunaina worriedly.

“Someone posted the details of our life on Reddit last night. This article about your night out tracks back to the thread that says...” I choked over the words because I didn’t want to discuss this in front of Aisha.

“Aisha beta, this talk is for adults only,” said Daima, hustling her out of the room hastily.

I could hear Aisha’s protests as Daima forced her to go ride her bike in the garden. I waited for her to return before I went on.

“It says we’re married in name only. And there’s a lot of speculation about why I

married Sunaina.”

“Let them say what they like,” said Daima, with an angry snort. “Who cares about barking dogs on the internet?”

“It’s much worse, Daima,” said Sufi as he went through the comments. “They are trashing Sunaina, calling her a gold digger. Mr C, did you see this comment by the original poster that’s hidden away at the bottom of the thread? When someone asked why a billionaire would marry a nobody, the OP replied, saying they are almost positive you married her to secure Aisha’s custody.”

“How the hell would they know that? The details of our marriage contract are supposed to be secret. Do you think there could be a leak in Ranvijay’s office?” I asked.

Daima snorted again. Meaningfully. I looked at her and raised an eyebrow.

“You don’t have to look so far, beta. I bet there’s a leak right here in our house,” she said furiously.

“No one living in our house would dare to say anything to the media, Daima. My staff is loyal to me.”

“And what about people who don’t live in your house?” asked Sunaina coldly. “Do you think they are bound by the same loyalty?”

“I don’t have time for riddles, Sunaina,” I snapped.

“Wise up, Mr C. The Reddit thread went up last night, and the article with my picture was released this morning. Who else could be behind it but Tahira?”

“I think she’s right. In another comment, the OP mentions that the two of you share separate bedrooms. How would anyone know that fact unless they have spent a night in our house? I’m sorry to say this, Mr C. But the source of this leak has to be either Tahira or your aunt,” added Sufi.

“Track it down, Sufi. Find out who posted this shit,” I said angrily.

If it turned out that Tahira was behind this smear campaign, I would make her sorry she ever set eyes on me. Because this shit could mess with Aisha’s adoption. If the social worker assigned to our case suspected our marriage was fake, she’d never sign off on it. And Ajit wouldn’t stop trying to get his hands on Aisha’s money until she turned eighteen. He’d keep filing for custody on some excuse or another. That was more trauma than any child should have to take.

“On it, Mr C. But you need to do some serious damage control immediately.”

“Like what?” demanded Sunaina.

“Date night,” replied Sufi. “I’ll book a table for you at the Ritz...no...wait. That looks very staged. Right! You’re going to take Sunaina for a picnic. I’ll arrange for you to be papped while you’re feeding her chocolate-dipped strawberries or something.”

“You’ve lost your mind,” said Sunaina bluntly.

“Too bad you’ll have to cancel your plans with your boy toy,” I said with savage satisfaction.

At least something good had come out of this whole mess.

“None of this would have happened if you had kept your girlfriend in line,” she

hissed.

“My girlfriend?” I asked in disbelief.

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“Yes. How else would she know our sleeping arrangements?” asked Sunaina stubbornly.

“Arre! Maybe she went snooping around the house,” cried Daima. “Viren is not the type to sleep around when he’s married, beta. You know him better than that.”

“Do I? I’m coming to realise I don’t know him at all, Bua. Did you see how she was draped all over him when they came down together for breakfast?”

I couldn’t believe this! Was that what she really thought of me? That I would go from almost making love to her in the hallway last night straight to Tahira’s bed?

“We did not come down together. I met her outside the dining room, and I couldn’t very well shake her off when she wound her arm around mine. She’s our guest,” I said stiffly. “And let’s not forget whose picture was splashed across the tabloids this morning. It certainly wasn’t mine.”

“Guys, stop fighting,” hissed Sufi. “These are not the faces we want to show the public.”

“I’ll tell you what I want to show your public,” muttered Sunaina, holding her middle finger up until Daima swatted at it.

“Sue! Work with me, please,” said Sufi, glaring at his bestie.

Sunaina crossed her arms over her chest and glared at me.

“I want to go home. I’ve had enough of this vacation,” she declared.

“That’s fine with me,” I snarled.

“Nobody’s going home until I’ve spammed the internet with pictures proving you’re both head over heels in love with each other,” snapped Sufi.

“What’s the point, Sufi?” asked Sunaina wearily. “It’s all going to end soon. Why are we even bothering to do damage control?”

“Because we’re not going to let that cow win, Sue! You and Mr C can end your marriage whenever you like, but it’s going to be on your terms. We’re not going to let Tahira embarrass you or the boss just because she wants to throw a hissy fit. If she wants a social media war, we’re going to bring it. I can’t wait to DM her a picture of Mr C kissing you under a big oak tree in Hyde Park.”

“Wait! What?” yelled Sunaina. “There’s going to be no kissing!”

“Oh, gorgeous. There’s going to be so much kissing,” announced Sufi gleefully, and I felt my throat close in panic.

“Arre! Are you planning a PR campaign or making dirty videos?” asked Daima.

“Ooh, that gives me an idea. Mr C, how open are you to the idea of leaking a sex tape?”

“Not at all,” I replied firmly.

When I had sex with Sunaina, it was going to be behind closed doors, not in front of a camera. Wait! What was I even thinking? I was never going to have sex with Sunaina! This was all Sufi’s fault. He was putting ideas into my head!

The plan was to distance myself from Sunaina slowly and painlessly so that we were living completely separate lives by the time the divorce was finalised. Instead of going along with my plan, Sufi was talking of sex tapes. The man was absolutely demented.

“Sufi...babe...I ask this with all the love in the world.Are you high?” screeched Sunaina. “I’m never going to have sex with Viren.”

Well, she didn’t have to be so rude about it.

“So it’s settled. You kids are going for a picnic. A clean, PG-13 picnic in the park,” said Daima, trying to hide a smile.

“Umm, Daima, he’s going on a picnic with his wife, not his grandmother,” protested Sufi.

“Beta, just make sure their pictures end up in Hello! magazine, not on a porn site,” she said sternly.

“Even better, Daima. I’ll make sure their pictures end up on Instagram,” said Sufi, with a wink. “Now, I’m off to tell Aisha the afternoon tea is off because we have to break the internet. Meanwhile, you guys go change into something less dreary.”

I looked down at my clothes and wondered what was dreary about them.

“What’s wrong with my clothes?”Sunaina and I asked in unison.

“Oh, gorgeous...I can’t even begin to tell you,’ said Sufi, giving us both disappointed once-overs. “You with the boring death metal t-shirt, Mr C, and you with that sasta ganji from Causeway, Sue. I thought I’d raised you both better.”

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“Umm, gorgeous...you didn't raise us at all. And what's wrong with Viren's t-shirt? It's his favourite band,” argued Sunaina.

“Yeah, and your ganji is lovely. Don't listen to him,” I told her gruffly because it was. I didn't recognise the colour because it was one of those complicated shades between green and blue, but it hugged her curves in all the right places.

Daima clapped her hand on her head and walked out of the room without a word.

“That was rude,” murmured Sunaina.

“Very,” I murmured back.

“If the two of you are done with this mutual and inexplicable back-rubbing, can we get back on the very important topic of your clothes?” asked Sufi snottily.

“Fine! I'll change into a dress if that will please Your Majesty,” said Sunaina with a sigh.

“Good, and let's go with a loose white shirt with shorts for you, Mr C,” ordered the tyrant.

Twenty minutes later, he marched us to the car, and we drove to Hyde Park. What followed was an hour of pure torture as Sufi forced us to pose for romantic pictures that were really not romantic at all.

“Okay, let's get one pic of you feeding the ducks. Mr C, please stand next to her and

smile adoringly,” he instructed like a drill sergeant. “Smile at your wife, not at the duck!”

I turned around to glare at him.

“Don’t make me push you into the lake, Sufi,” I growled.

Just then, something poked me in the ass. I turned around in surprise and found a goose glaring up at me.

“Can I help you?” I asked warily, and the little feathered bastard came at me aggressively in reply.

He stopped to spread his wings and shimmy his tiny butt in Sunaina’s direction before he charged at me again. I threw a piece of bread at him thinking he might be hungry, but it only made him angrier.

“Stop that,” I snapped when he pecked at my leg.

“I think he can sense you like foie gras and paté,” said Sunaina, with a cackle.

The bird preened at her before he resumed his completely unwarranted attack on me, while my heartless wife just laughed and laughed.

“Okay, I got a few good ones here,” said Sufi, who was busy clicking pictures when he should have been rescuing me from the goose of death.

“I swear to God, if any of those pictures end up online, I’ll fire you for good,” I snarled.

“You can try,” he replied with a loud snort. “Shoo, birdie! You can’t steal Mr C’s

wife. Come along, Sue, and stop flirting with dangerous birds.”

“This was so much fun,” she said, feeding the last of the bread to her new boyfriend, who I had to admit was a huge improvement on Dhruv. “What are we doing next?”

“Mr C is going to row you across the lake while you read a book,” announced Sufi.

“Where do you get these cheesy ideas?” I asked in disgust.

“Baby, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet,” he said with a wink. “Now, get rowing.”

That was easier said than done. Sufi got into a paddle boat and followed us around, taking pictures and giving stupid orders while I rowed my wife around the placid lake.

“Stretch your legs out and relax, Sue. You look petrified,” he scolded.

With a groan, Sunaina stretched her long, bare legs out in front of me. How the hell was I supposed to concentrate on rowing with all this temptation right under my nose?

“Okay, stop rowing, Mr C. It’s time to take some romantic pictures with your wife. Sue, go sit on his lap and make kissy faces,” said Sufi.

“No, thank you,” replied Sunaina primly.

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“Do it,” he snapped, and she rose with a weary sigh.

“You’re a pain in the ass,” she muttered as she stomped over to my end of the boat.

I set the oars down, ignoring my thumping heart as she climbed onto my lap.

It’s fake. It’s all for show, I told myself. But when I wrapped my hands around her waist and looked into her eyes, it felt far too real. Her pupils were dilated, and a pulse fluttered at the base of her throat, showing that she wasn’t as unmoved as she made out to be.

Sunaina wound her arms around my neck and turned to Sufi.

“How much longer?” she asked, wriggling a little to get more comfortable.

“Smile at your husband,” ordered Sufi.

Sunaina tried to smile, but her smile dried up as she stared into my eyes. Her full breasts brushed against my chest as her breath came faster. Her lips parted, and I couldn’t take my eyes off them. Her face was so close to mine. All I had to do was lean forward and claim her plump, juicy lips in a long, wet kiss.

I tightened my fingers at her waist to keep her still because if she wriggled any more, my rock-hard dick was going to leap out of my shorts. She licked her lips, and I groaned under my breath. My wife was going to be the death of me.

“I think we’re done here,” I called out hoarsely, and Sunaina froze when she felt my

hardness against her.

“Yep, all done,” she squeaked, clambering off my lap hastily.

In her haste, she knocked one of the oars into the water and I groaned in horror.

“Oops! Don’t worry, I see it,” she said, reaching for the oar that bobbed on the surface of the water, just out of her reach.

“Don’t lean too far,” I warned, but it was too late.

As soon as she leaned over the side, the boat began to rock. Before I could pull her back, she leaned too far, and the boat overturned. Sunaina screamed as we hit the icy cold water with a loud splash. She went under a couple of times before I fished her out of the water and held on to the side of the boat as I dragged her ashore, with Sufi holding her other hand. Thankfully, we hadn’t rowed too far from the shore before Sufi stopped us to take pictures.

He ran to get us some towels while I turned Sunaina onto her side and thumped her on the back to make her cough up all the dirty water.

“Stop hitting me,” she snarled.

“I’m just trying to save your life,” I replied, trying to hide my grin.

She looked so adorably grumpy with her dress all soaked and her wet hair plastered to her scalp. It almost made me forget we were just playing make-believe.

“Let’s just go home, please,” she groaned, and I didn’t blame her.

Our picnic had been a spectacular fail so far.

CHAPTER 9

SUNAINA

Isneezed loudly, and there was a chorus of Bless You from the people gathered around the kitchen island. I glared at them in response because this was all their fault. If they hadn't overreacted to a couple of stupid articles, I wouldn't have almost drowned in a lake.

"Don't be mad, Auntie Sue. You look like a mermaid," said Aisha, holding up her iPad. "Look."

"No, thank you, baby," I said, blowing my nose loudly. "I've seen enough for a lifetime. No more damage control! I don't care what anyone says about the state of our marriage."

"Oh, hush," snapped Sufi. "Look how much love you're getting online."

He had posted the pics two hours ago, and they were already viral. I didn't know what magic Sufi did, but the images he shared painted a very romantic picture of our marriage. Except for the one where Viren looked like a chiselled Greek god with his wet, white shirt plastered to his broad chest, and I looked like a beached whale as he carried me out of the water.

"Now, what do we want to do tomorrow?" he asked and I shuddered in reply.

"Why are you trying to kill me, babe? Isn't it enough that I almost drowned for you today?"

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Sufi merely snorted in reply.

“If I wanted to kill you, you’d be dead by now. Both of you. So quit whining and blow your nose one last time. You need to get better in time for an exhibition at the National Gallery tomorrow night. I think we should go full glam this time. Black tie for Mr C and a Valentino gown for you with red lips,” he mused.

“Why is Auntie Tahira still here?” grumbled Aisha.

“She’s your Daadi’s guest, beta,” said Daya Bua gently.

“She’s never going to leave, is she?” asked Aisha in despair.

“Looks like it,” said Daya Bua, with a meaningful glance at Viren.

“What can I do? I can hardly kick her out when Chachi invited her to stay,” he said defensively.

Hmph! He could if he wanted to. I gave the back of his head an extra strong glare as I walked past him on my way to the kettle. This house must have been built by giants, I groused silently as I stood on my tippy toes to reach for a mug.

I felt a sudden warmth behind me and Viren reached up quite easily to grab the mug for me.

“Here you go, shorty,” he said with a grin as he handed it to me.

I took him and slammed it on the counter before I threw in a masala chai teabag and filled it with hot water. Viren stared at the contents of the mug in horror.

“Why are you drinking that crap?”

“Because my throat hurts, and I have a cold,” I said crankily.

He rolled his eyes in response and snatched the mug out of my hand before he fished the teabag out and threw it in the bin. He poured the tea into the sink and pulled out another mug.

“What are you doing? I needed that tea,” I complained.

“That wasn’t tea. That was dirty dishwater. I’ll make you a proper cup of masala tea to soothe your throat,” he said, and I gaped at him in surprise.

“You?”

“Why not?” he asked, sounding offended.

“Viren Chaudhry, the billionaire and music mogul who has staff to cater to all his needs, is offering to make me a cup of tea. It’s enough to make anyone’s head spin,” I said snidely.

He rolled his eyes again and nudged me out of the way with his hip. I ignored the heat that sparked up my body from that playful little touch and stared at him suspiciously.

“Are you trying to poison me just because you want to avoid the divorce settlement?”

“For fuck’s sake, go and sit down before you make my head explode,” he snarled,

and I smirked at him slowly.

“Thank you,” I said softly.

Now it was his turn to sound suspicious.

“For what?”

“For the tea. And for saving my life earlier.”

His gaze dropped to my lips, and I could swear he bent his head a little. Daya Bua coughed loudly from the kitchen island, and we jumped apart with a start.

“I’ll go and sit down,” I said hastily, as Viren began grating some ginger into a saucepan.

What the hell was wrong with me, I wondered, not for the first time since I had married this man. How could I forget that Aisha was in the room? As for the whole bending his head for a kiss thing, it was just wishful thinking. I had made that mistake before, and look where it led us. But I hadn’t imagined the hungry look in his eyes as he stared at my lips, and for some reason, I couldn’t get it out of my head.

“What is Viren doing?” asked Daya Bua in surprise.

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“He’s making me a cup of tea,” I said awkwardly.

She and Sufi turned to stare at him openmouthed.

“What’s the big deal?” I muttered. “It’s only a cup of tea.”

“Babe, I have never seen Mr C lift a finger in the kitchen at home. And now he’s suddenly pounding spices for masala chai. This is totally a photo op,” exclaimed Sufi, pulling out his phone.

“It’s private, Sufi,” I said softly, pushing his hand down.

I didn’t know why, but the fact that Viren was doing something so unlike him just for me felt very precious, and I wanted to hide it from the world.

“Let me do that, beta,” said Daya Bua, rushing to help him as if the world would end if the big, bad billionaire made some chai.

“You’re on holiday too, Daima. Go and sit down with the others,” he replied sternly.

She looked stunned as she joined us at the kitchen island. When the chai was ready, Viren poured it into mugs and brought it to us. He winked at me as he handed me my mug, and I blushed in response. It was just a cup of tea, I told myself sternly. There was no reason to blush like a schoolgirl.

I took a hasty sip of the steaming hot beverage and realised everyone was staring at me for my reaction.

“It’s great,” I said, blushing again, and Viren gave me a slow smile that set my heart pounding.

That man and his dimple were a menace to society. And yet, I couldn’t take my eyes off either.

“What a cosy little scene,” said Tahira coldly from the doorway, and it was as if someone had doused me with cold water.

“Would you like a cup of tea, beta?” asked Daya Bua politely.

“No, thank you. I’m here to steal Viren,” she said, looking directly at me. “For the rest of the evening, I mean.”

Oh, please. We all knew what the bitch meant. She was throwing down in public. I kept my face impassive and returned her stare calmly.

“I’m afraid I’m taken, Tahira,” replied Viren. “I’m spending the rest of the evening with my wife.”

Daima and Sufi gave him approving smiles, but Tahira looked furious before she forced a smile on her face.

“Are you guys doing anything interesting?”

“Sunaina’s feeling slightly under the weather after our little accident in the park, so I’m going to keep her in bed all night,” he said wickedly.

Daya Bua choked on her chai as Sufi covered Aisha’s ears. She couldn’t help giggling when Daya Bua shot Viren an admonishing look. Tahira, on the other hand, looked like she wanted to throw up.

“How dull,” she murmured. “Anyway, you know where to find me if you get bored.”

I wondered if I could get away with stabbing her with a kitchen knife. Probably not. So I bit my tongue and sipped on my chai.

I didn’t know why I was taking this so personally. I didn’t own Viren. He was free to spend time with the chudail if he wished to, but the way she went about staking her claim over him was disrespectful in the extreme. So what if she suspected our relationship was fake? It was still very rude of her to flirt with Viren so openly.

When he didn’t reply to her invitation, she slunk out of the room with a resentful glance at me.

“Come on, wifey. Drink up your chai and get into bed. I was serious about that part,” said Viren, and I almost dropped the mug in shock.

Wifey?

Who was this man, and what had he done with my stiff and formal husband who wouldn’t even touch me unless it was a matter of life and death?

CHAPTER 10

VIREN

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Damn it!How the hell had that slipped out?

There was complete silence as that little word resonated through the room with the force of an explosion.Wifey.

I was supposed to increase the distance between us, and here I was, laying claim to her as my wife. I really needed my head examined. Sunaina looked shell-shocked. But Sufi and Daima looked triumphant. As if they had won a big battle.

It struck me that they were indulging in some seriously underhanded matchmaking, and a look at Aisha confirmed that she was getting swept away by their matchmaking fervour. Sufi and Daima were adults. But Aisha was a child. And if I didn't put a stop to this right now, my baby was going to be heartbroken when Sunaina left. Because that was a given.

I had never been as attracted to anyone as I was to Sunaina. But that didn't mean I was going to risk all my hard-won peace on a relationship that could end in disaster. There was no place in my life for romantic love. And maybe it was time to hammer that fact home to everyone. Including myself.

I set my mug down and straightened up.

“Sufi will keep an eye on you all night. If you guys don't mind, I need some time to myself. I'm going to bed.”

Sunaina looked hurt at my about-face, but she said nothing.

“Hain? So early. You haven’t even had dinner, beta,” protested Daima.

“I’m not hungry, Daima,” I said shortly and left the kitchen before they could stop me.

It was a long and restless night, tormented by dreams of making love to Sunaina. When the sun finally poked its head over the horizon, I gave up on trying to sleep and went out for a run in the crisp, cold air, hoping it would knock some sense into my head. When I got home an hour later, I was still just as conflicted, but I knew one thing. The sooner I got back to work, the safer I would be.

Family vacations were great, but when most of my family was conspiring to keep me married to Sunaina, I was playing with fire by staying on here. Especially when it was such a struggle to keep my hands off her. As it is, the very solid reasons I had for avoiding love were already starting to look blurry.

I poked my head around the kitchen door and found Daima supervising breakfast.

“Daima, I’m flying home this afternoon,” I announced. “I have an important meeting I can’t miss tomorrow morning.”

“Arre! You’re on vacation, beta. You promised us you were going to take the whole week off,” she complained.

“I know I did, but this is an important meeting, Daima. And you guys can still finish your vacation. We have the house until Sunday.”

“You...you’re leaving?” asked Sunaina from behind me.

I whirled around to meet her big, brown eyes, which glimmered with a mix of hurt and accusation. I cleared my throat and stared at a spot just above her head because

that was safer than looking into her eyes.

“As I was telling Daima, I have a meeting.”

When she said nothing, I hazarded a glance at her face and flinched inwardly at the contempt I found there.

“You guys can stay on until Sunday,” I added.

“Actually, I think it’s time we all returned home,” she replied coldly. “The sooner we get the adoption home visit out of the way, the sooner we can end this mockery of a marriage.”

She was right. It made sense for us to end it soon. I just hadn’t known it would be so difficult to walk away from her.

“All right. I’ll tell Sufi to make sure the jet is cleared for take-off by three-thirty in the afternoon. Will that give you enough time to pack?”

“I’ll manage somehow,” she said grimly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to wake Aisha and help her pack.”

She walked away from me stiffly, not looking back even once as she went up the stairs. I turned around to face Daima who was staring after Sunaina in dismay.

“You’ll regret this, Viren,” she said slowly.

“I know what I’m doing, Daima. And don’t worry about Sunaina. I’ll do right by her. I’ve arranged to transfer the Malabar Hill flat to her name, plus the Audi that she uses and a hefty financial settlement that will take care of all her needs for the rest of her life.”

She stared at me as if I was an idiot.

“I don’t think Sunaina will need your money for too long, beta. She’s still very young. I have a feeling she might meet someone who is capable of loving her almost immediately,” she said pointedly.

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Dhruv's name sprang to my mind, and I realised that he was already waiting in the wings. Hmph. If she was willing to settle for someone with such a limp handshake, that was her problem. But I hoped she didn't settle for him just because he was the first man to ask her out after her divorce. I hoped she'd wait until she found someone worthy of her.

"Good for her," I said coldly, and Daima shook her head in disgust.

"I thought I had raised you to be smarter than this, Viren. That girl is the best thing to happen to you in a long time. Do you even realise how she's changed you?"

"Nonsense," I said roundly, not wanting to listen to this, but Daima went on.

"When Aisha came to live with us, you were a complete playboy, Viren. And overnight, you turned into a saint."

"So it's Aisha's influence, not Sunaina's," I pointed out, but Daima shook her head.

"When Deven died, and you had to take on Aisha's responsibility, you buried your own needs and feelings so deep that you turned to stone. But in the past two and a half years, Sunaina has chipped away at that stone and made you human again. You may not have realised this, beta, but when Deven died, I was worried a part of you had died with him. Sunaina brought that part back to life. You're laughing again. She's softened your sternness. You're back to being the sweet, tender Viren that I was scared I'd lost forever."

I swallowed over what felt like shards of glass in my throat. Was this true?

No!

Daima was overreacting. When Aisha came to live with us, I was grieving for my brother. Grief was known to turn even a loving person to stone. There was nothing unusual about that. And over time, my grief had softened and been replaced by acceptance. And I learned to be happy again. That's all there was to it. I refused to accept any other explanation.

"You've been watching too many daily soaps, Daima," I said wryly. "Now, can you be packed and ready to leave this afternoon?"

She pursed her lips and stared at me in disappointment for a few more minutes before she nodded.

"Of course."

"Good. I'll tell Sufi to make all the arrangements," I said before I made my way upstairs.

CHAPTER 11

SUNAINA

The flight to Mumbai felt interminable.

Aisha was sulking in a corner because her Chachu was going back to work so soon. Sufi and Daya Bua were very subdued and shot me sympathetic glances from time to time. Tahira and Viren's aunt were very happy, though. Especially when Viren isolated himself in one section of the large private jet on the pretext of reading a contract.

Meanwhile, I sat at the opposite end of the cabin with my nose buried in the latest issue of Vogue, and when that didn't put a stop to the pity being directed at me, I slapped an eye mask on my face and pretended to be asleep for the duration of the flight. The flight attendant turned down the cabin lights around me, which was a blessing because, under the cover of semi-darkness, I could finally allow my tears to trickle down my face.

I cried silently, not wanting to draw any attention to myself. I didn't even know why I was crying. It wasn't as if I didn't know there was no hope for me. I knew very well that a man like Viren Chaudhry was never going to fall in love with a woman like me. So why was I surprised when he chose to end our vacation early rather than be forced to spend more time with me, pretending to be in love with me?

This was all my fault. I should have known my place. I was nothing more than an unofficial nanny to Aisha. If I had just stayed where I was slotted, I could have had a wonderful life. I had my own room in Viren's wing of the mansion. I had a full complement of staff at my beck and call. I could go where I wanted. I could do what I liked. I had a handsome allowance. As Viren's wife, I lived a very luxurious life. And as his ex-wife, I'd be even richer because our contract stated that he would settle property and investments worth almost a hundred crores on me. All because of what I did for Aisha.

But I was too dumb to settle for that. No. I had aspired for what could never be mine. I didn't want Viren's money. All I wanted was his love.

When I fell in love with him, I knew he would never be mine. I had even made my peace with it, even though it hurt me to see him treat me with the same impersonal kindness with which he treated the rest of the staff. But I knew that was all I could ever expect. So why did I forget that important fact and start hoping for more?

I had allowed Viren's kindness, Aisha and Daya Bua's love, and Sufi's unwavering

friendship to go to my head. I had begun to believe in the tangled web of lies we had all woven together when all I had to do was hold onto my end until I was asked to let go.

I took a slow, deep breath and gritted my teeth to force back the sob that rose to my lips. Because of my stupidity, I had destroyed everything that was holding me together. I was about to destroy my family.

The lines in our battle were clearly drawn, with Daya Bua, Sufi and even Aisha on my side. When our marriage ended, they were going to blame Viren, and I couldn't allow that. I couldn't allow them to turn on him because he had lost one family already. I couldn't be the reason why he lost the second family he had built for himself.

No matter how much it hurt me to do it, I had to make sure our divorce was extremely amicable. And after the divorce, I had to walk away from the people I loved with a smile. I had to assure them I wasn't shattered at being cut out of their little family for good because if they knew how much I was hurting, they would never forgive Viren. I would do it for him. As my last act of love.

And I knew exactly what I had to do to convince everyone, including Viren, that I was going to be fine. I pulled off the eyes mask and wiped my tears before I pulled out my phone to send a text.

Sufi slid into the seat next to mine and pressed the button to summon the flight attendant. She arrived with a small tray that she laid on the table in front of us.

“What’s all this?” I asked in horror.

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“Damage control. You look like a fright, babe. Close your eyes and lie back,” he ordered, pulling out a moisturising sheet mask.

I gave in with a sigh because there was no arguing with Sufi when he was on a mission. He slapped two cold teabags over my eyes and placed a glass of watermelon juice in my hand.

“Hydrate,” he ordered, and I hydrated.

“I’m going to miss you,” I mumbled, and he let out a loud snort from under his own sheet mask.

“I’m not going anywhere, gorgeous,” he retorted.

“But I am,” I replied. “And you know it.”

“I know nothing of the sort. Even if the divorce goes through, you and I are solid, babe. You’re stuck with me. Trust me, we’re going to be besties until the end of our lives, terrorising the inmates of whatever old people’s home Aisha dumps us in, together,” he said with a cackle.

“That’s the dream,” I said weakly. “Unless you get dementia and forget all about me.”

“Pfft! You’re unforgettable, babe. Like a nightmare that never leaves you.”

“Stop! You’re making me blush with all this praise,” I said dryly.

“That’s just the sheet mask working its magic,” he shit back.

“Hopefully, I’ll look less like a swamp witch when we land.”

“Who cares? We’ve all seen you at your worst and we still love you,” he teased.

“Well...Dhruv hasn’t seen me at my worst yet,” I said hesitantly. “And I don’t want to scare him off already.”

Sufi pulled the teabags off my eyes and glared at me when I opened my eyes to protest.

“What have you done?” he hissed, and I raised my chin in defiance.

“I asked him to meet me at the airport. I’m not going home with you guys.”

“Oh boy! There’s going to be bloodshed on the tarmac today,” said Sufi in a singsong voice. “Poor Dhruv. I liked him. He doesn’t deserve to die so early.”

“Shut up,” I hissed, looking around to see if anyone had overheard his predictions. “And don’t you dare chaabi Viren into fighting with Dhruv, you hear me?”

“Babe, chaabi-fying is my superpower,” said Sufi with an evil grin. “But in this case, I won’t have to do a thing. Mr C will do the needful.”

“He willnot. Viren is as eager to end this as I am,” I said coldly.

“That I agree,” murmured Sufi.

I shot him a suspicious glance because it didn’t sound like he agreed with me. But I had no time to argue with him. I had to find a very diplomatic way to break the news

to the rest of the family. Because it was time they learned to live without me.

“Look, it’s not like I’m cutting off from you guys completely. I just need some space right now. I’ll come back in time for the social worker’s home visit. Until then...we can do movie nights at my place,” I babbled.

“Sure! Because Mr C will definitely agree to spend Friday evenings with you and Dhruv. Honestly, Sue! Are you high? Your husband is not going to let you drive off with another man. Especially not with Tahira and her aunt watching gleefully.”

I groaned in despair.

“That’s why I need you on my side, Sufi,” I begged.

“I’m always on your side, babe. Which means I get to stop you when you go off half-cocked,” he said cheerfully.

I rolled my eyes and slapped my teabags back over my eyes. He could say what he liked. But I knew that Viren would only be glad I wasn’t going home with them. It would make the eventual separation much easier if we started now.

As we prepared for landing, I cast about for a tactful way to tell Viren that I wasn’t going home with him. Because I needed his help to break the news to Aisha.

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“You can’t do this to Aisha, Sue,” hissed Sufi as the plane landed and slowly came to a halt.

“Shh! First, help me break it to Viren,” I insisted.

But I didn’t get a chance to tell him anything. Viren disembarked first, with Sufi at his heels. I followed them more slowly, worried sick that I was going to mess this up terribly. We walked into the terminal, and it was only when I bumped into Viren’s hard back that I realised he had come to a sudden halt.

“What the fuck is he doing here?” he barked, and I knew he had spotted Dhruv waiting for me inside the terminal.

“He’s here for me,” I said softly, and Viren turned around to meet my eyes.

His own were unreadable behind his dark glasses.

“What does that mean?” he asked carefully.

I gulped at the menace in his voice.

“It means that I’m not going home with you...with you guys.”

“You’re going home with him?” Viren asked in disbelief.

I shook my head.

“He’s taking me to a hotel. We’ll figure it out, Viren. I need to move out of the house at some point...”

“But why now?” he asked sharply.

I shrugged in reply.

“Why not now?”

Before he could reply, Aisha came running to us.

“Chachu, I see Naani,” she cried, waving at her maternal grandmother, who was walking towards us slowly.

Sufi and Daya Bua formed a protective circle around the child as we stared at the elderly lady in horror.

“What on earth is she doing here?” asked Viren.

Since Aisha’s maternal uncle had started a custody battle to gain control of her inheritance, Viren’s first act after he won her custody was to refuse her uncle any visitation rights because he hadn’t missed any opportunity to convince her to sway her into telling the judge she was unhappy with us. He had warned her grandparents that they were on thin ice, and if they did anything to mess with his plans to adopt Aisha, they’d never see her again.

But we all knew it wasn’t as easy as that. She was all they had left of their dead daughter. They had the right to stay in touch with her as long as they did not cross the boundaries of basic decency.

“I’ll go and check what she wants. Sunaina, please stay with Aisha until I get back,”

he ordered.

“Of course,” I murmured.

I wasn't leaving her side until she was safe. Dhruv began walking towards us with a questioning look, but he stopped when I shook my head. I pulled out my phone and texted him to tell him to stay where he was, explaining the delay. I didn't want Tahira to make any snide comments about him in front of Aisha when she already had to deal with her other grandmother.

I had told Dhruv nothing when I requested him to help me out today except that I didn't want to return to Chaudhry House. He had agreed to help me immediately. And now I was making him wait like a driver. I felt like an absolute heel for treating him like this, but I really needed a friend who was not part of the Chaudhry universe. And when I met Dhruv after all these years, I still felt the same connection I had felt when we were in school. He was still the same sweet, kind boy he had been then.

I was very relieved when he texted me back and told me he'd wait. But that relief turned sour when Viren returned. He looked grim when he joined us.

“Viren, what's the delay? Why are we still here?” asked Tahira petulantly.

“Because we have company,” replied Viren.

I wondered if he meant Dhruv. But it was even worse than I expected.

“Aisha's Naani wants to make up for the time she's missed with Aisha.”

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“I don’t want to go to their house, Chachu,” said Aisha worriedly. “I don’t like the way they talk about you.”

“Well, your Naani wants to stay with us for a while. And we can’t say no because with the adoption decision coming up soon, I don’t want them to try and influence it in any way,” he replied.

“What do you mean?” I asked worriedly.

“I wouldn’t put it past them to allege that we’re keeping Aisha from meeting her other relatives and pressuring her to say she wants to live with us. I don’t want to take any chances with this, Sunaina. Let’s try and keep it civil for now.”

When Daya Bua took Aisha over to greet her Naani, Viren leaned towards me.

“Looks like lover boy is in for a disappointment. You’re not going anywhere until this visit is over. You’re coming home with us,” he murmured in my ear.

CHAPTER 12

VIREN

Sunaina went pale at my words.

“You don’t need me for this visit,” she protested. “Aisha’s grandmother doesn’t even know me.”

Was she so eager to leave us, I wondered angrily.

“Well, I don’t trust her or her family. We need all hands on deck as long as she’s in our house.”

“I am not ahand,” she snapped. “I am your wife!”

“Then act like it,” I hissed. “Stop making a scene and come home with me. Aisha needs you right now.”

Aisha’s mother’s family was the root of all our troubles. They were the reason I was forced to marry Sunaina in the first place.

When Aisha was eight, her uncle and his family started showing up every time she visited her grandparents. Disha’s brother, Ajit, was a ne’er-do-well who had run his father’s business to the ground and was in need of fresh capital for his next venture. Aisha had inherited Deven and Disha’s wealth, but unfortunately, they hadn’t left any will naming someone astrustee to oversee her inheritance, which meant that whoever had custody of the child had access to her wealth.

Ajit had filed for her custody on the grounds that, as a bachelor, I wasn’t equipped to deal with her needs. He claimed she’d be happier in his house with his two daughters for company. I knew he was only after her money. If Aisha went to live with him, he and his wife would neglect her or worse. Hence, my hasty marriage to Sunaina which helped me retain Aisha’s custody and swung the adoption process in my favour.

After they played such a dirty trick on us, I refused to allow Aisha to return to her grandmother’s house because Ajit was capable of kidnapping the child to get his way. Disha’s parents got supervised visits with their granddaughter under my roof, and I put a stop to that after the last one two months ago, when her grandmother wept and begged her to refuse the adoption. She made such a bad scene that I banned her from

ever approaching Aisha.

I was furious at her for turning up at the airport without my permission. But she played the dead daughter card and promised to be on her best behaviour.

“I haven’t seen my Disha’s baby in months, beta. I know you’re upset with me, but I was only doing what I thought was best for Aisha. If she’s happy with your family, I’m willing to accept that. But please don’t cut me out of her life,” Laxmi Aunty begged.

I was willing to give them an hour in the airport’s coffee shop, but before I could tell her that, my Chachi walked up to us and ruined everything. She hugged Laxmi Aunty as if she hadn’t met her in ages.

“Viren, you’ve punished her enough. You must allow her to visit Aisha again,” she said kindly.

“Bua’s right, Viren,” said Tahira, who had followed her aunt. “I have an idea! Laxmi Aunty can come to stay with us for a while to reconnect with Aisha. What do you think, Bua?”

I stared at her furiously, but she was oblivious to my anger. Who the fuck did she think she was inviting people to stay in my house?

“I didn’t know you were extending your visit with Chachi, Tahira,” I said pointedly, and she gave an awkward braying laugh.

“She insisted I stay with her for a while,” she stammered.

Chachi chimed in, adding her two cents of approval, and there was really no way I could get out of inviting Laxmi Aunty to stay. Of course, there was a silver lining to

this mess. If Laxmi Aunty and Tahira were staying with us, I could force Sunaina to stay on the pretext of putting on a united front. It wouldn't do for the Chaudhry bahu to go gallivanting with another man while her husband hosted guests in their home.

I didn't look too closely at why I wanted my wife to return home when we were about to end our fake marriage. All I knew was that I wanted her by my side.

"Fine!" she spat. "I'll stay. Only for the duration of her stay."

She stomped away to speak to the boy toy, and my lip curled in disgust when she gave him an extra-long hug. Ten Mississippis this time, I counted. What kind of man waited so patiently for another man's wife?

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“Is that Dhruv?” asked Daima, coming up to me.

She stared at him curiously and then smiled slowly.

“He’s cute,” she said, and I let out a snort of disgust.

“He’s a loser,” I snapped.

“And you’re jealous,” she murmured.

“Rubbish! I’m just a good judge of people, and that man is trouble, Daima. You need to make sure Sunaina stays away from him.”

“Sure! I’ll tell her to stay away from a handsome, successful doctor who also happens to be very sweet just because her soon-to-be ex-husband doesn’t like him,” she said with an eye roll.

“Boss, there’s something very shady about this whole thing,” said Sufi worriedly.

He had been talking to Aisha while her Daadi and Naani chatted away like old besties.

“Like what?”

“We were supposed to return at the end of the week. Aisha didn’t even know we were coming home today until she woke up this morning. So when did she have the time to text her grandmother and tell her what time our flight was to land?”

I stared across the terminal at the one person who looked the most pleased to see Laxmi Aunty -Tahira.

“If Aisha didn’t tell her, someone else must have done so. Someone who has been causing trouble since she gatecrashed our holiday,” Sufi added meaningfully.

“Find out what Laxmi Aunty is after, Sufi,” I said slowly. “She’s forced herself on us for a long stay. Why would she do that when she lives in the same city? I have a feeling Tahira is behind all this, but I can’t see what she stands to gain by inflicting another guest on us.”

“Is she coming home with us too?” asked Daima with a groan.

“Yes. And she’s the one who invited Laxmi Aunty to stay with us.”

“Some cheek that girl has,” said Daima indignantly. “Inviting someone to your house when she’s a guest herself!”

Sunaina walked up to us, still looking grumpy. I took one look at her face and asked Sufi to get going and call for the cars because the sooner I got her back under my roof, the easier I could be.

Tahira and her aunt drove off in Chachi’s car. I sent Daima, Aisha and Laxmi Aunty home in another car, while Sufi, Sunaina and I took mine.

“I’ve just found something very worrying,” said Sufi, pulling up a picture on his phone once we were on our way home. “I asked your legal team to look into Tahira’s activities to see if there was any way we could tie her to the leak about your marriage. They sent me this pic a few minutes ago, which was grabbed from a CCTV camera at her club.”

My blood ran cold at the sight of Tahira and Ajit clinking their glasses together in a toast. This had to be the most unholy alliance I had ever seen.

“When was this?” I barked.

“The day before she joined us in London.”

“So that’s her game,” I murmured.

Ever since she crashed our holiday, I had been wondering why Tahira was still hanging around even though I had made my disinterest in her crystal clear. But now I knew what she was up to. She had teamed up with Ajit.

This was payback. For rejecting her. For marrying Sunaina instead. And she had no qualms about messing with Aisha’s life just to get back at me.

“What do you think they are trying to prove?” asked Sunaina.

“They want to prove our marriage is fake. The adoption rules say we need to prove we’ve been in a stable marriage for over two years. If they find any evidence to support that conjecture, Ajit will fight the adoption.”

“Then we need to make sure they don’t find any evidence,” said Sunaina firmly.

Sufi let out a bitter laugh.

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“Those two snakes are going to be slithering around the house for a while, Sue. They will find all the evidence they need to prove your marriage is in name only within the first three days. Unless...”

I didn't trust the crafty look that came over his face, and his next words proved my fears were well-founded.

“Mr C, what are the chances of anyone prying the details of your marriage contract from your legal team?”

“Less than zero,” I replied promptly.

My lawyer, Ranvijay Rathore, also happened to be a good friend, and I knew there was no possibility of a leak from his office. He knew what was at stake here and had promised to do everything he could to help keep Aisha safe.

“So with that out of the picture, there's really just one thing they can exploit - the fact that the two of you don't share a bedroom. And that can be easily rectified,” he said with a wink.

Sunaina and I turned to each other instinctively, and I knew that the horror I saw in her eyes was reflected in mine.

How the hell was I going to keep my hands off her if we shared a bedroom?

CHAPTER 13

SUNAINA

It wasn't for nothing that I called Sufi the Narad Muni/Loki of my life. The man was a born shit-starter.

"You must be joking," I snarled. "I'm not sharing a bedroom with him. That wasn't part of the deal."

"And neither was your boy toy," said Viren. "And yet, you were about to swan off with him into the sunset, weren't you?"

"I was just trying to make the eventual separation easier on everyone," I cried.

Viren snorted in reply, and the sound made me want to punch him in the throat. Luckily for him, we drew up outside Chaudhry House.

I slid out of the car and stared up at the grand mansion that had become my haven. I had found sanctuary here. And love. But now, all I had left was heartbreak.

"Do it for Aisha," Viren whispered in my ear, sending shivers down my spine. "One month. That's how close we are to our goal. The social worker will take a month to make enquiries about us, and when she's compiled all her data, she will visit us for a home inspection. This month is very crucial for us, Sunaina. It could make or break the adoption. I don't want to give Ajit any ammunition to put a spoke in the process. Do you think you can put up with me until all this is over?"

Could I? Or would that one month destroy me completely?

"Only if we share a suite with separate bedrooms," I countered, but Viren shook his head.

“That would defeat the whole purpose. It has to be one bedroom. And one bed.”

He stared down at me grimly as he said that.

I felt a gush of wetness at the thought of sharing a bed with him. My heart began banging about in my chest as if possessed, and my vision started going dark.

“Breathe, wifey,” he growled, making my knees go weak.

Damn it! How was I going to keep my distance from him if he called me wifey?

“Don’t call me that,” I snapped, taking in a big gulp of air.

“It stopped you from fainting, didn’t it?” he asked with a grin.

“I wasn’t about to faint,” I said through gritted teeth. “I was just feeling a little claustrophobic at the thought of sharing a bed with you and your giant ego.”

“It’s not that big,” he said modestly, and I wondered if I could just put a pillow over his face when he was asleep and end all my misery.

He stared with suspicion at the smile that grew on my face at that thought.

“Don’t even think about whatever’s making you grin like a chudail,” he hissed.

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“Remember this grin every time you even think of pissing me off over the next month, Mr C,” I replied.

“Bring it on...wifey,” he growled just as I was walking away, and I was sure it was just a weird coincidence, but I stumbled over my own feet. With a deep breath and a lot of restraint, I ignored his low laugh and stalked into the house.

Sufi had already arranged to move all my stuff into Viren’s room, so when I went upstairs, I had to dodge past the helpers who were moving the contents of my wardrobe into Viren’s massive walk-in closet.

“Sufi...listen,” I said, grabbing his sleeve as he supervised the move. “That walk-in closet is so massive. Just put a day bed in there and no one will know any better.”

“Babe, I don’t trust those women. What if they come snooping in here when you’re both out of the house and take pictures of your sleeping arrangements? Are you willing to risk Aisha’s future over such a small thing?”

“Look, Viren’s Chachi probably already knows we sleep separately.”

“She lives in her own wing on the other end of the mansion, sweetie. She knows nothing of what goes on here because she sticks to her side of the house. Maybe she’s heard something from the staff, but they can’t prove a thing. Not anymore,” he replied.

I sighed in defeat and went unwillingly to Viren’s room. I had never been in here, although he had entered my room on the few occasions when I fell asleep in the den

during movie night, and he had carried me up to bed.

It was a huge room with the aforementioned walk-in closet and a bathroom that was bigger than my father's flat in Borivali. It had high ceilings with stained glass fanlights over the large windows and a big balcony overlooking the garden. The furniture was old and made entirely of teakwood. It was very different from the modern furniture in the rest of the house. These were vintage pieces, lovingly restored and shipped from all over the country.

I pushed open the bathroom door and gasped at the sheer opulence of it. There was a huge enclosed shower area that was too big to be called a cubicle, with a large whirlpool spa tub in one corner. There were speakers built into the ceiling outside the shower area. I gaped at the complicated shower equipment that looked like you needed an engineering degree to operate it. There was a big rain shower head, along with multiple shower heads at various heights, ensuring the most decadent shower experience.

I had a feeling this was going to be my favourite spot in the room, I thought with delight. I loved taking long, boiling hot showers that left me looking like a boiled lobster.

I dragged myself out of the bathroom reluctantly and found the room empty, except for my husband, who was standing by the window looking out at the garden. Immediately, I felt like an intruder. This was Viren's space and I didn't know if I would ever fit in here.

"I can hear you overthinking," he said, looking over his shoulder.

I smiled hesitantly.

"I was just wondering how I'd ever fit in here. This room is so...you."

“What do you mean?”

I looked around the room once before I met his enquiring gaze.

“The first impression is stark, uninviting...hostile,” I began, and a muscle jumped in his jaw at this indictment. “But then...”

Viren moved suddenly, and I lost the thread of what I was saying. He walked up to me and stood looking down his long, aristocratic nose at me.

“But then?” he bit out.

“Then you start noticing the little things that bring in the warmth, from the gorgeous vintage furniture to the soft, thick bedding. Not to mention that mindblowing bathroom!”

“You’re comparing me to a bathroom?” he asked in disbelief.

“It is the Viren Chaudhry of bathrooms, trust me,” I said with a quick grin. “It’s very special.”

His eyes darkened as he stared at my lips, and again, I felt a gush of wetness at the intensity of his gaze. Oy, if he was going to look at me like that every time we were alone in our room, then I was in serious trouble.

“I’m going to change and go downstairs,” I said hastily, ducking past him to look for a change of clothes.

The rest of the day sped by, with Aisha being monopolised by Laxmi Aunty, who ignored me as if I were a member of the staff. Luckily, Sufi had managed to have a quick word with Aisha, warning her not to answer any questions about our sleeping

arrangements. I was wondering if she would be weirded out by my moving into Viren's bedroom, but she didn't seem to care.

Viren's aunt and Tahira kept him occupied after dinner, and I went upstairs silently, hoping he'd stay downstairs until I was asleep. Although I had no idea how I was going to fall asleep at all. I mean, I was going to sleep in Viren's bed!

I changed into my Garfield pyjamas and got under the covers with my guided sleep meditation plugged into my ears. But I'd barely got to the deep breathing part when I felt the bed dip.

My eyes flew open, and I turned my head to see Viren staring at me in the dim light of his bedside lamp. My eyes skipped a beat at the look in his eyes.

"Hello," I whispered.

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“Are you comfortable?” he asked softly. “Do you have enough space for all your things?”

I nodded softly, and his gaze moved to my messy hair spread all over my pillow. Viren’s throat worked as he swallowed.

“You have beautiful hair,” he muttered, looking away abruptly.

“Thanks,” I whispered, my heart going at a million miles an hour. I was about to have a heart attack. All over a small compliment about my hair.

Just then, my phone pinged. I picked it up and was surprised to see a text from Dhruv, checking if I was okay. I typed out a quick reply and put the phone back on the bedside table.

“Why the hell is he texting you so late in the night?” demanded Viren, sitting up.

I swept my hair off my face and glared at him.

“It’s rude to look at someone’s phone,” I said coldly.

“Not when that someone happens to be my wife,” he countered.

“Fake wife,” I reminded him through gritted teeth. “You act like you have some sort of claim over me. But you don’t.”

“I don’t care, Sunaina. I can’t believe you brought him into our bed.”

I sat up in shock and gaped at him, wondering if he'd had a serious brain injury.

“Were you dropped on the head as a child, Viren?”

“I’m not sure. You’ll have to ask Daima,” he said with an eye roll.

I growled under my breath and went up on my knees so I was nose to nose with him.

“I did not bring anyone into our bed! I can text anyone I like because this is my space as much as it is yours. And if you don’t need my permission to text your friends, I certainly don’t need yours to text mine. As for calling it our bed, it is just a space that we share. So quit making it out to be anything more.”

“So you’d be okay with me texting...say...Tahira...while I’m in bed with you?” he asked, and I wanted to slam my pillow into his stupid, gorgeous face.

How dare he text her at all? He read my answer in my eyes.

“I didn’t think so,” he said with a smirk. “So don’t even think about that smarmy bastard when you’re in our bed.”

“Why not?” I demanded angrily. “Give me one reason why I can’t think of or text or speak to Dhruv while I’m in your bed.”

Viren went still at my question. He knew what I was asking. He had no right to object to my friendship with Dhruv, yet he was acting as if I was cheating on him. I couldn’t possibly cheat on him when we didn’t have a relationship to speak of.

“You know why,” he whispered. “It’s the same reason I will never think of, text or speak to any other woman while you’re here.”

“I’m here only for a month,” I reminded him. “We need some ground rules to get through this month, Viren. Otherwise, we’ll be at each other’s throats all the time.”

He stared at me for a few moments before he nodded.

“Fine!”

“Rule number one: No fighting,” I said.

“Rule number two: We leave the rest of the world out of our bed. This is our space, and only ours,” he countered.

That sounded dangerous. Viren and I needed a buffer zone between us to keep us from straying into dangerous territory.

“Why?” I asked again.

“I don’t know,” he said, but I pressed him further.

“Tell me why, Viren,” I insisted.

“Because I can’t stand the thought of him being anywhere near you! Not even in your thoughts,” he yelled. “And it’s the same reason why you can’t bear to see Tahira touching me.”

Damn! I hadn’t expected him to admit his jealousy. Or call out mine.

Where did we go from here? I had no answer. All I knew was that I could suffer the agony of being near him without touching him for a whole month and have nothing to show for it. Or I could indulge myself for a whole month and then find the strength to walk away from him at the end of it, even if it killed me.

I had been a rule follower all my life. I had never put even a toe over the line because it simply wasn’t in my nature. I wasn’t a rebel. I was a people-pleaser.

I had obeyed my father until he died, and I had obeyed my stepmother until it became absolutely unbearable. And I had obeyed the terms of our marriage contract. What did I get in return for always doing the right thing? Nothing but heartbreak. My father died and left me all alone in the world. My stepmother tried to sell me into marriage to a man twice my age. And my fake husband was going to divorce me soon, leaving me all alone in the world all over again.

Maybe it was time for me to walk on the wild side for a change.

What was the worst that could happen? Viren could turn me down if he didn’t want me. But if it turned out that he did want me, I’d get to live out my dreams, if only for

a little while.

I had no illusions about myself. I knew a man like Viren would never want a woman like me forever. I was no match for his culture and sophistication. I didn't fit into his world. But I also knew that there would never be any other man for me because my world began and ended with Viren.

At twenty-six, I had to be the world's oldest virgin because I had never been into casual sex. I was waiting for the right man. The man of my dreams. The man who would give me my happy ever after. But it was time to accept that I would never have a happy ever after because the man of my dreams didn't love me at all.

However, he was attracted to me for now. And this was my only chance to experience physical pleasure. I didn't want to die a virgin! If I could have a small taste of happiness for a change, why was I so hell-bent on depriving myself?

It was the easiest decision I had ever made, I thought wryly before I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his.

CHAPTER 14

VIREN

She took me by surprise.

One moment, we were glaring at each other, and the next minute, Sunaina pressed her soft lips against mine. I knew I should draw back, but for the life of me, I couldn't.

I stood still for a few seconds to give her time to change her mind if she wanted to, and when she deepened the kiss instead of pulling away, I threw caution to the wind and kissed her back. I teased the seam of her lips, and when they parted in invitation,

I sent my tongue in to play with hers. Sunaina started at the first stroke of my tongue against hers, making me wonder if she had never been kissed before. I gently sucked on her tongue, and she moaned in reply.

The little sound sent the blood roaring to my dick, and I kissed her harder until we were both breathless. She pulled away to catch a breath, and I stared down at her. Her hair was all over the place. Her eyes were shut, her skin flushed, and her lips plump and swollen. Sunaina had never looked more beautiful.

I reached out and stroked her lower lip with my thumb, and she opened her eyes slowly. She read the regret in mine and drew back hastily. I caught her by the elbow before she fell off the bed, but she shook my hand off.

“I’m...I’m sorry,” she whispered, going pale. “I thought...”

She broke off and looked away, her face suffused with shame.

“You thought right,” I said hoarsely. “I do want you. More than you’ll ever know, wifey.”

She licked her lips nervously and still wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“Then why...?” she began and broke off without finishing her question, as she allowed her hair to fall over her face, obscuring her from my view.

“Why did I stop?”

She nodded slightly.

“Because I might be many things, but I’m not the sort of man who takes advantage of a woman,” I replied. “I cannot make love to you, knowing there’s no future in this. I

refuse to lead you on and raise expectations I can't fulfil, Sunaina."

She nodded stiffly in reply, and I got out of bed. There was no way I could sleep next to her in this state. I needed a long, cold shower if I had to make it through the night.

I was almost in the bathroom when she spoke.

"I've never done this before," she said softly, and I froze with my hand on the door.

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“Done what?” I asked carefully, without turning around.

“Made love to a man,” she replied, and I groaned under my breath, my hand clenching around the handle. “Or even kissed one.”

Fuck me, she was a virgin! It shouldn't have mattered, but it did. Sunaina didn't know what she was doing to me. The fact that I was her first kiss made me feel about twelve feet tall and gutted me at the same time. I knew the significance of what she was offering. But it made it all the more important that I didn't lead her on.

“I have nothing to offer you,” I said harshly. “Except sex.”

I heard her get off the bed and walk towards me, and I turned around to face her.

“Do you want me?” she asked bluntly.

“What do you think?” I replied sarcastically.

“Let's leave the power games out of this, Viren. As you can see, I have absolutely no experience with these games. I've never played them. I'm asking you to be honest with me if you're not attracted to me because when it comes to sex, I'm not good at reading between the lines. And it's absolutely fine if you say you don't want me,” she said, her head held high.

But I could read the vulnerability coming off loud and clear. It was evident in the way she held herself, with her arms crossed over her chest defensively. She was bracing herself for a rejection. God! This woman was going to be the death of me, I thought,

running a hand over my face wearily.

“I don’t want your pity,” she added sharply.

I let out a bitter laugh.

“Trust me, wifey. Pity is the last thing on my mind right now. I’m trying to remember why I decided to be a gentleman while my body is raging at me for being a fucking fool.”

She shrugged lightly, and her t-shirt slid off her shoulder, revealing the smooth skin underneath.

“You’ve never behaved like a gentleman with me before, so why start now?” she quipped. “But it’s fine. You don’t need an excuse for not wanting me. I’m going to bed now.”

She turned away from me stiffly, and something inside me exploded.

“Are you fucking blind?” I roared, furious with her for refusing to see how much I wanted her. It was all very well for me to be noble about not taking advantage of her, but I couldn’t understand why she kept telling herself I didn’t want her. How could I not want her when she was sheer perfection?

She whirled around in anger.

“Don’t yell at me, Viren Chaudhry!”

“Then stop talking utter nonsense, Sunaina Chaudhry,” I retorted. “I’m not saying no because I don’t want you. I’m trying to do the right thing!”

“Fuck doing the right thing,” she yelled. “I’m sick and tired of always doing the right thing! I’m sick of always being good.”

“All right, then,” I whispered, grabbing her hand and pulling her into my arms. “Let’s be bad. Let’s be very, very bad.”

CHAPTER 15

SUNAINA

Oy!

I was all on board to be bad, but I hadn’t the faintest idea how.

“Are you sure?” I asked, giving Viren an out if he wanted one.

I didn’t want a pity fuck for the first time that I made love. I wanted him to want me as much as I wanted him.

“Chickening out already?” he asked with a feral smile, and I straightened my spine.

“Of course not,” I hissed. “I’m just helping you save face if you want to chicken out.”

“Not on your life, wifey. But let’s get one thing clear. Sex is all I have to give you. Don’t expect forever because I just don’t have it in me,” he warned.

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I wound my arms around his neck and stared into his eyes. All I could see was a deep, unmeasurable hunger. For me.

“I don’t need forever,” I lied. “I’m happy with ‘right now’.”

Viren ran his fingers through my hair, winding the length around his fist slowly.

“What are you thinking?” I asked breathlessly.

“I’m thinking of your beautiful hair and all the ways I’m going to play with it,” he replied, tugging gently at the hair wound around his fist, sending sparks of lightning shooting up my scalp.

“Obsessed much?” I teased and he nodded as he stared down at me.

“Very,” he replied simply. “If you knew the kind of dreams I’ve been having about you...”

My knees went weak at his words, and I let out a squeal as he hoisted me over his shoulder in a fireman’s lift.

“What are you doing?” I cried.

“Punishing you for torturing me for the past two years,” he grunted as he threw me on the bed.

I laughed as I scrambled backwards and sat with my back against the headboard as he

crawled to me on all fours.

Viren grabbed my t-shirt and pulled it off in one smooth move, revealing my bare breasts. I fought the instinct to cover them with my hands and enjoyed the way his eyes darkened at the sight of them. He took my hand and pulled me over to straddle him. I shivered at the feel of his hardness rubbing against my core as I sank into his lap.

His warm hands ran lightly up my side, sending goosebumps along my skin. When his thumbs stroked the underside of my breasts, my nipples beaded in response, and I planted my knees firmly on the bed as I raised myself up.

Viren dropped soft kisses over my neck and chest as he made his way down to my breast. I gasped as he closed his lips over my nipple and sucked hard, sending shafts of desire shooting to my core. I gripped his head and held it in place as he nibbled and licked his way from one nipple to the other.

He squeezed my breasts with both his hands, pinching the nipples gently. I couldn't take it anymore and landed back in his lap, bucking against his hardness as he squeezed my butt to hold me against him.

By now, I was sopping wet and impatient to feel him against me. Viren took my hand and placed it gently against his erection, and I palmed him with the flat of my hand, making him hiss in reply.

With a grin, I unbuttoned his shorts and slid my hands into the waistband of his boxers. Virgin I might be, but shy I was not. At least, not with him. I felt as comfortable with him as if we'd been doing this forever.

Viren groaned when my fingers found him and I paused for a second.

“Is this okay?” I asked hesitantly, and instead of replying, he took my lips in a hard kiss.

When his tongue invaded my mouth, I imitated what he had done earlier and sucked on it, first gently and then harder. His hard cock jumped in my hand, proving that I was going the right way about this.

Viren dragged his mouth away and stared at me, his eyes glittering with desire.

“Take off your PJs,” he ordered gruffly.

I threw them off immediately, deeply regretting my choice of panties. If there was any justice in the world, I’d have been in a pair of skimpy, lace-fronted bikini briefs the first time I took off my clothes in front of Viren. Instead, I was wearing the most boring cotton panties, ugh!

Luckily, he didn’t seem to mind, as he ripped them off instantly. I crossed my legs instinctively, but he moved them apart and pulled me to lie a little lower before he put a pillow under my hips.

“Umm, what are you doing?” I asked worriedly, and he shot me a wicked grin that shook me to my core.

Oy, I was in so much trouble. I was completely out of my depth and had no idea what was going on, and...oh-my-fucking-god!

Viren brought my inner rant to an abrupt halt with just one swipe of his tongue.

But instead of keeping that up, he nibbled his way down my inner thighs one at a time until my legs were trembling with need. And then he nibbled all the way up again. This time, when he paused to swipe at my weeping core again, I grabbed his head and

held him in place, hoping he'd get the hint. And boy, did he get it!

He licked and sucked at my clit while slowly pushing one finger into my wetness, stretching me out gently. His finger curled inside me as he moved it in and out, and I could swear I was about to pass out from the sensations mounting inside me. His other hand held down my restless hips as he began a merciless assault on my clit.

It hit me out of nowhere - my first orgasm. I wasn't prepared for it and let out a low wail as I went over the edge suddenly, my womb contracting with the force of it. Viren kept finger-fucking me until I climbed down from the dizzying heights I had soared.

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When I opened my eyes, I found him staring at me strangely.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, worried I’d done something wrong.

Nothing,” he replied. “Everything’s right for once.”

CHAPTER 16

VIREN

I had Sunaina under me in my bed, coming for me, my fingers coated with her essence. Of course, everything was finally right.

What more could a man want? Oh, wait. This man wanted more. So much more. And I had all night to get it from her.

Sunaina’s eyes softened as she smiled at me dreamily before she grabbed my head and pulled me up over her. Her legs parted, and I settled between them, my dick wedged perfectly against her pussy. She reached up to press a sweet kiss on my lips, which turned dirty pretty fast when I rubbed my fingers against her lips and bent to lick her essence off them.

The kiss got deeper and wetter as we both tried to devour each other. Sunaina ground her wetness against me, and I was equally happy to push back, rubbing the head of my dick against her sensitive clit. She raked her nails over my back and moaned against my mouth.

I pulled away and her eyes shot open as she glared at me.

“Where do you think you’re going?” asked Mrs Bossy Boots.

“Condom,” I replied with a grin, and she blushed.

I reached into my bedside table and found an old pack of condoms.

“I hope these haven’t expired,” I muttered as I pulled one out and rolled it on.

Sunaina’s brow creased as she shot me a quizzical glance.

“How long has it been since you...you know...?”

“How long has it been since I set eyes on you?” I asked.

“A little over two years,” she replied.

“Then...a little over two years,” I said, answering her question.

Her eyes grew wide as she digested the implication of that. I didn’t know why she looked so surprised.

“You mean...you haven’t...since we got married?” she squeaked.

“Of course not! What kind of man do you think I am?” I asked in outrage. “I would never cheat on my wife.”

“Fake wife,” she reminded me.

“My wife is my wife. Fake or real doesn’t matter,” I said sternly.

Her lips wobbled, and she looked like she was about to cry. So I did the only thing I could. I bent and kissed her angrily. But the kiss she returned was like honey and spice mixed together. Sweet. Achingly sweet, with a punch of desire at the end that made my dick hard enough to pound through the wall.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I asked, even though it would kill me to stop now.

But it was her first time, and losing her virginity was a big decision, not to be taken lightly. She could still change her mind if she wanted to. That was her right.

Instead of being happy at how considerate I was being, the madwoman shot me a furious glare.

“I swear to god, Viren Chaudhry, if you dare to stop now, I will kick you in the samosas,” she snarled.

I barked a sudden laugh, and it made her even madder. She grabbed me by the ears, pulled my face down to hers, and proceeded to nip my lips hard. I nipped back, and she seemed taken aback for a few seconds before she licked the spot where she’d nipped me.

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Honestly, this woman would be the death of me, I thought as I gave in to the headiness of her kiss with a deep groan that came from somewhere deep within me.

I grabbed her thighs and pushed them higher and farther apart, opening her to me even more. I pulled my mouth from hers and took a deep breath as I looked into her eyes, which were bottomless pools of desire and something else I couldn't place. Something I shied away from.

I wanted to look away, but I wanted to see the look in her eyes when I made her mine.

I pinned her arms above her head and wound my fingers through hers as I sank into her slowly, giving her time to adjust to the invasion. I paused when I felt her hymen, and she took a deep breath before she tilted her hips just a little, drawing me in deeper.

“Slow down, Sunaina,” I growled. “I don't want to hurt you.”

But she just smiled and locked her ankles behind my back before she raised her hips. I saw her flinch when I breached through and forced myself to stay still until she got accustomed to the feel of me inside her. When her thighs relaxed around me and opened even wider, I pushed deeper until I was buried to the hilt.

I swore I was going to take my time fucking her. We were going to take it slow, even if it killed me. But my wifey had other ideas. When I gripped her hips to keep her still, the vixen began to squeeze her inner muscles around my dick.

“That’s cheating,” I groaned.

“Then, move, husband,” she whispered before she nipped at my shoulder.

So be it. I pushed her knees apart a little more as I sank in even deeper and began to move. She met me thrust for thrust, letting out little yips of pleasure every time I sank into her depths.

“God, you’re so tight,” I muttered, wishing I could stay in her forever.

“I’ve never felt anything like this,” she said, rising up to kiss me.

The movement pushed me in even deeper and she groaned loudly at the sensation.

“Don’t stop,” she begged.

“What do you need, wifey?” I asked as I pounded into her hard.

The top of her head hit the headboard, but I kept going.

“I need...you,” she said hoarsely.

“Say it,” I ordered, wanting to hear it from her lips.

Her eyes flew open, and the desire blazing through them made me speed up my thrusts. Sunaina dug her heels into my back and gave me what I needed to hear.

“I need you to...to fuck me, Viren,” she whispered.

I grabbed her hands and held them tightly as I thrust into her even harder. She raised her hips higher and came with a gasp. I kept going even as her inner walls convulsed

around me, barely allowing her any break between orgasms as she came again before she had even climbed down from the previous one. This one was harder and longer, and Sunaina let out a loud, keening cry as she went over the edge. I joined her, grunting into the crook of her shoulder as we came in unison.

I stayed buried in her for a bit, both of us catching our breaths. Then I pulled out slowly, trying not to hurt her. She winced a little, and I kissed the tip of her nose softly and then her forehead before I went to the bathroom to clean up. I returned with a wet cloth and helped her clean up before I kissed her poor, sore pussy gently.

“No more,” she groaned sleepily. “I think you’ve broken it.”

“Don’t tempt me to prove you wrong, you witch,” I said, giving her clit one last punishing swipe before I went to discard the cloth.

She was almost asleep when I returned. I gathered her into my arms and pulled the covers over us before I fell asleep with my wifey curled up against my chest.

CHAPTER 17

SUNAINA

When I opened my eyes, the sun was just creeping over the edge of the horizon. I stared at the dim light streaming in through the windows and wondered how I was going to get through the day.

Viren’s arm held me firmly tucked into his body as he spooned me from behind, and I had no inclination to get out of bed. But we needed to set some rules before we went downstairs.

Because while sex with Viren was mindblowing, spectacular, and every other

superlative I could think of, it did not alter the reality of our marriage one bit. He had made that crystal clear last night before he made love to me.

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“I can feel the wheels in your brain turning at warp speed,” he growled into my ear.

Oh, help! Viren had a panty-melting baritone at any given time of the day, but the sound and feel of it rumbling in my ear when he was still groggy from sleep was simply lethal.

He turned me over for a good morning kiss, but I placed a finger over his lips.

“First things first, we need to set some ground rules before we set off a riot downstairs,” I said sternly.

Viren nipped at my finger and then sucked it into his mouth, making me moan.

“Stop distracting me, Mr C,” I scolded, swatting at his shoulder. “I’m serious.”

He shook his head sadly.

“This is the reward I get for making you come three times last night.”

I rolled my eyes and went on.

“We cannot let Sufi and Daima know we’ve had sex. If they ever find out, they’ll up their little matchmaking game, and when things do fall apart, as they will eventually, they will be heartbroken. And I can tell you right now, if they get involved in our business, you can kiss your amicable divorce goodbye.”

Viren’s jaw clenched at the reminder of the end of our relationship, but he could

hardly blame me for trying to minimise the damage to everyone who was so invested in our relationship.

“Fine! State your terms,” he said grouchily.

“My terms are very simple. No touching or kissing, except when we are alone in our bedroom.”

“I accept. In return, I have my own terms,” he said. “You will not meet, call, text or even think about that smarmy quack as long as we’re together.”

“For fuck’s sake! Dhruv is neither smarmy nor is he a quack. He’s a very well-qualified neurologist who heads the neuro department at Mumbai’s biggest hospital. And I’m thinking of having him check you out for brain damage,” I snapped.

“I’ll damage every part of his body if he comes anywhere near me,” growled Viren.

“This jealousy is very strange,” I said primly.

“I’m not jealous. I’m merely a good judge of people, and I don’t trust that snake,” he replied, stretching his arms over his head, drawing my attention to his biteable biceps and perfect pecs. Show-off, I thought with an eye roll.

“May I suggest you tend to the wildlife on your side of the family and leave my friends alone? Now, can you show me how to turn on that shower, please? It looks complicated.”

“Sure,” he replied, with a grin that I did not trust. “I’ll show you how to use it.”

I was right in not trusting that grin because Viren’s idea of help was far more hands-on than I had expected. The quick shower I had planned turned into a leisurely

exploration of each other's bodies that ended in frenzied lovemaking. As a result, we were quite late to breakfast, and the whole extended family were already going into the dining room when we went downstairs.

I was convinced our activities of last night and this morning were written all over my face, and I went to extra pains to avoid Viren. He sat at the head of the table, and when Tahira went to sit at his right, he frowned at her.

"That's my wife's chair," he told her point-blank, and she flushed angrily before she flounced over to the chair next to her aunt. I was about to sit in my usual chair between Aisha and Sufi, so I was very surprised to hear that. He gave me a meaningful look, and I realised he wanted us to portray the perfect happy couple in front of Laxmi Aunty, who was watching us like a hawk.

She looked disappointed when I sat down next to Viren. Daya Bua, who sat opposite me, gave me an approving smile, and I tried very hard not to roll my eyes at this drama. I mean, we were pretending to be happily married for half this crowd while also pretending to be completely indifferent to each other for the other half of the same crowd. I didn't know if I was skilled enough to pull off such a deception.

Like when Viren got some butter on his chin while eating his paratha, I was tempted to wipe it off because that's exactly what a loving wife would do. But Daya Bua and Sufi were watching me as closely as Laxmi Aunty and Tahira, and they would know our status quo had changed if I so much as looked at Viren. So, all I could do was nudge him lightly with my knee, and when he looked up, I kept my eyes on my plate as I scratched my chin once to indicate the spot where he had butter. Luckily, he got the hint and wiped it off with his napkin while I smiled at Aisha and coaxed her to eat one more paratha.

Tahira left to attend a meeting immediately after breakfast, and Viren's aunt took Laxmi Aunty to the club to reminisce about the old days when Deven and Disha were

alive. I didn't know how Viren's Chachi could even be civil to the woman who was trying to steal her granddaughter away. Did she have no loyalty? Or was her hatred of me greater than her love for Aisha?

I knew she had always wanted Viren to marry Tahira, but he had never shown any interest in her, even before I came into their lives. That had nothing to do with me. The least she could do was be kind to the man who provided for her like a son. Viren did everything that Deven would have done for his parents, even though he and his aunt did not really get along. His uncle was a reserved shadow of a man who had never gotten over his son's death. He kept to his wing of the house and rarely joined us for meals, preferring to eat in his suite.

The staff cleared the dining table, but Viren, Daya Bua, Sufi, and I sat there to brainstorm the arrangements for the social worker's home visit. The butler interrupted our plans with a gentle cough.

"Sahab, Sarang Ji and his wife are here to meet you."

"Please show them in," said Viren in surprise.

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It was a little early for a social call, but Sarang Sharma was one of his oldest friends and was welcome at Chaudhry House even in the middle of the night. He was also one of the country's leading music directors. Sufi liked to call him the composer with the golden touch because of his track record of churning out hit after hit. The last seven albums he composed for Viren's company, Silver Records, had hit platinum in record time.

Sarang was one of the few classically trained composers of our times. He had trained for years under Bhargav Pandit Ji, a renowned singer of the Rampur-Sahaswan gharana of Hindustani classical music, who had established a large gurukul in Rewa. Last month, Sarang had married his guru's daughter, Tarana, in a simple affair at the gurukul.

To my surprise, instead of taking his new wife on an extended honeymoon, Sarang and his wife returned to Mumbai immediately after the wedding, and he was back in his studio the next day. That was no way to treat a wife, and Daya Bua lost no time in scolding him for being such a workaholic. But I had a feeling it was more than just that. I had a feeling there was something seriously wrong with Sarang and Tarana's marriage. For one, they seemed to actively hate each other. I had seen them glaring at each other more than once.

"The sex can't be that bad, Sue. Sarang looks like he knows his way around the bedroom," Sufi had murmured wickedly in my ear when we had the newly married couple over for dinner.

I had shushed him but felt really bad about the state of their relationship because Sarang was a dear, and Tarana looked like a very nice person. I wished they'd get

over their differences and make an attempt to save their marriage.

But as they walked into the dining room, it didn't look like there was any better understanding between them. They still acted like the other didn't exist. I had seen complete strangers be nicer to each other than these two.

Tarana gave Daya Bua a lovely woven basket filled with goodies from her hometown, Rewa. I hadn't even heard of any of the sweets except the decadent-looking jalebi, but the Mahua ki puri looked very promising.

"I can only look at those sweets from afar," I said with a sigh, staring longingly at the basket that Daya Bua carried out of the room. "I'm on a diet."

Viren frowned at me.

"What rubbish! You don't need to be on a diet," he exclaimed. "You're perfect as you are."

"How sweet," said Tarana, and I rolled my eyes.

"He's just making sure I don't pass on these insecurities to Aisha," I quipped.

"Or maybe he just likes your curves," murmured Sufi.

I pressed my foot into his instep and he squealed in pain.

"Shut your trap before I shut it for you," I hissed, ignoring the knowing look Viren cast at us.

"I thought you'd be glued to your studio at this hour," he teased Sarang.

“Dude, I can’t get any work done until you fix this issue with Ria’s contract,” grumbled Sarang, throwing his sunglasses onto the table.

I noticed Tarana gritting her teeth when Sarang mentioned Ria Ghosh, the reigning queen of playback in the film industry. I wondered if she’d heard the same rumours that I had and if that was the cause of the tension between the couple.

At one point, Sarang and Ria were rumoured to have been dating. And quite seriously. It got to the point where she refused to work with any other composer. Together, they created music magic, but while Ria was completely smitten with Sarang, I hadn’t seen any signs of him reciprocating her feelings. And I was sure that chapter in his life was closed for good now that he was married to Tarana.

“The problem is entirely on her side,” retorted Viren. “She’s being extremely unreasonable. And if she doesn’t mend her ways, I’ll be forced to replace her, Sarang.”

“Are you out of your mind? I’ve just spent the past month composing nine new songs just for her. No one else can do justice to those songs,” argued Sarang. “I dare you to find another singer like her.”

“It’s not impossible, my friend. Everyone’s replaceable,” said Viren in a hard voice.

“Sunaina, I need to talk to you,” whispered Tarana, looking very pale.

I nodded and pushed my chair back.

“We’ll leave you to your very boring discussion,” I said, with a smile.

As we rose from the table, I noticed Sarang’s eyes tracking his wife even as he kept talking to Viren. But she didn’t see it because she was too busy stalking out of the

room in a temper. I smiled ruefully as I followed her to the covered verandah that wrapped around the whole house.

She looked glum as she leaned against the railing.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” I asked gently.

“You mean apart from the fact that my husband is so obsessed with another woman that he won’t ever give anyone else a chance?” she asked bitterly.

“Do you mean Ria?”

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“Who else? She’s all he can think about. Ria’s contract, Ria’s schedule, Ria’s riyaz. It’s strange how my entire life revolves around my husband’s work wife.”

“Sarang is not the kind of man who would cheat on his wife,” I murmured. “As far as I know, they are just colleagues.”

But I couldn’t deny the truth in her words. Even if he wasn’t cheating on his wife, Sarang spent far too much time with Ria. Sure, it was all in the studio, but still. It made his wife look like a fool. I’d be heartbroken if Viren humiliated me like that. Not for the first time, I wondered why Sarang had married Tarana at all if Ria took up so much space in his life.

“I’m just sick of playing second fiddle to Ria,” said Tarana. “And I’m sick of being the perfect wife and bahu.”

“What do you mean, babe?” I asked warily.

She turned around to say something but stopped and stared at me hard for a few seconds.

“You look different,” she said.

Then her eyes widened.

“Ohmigod! You’ve had sex!” she yelped, and I slapped a hand over her mouth.

“Are you out of your mind?” I asked. “You don’t know me well enough to say

something like that!”

“Sorry, but I have a sixth sense for that sort of thing, and I have no mental filter, which is a very bad combination. You’ve always had this untouched virgin quality about you, but now...now you’re giving full sex goddess,” she said with a wicked grin.

“Am not,” I argued.

“Are too,” she insisted. “And I’m very happy for you.”

Fuck! If Tarana could read me so easily, so could Sufi. I really didn’t want the details of my sex life to be common knowledge. That’s it! I was never having sex again. Viren and his magic dick were never getting anywhere near me again. This was far too embarrassing!

“Okay, stop turning so red,” cried Tarana in alarm. “Your family will never forgive me if I make your head explode.”

“You are a menace,” I informed her. “I always thought you were this innocent girl from a small town. But you’re not.”

“No, I’m not,” she agreed. “I might have grown up in a small town, but I’m not dehati in the least. I was born to be a star, Sunaina. Unfortunately, I became a bahu. Ugh!”

I stared at the woman in front of me, wondering how I’d slotted her so incorrectly. She was right. She wasn’t a small-town girl at all. She had the same quality I had seen in so many other women in this city of dreams. She was ambitious as hell. I wondered how far she’d go to make her dreams come true.

“What do you mean by star?” I asked carefully, hoping she didn’t mean a social media star.

“Are you still taking on new clients for your business?”

Oy, this was exactly what I was worried about.

I was a social media manager for several mid-level influencers. None of my clients had ever made it really big yet, but they were growing steadily. I was still waiting for that breakout star who’d go massively viral, but I knew for sure that a society bahu with stars in her eyes was not it.

“Umm...yes...but I’m quite selective about the kind of work I take on,” I said politely.

In reply, she pulled out her phone and played me a video.

“Is that you?” I gasped, staring spellbound at the sight of her singing a mash-up of a classical bandish and Unholy.

Holy crap! Tarana was no society bahu/wannabe influencer. She was a music professional!

It wasn’t just the singing, which was amazing, of course, but it was also the presentation. The way she looked and carried herself. She owned the screen!

“Tarana Sharma, you were right,” I breathed. “You were born to be a star.”

“Pandit,” she corrected me. “Tarana Pandit. I haven’t taken Sarang’s name.”

“Why not?” I asked curiously.

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We were married to the kind of men whose name was their identity. And it was but natural for them to want their wives to take their names. Viren had been quite clear about the fact that I had to take his name if we were to convince the adoption agency that we were in a stable marriage. He didn't want to give them a reason to doubt our relationship.

“Because my marriage destroyed the career I aspired to. I have no intention of allowing it to destroy my identity, as well,” she said starkly.

“Delayed, not destroyed,” I replied. “Your marriage might have delayed your career. But nothing can destroy your bright future, Tarana.”

“So how about it?” she asked. “Will you take me on as a client?”

I held out my hand, and she gripped it unsmilingly.

“Welcome aboard, Tarana Pandit. Let's make you a star.”

CHAPTER 18

VIREN

I stared at Sarang, waiting for him to tell me what was troubling him.

I knew my friend. He liked to bury his issues deep inside him, pouring his pain into his music instead of dealing with it like a sane person.

“How has Tarana settled in with your family?” I asked finally.

He let out an angry snort.

“My wife has no intention of settling down into comfortable matrimony, Viren. She has higher aspirations in life. Anyway, I’m not here to talk about her. We really need to resolve this issue with Ria because the producers are starting to fuss. They’ve already finished the last schedule of the shooting and want the album ready soon.”

“Stay out of it, Sarang. This has nothing to do with you,” I said curtly. “I will have a sit-down with Ria and her legal team. And if we can’t arrive at an understanding, you’ll have to look for another singer. That shouldn’t be difficult, surely.”

I didn’t know why he had such a blind spot where Ria was concerned. Sure, she was an amazing singer, but she wasn’t the only one. She wasn’t the first diva I had fired, and she wouldn’t be the last. That’s exactly how newcomers got their breaks in this industry. Every veteran artist lost a contract at some point because they threw one tantrum too many and were replaced at the last minute by a new artist. That was how the industry worked.

Sunaina and Tarana returned just in time to hear his reply.

“There will never be another Ria Ghosh, Viren. Mark my words.”

I noticed Tarana’s lips tighten at his words, and she looked daggers at him. I didn’t blame her. No wife liked to hear her husband be so obsessed with another woman. I could never figure out Sarang’s relationship with Ria. Were they having an affair? If yes, he would never have married Tarana. He wasn’t that sort of man. Was she merely his muse? For the life of me, I couldn’t figure out the hold she had over my friend. All I knew was that I didn’t like it.

Sarang and Ria had together brought back the golden era of Hindi film music that was based on melody rather than gimmicks. And they were a powerhouse duo. But I wondered if it was time to break this partnership before it became toxic to everyone around them.

Tarana gave Sunaina a meaningful look before she and Sarang left. I wondered what that was about. Before I could ask her, Sufi came in with my to-do list for the day.

“You’ve got a busy day today, gorgeous,” he announced. “You’re meeting with The Bandra Boys this afternoon. And can I just say I’m still fangirling over their lead guitarist, Tanvir? Now, if we can only find them another lead singer.”

The Bandra Boys were a progressive rock band from Bandra who had been with our label for the past three years. Unfortunately, their lead singer skipped out on them for a chance to join an alt-rock band in Germany. They still hadn’t found anyone to replace him, and I didn’t know if we could extend their contract unless they found someone soon.

“What exactly are they looking for?” I asked irritably. I didn’t like losing good artists just because they couldn’t get their act together.

“Tanvir says he wants a fresh voice. He’s tired of doing the same stale old thing. He wants to make some new music, and he wants someone with a strong Hindustani classical base this time around.”

I snorted in derision.

“Where’s he going to find a Hindustani classical singer to be part of a rock band?”

“I might have someone who’d be perfect for that job,” said Sunaina slowly.

I picked my next words very carefully because while I knew she meant well, her band of wannabe influencers were a far cry from the kind of singers we needed. We were looking for someone who was already recording-ready because we didn't have the time to train and polish them. Besides, we might have slept together, but that did not give her a say in the family business. Silver Records was my baby and my baby alone. And I ran it with my brain, not with my dick.

“Sunaina, it takes a special skill for a classical singer to perform with a progressive rock band. It requires an open mind and a level of flexibility that most gharana singers don't have. They are bound by the rules of their gharana, so as a record label, it's a very tricky thing for us to navigate. And we don't want someone who's trying to turn their hobby into a career. Progressive rock involves a lot of complicated techniques and compositions, so it has to be someone with the skill to blend their classical training with the rock aspect.”

“You don't even know whom I'm talking about,” she pointed out.

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She was right. I didn't, and I didn't even care because Sunaina needed to learn to stay out of my business.

"It doesn't matter because I don't have the time for influencers who think taking a few music lessons qualifies them to play with the big boys," I snapped.

As soon as I said that, I knew I had made a mistake. I mean, I knew it had to be said, but I shouldn't have put it quite so bluntly. Sufi let out a low whistle and backed away slowly, while Sunaina went still for a minute or so before she straightened her spine and gave me a glacial look that almost froze my balls off.

"Fine," she said softly.

It was just a word, so why did it sound like a declaration of war?

CHAPTER 19

SUNAINA

Of all the ruthless, arrogant, pompous asses in the world, I happened to be married to the worst one, I fumed silently as I heard his bullshit excuse for why he didn't want to consider the singer I was suggesting.

I knew his real problem. He thought I was trying to capitalise on the fact that I had lured him into my bed, and now was trying to take over his fucking company. Honestly! And they called women dramatic.

All I was doing was trying to help because Tarana wasn't just anyone. She was the mother lode.

Viren didn't know it, but she was exactly what The Bandra Boys were looking for. She had trained all her life under Bhargav Pandit Ji of all people. She had inherited his musical genius if that video was an accurate reflection of her skills. And she wasn't in the least intimidated by the rigid rules of her gharana because, in the video that I just saw, she was flouting them merrily.

I would have explained all this to my idiot husband if he'd given me a chance to talk. Instead, he had taken mansplaining and condescension to new heights, and it was time to show this big boy what little girls could do if you pissed them off.

I turned on my heel and walked away without saying a word, and I heard Viren swear under his breath. Sufi came running after me.

"He didn't mean it, Sue," he exclaimed. "He's just stressed because he doesn't want to lose that band."

He grabbed me by the elbow and dragged me to a halt.

"Talk to me, woman. You have that scary psychopath blank face going on, and I don't know what you're plotting, but I'm worried you'll accidentally destroy the world!"

I smirked at him in reply.

"If you don't want to go down with the rest of the world, you'll have to help me, Sufi," I said coldly.

"Oh God! You're going to get me fired," he groaned. "Listen, Sue, I can't afford to

get fired. I'm still paying off the EMIs for my flat in Nerul! And if Viren Chaudhry throws me off on my ass, nobody else will ever hire me."

"Eh, he's not going to fire you because I'll take the fall for this one. Don't you trust me?"

"I trust you...not at all," said the big drama queen.

"That's fine. All I need is for you to connect me to Tanvir."

"From The Bandra Boys? Oh no! What are you planning, Sue?" he yelped.

"I think it's time to show Mr Chaudhry the power of a wannabe influencer," I replied sweetly.

"Fuuuuuccck," whined Sufi.

But my bestie had never let me down until now, and he didn't let me down this time either.

"I know I'll regret this, but I'll tell Tanvir a friend of mine wants to connect with him. But that's all I can do. And Sue, if you value your head, don't tell him you're Sunaina Chaudhry. If your husband thinks you've pulled rank with one of his artists, he'll go full nuclear on you. Mr C doesn't take kindly to anyone messing with an artist who's under his protection."

"What exactly do you think I'm going to do to your Tanvir?" I asked irritably.

"I don't know! You didn't tell me what you're planning, remember?"

"Sufi Singh, this is highly classified info. Strictly need-to-know basis. And you don't

need to know anything about it because that gives you plausible deniability,” I said with a crooked smile.

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He sent me Tanvir's number, and I waited for Sufi to give me the all-clear before I texted him. I knew that the perfect time to reach out would be after Viren ripped him a new one for dragging his heels about finding a new lead singer. Tanvir would be vulnerable and worried about losing his big contract with Silver Records, and I had the perfect opportunity to present him with the perfect solution to his problem.

"Be gentle with him, Sue. Mr C just shot down his classical singer idea. He told him to get another singer just like the previous one," warned Sufi.

Perfect! Because now Tanvir had a point to prove. He wouldn't give up a chance to prove to Viren that he could make magic with a classical singer by his side. It was a question of his artistic freedom, but in this industry, you only got artistic freedom if you had the golden touch. And in today's age, the fastest way for a creator to prove he was gold was to have a video go viral. And that's where I came in.

I told Tanvir I was a social media manager for an upcoming classical singer, who was very open to experimenting with different styles of music, and that I wanted to explore a collab between him and my client. I sent him Tarana's video as an audition tape with no details about who she was.

I had my reply in minutes.

When can I meet your client?

I set up a meeting that very night at his home in Bandra, and he very kindly invited us for dinner.

The family was in the den when I went downstairs, and Viren's eyebrows shot up at the sight of me dressed in a dark grey chikankari kurta embroidered all over in pink. I had paired it with long, silver baalis and a thick silver cuff on one wrist.

"Where are you going?" he rumbled suspiciously.

"Someone has a hot date tonight," said Tahira snidely, and I wanted to smack her across the face with my handbag.

Viren jumped up and dragged me out of the room by the hand. When we were out of hearing range in the hallway, he turned to me furiously.

"I thought we had set some ground rules," he snarled. "You promised me you weren't going to meet that asshole for the duration of our marriage."

"I'm not meeting Dhruv," I cried. "I'm meeting a prospective client."

"Dressed like that?"

I looked down at myself in surprise. I was dressed very modestly in a long-sleeved kurta and loose palazzos.

"What's wrong with my clothes?" I asked in surprise.

Viren stared at me broodingly for a few moments before he spoke.

"Nothing's wrong," he bit out. "You look beautiful. And I want to lock you in our bedroom and never let you out because I don't want any other man even looking at you."

A slow smile spread over my face, and my husband looked grumpier than ever. I

looked around to make sure we were alone before I went up on my tiptoes and pressed a quick kiss to his lips. The opportunistic bastard grabbed me by the waist and backed me into the wall behind me.

“What time will you be back?” he growled as he bent forward and nipped at the tender skin beneath my ear.

“I...I...”

My mind went blank under the tender onslaught of his lips, and I shuddered in his arms. Maybe I didn’t need to go out after all. We could just go upstairs and...Tarana!

I remembered just in time that I had promised to pick her up in twenty minutes.

“I’ll be back late. Don’t wait up,” I stammered before I pushed him away.

CHAPTER 20

SUNAINA

Ihopped into the car waiting for me, and we set off for Sarang and Tarana’s fabulous sea-facing flat in Worli. I texted her when I pulled up in the parking lot and found her waiting for me.

“Did you have any trouble getting away from home?” I asked curiously. Wondering what her equation with Sarang’s very traditional family was like.

“A little. They were very shocked to learn I had plans tonight. Sarang’s mother expects me to wait for him every night and have dinner only after he has eaten, which is ridiculous because he eats at the studio most nights and gets home only to sleep.”

She shot me a desperate look.

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“Sunaina, can we not talk about Sarang and his family tonight? I need this to be only about me and my music if that makes any sense.”

“Of course,” I agreed readily because I knew what she was feeling.

When your husband was so famous, your very existence was obliterated by his fame. It became all about him. That’s exactly why I had held onto my job because it kept me from falling into the trap of believing I was really a billionaire’s wife. For the past two years, I’d had to constantly remind myself that when this was over, I was going back to a small flat in the suburbs, and it showed me the importance of being independent.

Tarana needed her music to be separate from everything that Sarang created, especially when she was going to be accused of nepotism anyway. It wouldn’t matter that she was an amazing singer in her own right. The trolls would always find a way to put her down just because she was married to Sarang.

‘So what’s the plan?’ she asked.

“I have no plan,” I confessed. “Tanvir saw your video and wanted to meet you right away. Shall we see how it goes?”

She nodded doubtfully as I stopped to pick up a couple of bottles of wine before our car pulled up outside a run-down colonial bungalow in one of the by-lanes of Bandra.

“Why are we meeting him in a bhoot bangla?” she hissed as I pushed the rusty iron gate open and made my way to the front door.

The paint on the outside of the house was peeling, but we could hear cheerful voices coming from inside. When we rang the bell, a bearded giant opened the door.

“Tanvir?” I asked carefully.

“Hey, come on in,” he said with a warm smile. “You must be Sunaina. And I recognised Tarana from the video.”

We followed him into the house and found it to be a warm, welcoming space with a large living room that opened into a dining area.

“Meet the band! That’s Atharva, our bassist, and that’s Gino, who plays keyboards, and his wife, Perpetua, is our drummer,” said Tanvir.

“Nice to meet you guys. This is a lovely house,” I said, which was true. It might look like a bhoot bangla from the outside, but the inside was lovely.

“This is Gino and Perpetua’s house. Atharva and I crash here most of the time, too, so we use this as our base,” said Tanvir.

“I hope you guys are hungry. Atharva and I have been slaving in the kitchen since evening,” said Gino as his wife opened the bottles of wine that I had brought along.

“We’re famished,” said Tarana, with a grin. “And something smells delicious!”

“That’s Atharva’s mom’s fish curry. The bastard won’t share the recipe, but he cooks it willingly enough, so we forgive him,” said Perpetua with a laugh. “We also have veggie options in case you’re vegetarian.”

Tarana happened to be vegetarian, and I was touched they went to so much trouble for our sake.

Dinner was a fun affair, with The Bandra Boys regaling us with tales of how they came together to form a band.

“But why are you called The Boys when Perpetua is a girl?” asked Tarana in confusion.

“We had another drummer when we first started out. We were all from the same boys’ school in Bandra, so the name came naturally to us. Perpetua joined us when Nikhil left the band to go into banking, and we offered to change the name, but she likes to see the look of surprise on people’s faces when they see her,” said Atharva, with a boyish grin.

“Tell us about yourselves,” said Perpetua. “Where are you girls from?”

I shrugged awkwardly and knew that we couldn’t go ahead with the evening without letting them know our real identities.

“In the interests of full disclosure, I need to tell you guys right now that my full name is Sunaina Chaudhry. I’m Viren’s wife,” I said slowly and found them staring at me in confusion.

“The Viren Chaudhry who has our asses in a sling right now? You’re his wife?” asked Tanvir with an angry glint in his eyes.

“Yes, but I’m here purely as Tarana’s social media manager, not as Viren’s wife. He has no idea I’m here because this has nothing to do with him,” I said hastily.

“And Tarana? Who are you?” asked Perpetua shrewdly.

Tarana raised her chin and met their eyes with defiance shining through hers.

“I’m Sarang Sharma’s wife,” she announced.

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Atharva let out a cynical laugh.

“Why are you girls here at all? You don’t need us when you have your husbands to launch Tarana’s musical career,” he said bluntly.

“I keep my music separate from my marriage,” said Tarana, and Tanvir snorted rudely.

“That is such a privileged statement to make,” he said, shaking his head in disgust. “When you know your husband is your safety net.”

“But it’s true. I need you people to understand one thing. You’re taking a big risk by going ahead with this collab. Both our husbands will be furious with us for going behind their backs,” I explained. “And they might take it out on you.”

“Why did you reach out to us?” asked Perpetua. “How did you even know we’re looking for a classical singer? That’s confidential information.”

“I overheard Viren and his assistant talking about you guys before he met with Tanvir this afternoon,” I confessed.

Perpetua stared at me for a few seconds before she grinned.

“You’re sneaky! I like that in a woman,” she said approvingly.

I got the feeling that Tanvir might be the talent, but Perpetua was the brains behind this band.

“But I still don’t get why you’re here,” grumbled Gino. “We’re already on thin ice with Viren. Why should we risk our contract because you girls want to play at being content creators?”

“I’m not playing at anything, buddy. This is my career just as much as it is yours,” snapped Tarana. “I understand if you don’t want to piss Viren off. That’s fine. You don’t have to do this collab if you don’t want to, and there won’t be any hard feelings about it. But don’t put me down before you even know what I’m capable of doing. I don’t sing for a hobby. I am Bhargav Pandit’s daughter and musical heir!”

“And I did give you guys a glimpse of Tarana’s talent. You wouldn’t have invited us over if you didn’t believe she was good,” I reminded them.

“All right, let’s all calm down and start over,” said Perpetua. “It’s time to make some music and see if we can find a way to work together.”

“But how? Viren isn’t going to be very happy about you girls going behind his back,” said Gino, who seemed to be the overthinker of the band.

“That’s why we need to go at this tangentially,” I said. “We need a couple of viral videos for fans to start demanding more collabs between your band and Tarana. Are you tied to Silver Record exclusively?”

“No, our contract is for each album, which is why we need a lead singer if we want them to renew it for our next album,” explained Perpetua.

“Okay, so let’s first try one collab and see how it does,” I said excitedly. “If your fans like your collabs, maybe you could pitch the idea of an album with Tarana as your lead singer.”

The band led us to their studio, and I settled down to record behind-the-scenes

content as the rest of them talked about music. Tanvir picked up his electric guitar and sat down cross-legged in front of Tarana.

“Can you run through some sargams for me?” he asked, and she sang a few notes.

He played them back with a rock twist added to the classical sargams. She quickly picked up what he wanted from her, and they played around with different scales and pieces until they were both comfortable. There was a lot of laughter as well as a few arguments as everyone chipped in with a different opinion.

This was marketing gold, I decided. I could use this to make blooper reels and BTS videos.

“What did you have in mind when you thought of a classical singer as your lead?” asked Tarana, and Tanvir stared into the distance for a bit before he spoke.

“I wanted to meld a rare Hindustani classical piece with rock. To create something unique and elevate our music. Do you have any suggestions?”

“How about a thumri by Bade Ghulam Ali Khan Sahab?” asked Tarana thoughtfully. “He wrote it to mourn his wife’s death, and even though it is one of the most poignant and intense thumris I’ve ever heard, I think it would pair very well with your style of playing. Sort of like a rock ballad.”

She sang a few lines, and the stark, intense melody gave me goosebumps. And when Tanvir began to play his electric guitar, I finally realised his vision for his next album.

They rehearsed a few times, and I shot a short video of them singing just one verse of the song. The video began out of focus with Tarana singing the first few notes of the alaap before the camera zoomed onto her face as she sang the first line. Then it

panned to Tanvir's guitar as he played his riff, and then it showed both of them in the same frame.

"Is that it?" asked Tarana, sounding slightly disappointed that the video was so short.

My fingers flew over my phone as I edited the video and uploaded it from her account, with The Bandra Boys as collaborators for the reel.

"I have enough content here for the rest of the week, babe. Let's see how this reel performs before we figure out our next step. We can ask the viewers if they want to hear the second verse, and so on. That's how you spin one song over a few weeks until you are ready to drop the whole song on your YouTube channel."

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They all murmured their agreement, and we spent the next hour or so shooting more content while Tanvir and Tarana experimented with different versions of the thumri.

On the way home later that night, Tarana turned to me and gripped my hand hard.

“Do you really think this is going to work, Sunaina? I’m really worried it might backfire, and I don’t want the band to lose their contract because of us.”

“Trust me, babe. Viren is an astute businessman. If your collab takes off, he will sign you as the lead singer for their next album. We just have to keep our fingers crossed and find a way to make it work.”

“How is it doing?” she asked. “I’m too scared to look.”

I pulled out my phone to check the stats and stared at my screen in shock.

“Wow! It’s doing way better than I expected, Tarana. The band’s fans are going crazy over the reel. It’s racking up likes, comments and shares faster than any reel I’ve ever posted,” I whispered.

She looked excited and terrified at the same time when I dropped her off at her place, and I didn’t blame her. We had just proved her talent for everyone to see, but it also meant our moment of reckoning had arrived much faster than we’d expected.

CHAPTER 21

VIREN

I wasn't planning to stay up waiting for my wife to drag her delectable ass home after her work dinner. No way! That would give her the wrong message. And yet...I found myself wide awake and reading in bed when she slunk into our bedroom.

She peered around the door, and her eyes widened when she found me awake. Was she disappointed, I wondered. There had been a flash of something in her eyes when she saw me.

Before I could speak, my phone rang. I wondered who was calling me so late in the night. To my surprise, it was Sarang.

"Hey, is everything all right?" I asked worriedly.

"You fucking bastard! What the hell were you trying to prove?" he raged, and I looked at the screen in surprise.

"Sarang, you've called Viren," I said sharply, wondering if he'd called the wrong person.

"I know that," he snarled. "Who else would I call?"

"You're not making any sense, man. Calm down and tell me why you're upset," I said, taking a deep breath to stay calm during this ridiculous conversation.

"Did you think I wouldn't find out? You're one of my oldest friends, Viren. I didn't think you would ever stab me in the back like this."

"Sarang, you have exactly one minute to start making sense before I come there and beat the shit out of you," I snapped.

"Ask your wife," he said before he hung up.

I turned to Sunaina in confusion and was surprised to see her standing by the door as if turned to stone.

“What’s Sarang going on about?” I asked.

She licked her dry lips and exhaled slowly.

“Viren, I need to tell you something,” she began just as my phone pinged.

“Hold on. He just sent me a reel,” I said, absently noting her flinch at my words.

I played the reel, and I felt icy fingers of dread creeping up my spine. It was Tarana...and Tanvir. Performing together. And it was exactly what Tanvir had described to me in today’s meeting - a mix of classical and rock. It was a flawless piece, and I had no idea Tarana was such a powerful singer. But one little fact stood out starkly. Sunaina was listed as one of the collaborators in the video.

Which could only mean one thing -my wife was behind this unholy collab!

“Is this your doing?” I asked hoarsely.

She nodded slowly, and that nod hit me like a body blow of betrayal.

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“I told you to stay out of it, and yet, you went behind my back to do this...why?” I asked, my voice as sharp as a whip.

“Why not?” she demanded.

I could not believe the audacity of this woman!

I strode over to her and grabbed her by the shoulders. She winced as my fingers dug into her skin, but she still glared at me defiantly.

“I told you Tanvir and his band had nothing to do with you.”

“And this collab between Tanvir and Tarana has nothing to do with you,” she countered.

“He’s my artist,” I yelled.

“You don’t own him,” she scoffed. “His band is contracted to you per album. That doesn’t mean they can’t make any other music.”

“Did it ever occur to you or Tarana to check if Sarang and I were okay with you doing this?”

“Are you serious, Viren?” she asked furiously. “Do you really believe we need your permission to do our jobs?”

“What jobs? Tarana is playing at being a content creator, and you used confidential

information that you overheard to enable her,” I said scathingly.

“Are you fucking deaf?” she shrieked in response, and for a minute, I was worried she’d wake the whole house. “Did you not hear her sing?”

“I agree she sings well, but this isn’t the way to go about it, Sunaina. You broke my trust,” I said, setting her away firmly.

“Oh, really? So you have never seized an opportunity that fell into your lap, I suppose?” she asked sarcastically. “And may I remind you that I offered you this option first? You didn’t even have the decency to hear me out.”

“Why should I have heard you out?” I growled. “Hundreds of people reach out to me every single day! I don’t have the time to hear everybody’s grand idea.”

“But I’m not everybody, Viren. I am your wife,” she replied angrily, and I shook my head in disgust.

There it was! And it was exactly what I was afraid of. Sunaina seemed to think that sleeping with me gave her a say in my company.

“Fake wife,” I corrected cruelly.

She flinched at that but recovered immediately and turned a deliberately blank face to me as I went on.

“And that does not give you a say in what happens in my company,” I added.

“I don’t give a fuck about your company,” she replied.

“Then what’s this all about?”

“This is about my work,” she said loudly. “Mine, not yours! Tarana is my client.”

“And Tanvir is mine.”

She shook her head in response.

“You’re not his manager. You merely own the publishing rights to his next album. If you get your head out of your ass, you will see that this collab between Tanvir and Tarana does not hurt your company in any way. It has nothing to do with Silver Records.”

“But why did you do this at all? All Tarana had to do was tell her husband she wanted to sing, and we could have arranged something.”

“So it’s okay for Tarana’s husband to help set up her career, but mine acts like I’m trying a hostile takeover if I even make one small suggestion.”

“Because their marriage is real,” I pointed out.

Sunaina’s eyes widened in shock, and her body bucked a little as if I’d struck her.

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“Wow! Thank you for showing me my place, Mr C. But I don’t give a fuck about what you think. I don’t need your permission to do what’s right for my client, and as for her needing Sarang’s help to advance her career, you just sit back and watch that girl go places without his help,” I said coldly.

I sighed heavily and ran a hand over my face wondering how we’d managed to muck things up on such a grand scale.

“Sarang is one of my best friends, Sunaina. How do you think he felt when he saw that my wife had helped his wife to make a public statement at his expense?”

“Ohmigod! Do you men think the world revolves entirely around you? Tarana was a goddamn amazing singer even before she married Sarang. This talent didn’t just sprout inside her as a result of the wedding pheras. She has every right to showcase her talent however she likes. I know you’re too old to understand the power of social media, but it is one of the fastest ways for a creator to get visible. Maybe that pisses you and Sarang off because you men don’t get to gatekeep the music industry anymore, but that’s your problem, not ours.”

It pissed me off no end that she’d just called me old and out of touch with the world. With her world. But she wasn’t done.

“And FYI, please get it through your thick head that I wasn’t trying to interfere in your business when I said I have the perfect lead singer for Tanvir’s band. I was pitching my client to you. When you bigshots pitch ideas to each other at parties and over a game of tennis, it’s called networking. But if a small fry like me does it, you get on your high horse and call it unprofessional. Double standards, much?” she said,

before she grabbed a change of clothes from the walk-in closet and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” I asked in surprise.

“I’m sleeping in Daya Bua’s suite tonight,” she replied coldly.

“Like hell you are,” I snarled. “I won’t let you mess with Aisha’s future just because you’re pissed with me.”

“Oh, please! I don’t think Tahira or Laxmi Aunty will think of spying on me there.”

“Is your ego more important to you than Aisha?” I asked.

Because that’s what it came down to - were we capable of putting our egos aside for her sake?

“Fine! Then I’ll sleep on the floor, but I’m not sharing a bed with you,” she snapped.

“Don’t be a child, Sunaina,” I said, rolling my eyes.

If looks could kill, I’d be lying on the floor with my head blown off, but Sunaina merely stomped into the bathroom and slammed the door as hard as she could.

CHAPTER 22

SUNAINA

I stood under the boiling hot shower for ages, tears streaming down my face. I wiped them away angrily, but they wouldn’t stop flowing.

I didn't know why I was crying. Was it anger? Maybe.

Viren was acting like I'd done something very unethical when it was just a little sneaky. I was sure he had done a lot worse. You couldn't build an empire like his if you weren't a complete shark. Would he have spoken to Tahira like this if she'd been in my place? Of course not! He'd probably give her a higher stake in his company as a reward. But just because I was a nobody from nowhere, he made me feel like dirt because I saw an opportunity for my client and pounced on it.

It wasn't even as if the collab hurt Tanvir or Silver's brand in any way. Viren needed a singer and I found him one. He was just too obstinate to accept that the idea he rejected without even considering had turned out to be a winner.

But that wasn't why I was crying. At least, it wasn't the only reason I was crying. I was crying because I was a fucking fool. Life had shown me over and over that there was never going to be a happy ending for me. The best I could expect from life was to be allowed to survive. And despite knowing that, I had dared to dream of joy based on just one night of spectacular sex.

What did I expect? That I was blessed with a magic vagina that would make Viren fall in love with me overnight. Men like him did not build a future with a woman like me. They had flings with women like me and gave their ever-afters to women like Tahira, who fit into their world because they were born into it.

I cried for all the things I would never have, and I cried for all the humiliation that was still in store for me because I was not the type to give up easily. If Viren and Sarang wanted a fight over this collab with Tanvir, Tarana and I would bring it.

I pushed my hurt down and forced my anger to the fore because that's what I needed right now to walk out of this bathroom with my head held high and share a bed with the man who had just shown me my place in his life.

I knew he was awake when I climbed into bed, but he said nothing. I faced the other side and tried to slow my breathing, taking extra care not to touch him at all. I had no hopes of falling asleep that night, but I must have done so at some point because when I opened my eyes again, it was morning, and I was back in the same position as yesterday morning - on my side and being spooned by Viren, with his arm firmly around my middle.

Damn it! We must have gravitated towards each other in our sleep. I enjoyed the warmth of his embrace for a few precious seconds before I pushed his arm away. I didn't care if I woke the asshole, I decided, as I stomped around the room gathering my clothes for the day. I made as much noise as I could, and even slammed the bathroom door for good measure.

I showered and dressed as quickly as I could before I headed downstairs for breakfast. Viren was still asleep when I left the room. I grabbed a bowl of poha from the kitchen and took it to the garden where I curled up in a big wicker chair and called Tarana.

"Thank God you're still alive," I said dryly when she answered.

"Ehh, what are they going to do? Starve me to death because I made a viral reel?" she asked with a bleak laugh.

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“Seriously, though. How did everyone react?”

“Sarang looks like someone hit him over the head with a sandbag, and his family completely disapproves, but he gave them a huge jolt this morning when he asked me if I needed a soundproof room for my daily riyaz. I think they expected him to ban me from singing in public because the women in his family don’t really step out of the house for anything but shopping and socialising.”

“I’m glad he’s not getting in your way, but I wish he’d help you get ahead. He is your husband,” I groused as I spooned up some poha.

“I don’t want his help, Sunaina. I want to do this all on my own,” she said immediately.

“All right. The band is very happy about the response to the reel, and they want to do another one soon. Let’s make a longer video this time, with the whole band. It will help you get some live gigs with them.”

“Will we be recording the video in a studio? I don’t have the money to chip in for the studio and equipment hire,” she said worriedly. “I mean, Sarang has pots of money, but I really don’t want to be obliged to him.”

“Hmm, let me ask Tanvir what other options we have,” I replied. “Don’t worry, babe. We’ll find a way to make it happen.”

I hung up and sent Tanvir a text explaining the money issue.

Just then, a helper brought me a mug of ginger chai, and I remembered the last time I'd had proper chai. I couldn't believe the Viren who made me feel two inches tall last night was the same man who made me that chai.

I wanted to lash out at him, but there was nothing I could do. He hadn't broken any promises he made to me. It wasn't his fault I had expected our night together to make a difference to him. All I could do now was make sure I didn't repeat that mistake. There would be no more love-making. No more heated glances or incendiary kisses. I would keep to my side of the bargain, and that was it.

I helped Daya Bua get Aisha ready for her first day back at school and saw her off at the door. Viren's Chachi, Laxmi Aunty and Tahira were in the living room when I poked my head around the door to pick up a magazine I had left there earlier. I wanted to retreat as soon as I saw them sitting around the coffee table, looking as ominous as the witches from Macbeth. But they had already seen me, and walking away without greeting them would have been rude.

"Good morning," I said cheerfully as I went in and found my magazine.

"Is that the latest Architectural Digest?" asked Laxmi Aunty.

"It is," I replied. "Would you like to read it, Aunty?"

"I'm sure Aunty is just surprised to see you reading it," said Tahira with a sneer. "After all, these houses aren't really what you're used to. Poor Sunaina grew up in a tiny flat in Borivali, Aunty."

"And she married a billionaire? How nice for you, beta," said Laxmi Aunty snidely.

Tahira turned to Viren's Chachi and went on as if I wasn't standing right there.

“Bua, this room looks very dreary. It really needs redecorating, don’t you think?”

“Arre beta, why should you worry about these things when Viren’s wife is standing right here?” asked Laxmi Aunty. “What do you think, Sunaina? Would you be interested in redecorating this room?”

“The poor thing wouldn’t know where to start, Aunty,” said Tahira cattily.

“Yes, she’s probably only shopped from Chor Bazaar before,” added Viren’s Chachi.

The three women tittered behind their hands, and I started shaking with fury. I had never pretended to be anything I wasn’t. I wasn’t the one hanging around a married man’s house, desperately waiting for him to notice me. Tahira’s pick-me behaviour was getting out of hand, and I was done with these bitches bullying me just because I was poor.

Anger coursed through me, clouding my mind until I wasn’t sure whom I was most angry at - Tahira and her coven or my arrogant husband who thought I needed to get clearance from him for the smallest things because of course, as a nobody from Borivali, I couldn’t possibly know anything in life! Well, I was done being their punching bag.

I turned on my heel and walked out of their room, ignoring their laughter, as I marched upstairs to Viren’s study. I ignored my husband who was on a conference call, and beckoned to Sufi. He came out and shut the study door behind him as he gave me a worried look.

“What’s wrong, gorgeous? Was Mr C very mad about the collab?”

“He was, but I don’t care. I need your help again, Sufi,” I said, choking back angry tears.

“Anything for you babe,” he replied immediately.

“Can you take me shopping?”

“Of course! Where do you want to go?”

“Chor Bazaar,” I said, with a feral grin.

“Whaaaat! Butwhy?”

“I’ve just been told the living room needs redecorating.”

CHAPTER 23

VIREN

I spent the morning working from home because I had promised to spend time with Aisha after she got home from school. Sufi and Sunaina took off early in the morning, and I didn’t know where they were headed. They were up to something, for sure, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to know what it was.

I took a break for lunch and was surprised to hear a lot of commotion from the living room.

“Arre! What are you doing?” shrieked my Chachi. “Where are you taking the sofas and the coffee table? Vireeeeen!”

I raced out of the study and came to an abrupt halt at the sight of a bunch of men taking the sofas out of the living room, as the rest of the staff stood by and watched in shock.

“What the hell is going on here?” I thundered.

A man stepped ahead with a sheet of paper.

“Sahab, we’re just following orders. We’ve been paid to move the sofas out of this room and replace it with the furniture that we have in our trucks,” he said, keeping a wary eye on my aunt, who looked ready to attack him with her walking stick.

“What furniture? You’ve come to the wrong house. We haven’t ordered any furniture,” I said wearily. After tossing and turning all night, I was too tired to deal with this crap right now.

“You haven’t ordered any furniture, but I have,” announced Sunaina, walking into the house, with Sufi suppressing a smile behind her.

I knew those two were up to no good.

“How dare you?” raged my aunt. Tahira stood behind her, looking tight-lipped with fury.

Interesting.

“But the three of you did ask me to redecorate the living room this morning,” said Sunaina gently. “I was just following orders.”

We were forced to step back as the movers brought in the stuff that Sunaina had bought. She had replaced the plush couches my aunt had ordered from Italy with what looked like very desi furniture.

“Where did you even find all this?” asked Tahira, screwing her face in distaste.

“Right where you guys suggested,” said Sunaina gleefully. “In Chor Bazaar.”

I bit back a laugh at the identical looks of horror on my Chachi’s and Tahira’s faces.

“Oooh! I feel faint,” moaned my aunt.

“I think you should go and lie down, Chachi,” suggested Sunaina, beckoning for my aunt’s attendant to help her out of the room.

Chachi staggered out of the room, but not before she shot me a commanding glare.

“Fix this, Viren,” she ordered before her attendant led her away.

“Are you out of your gawaar little mind?” hissed Tahira, advancing on Sunaina.
“How dare you fill this beautiful house with junk from Chor Bazaar?”

“Considering this is my husband’s house and not yours, I don’t need your permission to fill it with whatever I like,” said Sunaina, and I was very proud of her for standing up to Tahira.

I could have intervened at any point, but I had a feeling my wife was making a very savage point right now, and I didn’t want to get in the way of that.

Instead, I began to examine the furniture carefully. There were a couple of exquisitely hand-carved teak wood sofas upholstered with brocade.

“What’s this for ?” I asked, examining a large wooden trunk that was almost stark in its simplicity, but was a work of art.

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“It’s a gala that was traditionally used to store bed linen,” said Sunaina. “I thought we could repurpose it as a coffee table. It will add character to this room.”

“It will only add bedbugs and fleas to the room. Viren, do something,” shrieked Tahira, stomping her feet.

I ignored her and moved to the next piece.

“What’s this one? Is it a bench?”

“That is a ninety-year-old jhoola made from pure Burma teak. I think they sourced it from an old haveli in Rajkot,” said Sunaina proudly.

“I love this tile work,” I murmured.

“Are you serious, Viren?” asked Tahira in disbelief.

“Dead serious,” I replied, getting to my feet. “This furniture is gorgeous. All of it!”

Sunaina shot me a surprised glance before she turned to Tahira.

“I guess I understand my husband’s taste better than you do,” she said sweetly. “And one more thing, if you ever dare to try and put me down again, I’ll kick you out of my house so fast you’ll have gravel burn on your skinny little ass.”

“Your house?” spat Tahira. “You’re nothing more than a paid servant in this house, Sunaina. Everyone knows your marriage is fake. You can try and fool the social

worker by moving into Viren's room, but you don't fool me."

"Enough," I yelled, scaring her into silence. "I've put up with your crap because you're Chachi's niece. But you don't get to interfere in our personal lives, Tahira. Consider this your last warning. If you ever speak to my wife like that again, I'll cut you out of our lives and out of the company. Is that clear?"

She gulped in fear at the threat and nodded, even as her eyes shot sparks of hate at us.

"Also, since you seem to think our marriage is fake, would you like to count the hickeys on my body?" asked Sunaina with a sweet smile.

Sufi choked with laughter in the corner as I shook my head ruefully. My wifey was really on the warpath today. I waited till Tahira slunk out of the room before I turned to Sunaina.

"Was that last bit really necessary?" I murmured.

She rolled her eyes before she looked around the room.

"I...I got a little carried away, sorry," she said stiffly. "I was just so angry at those three biddies that I wasn't thinking clearly. I'll tell the movers to bring your old furniture back."

"Why?" I asked in confusion. "This stuff is so much better than what we had before."

She turned to me in surprise.

"Are you sure? It is from Chor Bazaar. I wasn't lying about that."

"Does that matter?"

“You tell me. From what I hear, Chor Bazaar is too downmarket for the Chaudhrys.”

I rolled my eyes because there was only one woman who would spout that kind of tripe - my Chachi.

“You’ve been listening to the wrong Chaudhry,” I said dryly.

“And Tahira said...”

“Let me stop you right there! Is Tahira a Chaudhry?” I asked her, with my index finger held up in a stop sign.

Sunaina shrugged in response.

“She wants to be one, that’s for sure.”

“Well, she can want it all she likes. It’s not happening in this or any other lifetime. And since she isn’t a Chaudhry, she doesn’t get a say in the furniture at Chaudhry House.”

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Sufi went out of the room to deal with the movers, and Sunaina turned to me curiously.

“Can I ask you something? Why do you put up with Tahira if you’re not romantically interested in her? That woman is all over you as if she is your wife and not me. But I haven’t heard you tell her off until now.”

I sighed heavily and led her to one of the new sofas, which was as comfortable as it was pretty.

“I tolerate her for my Chachi’s sake, Sunaina. As you know, she is Chachi’s brother’s daughter. She practically grew up in our house because she was so close to Deven. After he died, my aunt was heartbroken. And the only time she cheered up a little was when Tahira was around. How could I deny her the little joy that was left in her life?”

“But the woman is insufferable,” insisted Sunaina.

“I agree. But the last time that I tried to ban her from the house, my Chachi stopped eating. I was forced to accept defeat on the third day of her hunger strike. If Deven was around, I wouldn’t have to put up with any of this. But the selfish bastard chose to die and left me to deal with all of this. Now, whether I like it or not, my aunt and uncle are my responsibility, which means I can’t cut Tahira off completely. Unless she’s rude to you. The next time she tries to put you down, feel free to boot her out of the house. If my aunt complains about it, I’ll tell her to go and live with her precious Tahira,” I promised.

She looked slightly mollified, but I knew she still hadn’t forgiven me for yelling at

her last night. Well, I hadn't forgiven her for going behind my back either, so we were at a stalemate.

"Viren, I think it's fair to warn you right now that Tarana and The Bandra Boys will be collaborating again soon. The band's fans loved the reel I posted yesterday, and we are going to keep posting more to see if she can work with the band in the long run."

"In that case, she needs a manager. Unless she plans to join the band full-time," I replied.

"Not yet. She wants to keep her options open and is content to collaborate with them for gigs and albums for now. And she does have a manager. You're looking at her," said Sunaina proudly.

"I cannot sign Tarana for Silver if my wife is her manager. It's a conflict of interest," I informed her. "If she does as well as you're predicting, Silver would definitely want to sign her at some point. Whose side will you take in a fight - your husband's or your client's?"

"My client's side, of course," she replied promptly. "And I won't be your wife for too long."

"The actual divorce will take up to a year, Sunaina. Do you plan to keep Tarana waiting until then?" I asked, a little annoyed by her willingness to pick her client over me.

"Damn it! That's not fair! I worked so hard to get her and Tanvir together, and now, when she's about to make it big, I'll need to drop her and look for other clients," she complained.

I took a deep breath and told myself she had to deal with the downs that came with the ups in her career. I was allowed to feel sorry for her, but that didn't make it my problem. Still, when her shoulders drooped with defeat, I couldn't help myself.

"We do have one option," I said carefully, making sure not to over-promise or commit to something I couldn't fulfil. "If and when we sign Tarana for Silver, you can still handle her social media marketing as part of Silver's PR team."

Sunaina's head shot up, and she stared at me in disbelief.

"Are you offering me a job?"

Was I? I wasn't sure. We already had a strong PR team. But I knew that if Sunaina needed a job, I would create a position for her in the company. Hell, if social media marketing was her calling, I'd create a marketing firm for her under the umbrella of Silver Records. I would do whatever it took to provide her with everything that would make her happy in life. Only, I would go to great pains to hide it from her because I didn't want to look like a fool. Some would call me a lovesick fool, but that was ridiculous since I did not believe in romantic love. Or want it in my life.

"Do you need a job?" I asked gruffly.

Sunaina stared deeply into my eyes for a few sticky moments as if she could see all the feelings I had buried under a load of bluster, but just when my collar was beginning to feel a little tight, she shook her head.

"Not right now, but thank you for offering. I don't need a handout to get ahead in life. I'll find a way to make it work even if I have to drop Tarana until the divorce," she said firmly.

"It's not a crime to accept help," I pointed out. "In fact, some people would call it the

smart thing to do.”

“Well, those people have never been called beggars or gold diggers in their lives, and it shows,” she said fiercely. “I will grow at my own pace and on my own merit, Viren. I didn’t marry you for your money. You’ve already given me a family, and that’s all I need from you.”

My chest went tight at her words.

That’s all I need from you.

I had never been on the other end of the spectrum until I met Sunaina. When you were as overprivileged as I was, people always needed more than you were willing to give. And apart from Daima, nobody had ever thought about my needs. I was sure that if my parents were alive, I’d spend my whole life living up to their expectations and fulfilling my needs. As I did for my uncle and aunt. As I had done to a large extent for Deven and Disha. It was my job as head of the family.

But ever since I met her, Sunaina had given me more than she ever received. She gave me three years of her life. She gave me Aisha. She gave all of us joy and peace. And she asked for nothing in return.

I had never told anyone that I preferred vintage furniture over the fancy Italian stuff that we had in every room of our mansion except my bedroom. I had allowed Disha and my aunt the freedom to decorate my house the way they liked because I spent most of my time away from home, and they had never once asked me what I wanted.

But Sunaina had understood my taste, and even if she redecorated the living room out of spite, she filled it with stuff that I would like. And what had I done for her? In the two years that I had been married to her, I had only taken her out as a PR exercise or on family outings. Hell, we’d had sex, but we still hadn’t had a first date.

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“Do you want to go out for dinner?” I asked before I could talk myself out of it.

“Sure,” she replied. “Aisha wants to try the new Japanese restaurant at Chowpatty.”

I shook my head.

“No, not the rest of the family. I meant just us.”

Her eyes grew as wide as saucers.

“You mean...you and I?” she stammered. “Like a date?”

I nodded.

“Sure,” she said, her voice nothing more than a squeak. “But...are you sure? I mean...”

“It’s just dinner, Sunaina. Don’t overthink it,” I said briskly. “Tell Sufi where you want to go, and he can make the reservations.”

She hesitated again, and I realised that Sunaina Chaudhry was really bad for my ego. Any other woman would have jumped at the chance to go out with me, but my own wife acted like it was a painful chore. I’d seen her show more enthusiasm to go to the dentist.

“What is it?” I asked irritably.

“It’s nothing... Only, do we need to go to a fancy restaurant that needs reservations?”

“Where else would you like to go?” I asked curiously.

“I always had this dream date in mind, but it’s...it’s silly. And too downmarket for a man of your stature,” she said, shaking her head.

I grabbed her hand when she tried to rise from the sofa.

“Tell me,” I urged. “Describe your dream date.”

“I just want to go to the beach and have pav bhaji and falooda from a stall,” she said, not looking at me. “But if I take you to a roadside stall, you’ll get food poisoning, and your aunt will have me arrested for murder. Besides, the beach is far too crowded these days. So I’ll pick a restaurant just to be safe.”

“Would you mind if I made the arrangements?” I asked, and she gave in with a polite smile.

“Of course! Just tell me what to wear,” she replied. “Now, I need to meet with Tarana and the band.”

“Sure. Just be ready for our date by seven,” I said and watched her walk away.

CHAPTER 24

SUNAINA

Honestly, you could take a girl out of Borivali, but you could never take Borivali out of a girl!

Why on earth had I said that thing about pav bhaji and falooda to a man like Viren Chaudhry?

But I hadn't grown up around all these fancy restaurants. All my Baba could afford was a beach outing followed by pav bhaji from a stall, and those were some of the happiest memories from my childhood. Naturally, when I grew up, I thought the most romantic thing was for a couple to split a falooda with two straws in the same glass. How was I supposed to know that one day I would marry a billionaire whose idea of a date was so different from mine?

But none of that mattered right now. All that mattered was that Viren had asked me out on a date.

I almost walked into the door when it hit me that he had taken the first step towards turning our fake relationship into a real one. Ohmigod! Was he sick? He didn't look feverish, but what did I know? I wasn't a doctor.

I saw Sufi arguing with the movers about where to place the jhoola, and I caught him by the arm.

"Sufi Singh! I think Viren is sick," I cried.

"What? I'll call the doctor right away," he said in alarm. "What's wrong with him?"

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“I don’t know, but he wants to take me out on a date tonight,” I whispered. “Why else would he do something so alien to his nature?”

“Umm...because he’s finally come to his senses?”

“I don’t know about that, but when I get back, you need to help me pick out an outfit for tonight,” I said, heading towards the car waiting for me.

“Hold it, gorgeous. The only place you’re going now is to a salon. Look at the state of you,” he shrieked, but I made my escape when one of the movers called him over to sign for the delivery.

Primping could wait. I had more important things to do.

I picked Tarana up again and took her to Bandra. She looked much happier since her reel went viral.

“Did Tanvir tell you if he found a studio to record your song?” I asked.

“He said he found something, but he wouldn’t give me any details. Said it’s a surprise,” she replied.

To our surprise, the band was waiting for us outside Gino’s house, next to a lime green and yellow Tempo van with the name of the band painted all over it.

“Hope in,” said Atharva from the back of the van. “And hold on to the sides because Perpetua drives like a maniac.”

Tarana and I piled into the vehicle excitedly, and we set off for the super-secret location that turned out to be a very familiar studio in Khar. And the reason I knew the place was because Viren owned it.

“Umm, guys...this place costs a lot of money,” I said, knowing Tarana couldn’t afford to spend so much.

“The owner is letting us use it for free,” he told me with a wink before he led Tarana into the building.

I followed more slowly, wondering why Viren was giving us this space when he disapproved of the whole affair. Because that was the kind of man he was, I realised. There was no limit to his generosity.

By rights, Tarana should have had access to her husband’s studio, but Viren knew Ria Ghosh reigned supreme over there, and getting her to vacate even for an afternoon, especially to accommodate Sarang’s new wife, was going to be very difficult. So he circumvented the problem by offering us his own studio even when he didn’t have to.

Viren didn’t agree with the direction the band was moving in because he didn’t think our audiences were ready for progressive rock with such a heavy classical influence. But he still gave them what they needed because they were his people. Because Tarana and I were his people, too.

I was about to enter the building when someone called my name. I turned around instinctively and recoiled in horror when I realised it was my stepmother, getting out of an autorickshaw.

I turned to go without acknowledging her because this woman had destroyed my childhood and almost destroyed my whole life. I didn’t owe her anything after she tried to sell me to a man twice my age.

“Sunaina! Wait for me,” she cried, throwing some change at the auto driver.

“Are you following me?” I asked, and she tossed her head angrily.

“Not everyone is made of money like your husband. I’m here to meet a client who lives in that building,” she replied, nodding to a posh high-rise next to the studio.

So she was still conning people with her fake astro-vaastu tricks.

“Good for you,” I said and tried to walk away again.

“Arre! What’s your hurry, beta? Don’t you have any time for your poor mother?”

I shook my index finger in her face, and she flinched at the movement.

“Do not call yourself my mother. You were my father’s wife, and then, you tried to be my pimp. That is all you will ever be to me,” I said coldly. “And no, I don’t have any time for you.”

Her face twisted with anger and hatred.

“You think you’re so much better than me just because you have your man supporting you. But wait till he tires of you, beta. Then you’ll come running back to me,” she said viciously.

I shook my head in reply, but she went on.

“Your own father got sick of you and died to get away from the burden that you were. Do you really think you can keep a man like Viren Chaudhry? I don’t know what vashikaran you’ve done on the poor man, but it won’t last forever. The day it wears off, he will recognise you for the trash that you are, and he’ll throw you out with the

rest of his garbage,” she hissed.

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I knew she was lying. I knew she was lashing out at me because I had refused to be her meal ticket in life. But some inner wounds refused to heal, no matter how irrational they were.

My father had done his best to protect me from my stepmother, and I had always felt that's why his heart gave out so early. It was because he couldn't deal with the constant fighting and yelling at home anymore. I had blamed myself for not being dutiful enough, even though Daya Bua had maintained that my father was proud of me until the day he died.

She and Sufi could say what they liked, but I knew there was something completely unloveable about me. That's why I had nobody in the world to love me. Not in the way that really counted. Even Daya Bua, Sufi and Aisha could vanish if my relationship with Viren ended badly.

As I stared at the ugliness hiding behind my stepmother's guileless eyes, I wondered why she hated me so much. I had only ever tried to please her. But I never could. I was never enough for her. Well, that hadn't changed, apparently. I wasn't even good enough for my husband, which was why he couldn't wait to divorce me.

And then I remembered that he was taking me out on a date tonight. That had to count for something. It had to mean something good.

I gave my stepmother a thin smile and walked past her without reacting to the venom she had just spouted. The security guard gave me a quick salute and held the door open for me. I felt a strange safety and warmth when I walked into that building. And I knew it was because I was under Viren's protection in every way. He might not love

me, but he cared for me. A lot. And for now, I was content with just that.

It was quite late when we finished the recording. Again, I managed to shoot a lot of content and posted a teaser with the promise of the full video to come soon. The band had booked Tarana for a gig at Hard Rock that weekend, and I promised to take her shopping for clothes.

“A ripped and faded pair of jeans paired with a brocade waistcoat,” suggested Perpetua.

I thought about it for a while and then shook my head.

“Let’s do a brocade crop top with a short black pleated skirt paired with black combat boots with contrasting sequins. I’ll get Sufi to help us glue sequins on a pair of combat boots once he helps us source the clothes,” I said. “And if we can get a darzi to stitch a pair of matching brocade elbow-length fingerless gloves, that would be the perfect touch of madness. If we can’t get the gloves, we’ll find you a big stack of brocade-covered bangles for each hand.”

“Ooh...girly and punk at the same time! I love it,” exclaimed Perpetua, who was the most punk woman I had ever seen.

“But where can we find such clothes and accessories?” asked Tarana, looking completely out of her depth.

“Sufi has sources,” I proclaimed happily. “He has some mad-talented friends, trust me. And he has some of the country’s best designers and stylists on speed dial. They’ll be falling over themselves to dress you, babe.”

When I got home, Sufi and Aisha were waiting for me, almost hopping with excitement.

“It’s our first date,” they yelled in unison as soon as I walked in the front door.

“Umm...it’s my first date. So please take a chill pill, people,” I said, with a hard eye roll.

“Babe, we’re all so invested in this relationship that we will need extensive therapy with dolls to resolve all that trauma,” said my favourite drama queen.

“Yeah, I don’t need any more therapy, Aunty Sue. So please make this date work,” begged Aisha.

Oy, so much pressure already! And I wasn’t even dressed for my date.

Sufi had set out a high-neck, pleated dress in a dark purple with three-fourth-length sleeves. It didn’t look like much on the hanger, but when I wore it, it looked like a million bucks, especially when I turned around and saw that the back dipped almost to the waist. I paired it with a pair of gold-flecked purple bondage heels just because.

Viren’s eyes darkened with desire when he saw those heels, and I was worried he was going to cancel the date and carry me off to bed. Luckily, Aisha came downstairs just then to say goodnight, and the moment passed.

I slid into the car, being very careful not to flash anyone before I turned to him.

“Where are we going?” I asked, and Viren grinned in reply.

“That’s a surprise,” he said, refusing to reveal anything else.

Thirty minutes later, we arrived at a sea-facing bungalow in Juhu. But we skipped the front door and took the narrow path that led around the house and down to the beach.

“Whose house is this?” I asked.

“A friend’s house. He lives in the US, and very kindly allowed me to borrow it tonight.”

“But why?”

“You’ll see,” he said with a laugh. “You might have to take your shoes off, though.”

He led me down to a private stretch of Juhu beach, cut off from the crowds by a large fence on both sides. There was a romantic table for two set up in the sand, with flowers and citronella candles to keep the mosquitoes away, and rose petals scattered all around it.

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There was a host waiting to welcome us, and he poured us some champagne before he left us alone to enjoy the sea, the sand, and the company.

“Here’s to recreating your dream date. Minus the food poisoning, of course,” said Viren, raising his champagne flute in a toast, and I squealed with joy.

“It looks amazing,” I whispered.

We made comfortable small talk for a while, and I felt a slow buzz enveloping me, thanks to the champagne.

“And here’s our dinner, just as Madam ordered. Pav bhaji from a stall,” he announced.

I turned around in surprise to see the chef setting up a pav bhaji stand in one corner, with a falooda counter in the other.

“Are you serious?” I gasped.

“Dead serious. I sent the chef to the thela on the beach to beg for the stall owner’s special recipe. He’s been slaving over it all evening,” said Viren.

I laughed at the absurdity of it, but I was also aware that I was falling even more head-over-heels in love with my fake husband.

VIREN

“Keep the shoes on,” I said gruffly when I slipped Sunaina’s dress off her shoulders and kissed my way down her spine.

She gasped at the feeling of my lips on the little hollow just above the curve of her ass.

“Hands on the dressing table, Sunaina,” I ordered, and she obeyed immediately, her eyes glued to mine in the mirror.

I had brought her home after the delightful first date, where I plied her with champagne to loosen her tongue. And I discovered that drunk Sunaina was hilarious. And very, very wild.

I carried her up the stairs when we got home because, in her state, she couldn’t walk in those heels. And as soon as I set her down in our bedroom, she pulled a straight stripper move and went down on her haunches in front of me. Before I could do more than groan at the sight of her in the full-length mirror on the wall in front of me, she pulled my hard dick out of my pants and went to town on me.

I let her go on until I was at the very edge before I tapped her on the chin. Sunaina held my eyes as she slid my dick out of her mouth and licked the sensitive underside of the head hard. I swear I saw stars just then.

I pulled her upright and dragged her to the big dressing table with the mirror. In one swift move, I swept the contents of the table to the floor and set Sunaina’s hands on it.

“Eyes on me, baby,” I growled. “I want you to see everything I do to you tonight.”

She shivered in response as I spread her legs and pushed the skirt of her dress upwards ever so slowly. I could feel her legs trembling under my hands. Good! I was going to make her tremble a lot before this night was out.

A little later, I stared at the glorious picture she made, bent over the dressing table, her full breasts almost spilling out of the purple lace bra she wore, her hair all over the place, her face flushed, and her eyes wild with desire, as I pumped my cock in and out of her from behind.

This time, as I thrust forward, I bit down on Sunaina's shoulder, eliciting a scream as she came apart in my arms. Her hands and legs shook uncontrollably, as did her inner walls around my cock. But it wasn't until she had come for me once more that I allowed myself to come, pushing her down over the dressing table, her head almost hitting the mirror with the force of my thrusts.

When we could both breathe after what felt like ages, I pulled out of her and carried her to the bathroom to clean up. She was half asleep already and curled up in my arms when we tumbled into the bed.

I fell asleep with a smile on my lips, and it was still there when I woke up the next morning. And I could swear it was still there two weeks later when Sunaina smiled at me across the dinner table.

The Bandra Boys had come over for dinner to introduce their new lead singer, who had taken the internet by storm. Sarang glared at his wife across the length of the table, but she was oblivious to his anger as she basked in the approval of her new friends.

As expected, we were in the process of signing Tarana's first contract with Silver Records over Tahira's and Ria Ghosh's protests. She was recording a full-length album with The Bandra Boys, and I knew she was on an upward trajectory.

Meanwhile, our adoption process was moving very smoothly, and all that was left now was the home visit that was scheduled for next week. So, my life was better than it had been in a long time, and it was all due to Sunaina. I refused to think about what awaited us on the other side of the home visit because we could cross that bridge when we came to it. Right now, I was simply going to enjoy the fact that I was happier than I had ever been.

So, I was very surprised to find Sunaina shaking me awake in the middle of the night, looking absolutely terrified.

“Wake up, Viren,” she begged.

I opened my eyes and stared at her unseeingly because, in my mind’s eye, all I could see was a car going up in flames. And trapped inside the car was my little Aisha.

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“What’s wrong, Viren? You were screaming in your sleep,” she whispered when I forced myself to sit up. “Are you okay?”

I nodded and reached for the bottle of water on my bedside table. I drained the bottle before I turned to Sunaina.

“I’m fine. It’s just a nightmare,” I said hoarsely, trying to regulate my breathing.

She sat back on her heels and studied me carefully.

“Do you often get them?”

I shook my head in reply.

“I first got them after Aisha’s parents died, but I haven’t had them in ages. I wonder why they showed up again.”

“Maybe it’s the stress about the adoption home visit that has triggered them again,” she suggested.

But I knew better.

The adoption was a cinch now that even Tahira had moved out of our house. Laxmi Aunty was still here, but she was helpless without her chief jaasoos. No, this was different. It was as if my mind was trying to tell me something.

Sunaina held me until I fell asleep again. But the same thing happened the next night.

Only this time around, I dreamt of both Sunaina and Aisha trapped in the burning car. I couldn't tell my wife the details of the nightmare because it was far too horrifying, but I couldn't close my eyes anymore for fear of what I might see if I fell asleep.

I could tell Sunaina was worried because I stayed awake all night only to fall into an exhausted, dreamless sleep in the early hours of the morning.

“Do you want to consult someone about these nightmares, Viren? You look terrible,” she commented one morning just a day before the home visit.

“Then don't look at me,” I replied curtly, draining my cup of coffee and walking away from the breakfast table without a second glance.

CHAPTER 26

SUNAINA

Ididn't know that a person could have such a personality transplant in just three weeks' time.

Sure, I knew Viren was exhausted because of the nightmares. But it was more than just that. Because he wasn't taking it out on Daya Bua, Sufi or Aisha. This special treatment was reserved only for me.

“We show our best and worst sides to the person we love the most, beta,” said Daya Bua, trying to make me feel better. “Please be patient with him. I promise you he will behave much better once the adoption comes through.”

“I don't believe that, Bua,” I said cynically. “Viren is showing me that he doesn't need me anymore.”

Even though I tried to fight it every single day, my stepmother's words had stayed with me. They had taken root inside my brain. Every time Viren rebuffed my efforts to help him, every time he pulled away from my touch, I heard her voice in my head telling me I was unloveable. That Viren was just using me to make the adoption go smoother.

At some level, I knew he wasn't like that. I knew he was the soul of generosity. But then he went and did or said something so rude to me that I'd be convinced he hated me.

"Don't give up on him, Sue," urged Sufi.

"He's given up on me, Sufi," I retorted.

"So hold on even tighter. He needs you the most when he's pushing you away the hardest, even if he's not ready to admit it. Not even to himself."

"But why is he pushing me away at all?"

"Because he's falling in love with you, beta," said Daya Bua. "And if there is anything that terrifies Viren, it is love."

"No, Daima. He's not afraid of love. He's afraid of losing the people he loves," corrected Sufi. "And that's to be expected in the circumstances."

"That hasn't stopped him from loving you guys and Aisha," I said wistfully. "But when it comes to me, he's fighting it with all his might as if I'm a chudail trying to steal his soul."

"Did he tell you what these nightmares are about?" asked Daya Bua.

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“No, Bua. He just clams up when I ask.”

“Trust me, beta. Things will change for the better after tomorrow,” she said.

The home visit went very smoothly, with the social worker talking to all of us. Laxmi Auntie did do some drama about how Aisha missed her Ajit Maama and his daughters, but our brave Aisha soon put a stop to that.

“That’s not true, Naani,” she said firmly. “I don’t miss them at all. Ajit Maama’s daughters are very mean to me. I want to live here, with my Chachu and Auntie Sue, and Daima and Sufi, because I love them the most in the world.”

You could see the social worker melting at her words, and she gave Viren and me a very approving glance. I pressed his hand gently and was relieved when he wound his fingers tightly through mine.

“You will be informed of the decision soon,” she said before she took her leave.

As soon as she left, the atmosphere in the house became lighter as we all breathed a collective sigh of relief. The worst was behind us, and we could get on with our lives now. I focused all my efforts on helping Viren deal with his nightmares.

He didn’t want to discuss them, and that was fine. I found other ways to distract him when his eyes took on that faraway look, and I felt him withdrawing to another dimension mentally. He was trying to cut me out, and I refused to allow it.

I realised I could jolt him out of that state and bring him back to me by simply kissing

him or touching him. Of course, it usually led to frenzied, desperate lovemaking, but I called that a silver lining. When he was pounding into me desperately, I would silently tell him how much I loved him. Over and over, I would chant those words. Never aloud, though.

I called myself a chicken because if there was anyone who needed to know he was loved, it was Viren. But I couldn't bear to think of what it would do to me if I said it aloud and he rejected me. If he rejected my love. I didn't think I could bear it.

Of course, the rest of the family was convinced he loved me as much as I loved him, but I wasn't quite so sure. Viren was still very kind, and he still wanted me physically. But there was a growing distance between us emotionally. And it was bigger than it used to be before we started having sex. It was like a giant invisible wall that he'd erected between us.

I tried to say and do positive things to bridge the gap, but I was clearly fighting a losing battle.

Ten days later, we got the call! The social worker was very happy to approve the adoption, and we got the adoption certificate a few days later.

"We want a big party, boss," declared Sufi.

"Of course! Let's have a big blowout at the Taj," said Viren immediately. "Invite everyone you can think of, Daima. It's time to celebrate!"

"That's not what I meant, Mr C," replied Sufi, shooting him a troubled look. "Let's do something fun and intimate for the immediate family."

Viren smiled politely, but I got the feeling he'd stopped listening. And he did get his big blowout at the Taj, with the whole world invited to maintain the no man's land

between Mr and Mrs Chaudhry.

It was a lovely evening with great food, drinks and amazing company. Everybody was having a wonderful time. Except me.

Because I was the only one who noticed that Viren hadn't touched his drink all evening. And while he was being the life of the party, he hadn't so much as looked at me even once, let alone dance with me.

And yet, I knew that he was going to take me home and fuck me in my bright red stripper heels, probably with my dress still on. And that was all I'd get. Because these days, I didn't get any cuddling or spooning. Nor any loving forehead kisses. I wasn't his wifey anymore. I was just a fuck-buddy to slake his hunger. Nothing more.

One of the newer artists he'd signed, a pop singer from Haryana, who had given five party hits back-to-back, sidled up to him and led him to the dance floor, which was too crowded for them to do more than just sway in place. I forced myself to watch as she wound her arms around his neck and smiled into his eyes. And the rat bastard smiled back.

That was my cue to leave the ballroom. I headed straight for the loo, where I threw up everything I had eaten that night. As I stared at my haggard face in the mirror, I realised that I was living in a fool's paradise. Viren was never going to love me back.

We had no reason to stay together now that Aisha was safe. It was time to cut my losses and walk away with my dignity intact, even if my heart was shattered.

The party was winding down when I came out of the bathroom. Daya Bua had already taken Aisha home. I didn't want to wait and find out if Viren would come home with me or if he'd accept the open invitation to take his new skank home.

To my surprise, I found him waiting for me outside the bathroom.

“What do you want?” I asked coldly.

He fixed his brooding eyes on me, and I stared right back at him because I refused to back down. If he wanted to go home with that bitch, he’d have to tell me that to my face, and I wasn’t going to make it easy on him.

“I thought you left,” he said.

“I just got sick of seeing you make out with that skank.”

Viren turned to look at the dance floor in surprise and bit back a smile when he turned back to me.

“Myra’s not a skank,” he murmured.

“Did she have her hands on my husband?” I enquired politely.

“She did.”

“Then she’s a skank. And if you use her to piss me off, you’ll only have yourself to blame when I take her eye out with my stiletto heel,” I replied with a glacial smile.

“You’d do that?”

“Try me,” I invited. “And after I’m done with her, I’ll go after your balls.”

He shot me a feral grin.

“Bloodthirsty little thing, aren’t you?”

“So says the man who threatened to rip Dhruv’s arms off for just texting me at night.”

“Hey, he was asking for it,” snapped Viren, and then he ran a hand over his weary face. He looked exhausted. Like he was at the end of his tether.

“What are we doing, Sunaina? This wasn’t the plan, was it?”

“I don’t even remember the original plan anymore,” I admitted.

“We were supposed to walk away from this with a clean break,” he reminded me.

I reached out a hand and stroked his cheek almost unwillingly. I didn't want to touch him or have anything to do with him, but for the life of me, I couldn't stay away. My lips wobbled as I stared at the pain and confusion in his eyes, knowing they were reflected in mine, and I had to fight back the tears that were always close to the surface these days.

"Can you walk away from me so easily, Viren?" I asked in a little girl-lost voice that I absolutely hated.

Was I so forgettable that he was ready to move on so soon? That meant my stepmother was right. It meant she won. Even after all these years, she always won. Because no matter how hard I tried, no matter how much I gave of myself, the people I loved didn't feel the same way about me. Baba didn't, my stepmother definitely didn't, and apparently, neither did Viren.

He did not answer my question, but he pushed his cheek into my hand and held my wrist as he pressed soft kisses into my palm.

"Wanna get a room for tonight?" he asked instead.

I wanted to pull my hand away and plant a sharp slap on his cheek. I wanted to walk away from this man who only had one use for me these days. Instead, I nodded slowly.

"Sure," I said. "But only on one condition."

"And what's that?" he asked with a cocky smile.

"No sex," I replied, happy to see his smile falter.

"What?"

“Spend the night with me without sex. And I know you won’t fall asleep until it’s almost morning. So, spend the night talking to me,” I said softly.

“Why?” he asked in a tortured whisper.

“We’ve spent so many nights lying in bed next to each other lately, wide awake but lying in complete silence all night. Let’s break the silence for one night, Viren. Because it’s getting to me. This silence will destroy us someday. Let’s break it before it breaks us,” I begged, pressing a soft kiss on his knuckles.

Viren gripped my hand tightly and pulled me closer, cradling my legs with his.

“Are you sure about the no sex part?” he asked in desperation.

“If you really wanted to make love to me all night, I’d say yes in a heartbeat. But I won’t let you use my body just because you’re too scared to talk to me,” I replied coldly.

“I have never used your body, Sunaina” he snapped. “I have only ever made love to you. It has never been anything less than that.”

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“Then why does it leave me feeling used and cheap?” I asked quietly.

He looked at me furiously, hands gripping my shoulders so hard I was sure they were going to leave marks on my skin.

“Really? Were you feeling cheap yesterday morning when I ate you out in the shower and made you come three times? Did you feel used when I fucked you in my study three days ago? Or when you got down on your knees and took me in your mouth last night?”

I trembled with need at the memory of everything that we had done to each other but stood my ground.

“It wasn’t the sex that made me feel cheap and used. It was the fact that you used sex to change the topic every time I asked you how you were feeling,” I stated, and he flinched as if I had dealt him a body blow. “That’s all it was to you, Viren. A diversionary tactic. That’s why I’m asking you if you have the balls to stop hiding behind sex and just talk to me tonight.”

He looked tormented, and I was wondering if I’d pushed it too far, but then, he nodded. Just once. But it was enough to bring a tremulous smile to my lips.

“In that case, I’d be happy to spend the night here with you,” I replied.

We wandered over to the reception desk hand-in-hand because Viren was holding my hand tightly as if it were a lifeline that kept him from drowning.

“What do you want to do first?” he asked, throwing off his Armani jacket as soon as we entered the room.

I inspected the complimentary box of chocolate truffles and champagne the hotel had left on our bed. That looked promising, I thought happily. But first things first.

“Do you want to try the hot tub on the balcony?” I asked excitedly.

“Do you have a swimsuit?”

I lowered my lashes and gave me a sidelong look.

“Are you brave enough to go without?” I teased.

“I am, but is it safe for you to do that?” he asked with a frown.

“The balcony is sea-facing, Viren. There’s literally no one around,” I replied with an eye roll. “Let’s live a little. You know I’ve never been skinnydipping.”

He paused in the action of throwing off his shirt and gave me an incredulous look.

“Never?”

I shrugged in reply, refusing to feel embarrassed.

“I never had the opportunity,” I said.

Viren pulled out a notepad and pen from the writing desk in the corner of the room.

“Here,” he said, tossing them to me. “Make a list of everything you’ve ever wanted to try in life.”

I caught them, intrigued at the idea. I had never made a bucket list because I was too busy trying to survive. But maybe now was the time to try new things.

I threw off my clothes and slid into the hot tub when Viren said it was warm enough. He poured us some champagne and opened the box of chocolates.

I picked a dark chocolate truffle with macadamia nuts and relaxed in the tub with the chocolate in one hand and champagne in the other as I thought about all the things I wanted to try.

“There’s this thing where you go rolling down a hill in a big plastic bubble,” I said slowly.

“Do you mean zorbing?” Viren asked in surprise.

“Yeah! That looks like fun!”

“It is! And it’s even more fun on water. Here, let me write that down for you,” he said, setting his champagne aside. “What else?”

“I want to ride cross-country on a motorcycle. Like a really long trip...maybe to Manali?”

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“We could do that next week,” he replied promptly. “I can take you to Manali on my Harley. What else?”

“Let me see... I’ve always wanted painting lessons, but I never got around to doing them.”

“These are all things we can do very easily, wifey. Tell me something you’ve never had. And I’ll do my best to arrange it for you,” he said with a laugh.

I stared at him, wondering if I was about to ruin everything.

“Since you ask...I’ve never had love, Viren.”

He froze for a few seconds, and I was sure he’d tip the hot tub over in his rush to leap out of it. But his hard gaze never left mine as he swallowed hard. I saw his Adam’s apple bobbing with the movement and wanted to go over to him and lick it. But he had promised me a night of just talking, and I wasn’t going to muck it up with more meaningless sex.

CHAPTER 27

VIREN

Iknew I could end this conversation right now. All I had to do was reach out and touch my wife. Maybe press a few kisses to her soft, gleaming skin. And within seconds, she’d be locked in my arms, eyes closed in bliss, this conversation long forgotten.

But as she'd shown today, she didn't forget anything. She was the one person who saw through me clearly. Besides, the bleakness in her expression as she told me that she had never had love in her life simply gutted me.

How was this even possible? Sunaina was one of the most loveable people I knew. I had to hear her out, and maybe show her how much love there was in her present, even if she hadn't had any in her past.

"What do you mean?"

She lifted her shoulder idly and looked away as she took a sip of champagne.

"It's fairly self-explanatory," she bit out. "I've never had anyone in my life really love me. It is what it is."

"Sunaina..." I began, but she turned an incendiary glare at me.

"Don't you dare to pity me, Viren Chaudhry!"

"I'm not pitying you, you prickly little cactus. I'm trying to tell you you're wrong. There are many people in your life who love you to bits."

But she shook her head stubbornly and I soldiered on.

"Daima told me your father really loved you."

Sunaina sighed heavily and drained her glass. I topped it up, and she toyed with the stem of the champagne flute as she mulled over my words.

"He loved me a lot when my mother was alive. But after she died, I was more of a burden to him. Especially after he married Aunty. They could have had a happy

married life if it weren't for me."

"How do you figure that?"

"She hated me," said Sunaina plainly.

"And that's on her. It's a choice she made," I pointed out.

"Yes, but my poor Baba spent all their married life protecting me from her wrath. That kind of stress takes a toll on your life, right? He was so miserable all the time, and sometimes I used to wish I had died when my mother did so that the poor man could have had some chance of happiness after us."

My heart clenched at the thought of a world without Sunaina. Our lives would be so poor if we hadn't met her.

"The fact that he chose you over his marriage should tell you how much he loved you," I said, my voice rough from all the emotions clogging my throat.

She gave me a startled glance, which showed me that she had never considered this angle.

"Why did your stepmother hate you?" I asked curiously. "How old were you when your father married her?"

"I was four."

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I nearly spat my champagne out at her words. Who could possibly hate a four-year-old?

“Why did she hate you?” I repeated.

Sunaina shrugged again, munching on her chocolate viciously before she spoke.

“Maybe because I’m unloveable. My Baba was forced to love me because I was his child. But nobody has loved me after him. Do you know what it’s like to go through life constantly feeling unworthy of love, Viren?”

“Your stepmother is an absolute delight,” I said sarcastically. “But just because she didn’t love you doesn’t mean you don’t have love in your life, Sunaina.”

She looked up sharply at my words.

“What do you mean?” she asked, going pale.

“Well...Daima, Sufi and Aisha absolutely adore you. They wouldn’t if you had been unworthy of love. In such a short time, you’ve become the centre of their universe.”

And mine, but I wasn’t going to tell her that because it was stupid. This whole conversation was stupid! Why were we sitting around a hot tub talking about love like schoolgirls? Next, she’d want to make those awful friendship bracelets I kept finding all over the house.

“You don’t look happy to hear that. Why?” I barked because she looked absolutely

miserable. As if I'd killed her puppy.

"Because when you list all the people who supposedly love me, there's no mention of your name," she whispered, tears pooling in her eyes. "If I'm so worthy of love, how come my own husband doesn't love me?"

Damn it! This is exactly why I didn't like to sit around and talk about my feelings. Because they weren't conversations. They were traps!

And they made you look at parts of you that you had hidden away for so long you didn't even recognise them anymore.

I took her hand and pulled her into my lap, and this time she came willingly. I wasn't trying to cloud the issue with sex, but I needed to hold her while we had this conversation.

"That's because your husband is incapable of love," I confessed into her hair. "He's a fucking coward whose heart turned to stone a long time ago. You can't squeeze love out of a stone, Sunaina. So don't waste your time trying."

She raised her head and looked into my eyes. Her own were wintry as hell, making me feel as if she could see all the way through to my soul and found it sadly lacking.

"If that were true, you wouldn't have created a family to replace the one you lost, Viren. If you were as stonehearted as you claim, you wouldn't have taken Aisha in the way you did."

"Aisha is my niece. She's family. And you don't choose to love your family. You simply do," I replied, shifting in the tub restlessly.

"And Daya Bua?"

“She practically raised me, Sunaiana. She was more of a mother to me than my real mother, who preferred attending high society brunches and parties to spending time with her baby. How can I not love Daima? She’s the only mother I’ve ever known.”

“And Sufi?”

“I don’t love Sufi! He’s my assistant, that’s all,” I said defensively.

Sunaina raised her head to glare at me.

“Bullshit! He’s told me all about how you mentored him when he was living at the LGBTQ+ shelter, and how you sponsored his education and gave him a job. Trust me, Viren. Sufi is as much part of your little family as Daya Bua and Aisha.”

Fuck me, but she was right! I did love the little troublemaker like a brother. Great! Now I had another person to worry about!

“And the only one left out is me,” she said bitterly. “All over again.”

I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her hard.

“Are you blind? Our whole world revolves around you. What more do you need, Sunaina? I can’t sleep at night because you’re the star of all my nightmares!”

“Excuseme?” she snapped.

“You and Aisha. That’s all I dream about... You and Aisha...trapped in a burning car...struggling to get out. I’m running to save you, but I’m too late. Every damn time. And every night, I have to watch the two of you die right in front of me. So, please tell me why I should make the mistake of loving you if I’m going to lose you the way I lost my parents and Deven,” I snarled.

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“Because you already do, you fucking idiot,” she whispered, running her thumb over my lips.

I bit it viciously, and she squirmed in my lap.

“Don’t go there, Sunaina,” I warned her softly. “I told you I have no love to give you.”

“Then divorce me right away,” she said with a challenging look. “Call your lawyer tomorrow morning and tell them to start the proceedings immediately.”

Umm, that was the plan. Of course, it was. But what was her hurry?

“I’ll call the lawyer when I’m ready,” I informed her loftily. “There is a process to these things.”

She let out a loud snort of derision as she slid off my lap and stood up. I watched spellbound as the water drained off her gorgeous body, leaving behind trails of droplets I wanted to trace with my tongue. She leaned over me, cupped my face tenderly and gave me a crooked smile as her perfect breasts dangled in front of my face like forbidden fruit. Damn, but this woman could bring me to my knees with just one look.

“Call me when you make up your mind,” she said. “Either way.”

“Where are you going?” I asked in desperation.

“Home,” she replied, not looking at me as she dried herself with a thick towel and threw on her clothes.

CHAPTER 28

SUNAINA

Until now, I had strongly believed that my husband did not love me. That there was no chance he'd ever love me. Because I wasn't good enough for him.

But now, I understood that it was a bit more complicated than that. There was nothing wrong with me. The problem was that Viren believed himself incapable of love. He was such a fool!

Even a blind person could see that he was one of the most loving people on earth. And he loved without ever expecting to get it back. For the first time since I fell in love with him, I accepted that Sufi and Daya Bua were right. Viren did love me. He just didn't know it yet.

I had to be patient and allow him to reach that realisation on his own. And I had to hold on. I had to hold on with all the love inside of me. I had to hold on until this stubborn, stupid, arrogant, wonderful man finally figured out how much he loved me.

Well, I was nothing if not resilient. I was willing to hold on for as long as I had to. But I needed to get home now. If I stayed with him at the hotel any longer, I'd end up where I always did - in his bed. And that would only let him hide behind sex. I was done letting Viren hide behind anything.

When I came downstairs, Sufi called a car for me, and I left without a backward glance.

My phone pinged almost as soon as the car drove out of the hotel gates.

Miss you already.

Oh, yeah. Viren was almost there. It wouldn't be too long now, I thought, hugging myself tightly.

I was both exhilarated and terrified right now. The only reason Viren was having nightmares about me was because he loved me. Anyone could see that. He was terrified of losing me. And his past made him hold on to those fears, almost baby them until they became manacles around his heart.

I had to give him the space and time to break free of these manacles, and...a sudden, hard jolt interrupted my reverie, and I let out a little scream.

It took me a minute to understand what was happening. We were on the big flyover near our house, and a speeding truck had just barrelled past my car, nosing us out of its way. My car swerved wildly before it took a flying leap off the lowest side of the flyover and landed upside down on the road below.

As my eyes drooped shut, my last thought was that I hadn't told Viren I would wait for him.

Forever, if necessary.

CHAPTER 29

VIREN

I threw on my clothes and stayed out on the balcony, staring out into the darkness of the ocean.

Sunaina was crazy! She couldn't just issue an ultimatum like that.

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Accept you love me, otherwise, divorce me.

What nonsense! I had no intention of doing either. Wait...what was I saying? Of course, I was going to divorce her because our wedding contract had an expiry date set out in very clear terms. Why was I even considering otherwise?

Strange, but when we drew up the contract, there was no clause suggesting what to do if we both wanted to stay married. Neither Sunaina nor I ever anticipated that possibility. But now, it was all I could think about.

Was she right? Was I...was I falling in love with my wife? And why did that possibility not terrify me as much as it should? It was the last thing I ever wanted, and yet, I was beginning to warm to the idea. Slightly. Only a little. I mean, I wasn't head-over-heels in love or anything ridiculous like that.

Fine! I was willing to admit the possibility that I was maybe...a little in love with my wife. But only within the acceptable standards of sanity. Nothing too outrageous. Like I loved Sufi. Only with a lot of sexual attraction thrown in. There! I had found a decent middle ground that gave us both what we wanted without compromising everything I believed in. I hoped that was enough for Sunaina because this no-sex rule was proving to be very difficult, even for one night.

I craved Sunaina like an addict craved his next fix.

Fuck it! Why was I still here? I could just go home and tell her I loved her - within reason - and get on with the best part of the evening.

I raced to the door and threw it open, only to find Sufi standing on the other side, his hand raised to knock. But that wasn't what worried me. It was the look in his eyes - shocked, and absolutely ravaged.

A cold hand clutched at my heart because I had seen that look many times before. I knew what it meant.

"Sue..." he began, licking his dry lips before he could get the words out.

My head began to reel and I thought I was about to pass out.

"Sue just had an accident, Mr C. She's in hospital," he said, his voice choked with tears.

A guttural cry rose out of my chest and rent the air.

And my last coherent thought before we raced to Sunaina's side was that I was about to lose the only woman I had ever loved. And I was such a bastard that I hadn't even told her how much I loved her.

We rushed into the ER and found a team of doctors waiting to brief us. The Chief Medical Officer, the chairman of the board, and the heads of almost all the departments were in attendance and were clamouring to talk all at once, but I had only one question for all of them.

"Where is my wife?" I roared.

They led me to her bay immediately, and my heart almost gave out at the sight of my beautiful Sunaina lying in that bed, covered in blood, with all those tubes connected to her.

“How is she doing?” I asked, keeping an eye on the monitor, hoping the steady beeps from all the machines meant she was still with us.

They briefed me as best as they could.

“It’s still too early to tell, Mr Chaudhry. She has a fractured pelvis, broken ribs, and a possible head injury. We’re checking to see if there’s any internal damage. As soon as she’s haemodynamically stable, we will take her into the OT.”

“What does mean?” I asked hoarsely. These were just words. They didn’t tell me if Sunaina would make it.

“She’s lost a lot of blood. We need to fix that before we begin to operate on her,” the surgeon explained in simple terms.

I thanked him and allowed Sufi to lead me out to the waiting room where I found Daima waiting for me. She looked as if she had aged ten years all of a sudden.

“How did this happen, beta?” she asked, bursting into tears after I briefed her on Sunaiana’s condition.

I let out a bitter laugh.

“All I can say is that I am cursed, Daima. I’m cursed never to have love in my life.”

“Don’t say that,” she said sharply. “Sunaina is still alive, isn’t she? My girl is a fighter, Viren. She will hold on. For your sake, if not for ours.”

“Boss, there’s some bad news,” said Sufi, who had been speaking to one of the doctors. “The chauffeur who was driving Sue’s car, Ramesh, just succumbed to his injuries.”

I closed my eyes in despair.

Would the tally of losses in my life never end? What kind of curse was this? Poor Ramesh had been serving our family for over forty years. He would be missed.

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“Sufi, make it clear to his family that he was blameless in this accident. You know how the media likes to twist things around. And pay all his hospital and funeral costs. We’ll figure out a hefty settlement for his family after Sunaina’s surgery.”

Four hours later, we were still in the waiting room. Sunaina had been in surgery for over two hours, and it was going to take a lot longer before they could bring her out.

I sent Daima home with Sufi because she needed to be there when Aisha woke up to break the news to her.

“Get some rest, Mr Chaudhry,” said a nurse sympathetically as she brought me a cup of coffee. “She’s going to be in surgery for a few more hours.”

I leaned back in my seat and shut my eyes because when they were open, all I could see was Sunaina’s expression when I told her I could never love her.

I tried a few boxed breathing techniques Aisha’s therapist had taught her over the years, but as soon as I tried to relax, my brain suddenly threw up a flash of memory from the past. It was quite hazy, which meant it was really old. I remembered Daima coming into my bedroom with tears rolling down her face as she explained to me that my parents had gone to heaven. And that they were never coming back.

I don’t remember ever having cried for them as a child because Daima had replaced my mother long before her death, and my father was more of an authority figure than a friend. But now my eyes welled up. Not in their memory but for the little boy who had just lost his parents.

I jerked open my eyelids and forced back the tears just in time, for Sunaina's friend, Dhruv, came marching up to me, dressed in scrubs.

"Viren, I just heard about Sunaina's accident as soon as I came out of another emergency surgery twenty minutes ago. I've spoken to her surgeons, and trust me, Sunaina is in good hands. I'm going into the OT now to observe her surgery from the viewing area, and I'll keep you posted every thirty minutes. All right?"

I barely had the courage to nod. He clapped me on the shoulder and raced back the same way he'd come.

Sufi returned with another cup of coffee, and I downed it like medicine because I needed the caffeine right now.

"Her boy toy is going into the OT to keep an eye on her," I said numbly.

Sufi gripped my shoulder in sympathy.

"She's going to be fine, boss. You know that," he said bracingly. As if he was trying to convince himself as much as he was trying to convince me.

"Any news about Ramesh's funeral? And the truck that hit them? Did the police find it?"

"Ramesh's funeral will be held in the morning around ten," said Sufi.

"I'll be there," I promised.

"Boss, you need to stay here with Sue. I will go on your behalf," he argued, but I shook my head.

“I have to go, Sufi. I owe him the courtesy of attending his funeral after everything he’s done for us.”

“All right, boss. As for the truck, cops stopped it halfway across the city after multiple bystanders called the police helpline to complain about the incident. The driver is in custody.”

I managed a nod and kept my eyes on the double doors in front of me. What did I even expect? That Sunaina was somehow going to walk out through the door?

“Why don’t you close your eyes for an hour while I keep watch? And then we can switch,” suggested Sufi.

I didn’t bother telling him that I couldn’t sleep until I knew she was fine because I owed it to him to try to get some rest. If I didn’t rest, he wouldn’t rest either, and we both needed to be alert tomorrow.

Again, I tried the same boxed breathing, and again, the same thing happened. Only this time, instead of my parents, I got a call about Deven and Disha. In my mind’s eye, I saw how I had identified their mangled bodies. And how I’d had to wake up little Aisha and tell her what had happened. And the aftermath. My body jolted at the memory of holding her as she screamed in terror every night for almost two months after her parents died. Again, tears welled up in my eyes. For Aisha, this time. And for Deven and Disha who would never get to see her grow into a beautiful woman who was the best mix of both her parents.

When I couldn’t take it anymore, I gave up on rest and opened my eyes to find Sufi weeping silently. I put my arm around him and held him as he cried.

“I know, Sufi Singh,” I whispered. “I know.”

He shed the tears I just couldn't right now. Because crying for Sunaina meant I was giving up on her. And that I would never do. I would sit here and pray to a god I didn't even believe in to save the woman I loved. I'll do anything you ask, I chanted silently. Just let her live.

Three hours later, the team of surgeons came out looking as exhausted as we felt.

"The surgery went well," said Dhruv, speaking for them. "We're optimistic about the results, even though it's too soon to say anything. She will be under observation in the recovery room for the next few hours before we move her to the ICU. God willing, we should be able to move her there by evening."

I sent up a short prayer of thanks and thanked them all.

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It was already eight in the morning, and by Dhruv's estimate, they would move her to the ICU around 4 pm.

"I need to attend a funeral this morning, Dhruv," I said worriedly. "The chauffeur who was driving her died on the spot, and he's being cremated in a couple of hours. Will Sunaina be okay if I go to the funeral? I don't want to leave her, but I have to do my duty by Ramesh."

"Of course," he replied. "I'll stay with her while you attend the funeral."

"Thanks, man," I said gratefully and went home for a quick change of clothes before the funeral.

Ramesh's family was understandably heartbroken. I spent some time assuring them of all my help before they began his last rites. As I stood by the burning pyre, I started getting flashes again. But instead of the past, I kept seeing Sunaina lying under the logs instead of Ramesh.

The first time it happened, I almost jumped on the pyre to save her from the flames before I came to my senses. But it happened again and again until I could take it no more. I paid my respects to Ramesh and left the crematorium, my eyes burning with unshed tears. For Sunaina.

They allowed me to go into the ICU and see her for five minutes that night, even though she was still heavily sedated. She was still connected to all the tubes and was heavily bandaged, but I could see more life in her unmoving form.

As I stared down at her, I ran a finger gently over her hand and made a silent promise to her. She was in this state because of me. Because of my cursed life. I was going to free her from this curse, even if it was the last thing I ever did.

CHAPTER 30

VIREN

They kept Sunaina in a medically induced coma for three days to allow her body to heal. And I was by her side every minute of the day, clocking every little change in her condition, urging her to heal quickly.

When they finally decided to wake her up, she showed no inclination to open her eyes even though her condition was stable.

“While you’re lazing away in bed, Aisha is crying all day, and Daima has stopped eating. Sufi is not much better,” I scolded her. “I am the only person with any sense around here. And I’m wasting precious time in the hospital when I could be at work. Oh, and your boy toy won’t stop hovering around you like a little ministering angel. If you don’t want me to rip his arms off, open your eyes, Sunaina.”

There was no response.

“Fine!” I said, trying again. “Don’t tell me I didn’t warn you. The next time he gropes you under the pretext of taking your temperature, I’ll rip his puny little head off. They’ll have to clean his blood off the floor, and the patients will be traumatised for life. But that’s all on you, wifey. You know what to do if you value his life. Just open your eyes. Stop being so bratty, for fuck’s sake.”

“Umm, can you stop threatening me?” asked Dhruv, rolling his eyes as he read Sunaina’s charts. “She will wake up as soon as all the drugs we pumped into her body

get cleared out.”

“See? I told you he was shady. He’s a fucking drug dealer. He just admitted it,” I went on, ignoring the ministering angel.

He patted me on the shoulder and went on with the rest of his rounds.

As soon as he left the room, Sunaina’s eyes flickered open, and she stared at me blearily before she shut them again. I wanted to shout my joy to the whole world, but all I did was ring for the nurse. They poked and prodded her for some time and coaxed her to open her eyes.

I stepped out into the corridor and found Daima, Sufi and Aisha waiting for me.

“She’s waking up,” I informed them. “Maybe not right now, but soon.”

About an hour later, Dhruv came out of the ICU beaming.

“She’s awake, Viren. You can go and see her now. She’s asking for you. She said something about your nagging getting on her nerves. I told her I’d fill her in on your activities while she was in a coma, so you better go in while she still wants to see you,” he teased.

I cleared my throat and swallowed the sobs of gratitude struggling to get out.

“Let Aisha go in first. She’s been very worried about her Auntie Sue,” I said.

Dhruv gave me an odd look as he took Aisha in. She came out wiping happy tears and grinned at me.

“Auntie Sue is so mad at you for not letting her sleep, Chachu. Go and say sorry right

now.”

“Let Daima go first, beta,” I said, waving her into the ICU.

Daima went in with a strange look at me, and I blew out a short breath.

“Sufi, I’m going to take Aisha home. You go in after Daima,” I instructed.

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“Uh-huh. And why aren’t you going in?” he asked in disbelief.

“I’ll go later. I’m late for a meeting,” I said vaguely.

“No, you don’t! I cleared your schedule for the whole week, remember?”

“Just do as you’re told,” I snapped, and he flounced away in tight-lipped fury.

Aisha gave me a worried look as I led her to the car.

“Are you upset with Aunty Sue?” she asked finally.

I shook my head.

“Maybe a little, because she did give us quite a scare. But I’ll get over it,” I said, making my plans.

Before the night was over, I was seated in my private jet en route to Dubai for a series of meetings that would last for two weeks.

CHAPTER 31

SUNAINA

I raised my head groggily as soon as the door opened, waiting eagerly to see the look on Viren’s face when he saw me awake after all these days.

To my surprise, it was Aisha who came in. She cried at the sight of all the needles and tubes inside me, and I reassured her as best as I could, wondering why Viren put her through this experience alone. He could have come in with her because the poor dear needed a tight hug, and there was no way I could hug her right now.

Come to think of it, I needed a hug, too, so why was my husband not here? It was his god-given duty to hug me, especially after his incessant nagging of the past two days. I couldn't open my eyes, but I heard him all right.

When Aisha went out, I was sure he would come next. But Daya Bua came in after Aisha and then Sufi. They both did not mention Viren, and neither did I because I was sure he would come after they did. After all, this was just like him - to allow everyone else to visit first.

But the door shut behind Sufi and didn't open for a while until they rolled in another patient. I got tired of keeping my eyes glued to the door and gave in to the demands of my body and the heavy medication, allowing sleep to claim me.

I sensed something different about Daya Bua the next morning when she dropped in to visit me. It took me some time to figure it out - she was furious about something. But Sufi was even worse. He looked absolutely devastated.

I still didn't ask them anything.

It was only when I had been awake for two days, and Viren had neither dropped in to see me nor called nor sent a message that I mustered the courage to check with Sufi.

"Where is he?" I asked softly.

He knew what I meant, of course, and didn't meet my eyes as he brushed my hair out of my face gently.

“In Dubai,” he whispered finally.

The machine above my head beeped loudly as my heart gave a huge jolt, and the nurse came running.

“I’m fine,” I said, trying to take a deep breath. When the machine piped down, she left us alone again with a warning glance at Sufi, who was almost in tears.

“When did he go?”

“The night you came out of the coma.”

“And when is he coming back?”

“I don’t know, Sue. I don’t know anything anymore.”

Wow!

Viren Chaudhry had finally proved that he did not love me. It didn’t matter if it was because I was unloveable or because he was incapable of love. He just didn’t love me.

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As for the words I'd been hearing while I was in a coma, they must have been some weird medicine-induced hallucination. Because there was no way the man who said all those things and begged me to wake up could have abandoned me as soon as I opened my eyes.

And still, I couldn't help but keep my eyes trained on the door every single day, waiting for him to come. But he didn't come.

Not even when they discharged me from the ICU and moved me into a private ward that cost an arm and a leg. Aisha, Daya Bua, Sufi and all the friends I had made since I married Viren filled my room with flowers and presents, but there wasn't even a get-well-soon card from my husband.

My fake husband, I corrected myself. It was time to start using the correct terminology for our fake relationship.

I didn't ask if Viren had returned from Dubai, and nobody mentioned him. As the days passed and he was still a no-show, it began to make even our visitors uncomfortable, though they didn't say anything. Except for Sarang.

"I'll go to Dubai and drag him back home by his ear, Daima," he growled one evening, thinking I was fast asleep. "He can't do this! He must be out of his mind."

"It won't do any good, beta," she said with a sob, and my heart sank at her words. "Our Viren has changed overnight, Sarang. His heart has really turned to stone."

I struggled to hold back my sobs, and thankfully, they left right away. I turned my

face away from the door and allowed my tears to fall silently, crying for what I thought I had lost, but which wasn't mine to lose in the first place.

Dhruv broached the topic when it was clear I would be discharged the next week.

“What the hell is going on between you and Viren, Sue? Why hasn't he been in to see you?”

I turned a weary face to him and smiled bleakly.

“I think that's self-evident, Dhruv. We're not together anymore.”

“Bullshit! That man was here from the moment you were brought in right until the moment you opened your eyes. He didn't eat, sleep or move from your side when you were critical. He held on to you as tightly as you held on to life. So what happened to make him vanish overnight?”

“Haven't any of your patients been ghosted by a partner after an accident?” I asked cynically.

“Of course,” he replied. “It's sadly more common than you think. But none of those partners was as steadfast in their care as your husband.”

“It was the funeral, in my opinion,” said Sufi, with a giant sniff as he rearranged my flowers.

“What funeral?” I asked in confusion.

“Ramesh's funeral. I saw Mr C during the last rites. Something happened to him, and when we left the crematorium, it was as if something was broken inside him.”

“Find out what’s wrong with him and fix this, Sufi. Because this is just wrong,” said Dhruv severely before he left the room.

“I don’t know how to fix this, Sue,” whispered Sufi in dismay. “For the first time in my life, I have no quick fix or jugaad for a problem.”

“It can’t be fixed, Sufi Singh. Sometimes, it’s important to know when a problem is past fixing,” I said, feeling exhausted and broken.

“This is your marriage we’re talking about, Sue. You can’t give up so easily,” he exclaimed.

“Why not?” I snapped. “When it’s clear that Viren has given up already. There’s nothing left to save.”

And I was proved right the day I was to be discharged from the hospital.

Sufi and Dhruv were completing all the formalities and billing, and Daya Bua and Aisha were helping me pack my things. This room had been my home for a month now, and I had grown attached to it. I didn’t know how I could go back to Chaudhry House when I knew Viren didn’t want me there anymore.

There was a knock at the door, and Aisha squealed with joy.

“He’s here! Chachu is finally here!”

She ran to him, and he picked her up easily, giving her a tight hug. He then greeted Daya Bua, who gave him a very cold welcome. And I noticed he still wasn’t looking at me, the coward.

Did he really think I was going to fall on his chest and cry about his absence? I mean,

I would if I could, but I knew it wouldn't make any difference to his stony heart. So why bother?

I didn't say a word, just went on packing my stuff into the holdall Sufi had placed on my bed. Eventually, Daya Bua hustled Aisha out of the room, and I braced myself for whatever was coming next.

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I snuck a quick look at his face and was surprised to see him looking haggard. Must have been partying hard with European supermodels in Dubai, I told myself sternly.

My disobedient heart still skipped a beat when he moved towards me. I kept my eyes on what I was doing, pretending he wasn't in the room until he cleared his throat.

It took every bit of willpower I had not to cry when I met his eyes. To present a blank face to my husband, who had dumped me in a hospital and ghosted me when I needed him the most.

“The doctors tell me you're doing better now,” he said gruffly, not meeting my eyes.

I said nothing. He could see for himself that I was standing on my two feet. Considering I was in a very different state the last time he saw me, there was nothing I needed to say.

Viren waited for a minute, and when I didn't reply, he held out a sheaf of papers. I stared at it as if it were a snake, and didn't reach out to take it until he spoke.

“I'm filing for divorce,” he announced. “You need to sign this document too.”

My chest suddenly went tight, and it felt as if the bottom had dropped out of my world. I focussed on taking slow, deep breaths and still said nothing.

With a sigh, he placed the papers on the bed in front of me.

“Let's not make this difficult,” he began. “We knew this day was coming.”

I didn't want to hear his excuses. I didn't want to hear anything anymore. I just wanted to be done with this farce of a marriage.

So I held up a hand, and when he stopped talking in surprise, I pulled out a pen from the bedside drawer and scribbled my signature wherever it was marked in the document. Then, I flung the papers on the floor in front of Viren to show him what I thought of him and turned my back, still without saying a word.

He left the room as quietly as he entered, and when the door shut behind him, I sat on the bed and wept. I don't know when the door opened again, but Daya Bua came and sat next to me.

"I'm so sorry, beta," she said, holding me as I cried my heart out. "This is all my fault. I should never have brought him into your life."

"No, Bua. This is all on Viren. This has nothing to do with any of us," I said firmly.

Sufi came in just then, looking thunderous.

"I heard what he did, Sue. Why did you sign the papers so easily? You should have made him sweat."

"I just want to move on with my life, Sufi. I'm sick of feeling so broken from inside."

"Cool, I have the car waiting outside. Let's get you home and into bed," he said briskly.

"I have no home, Sufi. Not anymore."

"Babe, you're coming to Chaudhry House," he argued. "That's where you belong."

“Not anymore,” I repeated. “Starting now, Viren and I are in the cooling-off period for the divorce. We cannot live under the same roof anymore. And I don’t even want to live in his house. Take me to a hotel for now, until I find an apartment of my own.”

“Arre, why should you go to a hotel? We’ll take you to the flat at Malabar Hill. That’s coming to you in your divorce settlement anyway,” said Daya Bua.

“I don’t want it,” I said desperately. “I don’t want anything from Viren Chaudhry ever again.”

They realised I wasn’t in a good place emotionally and spared me the stress of an argument.

Sufi booked me a room at the Taj right away and charged it to Viren over my protests.

After they settled me into my room, I asked them to leave.

“Haye haye! How can we leave you in this state, beta? You can’t take care of yourself,” said Daya Bua.

“Bua, I’ve been taking care of myself for years. I’ll manage somehow,” I replied and sent them on their way.

I scrolled through the internet looking for places to rent, but I soon realised that the renting process could take ages. I needed something right now. So I called Perpetua and gave her a full update on my health before she allowed me to get to the reason I had called.

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“Hey, can I ask a favour? Do you have a spare room in your house that I can rent?”

She was happy to have me move in immediately, and we agreed on what I considered a very reasonable rent. She even promised to help me move.

CHAPTER 32

VIREN

We had stopped eating as a family after Sunaina signed the divorce papers.

Daima and Sufi ate in the kitchen as a sign of protest, and when I tried to join them in the kitchen, they threw their dishes in the sink and stood by the wall like the serving staff. I knew they were making a point, but it hurt like hell.

In one stroke, I had again lost most of my family, this time, it was all my fault.

“Daima, won’t you eat with me?” I asked softly. “You’ve been eating with me since I started eating solid food, and now you’re pushing me away because I choose to live my life by my chosen path?”

Her lips wobbled and tears filled her eyes, but she didn’t sit down.

“You’ve made the biggest mistake of your life, Viren, and you don’t even know it,” she whispered.

Didn’t I? I gave a mirthless laugh that had her glaring at me.

“Is this funny to you? Aisha is crying uncontrollably in her room, and you’ve just undone years of therapy for her. Believe me, Viren, that child is the only reason Sufi and I still working in this house.”

“You don’t work here, Daima,” I yelled. “The two of you were my family even before I married her. So I don’t see why that has to change!”

“Change is the only constant in life, beta. We were a family before Sunaina, but in cutting her out of the family, you have splintered the very fabric of our lives.”

I ignored her words and turned to Sufi.

“Tell her my lawyer wants to meet with her to discuss the settlement,” I ordered. “She’s been putting it off, and we have the final court date in two months.”

“Tell whom?” he asked, narrowing his eyes at me. “Say her name, Mr C.”

“Sunaina,” I thundered. “There! Are you happy now?”

As if not saying her name made any difference to how much I missed her even after four months.

I had hoped signing the divorce papers would help me get on with my life. To make my peace with the fact that the Sunaina chapter of my life was closed for good. But even four months after we walked away from each other, nothing had changed.

I still woke up with this ache in my heart from where I had cut her out for good. I still got the same nightmare about losing her. And we were all still completely miserable.

As for my soon-to-be ex-wife, she had moved into her own room in Gino and Perpetua’s house, according to my sources. Yes, I had sources. I had people looking

out for her after she pulled an Uno Reverse on me and flatly refused a financial settlement. She wanted nothing I was planning to give her. She turned down the plus four-bedroom flat in Malabar Hill, the hundred crore cash settlement and even the car. All she wanted was visitation rights with Aisha, with Daima and Sufi overseeing the transfers every other weekend.

“Of course, I’ll give her visitation,” I yelled down the phone to my lawyer, Ranvijay. “But she also needs to take the money. What is she going to live on?”

“Umm, Viren, you do realise you’re saving a helluva lot of money if she refuses the settlement?” he asked sarcastically.

“This is my wife, RV! I have to provide for her.”

“No. She is your fake wife. And you owe her nothing if she doesn’t want anything.”

I slammed the phone down because, of course, he didn’t understand anything.

He didn’t understand that even after four months, I couldn’t turn my feelings for her off like a tap.

When even Sufi stonewalled me, I threw my fork down and rose from the table.

“Fine, I’ll deal with this myself if she can’t be arsed to talk to my lawyer,” I snarled.

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“If you want to speak to her, have the balls to do it openly, Mr C. Stop spying on her. It’s giving icky stalker,” he said snidely.

“What?” I asked in surprise.

“Who do you think pays all the bills?” he asked as if I were a child. “Did you think I wouldn’t find out you hired a detective to keep an eye on her?”

Daima slapped her forehead in despair.

“Where did I go wrong in raising you, beta? You cannot stalk a woman like this,” she wailed.

“I’m not stalking her! I’m keeping an eye on her to make sure she’s safe,” I yelled.

“If you want to see if she’s safe, go knock on her door and talk to her. Don’t have your people follow her around. That’s the opposite of safe,” said Sufi.

“And if you’re so concerned about her safety, you shouldn’t be divorcing her in the first place,” said Daima, with a sniff.

“It’s okay, Daima. We only have to put up with this until the divorce comes through,” said Sufi, throwing me a sneer. “If I guess correctly, Dhruv won’t waste any time in marrying her as soon as they get the divorce decree.”

“I knew he was a sneaky bastard! If he’s been bothering my wife, I’ll rip his guts out and feed them to the dogs,” I snarled.

“Your ex-wife,” corrected Sufi.

I glared at both of them and stalked out of the kitchen because there was no point in explaining myself. But Daima followed me to the study.

“It’s not too late to take it back, Viren. Stop the divorce and go tell your wife how you really feel, beta.”

“I feel terrified, Daima,” I said bluntly. “I feel paralysed by fear. I keep seeing Sunaina on the funeral pyre. I can’t live like that forever.”

“Tell me this. Has your fear lessened since you left her?”

“Unfortunately, it hasn’t,” I admitted gruffly.

“And it never will,” she declared. “It will only end when she dies, and then it will turn into grief. Because this fear is just an extension of your love. And it’s not unique to you, beta. We all feel it. Our biggest fear is always losing our loved ones. Who hasn’t had that fear almost every single day? Whether it is the fear of losing a spouse, a lover, a child, a parent or even a close friend, we all must suffer through it. That is the price we pay for love.”

“Then how do people love at all?” I asked bleakly.

“We don’t love when it is convenient to do so, Viren. We love our people despite all our fears and insecurities because love trumps fear.”

“I can’t afford to lose her, Daima. Not after everyone else I’ve lost,” I said in desperation.

“But you are already losing her, Viren. And do you think she’s going to be safe just

because she's not married to you anymore? Or that you will grieve her death any less because you're not her husband anymore?"

I thought about what it would mean if something happened to her even years after the divorce. My entire body clenched in fear, and I realised Daima was right. I had just made the biggest mistake of my life.

"Fuck! I never looked at it that way, Daima. It doesn't matter if Sunaina isn't my wife any longer. No matter how many years we spend apart, I will still be just as heartbroken if she dies," I whispered.

"Then wouldn't you rather be with her and build up a precious store of memories that will stay with you long after she's gone?"

I stared at her with unseeing eyes.

"How do I undo this, Daima? I broke her heart. How can I fix this?"

"Sometimes, the best thing to do is go and talk it out face to face," she urged.

CHAPTER 33

SUNAINA

I cursed under my breath as the paper bag in my hand ripped from the bottom and all the mangoes rolled to the ground.

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“Need any help?” asked a very familiar voice, and I froze in place.

Four months. It had taken him four months to show up.

I left the mangoes where they were and stuck my key into the front door. Gino and Perpetua were out on a short holiday with the rest of the band, and I was all alone in the house tonight. I wondered if Viren knew that.

“What do you want?” I asked bluntly, as I threw the door open and began flinging the mangoes over the threshold.

“Can you look at me, please?” he begged. “I haven’t looked into your eyes since the night of the accident.”

“Poor you,” I replied with a bitter laugh. “The wife you abandoned in the hospital won’t play your games any more. I’m sure it sucks.”

He drew in a sharp breath and let it out slowly. I was aware of everything about him, even if I refused to look at the bastard.

“I’m really, really sorry, Sunaina. Running away was a huge mistake.”

“Yes, it was,” I quipped, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Can you forgive me?” he had the audacity to ask.

“No,” I replied coldly. “Because this is *ayou*problem. It has nothing to do with me.”

“Really? Are you trying to say you don’t miss me?”

“Of course, I miss you, you blithering idiot. But it doesn’t change the fact that you took my heart and stomped all over it before you abandoned me. And now you’re back, apologising for it after four months. Why?”

“Because I can’t live without you,” he growled.

“And yet you did just that for the past so many months,” I pointed out.

“Yes, I did. I existed. But that’s all it is - a joyless existence,” he said hoarsely. “You took all the sunshine...all the joy out of my life when you left.”

I rubbed my face in exhaustion.

“Get to the point, Viren. What do you want?”

He didn’t reply for a few moments, and I finally looked at him because this was Viren! How was I ever going to keep my eyes off him?

I found him looking me up and down with a scowl.

“You’ve lost weight,” he accused.

“Yes, because I’ve been gymming regularly. Again, what do you want?”

“I don’t like it,” he went on, ignoring my question.

For fuck’s sake! It was like talking to a stubborn toddler!

“You don’t have to like it. My body does not concern you anymore,” I snapped.

“Everything about you concerns me. And it always will! That’s what I’m here to tell you, Sunaina. I was wrong in thinking I’d stop being afraid of losing you if we weren’t together. That fear became part of my life the day I fell in love with you, and now I have to live with it for the rest of my life because I don’t know how to stop loving you.”

My throat went dry and when I swallowed, it felt like there were shards of glass stuck in there.

He was in love with me? My heart did a pirouette in my chest, and I had to give it a very stern lecture because he couldn’t just waltz in here and tell me he loved me, and expect me to forgive him.

“Tell me how you did it,” he said desperately.

“Did what?”

“Stopped loving me.”

“I never stopped,” I whispered. “I don’t know how, either.”

Viren took a hopeful step closer to me, but he froze when I backed away.

“Here’s the thing,” I said gently. “Your sudden epiphany does not erase the way you’ve treated me. It doesn’t matter if you love me when you can abandon me so easily.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but I held up a hand to stop him.

“I’m not denying that you love me. But I think you love your fears more than you love me. That’s why you held on to them harder than you held onto me.”

His throat worked as he swallowed, and I took the time to notice the dark circles under his eyes and the fact that he had lost weight, too.

“You’re right. I was holding my fears closer to my heart than I held you,” he admitted. “And I’m doing therapy to learn to cope with my past, Sunaina. I can never erase what I’ve done to you. The question is whether you love me enough to forgive me and let me in again.”

“You’re in therapy?” I asked, my heart jumping with joy.

“Yes. I attend solo and group sessions every week, and they have been a revelation.”

“What if I still want to go ahead with the divorce, Viren?”

He flinched at my words but set his jaw firmly after a moment.

“That’s your right, wifey. I won’t stand in your way if that’s what you want.”

Damn it, I didn’t want that. At all!

But I didn’t want this blighted fake marriage either.

I took a step closer to him, and he did the same. And when we’d both taken a few steps in the right direction, we stared into each other’s eyes for what felt like an eternity.

Viren reached out and drew me into his arms, and pressed a soft kiss to my forehead. Then he kissed my nose. And then, I tilted my head just the right amount to let him kiss me on the lips.

It started softly but soon turned hungry enough to set me on fire. I pulled away from him and gave him a tremulous smile. He just stared at it like a man starving for ages.

“Come home with me?” he murmured.

I shook my head slowly.

“I live here now. But you’re welcome to come in if you like,” I said, with a sidelong glance at him.

He followed me over the threshold and helped me pick up the mangoes before he backed me into a wall and kissed me hungrily. Over and over again, until we were both gasping for breath.

Between those deep, wet kisses, I pointed out my room, and he hoisted me over his shoulder in a fireman's lift and carried me to my bed.

Hours later, I was drawing slow circles on his chest as he tried to catch his breath when I raised my head and fixed him with a firm stare.

"I still want that divorce," I said. "And on my own terms. Which means you can stick your money where the sun don't shine."

Viren sat up angrily.

"Are you serious? You're dumping me after what we just did?"

I shook my head and smiled at him.

"I'm just dumping our fake marriage."

"And what do you want instead? What is this?" he asked pointing to the two of us wrapped up in each other's arms.

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“This is a new beginning,” I replied with a deep sigh of contentment.

EPILOGUE

Tahira Mundhra knocked on the glass door of Viren’s office just before lunchtime.

“Hey, stranger,” she cooed.

He waved her in and went on with his call for the next ten minutes, as she tapped her foot in annoyance. Eventually, he ended the call and turned to her with a warm smile.

“Hello! This is a pleasant surprise!” he said.

“I’ve been meaning to call you...you know...about the divorce. I’m so sorry you and Sunaina split up. But I must say, divorce agrees with you. You’re looking good, Viren!”

“Thanks! All the credit goes to my new girlfriend,” he said modestly.

Tahira’s smile faltered.

“N...new...girlfriend? Already?”

“Yes, and here she comes with our lunch! I’m so glad you’re here today, Tahira. May I introduce you to the love of my life?”

Tahira turned around stiffly and pasted a catty smile to her lips, which vanished when

she saw the woman who walked up to Viren and kissed him warmly.

“Sunaina?”

“Hi, Tahira,” said Sunaina politely.

“I... don’t understand! Are you guys dating again?”

They nodded in unison, which seemed to irritate Tahira.

“After your divorce?”

“A little before the divorce, actually,” said Sunaina.

Just then, Sufi entered with a bottle of champagne and four glasses.

“What are we toasting today, boss?”

“New beginnings!” said Sunaina and Viren in unison.