

A MAN TO DIE FOR



SUVIKA



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A MAN TO DIE FOR

Suvika

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Your memory is a monster; you forget - it doesn't. It simply files things away. It keeps things for you, or hides things from you and summons them to your recall with will of its own. You think you have a memory; but it has you! – John Irving.

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Prologue

2002, a small town in India

The first thing anyone entering the street would notice was the burning house. The intensity of the flames flaring up the sky were indescribable. The Chief Fire Officer, David, stood in front of the building and watched the fire engulf it from all sides. The fire was everywhere; the roof, the doors and windows, fire was even coming out of the house through various openings, like there was a fire-breathing dragon inside the house, puffing away vicariously. The flames burned deep red and amber, almost livid purple as he saw his whole team trying to put it out. It was a small town. There weren't even equipped to handle this kind of an inferno. He had called in every truck and man in disposal and even requested the neighbors to help out. Some got out their water pipes and some carried buckets, splashing them over the burning house. Nothing and no one inside was likely to survive the fire, he thought as he saw some flames licking up in the air with the wind, trying to catch something else on fire, and finding nothing but air, disappearing into the windy night, like disappointed flutters. Chills ran up his spine at the mere thought of that kind of blaze spreading. He thanked God Almighty for the huge lawn and garden surrounding the house.

"What's the report?" David ran up coughing to one of the members of his team who had just come out of the building.

The guy looked at his boss and grimaced. David observed that he was a little pale under all the soot and smoke that covered his protective gear and face. "Both of them were inside. Dead. At least I think it's them. Can't say for sure until after the postmortem. Looks like the fire started in the kitchen."

"Any evidence of a foul play?" he asked, gesturing to the waiting ambulance and medical personnel and also to the police to enter the scene.

"Uh, no. No foul play. But..."

"But?" David asked. He hadn't liked the man and the woman who had been living in that house any more than the people living in the street or in the town did but that didn't mean he had wished them dead. Not like this. Being charred alive was a horrifyingly painful way to die.

"There is no polite way to say this so I'm just going to put it bluntly." David

waited for the guy to continue. “The fire started in the kitchen. Gas cylinder was probably what caused the sudden explosion. I’m guessing faulty electrical wiring added to it. They didn’t stand a chance. Not in the state they were in. Their bodies are in the hall floor. One on top of the other. Stuck together. I didn’t find any evidence of clothes on them either. Not that the fire would’ve left any but still...”

“Jesus!”

“They are trying to separate them now,” he said clutching his stomach as nausea rolled inside him.

David hoped the rest of his team had a stronger constitution. Adjusting his head gear, he started to step into the scene when a car came screeching to a halt a few houses away. He saw the man getting out of it and swore. Could this day get any worse?

“Wait! Isn’t that...”

David’s nod was grim. “Anurag. Vandana’s husband.”

What Vandana did... What this man and his child had gone through the last few years would probably have gone unnoticed had it been a metro city. In towns this size, almost everyone knew everyone. By name if not by familiarity. Most times it was a blessing but sometimes it was a curse.

Approximately five feet eleven inches in height, Anurag had a tall, well-built stature. Add a fair complexion and deep brown-black eyes to it, he was downright handsome. But right then his complexion was pale, the creases over his forehead that had started popping up a few months back were now more prominent than ever and he seemed to have aged a decade since the last time David had seen him. And David could also smell the booze on him as he tried to stop him from plunging himself into the burnt building.

“My...wife...Vandana...Please tell me she is not in there!” he pleaded, his voice was a slur as he struggled against the restraining arms. “VANDANA!”

“Anurag! Anurag you need to calm down! Let my guys do their job. Stay back!”

“Please tell me she is safe. Please tell me she’s alive! I need to see her. Please! She’s my wife! I can’t live without her.”

David suppressed a sigh. “Anurag, I’m sorry! We couldn’t save either of them.”

“I don’t care about him,” he cried, still struggling to be freed. “I don’t care. I just want her back. It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters. She’s my wife! VANDANA!”

“Anurag! Please control yourself! Anurag!”

David’s words went unheard as two stretchers were brought out of the charred building, completely wrapped. David gestured the guys not to stop or slow down. They quickly loaded the bodies into the waiting ambulance but as it started to roll down the street, Anurag broke free of the shackling hands and began to run.

“Vandana! Vandana! Don’t leave me! I love you Vandana! Please come back!”

The Chief Fire Officer could do nothing but stand helpless as the grief-maddened husband ran behind the vehicle that carried the dead bodies of his wife and her lover.

Chapter One

2015, Bangalore.

Saying that Shikha Bose was in a cranky mood was putting it mildly. Her neighbor was her curse. Gods above, not satisfied with the three broken engagements in her history had sent this affliction to infest not only her but her entire street. Damn the man and double damn his Bullet bike. The city was flooded with apartments of all sizes and types. Did her parents buy one of those? No! They wanted an independent house. Considering that it had been almost three decades ago, they had been able to afford one too. In Jayanagar, one of the best residential areas of Bangalore. After completing her post-graduation in SIBM, Pune, she had grabbed a great job in the city she was born and brought up in. Her mom had been ecstatic. Even Shikha had been ecstatic. That was until she noted the distance and the route from her home to work and back. APS occupied two towers at ITPL. Did her parents agree with her decision to take a single bedroom near the office which included her promise that she would visit them every weekend? No. Steam had blown out of her mom's ears while her dad had used emotional blackmail quite shamelessly. Net result? She was left to battle the traffic five days a week. The fact that her dad had gifted her with a new car as an enticement made things only marginally better. And the fact that everyone including she herself assumed it was a temporary arrangement until they found a nice guy for her to marry and board the train or flight, depending on where the guy was based, made things worse.

Now three years after she had accepted the job, her parents decision that she would stay with them and three broken engagements later, here she was, still working the same job, still living with them and still single. Not that she minded being single. In fact, she had decided on staying that way for the foreseeable future after the last fiasco. She was better off, way better off living with her parents and climbing up the corporate ladder slowly but surely. Bad traffic notwithstanding. Which brought right back to the topic of her gripe. Her house and the goon of a neighbor.

Shikha, along with two brothers, both elder, had been brought up in the same house and she loved it. At least she did. Until that...*that man* had entered the scene a couple of weeks back and made it his mission to destroy all her joy. God knows what the owners had been thinking leasing the place to a guy like him. Last night he had ridden home in that bike of his at 2.45. Unfortunately

her bedroom was on the same side of the house as his driveway and she had opened the windows to allow some cool breeze in. He had accelerated it twice before turning the damn engine off. His helmet fell once and his main door made all kinds of noises as he shoved it open with all the subtlety of a tank. Then he turned on his porch light, which by some evil design was positioned to shine directly on her face if she was lying on her back or God forbid, facing the window, which she had been. Even the closed curtains couldn't prevent the bright glare. He let the main door slam twice as he went in and came back out again for God knows what and went back in again. And it didn't end there. He forgot to turn the damn light off because a few minutes later the hall light was switched off but the porch light stayed on. She couldn't sleep until wee hours of morning and was super late getting up because she slid the phone alarm shut instead of snoozing it.

"Damn it! Damn it!" she muttered as she jumped into the shower and jumped out a minute later, wrapped a towel around her wet body and started brushing her teeth and spitting into the sink. With her free hand she started drying her body as best as she could before turning on the water to rinse her mouth.

Her parents were in for a huge disappointment, she thought glumly. The people who had lived there previously had been the owners, a nice, elderly couple who had often accompanied her mom and dad to the nearby temple and sometimes vegetable shopping. But as luck would have it, their son had shifted abroad and had wanted them with him. Her parents had been looking forward to introducing themselves to the new tenants and making friends with them. Shikha couldn't control her scoff as she hurried to get ready. They were in for a very rude surprise once they got back from their six week vacation.

The ringing of the landline telephone snapped her out of her thoughts. It was either her parents or one of her over-protective brothers. She prayed it was her parents. They were easier to handle. But she should've known luck just wasn't with her that day. It was her elder brother, from US.

"Yes dada," she said in greeting.

"Hey Choti, how is going? Getting ready for work?"

"Yes and I'm already late so if it's nothing urgent, we'll catch maybe tomorrow," she said pushing the hangers with saris on them aside. No time to wrap, drape and pin today. "God, why aren't jeans made an official dress code!" she muttered.

Her dada laughed. "Don't tell me. You shut off the alarm instead of snoozing it."

"Dada, I really do not have time for this. I'm fine, the house is fine, my car is

fine, no new scratches after last week and no, there is absolutely nothing for you to worry about. Tell mom and dad that I'll talk to them tonight."

"Fine, OK but be careful. I don't like you staying alone in that house. If it were an apartment it would be a different thing..."

"Yeah but it's not an apartment and the street is safe. A residential area," she reminded him as she dashed back into the bathroom for a hurried makeup job, slipped a pair of earrings into her earlobes, strapped the wrist watch and grabbed the outfit that she always grabbed when she was running late. Black skirt, white top and a multicolored scarf looped around her neck.

"Did you have your breakfast?" he fretted.

"Dada, FYI, I'm 27 not 7. I'm off now, bye."

She disconnected the call without giving him a chance to add more instructions, threw the phone in the general direction of the sofa, slipped her feet into a pair of flats, grabbed her backpack, keys, mobile and hightailed out of the house. She had a hair brush in her backpack and would use it before getting down from the car at the office. One major advantage of having a bob-cut hair. It was hassle free and saved loads of time on days like this one considering the fact that her hair was thick and slightly curly. It was not exactly a pixie or crew cut but close. Very close. Her mom had been horrified and her dad had been offended but they had little choice. It was the hair or their daughter living with them. They couldn't have both.

She threw the backpack in the backseat of her metallic green Brio, opened the gate, jumped into the driver's seat and started the car. She put the car into reverse gear and backed out of her house. Her car had a reverse horn which most of the Indian cars had. It didn't help the noise pollution but it sure prevented a few dents, bumps and scratches. Fair trade, she concluded. But apparently not her surly-burly neighbor who came stomping out of his house at the noise. From the thunderous scowl darkening his face, one would think she had been playing rock music at volume 100 for the past one hour. Just when did he go to work? Did he work at all? So far she couldn't discern any pattern or timings. One would expect a person to be awake, she quickly checked the time. At 8.30 in the morning. But his blood shot eyes suggested that he had dragged himself out of the bed. Maybe he worked in a call center, she thought. But he sure didn't look like a guy who handled calls with a trained accent.

Once the car was out of the gate, she put it in neutral and got out to lock her gate. He was out of his gate by then. She even gave him a cordial apologetic smile. Considering how he had woken her up at 2.45 the previous night, it had been a huge effort but she did smile. A wasted effort.

“You trying to wake the dead or what?”

Shikha gritted her teeth and gave diplomacy one more shot. “I’m sorry,” she said in an even tone, walking past him to shut and lock her gate.

He muttered an indistinctive reply before striding back into his house and banging the door shut. The sheer injustice of the situation spiked her temper but she controlled it. No way would she admit it to anyone but herself that she was afraid of that guy. Shikha Bose wasn’t in the habit of backing down from anyone but this guy...he was scary. She didn’t even know his name, she thought with a scowl as she drove off to her work. All she knew was he was tall, burly and didn’t seem to be working any regular job. He looked a little like that Tamil actor Surya. Only bigger. And meaner. He could be dangerous. God knows what kind of things he was involved in, she thought with a shudder. He was a big, muscular guy with Daniel Craig Skyfall haircut. Not just the hairstyle, even his body resembled that of the latest 007. He had a mustache that curled a little at the edges. Not like Amrish Puri in Karan Arjun. More like Ajay Devgn in Bhagat Singh. But the unshaven face and bloodshot eyes sure weren’t those of any freedom fighter. More like WWF participant. He would win too, she thought with dark humor.

Shikha worked as assistant general manager in the finance department of Asian Peninsula Systems, or APS as it was called. It was a twenty five billion dollar company that supplied integrated circuits for both computer and mobile devices across the world. Or rather it manufactured the circuits and sold them to the Original Equipment Manufacturers or OEMs as people called them, who in turn did the integration and packaging before selling them to the customers. And like in any large company, the atmosphere here was a little weird. A bizarre mixture of geeks in jeans and wrinkled t-shirts and management types in three piece suits and a few in semi formals who acted as go-to between the geeks and the higher-ups. If Shikha had been working in the geeks department, no one would’ve cared if she had been late but she was in finance and her boss was a stickler for punctuality. His pointed look at the clock as he watched her walk into the office meant she would be staying late to make up for it. Added to that, her phone had been beeping its head off with incoming mail alerts and reminders. She quickly typed a message to both of her friends in their WhatsApp group.

Dinner Ladies?

Yes.

Hell Yes!

Two replies popped up almost simultaneously making her grin. Thank God it was Friday.

Preeti Singh packed both the lunch boxes and snapped them shut. She stacked the dirty dishes in the utility for the maid to find and clean along with the previous night's leftovers and used plates, praying like she did every day.

"Please Shanti, don't take off today. Please, please. Pretty please. Please don't let me see all these things as soon as I get home tonight."

"You know, you really need to stop mumbling to yourself. It's become a habit now," Preeti's husband, Jai said, coming into the kitchen for his early morning coffee.

Preeti started loading the washing machine. "You didn't have dinner last night."

"It was cold."

"We have a microwave Jai. The cook makes rotis in the evening so of course it's going to be cold. What do you expect?"

"I come home tired from work. I'm not in a mood for heat it and eat it," he snapped back. "I had a heavy snack at the office anyway."

"And a few drinks too."

"I was out with friends and it was just one drink."

"Right," Preeti didn't have time to stand and argue. She handed him the coffee cup and left the kitchen. "I'm off to work. Your breakfast is on the table."

"It's cornflakes. You make it sound like hot paratas are waiting for me," he scoffed.

"If you want hot paratas, you need to help me make them. I don't have time." It was an old argument. They lived in a three BDR apartment in Koramangala and she had to leave on time if she wanted to avoid getting stuck in the traffic.

"What do you have time for? Seriously! Weekdays you go to work. Weekends you go shopping. You're never home before me. You don't want to go out with me..."

"Both of us work on weekdays. I go to buy groceries and veggies over weekends. You don't want to come with me to that either so I guess we're even."

"Don't start that again. You know I'm not used to doing all that stuff. I never did it before and have zero interest in doing now."

"And I did it since the day I was born?" she snapped back. "But I learnt,

didn't I?"

"OK listen, mom and dad are planning to come next month."

"Great!"

Preeti wanted to throw the hairbrush on the mirror. Taking a deep breath she started to brush her long, straight hair in smooth strokes. Her husband never liked it when her parents come for a visit but she was supposed to welcome and bow down to every wish and command of his. Her in-laws didn't like the fact that she worked. And they made sure how displeased they were every minute of every day that they were there. Nothing she did was right. She wasn't taking care of her husband, wasn't taking care of the house, was paying her maids too much. The list just went on and on and on. She normally didn't give a fig about any of those barbed comments but in her previous visit, her mother in law had laid the blame of their childless marriage at her feet. Said that there must be something wrong with her that she hadn't conceived even after three years of marriage. Preeti had waited. Waited for Jai to step up and defend her. Tell his parents the truth that it had been his decision to wait for the kids. That she had wanted to have them all this time. It was he who wasn't ready for the responsibility. But he hadn't said a word. Not a word. Instead he had changed the topic.

"My mom wouldn't understand Preeti. Just ignore it," had been his words when she had confronted him later that night. This was the guy she had been in love with since her under-grad days. This was the guy she had fought with her parents to marry. More importantly this was the guy who had stood in front of her hostel gate all night the time she had been down with malaria. The guy who had sworn to her parents that he would treat her like a princess. What was the saying? *Love is blind. Marriage is the eye-opener.* The guy she had fallen in love with was in there somewhere behind all that attitude of taking her and their relationship for granted. She just didn't see him much these days.

"What does that mean?" he snapped, trailing after her into their bedroom.

"Nothing." She quickly started to getting dressed in black tights and maroon-black kurta, a part of noting her husband's total lack of interest. After three years of marriage, she wasn't expecting him to be rampant with desire at seeing her almost-naked body but there wasn't even a spark. Hell, he wasn't even looking at her.

"You need to adjust your office timings when they're here."

"Like you adjust your timings when my parents come? Sure, I can do that." He hadn't even made it home for dinner on the night she had arranged a

birthday dinner for her dad.

“Why are you being sarcastic?”

“I’m off now. Don’t forget to take your lunch box.” Throwing a long stylish scarf over her shoulder she slung her backpack onto the other, grabbed her phone and keys. APS was big on dress code for their sales team and since she had been recently promoted as sales manager for her sub-division, she couldn’t afford to go lax in the dressing department. There in lay another issue. Her promotion. She’d bet her increased paycheck that Jai hadn’t expected it. He had encouraged her to take up a job so that she would keep herself occupied until he got back home from his work. He hadn’t expected her to start loving it or that she would excel in it.

“Preeti!”

She stopped at the door and sighed before turning back. “Look, I heard what you said and I’ll try but I can’t promise. You know I can’t promise.” She met his irate eyes, her own eyes inscrutable. “See you tonight.” Her phone pinged with a familiar music. She quickly scanned the message. It was from Shikha.

Dinner Ladies?

Yes. She sent her reply. Thank God it was Friday.

Siya Dutta frowned at her reflection as she pulled back her curly hair and secured it with a large clip at the back of her head. There were dark circles under her eyes, she fretted. Tapan wouldn’t like it. She needed to use some cucumber slices right away but she was already running late for work. Tomorrow, she promised herself. Tomorrow was weekend and she would get a complete facial done too. He loved to show her off to his friends. Sometimes it hurt that he gave more importance to vanity than the person underneath. But she did want to make him proud. She loved him so much. Couldn’t imagine living a day without him. And he loved her too, she reassured herself. Of course he did. He told her that. Multiple times. She tried to think back and remember the last time he had told her that. Four months? Five months back? These days the love words had dwindled to crude sex words uttered when they were having sex or when he wanted to have sex.

In the beginning it had all been wonderful. They had met at APS where she had been screening a few candidates for managerial position and he had been one of the candidates. And the most handsome guy she’d ever laid her eyes on. He had flirted with her, complimented her on her work, her astute observation skills and yes, her looks too. She had blushed and glowed but refused his invitation for coffee. He’d taken the refusal graciously but gave

her his number in case she changed her mind. And she did change her mind, she thought bleakly. She had called him the next day. Coffee had changed to lunch and that weekend they had gone out for dinner. The next weekend they had spent the whole of Saturday together, once again ending it with a dinner and this time a goodnight kiss.

Firm arms wrapped around her from behind, pulling her hard against an equally hard male body. Lips nibbled her neck with seductive expertise making her arch and moan.

“Hmmm,” Tapan growled in approval as his hands went under her shirt, fingers searched and found her hard nipples through her lacy bra. “I want to fuck you,” he said, the fingers already reaching for the hook in the front.

“I can’t,” she moaned. “I need to leave or I’ll be late.”

“We live in Marathalli. It’s a fifteen minute drive to APS in rush hour traffic. And I’ll be quick. Real quick.”

And he was, she thought pulling up her cream trousers five minutes later. Quick and amazing. He had the ability to arouse and satisfy her with effortless ease. And no matter what, he never left her high and dry. But was she just a body to him? The question was haunting her these days more often than not. As she applied a light make up that would accentuate her fair complexion, she thought back to their first kiss. There had been no hiding the fact that he knew what he had been doing. There was no hesitation, no tentative exploration. He had claimed her lips and her. But he had been oh, so tender. Gentle. Loving.

“I want to touch you so badly,” he had whispered. “I want to worship your body,” he’d said.

But she hadn’t been ready. He’d waited. Or had he? They were lovers now. Almost living together. A few months back she’d moved into a single bedroom apartment that faced his two BDR. It saved a lot of time that was spent on the road. And it was only for the time being, she had reasoned herself. Soon they would get married and move into a bigger house. He spent most of his nights at her place or she at his but it didn’t stop him from flirting with other women. Sometimes right in front of her. He’d never done anything more than that of course. At least not in front of her. She’d once tentatively told him that it hurt to see his philandering ways. He had laughed and told her not to be a typical insecure clingy female. Her friend Shikha had told her more than once to give him a taste of his own medicine. To go ahead and flirt with a guy in front of him. But she couldn’t do it. She wasn’t like that. For her, it was and always had been Tapan. So she waited. Waited for him to take their relationship to the next level.

“Hey Siya, my sister and her family are going to be here next week,” Tapan said from where he lay lounging on her bed with just a thin sheet covering his sexy body.

Siya’s eyes lit up. Quickly applying the lipstick, she buttoned up her olive green shirt and walked out of the bathroom. “Wow! That’s great! So what’s the plan?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged, getting up from the bed to grab a towel. “Just thought I would give you a heads up that whole of next week until they leave, you and I are going to be just neighbors.” He winked, walking past her towards the bathroom. “Know what I mean?”

“But...why?”

“What do you mean why? One whiff and my sister will holler to the hills and my parents...” his shudder completed his sentence before the door closed behind him.

Would she hesitate to introduce him to her parents as her lover? Of course yes. But what about as a friend? Why couldn’t he at least tell his family that she was his friend? Swallowing down her tears, she grabbed her keys and laptop. The phone in her pocket beeped. It was Shikha.

Dinner Ladies?

Hell yes! She typed her reply. Thank God it was Friday.

Friday meant a chance to spend time with friends. A chance to unwind, bitch and cheer about their lives, depending on the occasion and mood. Just the three of them. Shikha, Preeti and Siya.

Chapter Two

It had been a bitch of a day, Shikha thought as she entered TimTai that night for the girls' meet and eat. But at least it was the last bitch...until Monday. Hopefully. Sometimes she hated being right. Her boss did make her stay the extra time because she had been late coming in that morning. He didn't give a direct order to do the ET. No one did that these days. Or rather it was more subtle these days. A couple of added meetings, documents to be prepared, approved and emailed. Oh yeah, it was definitely more subtle. She looked around and waved. Preeti and Siya were already there so there was no need to wait for a vacant table, she thought with satisfaction as she dodged through the waiters and customers and tables. They were Shikha, Preeti and Siya to the world but Shik, Reet and Si to each other.

"What a day!" she groaned, dropping into the empty third chair.

"Tell me about it!" Preeti muttered, sipping her drink and passing on Shikha's glass to her. "And I don't want to think about tomorrow. Both veggie and grocery shopping. Does it ever end?" she wailed.

"Yeah," Shikha said, glumly. "For the next four weeks I'll be doing the same."

"You've managed for two weeks," Siya consoled. "You'll pull through the rest."

"Patel made a pass at me today." Preeti rolled her eyes.

"Patel? You got to be kidding!" Siya and Shikha chorused, in synchronized disbelief. Patel was one of *the* best computer geek / genius of APS. Tall, gangly, young, he was clueless about anything and everything that was not related to computers. A twenty two year old walking definition of nerd if they had ever seen one. In fact it was said in the company that Patel understood only one language. Binary. Of all the possible offenders, the thought of that guy making a pass at anyone was just too unbelievable to comprehend. In fact they kind of found him cute in a nerdy way.

Preeti giggled. "I swear I'm not. I was prepping for the meet and he comes, stands before me with this awkward expression on his face and says, *Preeti, Beth told me to jack off. How do I do that?*"

Shikha and Siya dissolved into fits of laughter. "What did you tell him?" Shikha brought her hilarity under control enough to ask.

"What could I say?" Preeti shrugged, "I told him Google was sure to have an

instruction manual.” She waited until her friends stopped laughing and continued, “I didn’t expect him to Google it right away.”

“No!” Shikha shrieked.

“Yes!” Preeti shook her head. “The next thing I know, he turned as red as a Shimla apple and ran.”

“Poor kid yaar. Someone should break him in. He is too...” Siya shrugged and left the sentence incomplete. Yeah, there were no words to describe Patel.

Fact of the matter was political correctness was way off reality in most of the work environments. People were people. Some guys were jerks and no amount of sensitivity training and / or sexual harassment regulations were going to change that. But most of the guys at APS were OK. And it balanced things out because some women were synonymous to barbed-wire bitches. Shikha had stopped looking for perfection, both at APS and her life. Perfection, according to her, was a myth. Like unicorns in fairytales. Siya thought she was too cynical. She was the youngest among the three and maybe that was why she still believed in fairytales and prince charming on a white horse. Her rose-tinted glasses were a bit faded after Tapan walked into her life but they were still intact.

On the face of it there was absolutely nothing in common between the three friends except the work place. Shikha worked in finance. She was of average height, with curves that men found drooling over, according to Preeti. She had a cropped haircut and slightly smoky voice. Her best feature, even if she did say so herself, was her mouth. Well, her lips. Lush lips. But Siya insisted that it was her eyes. Bedroom eyes she called them. Dark grey circling black. Amethyst, if you want to be particular. But the three broken engagements, especially the second one that happened the night before the wedding, attested to the fact that bedroom eyes and lush lips didn’t work for men. God knew what worked for them and Shikha was in no mood to delve into their psyche. So she hid her hurt and disillusionment quite well under the mask of indifference and devil may care attitude and went on with her life. She had a great job and a healthy bank account and even though she did live with her parents, she was not financially dependent on them.

Siya, the youngest of the group worked in HR department. At twenty six she was in-charge of regional recruitment and initial filtering of candidates. She was short and her figure was almost boyish. But the thick curls that framed her oval face and sloe eyed look combined with her cheerful smile drew men to her like flies. Now, all she needed was a firm backbone. Shikha never understood why her friend settled for Tapan. Yeah, sure, he was gorgeous and sexy but man, he treated her shabbily. He had even flirted with her the first

time Siya had introduced them to Tapan. Yuck! But the girl was crazily in love with that guy and refused to give up on him. He doesn't mean anything. It's just that he is friendly, she tried to reason with her friends. Siya was one of those women who wouldn't easily give up on a relationship. She did everything she could to save it, even at the cost of her own emotional pain. It was not wrong. Of course it was not wrong. But the guy should deserve that kind of devotion.

Preeti was the wonder woman of the sales department. She was Shikha's age. Twenty seven. With two promotions in one year, she was fast up on the corporate ladder. She was tall and willowy with the grace of a feline. Her creamy caramel skin was soft and perfect and her voice was gentle and lyrical. She was remote and ladylike unless she was pitching her product. Then they got to see her charming side. She had been married for three years to her college sweetheart, Jai Singh and they lived in a nice three bedroom apartment that was midway between his office and hers. Jai, according to Shikha was the epitome of chauvinism, although she never stated it to Preeti directly. No need to rub salt in the already bleeding wound. It was not as if her friend was unaware of that fact. Personally Shikha thought Preeti should just put her foot down and lay down some ground rules for that guy to follow. But hell, she was no expert in personal relationships so she tried to refrain herself from giving advice. Well, most of the time. But he made it very difficult sometimes. He didn't like their Friday night get-together. Preeti didn't bow to his wish, though. She quietly ignored it. It was not as if they were out all night hitting one bar or disco after another. It was just dinner. Something they didn't have to cook or clean afterwards. And they made sure they left for their respective houses before nine.

"Ruhi slapped a new recruit today," Siya imparted the latest topic of discussion in the HR department. "All the poor girl did was crack some sex joke."

Ruhi worked in HR along with Siya. A female who didn't know the definition of humor and looked as if a smile would crack her face. It wasn't that she was old or ugly looking. She was about their age, Shikha presumed. But her dress sense was...well...manly for the lack of a polite word. She was a good looking woman who hated anything and everything feminine and that included her own assets which she tried her best to hide.

"She should just take a leap and get the sex change operation done," Shikha said in a bland voice that cracked up her friends. "What was the joke?"

Siya giggled at that predictable question. "A boss said to his secretary, *I want to have sex with you, but I will make it very fast. I'll throw thousand bucks on the floor and by the time you bend down to pick it up, I'll be done.* She

thought for a moment then called her boyfriend and told him the story. Her boyfriend said, *do it but ask him for two thousand. Then pick up the money so fast, he won't even have enough time to undress himself.* She agrees. After half an hour passes, the boyfriend calls the girlfriend and asked what happened. She said, *the bastard used coins, so I'm still picking it up and he is still having sex with me!*"

All three slapped their palms on the table and cackled. It was finally Shikha's turn. "Don't be surprised if I get arrested in the near future. I suggest you two keep the bail money in hand," she said grumpily, propping her elbows on the table and munching on the starters that the waiter had just placed on the table.

"Your neighbor again? What did he do?" Preeti asked sympathetically. She knew bad neighbors had the ability to make life hell.

Shikha narrated everything from his porch light to her reverse horn. "He came charging out of his house like a grizzly bear with a sore paw."

"Why don't you complain to the police?" Siya suggested. "Maybe he really is a dangerous guy and you're going to be alone in that house for another month almost. These days decent looking guys are turning out to be perverts and this guy, according to you already looks dangerous."

"If I have another episode with him over the weekend, I think I'll do that."

"Maybe he drank more than his usual the previous night and had a hangover this morning," Preeti said.

"He didn't smell like a drunkard," Shikha thought back with a frown. "He sure did look like one but he didn't smell like one. Dammit, I don't want to think how he would be when he is hungover."

"At least, he's just a neighbor. You can avoid him," Preeti consoled.

She was so not going to let that guy ruin her dinner with her friends. "Enough about him. Anything interesting with you guys?"

"My in-laws are going to come," Preeti muttered into her drink, wishing it was something stronger than Pink Cloud.

"Oh man!" her friends chorused. They all knew about her mother in law's comment on children and Jai's lack of response. But there was little either of them could do to help other than lending a shoulder to lean on and an ear to vent out.

"Tapan's family is coming so we're going to be strangers and neighbors for about a week or so." Siya bit her lip as misery clouded her face.

The waiter came to take their order for the main course. Preeti rattled off

without looking at the menu. After three years they knew each other's preferences. When he left, they leaned closer to the table. "What the hell Siya!" Shikha growled in obvious anger. She was an expert in dumping and getting dumped. She had dumped the third guy she'd gotten engaged to after finding him in bed with another guy and the second guy had dumped her the night before the wedding when his ex-girlfriend had come to him pregnant. Getting over that had been really hard but she'd done it.

Siya shrugged but her friends could see the tears glistening in her eyes. "We're not engaged or anything na," she tried to be nonchalant. "I don't have any right to complain."

"Is he worth the pain Siya?" Preeti asked her gently.

"I love him. I can't see myself..." She shook her head. "I just need to be patient. He just needs time." She looked at Shikha. "I know you don't believe but he does love me. When he's with me he is so caring, considerate, sweet..."

Yeah, right. Shikha resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "They all are," Preeti declared, playing with her napkin. "Until they get what they want. Take my word Si, they put on an act for a while. But once they realize you are tied down to them, they relax and show their real faces behind that façade."

"So I should either put up or break off?" Siya chewed her lip some more.

"In a nutshell, yes." Shikha took over.

"But I can't be like that. I can't just give up. I need to try."

"For how long?"

"I don't know but I do know that I can't walk away from him. I know he's not perfect but...I need to try."

"But being a yes-master to him is not the way to go about it." Shikha said, relieved when the waiter brought their food. Bitching about men would have to wait.

Preeti loved Saturday mornings the best. Monday to Friday she had work to rush to and Sunday meant a day closer to Monday and it was spent preparing for the week ahead. But Saturday! Ah, Saturday she could just chill out most of the day. And that was what she was doing. Sitting in the basket swing in the balcony and sipping her tea. Her husband joined her a few minutes later with his cup in hand.

"Good morning."

Preeti smiled her welcome. “Good morning. You’re up early today.” Jai shrugged and left it at that. “Want to go for a walk? Weather looks lovely.”

“I have a call in twenty minutes. You go ahead and I’ll join you after that?”

Preeti shook her head. “No. It’s no fun walking alone. Finish your call and we’ll go out for breakfast. I can get the vegetables on my way back.”

He made a face at the mention of chores but relented. She had a long, relaxing shower and even washed her hair while he attended the call and got dressed in tracks and a loose fitting t-shirt. After being in formals the whole week, she let her hair down figuratively as well as literally over the weekend. Grabbing her wallet, she grinned at her husband. “Shall we go? I’m hungry.”

“Going out with your husband doesn’t warranty dressing well I suppose?” he asked, pulling on his jeans.

“It’s just for breakfast na.”

“Yeah but you wouldn’t think of going dressed like that to meet a client or even your colleagues now, would you?”

“I would go like this to meet my friends,” she replied calmly although she felt her good mood spiraling downwards.

“Those two?” Jai felt his own mood going downhill. He never did like that Shikha and Siya and never understood what his wife saw in them. “They don’t count.”

“Jai, its weekend and I don’t want to fight. Come, let’s go. I’m hungry.”

“Where has the woman I married gone Preeti?” he asked almost resentfully. The woman who always had a special smile for him, who wanted to look the best for him, who wrote him love letters despite the fact that they met every day.

“I’m sure she’s with the guy whom I married. Wherever he is,” came the unhesitant reply.

“Hey, what’s the plan today?” Tapan asked the moment Siya opened the door for him.

She shrugged. She hadn’t forgotten his instructions that they would act as strangers from next week on. “Nothing much.” She paused before asking, “Why?”

Firm, gentle hands led her to the chair where he made her sit and stood behind her to massage her shoulders. “Both of us have been busy the whole week so I

was thinking maybe we can go for a long drive, relax and generally chill out. What say?"

A small smile of delight formed her lips. "Long drive? Where to?"

It was his turn to shrug. "Do we have to decide right away? Let's just play by the ear. We can take turns driving, stop when we feel like stopping...go on our own little adventure."

Siya felt the excitement take over. She sprang up from the chair. "OK. I'll go and get ready. Want me to pack anything?"

"Nah. No overnight stay. My sister and her family will be coming tomorrow night."

Her smile slipped but she refused to let that reminder deter her good mood. "When shall we leave?"

"The others are on their way so as soon as you get ready?" At her uncomprehending look he asked, "What?"

"I thought it was just you and me."

He rolled his eyes. "Where is the fun in that? Now move, move." He patted her butt, nudging her towards the bedroom.

Saturday morning dawned bright and beautiful. Shikha didn't know whether it was sheer tiredness or the lack of sleep the previous night or the belly-filling, calorie-high dinner she'd had with her friends or the fact that she slept in her parents' bedroom but she slept like a log and woke up fresh and lazy. She didn't mind lazy. After all, it was weekend. So lazy was good. Maybe she should sleep in her parents' room for the next four weeks. It sure would mute the bullet sound, especially if she closed the windows and curtains. She thought she heard a couple of jeeps screeching to a halt along with that noisy bike but since there had been no glaring lights or blaring horns, she'd slept. Maybe the goon invited his friends for a drinking binge, who cared!

A little after seven thirty she got out of the bed, brushed her teeth and made herself some coffee. She was most definitely not an early riser. She could stay up almost till two or even three in the morning but wake her up before seven and she was a grumpy bear. But years of college and later the job had taught her to get going after a cup of extra strong coffee. Caffeine was her life saver. Then she set about making calls to both her brothers, one in US and another in Rajasthan. She did Face Time with her parents who were touring the US, after spending some quality time with their elder son. Shikha's second elder brother was in the army and after being in Kashmir previously, which had

given her parents many a sleepless night, he was now posted in a relatively trouble-free area of Rajasthan. He had sustained a minor injury during one of his training exercises but made her promise not to blurt it out to their parents. Her army-trained brother balked at coddling and fussing that their mom tended to do most of the time. He never outright objected but he'd always have that deer-caught-in-the-headlights look on his face that sent Shikha and her elder brother into splits.

After munching on cornflakes in milk, she planned for the day ahead. Groceries, veggies, washing machine and some gardening. The last one perked her up. Her dad loved gardening and so did she. Between both of them, they had various plants including three different colors of roses, two colors of hibiscus, marigold and a lily plant. Her mom never had to buy flowers for her puja. Her dad had planned on getting some chrysanthemums after coming back from his trip. But she would get them now and plant them. As a surprise. Task decided, she quickly showered and got dressed. The eagerness to start on the plant project gave her the motivation to finish the boring, mundane tasks faster than the usual. By four in the evening she was back from buying the plants, additional soil and fertilizer. Her good mood just got better as she looked at the flowers that were gently waving in the cool evening breeze. Two colors. Orange with yellow center and pink with white center. Patting herself on her selection, she gulped down a cup of tea, changed into shorts and t-shirt and got to work.

She backed her car out of the shaded portico until it was right in front of the small garden, switched on the music in the car radio and grabbed her shovel. She smiled and waved at a few of her neighbors who like her were out doing things that they didn't get to do on crazy weekdays. It was a nice neighborhood where people smiled, wished and often helped each other. With the songs from Rock On blasting from the car speakers she got to digging and making space for her new babies. Oh her dad was going to be so happy, she thought with a happy grin. Planting a new baby plant and watch it grow gave her a sense of achievement. It was not easy, especially growing a flowering plant. Everything had to be right. Soil, water, fertilizer and even the weather. For some people it was boring. But for Shikha, it was meditative. And relaxing. And soothing...

Something tapped on her shoulder. She shrieked and swung, lifting the shovel in self-defense against the attacker. Her neighbor, the jerk, stood there. Bloodshot eyes, wrinkled clothes and a scowl scary enough to scare little kids. Without a word, he whirled, stomped towards her car and next moment, silence filled the air as he shut her stereo off.

"What the hell!" she roared. The day had been so good and he had to ruin it.

Face red with temper, she stood with her feet apart, ready to attack.

“Are you going to use that or be reasonable?” he gestured towards the shovel that was still raised in her hand.

With effort, she lowered it down. Slowly. The temptation to slug him with it was eating away at her. “Just what the hell is your problem?”

“I am trying to sleep,” he enunciated each word with clear spacing between them. “Do you have to blast my ears with that thing that is supposed to be music?”

Shikha gaped at him. “It’s four in the evening.”

“So?”

“So get in the bed at a decent hour mister. It’s not my problem.”

“Just what is it that you have against letting me get some sleep? You’re the noisiest woman I’ve ever seen...”

The injustice of that statement made her forget that she was a little afraid of him. She strode up to him until she stood right in front of him. The top of her head came up to his neck. Almost. So what if he was big? She was mad. And mad bet big any day. Any time.

“I’m noisy?” she gritted her teeth. It was tough to shout with her jaw locked so tight but she tried. “I’m noisy?” She jabbed a finger at him. “I’m not the one who woke the entire street at two forty five in the night with that thing that you call a bike. I’m not the one who accelerated it before turning it off, banged your door twice and forgot to switch off your porch light which kept me from sleeping.” She advanced another step towards him, forcing him to take a step back to avoid another finger jabbing. “Furthermore, it is a reasonable assumption to expect people to be asleep at two in the night rather than at nine fifteen in the morning or four thirty in the evening. You have a problem with noise during day time in this city? Get a pair of earplugs.”

Shikha lifted the shovel and slung it on her shoulder like Hanuman carrying his mace. “The day had been going so well and now you’ve gone and ruined it,” she glared. “Don’t tempt me to use this on you,” she added, gesturing to her shovel.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “You better not use it or I would have to arrest you.”

“What?” She stared at him.

“I’m a cop.” His pause taunted her. “Karthik Iyer, DCP, crime branch.”

Disbelief was evident in her eyes and voice. “You’re a DCP?” she asked for reconfirmation.

“Yes.” Social niceties taken care of, he went back to his jerk-mode. “Look, I don’t hold a nine to five job like you. I get sleep when I can, which hasn’t been much in the last couple of days.”

“Fine,” she snapped back. “I’ll switch off the music when I garden, which is the only time I get to hear it let me add. Am I allowed to dig and plant my plants?” she asked sarcastically. “Or would that disturb your sleep too?”

“Not unless you’re going to be hitting a bass drum with that shovel,” he snapped back before striding off towards his house.

I can’t hit a cop. I can’t hit a cop. I can’t hit a cop, she repeated to herself as she picked up the shovel.

Chapter Three

It was Sunday afternoon and Siya waited until all their friends left. Correction. Until all his friends left. Shikha was right. Being a yes master was not the way to go about it. She loved Tapan, yes. But that love was costing her self-respect. She was going to put her foot down. Yes, it would hurt her but it was not as if she was not hurting now, was it?

She took a deep breath and stood in front of the couch where Tapan was slouching negligently, fiddling with the TV remote. "I'm leaving."

"What's the hurry? My sis's flight doesn't land till almost midnight."

"Tapan," she injected firmness into her voice. "I'm going."

He frowned and got up slowly. "What's wrong Siya?"

She took another deep, fortifying breath. No backing down now. "You said we should be just neighbors when your family gets here. I think we should continue the same even after they leave."

"What, you breaking up with me?" he scoffed, disbelief evident on his face.

"Yes. I will start looking for another apartment and vacate mine as soon as I can. I don't think it would be comfortable for either of us..."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, hang on just a damn minute. Where is this coming from? You were fine until a few minutes ago. We went out yesterday, spent the night together and today you want to break up?"

She would miss him. She already missed him. Tears glistened in her eyes at the thought of not seeing him again. Not feeling his arms around her as they cuddled and watched movies. His smiles, his laughter, his touch, the deep, soothing voice he crooned at her as he gave her a massage after a tiring day at work. She would miss him oh so much. But...

"I love you Tapan. You know that. I love you more than I can ever say but..."

"But what?" he just looked plain confused. Bewildered.

"Love is not supposed to hurt like this Tapan. And it's hurting me. *You* are hurting me. Every time you flirt and charm other women, you hurt me. Every time you touch them you hurt me."

"Oh come on Siya," he took a step towards her but stopped immediately when she backed up a step. To this day he didn't remember a time when she'd backed away from him. "You know it doesn't mean anything. I'm just being friendly."

“It is *not* friendly. Don’t tell me it’s friendly because I *do* know the difference. I can *see* the difference.” She remembered Shikha’s words. “What if I do the same thing? What if I hugged and patted Sunil’s butt?” she asked, naming Tapan’s best buddy. “How would you feel if I flirted with him, extended my plate so that he can share my dinner? Complimented him on how hot he looked?” Tapan looked away, as if he didn’t like the picture she was painting. Too bad. She should’ve painted and colored it a long time ago. “Do you know how it felt to watch you do all that yesterday with that girl? And it wasn’t the first time.” She waved, not giving him a chance to speak when he opened his mouth. “I know there are a lot of women out there who are OK with that kind of a thing. But I’m not. I’m not OK.” She swiped a trembling hand over her wet eyes, smearing her mascara and not caring. “I put up with all that hurt because I love you. But hiding me away when your family comes like I’m your *dirty* little secret, like you’re...you’re *ashamed* to even know someone like me...I accept that you can’t tell them that we’re lovers but what about a friend? A girl you like, respect, someone you’re interested in? You can’t even do that, can you? You can’t do that because I don’t hold that kind of a place in your life. I never tried to hold myself away from you so you probably think I’m e-easy.” More tears leaked from her eyes. God, she didn’t know it could hurt this much.

“Maybe I am, I don’t know,” she continued. She sniffed, inhaled deeply and continued in a steadier voice. “I did what I did because I fell in love with you and saw my future with you. But now I realize it’s not enough if I see it alone. Bye Tapan. Take care. I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other until I move out of my apartment but I’ll try to keep out of your way as much as I can and I suggest you do the same.” With that she turned and walked out before her courage deserted her.

Preeti watched the main door as it slammed shut behind her departing husband. It was Sunday and he had gone off to work. An important meeting, he’d said. And maybe it was. She didn’t deny the possibility. She herself had weekends when she’d gone to meet with someone, a prospective client usually but it had been rare. She tried her level best to avoid bringing her work home. She tried her best to give her 100% to her home and her husband. But not Jai. Not anymore. He had been so much fun when they had been in the college, full of laughter and jokes. Where had that cheerful boy gone? Most of the days he didn’t get up until she was ready to go to work and then both got ready and left. He came home late, later than her and by then she was so tired that she would be asleep. If his aim was to not spend time with her, he was succeeding admirably. Maybe he didn’t want children because he didn’t

want her. Maybe she was the one who was hiding her head under the sand and not facing that reality. The thought made her chest hurt. She loved him. Or rather the person who was underneath all that surly exterior. When she was down or tired, his face always had the ability to bring a smile. Not the face that he'd been showing the last couple of years but a different one. One where he was laughing, hugging and twirling around with her the day she'd scored top in her college. He had looked ready to burst with pride the day she had climbed up on the dias to receive her medal. She loved the clumsy, fumbling, eager guy who had torn her blouse in his eagerness to make love to her on their wedding night and looked so contrite and apologetic that she'd laughed and kissed him. She loved the man who had prepared her resume and applied in various jobsites because he didn't want her to just sit at home, waiting for him.

She didn't love the man who didn't come near her except to fuck her once a fortnight, if that. She didn't love the man who told her to work but didn't support her when she did. Pathetic, she thought with a grimace. That's what she was. There were countless women out there who didn't have the things that she did. Who suffered through truly traumatic marriages and partners and here she was, bitching about what they would view as a luxurious life with a nice husband. She was indeed better off than many but she wasn't happy. With a sigh she started sorting out the clothes to be washed. Midway in the task she stopped and frowned. Picking up one of Jai's shirts that she'd thrown in the washing machine, she brought it to her nose. It smelled of...perfume. It was faint but it was there. And not the one that she used. Everything around her receded and faded as she stood there, clutching the shirt, unease slithering down her spine, chilling her insides. Was there another woman? Was that why he had been so distant all these days? Sweat beaded on her forehead as suspicion took root. Was this it? The beginning of the end of her marriage?

Shikha shifted the carry bag from one hand to another as she turned into her street, her steps easy and leisurely. She had forgotten to get milk and juice packs when she had gone for groceries the previous day. Forgoing her car, she had walked up to the nearest supermarket and was now on her way back home. Honestly, sometimes it was easier, not to mention faster to walk than drive and spend half hour looking for a place to park the car. Lost in her musings, she didn't hear a bike roaring and turning into her street behind her. Before she realized what was happening, she felt a swift tug on her shirt and a ripping sound as the bike swept past her with the guys on it laughing their head off. Her shirt had been torn at the back, neck to waist. Thankfully the collar and edges held together, holding the shirt to her back. Fury washed

over her and she screamed, “Bloody bastards!”

They heard it. The bike screeched to a halt and both of them erupted from it, “What dyu call us bitch?” one of them bore down on her.

It was a small street filled with well-known friendly neighbors. Her scream followed by screeching of the bike brought a lot of people out of their houses. “What’s going on here? Shikha beti, any problem?” one of her dad’s friend asked, coming out of his house.

“Shut up old man!” the second guy pushed him back, coming to beside his friend, almost surrounding her.

The smell of alcohol wafted and hit Shikha’s nose and she moved back a step. Around her she could hear the neighbors’ collective mutterings of disgust. “Someone go and call that policewala. I think he’s home.”

Either the drunkards didn’t hear or didn’t care. She thought it was the former because they sure didn’t look like guys brave enough to face the police. They were drunk enough to be aggressive, not staggering and stuttering. “I ashked a quesion ‘ere bitch. Whadyu call us juz now, huh?”

“Bloody bastards,” she enunciated each word loudly and clearly. “Drunken bloody bastards,” she added.

The first guy rounded on her. “Drunk or not I think it’s time we showed you we can do more than tear your shirt.”

Yeah, like she was going to wait for that! Shikha charged him, bulldozing into him from the side. The impact sent him staggering. He tried to regain his balance but lost it and landed on his butt. He struggled to get up and with another lurid curse lunged for Shikha. She dodged to the side and stuck out her foot. He stumbled but managed not to fall on his face. The second guy tried to grab her but one of the neighbors caught him from behind by wrapping both arms around his waist. Soon another neighbor joined him and both of them brought the guy down and held him. The women were running into their houses, probably to bring out their weapons, a part of Shikha thought with wry humor.

The guy who had stumbled, regained his footing and turned to her with blood in his eyes. She fell into a boxing stance, learnt from being the only girl after two brothers. She only hoped she still remembered what her brothers had taught her. She heard excited voices behind her as she focused on the guy advancing towards her. She had no doubt he would hurt her but she was equally sure she can get in a few punches of her own. He charged at her and this time there was no evading him. She went down but brought him down along with her with a solid punch to his ribs. A few youngsters tried to wrestle

the drunkard off her. Shikha rolled, pinning the guy under her with her knee of his chest, grabbed a chunk of his flesh at his waist and twisted it, pinching it as hard as she could. He bellowed like a wounded buffalo.

Shikha raised her fist to deliver another punch to his face when her fist was grabbed in a strong hand and another wrapped around her waist. She was pulled away from the guy but she made sure she kicked him in his ribs before he became unreachable. Dazed, she saw the drunkard's face mashed to the ground as his arms were wrenched behind him and handcuffs slapped around his wrists. She struggled to an upright position and came face to face with her neighbor, the jerk. The cop jerk.

"Damn it, I should've known it was you," he snarled. "You OK?" he asked in a calmer voice.

She turned, still dazed and saw the second guy tied to a lamppost. His shirt was torn and his face, she frowned to look closer and couldn't hold back a grin. With his face covered in chili powder, he was screaming blue murder and thrashing like a pig. The women surrounding him looked mightily pleased with themselves as they calmly acknowledged the elders patting their shoulders and praising them. Not many men knew how many weapons a woman had at hand in her kitchen alone.

Shikha was startled as she felt something fall on her shoulders. She turned to see that the jerk had stripped his shirt and placed it around her shoulders, covering her almost naked back. Well, she couldn't call him a jerk after that. She watched him drag the drunkard and tie him along with his friend to the lamppost. The not-the-jerk-anymore-cop sure was as strong as he looked, she thought as she watched the bulging, flexing muscles of his forearm that popped out of his sleeveless vest. He had lifted the drunkard with one hand as if he were a pillow that he could tuck under his arm.

"I'm tempted to arrest all three of you," he said, walking back towards her. "Drunk and disorderly."

Jerk! Her scowl came back full force. "I'm not drunk."

"No, they are drunk," he gestured his thumb towards the lamppost. "You're disorderly," he ended, coming to stand in front of her.

"You saw what they did," she thundered, gesturing towards his shirt that was now draped on her. "What did you expect me to do? Cry and scream for help like a wimp or beg them to leave me alone?" More words hovered over the tip of her tongue but she swallowed them back, not wanting to get arrested for real, for badmouthing a cop.

He conceded her point and his eyes smiled, as if he knew what kind of words

she was holding back and whom they were directed at. "I need your statement."

As if on cue, a police jeep came barreling down the street, sirens and all. Within minutes, the guys in uniform hauled the drunkards into it, saluted the jerk cop and barreled away leaving behind a buzz of excited chatter. Anxious women came forward to fuss, pat and commend Shikha for her act of bravery and check on the men who had been involved in the ruckus.

"Ada kadavule!" The jerk muttered, looking around the gathering crowd and back at her. She knew enough Tamil to understand his *Good God!* Or something to that effect.

The elderly man who had been the first one to come to her rescue came forward. "Are you alright Shikha beti? You did a wonderful job I tell you. Your father would be so proud of you. You should've been here sir," he said to the cop. "She made a fist and kicked that guy," he swung his arm in imitation, making her jump back to avoid that demonstrative punch.

"Yes sir," she said, stressing on the sir. "You should've been here."

"I was on the phone," he glared back and paused. "Are you OK?"

She nodded and looked around for her purchases. Another lady picked up her carry bag and extended it to her. She peeped in, expecting the milk packets torn and the mixed with the juice broken out of the tetra packs. But thankfully everything looked intact.

"Your knee is bleeding," he observed, giving her a thorough once over. "And your knuckles are bruised. Are you hurt anywhere else? Do you need to go to the hospital?"

Now that the excitement had died down, Shikha was exhausted. All she wanted was to go home, hit the shower and have a few gallons of ice cream. She shook her head. "I'm fine. Had a TT shot recently and I can clean the scrap on my own."

Thanking everyone, she started trudging towards her house and didn't hide her scowl when she saw the cop jerk fall into step beside her. "Are you always like that?"

"Like what?"

"Violent," he said after thinking for a moment. "You are up to date with your TT shot," he added as if that explained his question.

I can't hit a cop, I can't hit a cop, I can't hit a cop, she chanted silently. He stopped her at her gate with a firm, gentle hand on her arm. "You did good. I need a statement but I'll take care of that later. Put some ice on those bruises

and clean up that knee.”

Well, hell, did the guy have a split personality disorder? “Look, uh,”

“Karthik Iyer.”

“Shikha Bose,” she introduced herself. “Do I need to come to the station?”

He shook his head. “I’ll get the papers for you to sign tonight. Are you sure you don’t want to go to the doctor?” he looked once again at the bleeding shin peeking out of the torn capris.

“Just don’t thunder around in that bullet in the middle of the night and wake me up.”

“So long as you don’t blast my ears in the morning with your reverse horn,” he countered, sauntering towards his house next door with a small wave.

Shikha woke up the next morning without the benefit of alarm. The simple act of rolling over woke her up as her knee and hand protested loudly and simultaneously. She checked the time in her phone and saw that she had missed out on a whole conversation in the WhatsApp group that happened the previous night. Quickly scanning the messages, she swore. This called for an emergency meeting. Somethings just can’t wait till Friday. They decided on meeting at the Pizza Hut closest to APS after work. That taken care of, she limped to the bathroom for a hot shower that would loosen up her stiff knee and dressed in a form-fitting plain white kurta and a multicolored Patiala pants. They were loose, at the same time covered the injury. She was so not in a mood to go into details with her curious colleagues. A painkiller and coffee later, she was good to start her day. Her car had spent the night outside the gate since it had been there before that incident and later on she didn’t have the energy to drive it in. So that saved her a few more minutes not to mention another confrontation with you-know-who. Mondays tended to flyby at APS. And soon it was the end of the day and she was striding into the Pizza Hut as fast as her injured knee would allow. The three of them had reached almost at the same time and fairly fell into each other’s arms, giving themselves a tight group hug.

Shikha was the first to pull away. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for the chat last night.”

Preeti waved away the apology, heading to a corner table, thanking the fact that it was not crowded. “How is your knee?”

Siya took Shikha’s hand, checking the bruises. “God, that must’ve been quite a punch,” she crowed. “Wonder how that guy is doing.”

“Hope he had a couple of broken ribs.” Preeti growled.

“And guess what? The jerk is a cop.” Shikha announced.

“What?” the other chorused in shock. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “He was the one who made the arrest and later came by to my place to take my statement. A DCP no less.”

“I guess cops are just as likely to be jerks as the rest of the males,” Siya muttered.

“You really broke up with Tapan Si?” Shikha asked. Siya nodded, sadly but firmly. “And you Reet? Are you sure? I mean did Jai say something?”

“I didn’t ask,” Preeti’s eyes were downcast. “I guess I’m afraid to. Now it’s just in my head but if I ask and he doesn’t deny, it will become a reality.”

“What do you plan to do now?” Siya asked. Breaking off with a lover was one thing but a divorce was quite another.

Preeti shrugged. “When I had met him first, during our college days, he had been perfect, you know...” her face held equal amounts of pain and anger.

Siya shook her head. “Perfection in men is a myth buddy. Comes right beside unicorns and dragons. Not that we are perfect but most of us at least try.”

“Men suck,” Shikha stated flatly, making even the despondent looking Preeti smile. “And if someone says they’re seeing a perfect man it means they’re watching a sci-fi movie.”

All three exchanged high fives at that statement and the tension that had held them until then broke free and they laughed. The music system in the joint finished one song and another started just as they placed their orders.

*‘Cause I would die for you look into my eyes and see it’s true
Really I could never lie to you just to make you see that
No one else could ever love you like the way I do*

They exchanged glances and groaned. “Yeah, sci-fi alright!” Shikha muttered.

“What if you really find a man to die for Shikha? How would he be?” Siya prodded. Life sucked, men sucked but they had to move on. Find reasons to smile and laugh.

“I don’t want to die buddy, least of all for a man!” At her friend’s raised eyebrow look, she sighed. “You want to talk sci-fi? Fine. My sci-fi man should love this country.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Siya hastily pulled out her ever present tab and started typing away.

“What? We’re making a list now?” Shikha asked.

“Of course. Mr to die for would hardly have one single quality. That would make him, well,”

“Reality!” All three chorused and burst out laughing, the bad mood completely dispelled for the time being. Preeti clapped. “OK. OK. If it’s a list then patriotism can’t be number one.” The other two nodded and started thinking. “Faithfulness,” she said after a few moments. “You can’t live with someone you can’t trust. He should not lie or cheat. Not ever.”

All three nodded and Siya typed it up. “Number two would be he should be dependable,” she said firmly. “Has regular income / steady job and keeps his promises. He should be a guy who doesn’t need to set a google reminder that he has a date with me. He should remember and show up. *On time.*” In other words, unlike Tapan.

Preeti and Shikha agreed. Shikha gave the number three. “He should at least understand the joke when it’s cracked. And not just the dirty ones. If he can crack a few of his own it would add a few more points on his score.”

“You mean you don’t want a male version of Ruhi,” Siya said giggling and typing.

“Or my boss,” Shikha stated. Anal retentive control freak defined him nicely. “Oh I want patriotism now. He should love his country. Absolutely, loyally, possessively love it. Implying he should be royally pissed off at anyone who disparages it.” They agreed unanimously. Doesn’t matter where you lived but respecting one’s motherland did come under most important requirement.

“Number four should be kids. He should like or at least be comfortable around kids,” Preeti said. “I’m going to go for number five too. Parents. If he wants me to treat his parents as mine then he should treat my parents as his. No one-way traffic.”

Shikha slouched back in her chair, stretching her legs. “Personally I would like a rich guy. Well, not filthy rich of course but comfortably rich.”

“What’s wrong with filthy rich?” Siya asked curiously.

“Are you kidding? Filthy rich equals to arrogance. He will start calling all the shots. Experience speaks so heed it,” she said thinking back to the first guy she had been engaged to.

“That’s number six.” Siya raised her hand, stalling Preeti and Shikha. “Number seven is he should be handsome. Sexily good looking packing a few packs.”

Preeti grinned. “Jai has never had any packs.”

“Yeah but he doesn’t have a beer belly either,” Siya swiftly pointed out. “He

should be a great kisser. And toucher. His kisses should make my toes curl. His touches should make me wet in all the right places.”

“Tapan!” Both her friends chorused. After all, sex had never been an issue between their friend and Tapan, the toad. “He definitely scores that one,” Siya agreed ignoring the twinge in her heart.

“Look,” Shikha rubbed her hands. “I obviously don’t have the experience you two have but if there is a man I would die for then he should be great in bed. Not just good but great. He should be able to make me moan, groan and scream. He should have the strength of an Olympic swimmer and stamina of a hormone driven teenager.” Preeti choked on her starter before she threw the one in her hand back on the plate and clutched her stomach, almost falling off the seat laughing. Siya tried to control a little but her shoulders shook in silent hilarity. “What? Don’t tell me it’s humanly impossible. He is my man. My creation and he can be anything I want him to be.” Both of them nodded with difficulty, a few snickers still managed to break free. Shikha leaned forward inquisitively. “Tell me something. Do the dimensions matter? Something like the bigger the better or longer the better?”

They were quite literally clutching their stomachs and roaring with laughter by the time the waiter brought their pizzas. The poor guy had to wait until his customers controlled themselves enough to get back into their seats. It was tough but they managed it. Preeti waited until he served and left before saying, “Of course the bigger and the longer the better.”

“I hope you don’t mean monsters. I don’t think I want monsters.” Shikha bit her lip, trying to look innocent. And failing miserably. “Doesn’t mean I prefer cashews and walnuts of course.” The laughter this time included table thumping.

“But, but, but!” Siya raised her finger. “At the end of the day, it’s not how much he has but what he does with it and how and for how long.” She concluded, typing away but her fingers were trembling in an effort to control her mirth.

“And he should definitely last longer than a TV ad,” Preeti inserted sending them into another paroxysm of hysterical laughter.

“What’s the heading? Mr To die for? Sci-fi man?” Siya rattled out the options.

“Nah,” Shikha waved it away. “A man to die for!”

Chapter Four

Preeti was in a rush. She had been late coming home on Monday night, courtesy of the dinner with her friends but Jai hadn't been home. She had tried waiting up for him until almost midnight but in the end had fallen asleep on the couch. She had woken up to the sound of the key inserting in the door and had even started heating up the dinner for him. But he had barely glanced at her as he said,

"Don't bother. I've already had my dinner."

He had gone in to change and hit the bed while she was left to clean up and shove everything in the fridge. By the time she switched off all the lights and entered their bedroom, he was fast asleep, his body turned away from her. He didn't even hug or cuddle up to her anymore these days. It was as if there was no need to touch her if there was no sex involved. How long had it been since he had rolled over and kissed her awake in the mornings? Stood in the kitchen chatting up to her while she cooked? Grabbed and dragged her to shower along with him? A companionable arm around her shoulders, an occasional warm hug... Something...anything to suggest that he was glad to see her? Longer than she could remember. Now it was like if they were not having sex, he didn't feel the need to touch her. The fear that he might be interested or involved in another woman might have all been in her head but neither was he interested or involved with her. Where had they gone wrong?

These contemplations meant she got delayed in cooking and packing their boxes. Cursing herself softly she ran to get dressed. Jai was in the shower but if he got ready fast, maybe they could leave together. About to strip her t-shirt in favor of a long skirt and top, she stopped when she heard an incoming message beep. Both their phones were beside each other, inserted into their respective chargers. She checked hers but there was nothing. Without much thought, she opened Jai's phone. Sure enough the light was blinking. It was an email from someone named Zara. After a quick glance at the closed bathroom door, she clicked the message open.

Client meeting at 11 today. Hope you'll wear that new blue shirt. It suits you to a T.

Zara was his colleague that much was obvious. A colleague who suggested what shirt he should wear? Jai was no Tapan. She knew her husband. At least she thought she did. And the man she knew where to draw the line. Quickly marking the email as unread, she replaced it and got ready. Just as she was placing her lunch box in her bag, Jai came out of the room. Dressed in the

blue shirt. He barely glanced at her as he slung his backpack.

"I don't need the lunch box today," he said as a way of goodbye.

Because you will be having it with Zara? The question hovered on the tip of Preeti's tongue but she swallowed it.

Tuesday, thank God, had been uneventful and it was over, Shikha thought with wry humor as she made her way home. Other than her boss being his regular ass-self, there hadn't been any major catastrophes. More than once she had felt like asking him what the fuck was his problem but not wanting to stir what was bound to be a hornet's nest, she had bitten back the words that had been on the tip of her tongue, fighting to get out. He had always been a chauvinistic pig to begin with and rumor had it that he was undergoing a rather messy divorce because he was caught with his pants down with someone other than his wife. A very young someone. So currently the perpetual nagger was an irritating nagger. In a lot of ways her boss reminded her of her first ex-fiancé. Arrogant, snotty and a totally self-absorbed guy whose thoughts centered on one person and one person only. Himself. But he was brilliant with numbers and even though it grated on her nerves, she had to admit that his WC management was top notch. Bottom line, there was no choice. If they wanted the sweet, they had to put up with the shit. And he had never crossed the line in his work place so management turned a blind eye to his attitude.

The entertainment of the day had been Ruhi again. One of the junior managers had stuck some kind of quote poster on her desk and Ruhi had objected. Siya had posted a picture of both the women at loggerheads, almost ready to pull each other's hair out. Shikha's grin turned into a suppressed giggle. She had messaged back to Siya asking why she hadn't recorded the incident. They would've at least had a good laugh. When life got boring or tiring, you take entertainment wherever you found it. Parking her car under the tree beside her gate, she got out. She would park it inside later. First she needed to get out of the sari.

"Hi."

The voice came from right behind her just as she was inserting the key into her house door. Stifling a shriek, she whirled and faced her neighbor. The jerk cop. And he was wearing his uniform too. "Dammit," she shouted. "Stop sneaking up on me like that!"

"It's the only way I know how to walk," he replied in a deadpan voice. "If I had waited for you to turn around it wouldn't be sneaking." He paused. "You

curse a lot.”

“You would drive a saint to cursing,” she snapped.

“And you definitely don’t belong in that category now, would you?”

I can’t hit a cop, I can’t hit a cop, I can’t hit a cop. “Did you sneak up on me for a reason or is this your new form of entertainment?”

“Tell me, is there a day when you don’t pick a fight?”

“The days when I don’t see you,” she replied sweetly.

He nodded once briefly as if he had expected the exact same answer. “Those two are out of the hospital and in the jail right now.”

“Hospital?”

“The guy you hit had a couple of cracked ribs and the second had chili powder in his...well...everywhere,” he looked in danger of smiling as he imparted the details. Shikha looked so smug that his smile broke free. “Their parents might post a bail but the case is still active, that is if you have no intention of withdrawing it?”

“No way. Just let me know when the court hearing is and I’ll present myself. I’ll see if a few other women will join me to make it stronger,” she said, gesturing to the neighborhood.

“It can’t get any stronger and I think you won’t even need to come. One of the kids in the street took a video of the whole thing from his phone. His father handed it over to me this morning.”

“He got what they did too? Or just me punching that guy?”

This time the smile turned into a full-fledged grin making him look human. A very handsome human. Shikha wished they weren’t standing on the porch, with the setting sun throwing light on his profile because she could see how dense and thick his eyelashes were. They probably touched his cheeks when he slept. The brown-black striations in his eyes and the sharp, regal nose were more prominent in that particular angle. He wasn’t bad looking at all when he was not snarling, she admitted to herself grudgingly. Truth be told, he looked tough, competent and a real bad news for her peace of mind.

“He got everything from the moment you turned into the street till the police jeep rolled away after the arrest and they have priors too.” He paused again, slanting his gaze to her legs. “How is your shin?”

“It wasn’t as bad as it had first looked. Just a scrape.” She sighed. “Look, I just got back from work and quite literally dying for a cup of tea. Would you like to come in and have some with me?” He had after all kept her updated on

the progress and gave her the good news that she wouldn't have to attend the court sessions for God knows how many times. Not that it would have deterred her but still...

"Sure," he removed his cap and followed her inside. "I thought most single women preferred to live in apartments."

"I'm not a single woman," she said, making her way into the dining and kitchen area. "Well, I am but I live with my parents. They're in US right now visiting my brother. What about you?"

"I'm single too," he said with a grin.

She'd thought as much but all the same, it was good to get the confirmation. She waited until he pulled one of the dining chairs and sat before depositing her backpack in the other chair and entering the kitchen. "Tea OK with you? I make coffee but not the South Indian style."

He waved it away. "Tea is fine. So it's your parents and you and your brother?"

"Two brothers. I'm the youngest."

He gave another of those brief nods of his that probably meant he had connected the dots. "They taught you to fight like that, huh?" His eyes twinkled again.

"When we were kids all I wanted was to be a part of their team...you know... play like them, be like them..." she shrugged, smiling at those fond memories. "I begged, cajoled, threatened them until they taught me all kinds of stuff starting from jumping the walls to..."

"Kicking men's balls," he finished for her. Shikha's own grin broke free as she added the tea powder to the boiling water. "What do they do?"

"Elder brother did his MS and is working in US and younger one is army."

He regarded her with intent eyes. At her small frown, he elaborated. "You said he is army. Not he is in the army or working for the army. Your brother is a life-giver for the country. And you are very proud of that. Of him."

"You're very observant," she acknowledged, pouring the tea into two cups and bringing them over to where he sat. He took one and she took the other. "Yes. Not a day goes by when I don't argue with my dada as to why he can't do something here." She waited a breath before saying, "I looked you up in Google today." He raised his eyebrow. She glared defensively. "Well, considering the fact that I had initially pegged you for a gunda..."

"Gunda?" he choked a little on his tea. She wasn't sure if he was outraged or

amused.

“Unshaven face, bloodshot eyes, coming home at odd hours, making a lot of noise, ill-tempered as if you had a hangover...” she shrugged. “What else was I to think? And later on I thought you were a dirty cop.” This time he was definitely outraged. Funny, he was more furious about the dirty cop comment than her assumption that he was a goon. “So I looked you up. Age 32, one of the youngest officers to be promoted as DCP, four promotions and ten transfers in four years. Threats, bribery, blackmail, nothing works on you including political pressure. If the article is to be believed, the mere thought of Karthik Balakrishnan Iyer interrogating is enough for most of the criminals to confess.”

“The last couple of weeks have been hectic,” he said after a lengthy pause. “We have been trying to catch a child molester and I didn’t want to give him a chance to cross the city limits.”

“Did you catch him?”

He nodded. “The girl is twelve years old and still hospitalized. In no position to be a witness in the court.”

“So what are you going to do? You caught him but without the witness...”

In the last couple of years she had stopped getting shocked at hearing such things. What did that say about the current situation of the country, she wondered. For the life of her she couldn’t understand how they could commit such an act on a small child. Even demons had been known to spare the kids.

“He confessed,” he said, cutting through her words and thoughts.

“So the article was true, huh?” Maybe she could get along with him, she thought with a small smile. Especially since he had such a valid reason behind his behavior. “I’m sorry for snapping at you...”

He raised his hand, halting her words. “Don’t apologize and spoil the effect. It was the best form of entertainment I’ve had in a long time.” Grinning he took his empty cup and placed it in the kitchen sink. She followed him. “I wish every woman does what you did the other day.”

“I think a woman does try to fight back but in situations where she is completely alone with a 1:5 ratio,” she shrugged and left it at that. “You’ve been a DCP here for nearly a year now. Where were you living before?” She realized the question came under the personal category but what the hell...she has already asked it. He can just not answer if he didn’t like it.

“Banashankari,” he replied without hesitation. “The owners sold the house. Do you run every day? I saw you a couple of times in the mornings.”

Her smile was rueful. “I try to. If I manage to grab shuteye for at least six hours, I go. Otherwise, you know,” she shrugged.

“I’ll try not to wake you when I get home at night,” he offered, picking up his cap and black leather jacket.

She walked him to the door and opened it. “I’ll try not to wake you when I leave in the mornings.” With another grin and a small wave, he was gone.

Siya trudged up the steps that led to her single bedroom apartment. The recruitments were on for the year and the next few months were going to be a bitch. Teams from each department would be going to different colleges and institutes to conduct interviews and hire people. She was in-charge of all travel schedules and itineraries of the higher-ups. If any of them had not signed up, it fell on her to make sure they do and that there were no overlaps. What she wouldn’t give to see Tapan’s smiling face first thing when she opened the door, she despaired. They would relax together in that bathtub with bubbles floating around them and laugh as they tried to shift and their elbows and knees got in the way in that small space. He would pull her between his legs and with his front to her back give her a massage that would turn her tightly wound muscles into limp noodles. Had she been too hasty in breaking off with him? Should she have talked to him some more? Been more patient?

Riddled with doubts and second thoughts, she reached her floor and stopped. Music and laughter could be heard from Tapan’s apartment. His family was there probably, she thought. Her eyes fell on the shoes and sandals scattered in front of his door. Not just his family. His friends were there too. Guys and girls. Hurt fury rolled through her and she quickly blinked away the moisture that sprung into her eyes. Striding to her door, she opened it, entered and banged it shut. Apparently she was the only one who was supposed to pretend that she was a stranger. To hell with him, she thought with an angry swipe of hand over her damp eyes. To hell with them all. He didn’t deserve her love. He didn’t deserve a single bloody moment of her life. And he most certainly didn’t deserve her tears. He was a toucher and a kisser, yes. And he might know what to do and how to do it but that’s all he knew.

She would show him what she thought of him. Dragging out her Tab, she went into her Facebook account and started typing.

A Man to Die for!

Do you qualify?

Shikha stretched and bent, touching her toes and arching her back, doing her warm-up routine before she started on her run. After her conversation the previous evening, she had backed her car into the portico. That way there would be no need to put the reverse gear at all in the morning. And she hadn't heard the thud-thud-thud of the bullet last night nor had the porch light come on her eyes. All in all, a great sleep and a fresh morning.

"Good morning."

Since she had heard his main door snap shut, she was better prepared for him. "Good morning," she greeted him back pleasantly. She gave his sweat shirt, shorts and shoes a quick once-over. "You out for running too?"

He gave a brief nod. "If you don't mind the company."

Her smile widened. "With DCP, crime branch? I feel safer already." Locking her door, she stuffed her keys into her shorts pocket and joined him outside her gate. "You always carry your weapon?" she asked, gesturing to the small bulge at his back.

He shrugged and left it at that. She didn't push him. "Are you sure you're OK?" he asked as they started with a brisk walk. "You haven't insulted me yet and we've been talking," he glanced at his watch. "For more than a minute."

"I'm saving my energy for something important to come along," she replied flatly.

"That's my girl," came his grinning reply. "I feel better already."

"You're *really* pushing it."

He laughed at her dry comeback. Thirty minutes later she was still matching him stride for stride. Talking while jogging wasn't easy, so they didn't even try. They had run down the street to the park that was few streets away. They didn't go into the park, instead ran around it twice. It was still early with only the occasional milk vans and a few autos driving by and the vegetable vendors unloading their carts and trucks. The early morning air was cool, yet to be polluted by the rush hour traffic. Gravel and dirt crunched under their pounding feet. She was still breathing easily and there was still plenty of spring in her legs. She loved the feel of her muscles bunching and relaxing, with nothing to concentrate on but the running. Beside her, he ran as if they had just started. His stride was effortless, his breathing slow and even.

"Do you run every day?" she asked, scowling that she was panting a little.

"Among other things," he replied evenly.

She stopped. "What other things?"

He stopped beside her and shrugged. "Swimming, sit-ups, pull-ups..."

"Breast stroke or side-stroke?"

"Both."

She hoped her eyes didn't pop out of her sockets. "Anything else?" her tone had a sarcastic edge to it but it couldn't be helped. Here she was, dragging herself out for the run as and when she could and panting after mere thirty minutes and there he was! Listing out his exercise regime like a waiter rattling off the menu at one of those fast food joints.

He grinned. "I don't have time to do all I want to do Shikha Bose," and he started off. "Now come on, time is wasting."

"Karate, Kung Fu, boxing, wrestling..." she ran after him rattling off the options.

"Judo. And I do target practice."

"Right hand or left?"

"Both," came the confident reply.

"Great," she muttered. "You are the only specimen to your parents or are there more like you?"

He threw back his head and laughed. They stopped running and started walking as they turned into their street. "I have a younger brother. He's a chef in the making."

"A chef?" she choked. It was as far from police work as it could get. Talk about siblings having different aspirations. "Your parents were OK with that?"

He shrugged, both of them coming to a halt near her gate. "Dad was fine once we talked to him about it. Mom threw a fit, both times but I guess now she is slowly reconciling."

She nodded and checked her watch. "I need to rush. And uh, thanks for..." she gestured towards his bike.

His eyes smiled back at her. "Thanks for..." he glanced at her car. "Have a good day Shikha."

"You too Karthik."

She ran home, got ready and stuffing a hastily made sandwich into her mouth, fled to work. Thank God the maid had her own set of keys and after working in their house for almost a decade, she was regular and completely trustworthy. Shikha's work had become all the more easier once she had

taught the lady how to operate the washing machine. She reached work by 8.30 and was ready for a break by 11. There were several girls and guys grouped around a table when she entered the canteen. The girls were laughing like crazy and the guys looked totally pissed off. Curious she made her way there after collecting her cup of tea.

“Hey, what’s happening?”

Pallavi, a girl from HR tried to control her mirth enough to answer. “Oh this one you gotta read Shikha.”

“That was so not funny,” a guy with a sulky face muttered.

The girls ignored him as Pallavi extended her phone to Shikha. “Read that. I’m so going to like it and forward it to all the groups.”

“I’ve sent a bulk email to everyone in the company. Excluding the top guys of course,” another one piped up.

Aaah, another of those man/woman jokes, Shikha thought with a grin, taking the phone from Pallavi. *A Man to Die for! Do you qualify?* Shikha bit back her groan at the last second. Dammit Siya!

Chapter Five

Who was she? Who would dare to write such disgusting, filthy stuff? Making a list of a man worthy of for her to die for! What did she know about a man's worth? She wants to judge men? Go through them until she can pick out the one she wants? Who did she think she is? Angel of perfection? Goddesses stepped out of heavenly gates? Whore! That's what she was! She isn't worth yesterday's trash! Eyes filled with hatred stared at the words that danced on the laptop screen. Internet was full of disgusting stuff. But this was different. This one hurt. Didn't she know how much this hurt? And everyone were reading and laughing. As if it was some joke. How could they laugh? Who wrote this? It was so frustrating not knowing the identity. Was there no way to find out? Whoever it was, shouldn't go unpunished. She should pay. She should definitely pay.

“Dammit Si! You actually posted on your wall?” Shikha groaned, covering her eyes with one hand.

“I was pissed off at Tapan and I guess I wasn't thinking straight,” Siya muttered guiltily. “How bad is it?” She hadn't checked her account and had silenced the notifications in her phone after posting it.

The three of them had gathered in the canteen during the lunch break to discuss the issue. True that Siya hadn't actually mentioned names but the words *we* and *us* have popped out more than a couple of times in the whole post. It was just a matter of time before someone noticed that it was a group effort. Would anyone connect the dots and realize it was them? Shikha hoped not.

“You were the one who copy pasted the whole thing,” Preeti said with a scowl. “You should know how bad it is. Pretty much verbatim of whatever we talked.” She turned to Shikha. “How did it even reach the APS email in the first place? And someone sent me the same thing as a WhatsApp message, complete with emoticons attached.”

Shikha got curious. “Really? What emoticons did they use for points nine and ten?”

Siya tried to glare but in the next moment all three dissolved into giggles. “Honestly, don't people have anything better to do than forwarding messages? And who the hell has time to type all that in WhatsApp!”

“Well, you are a friend of that Pallavi in your FB, aren't you?” Shikha asked

the rhetorical question. “She liked it and her friend read it and liked it...you know how that stuff spreads. Guess it had been a slow day yesterday. According to what I gathered, Pallavi liked it so much that she copied it and sent it as a bulk email at APS. As far as I know, it stopped at the managerial level. And one of them loved it and took a few minutes to send it as a WhatsApp message. She is in some ten groups and she wanted everyone in those groups to read.” She paused to take a breath before delivering the last bit of news. “It’s been tweeted and retweeted too the last I heard.”

The other two groaned. “People really don’t have anything better to do!” Preeti muttered.

“Oh come on, how many times we forwarded something stupid or funny,” Siya countered. “We never know where these things originate from. Someone sends us and we send to someone else.”

“Let’s hope the same is the case now too. Bad enough that the whole thing is out, it would be worse if people come to know who wrote them in the first place,” Preeti grimaced.

“There was nothing offensive in it, was there?” Siya asked puzzled. “We stated what we want and how we want...” realizing how that had come out, they giggled some more.

“It is turning into a battle of sexes at APS,” Shikha rolled her eyes as she imparted the titbit. “Guys cribbing about the comments about being compared to walnuts and TV ads and women retorting about payback times.”

“How ironic that the top five on the list have been all but forgotten and people are clinging to the physical stuff,” Preeti’s comment was rueful as she got up and started to clear her trash. “Chalo, I gotta to go now. There is one client visit coming up.”

Shikha and Siya followed suit. A Man to Die for, sure had been a figment of their very active imagination but it was taking a life of its own right in front of their eyes. They only hoped their names never got out. Who would be interested in backtracking a stupid joke to its origin? No one. This one would hold people’s interest until the next one came along and then it would be forgotten.

“Yes dada, everything is going on fine and no, I don’t have problems sleeping alone in this house,” Shikha stifled a yawn and a sigh. What a way to begin her day! Talk with her over protective big brother and remind him for the thousandth time that she was an adult. Switching to hands-free, she started on her warm-ups before the run.

“Are you even listening to me Choti?”

She stifled another sigh. He was hardly mumbling for her to ignore. She loved him thoroughly. No two-ways but he got on her nerves. She wished he would get married to that long-term girlfriend of his and pop out a few kids. At least his attention would be split.

“Yes dada, I’m listening.”

“Mom and dad are beginning to worry. They don’t need it in this age and could easily be avoided if you just say yes to marriage.”

There it was again! “Easy for you to say,” she snapped. “You’re not the one with three broken engagements behind you.”

“Choti, you need to get over it,” his tone gentled. “Just see the snap I sent you. He is my colleague and a really good friend of mine.”

“And lives in US,” she finished for him. “Green card holder and soon-to-be US citizen. You know my thoughts on that.” Oh how she wished her fauji dada was with her now. As a typical middle child he had played the peacemaker more than once between his little sister and elder brother.

“It’s ridiculous,” he said, losing his patience. “This is not the 70s. These days it hardly matters which country you live in. Look at me. You guys talk to me every single day and I earn enough to come for a visit at a moment’s notice.”

“It’s not about that and you know it. Dada, change the topic,” she said, locking the door behind her for her early morning run.

“Stop being so rigid and selfish Shikha. If not for you mom and dad would stay with me for longer. Now all they do here is worry that you are there alone. No wonder most of our relatives blame you for the broken engagements. This kind of attitude...” his words ended abruptly as if he had realized he had crossed the line and hurt his little sister.

Too late. “OK, you know what? Go to hell!” She didn’t wait to hear more.

That was her at her peacemaking best, she thought and then had to blink away an uncharacteristic dampness in the eyes. Stuffing the phone in her capri, she looked up straight into the eyes of her neighbor. They stared at each other over the main gate of her house. Sliding her eyes away from his intently probing ones, she opened the gate and started walking at a brisk pace. He fell into step beside her but didn’t try to strike up conversation. Walk turned to jog and jog to run until she was sweating and panting. But it was a great outlet for her hurt and frustration. And she was grateful for her silent companion who left her alone but made sure she didn’t feel alone. Almost an hour later they were back. He stopped when she stopped in front her gate.

“Thank you Karthik,” she said with a sigh.

He didn’t ask for what. Didn’t press for details as most people would have done. He gave a brief nod, took out a card from his pocket and extended it to her. She took it with a quizzical glance at him. It was his card with his cell number on it. “Keep that with you. In the mood you’re in, if you end up kicking someone’s balls, call me.”

She wanted to be outraged but felt a grin tugging the corners of her mouth. “You think I would need your help?”

He scoffed. “No but he would.” The grin turned into a delightful laughter. He grinned back and patted her cheek. “Keep that up. Good day Shikha.”

“Good day Karthik,” Her good mood restored, she waved and went home.

And her good mood lasted all morning, well into the noon. Her brother called again. He apologized, she forgave and they made up. Then lunch time came and the day went spiraling downwards. She entered the canteen and realized the conversations flowing there were mainly centered on the post and the women involved. So they’ve caught on the fact that it was more than one woman who’d written it. She hid her scowl and tried to tune out the banter but perked up with she spotted Siya entering the canteen.

“Still going on, huh?” she asked plopping herself beside Shikha.

“Oh yeah and they seemed to have figured out that there are multiple partners,” Shikha replied, waving to Preeti who had walked in with her lunchbox.

“What’s the FB status?” Preeti enquired.

“More than a lakh likes and crossed thirty thousand retweets,” Siya said after checking her phone. They looked at each other, not sure whether they should be worried or proud of the numbers. “I’ve lost count of number of friend requests I’ve got. Thank God I wasn’t the one who put it on Twitter. Can ignore the friend requests but keeping track of followers...jeez!” she shuddered. “But on the flipside I think as with most of the cases, focus is on the content. No one cares who did it.”

Shikha stopped chewing as Pallavi strolled up to their table. Judging from the way her eyes lit up when she found them together, the cat was out of the bag. “Hey,” she said with a huge grin splitting her face. “It’s you three. I mean that post...it was made by the three of you, right? I read it on Siya’s FB page and you guys are thick. It must’ve happened on one of your Friday get-togethers,” she clapped, pleased at her own discovery.

There didn’t seem any point in trying to deny it. Shikha hid her grimace

behind what she hoped was a smile and shrugged. Siya gave an abbreviated nod while Preeti just started on her lunch, ignoring the question.

“Oh this is so cool! How did it all start? I mean what was your inspiration?” Pallavi pulled her chair and settled down, no doubt for a round of inquisition.

The men in our lives, Siya wanted to say but bit back the words. The way things were going, their life histories would be out on Twitter by nightfall if she opened her mouth. At the same time she didn’t want to tell her that it was a forwarded message and give the credit a faceless person. Shikha, evidently coming to the same conclusion, took over. “We were just having some fun. Nothing preplanned or anything like that.”

“I think it is super cool girls,” she enthused. “I sent it to my husband too. He is mightily pissed off right now but the females in his team are absolutely loving it. Hey Preeti, your husband and mine work at the same place, right?” She laughed, delighted at the new revelation. She quickly took out her phone to relay the very vital information. “Oh he’s going to love this one. His friend’s wife is one of the authors.”

Preeti looked as if she wanted to grab the girl’s phone and throw it out of the fourteenth floor window. And Shikha could understand the feeling. Maybe she should brace herself too. The way this one was going, it wouldn’t be long before her brother in US reads it and gives her a dressing down. Siya was the only one who seemed to be taking things in her stride. Understandable, since she is an only child and her parents who lived in Ahmedabad had zero interest in the social networking sites.

“We’re authors now?” she asked.

“Well, of course you are. My sister thinks this one has the potential to reach the top 100 list of highest number of likes in FB. Hey, why don’t we do that? Let’s aim for the top 100. If not FB then Twitter. Max retweets. What say?” she looked at the three, finally registering their total lack of enthusiasm. “What?”

Shikha had *what the fuck* look while Siya was still trying to decide between *hell no* and *is your head screwed right*.

“Uh listen Pallavi,” Preeti gave a shot at diplomacy. “We wrote that thing just for fun. This is kind of totally unexpected and none of us are interested in setting up any records.”

The girl looked downright put out. “Oh. But I think it’s a great chance and you shouldn’t miss it. Think about it and let me know. We girls at APS are all behind you in this,” she added with a wink. “Just say the word and we’ll flood the Twitter and soon you all will be famous, signing autographs and stuff.”

Shikha choked back a grunt. She would get her ass fired before that. Her boss was already looking for excuses to knock her down a step or two. This was like delivering her head on a silver platter. She waited until Pallavi left their table before muttering, "Autographs? Seriously? If this goes on I'll have to ask Karthik to provide us protection."

Siya and Preeti stopped with their spoons held midway in the air. There was a long pause. "Karthik?" Siya asked slowly.

"Yeah, Karthik. My neighbor. You know him."

Preeti choked, dropping her spoon back in her casserole. "The jerk neighbor who turned out to be a jerk cop who resembled a mafia member and a drunkard whose clothes hadn't seen the inside of a washing machine.."

"OK, yeah, fine, it's the same guy."

Siya's eyes went round. "You are blushing buddy and you *never* blush." They should know after all. Both of them had been with her through all the three engagements and the subsequent breakups.

"What? No!" Shikha protested violently.

Preeti blinked, astonished. "You've fallen for him?"

"Good God no! What's gotten into you guys? We just kind of introduced ourselves and he accompanied me during my early morning runs the last couple of days, that's it."

"If you say so," Siya shrugged one shoulder.

"No, really. He's not a bad guy, I accept that but there's nothing more to it than that. I mean, come on, he is a Tamilian. Iyer. With my history, even thinking of anything with him would be asking for trouble. Aa bail mujhe maar," she quoted. She waved them to silence when they tried to protest. "We're getting off the topic. Preeti, what's Jai going to say to this?"

Preeti gave a tight smile. "I don't see any point in trying to deny it or hide it. I refuse to feel ashamed of something that was done with my friends just for fun." Sighing she packed up the rest of the food and got up. "At least this would give me a chance to clear out a few things, right?"

"Good luck," Shikha hugged Preeti. "Keep us posted, OK?"

Siya locked her bike and walked up to her apartment, her thoughts still on Preeti. Did her one careless act ruin the relationship between her friend and her husband? Agreed that things had been rocky even before that but this post didn't help the matters, did it? Would Jai understand? She didn't think she

would forgive herself if they broke off because of this. The initial points had all been valid ones. It was later on that the humor had gotten the better of them. Now they were stuck with people judging them basing on those. That was the worst part of this whole fiasco. The judgement that was sure to come. As if all they cared about was the size of a penis and time taken to ejaculate.

Her phone pinged. Since it was not an FB or Twitter notification, she opened it. It was from Tapan.

You did this to make fun of me, didn't you?

Make fun of him? She frowned. *Why would I even want to make fun of you?*

Well, that's what's happening to me. Whoever has read your stupid post, my friends, are laughing. Asking for my size and how long I last.

You know I would never make fun of you Tapan. But I was hurt when you said we have to ignore each other in front of your family.

Aaah so you are taking revenge.

Suddenly she was tired. Tired of fighting for him. For them. The hope that refused to completely die down, diminished a little more. Sighing she tapped her reply. *You know what? You are right. Parts of that list were aimed solely at you. Like faithfulness, dependability, sense of humor.*

Preeti entered the house and closed the door behind her. Jai was home. Earlier than her. But she didn't fool herself thinking he wanted to spend time with her. What he came home looking for was a confrontation. He was probably in the study or in the bedroom with his Kindle. She went into the kitchen to deposit her lunch box and got herself a glass of water. She didn't have to wait for long. He came out of the study and stood at the entrance of the kitchen as if waiting for her to stammer an apology.

"Wow, you're home early. Will wonders ever seize." There. He can look for her apology in that.

His lips thinned. He hadn't even changed after coming home. She glanced at his stylish clothes and trim haircut. He always did dress very well. Even if was a pair of jeans, he wore it with style. "What the hell is wrong with you Preeti?" She tilted her head, waiting for him to expand. "Seriously, have you gone mad? Making that list and publicizing it like it was some kind of an achievement? You have any idea the kind of comments guys are passing on about you? You have any idea how it felt when that guy walked up to me laughing and told me that you were one of the women who wrote it? I never liked those friends of yours to begin with but now? I'm just." He threw up his

hands in the air. “They’re just...”

“Stop.” He looked startled at her firm voice. “You want to talk about me fine. Don’t bring them into it. Not. One. Word.” She stressed when he opened his mouth.

“Fine,” he snapped. “They are what they are but what is wrong with *you*? Writing about who you think is a man to die for!”

“Not who Jai. What. It’s about qualities. You know things like dependability,” she looked straight into his eyes. “Faithfulness.”

He slid his gaze away from hers. Preeti waited for the crippling pain to hit her, then gathered it and shoved it into a corner of her heart to be aired out later. Taking a deep breath, she asked in a calm voice. “Who is it? Zara?”

Jai seemed taken aback and stammered. “Who is who? What Zara? What nonsense are you talking?”

“The woman you keep comparing me to.”

With a distracting hand through his hair, he whirled away from her. “I’m not having an affair with anyone if that’s what you’re asking. And don’t change the subject.”

“Maybe not yet but there is someone, isn’t there? Someone you’re attracted to?” He didn’t turn to face her. He didn’t deny and that was a loud answer for her. “I’m going to shift my things to the other bedroom,” she said calmly. “Doesn’t mean I’m going to file for divorce tomorrow morning but I really think both of us should step back and think about our relationship. What we want from it. *If* we even want it.”

“You’re changing the topic! We need to talk about you and your discussion about the man making you moan and scream. My team members are laughing at me Preeti!”

It hadn’t been her who had added that but she wasn’t going to rat out her friend. “And all you had to tell them was yes, you’ve spoiled me for another man and that you’re the reason your wife has such high standards. We did it for fun and that’s all I’m going to say on that subject. Some new thing will pop up and this one will fade away before you know it. It’s an issue only if you make it into one Jai.” Sighing she rubbed her forehead. “Now I’m going to shift my stuff into the other bedroom. Think about what I’ve said.”

It was past nine by the time Shikha reached home. She backed her car into the portico and laughed out loud when she saw Karthik pushing his bike into his portico. Getting down from her car she called out a greeting, “DCP saab is

home early tonight I see!” He grinned but she could see the lines of tiredness etched across his face even from that distance. She took out her backpack and the carry bag from the car and walked up to the wall that separated both the houses. “Looks like your day has been as delightfully bitchy as mine.”

He laughed, dispelling some of weariness on his face. At a closer inspection she realized something else. She peered closer at his damaged knuckles. Bruised but they didn’t seem to be broken. “The guy is in the hospital or mortuary?”

That drew another huff of a laughter from him. “Blood thirsty woman.” And then it was his turn to peer. “I smell food.” She grinned and lifted her carry bag. “Bhelpuri, sevpuri, dahi puri, samosa chat, kachori chat and vadapav.”

“You’re going to eat all that?” he looked astonished.

“I might’ve gotten a little carried away while ordering.”

“And I didn’t get a chance to have my lunch today. Care to share?”

“Sure. I got two of each. What do you want?”

He looked at the sky and surroundings. “Weather is nice. Let’s eat here. That way we can have a little of everything. The wall can be our table.”

She giggled. “You’re really hungry, aren’t you? OK. Let me get changed and we’ll meet here in five minutes?” Both of them hurried into their houses and were out in four and half minutes. She got the plates, spoons and a napkin to spread over the wall and they spent the next ten minutes gorging on the junk food. It probably wouldn’t help her calories but it sure revived her good mood once again. As they got to the last item, she said, “Fine, don’t tell me how you got those knuckles. I’ll just read in tomorrow’s paper.”

He finished chewing and said, “You won’t find it in any newspaper.”

“Online then.”

“Not there either.” He grinned and shrugged. “A missing person’s case. I went to a politician to ask a few questions. His uh, bodyguard got in the way.”

“And no one will come to know?” she wailed. “That’s so unfair. *You* should be the one in the news not *me*.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You’re in the news?”

“Not in the way you think,” she scowled. “My friends and I wrote something for fun a couple of days back and now it’s all over the social media along with our names. Everyone at APS...that’s where I work...are now split into two groups because of that one post. Applauses from women and catcalls from men.”

“What’s it about?” he asked polishing off the last of the bhelpuri and licking his fingers.

He really had been hungry, she thought. Then his question registered. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Fine. I’ll check out for myself then.”

“Do whatever you want but I’m not talking.”

The sound of the gate opening made them both look in that direction. Another cop just walked into Karthik’s house. He saw them both near the wall, changed direction and came up to them. “A unique way to have dinner.”

Karthik wiped his hands with a tissue and made the introductions. “Salim, this is...”

“Shikha Bose,” Salim completed the sentence with a grin. “Hi I’m Salim, DCP South-East. Karthik’s friend and current colleague.”

“How did you know my name?” Shikha asked suspiciously.

The men exchanged hasty glances which she was sure meant to convey something to each other in a language unknown to her. “Uh those guys Karthik arrested? I saw the evidence video and recognized you.”

Yeah, right. She would bet her paycheck her neighbor cop shared some other facts about his neighbor. “If you say so.” She just got back her good mood and didn’t want to ruin it so she let it slide. “So you guys have known each other long?”

“Same batch during our IPS training and we had been together for the first couple of postings,” Salim replied. He was a little shorter than Karthik, leaning towards the lankier side and minus the mustache. But both of them sported the same crewcut style of hair. He turned back to Karthik. “Boss, we need to go. Oh and before I forget, Nafiza read some post online today.” He sighed in exasperation. “I am to tell you that according to that list she’d bet that you are a man to die for and I would come a close second.”

Shikha, who had been in the act of gulping down water, choked and spewed it out, making the men jump back to avoid being sprayed. Both of them glanced at her. One with mild concern and another with intent speculation. Even through her sputtering and coughing because the water had gone the wrong way, she saw the wheels turning at supersonic speed in Karthik’s head. And waited for the ground to open up and swallow her whole.

Chapter Six

The image that stared back from the mirror was familiar yet strange. And no wonder. Ever since all this started, there had been no sleep. Only fitful dozing. Besides, so much pain, hurt, anger and hatred bottled up inside would definitely change the person on the inside as well as the outside. No one would take away the pain of course. But hatred. Yeah. That would go away. That would definitely go away once justice is served. Soon. Real soon. To think those bitches worked at APS! The mere thought was blasphemous. The fact that they were colleagues! It brought the stomach contents into the mouth. They thought they were so smart, trying to hide their identities. Some things can't be hidden. And now the names were out. The women at APS were calling them Terrific Trio while the men thought they were Terrible Trio. Neither was correct. They were Trash Trio who mocked and taunted. A Man to die for indeed! What did they know about such a man? Nothing. They had absolutely no clue. Had they ever tried to measure up and fail every single day? Did they know what it was to try and try knowing you would fail, yet unable to give up? Did they? No. They didn't know. And they didn't deserve to live. They want a man to die for? They sure wouldn't get that man but they would die. Yes!

“Don’t. Say. It,” Shikha said the next morning as she came back from her run the next morning and saw Karthik back home, parking his bike. He had left the previous night soon after their chat dinner and his bike hadn’t been there this morning when she had come out for her run.

He looked like he wanted to throw back his head and laugh out loud but managed to control it. Barely. Good. It wouldn’t do good to attack a cop. “Not even a good morning?” She growled and the laughter he’d been trying to suppress broke free. “Sorry I missed our run.”

She was not. She was 200% sure he’d read the damn post, despite whatever it was he’d been doing all night. She was spared from discussing it while she tried to burn her calories. Thank God for small mercies Siya at least didn’t write who said what in that. All she needed was for him to know she was talking about cashews and walnuts. And monsters. “Night-out, huh?” she asked instead.

“Yup.”

“Off to bed now?”

“For a few hours yes. Then I have to leave again.”

“I thought DCPs drove Scorpios and XUVs these days.”

His lips tilted in a half smile. “I like my bike.”

“And security?” He worked in crime branch for God’s sake.

He shrugged. “I can handle myself.”

“How do you manage cooking and cleaning and stuff?” she asked curiously.

“My maid has a key. I don’t know what time she comes but she gets the work done. Food is not great but edible.” He paused. She knew he was going to talk about that damn post. She just *knew*. “I read that post. Anyone who rates faithfulness as number one and patriotism in the top four, has her head firmly on her shoulders. You girls did good,” he gave one his customary abbreviated nod.

She blinked and blinked again. OK, that was, well, unexpected. Why can’t this man be predictable for once, she thought with despair. She had been bracing herself for his deriding comments all night, even during the little time she had run this morning. And here he walked in and totally blindsided her. *Men! Go figure!*

“Uh, yeah, well, thanks.” She mumbled and scowled. “Everyone has all but forgotten those important points.”

“It’s all about priorities,” he shrugged. “Ignore them and this will blow over sooner rather than later.”

Shikha took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. Funny how two sentences could make her feel so much better. “Yeah, guess so. I, uh, I need to go or I’ll be late for work. Looks like you used your knuckles again. You need to put some ice on them or they won’t help you next time,” she said grinning.

He huffed a small laugh. “I’ll do that, thanks. And Shikha?”

Almost at her door, she stopped and turned her head towards him. “Yeah?”

“You are right. Monsters can be uncomfortable to say the least and cashews won’t help you.”

Her mouth quite literally dropped open. She stared at him, aghast. The only thing she could think was, “How did you know I said those things?” Then wanted to bang her head against the nearest wall as she realized she had asked it aloud.

He added a wink to his grin. “Even on print you are pretty easy to spot, Shikha Bose.” She did the only thing she could do under the circumstances.

Ducked her head, ploughed into her house and banged the door shut with a resounding thud. It didn't help things at all when she heard his roar of laughter that accompanied her undignified exit. *Men!*

She was still miffed about the conversation when her phone rang and she answered it distractedly. "'lo?"

An odd ghostly whisper reached her. "You won't get the man but you will die!"

And the line went dead. Who the hell was that! The caller id said unknown number. She started to redial but her phone rang again, this time displaying her fauji dada's number. "Hey dada, how is your leg doing now?" she asked with a grin.

Preeti was almost out of her apartment complex on her way to APS when her phone rang. She frowned at the unfamiliar number but answered. "Yes?"

"You won't get the man but you will die!" And the line went dead. *What the hell!* Furious she started to press the callback button but another car honked loudly from behind, making her swear softly. She threw the phone on the passenger seat and put her car in gear.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't one of the authors!"

Preeti halted and turned just inside the conference room, barely managing to hold back her glare. After a terrible, lonely, confused and pain-filled night, she had quite literally dragged herself to work. Curling up into a ball and wallowing in her misery had been oh so tempting. But what would that solve other than robbing her of her sanity? APS at least kept her busy and it was Friday. Their dinner night. She could lean on her friends' shoulders and draw strength from them. If she got out of this meeting unscathed, that was. Every Friday the sales team met for review and reappraisal. But from the looks of it, this week the meeting would be centered more on that stupid post than their reports. Ugh! Fine! In for a penny, in for a pound, she sighed.

Drawing a smile from somewhere, she looked at the guy who had drawled out that extremely sarcastic welcome. Arnab Das. The guy who had been brushed aside when she had gotten the last promotion. A sore loser if she had seen one.

"You seem surprised Arnab. I thought I was supposed to be in this meeting," she replied calmly.

He flushed and glared. "A shame!" People in the conference room looked uncomfortable and entertained. "A sales head holds the reputation of the

company in the palm of his or her hand. And now the reputation is in the hands of a shameless woman who writes trash.”

Preeti controlled her flinch. “And why is that? I thought it was honest.”

“Honest,” he scoffed. “Yeah right. The whole thing revolved around what a guy has in his wallet and in his pants.”

A few girls exclaimed in obvious outrage but Preeti didn’t shift her eyes away from Arnab. “It started with some genuine issues of fidelity and dependability and ended on a humorous note. Most of our colleagues see and realize it for what it is,” she gestured to the rapidly filling conference room.

“It was filthy and mean-spirited,” he said.

“I don’t agree. People see what they expect to see. Dirty minds see grub everywhere.”

“You’re saying I have a dirty mind? How dare you!”

“Enough!” Their CEO walked in, took in the scene at one glance and barked the command. “Arnab, stop dragging out the same old shit. We have better things to do at APS than discuss some post in FB. Now get your head out of your ass and sit down. We’re going to have new clients and new targets for the next quarter.”

Preeti let her tense muscles relax slowly as the situation diffused. How long would this go on? The meeting began and concluded quickly and peacefully after that.

Siya had slept a little better on Thursday night and woke up fresh on Friday morning. Maybe she was recovering from broken heart or maybe she was moving on despite the broken heart. Since it was Friday, she could discuss and evaluate during the dinner with her friends, she thought with wry humor. Reaching her bike, she was about to pull on her helmet when her phone rang. Frowning at the unfamiliar number, she nevertheless answered. “Hello?”

“You won’t get the man but you will die!” And the line went dead. *What the fuck!* Frown deepening, she pressed the call back button but the line was engaged. *Nutcase*, she muttered to herself, strapped the helmet on and started the bike.

“Siya, here are the schedules and the pending signups. Crosscheck them with the top guys.”

Siya took the printouts from her manager and started going through them. “Their calendars are all up to date?”

“I think so but double check that just in case. Oh and there are some overlaps in the previous list of signups.” She grimaced. “Thank God we caught it or it would’ve been a mess.”

Nodding in agreement, she took the sheaf of papers and stepped out of her manager’s cabin, almost colliding with Ruhi. “Oh, sorry,” she said politely.

“It wouldn’t have happened if she had her mind on her job instead of that disgusting post,” Ruhi growled in a low tone.

“Excuse me?” Siya said, taken aback. She shouldn’t be surprised. Ruhi needed an excuse to get her dander up. In fact it was a surprise that she had waited as long as she did. Maybe the list of things that pissed her off had been pretty long, she thought humorously.

“The overlaps in the previous signups,” she clarified. “They wouldn’t have happened if not for that cheap, dirty article that you posted on the net,” she said, her face flushed. Then she shook her head firmly. “I don’t even want to discuss it with you.”

“Fine by me.” Siya said, trying not to look amused.

“I’m going to see if I can change my group,” she said with a fierce glower.

“You are welcome to try but don’t get your hopes up. You know how it is until the initial round of recruitments are over,” she said sweetly.

“Fine,” she glared. “But you better not...”

Siya’s patience ran out at that point. “Ruhi, do you realize you’re behaving like a petulant school kid?” Ruhi opened her mouth to protest but wasn’t given a chance. “Get back to work and leave me to do mine.”

Siya waited until Ruhi strode away before muttering to herself, “Who the hell hired her?”

“Not me,” came the immediate reply from her manager’s cabin. Siya giggled.

Shikha was called into her boss’s office just as she was about to go in search of some tea. Her boss, Vittal Rao was a perpetually grumpy, ill-tempered boor. Some people came by it naturally while some people worked at it. Rao did both. She sighed and dragged herself into his cabin. He wasn’t pleased with her, that much was glaringly obvious. And absolutely nothing new. He was never pleased with any of the female members of his team. Guess he considered women were fit for cooking, fucking and breeding. Even if he hadn’t been caught with his pants down, that alone was enough for a woman of today for filing divorce.

She suspected the reason for this conference and prepared herself to be chewed out. “Ms Bose, the environment at APS is getting ruined.”

“Ruined how, sir?” she asked innocently.

“Don’t be facetious Ms Bose. There have never been gender fights at APS. Nor has the language of the company has ever deteriorated to this level. You and that ridiculous post of yours are the reason for this. It is vulgar and dirty to say that least.”

“How is it my doing?” she asked with a bewildered frown.

“That dirty list of yours...”

“It was not exclusively mine,” she couldn’t help pointing out. “You could say it was a collaborative effort.” And damn if she apologized for it. Why the hell was he holding her solely responsible for the whole mess, she didn’t understand. Fine, it got posted on FB and took off after that but how was she to be blamed if people liked and loved and retweeted it? She wasn’t the one who put them to work in the social media! But logic, women and Rao never went hand in hand.

“Ms Shikha, please. You might not be the only one but I have no doubt you’re the one who started all that nonsense. And now it’s up to you to control it.”

Her eyes bugged out. She really couldn’t help it. “Control it how?”

“That’s not my problem,” he waved it away.

“How can you say that sir? The reputation of this department is on your very capable shoulders and you need to help me out if people out there are besmirching it.” She sat back with a smile and started outlining her plan. “You could start by sending an email within APS. Your word would undoubtedly hold more weight than mine would.” Boosted by the look of discomfort spreading across his round face, she continued, “I’ll add you as my friend on the Facebook. You can start backtracking and encouraging people not to like it and talk to them into..”

“Uh, I don’t think that would be the best way to handle things.”

“Then what do you suggest?” she asked with innocent eagerness. She never could fool her brothers with it but Rao was another matter. His expression went completely blank as he stretched his neck like a turkey. She hid her smile.

“Uh, on second thought, I don’t think that would be necessary. I’m sure with time such nonsense will die its own death,” he said nodding repeatedly.

That meant he knew there was nothing he could do. There was nothing

anyone could do once stuff reached the internet.

“I think we can declare the situation officially out of control,” Shikha said glumly as they fortified themselves with Virgin Maries and Pinacoladas to go with their dinner at the Thai restaurant that was situated smack in the middle of their respective homes.

“1.5 lakh likes and over fifty thousand retweets,” Siya supplied the last numbers. “Seriously, was it really that good? I mean haven’t we read more ribald and interesting ones before?”

“Yeah, but we’ve never kept track of the likes or retweets of such stuff, right?” Preeti shrugged. “People have lives to lead and this one will get its fifteen minutes of fame and die away just like the ones before and the ones after.” They clinked their glasses on that note. “Anyway, this whole thing has finally got Jai and me talking. Her name is Zara.”

“Oh Good God!” Siya and Shikha stared at their friend aghast. “I’m so sorry Reet. What are you going to do now?” Siya asked. “He’s a damn stupid dumbass if he chooses some other female over you.” Shikha looked totally pissed off.

Preeti shrugged and tried to smile. Shikha always had the ability to make her smile. “Thanks for the vote of confidence buddy and I’m not going to do anything for now. He says he hasn’t been unfaithful to me.”

“And you believe it?” Shikha asked doubtfully.

Preeti ran a finger over the rim of her glass. “I have been doing some thinking since last night. I realize I’m not completely blameless you know.” At her friends’ twin stares of disbelief, she asserted. “If he’s not a man to die for then I’m not a woman to die for either.”

“We don’t see you having an EMA,” Siya scowled. “Or even tempted to have one,” she added.

“I didn’t say we’re equally at fault. Just that I’m not completely blameless. I haven’t been neglecting myself but I haven’t made any efforts to be attractive to him either. Before I used to dress up for him but now I dress up for others while he gets the tracks and nighties.”

“Yeah, well, if that’s his complaint, I can only say that he is watching way too many Ekta Kapoor shows,” Shikha said dryly. “Home is where you can chill out for God’s sake, not deck up in designer wear and perch yourself on the couch!” Siya didn’t comment. She felt she had no right to since she herself had been one of those women who decked up to please their men until

recently. “And if you are talking about appearances,” Shikha continued, “Does *he* make that effort? Does *he* dress up in anything other than his PJs or shorts when he’s at home?”

Preeti conceded the point but couldn’t help verbalizing the rest of her thoughts out loud. “We were best friends before we became lovers. But now I hardly talk to him. I bounce off my thoughts and ideas with you guys instead of with him. I give him the cook and the housekeeper instead of lover and partner. That’s not the way it’s supposed to be, right? Maybe that’s why he got bored.”

“When is he ever there for you to talk to him? He expects you home before him but does he make an effort to spend time with you? Come early once in a while, plan an outing, something?” Shikha asked gently.

Poking holes in her friend’s marriage was most definitely not her intention but she couldn’t stand and let Preeti shoulder the blame of Jai’s infidelity. If a person wanted to break his vows then he will find 1001 reasons to do so. They were not reasons. They were excuses.

“I don’t understand why for every single thing that goes wrong in a relationship, a woman ends up taking the blame for it. You’re not sharing things with him, correct. Has he been sharing?”

“I don’t think he realized the amount of adjustments he would have to make when he told me to look for a job,” Preeti said, leaning her head back on the chair and closing her eyes.

“You know sometimes I think for all the lack of modernity, the previous generations had been better off,” Siya stabbed her fork to emphasis her point. “The roles had been clearly defined. Man, the bread winner and woman, the homemaker. Now we’re brought up with ideas of equality drilled into us from cradle. But our parents don’t tell us that the fate of that equality lies in the hands of our partners. We’re their equal only if *they* think we’re equal.”

Shikha started cutting her starter to pieces with more force than required. “Especially since most of those men’s mothers are housewives. They see their mom and expect their wife to be like their mom. But at the same time this equality thing pops into their messed up heads. So at the end of the day they want their wives to work *and* be the perfect homemakers.” She opened her mouth to add more but snapped it shut at the last second.

Preeti saw that and giggled. “Out with it Shik, I promise I won’t mind.”

“I don’t want to be accused of equating your husband to a dog.” When Siya looked confused, Shikha had no choice. “I was about to say *dhobi ka kutta na ghar ka na ghaat ka*.” Roughly and politely translated, neither here nor there.

“Now don’t you dare take out your tab Si,” Preeti warned. “I can’t take another post going viral.”

“What, you think I’m crazy? This one has traumatized me enough. I don’t even login to FB or Twitter anymore.” Siya shuddered.

“Any peep from Tapan, the toad?” Preeti shifted the topic to Siya.

“Yeah, he thinks I posted the list to take revenge against him.” The other two rolled their eyes. Men and their egos! “I said yes, the list was aimed at him. Most importantly the first three points.”

“Way to go girl!” Shikha clapped and Preeti blew an air kiss.

Shikha’s phone rang before the conversation could continue. “Hello?”

A slightly familiar ghostly whisper spoke. “You won’t get the man but you will die!”

The line went dead. Fury rolled through her. What the hell! That was the second time that day. She quickly pressed the callback button and just then Siya’s phone rang. She watched her friend’s face turn red and then white. And before she could ask her, Preeti’s phone rang and the next moment even she wore a similar expression.

“I got this call this morning too,” all three chorused at the same time.

“What’s happening here?” Shikha asked, frowning. Worry slowly replacing dismay.

“With the kind of creeps that are popping up these days, who knows whose chain we’ve yanked with that thing that we wrote,” Preeti looked equally perturbed.

“Oh come on!” Siya shook her head. “That’s just crazy. I mean things like that happen in the movies. Or maybe for some famous chicks. We’re three normal women.”

“Who posted a rather bold list of qualities that men should have if they want to come anywhere near us.” Preeti added.

“It could be a crank call but I don’t think any of us can afford to brush it off,” Shikha insisted. “Someone got our numbers and has called us twice. Said the same thing twice. It was the same thing, right? You won’t get the man but you’ll die or something like that?” The other two nodded. “So it *is* related to that post. The words are too similar to be a mere coincidence.” She scrolled back to check her caller list. “And he called from two different numbers.”

“If he got our numbers, he could get our addresses too.”

“But how did he get our numbers in the first place?”

“I don’t think we should think about the how. The fact is he got it and maybe he knows where we live too,” Shikha’s heart thudded with the first trace of fear.

“Jai comes in late and Siya lives alone,” Preeti voiced her fears. “The security in our apartments is not great but at least it’s there. But Shik, you live alone in that house.”

“Aren’t you two overreacting? Getting scared like kids telling ghost stories?” Siya asked.

“Question is can we afford to brush it off.” Shikha said in a low voice.

“What do we do now?”

All three looked at each other, their minds drawing a blank.

Chapter Seven

“Can your cop friend help?” Preeti asked after a few nail biting moments.

“Yeah, I guess I can ask him when I get back... Hey wait, he gave me his card yesterday and I saved his number.”

“Then call him.”

“Now?”

“Guys, maybe we should just wait? It could be nothing.” Siya said doubtfully.

“We can’t brush this incident as a coincidence, can we? It must be the same person. At least the cop will tell us what to do.” Preeti insisted.

Shikha tapped her phone before Reet finished talking. “Uh, Karthik, hi. This is Shikha. Your neighbor.”

“Don’t tell me you kicked someone again!” The background score accompanying his voice indicated that he had the company of several honking cars and bikes. Probably stuck in traffic, as was the Bangalore norm during weekends.

“No. Because I’m on the phone with the person I really want to kick,” came her sweet reply, making him laugh out loud.

“So what’s this about?”

“We, my friends and I have gotten a few crank calls since this morning. Some guy saying that we won’t get the man but we will die.”

Every trace of humor got wiped out of his tone. “Where are you right now?” he asked quietly.

She named the restaurant. “I know we’re probably panicking for no reason but they were from different numbers. Landline.”

“Give me the numbers from which you got the call,” he ordered in what she could only term as his cop voice. All three of them checked their phones. Shikha messaged them to his phone. “OK. Got it,” he said. “Keep your cellphones with you. I mean with you. Not in your handbags or cars or beside your beds. In your pockets. Always. Make sure they’re not discharged at any point of time. Put someone you absolutely trust in the speed dial.”

“Speed dial. OK.” Snatching a paper napkin she started jotting down his instructions.

“Did his voice sound familiar?” his question was clear. He must have moved

away from the traffic.

She repeated the question. Both Preeti and Siya shook their heads. “No. It was like a loud whisper. Sounded weird. Kind of raspy. And it was just one sentence. He didn’t even wait to hear our reply.”

“Any background noises that you can identify with?”

“No. As I said the call lasted barely for a few seconds.”

“Where do your friends live?” Switching the phone to the speaker mode, she gave him the area and apartment details. “Do they have families?”

“Siya’s parents live in Ahmedabad and Preeti is married, no kids and in-laws don’t live here.”

“Shikha, listen to me, I’m right now in the middle of something nasty. I probably won’t be home tonight or even tomorrow. But I will look into this, I promise you. And until we find out who did this and why, you three be careful, you hear me?”

“You’re supposed to tell me I’m a crazy coward for thinking of worst case scenarios,” she said nervously. Her gaze darted around the restaurant. They had chosen a corner table, away from the crowd and no one seemed to be paying any attention to them.

“I won’t say that. Not when it concerns your safety. Do not let anyone into your houses except family and the friends that you absolutely trust with your life. Don’t get in the car with anyone. If your car breaks down, lock yourself inside and call for help. Carry a pepper spray with you and do not take help from strangers. Keep the doors and windows of your house locked. If I’m not wrong, Siya’s apartment is fairly new. Tell her to inform the security to keep an eye out for strangers. Preeti should give instructions not to send anyone into her apartment unless they call ahead through the intercom. Not even a maintenance guy. Is that understood?”

“Yes, yes, we understand.”

“And you. When are your parents going to be back?”

“In about three weeks.”

He swore. “I saw the burglar alarm at your place the other day. Does it work?”

“It does.”

“Start using it. You hear me?”

“Yes. I promise I’ll use it.”

“Your glass windows have iron grill on the outside. So they should be safe. Slide the glass windows and curtains shut. Switch on all the lights in the hall and kitchen and also in other bedrooms that you’re not using. It would give an impression that there are more people in the house. Play some music. I’ll make sure a patrolling jeep makes a couple of rounds and I’ll be back as soon as I wrap this one up.” She could hear him inhale deeply. “It could be something or it could be nothing but don’t take the chance.”

“But you think it’s something, don’t you? That’s why you’re going all cop on me.”

A reluctant chuckle escaped him. “If I had been going all cop on you I would’ve told the three of you to spend the night at Preeti’s house. I just want you all to be careful. Preeti ji, your husband is in town, right?”

“Yes. Hi Karthik and uh, thanks for the safety tips.” Preeti got her first real smile of the day.

“How the hell did you know that you’re on speaker?” Shikha glared at the phone.

He made a noise that was somewhere between amusement and exasperation before saying, “Don’t make me go all cop on you by asking silly questions. Siya ji, do you have a car?”

“A bike.” Siya replied with a grin. “Hi Karthik. We’ve heard quite a lot about you.”

He laughed that deep, throaty laugh of his and Shikha was sure he was running his finger over his Bhagat Singh mustache. “I sure would be interested to know the kind of adjectives she used.” Preeti and Siya joined the laughter while Shikha poked out her tongue. “Don’t park your bike in the usual spot. Park it somewhere where it’s not clearly visible. Don’t walk in the basement. Take only well-lit paths. I’ll keep Shikha posted on the developments. You all take care, OK?” Both of them chorused their agreement. “Take my number from her.”

Fear subsided and appetite took the front seat as she started on the main course. “I’ll give them,” Shikha said over a mouthful of Pad Thai noodles.

“Keep yourself safe for me until I reach you Shikha Bose.” And the line went dead.

Temporarily reassured, they relaxed and the atmosphere lightened. Preeti and Siya exchanged looks as if deciding who should go first. Siya took the plunge. “I can’t believe you thought *that* guy was a drunk jerk! I could get drunk on his voice alone!”

Shikha glowered, then grinned. “You should see him with his scowl and in those old, tattered jeans and wrinkled shirt with bloodshot eyes and unshaven face. But yeah, he does clean-up pretty well,” she added. In fact, he was drool worthy in his cop uniform. And shorts and t-shirt. But she didn’t share that titbit with her friends.

“Is he good looking?” Siya probed mischievously, the crank call already delegated to the back of her mind. It was just probably some nutcase hacker. Ignore and he will stop, she concluded and brushed it off.

“He looks a little like that Tamil actor Surya. Only taller and more muscular.” Shikha rolled her eyes as Preeti started fanning herself and Siya pretended to swoon, almost falling face down in her fried rice. “Since Tapan, the toad, is no longer in the picture, you are welcome to try your luck with this guy,” she said, waving her fork as if granting permission, ignoring the green eyes monster poking holes in her from all directions.

It was Siya’s turn to scoff. “When that guy has the hots for you? Thanks but no thanks.” When Shikha looked heavenward, she added, “You don’t need to be a psyche to know that Ms Bose!”

Preeti nodded in agreement. “Keep yourself safe for me until I reach you Shikha Bose said it all. Why are you not ready to even *consider* him?”

“Because I have zero interest in investing my emotional energy on something that’s not going to get me anything.”

“The broken engagements were not your fault.” Preeti said gently.

“I know that. Of course, I know that.” Shikha looked away. She hated talking about it, even if it was with her best friends. “I just mean that...look...the three of them had everything. Horoscopes matched, families liked each other, same financial status, same caste, same sect, same everything. If *they* didn’t work out...girls, come on, he is a South Indian Brahmin. His mother couldn’t accept his choice of profession. You think she would accept a girl from a Bengali family? If he is even interested, that is,” she added.

“You don’t eat non-veg na,” Siya pondered.

“Yeah but I’m an exception in my family and my brothers are still trying to convert me. It’s not just about the food. Look, firstly, I don’t know if he’s interested.”

“Oh he is.” Preeti said, brushing her long hair back in a smooth, elegant stroke.

“Second” Shikha continued as if Preeti hadn’t spoken. “I don’t want to be interested in him.”

“You may not want to but you *are*,” Siya winked, exchanging fist bumps with Preeti.

“Ha, ha, ha, very funny,” Shikha said, flapping her hands like wings. “But seriously, girls, be careful and mark your attendance in the WhatsApp group and don’t forget you pepper sprays.”

Frustration added a new dimension to hatred and fury. It made the eyes redder and the tick on the jaw was almost a permanent fixture. As was the pacing. Everything had been planned so meticulously. Shikha lived alone because her parents were visiting her brother and Siya too lived alone. Oh yeah, she had had a thing going with a guy but apparently she had broken off with him. APS gossip was pretty reliable if one paid attention to it. Poor guy was tried and discarded. Her apartment security was laughable. They hadn’t even installed the CCTV cameras which were a compulsory thing these days. Preeti. Now that had been difficult to think and plan because Preeti’s apartment complex was huge and guests had to sign and all that nonsense. But where was it written that she had to be killed in her home? Bottom line was she had to die. They all had to die. Unlike the previous girls, mere threatening or hurting will not do. These three were different. What they did hurt. The bitches will learn their lesson. Will know how much it hurt to read that trash of theirs. And they will pay with their lives.

Yet nothing worked out as per plan. Two nights wasted. Friday night and Saturday night. Shikha had some guests over. Lights had been on all over the house and music was heard. Not the loud blaring kind but more in tune with family gatherings. And the patrol vans had been an added hurdle. Siya’s apartment lights had been off and her bike was missing from its spot. Where did she go? Was she trying out someone else for size? That must be it. Knocking on Preeti’s door was anyway ruled out and that bitch didn’t come out of her apartment on Saturday. Dedicating the days and nights to teach them a lesson was regrettably not possible. There were responsibilities. Obligations. Family. Family of course came first. But this can’t go on. Something had to be done.

“PCOs?” Shikha stopped her run to stare at Karthik. “I didn’t know there were any of those anymore. I mean even my maid has a cellphone. Hell, even the guy who comes in to buy old newspapers has a cellphone.”

With a firm hand on her back, he got her running again. “Yeah. This one is not a traditional one. More like a small grocery shop. Apparently people sometimes come in to make calls. And no, no cameras. Two different areas,

two different shops, neither of which had any kind of security cameras.” Hearing her sigh in frustration, he asked, “Did you get any more calls?”

She shook her head. “My landline rang a few times but got disconnected when I picked up. Do you think someone was playing a prank? Straight answer please.”

“It’s a strong possibility.”

“Why do I hear a *but* in there somewhere?”

“I’ve learned not to ignore my gut feelings,” he said with a shrug.

“And your gut says this one is not a crank call.”

He gave a brief nod. “One, why the PCOs? Why not just a prepaid cellphone? Two, you said you guys don’t display any of your contact info in the social media so how did this guy get your number? He could be a hacker of course but again, as you said, you’re extra careful. You didn’t enter your phone number anywhere. How did he get it? Three, disguising implies you would recognize the voice if spoken normally. So it’s someone you might know.” He waited a heartbeat before asking, “The calls to your landline. Did the other two get them too?”

“I’ll ask.”

“How are they?”

“Fine. Siya spent her the last two nights and yesterday with her cousin who lives close by. Preeti has some issues going on in her personal life so pretty much stayed at home.” They stopped once they reached his gate. “Thanks for the patrol vans and uh, well, thanks for everything.”

Head tilted a little to the side, he studied her intently. “You don’t have to thank me for anything. I didn’t do it for you, I did it for myself. I never want to see Shikha Bose scared. Of anything. Or anyone.”

Shikha swallowed and forced herself to look away. “You said you were in the middle of something nasty. All wrapped up now?”

“Things don’t get wrapped up so fast, especially when the suspect list is a mile long.”

“Don’t you get frustrated by this whole system? The loopholes in the law, the delay in justice...I mean witnesses die or get sold out, evidence disappears, lawyers push for trials and retrials...”

“I can’t afford to get frustrated. My focus is on the criminal. In catching him and making sure he or she doesn’t do it again. I don’t look at the loopholes. I look at the cases that are solved *despite* the loopholes. Cases that slide

through them are remembered but people read the solved ones, say good riddance and forget. You know how many terrorist attacks have happened in this country but you don't know how many we've managed to stop because those things never come out." He gestured towards the road and changed the topic. "Want to have breakfast? We can go to that new place a couple of streets away."

Not wanting to come across as an admiring, besotted fool, she forced her gaze away from him. It was just breakfast, she told herself. "Let me dunk myself in the shower and we'll meet in fifteen minutes?" He nodded. "Oh after that dinner, it's your turn to pay and I want masala dosa." She ran into the house with his laughter following her.

Preeti adjusted her hands-free to peek into her refrigerator. Never mind that someone out there probably wanted to out her and her friends. Never mind that her marriage was falling apart at seams. She still had to eat. And that meant she had to cook.

"Landline. Yeah, I've got a few of those too," she said to Shikha. "No one spoke though. Just disconnected the moment I picked it up. And Jai picked up a couple of those hang-up calls too."

"Speaking of whom, how is that situation Reet?"

Preeti grabbed a few veggies and threw them on the counter before straightening and rubbing her forehead. "No change. My head is pounding. I think it all finally hit me last night and I cried until I was sick. Jai knocked on my door a few times but I didn't open. Last thing I wanted at that moment was to hash out or play more blame games."

"Did you tell him about these threatening calls?"

"Yeah. This morning. He laughed it off," she shook her head and sighed. "Said it must be someone who must be as pissed off as he had been when he had read that fucking post. Quote, unquote."

"Well, that someone knows our cell numbers and now the landlines too. He should think about that," Shikha remarked drily. "Si is going to be at her cousin's through the weekend or what?"

"Nah. She just got back home," Preeti replied after checking the messages. "Marked her attendance in the group and updated her plans. Apparently her cousin was out to attend some friend's wedding. What's your situation with Karthik Iyer?"

Shikha made a sound at the back of her throat. "He's back from wherever he

had been the last couple of days, we went for our run, he made me run more than the usual,” she said, groaning and stretching. “Damn what I wouldn’t give for a massage.”

Preeti giggled. “I’m sure he’ll provide that too if you ask him.”

“And we had breakfast after that,” she continued, completely ignoring her friend’s not-so-subtle comment, making Preeti giggle some more. “He’s taking these calls pretty seriously Reet.”

“But bottom line is there is nothing much he can do unless whoever is calling talking leaves us some clues or gets caught in the act.”

“Yeah,” Shikha agreed glumly. “Chalo, you take care and keep me posted. I’ll talk to Si once my phone gets charged.”

“OK.” Preeti ended the call and sighed in relief as one of the boxes that she had pulled out of the fridge had the aata ready. “Thank you Shanti,” she murmured. Her maid did follow the instructions most of the time.

“So what’s your friend saying?”

Preeti darted a quick glance at Jai, who was leaning against the kitchen doorway before going back to chopping the vegetables. “She has been getting those blank calls to her landline too.”

“You three are driving each other crazy conjuring up all kinds of nonsense,” Jai’s voice was as derisive as the expression on his face.

“She’s neighbors with a DCP. Apparently even he doesn’t think threatening calls are funny. He is investigating.”

Jai waved it away. “Neighbor. Probably trying to impress and show off. You remind me of people coming out after watching Omen movie. Scared of their own shadows,” he said with a sarcastic snicker.

“At least he is not laughing at the thought that someone out there is threatening to kill me,” she replied in a deadpan face and tone. “I thought you had a call?” Jai glanced at the clock and swore softly before striding off towards the study.

“Yeah, everything is silent on this end.” Siya said stretching her feet on the couch. “No idea of the landline though because I was not there. Maybe whoever it was got tired of his own bullshit and gave up. You girls panicked for no reason.”

“Maybe. Both my phones have been creep-free since morning,” Shikha agreed with cautious optimism. “I have a breakfast meeting tomorrow with

the whole team regarding some budget cuts,” she gave the unpleasant news, effectively shoving the topic away for the time being.

“You better not be cutting my bonus,” Siya warned.

“If things don’t pick up soon, expect cuts everywhere my dear. Until the big boss man says Mogambo khush hua, everything is up in the air,” Shikha replied, referring to their CEO who was famous for his exacting, impossible standards.

“There goes my bonus then. Raam naam satya hain!” Both of them cackled. “How’s your hot hero?”

Grunting under her breath, she repeated the incidents she had updated to Preeti that afternoon before asking, “And your neighbor? Still silent I presume?”

“That reminds me, I went apartment hunting with my cousin yesterday. Found a couple that are almost next to APS. I think it’s time I moved out Shik,” she said quietly.

“I agree. Make a clean, complete break off. Si, you deserve someone much better.”

“Shik, it’s not that easy for me. I can’t just let go and turn the tap off my feelings like that. Every day I wake up, my first thought is about him. I keep thinking if I had been patient maybe...”

“Si,” Shikha sighed Siya’s name. Siya was the softest among the three. She had a mushy heart and always looked for the best in others. “You won’t be moving out of the city. Just out of the immediate vicinity. And it’s not enough if only one of you wants the relationship, right? If distance helps and he sees the light, he knows how to contact you. I’ll see if I can get out of the work a little early tomorrow and we’ll go, check out those apartments and finalize one. OK?”

“What will I tell mom and dad?”

“Just say the new one is walking distance to APS. It would save you time and fuel. It would be the truth, wouldn’t it?” That was another common thing that bound the three of them. They never liked to lie to the near and dear. Evade the truth, yes. Outright lie, no.

Siya inhaled deeply and surrendered. “OK, fine. Done. We’ll go and finalize tomorrow.”

“Goodnight buds.”

“Goodnight buds.” Siya cut the call and saw that there was a message. She

clicked it open. It was from Tapan.

I thought about what you said the other day. You are right. I've been an ass and I'm sorry. But if you give me another chance I promise, I'll make it up to you. I want to talk to you Siya. Really talk. Please.

She blinked and sat up in shock. Tapan was apologizing? He wanted to talk? Her doorbell rang before she could process the information. She stared at the door in disbelief. He wasn't even giving her time to think before he came knocking! Wiping her suddenly damp palms, she inhaled deeply and quickly ran her hand through her hair, wishing she had taken time to wash it. Just as quickly she pushed away that thought. He should like her for who and what she was. Not just because she looked beautiful or dressed in a certain way. Inhaling deeply she opened the door.

Chapter Eight

Killing had been overwhelming. It had not been easy. It had been tough and tiring. And draining. Even a little bit scary. But the wild rush of joy, the sense of achievement had been ecstatic. It made everything worthwhile. Most importantly, it brought back the sleep that had remained elusive until then. Deep, dreamless sleep. Now the eyes in the mirror were clear and bright. Mind was fresh. Time to get ready and go to work. APS would probably be buzzing with the news. The thought brought a frightened frown. Would anyone know? No, of course not. How would anyone know? There were no clues left behind. Everything that was used has been brought back. The frown cleared. Killing Siya had been necessary. There hadn't been any choice. Eyes closed to relive every moment of the previous night. The shock in the bitch's eyes, the crunching sound as the rod connected with her head, the flailing of legs as the rope tightened around her neck. The knife was just to make sure. But it was the one that gave the most thrill. The sensation of the sharp blade digging into the body, messing with the organs. There had been no movement though. Siya hadn't felt the pain. The rope had done the job. The next one would have to be planned better. Oh this was so much better than scaring those school girls off or threatening the mean bitches in college. This one took away a little of the hatred. It worked and was way more powerful. Yes. Power. That was what had been missing before. Not anymore though. Not anymore. One down, two to go. One down, two to go. Feet tapped in sync with the lyrical words as fingers grabbed and pulled a light brown shirt from the hanger. One down, two to go-o-o. One down, two to go-o-o.

Monday morning Shikha was humming to herself as she entered the lift and pressed the button that would take her to her floor at APS. She had to accept it. Her mornings were definitely better these days. Uninterrupted sleep, well, reasonably uninterrupted. The lights and music were still on, although on low key. But she had worked her way around it. She kept one room dark and used it for sleeping. Since she was not blaring her speakers with rock band, the music didn't bother her. She, in fact, liked it. Found it soothing and relaxing. And last but most definitely not the least, her early morning exercise regime. That morning her phone alarm had pinged at its usual time and as usual she had snoozed it. But the next moment it had started ringing. Eyes still closed, she muttered a sleepy, "lo."

"Time for our run Shikha Bose. Move it," came the voice from the other end.

She had blinked and sat up. “W-what?”

“I plan to run a couple of extra kilometers today and you’re coming with me. Be ready in five.”

“Goddammit Karthik!”

“Good morning to you too,” he had laughed. He had actually laughed at her curse before ending the call.

And she had been out of her gate in six minutes. Not bad at all considering she had answered the nature call, brushed her teeth, changed her t-shirt and got on her socks and shoes. They did run those extra kilometers too. But she could tell he looked tired and frustrated about something. That nasty business he’d mentioned was probably still on. She didn’t press for details and he didn’t offer them. Her silent companionship must have worked because by the time they stopped for some coffee in one of those roadside stalls, he had been back to his usual self. Which was a combination of a hero and a jerk.

She had felt wide awake and quite refreshed as she got ready in one of her most favorite work outfits. Cream colored trousers with a black full hands shirt. The cuffs when rolled up once had the same cream color on the inside as her trousers and so did the inside of her collar. A tan colored thin belt around her waist and a black strapped wrist watch. Oh and thick gold earring loops. She sighed in satisfaction as she stepped into the foyer that led to the conference room. She was the first one. She did like being the first. Getting a jump start on the rest of the lazybones, she thought with a grin. As she walked through the foyer, she crossed paths with Patel.

“Hi Patel, howz it going?” she asked with a grin.

“Uh, what, yeah, fine, OK,” he mumbled distractedly before ducking into the elevator, his fingers busy on his tab. Her grin turned into a chuckle when she remembered Patel’s comment to Reet asking her how to jack off. He did take geekiness to new levels.

There was another good news that day. She had come across quite a few of her colleagues on her way to the elevators and even in the carpark area. None had mentioned or even hinted at the damn post. Maybe the craziness was dying down and people have finally moved on to something new, Shikha thought, silently crossing her fingers. No nasty calls to her phone and no snide comments to her face. So far, so good. The budget meeting took longer than usual and everyone including the CEO was glad when it finally ended. He was not happy but neither was he pissed off enough to slash off their paychecks in half. But no more new recruitments unless the performance and profit graphs picked up in the next couple of months. HR was so not going to

be happy rescheduling and cancelling the campus interviews, Shikha thought with a grimace, as she went back to her seat.

And that reminded her that she and Siya were going to go apartment hunting that evening. Frowning, she took out her phone. After having said her hello in their group, she had put it in the silent mode and gone to the meeting. The hello was a signal that she was alive and kicking. Preeti had put on a raised hand emoticon marking her attendance a little after that but so far no Siya. Frown deepening, she called her number. It rang for about six times before going to the voicemail. Shaking away her uneasiness, she left a message.

“Si, where are you? Call me at the first chance you get.”

Her inbox popped up with a new message regarding an upcoming investors’ meet and before she knew it was lunch time and still no word from Siya. But there was a message in the group from Preeti asking where Siya has disappeared. Biting her lip, she made her way to the HR department. Siya’s seat was empty and her manager had been trying to reach her since morning. Heart thudding loudly in her ears, she called Preeti.

“Reet, Siya didn’t turn up to work.”

Preeti sounded equally perturbed. “I tried both the mobile and landline numbers Shik. She’s not answering. Hope she didn’t have an accident or something on the way to work.”

“Or...” Both of them became silent as neither wanted to voice their increasing terror.

“OK, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Best case scenario is she lost her phone and is probably stuck in traffic somewhere or bike gave a problem. Worst case scenario is she had some accident and is in a hospital.” Preeti said, making her way to the elevators that would take her to the canteen. “I’ll meet you at the canteen.”

“I’m coming there. I think I’ll call Karthik. He might be able to help us.” She ended Preeti’s call and speed dialed Karthik’s number. “Hey, sorry to disturb you.”

“I could use a break,” came his reply.

“Listen, it’s probably nothing but we’re not able to contact Siya. She hasn’t come to work, not picking up her phone...maybe she was in an accident or something. How do we check the hospitals and stuff? What do we do?”

“Where are you now?”

He had that cop voice on. Shikha ruefully wondered if they had some kind of special training for that too. “At work.”

“Preeti?”

“At work,” she repeated.

“I’ll check with the traffic police. Message me her complete address and I’ll have someone check her apartment. Stay put until you hear from me. Don’t go anywhere alone. Either of you. Is that understood?”

“Yes.” Her throat worked as she swallowed. “Karthik, she would be fine, right?”

“I’ll let you know. Take care of yourself for me.” Karthik didn’t take time to think after talking to Shikha. Even as a new recruit in the police department, he’d learnt not to discount his gut and it was screaming at him that Shikha was not overreacting. She was not the type to panic over nothing either. He swiped his finger on his phone. “Salim, I’m sending you one address. It comes under your jurisdiction. I want you to go and check it out but don’t go alone.”

Salim knew Karthik long enough to not waste time asking questions. “Want me to break in?”

“If the door is not answered, then yes. Call me when you know something.”

A quick check at his phone, he saw Shikha had sent him Siya’s bike name, model and registration number. He passed them on to the traffic section and asked them to let him know of any accidents involving the two wheeler and the woman. Forty five minutes after calling Salim, his friend called back. “Boss, do you know this woman?”

Karthik strode towards the police jeep. “Is she alive?”

“No. Karthik, it’s bad. Do you know this woman?” he repeated his question.

Scribbling the area name to the driver, he switched on the sirens. “I’ve never met her but I’ve spoken to her.” He slammed his fist on the dashboard. “Dammit! I told her to be careful. She is Shikha’s friend.” Tyres screeched and horns blared as the Scorpio cut through the traffic.

“It’s been more than twelve hours is my guess.”

“COD?”

“Tough to say. I’ve called it in. Does she have any family?”

“Her parents live in Ahmedabad. She has a cousin somewhere in Bangalore but right now is out of town attending some wedding.”

“We would need your Shikha to identify the body then,” Salim said quietly. “I’ll start talking to the neighbors. Ask them if they saw or heard anything.”

Karthik closed his eyes. *Dammit! Dammit! Dammit!* “I’ll be there in a few.”

Karthik and Salim remained silent as the medical personnel shifted the body into the waiting van. Siya had lived in a single bedroom apartment consisting of a small hall cum dining area, kitchen and a bedroom with attached bath. Nothing looked out of the place. Siya had one whole wall of her hall filled with photo frames. Siya with her parents, Siya with Shikha and Preeti on her birthday probably with the cake on the table and the three of them with those jaunty birthday caps on their heads and huge grins on their faces. Another one was probably during office Christmas party. They were wearing red dresses, with their glasses raised in a toast. Another one was of three of them in their nightwear, laughing into the camera, probably taken at Shikha’s house. He recognized the furniture.

Karthik and Salim looked at the markings in the hall. Her body had been laid sprawled. Karthik had Siya’s phone with him. He had read Shikha’s and Preeti’s messages in their group. The latest one said, *I’ve called Karthik and if I know him right, he’s going to have someone at your place asap. If you’re hurt Si, sit tight. Someone will be there to help you shortly.* There were a couple of missed calls from Siya’s mom and a couple from someone named Tapan. There was a message from Tapan too wanting to talk to her. *Dammit!*

“What are you thinking?” Karthik asked. He pushed his feelings out. Just as he ignored the odor. Lots of people knew that dead bodies smelled bad. But he knew from experience that the smell varied depending on the stage of decomposition. Freshly dead but intact they smelled of meat. Disrupted they smelled of bowel, stomach and bladder content. Burned they smelled the same but with a porky barbeque tang. Decomposed they smell sweetly cheesy in an overpoweringly sickly, vomit-inducing way. This one was a combination of disruption and decomposition. The first time he had witnessed a similar scene, he had puked his guts out. The medical examiner had rolled his eyes and hustled him away from the mortuary. Now he was a bloody expert in tuning out his feelings along with the odor and tuning his objectivity in.

“That whoever did this, it’s a first for him.” As usual, Salim’s thoughts ran similar to his own. They often completed each other’s sentences and always had each other’s backs. No matter what. That kind of trust in their profession was rare. And precious. And neither had to worry about treading on the other’s territory.

Karthik walked around the markings, seeing the body in his mind’s eye. “Head injury, knife wounds, strangulation. It’s as if he couldn’t decide what to do or how to kill. Hatred and rage drove him until that point but he probably didn’t realize the effort it requires to actually take a life. To kill the object of

his hatred.”

“Yup.” Salim pointed to the place beside the door. “He probably hit her on the head as soon as she closed the door behind her. Whoever it was, she knew him, opened the door for him. She fell unconscious probably or just down on her knees. He then dragged her here,” they followed the blood trail that stopped in the middle of the hall. “Tried strangling before going for the knife. Or used the knife first?”

“Or tried the knife first, then switched to strangling and switched back to knife.”

“Or strangled and later used the knife just to be sure. Or for the hell of it. We won’t know until we get the postmortem report. She had her nightie on so can’t say about sexual assault.”

If the bastard left any DNA on her, he was nailed. “It’s going to hit Shikha hard,” he muttered. “I have to tell her. She has to identify the body, notify Siya’s parents...dammit! I told them to be careful. I told them...”

“Them?” Salim frowned. “Is there something I should know? This is not a small thing. The crowd within this small apartment complex has been relatively easy to handle so far but once the reporters enter the field...”

“Yeah,” he could see the circus. “I’ll tell everything I know tonight. Come by my house once you’re done here. Meanwhile I’ll handle the body identification and see if I can put a rush on the postmortem.” He paused before adding, “This one might be the bastard’s first and if we don’t figure out who did this soon, it won’t be his last.”

“Dammit Karthik, that is so not reassuring. If I have to walk up to the Commissioner and tell him that we have some kind of serial killer in our hands...”

“A killer with specific targets. For now.” Because once a guy got the taste of it and started to enjoy it, he would find reasons to strike again and again until he is stopped or killed. And it didn’t help his fury that one of those specific targets was the one he loved. Both of them saw the news vans rolling down along the road. “You see to them. I’m out of here.” Cap in hand, Karthik strode towards the waiting jeep.

Shikha was ready to tear her hair out. Lunch time had come and gone. Neither she nor Preeti had been able to swallow a bite. The longer Karthik took in contacting her, the more she got agitated. Something was wrong. Definitely wrong. She stopped herself from calling him. If he was in the middle of

saving her friend, she didn't want to distract him. It was almost four thirty in the evening by the time he called.

"You still at work?" he asked without bothering with pleasantries.

"Yes," she swallowed. Now he had called and she didn't want to ask. Didn't want to know.

"I'm at the APS carpark. Beside your car. Can you and Preeti come down?"

She didn't waste time asking questions. "We'll see you there in five minutes."

Having discarded his cap, he had pulled on his black leather jacket over his uniform shirt. He was leaning against his Scorpio and straightened when Shikha burst into the basement and strode towards him the moment she spotted him. Her eyes were stark with fear as she studied his expression. He had on his cop face, an expressionless mask, but she went white.

"Tell me," she whispered in a choked voice.

He sighed and opened his arms. "I'm sorry Shikha."

She stumbled and fell into them on a choked gasp. She clutched his jacket tight. He felt her shaking and held her tighter. "She's dead, isn't she?" she said in a trembling whisper. "Si is dead," she repeated on a choked gasp. It wasn't a question. She knew.

Shikha had cried so much her eyes were swollen almost shut. Karthik simply held her tight through the storm of weeping in the basement carpark of APS. Then she had gained a bit of control until Preeti ran up to them and it had started all over again. Karthik, this time, had gently but firmly hustled them into his jeep and told the driver to take off from the premises. He didn't want to draw attention to the women. They sat in the back while he took the seat beside the driver, held on to each other and cried for their friend.

"W-we need to call her p-parents," Shikha's voice was thick as she fumbled for a tissue. Karthik extended the box that was in the jeep. She pulled out a few and blew her nose and wiped her face. Preeti grabbed the rest to do the same.

"Is her cousin back from the wedding?" Karthik asked in that quiet voice of his.

"I-I don't think so. I don't know. S-Siya said three days and we don't have her n-number."

"I need to call Jai," Preeti said, swiping the screen of her phone. "Hello Jai?"

“I’m in a meeting,” his reply was curt before he disconnected the call.

Gritting her teeth, she tapped the callback option. This time she didn’t give him a chance to say anything. “I just called to say that my friend Siya is dead. We’re on our way to Vydehi now. I don’t know when I’ll be home.”

“W-what? Preeti, wait!” But she didn’t wait. Just silenced her phone and threw it into her handbag. Her friend was dead. She had no business feeling bad that her husband had no time for her. Despite of everything that had gone wrong between them, she had wanted him to be with her. Wanted him to hug her and tell her that he was there, that everything would be alright.

“I have her parents’ number,” she said to Karthik. “Should we call them? What do we tell? How do we tell?” Tears rolled down her cheeks once again. “Si is their only child.”

Karthik could think of no way to sugarcoat what was to be done. He took a deep breath and turned to face Shikha. “We need someone to identify the body first.”

Karthik felt Shikha leaning against his back, arms wrapped around his waist relaxing. She was exhausted and probably dozing. He let her relax as he drove his bullet towards their homes. It was ten fifteen that night when Karthik finally picked her up from Preeti and Jai Singh’s apartment. Shikha had been with them since they got out of Vydehi Hospital. He had to give it to the two friends. After the initial moments of stunned silence, both had stiffened up their spines and agreed to identify the body. It hadn’t been easy. The image of the body locker being pulled open to reveal their friend would be the one staying with them for a very long time. But they had done it. They had gripped each other’s hands tight and made the positive identification. He knew the medical examiner and had requested him to show them just the face and had brought them out as soon as the deed was done. They had hugged each other and cried some more after coming out. Preeti had looked like she wanted to puke but controlled it while his Shikha was made of sterner stuff. Just as he had been debating where to take them, Preeti’s husband had come. Karthik introduced himself to him since neither Shikha nor Preeti thought to and requested him to take the women home and not let them out of his sight. His phone was ringing nonstop. Both Salim and the commissioner had been trying to reach him and he had to go. Promising Shikha that he would pick her up from Preeti’s house, he sent them both with Jai.

Now, almost six hours later, he was driving her back home, this time on his bike. He was tired and angry. Tired because this was not the only case he was handling and angry because he hadn’t been able to protect an innocent

woman. He had told Salim to give the two women some time. That the questions could wait until the next morning. They needed to come to terms with what happened. Process the information and accept the truth while he and Salim tried to figure out how to keep them safe *and* catch the killer.

“Did you eat anything?” he asked, stopping the bike beside a Kati roll joint.

She lifted her head from its resting place reluctantly and shook her head with bleary eyes. She had fallen asleep, he thought. “I just want to go home.”

After making sure, she wouldn’t topple from the bike, he went and got a couple of rolls for each of them. He gave two to her. “You need to take care of yourself for me Shikha Bose. Eat,” he ordered gently.

And she ate. She just didn’t have the energy to argue. Besides, she had skipped lunch too and breakfast had been a bowl of cornflakes. She needed the energy to stay on her feet and keep herself alive. “I left my car at APS,” she said as she bit into the spicy roll and felt the taste explode onto her tongue.

“It’s in a safe place. Let it be. You can collect it later. Did you talk to your parents?”

She shook her head. “I spoke to them last night. They’re on their way to Niagara Falls. First time they’ve gone to the US. I don’t want to spoil it for them unless absolutely necessary.”

“You need to have someone in the loop,” he said, polishing off his roll.

“I told my fauji dada. Not everything but...I told him about Si.” Grief once again threatened to overwhelm her.

“That’s what you call him? Fauji dada?” he quietly diverted the topic.

It worked. She exhaled and swallowed her food. Even managed a small smile. “Yeah. Ever since we were in school, joining the army had been his dream. His aim. He became my fauji dada from then on.”

“You want me to talk to him? Let him know that...”

She started shaking her head even before he could complete the sentence. “After...” she hesitated and then thought what the hell and plunged. “After my broken engagements, any mention of a man tends to make my family go on red alert.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Just how many are we talking about here?”

“Three. Go ahead and say it. I’ve heard it all,” she waved her hand.

“I’m waiting for you to complete the story,” he said offering her a small

mineral water bottle that he'd bought along with the rolls.

"I didn't have the fortune...or misfortune, depending on how you view it of falling in love with a guy. So parents saw a match and I gave my OK, got engaged and then realized he was a rich jackass. He looked down and talked down to me and a week after the engagement realized that I brought him bad luck because he lost two major contracts after we got engaged. He broke off. Second one had been fine until the day before the wedding when his ex-girlfriend turned up pregnant. Third one was weird. I felt off whenever I spoke to him then one day saw him with his boyfriend." She exhaled. "He was gay and didn't want his parents to know." Her shoulder lifted in a negligent shrug but her eyes couldn't hide the beating her trust had taken not once but three times. "I told my parents to give themselves a break and sent them to US for their wedding anniversary. It was a gift from all three of us. How did she die? I mean, what happened?"

If he was surprised by the abrupt change of topic, he didn't let on. Karthik hesitated. Reluctant to give her the gory details. "She was hit on the head. We won't know all the details until after the examiner gives us the report." He spoke the truth. Just not the whole truth. "Don't," he said, gently shaking her, forcing her to open her eyes. "Don't think about it."

"How can I not think about it?"

"Think about her. Her voice. Her laughter. Your friendship..."

"She never did take those calls seriously, you know? Thought such stuff happens in movies. She broke off with her boyfriend recently," she said abruptly. "Reet and I kept telling her that she was better off without him but she was pretty cut up about it. Kept hoping he would change. But after that damn post I think she gave up. He blamed her, said she was taking revenge on him..."

"What's his name?" his question cut through her ramblings.

"Tapan. Tapan Grewal." She frowned. "Wait, you think he could've done it?"

"I'll look into it," Karthik's tone was neutral. He would question him. An irate boyfriend, one with a wounded ego over that post and a murdered woman. That would make the guy number one on their suspect list but there has to be evidence to support it because truth has a way of going against the odds.

Shikha settled for a jerky nod and didn't say anything until he stopped his bike in front of her house. She got down and waited for him to remove his helmet. "Thank you. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't been there Karthik."

“You would’ve managed anyway. Go and pack whatever you need for the night. You’ll be staying at my house until we catch this guy.”

“What? No. I’m not moving in with you.”

“Alarm system is good but it won’t stop a determined killer. So until this is resolved, either you move into my house or I move into yours. Choose one.”

Chapter Nine

Jai closed the door behind Shikha and her cop friend. Karthik had been in civil clothes but he had his weapon tucked into his waistband. Legal or not, he wished he had one too. With a deep sigh, he rubbed his palm over his face. Damn! Talk about life turning upside down in the blink of an eye. Just the previous night he had mocked his wife for overreacting. When he thought about her curt message that she was going to see her dead friend, it was like he's been hit in the solar plexus. His glance fell on Preeti. She was sitting on the couch with her feet tucked in under her and head resting on her arm, staring into space, her gaze vacant. The ravages of grief had left her pale but she was dry-eyed. Like there were no more tears left in her. Someone out there was trying to kill her? Because of that stupid post? It was too bizarre to contemplate. Things like that happened in movies. Not in real life. Did they? Sure, the post had made him angry but as Preeti had rightly said, it was already forgotten. Not by everyone apparently.

He made way into the kitchen and heated up the food. The maid had cooked some bisibelabath that morning. He heated it in the microwave and transferred it into two bowls and carried them into the hall. He wasn't any hungrier than she was but they needed to eat. If what Karthik said was true... he shook his head, not wanting to contemplate the scenario. They would think and make decisions tomorrow morning. Not when she was in pieces, ravaged by grief.

"I'm not hungry," she said, looking at the bowls in his hands.

"You need the energy buddy. Eat at least a few spoons. Please." He kept his voice low and soothing and suppressed a relieved sigh when she took the bowl and started eating quietly. Reluctantly.

True that he'd never liked her friends but he wasn't a complete bastard. He knew she loved them to pieces and that had been one of his main gripes. He had been jealous of the time she gave to her friends. Siya and Shikha had taken the place that had once been exclusively his. She smiled with them, laughed with them, went out with them and shared her thoughts and secrets with them. It was as if once he became her husband, he was no longer her best friend. Yeah, right, you expected her to give you something that you yourself were not giving her. Time. But now she had lost one of her friends and she looked...broken. For her it was like losing a close family member. It would be a while before she recovered.

And while she recovered, he could use that time to rebuild their relationship.

He didn't know how they had lost touch with each other. No. He knew. He had not been ready to compromise on his work or the time he spent with his friends but expected her to do it for him. He had wanted her to work but work around his schedule so that his life remained unchanged. Undisturbed. He left her alone to balance both her professional and personal lives and on the occasions when her professional life took precedence, he resented it. And her. The innocent flirting at work with Zara had started to seem more important. Or maybe it had not been so innocent. Once he had started comparing everything Preeti did and said to Zara, who never nagged and always went out of her way to accommodate him, it had stopped being innocent. Preeti was his wife, for God's sake! She had the right and the freedom to nag him and push him, to demand his time. He had ignored her demands and pleas until she finally stopped. Until she gave up. And resented her some more because she gave up. And he knew what finally made her give up. It was the day his mom had asked about kids. His mom was a traditional woman who wouldn't understand a guy needing time. She would nag and hound him. So in his attempt to wheedle out of that, he had kept mum not realizing that she would start on the blame game.

He had loved Preeti since he was nineteen years old. How had he lost sight of that – of what they had together? Why had it taken the terror of realizing that a killer was behind Preeti and her friends for him to realize that there would no life for him without her? He wanted to make it up to her. But would she let him? For the past few days, ever since she'd asked about Zara, Preeti had pulled away from him. Did she really believe he had been unfaithful to her? He had tried to imagine how he would feel if she had flirted with one of her colleagues. If she went out on not-so-professional lunches. The food he'd been trying to swallow stuck in his throat.

"You didn't have to leave your work. I would've managed," she said in a voice that had turned raspy from all the crying.

"I wanted to be with you. I'm sorry I snapped the first time you called. I'm sorry."

"For what?" she asked, making her way into the kitchen to deposit her half-eaten bowl.

"For everything. For not being responsible. For not supporting you. I love you Preeti and I can't live without you." He wanted to hold her. As if sensing that, she took a step back.

"What about your girlfriend?" She couldn't even dredge up her anger or pain as she asked the question. She was numb.

"I know you don't believe me but I swear I didn't...I was never..." He rubbed

his hands over his face. “I flirted a little but nothing more than that. Not ever. It-It didn’t feel right. I knew what I was doing was wrong but I let my ego get the better of me. But I never crossed any lines Ritu. Not once.”

It had been so long since he’d called her by that name. He was the only one who’d ever called her Ritu. She was Preet to her parents and Reet to Shikha and Siya. Only Shikha now. Her eyes teared up again at the thought of Siya. “I can’t think right now Jai. I’m just...I can’t think.”

“I just wanted you to know the truth.” He paused. “Can I sleep with you Ritu?”

“You want to have sex.” It was a tired statement.

“No.” He controlled his wince at her assumption that he would want to have sex at a time like this. “I mean sleep with you in my arms. In our bed. I want to hold you.”

Preeti couldn’t deny him that. Truth be told, she wanted to be held by him. She got her blanket from the guestroom and curled up into his waiting arms.

“How is Shikha?” Salim asked, the moment Karthik stepped into what could only be termed as their den at the police headquarters.

“As well as can be expected. APS is closed today in mourning so I dropped her off at Preeti’s place.”

“Is that wise? If everything we’ve discussed last night is true, the guy might take it as a chance to off both women in one shot.”

“Preeti’s husband has taken off from work. He’ll be their shadow until we make a proper plan. Did you talk to the big guy?” Karthik asked, perching on the edge of Salim’s table.

They referred to the commissioner as the big guy. Not because he was their boss. The guy was really big. He had a big face, broad body and a tummy that made it impossible for the man to see his big feet. He was also a man who had the ability to see the bigger picture and didn’t hesitate to bend the rules if it meant catching the criminal. That was what mattered to Karthik. Salim had come to Shikha’s house the previous night and Karthik had updated everything that he knew while Shikha slept in the next room. And since technically this one was Salim’s case, he left it to his friend to keep the big guy in the loop.

“Yup. Since the threat comes under speculation, he thinks we should keep it close the chest and treat it like a single incident murder case.”

“I got that when I read the news.” Karthik nodded. There had been no mention of anything other than the fact that the girl was an IT employee and police are investigating. “Have you tried calling Tapan Grewal?”

Salim got up from his seat with a grin. “I did one better. He’s inside,” he said, thumping towards the interrogation room. “Thought I’ll let him sweat it out a little.”

“Hope it worked.” Karthik fell into step beside his friend.

They had various methods to break a suspect. Depending on the evidence, the methods changed. Less evidence, they started out mild and tightened the screws figuratively as well as literally as the clues piled up. They entered the ten by four interrogation room where Tapan was restlessly pacing. Salim took a chair while Karthik opted to stand ominously in front of Tapan until the guy went and sat facing Salim.

“So, Mr Tapan Grewal, you were at the airport this morning. Going somewhere?”

“No. My plane had just landed. I was on my way to my apartment. What’s this about? What did I do?” Tapan’s bewildered gaze swung between both the cops.

“I don’t know. You tell us. What did you do?” Karthik asked almost casually.

Tapan tried to smile but it was awkward and nervous. “I jumped the signal a couple of times last week. Is that what this is about?”

“Do we look like traffic police to you?”

“Then...I’m sorry. What’s this about?”

“Do you know a girl named Siya Dutta?”

Tapan frowned. “Of course I know her. She is my girlfriend. Why?”

“You consider her your girlfriend even after she broke up with you. Possessive, huh?” Karthik said, circling around Tapan like an eagle ready to plunge and grab the snake by its neck.

“Well, yes, she did but...” He sighed. “Yes, I know Siya, we have been lovers for the better part of a year now, she lives in an apartment opposite to mine but she spent more time in my apartment than hers.” His wary gaze shifted to Salim as he reluctantly added. “Until she broke off things with me. You need to tell me what this is about. Why are you asking about Siya?”

“Where were you on Sunday night?” Salim counter questioned.

“I had been to Lucknow along with my sister and her family. They had come

from the US last week and my parents had planned a family gathering over the weekend. Sunday night. So I attended that and got back this morning.”

Salim darted a quick glance at Karthik. They would verify it of course but if what he said was true, then there was no way he would’ve killed Siya. Unless he flew in on Sunday evening, offed her and flew back to Lucknow again to attend the party. Again, that could be easily verified. “Why did she break off with you?” Karthik asked when Salim left the room to do just that.

Tapan exhaled in a soft grunt. “Because I was an ass. I was a selfish bastard and hurt her with my stupid behavior. But after she left, I-I missed her. I wanted her back in my life. I was with my family but everything felt wrong without her. I told my mom about her...I sent her messages begging her to... why are you asking me these questions? Please, could one of you explain?” He pleaded.

Karthik pulled up another chair and sat. Salim came back into the room a few minutes later and gave a subtle nod. “Siya was attacked on Sunday night at her home,” he told Tapan as gently as he could.

“Siya was attacked? Where is she now? Which hospital? Is she OK?” Tapan fired the questions as he shoved the chair back and got up.

Looking at him Karthik realized the news was going to hit him pretty hard. But he deserved to know. “I’m sorry Mr Grewal. Siya didn’t survive the attack.”

“Didn’t survive?” Shock flared in his eyes and he staggered back. “She-she’s dead?”

Salim nodded. “I’m sorry.”

Tapan stood stunned for a long moment, then slowly began to collapse until he was down on his knees. He buried his face in his hands and sobbed. Giving the broken man a few minutes of privacy, both of them walked out of the room.

“There goes our most probable suspect,” Salim muttered.

“Siya spoke to Shikha that night.” Karthik said, thinking aloud. “She was attacked the same night, probably minutes after the call. No sign of forced entry. She knew the killer. Felt secure enough to open the door to him despite the threatening calls. And the attack had been personal. Clumsy but characterized by rage and hatred. The killer knew her contact details.”

“And you’re surprised? Do you have a Facebook account?” Salim asked derisively. “Wow, what a way to start a day,” he tried to emulate an enthusiastic speaker. “Sitting in my balcony, watching sunrise with my new

coffee mug. Hey, hubby got me this new dress, how do you like it guys? OK, off to Forum mall for shopping and movies. I'm no longer part of a couple. Status changed to single." Karthik couldn't hold back his grin. "Their whole life stories and routines are posted out there. One just needs to know how and where to look. That's it."

"When are we going to get the postmortem report?"

"I've put a rush on it. Will let you know."

Shikha winced as her phone rang again. Checking the caller id she threw it aside with a groan. People from APS had been calling either one of them on and off all morning. They stopped answering after the first few but didn't have the luxury of silencing or shutting off their phones. What if Karthik or his friend tried to call? What if Siya's parents wanted to speak? Shikha had called them from Preeti's house. They were staying with Siya's cousin who had cut her trip short after getting the news. They were in shock, hardly able to form a coherent sentence, their thoughts and words circling around two questions. What happened and why did it happen. Her fauji dada had called in the morning to make sure she was fine and it had taken everything in her to act and speak normal when her parents had called.

"You slept last night?" Preeti asked, settling herself beside Shikha on the couch with her tea cup. Jai was working from home that day and was in the study but he was the one to open the door whenever the doorbell had rung. Once it had been the maid and second had been the carwash guy.

"Yeah, I didn't think I would. Had a killing headache by the time I reached home. Karthik wanted me to move in with him but I refused."

"He doesn't seem like a guy to take no for an answer. What did he do?"

"Oh, he took it alright." At Preeti's raised eyebrow look, Shikha admitted the rest of it. "He moved in with me instead." Both of them grinned a little. But their humor felt incomplete without their third partner. "He stretched out on the couch while I slept in the downstairs guest bedroom. I suggested he take up another room. He gave me that cop look. I was too tired to even feel the weirdness of it all so took a painkiller for the headache. I remember closing my eyes and the next thing I know it was morning and he was looming across the doorway prodding me to wake up." Shikha sipped the last of her tea before shifting the topic. "Things seem to be changing for you too."

Preeti's smile was rueful. "Yeah, guess a psycho killer wanting me dead tends to rearrange priorities real fast. I didn't expect to sleep the night either but.." she shrugged. "I needed to be held and he did that. Just wish the

circumstances were different. I mean it could easily have been me,” she bit her trembling lip and breathed deeply until she could get her voice working. “I think that scared him. You think we should’ve told her parents about the post?” she asked suddenly.

Shikha shook her head. “We don’t know it for sure, right? I mean, all said and done, we’re speculating. Have you gotten any calls?”

“Nothing after Saturday night. You?”

“Me neither.” Both fell silent. “They’re going to question Tapan today. Guess we’ll know more after that.”

Jai came out of the study and joined them after that. He had met Siya only a couple of times during the office party gatherings and once when both Shikha and Siya had come to their place for dinner. He didn’t know much about her, had never been interested in interacting with either woman besides a casual hello, how are you. But that evening he sat beside his wife and listened to them talk about Siya. They cried, laughed and played around with what-if scenarios. Siya’s murder was so unbelievable that only endlessly talking and rehashing could they gradually come to terms with it. With losing her. It was late in the evening when Karthik came to pick up Shikha.

“She can stay with us,” Jai offered immediately.

Shikha shook her head but the smile she gave Jai was genuine. “Thanks but I’ll be fine. You coming to work tomorrow?” she directed the question to Preeti who nodded her affirmation.

“Do you think that’s wise? I mean...won’t it be safer for them to stay at home?” Jai asked Karthik.

“Any more of those calls today?” Karthik asked.

“Nope,” Shikha answered.

Karthik thought for a few moments. “So far we don’t have any concrete proof that the calls and this murder are connected.”

“But you just said Tapan has been cleared,” Shikha said. “Who else would’ve..”

“I’m not saying the calls and the murder are not connected. I’m saying we don’t have proof.”

As if to counter his statement, Shikha’s phone rang. One look at the screen displaying another unfamiliar number had her gripping Karthik’s arm and switching on the speaker. “Hello?”

“One down, two to go-o-o-o. One down, two to go-o-o-o.” the same ghostly

whisper chanted in a singsong tone before the line went dead. Only to call Preeti's cell and landline and repeat the same thing.

Silence ensued. Karthik's jaw locked as his eyes turned cold with rage. Jai threw Preeti's phone in the general direction of the couch before pulling her tight into his arms. "That's it," he said. "I'm sending her away to her parents until all this blows over."

"Up to you of course but for how long?" Karthik asked quietly. "Whoever it is, knows where you live so even if you leave the city for a few days, it won't make a difference. He'll wait and strike once she is back. He knows all the personal details of these girls. And if she quits APS, he has her house address. Another new number, right?"

"Yeah." Shikha looked bewildered and pissed off. "But how? We don't give those details anywhere. Hell, I even have my birthday wrong on FB. No one bar family and close friends have them." Her startled gaze flew to Karthik. "It's someone at APS, isn't it? APS has our details. It's someone who can access that information."

His girl was sharp, he had to give her that. She connected the dots and came to the same conclusion that he and Salim had arrived at. "It could be anyone who has the authority or ability to crack into your personal files."

"You just covered the whole of APS," Shikha muttered. "All senior level managers have the authority. They could ask for the information directly from HR and no one would think it odd. And the rest are computer wizards and hackers. Give them enough time and they could probably hack into the CBI. And I'm so not hiding like some criminal." Shikha tossed her head, daring him.

"Neither am I." Preeti added. "Hiding is not going to make all this go away."

"True," Karthik agreed. "We'll have the postmortem report by tomorrow. We might get clues from that. The lab is still looking for prints. I'll talk to your CEO tomorrow, see if he will agree to let me look at the employee files. But until then you two need to be on your guard. Do not go alone with anyone, anywhere, no matter how important or urgent he says it is. Trust no one except each other as long as you are at work."

"I'll drop you and pick you up for however long required," Jai assured his wife. He would stand by his wife no matter what. He wouldn't let anything happen to her.

"Shikha?" Preeti asked.

"I'll take care of her," Karthik promised.

“You’re a cop. Not my bodyguard,” Shikha countered, poking him in the chest with one finger. It was like poking a steel plate, with no give beneath the skin.

“Any reason why I can’t be both?” he countered back.

“What if you had to go somewhere? Chase some leads or suspects or whatever.”

“I’ll handle it.”

“But...”

“I said, I’ll handle it,” he repeated, hustling her towards the stairs.

“Oh hello, we’re on the ninth floor.”

His reply was a shrug and, “We didn’t go for our run this morning.” They waved to a grinning Preeti and a faintly smiling Jai.

“Did you take the stairs while coming up?” she asked, pushing past him for a head start.

“I didn’t make you climb them this morning, did I?”

Frustration gnawed. Anger and hatred rose up again, taking away the relief. The sleep. Where was she? Where was the bitch? The whole evening had been wasted lying in wait for her near her house. Her parents were not in town and she had no other relatives. So where did she go? Did she have a boyfriend like the dead bitch? Nah. Men always looked at her, especially when she was dressed up all feminine and girly in those skirts or saris. But with three broken engagements behind her, who would approach her? She was most likely at Preeti’s house. Yes. That made sense. Shadows faded and eyes once again glittered in delight at the thought of the two bitches crying over their friend’s mutilated body. And they had to know who did it too. They had to know it was now their turn.

One down, two to go-o-o, the humming continued along with the foot tapping.

Experience did make a difference. First time it had been tough to decide what to do, how to go about it. Now things were clear in the mind. Crystal clear. Picture perfect. The sharp carving knife glinted in the streetlight. Just thinking about how it would feel to dig it in her, twisting it in her, watching the pain and horror on the bitch’s face as she realizes that she was paying for her sins... Goosebumps rose across the flesh in anticipation. But where was she? Why wasn’t she home yet? There was no time to waste. There were responsibilities waiting. Family came first. Family always came first.

Thoughts halted at the sound of an approaching bike. It went past the car and stopped in front of Shikha's house. Aah, there she was. Wait! Who is the guy? Why is he going into her house with her? A police jeep stopped right behind the bike and a couple of cops got down and saluted the guy before taking up positions discreetly near the house. No. No. No. Fists filled with frustration banged on the steering wheel. No one can protect the two. No one. They would have to die. Just like Siya. They would have to die.

Chapter Ten

Shikha was the first one to wake up on Wednesday morning. Her glance fell on Karthik who was asleep on the rolled up bed in the hall. She could call out his name or shake him awake, she supposed. But there was no fun in that. What was fun was tip-toing into the kitchen to fetch a steel plate and spoon and banging them together near his face. He woke up alright. But she didn't get a chance to relish on his startled exclamation for more than a fraction of a second. That was all it took for him to topple her and pin her to the ground. Both her hands imprisoned in one of his and his torso holding her immobile. Then her identity registered.

"That was a damn stupid thing to do Shikha Bose," he gritted, releasing her just enough to allow her to breathe.

"Do you react the same way to whoever dares to wake you up?" She was breathless and startled but not scared. She knew he would rather cut off his arm than hurt her. Or rather, the cop in him would cut off his hand than hurt her.

"No. I reserve it for women stupid enough to startle me when I'm trying to protect them from a psycho maniac."

Some of the light in her eyes dimmed and flickered on the brink of extinguishing, making him instantly regret reminding her of that. But this was his Shikha. A woman with more guts than some of the cops he'd met. She stiffened her spine and her chin rose. "Can we not talk about that?"

"Sure," he readily agreed, making no attempt to let her go.

They were both breathing hard, with her looking up at him and him looking down at her, their noses only inches apart. Contrary to his big, tough body, his eyelashes were long, making her wonder if they touched his cheeks when he closed his eyes. Cursing herself inwardly, she forced herself to look away from the deep, dark pools of his eyes. They were sucking her in and she had no intention of getting sucked into anything or anyone. He was a cop. A good cop. And her neighbor who was just being kind and helping her in a tense situation. Nothing more. Nothing less. They were two very different people whose lifestyles didn't match. Still, for a dizzying moment she thought of how life with him would be like. She enjoyed being with him even when he annoyed the hell out of her. He challenged her, just by being himself. She was hurt and grieving over the loss of her friend but she could feel life coursing through her veins in a way it hadn't done ever before. Had he done that or was it the prospect of the looming danger that was sending her hormones

haywire?

“What are you thinking Shikha Bose?” he asked even though could read her thoughts on her face. Well, maybe not all but he could decipher the general direction.

“Am I under arrest?”

He grinned. “Tempting thought but no.” With that he slowly released her and got to his feet, extending his hand to her. She took it and pulled herself up.

“I don’t want to run today,” Shikha stated with her arms folded in a gesture of resolute stubbornness. “It took you less than a second to have me helpless under you. I want you to teach me how to defend myself.”

“You did alright with those thugs a few days back,” he said softly.

“Still...” she shook her head. “So will you? Teach me that is.”

“Have you had any formal self-defense training before?”

“Nothing formal but dada taught me some stuff after that Nirbhaya case.”

Karthik’s nod was brief. “Rape prevention mechanisms. Your fauji dada?” She nodded. “OK. Any in-depth training will take time. You can’t just get it in a day or two but I’ll teach you a few things. You’re in good shape already. That helps.”

“You don’t think I’m average?” the question popped out of her mouth. “That’s how most people describe me. Average height, average build, average looking...”

Most people or one of the three idiots, he thought but didn’t ask. Instead he answered her question. “There is nothing average about you. Now, are we going to start this thing or stand here discussing your sexiness all day?”

You think I’m sexy? The question hovered on the tip of her tongue but she bit back. Quite literally. “You take the bathroom downstairs and I’ll take the one upstairs.”

When she came back downstairs after freshening up and changing from her Pjs into a pair of shorts and t-shirt, she found the hall’s furniture pushed to the walls and the center occupied by a three inch thick mat that her elder brother had bought for their father in his last trip from abroad. It was foldable and made a good base for yoga. Karthik, in his sleeveless white vest and tracks was on it, already doing push-ups.

“That isn’t thick enough,” she pronounced even as her greedy eyes absorbed the bulging, flexing muscles of his arms.

“It’s thick enough. I’m not going to be dropping you on your head,” he said pulling himself to a vertical position with the ease of a ballet dancer.

“It’s my butt I’m worried about,” she muttered, toeing off her slippers.

“I promise to take good care of that too,” he winked.

He was as good as his word. The workout didn’t involve getting tossed around or twisted into a pretzel. “First, don’t try to take anyone down. You aren’t good enough. The best you can hope to do is get away, so that’s what you need to focus on. You have the advantage of surprise on your side because men like this bastard don’t expect a woman to fight back and you are small...”

“I’m not. You just said I’m not average,” she glared. “I’m most definitely not...”

He cast his eyes towards the ceiling. “You’re smaller than most men,” he amended.

“But I’m...” she thought for a moment. “I’m sinewy.”

“Seri.” OK. He laughed. “Where, I don’t know, but I’ll take your word for it. As I was saying,” he continued when she got ready to argue further. “He probably expects you to cry and plead for your life.”

“And you’re going to teach me how to make him cry and beg for his life.”

He moved until he was standing in front of her, his eyes direct as they met hers. “Always remember Shikha Bose. Try to escape. If you feel that you can’t, then fight.” She nodded. “And no matter what you do, don’t give up. Never give up. You give up and you lose before you start.”

She lifted her head proudly. “It’s not in me to give up Iyer.”

“Good. Let’s get started.”

Courtesy of her brothers, she already knew some of the basic stuff. Karthik refreshed her on how to break the bold of someone who grabbed you from the front – bring your arms up hard and fast inside the assailant’s. A quick, stiff-arm jab of the palm up and into someone’s nose, if done hard enough would cause enough pain to put him down on his knees. So would slapping cupped palms over his ears, a move designated to rupture the ear drums. A jab of stiffened fingers into the eyes or throat was disabling. He showed her how to grab the throat for crushing the trachea. Even if she couldn’t manage crushing power, the blow done properly would disable the opponent. They moved around on the mat, into different positions and scenarios. By necessity, the drill was close contact. Shikha forced herself to ignore the tingling sensations generated by having his tall, hard-muscled body against hers, his arms

wrapped around her in various holds as he instructed her on how to break those holds. They worked up a sweat and her entire body felt sensitized after the workout with him. His forearms had brushed her breasts a few times, his hands had been on her legs, hips. His body had slid against hers, and when they grappled, one of his legs had been between hers. He didn't touch or behave in any inappropriate way. No all the inappropriateness was confined in her mind. Karthik Iyer was way, way out of her league and for her own sake she should pay attention to that fact. She was already risking more than she could afford to lose.

"Enough," she moved away from him, distancing herself emotionally as well as physically. "Let's continue this tomorrow. I need to get to work." And weather be damned, have a cold shower.

He nodded and stepped back, giving her the space that she seemed to so desperately need. "One of my guys is right outside so I'll go and get ready. We'll leave together."

"Bike ride." She grimaced.

"You don't like?"

"What's not to like?" her eyes turned dreamy. "Dust, smoke, not to mention inability to wear skirts or saris, sitting on that narrow seat with no room to move for an indeterminate amount of time in the rush hour traffic.." she clapped her hands. "Oh, I can't wait DCP saab!"

Karthik ambled towards her, eyes alight with laughter, his forefinger running over his mustache. "So you're saying you didn't like riding with me the other night? Was that why you seemed put out last night when I came in the Scorpio?" He didn't wait for her answer. Instead, cupped her cheek. He had touched her before. Of course he had. She had hugged him while crying for Siya's loss, hugged him from behind while riding his bike, not to mention the morning's training. But this small, simple gesture caught her off-guard. It seemed...intimate. It *felt* intimate. "Go and have your cold shower while I have mine. You're not the only one, you know." He winked, turned and left before his statement completely registered her befuddled brain.

"Shikha back to work?" Salim asked when he saw his friend enter the den.

"Yes. Murder still on the news?" Shikha had been avoiding the TV and newspaper so he couldn't get a chance to catch up on the front.

"Yup. I'll need to give them the ME report ASAP. Speculations and discussions are going on as to whether the victim was raped or not."

Karthik swore. It was nothing new but since he knew the victim... “Has the body been released to the family?”

“Yes. Her father and a couple of others collected it. Cremation is this evening I suppose. I’m not sure.”

Shikha will want to go there, he thought and quickly messaged her the information. She would coordinate and let him know and he would take her there. “So, what’s the report?”

“COD is strangulation. Knife wounds were postmortem, probably done with a carving knife or something similar. Head injury anti-mortem. No sperm. No sexual assault at all.”

“Just like we thought. So the knife wound was to make sure.” Though it was not a question, Salim nodded. “It was overkill. He needed to stab only once or twice to get his confirmation. All those lacerations on the chest...her abdomen was sliced open.”

“He did it once, liked it and kept doing it?”

“He has chosen his weapon to kill then.”

“You’re sure this is going to turn into a serial? I know we’ve seen weird things, nasty things but boss, killing over that funny post goes beyond that.”

“The bastard has made a song out of it Salim. One down, two to go. He called them both and taunted them with it. Another number. I sent our guys again. They turned up empty. Another PCO kind of a thing with no cameras of any kind. He is a warped guy so his logic would be warped too. All or few or one of the points have got him all twisted.” He ran a rough hand through his crewcut hair. “Any prints at the scene?”

Salim picked up another file. “One fingerprint on the inside doorknob. It’s partial but clear enough. We’re running it now. If the guy has had any priors, he’ll be in our system but otherwise...”

“Why didn’t he rape her and kill her? Why not prolong the torture?”

His thought process would probably shock others but Salim knew what he was asking. They had to think like a criminal to catch him. It was the best weapon. Criminals dehumanized their victims and he humanized the killers. Get into their head, get ahead of them and catch them. Or kill them. But something about this murder was bothering him. He couldn’t say what. It would come to him sooner or later but until then he wouldn’t stop thinking about it. And once it came to him, he got tunnel vision until he had the guy behind bars or on the mortuary slab, depending on the situation. He never deliberately executed a criminal no matter how much the bastard deserved

killing but if circumstances led to it, he didn't hesitate or regret. Salim told him more than once that he was a cross between Rottweiler and American Pitbull Terrier.

"Maybe he can't get it up. He's impotent. Did you read the last few points in that post? Some of them even I can't manage," he said looking pained at the admission. "And you're in love with one of the girls who made those points in the first place. Ya Khuda! Good luck Iyer!"

"Thanks," he said with a grin, thinking of her stubborn, sexy eyes on that slightly triangular face with that cropped hair and that determined tilt of her chin and those sinfully tempting lips.

He had fallen for her the day he saw her punching the guy who'd tried to manhandle her and he had no hope or desire to get up. Ever. She attacked life with guts. He had never met anyone so annoying, funny and sharp. As much as he enjoyed that morning, she drove him crazy. Touching her during her self-defense lessons – he had to have lost his mind to subject himself to such torture. But she delighted him with her grit he couldn't bring himself to stop. She was aware of him. Oh yeah, he had seen the way she looked at him while he was doing his pushups, seen the effort she made not to stare. She trusted him with her life. Not her heart, courtesy of the three idiots. Their different backgrounds weren't helping the matters either. But damned if he'd let anything happen to her even if that meant he had to become her shadow.

"Have you told her yet?"

"Vaayi moodu!" *Shut up!* Karthik looked peeved. "She just lost her friend. Her own life is in danger. Proposal is not high on the list of my priorities right now." He sighed. "Back to the case. It is someone who works in that company. Attack was too personal and he knew too much of their personal information."

"But this kind of insanity wouldn't go unnoticed, right? And it couldn't have developed overnight either. And we've read worse stuff than this post."

Another point clicked and fell into place. "This guy is socially incompetent. I doubt he would have things like FB account or Twitter account. And no, this kind of behavior can't go unnoticed. He hates women and that would've come out somewhere. Complaints lodged by the co-workers, warnings from management..."

"If he is not active in social media..."

Karthik slapped his palm flat on the table. "The post made it to the APS mailing list. That's how he got it, read it and knew the identities."

“And he flipped?” Salim asked doubtfully.

“Probably or maybe there has been some recent stressor. His colleagues and team members would not be comfortable working with him and it’s sure to have made into the employee records. I’ll talk to the CEO, see if we can get access to the employee personal information.”

“If he is from APS...”

Karthik nodded. “He is not going to be able to resist contacting his other two targets today. He would see them, talk to them, express his sympathy even.”

Shikha and Preeti stepped onto the elevator in the APS building. Their arrival at APS had coincided and it was marginally better to go in together. Not so lonely. Although their group would always feel incomplete without Siya. Hell, it was no longer a group. It was just Shikha and Preeti. Their eyes teared up every time they went on WhatsApp and saw their now silent group, the last message, the one she had sent to Siya informing her that Karthik was going to send someone to help her. Their world was altered in a single night while most people who worked at APS went about totally unaffected. Of course the people in HR were sad and shocked, but most people they met on their way had either not mentioned it at all or said something along the lines of, “Did you hear? Terrifying, isn’t it? A girl from HR I heard.”

Shikha found herself studying every man she saw at work that day, her first thought, was he the one? They all seemed so normal. She knew most people, liked some, disliked some. But couldn’t imagine anyone as a killer. Once that imagination led her nowhere, she changed the direction of her question. Whom would Siya allow into her house without hesitation? Siya being in HR, of course, knew most of the people working at APS. But open the door of her apartment? Maybe he came in like an unexpected guest. Maybe he said he needed her help with something or needed to schedule some interview for someone he knew. Which could be...just about anyone.

“Shikha, can I have a word with you?” It was Rao, her boss.

Shikha suppressed a sigh. She was the AGM finance but the position had more responsibility than power. She had left abruptly from work on Monday and didn’t take any work related calls after that. She hadn’t attended that evening meeting and hadn’t completed or submitted her reports. Now she would be getting an earful for her irresponsible behavior from her boss and she braced herself for that.

“I want to tell you how sorry I am about your friend Shikha. I’m sorry for your loss.”

His unexpected, sympathetic gentle tone took her aback. Tears rushed into her eyes but she held them back before they could roll down her cheeks. She swore she wouldn't cry that day. "Thank you," she said in a tremulous voice. "We were really close. And I-I'm sorry for leaving so abruptly the day before yesterday. When I got the call I-"

He shook his head, raised his hand, stalling her words. "I totally understand. Don't worry about it. You have a good team. They pitched in and got the reports ready. And as for the meeting, I'll email you the details." He hesitated. "Yesterday was the cremation?"

Shikha didn't want to think about cremation but it was impossible not to after getting Karthik's message. But her voice was steady as she replied, "They just released the body after the autopsy but I don't know when..."

"Of course, of course. Uh, if you want to take some time off..."

"Thank you sir. I'll go once I know when but until then I need to work or go mad thinking..."

"I understand. You take care, OK? And please convey my condolences to her family." He patted her fingers once and walked away.

She had known the day wouldn't be easy but hadn't imagined how tough it would be. Her whole team came to her seat to hug, console and offer condolences and Pallavi and a few others from HR including Ruhi had come to do the same. Siya's boss had tears rolling down her cheeks as she enveloped Shikha in a maternal hug. It made holding back her tears even more difficult. She wondered how Preeti was faring.

Preeti wasn't faring any better. In fact it was worse for her. Along with the condolences from the members of her department, she had clients to talk to, calls to attend, pacify the irate ones whose calls she hadn't answered the last couple of days and none of them had any idea as to why her throat felt raw or she was rushing to the restroom at the drop of a hat. She had totally lost it when Arnab Das, the guy who never lost a chance to turn every meeting into a confrontation, extended his sympathy and offered to handle a few of her calls. Her nose had taken a permanent shade of red and so did her eyes. Her husband was being caring, loving and protective. He had even woken up early to help her out in the kitchen before dropping her at APS and promising to pick her up by six in the evening. She wanted to share all that with Siya. Siya who never gave up on anyone. Siya, who told her time and again to be patient that things with Jai would settle down, not to quit. Preeti had been patient, things looked as if they were settling down and she had decided her marriage was worth fighting for. But there was no Siya to hug and cheer. No Siya to tell her I told you so.

“Preeti,” came the hesitant voice from somewhere near her left.

Preeti turned her head and blinked. “Ruhi. Hi.” Normally she would’ve smiled politely but it was beyond her that day. If that offended Ruhi, she can get lost and stay lost, she thought tiredly.

“You and Siya were close, weren’t you?”

Preeti nodded, hiding her surprise. Ruhi was offering her condolences in her own awkward way. “Yeah.”

“The office is not the same without her. You must be missing her a lot.” Preeti nodded again. After a couple of moments of awkward silence, Ruhi patted her on her shoulder and left. Office indeed was not the same without Siya, Preeti thought.

Without prior plan both of them showed up at lunch time at the canteen. Neither was particularly hungry but they had work to do so they had to eat. Shikha opted for a sandwich while Preeti got herself a salad. “I can’t believe we’re working with a murderer,” Preeti said, picking on her lettuce. “Slime balls, yeah. Jerks, oh yes. But killer,” She shook her head in disbelief.

“Tell me about it. Even my boss unbent enough to show concern.”

“So did Arnab. Remember the guy who dragged that damn post into the CEO meet?”

Shikha frowned. “Yeah, he hates your guts. Hates that you’re better than him.”

“He’s no angel but I don’t see him brave enough to kill anyone. And even if he is, why Siya? It should’ve been me.”

“Dammit, we don’t know so we have to assume the worst of everyone.” Shikha muttered. “The innocent until proven guilty doesn’t wash here. God! Let’s talk about something else. How is Jai?”

“So far, so good. At least he’s not blaming me for this mess. I wish we hadn’t written that stupid list in the first place. None of this would’ve happened...”

Anger replaced pain in Shikha’s eyes. “Don’t go down that route Reet. We did nothing wrong. It’s not our fault. It’s the killer’s.”

“You’re right. Let’s change the topic. I see your Karthik dropped you today.” She raised her eyebrow. “He is still sleeping on your couch?”

“He opted for a rolling bed last night. The couch and his height and width don’t match.” Both of them giggled slightly. “I made him teach me some self-defense stuff this morning. Arms are aching,” she said groaning and rotating her shoulders.

“Did he say his bye when he dropped you?” Preeti grinned at Shikha’s incomprehension. “Take care of yourself for me Shikha Bose.” Her grin widened at Shikha’s glare. “Oh come on now, it’s so cute, the way he says it. All possessive and caring rolled into one. So did he say his bye?”

“OK, fine, yeah, he said it. Happy now? He just...I don’t think he means anything by it.” Preeti’s soft laughter incensed her some more. She took it out on the sandwich by biting off a huge chunk of it. Yes, it felt good whenever he said that but she didn’t want it feel good.

“Uh, Umm, Preeti?” Both of them swirled their heads in unison to see Patel standing beside their table, his gangly frame shifting from one foot to another and his brown shirt looking as if he’d slept in it. “Hi Shikha.” He gave another awkward greeting.

“Hi Patel,” they greeted back, gesturing him to take the free chair.

“I just came to the office. My father hasn’t been well so... Uh, I just got to know about Siya. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks Patel. How is your father doing now?” Shikha asked. Poor kid. He looked decidedly uncomfortable but she could see the regret in his eyes. For all his genius IQ, his people skills were below zero. The three of them were among the very few at APS that existed in his comfort zone.

“My father, yeah, he’s fine. Still in the hospital but doctors say he’ll pull through. You guys take care. OK?” He patted their heads in a strange adult-like gesture and then he was gone.

Shikha and Preeti exchanged glances, their smiles wry. “Guess somethings never change.” Shikha said ruefully. “But I can confidently say that I’ve never been touched or hugged by so many people in one day before.”

“Yeah, me too.” Both their phones beeped with incoming messages at the same time. It was from Siya’s cousin. Any desire to eat evaporated. The cremation was going to take place in a couple of hours. They left the food and went to take the permission to leave.

They were crying. As if a few tears would hide the kind of disgusting bitches that they were! Expressing sympathy and concern hadn’t been easy but it had to be done. How else to see their pain? Their fear! The fear that they were going to be the next. They were going to meet the same fate. But there was no fear. Fury turned the eyes red as the rocking motion of the body continued. They were not afraid. What did they think? That it was all a joke? That they could write whatever they wanted and walkaway scot-free? One of them had

been close today. So close. The temptation to mete out justice had been overwhelming. But it was not the time or the place. Soon. Real soon. Fingers flexed, fisting and relaxing. This time the hands would be steady. They would not tremble. And this time the bitch would know and feel the knife going into her. She would know every strike and slash. Excitement crept along the spine at the thought of watching the life slowly drain out of those eyes. Soon. Real soon. One down, two to go-o-o. One down, two to go-o-o.

Chapter Eleven

“So, almost everyone you know had come to convey their condolences,” Karthik stated after hearing her brief up of the day. Shikha nodded. “Anyone unexpected? Or stayed longer than necessary? Any undue interest in what you’re going through..?”

“Not really. Everyone just seemed normal and concerned. Sympathy from my boss had been unexpected, so was Arnab from Preeti’s department. Oh Preeti said even Ruhi had come to convey her condolences. She is one prissy lady I tell you. Hell even Patel opened his mouth to actually form a few sentences. He is a geeky kid but ask him to talk and he pales.” She sighed and stated, “It’s weird that I’m eating a pizza.” She bit into the veg exotica pizza slice. “It’s weird that I’m even feeling hungry. Don’t you think so?” She asked with her mouth still full.

Karthik guzzled the coke from the bottle before extending it to her. “A few years back Salim and I were working a case. A group had killed a whole family. Husband, wife, three kids and elderly parents. The whole house had been awash in blood and gore. We sent the bodies for postmortem, did the initial round of investigation and you know what we did after that?” She shook her head, curious. “We went and had our lunch.” He paused, letting his statement sink in. “We had to catch the guys who had barely left behind any clues. We needed our minds and bodies to be alert. For that we need food. Starving doesn’t solve anything except make us weak and sloppy. You are eating. Doesn’t mean you are insensitive.”

Both Salim and Karthik had attended Siya’s cremation. So had a few others from APS including their CEO. And Shikha and Preeti of course. Salim had talked to Siya’s parents, assuring them that no stone would be left unturned until they catch the guy who did this. Karthik used the opportunity to talk to their CEO, Naresh Nadar, a man in his early fifties with sharp eyes and deceptively congenial expression. Predictably the man hadn’t been convinced of someone from APS being the killer and very politely told Karthik that if he wanted personal information files then he needed to get a warrant first. A time taking process especially with the current evidence. But there was no way around it so Karthik told Salim to get started on the process. He had spotted Tapan Grewal too. The guy had looked shattered, broken to pieces as he introduced himself to Siya’s parents before placing a huge bunch of roses of various colors beside the large framed photograph of Siya. As Harriet Beecher Stowe once said, *the bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone*. Tapan’s tears reminded him of that.

Jai had been there with Preeti and left the cremation grounds at the same time as Shikha and Karthik. Jai had his car while Karthik drove Shikha's car since he had come with Salim. They had to get her car home anyway so it worked all around. And here they were, back in Shikha's house after a long shower. Shikha took the upstairs bathroom while he used the one in the guestroom. He saw a couple of their neighbors shooting them disapproving looks as they entered her house together. No doubt her parents would get to know about the supposed tryst the minute their plane landed in Bangalore. Sooner if they called any of the neighbors for a friendly hello.

"You know, I never asked you before, what did you study before you became a cop?" Shikha leaned forward in her chair, propping her elbows on the table.

"B Com," came the bland reply. "Passed in third class," he added, polishing off his third pizza slice.

Shikha, about to pick up her second slice, stopped and stared before thrusting one leg up towards him. "Here, pull the other one."

He bit back his shout of laughter. "What? You don't believe me?" he asked. Her reply was a grunt as she resumed eating. "How did you know?" he asked curiously.

"Your English is too good for a guy who struggled to clear his B Com. Out with it."

His grin broke free. "Psychology M.A and B.L."

"You're a lawyer too?" her eyes bugged out.

"I didn't enroll in the bar."

"Knowledge is power. I get it. But psychology!"

He shrugged. "Nothing is easier than denouncing the evildoer."

"Nothing more difficult than understanding him," Shikha finished the Dostoyevsky quote, grinning at his look of surprise. "Which university?"

"PU."

"You studied in Chandigarh?" He nodded. "Salim too?" His eyebrows shot up so she shot a look heavenward and elaborated again. "You two talk in that silent code language. I saw it that night he came to your house and also today."

He grinned. "We used that code language while we had been together in the academy and mastered it during the first couple of postings. Same city. And you? You joined APS soon after your studies?"

“Yeah. Campus recruitment. Initially I was excited that I would be back in Bangalore until the daily traffic battle registered.” She ran a hand through her cropped hair. “Hence the haircut. Saves time.”

“I like it. It suits you.”

“I thought most south Indian men liked women with long hair.”

“I’m not most men.”

As if she didn’t know that, she thought with mild amusement. “So were you guys able to catch the guys after having the lunch?”

He gave a brief nod. “Not immediately but yes. We caught them. They were a pack.”

“A pack? Like in wolves?”

He nodded. “Three or more that kill in unison.” She sat, waiting for him to say more. He obliged. “As in nature, the group dynamic dictates the pack’s ability to hunt successfully. And as long as they’re successful, they will continue to hunt.”

“So they were a group of psychopaths?” He nodded again. “How are these packs stopped?”

“Not how. What.”

“OK. *What* stops this pack?”

“A stronger pack.”

“You, Salim and your team was the stronger pack in this case,” she concluded with satisfaction.

He grinned at the way she seemed to relish that bit of information. “Most women cringe and pale when it comes to the topic of murderers and psychopaths.”

“I’m not most women.” She tossed back his words with a grin.

His eyes travelled across her face. “No. You are most definitely not most women.”

“Uh, listen maybe you should go back to your place to sleep. You’ve put that goon squad in front of my house,” she said referring to two cops and a jeep parked under the tree right outside her house. He gave her that look. Diplomacy wasn’t going to work, she decided. “Karthik, I look like hell and I feel like hell and I have to make sure I don’t look like this when I go to work tomorrow,” she gestured to her face, faintly red eyes with dark circles under them and withered face. She opened the refrigerator door and peeked inside.

“I need to relax and do some magic wonders.”

“Sticking your head in the fridge relaxes you?” Leaning back in his chair, he regarded her interestedly.

She pulled out a cucumber and threw it at him. He neatly ducked. “Cucumber slices. On my eyes. And a face pack on my face.” She deliberately spaced each word and uttered them in a low voice. After all it was tough to shout while gritting her teeth.

“Don’t let me keep you.”

“Fine,” she muttered and flounced off only to stride back to grab her vegetable.

A few minutes later, she was leaning back against the couch with her eyes closed, slices of the cooling cucumber over them and face a strange shade of green. But it was cold, moist and incredibly soothing to her sore eyes. The room was silent except for the faint whirring of the ceiling fan and the ruffle of papers as Karthik went through his paperwork in the big easy chair that her dad normally used. She tried not to think about how right it felt. How comfortable. She hadn’t known him for long. Barely two weeks. Why did she trust him to the extent that she was fine sleeping with her door unlocked while he slept just a room away? The L word tried to insert itself into her thoughts. She quickly pushed it away. No way. This...whatever *this* was, wouldn’t last forever. It shouldn’t. Because her self-esteem and her trust were not in a position to take another round of battering. And this time it looked like even her heart wouldn’t escape intact.

“I thought that thing was supposed to relax you,” he said abruptly, scattering her thoughts. He probably noticed her twisting and bunching the cushion.

“I am relaxed,” she muttered. Or trying to. And failing.

“Tomorrow I’m going to interrogate a guy. I’m thinking I could use your help.”

“My help?” She removed the round slice from one eye to stare at him in surprise.

“Yeah, one look at you like the way you do right now, he might just scream in terror and confess,” he said, looking as if he was seriously considering the idea.

She threw one of the couch cushions at him. It hit on the shoulder and bounced off. But in all seriousness, she couldn’t get mad at him. He made her feel better. Lightened her mood. And she honestly didn’t know what she would’ve done if he hadn’t been there today. He had stood like a wall

between her and the press who had come to Siya's cousin's house just before the cremation. There was something in his face and tone that made the most persistent of journalists retreat.

"You and your brothers, none of you look like each other," he observed the photo frames hanging on the wall.

"Yeah. Dada takes after my mom. Fauji dada looks a lot like my dadu and I look like my didima, uh, mother's mom. At least that's what my mom says. Personally I think I look like no one. Or maybe a little of everyone." He laughed softly. "You and your brother resemble each other?"

"Worse. We look like twins. Almost identical twins. He is younger than me by sixteen months."

She removed the slice on her eye again. "What if a bad guy mistakes him for you and attacks? Chefs don't carry guns."

"Naan thambi," Fondness and pride resonated in his voice. *My brother*. "He's got something better than a gun. A butcher knife." He grinned, gently placing the slice back on her eye. "And knows how to wield it too." He went back to his paperwork. Lightheaded and strangely content, she relaxed beside him.

Jai deposited the dishes in the sink and switched off the kitchen and hall lights before making his way to the bedroom. He had sent Preeti there a few minutes earlier stating he would be there soon. She looked exhausted and no matter how much of a brave front she put, it was obvious to him that Siya's death had shook her up big time. The cremation that afternoon hadn't helped her either. She hadn't cried. Just turned and hid her face in his chest when the pyre was lit. But he had felt her shudders. And he was glad that he was there to hold her. That it was *him* that she had turned to, even though Shikha had been standing beside her on the other side. Of course, it could also be because Shikha's cop friend had his arm firmly around her shoulders. The press had been there too, and some idiot had tipped them off about the three girls being best friends. They had been right outside, waiting to pounce. He hadn't wanted them within a mile of his wife and looked at Karthik who gave a brief nod. Jai wryly accepted that Karthik Iyer can be nicknamed as a bulldozer. Keeping one arm around Shikha's shoulders, he had simply ploughed through the reporters and the press. Taking his cue from him, Jai had done the same, looking neither left nor right, completely ignoring the questions and waded his way out with Preeti stuck to his right side like glue.

"Can't sleep?" he asked coming into the room to find her reclining on the bed with pillows stuffed behind her back, staring into space.

Preeti blinked and tried to smile. “Too wound up I guess. Hey, your parents. When are they scheduled to come? I totally forgot about that.”

Sighing he sat next to her, brushing away the soft tendrils of hair that had fallen over her forehead. “Don’t worry about it. I spoke to them last night and told them to postpone their trip for the time being. We’ll think about it once all this gets resolved.” He waited a heartbeat before asking, “You want sleep in my lap? You always say that relaxes you like nothing else does.”

She looked at him, sitting beside her on the bed, his hair ruffled from running his fingers through it, his shirt undone partway, his eyes black with an emotion that she hadn’t seen in a very long time. Love. Pure and bright. “I thought you had some work to catch up on,” she whispered.

He shrugged. “I’ll do it later or wake up early tomorrow and complete it.”

“Jai?”

“Hmmm?” he leaned forward to brush a soft kiss on her forehead.

“Stay with me,” she said softly but clearly. “Make love to me.”

Everything in him stilled. It was a sad state of their marriage that he didn’t even remember the last time she had said those words to him or he said those words to her. They had lost their way in their marriage and when they did meet, they fucked. Even those encounters had dwindled to nothing, thanks to his ego and his work. But he had decided to win her back, to rebuild their relationship and this was a huge step from her side. He wasn’t going to let it go. Wasn’t going to let *her* go. His Ritu may not love him anymore. She sure as hell didn’t trust him. And maybe all she needed now was the comforting presence of another human being. A way of celebrating life after seeing death. But he would take it. He would build something from it and show her that he would be with her and for her from now on.

Her tongue snaked out to wet her dry lips and encountered his. She could not stop herself from taking a small taste of the masculine spice she knew to be his alone. And in the next second, his mouth was devouring hers with carnal intensity. His hands were everywhere. Pushing down covers. Sliding her nightgown off her. Within seconds they were both gloriously naked and he had her wrapped up against him just as she had been craving. He kissed her neck, her ear, her eyelids, the quality of the kiss changing, gentling until they were barely touching. He covered her entire body with tiny kisses, tasting her in the most erogenous spots, making her writhe in need. He took her from one plateau of pleasure to another until starbursts exploded behind her eyelids. He made love to her for a long time, building her arousal to a fever pitch before sending them both over the edge in mutual ecstasy, his groans mingling with

her moans, filling the silence of their room. He collapsed on top of her, his head resting so his mouth was practically touching her left ear.

“I love you Ritu,” he said, his voice breathless and panting.

Preeti closed her eyes, a tiny smile playing on her lips. She felt his finger gently trace that smile, widening it. She remembered the way he had strode through the crowd after the cremation, one arm tight around her shoulders, shielding her from cameras and questions. Since Siya’s death he had been with her every second he could spare. He had hated the post but hadn’t blamed her for whatever happened after that. *She* had blamed herself. Was *still* blaming herself. But he hadn’t. Not once. Not even a hint. His fury was solely directed towards the guy who had done this to them. He had stood by her, offering support and protection.

She opened her eyes and watched him drift to sleep, his face relaxed, arm wrapped around her and one of his legs thrown over both of hers, almost surrounding her with himself. He had always loved to sleep that way and so had she. Some nights they had gone to sleep still joined to each other. Then bit by bit, slowly life and reality had intruded and they had drifted apart until each occupied his or her side of the bed and stayed on that side. Now he was like before, she thought, looking at his beloved face. Caring, loving, considerate.

But for how long, a part of her wondered. This change in behavior...was it because her life was in danger and she lost her friend? Would it fade away once everything was restored to normalcy? Would he go back to the person he’d become in the last couple of years? The one who expected her to be the earth that revolved around his sun? Always adjusting, always compromising while he basically remained unchanged and untouched? The one who could get sexually attracted to another woman yet felt jealous of the time she spent with her girlfriends? She loved Jai with every fiber of her being. He was her husband. Her partner for life. But as her father had once told her love is nothing without trust. Could she trust him again? To be with her as her friend and partner and not just her husband?

Cowards! The angry hiss rattled with fury. Everything had been planned for Wednesday evening but they had left early. Gone to attend the cremation of their friend. So the execution of the plan had to be pushed for Thursday. The feel of the sharp blade going inside her body and coming out drenched in her blood. Fingers fisted and released, itching to feel the dark red liquid wetting them. Cleansing them. But they had those bloody bodyguards with them. The hiss turned into a low growl. Their presence threw a wrench on everything.

Neither of the two was ever left alone. Working hours were full of APS staff. And after work hours, those two men took over. The way they looked around, observing every passing person was unnerving. Especially that cop. He was really scary with his cold, spine-chilling eyes and wrestler built. Even while walking on the pavement, he placed himself between Shikha and others. Frustration and hatred were eating away the insides again. Thursday had come and gone too. Today was Friday. It had been to be done today, no matter what. One of them had to go today. Not knowing when the chance would present itself, being always on the ready all the time was exhausting. And the work at APS couldn't be avoided either. Responsibilities shouldn't be shirked. And promises should be kept. Promises should always be kept. Especially the ones made to the family. The rocking motion started again. And so did the humming. One down, two to go-o-o. One down, two to go-o-o.

“Hey guess what?” Preeti smiled when she heard Jai's voice on her phone. “I went ahead and hired myself a new assistant manager. Told the guys I can't handle it all on my own.”

“OK...” she said, frowning, waiting for him to continue.

“So that means *hopefully* I would get to come home at a reasonable hour and my weekends would be reasonably free.”

“Really? Oh Jai...”

“Really! Oh Ritu!”

Both of them laughed at the long forgotten memory now refreshed. They had acted in a play during their college days. He, the pirate and she, the abducted princess. One of the most repeated dialogues in that had been her *Oh, Jack!* To which he had to counter, *Oh my Princess!* The creativity, or the lack of it, of the dialogue writer had had them in splits all those years back but they had carried it along into their relationship.

“So, ready to head home?”

“Oh yeah, definitely. Today has been horrible workwise,” she grumbled.

“Maybe we can fill up that bathtub and relax once we get home. I'll even give you a nice massage to go with it.”

Preeti's smile turned into a grin despite her pink cheeks. “Oh, Oh. Someone is being romantic today, huh. Where are you? What's all the noise?”

“I'm on my way to pick you up and the noise would be the rain beating down on the car.”

“You’re talking while driving?” she screeched.

“Damn! You almost punctured my eardrum. Relax Ritu, I’m on hands-free and both my hands are on the steering wheel.”

“Still...”

“OK, fine, I’m at the traffic signal near your office.”

“I’ll come down then and wait for you near the gate.”

“Be careful, OK? Don’t walk alone. Where is Shikha?” he asked almost immediately.

“Karthik picked her up a few minutes back. God, she’s going to be drenched on that bike of his,” she giggled.

“They can warm each other up then.”

“Jai!”

“What? You think I’m blind? Hey, the signal turned green.”

“And I’ve stepped into the lift. See you.”

Preeti stuffed her phone back in her backpack with a smile. Her weariness was already fading off. Jai was waiting for her. She practically danced her way out of the lift. The rain was now slowing down to a drizzle. Forgoing the umbrella, she started walking on the pavement that would take her to the main gate. She would meet Jai there, saving him the hassle of clearing the security gate. After all, it was hardly secluded. People were still milling about, though not in huge crowds but she sure wasn’t the only one walking. She saw Jai’s car at a distance and waved, trying to evade jostling the person coming from the opposite direction. In the next second she felt something dig into her abdomen and a pain unlike anything she’d ever known ripped through her insides. She opened her mouth to scream but she was pushed roughly onto the road, her last sight that of Jai’s car screeching, tyres squealing in protest, the front tyre coming to a halt mere inches from her face. Someone, Jai, she thought, bellowed her name and then she knew nothing.

“You better brace yourself for a Spanish inquisition when your parents return,” Karthik said, slipping the window curtain back into place. “Your neighbors have started giving us disapproving looks.”

Shikha strolled into the hall, one hand rubbing her wet hair with the towel slung over her shoulders and the other one carrying a small tray which had two steaming mugs of tea in it. “What did you expect? This is a residential area and my parents have been here for more than two decades.”

They had been drenched down to their shoes by the time they reached home but Shikha had never enjoyed a bike ride more. It hadn't been a heavy rain. More like a continuous drizzle and surprisingly not much traffic for a Friday evening. They had even made a quick stop at the police station because he had to talk to someone. He had asked her if she wanted to trade the bike for a Scorpio and grinned at the crestfallen expression that she'd tried to hide. So they had ended up coming home on the bike. He drove slower than he had before which made her realize he had left something unfinished so that he could pick her up. He then gently but firmly pushed her into her house and locked her in before going to his house to dry himself and change. She was still miffed at that. He had actually bolted and locked the door from the outside with her on the inside. Agreed that it was for her safety but still... Now both were once again dry and warm. She, in a purple V-necked t-shirt over a pair of dark grey capris while he was in a grey and dark blue striped collared t-shirt over a pair of dark blue jeans.

"I'm surprised they haven't asked you what is going on," he said, taking one cup.

"The aunty two doors down to our right did ask me," she replied, picking the second cup and leaving the tray on the center table.

"And?"

"I told her," she shrugged and sipped her tea.

"Told her what?"

"That the case would be filed and investigation would be carried out on the two guys you arrested that day only if I..." she gave a meaningful pause, "Agreed to your...*conditions*."

He looked aghast, his face resembling that of a thundercloud before it sunk into him that she was pulling his leg. Something in his expression must have clued her in because she carefully placed her cup back on the table, preparing to run. "Vena pannathe, Shikha Bose," he muttered, pouncing on her. *Oh no, you don't, Shikha Bose.*

She was fast, he had to give her that. And as slippery as an eel. Twisting out of his arms, she ran, putting the couch between them. As if that would stop him, he scoffed before leaping over it and effectively caging her between the wall, the couch and himself. Trapped and nowhere to go, her eyes darted this way and that before she careened into him, fingers racing over his abdomen and waist, tickling him for all she was worth. Caught off guard, he stumbled back, trying not to squirm under those merciless fingers. Her eyes lit up with pure devilry.

“You’re ticklish!” she laughed, unerringly going back to the same spot that made him yelp and convulse in suppressed mirth. “I can’t believe Karthik Iyer, DCP crime branch, nightmare for the criminals can be tickled like a three year old.”

“Shikha, s-stop,” he backed out and howled as her fingers found that spot again.

“I wonder what would happen if they knew,” she advanced towards him and laughed when he backed up. “They don’t have to use their fists. No hitting,” she was overcome with hilarity. “Only tickling.”

Shikha didn’t know how it happened. One moment she was tickling him and the next both her hands were gripped and pulled over her head, her chest mashed against his and she was staring into his disturbing dark eyes that were filled with laughter and a promise of retribution. Laughter died as she noticed how much she had to look up at him. His shoulders and chest dwarfed her, and again she wondered what sort of work he had done that had developed his torso to that degree. Slowly he reached out, and his hand touched her hair. Everything in her became still while his fingers sifted through the short strands. He didn’t say anything. He lifted his other hand, and his palms cupped her face, his fingers gliding lightly over her forehead and brow, down the bridge of her nose, over her lips and jaw and chin before sliding down the length of her throat. Her breath had stopped, but she didn’t notice.

“Karthik, no,” she whispered but her eyes were closing as warm pleasure built in her, her blood beating slowly and powerfully through her veins.

“Romba soft.” *So soft.* His voice roughened even more than normal. He felt her softness, her warmth, and the gut-wrenching pleasure of her breasts flattening against the hard planes of his chest.

“We shouldn’t do this,” she managed to say, turning her head aside evading his lips at the last nanosecond. She brought her hands down and pushed lightly at his shoulders.

“Why not?” he murmured, tracing her cheek with slow kisses. His tongue touched the sensitive hollow below her ear, and her hands tightened on his shoulders as wonderful little ripples of pleasure radiated over her skin.

Her sense of self-protection made Shikha push at his shoulders again, and this time he slowly released her. “I can’t do this,” she said in a low voice.

“Why?”

“I’m not interested in affairs,” she stated, hoping the tremor in her body was not obvious in her voice.

“And you think I am?” he looked angry and offended. “Goddammit Shikha!” He didn’t get a chance to finish as his phone rang. With a soft curse, eyes still locked on hers, he answered. “Yes?” Shikha watched shutters fall on his eyes, his body tightening, moving away from hers. “When?” the question shot out like a bullet. “Where?” He gave a small nod. “We’re on our way.”

Shikha straightened, a chill creeping up her spine. He said *we*. Why did he include her? Unless...Unless... He ended the call and looked at her. She had her answer. *Reet!*

Chapter Twelve

Jai blindly paced the corridor outside the surgical waiting room. He couldn't sit down, though the room was empty and he could have had any chair he wanted. If he stopped walking, he thought, he might very well fall down and not be able to stand again. He hadn't known such crippling fear existed. Until he saw Preeti falling straight under the wheels of his car, her face an inch away from being crushed under the wheel, lying face down on the concrete road, unconscious in a pool of blood. Thank God someone had called for the ambulance and it had arrived within minutes. Or he was sure she would've died before they got her to a hospital. But he had been too scared to move her until then, could only sit helplessly beside her, and with trembling fingers, feel her pulse slowing down. He hadn't been able to do anything other than chant her name in a desperate plea. Even after getting her into the ambulance, the medics hadn't managed to stop the bleeding, but they had slowed it, started an IV saline to pump fluid back into her body and raise her plummeting blood pressure, and gotten her to the hospital alive. He had been shouldered aside then, by a whole team of gowned emergency personnel.

"Are you any relation to her, sir?" a nurse had asked briskly as she all but manhandled him out of the emergency room.

"I'm her husband," he'd heard himself say.

"Do you know her blood type, sir?"

He did but nothing came to his mind just then. It was blank with shock and sheer, gut-wrenching terror. His entire attention focused on the cubicle where about ten people were working on her. He barely knew anyone was asking the questions, and the woman hadn't pushed it. Instead, she had patted his hand and said she would come back in a little while when his wife was stabilized. He had been grateful for her optimism. But no sooner than she had said it, the flurry of activity around Preeti's prone form increased and before he could ask, she was wheeled towards a huge lift and from there into the theater.

The pacing that had started then hadn't stopped. Visions of the same scene kept playing round and round in his head. Preeti waving at him, him grinning at her enthusiasm as he started to ease his foot on the accelerator, her smile turning into shock just before she was pushed onto the road, straight under his car. Jai literally staggered, clutching the wall for support. Yes. Someone had pushed her. Someone with a hooded jacket. If Preeti hadn't waved and if he hadn't seen her waving, he would've run his car over his own wife. His stomach heaved. One of the staff nurses ran up to him holding a nearby

trashcan. He emptied the contents of his stomach into it before collapsing onto his knees.

“Sir, do you need a doctor? Sir? Sir, can you hear me?”

He shook his head at the first question and nodded at the second. He grabbed the water bottle extended to him gratefully, splashing cold water over his face before stumbling towards the restroom at the end of the corridor to rinse his mouth and wash his face. Someone pushed her. Someone tried to kill his wife and almost succeeded. Might still succeed, if the grim faces of the doctors as they went into the OT was any indication. And it wasn't just the push. Something happened before that. The car hadn't touched Preeti that much he was sure of. But she had been spewing blood from her abdomen. Someone had attacked her, then pushed her under his car. He heaved into the sink once again, although there was nothing left in his stomach. Dazed, he dragged himself back into the waiting area. One of the staff handed him Preeti's clothes in a cover. They were covered in blood. So was the front of his shirt. Preeti's blood. He should call her parents. His parents. Clutching the clothes, he looked around, and saw Shikha and Karthik coming out of the lift. Saw Shikha's searching gaze finding him before she started running in his direction. Dropping the clothes cover, he opened his arms and hugged her tight. Shock started wearing off, leaving behind a trail of tears running down his cheeks. Shikha tightened her arms around him, shivering. Or was it him? He didn't know. He just knew he wasn't alone in his terror and grief.

“H-how is she? Where is she? What happened?” Shikha stepped back to shoot the questions.

“I-I don't know,” he said, thumbing towards the OT, “They took her in there a few minutes back.” He looked at Karthik. “It wasn't an accident.”

“Can you tell me what happened?” Karthik guided Jai to a nearby chair, his movements and voice as gentle as he knew how to be. “I know you're still in shock but I need the information. Take a deep breath. That's it. Again. Close your eyes and think back to the time you went to pick up Preeti.” He waited for a few moments, giving Jai time to regroup. “What do you see?”

“The wipers of the car. It was drizzling. Preeti is on the pavement. Walking towards me..my car.” Jai narrated everything he could remember as clearly as he could. Shikha was sitting right beside him and by the end of it, he was clutching her hand.

“A guy in a hooded rain jacket. What color? Can you remember?”

Jai shook his head. “Something dark. Dark blue or black I don't know. It was for a fraction of a second. After coming out of the car to see to Preeti, I

looked around. There were too many people gathering around.” Images were a blur of umbrellas, jackets and raincoats.

“Did you see the hand? Color of the skin? Fair, dark?” Karthik knew it was a long shot but he had to ask. “Or the height? Was he tall or short?”

“I don’t know,” he snapped, getting up to once again start pacing. “All I know is I almost killed my Ritu. Her head was under the bonnet, an inch away from the wheel, you know that? An inch!” he shouted, his forefinger and thumb marking the distance.

“But you didn’t,” Karthik insisted softly. He stood in front of him until Jai had no choice but to stop pacing and look at him. “Your quick reflexes are what saved Preeti’s life. Don’t go into the what-if scenarios. I know it’s tough but you need to pull yourself together.” Jai nodded and moved away and took his phone out. “Jai, don’t give out the details to anyone as yet. It was an accident and let’s leave it that way for now.” Karthik waited for Jai’s nod before going to Shikha, crouching down in front of her. “Shikha.”

It was his cop voice, Shikha thought looking up at him. “I need to go to the scene. Salim is already there. I don’t know when I’ll be back. I want you to stay here until I do. Is that understood?”

No, don’t leave me alone. Take me with you. She bit back those words before they could pass her lips. She was still shaking, barely holding it together. She would be a hindrance, not to mention distraction. He would be torn in his need to protect her and his need to do his job. She gave a jerky nod. “I-I’ll be here with Jai and message you w-when..” she gave a futile gesture towards the OT.

“Promise me that you won’t go anywhere alone. No matter what.”

“I-I promise.”

She was barely holding it together and sooner or later, she was going to fall apart. He could see it in her eyes. On her face. But there was nothing he could do about it now. His Shikha was strong but this kind of a thing would unhinge even the strongest of the persons. He quickly scrolled through the contact list in her phone and got the number he needed. After a quick kiss on her forehead, he turned and left.

Two down, one to go-o-o. Two down, one to go-o-o. The rocking motion continued without a pause. The hand holding the carving knife was still red. With blood. Her blood. Head tilted to the side, studying the knife and the hand. Eyes glinted with disappointment. It had been too rushed. The bitch

hadn't known who was doing it and what was happening. She hadn't known or felt the pain for long. It had been too quick. But what else to do? There had been no other way. The two of them had gotten themselves those muscle-bound bodyguards. And punishing them couldn't be delayed until everyone relaxed and forgot about it. What would be the point then? Yes. It should not be delayed. And patience was an overrated virtue. Bottom line, they had to die. They would die. They are dead. Two of them. One more left. Satisfaction quickly replaced the disappointment. Fingers formed into fists. Red. Blood. Her blood. Eyes closed, thinking back to the moment when the knife pierced her insides. Deep. Slashing and slaughtering the organs. Temptation to keep going, keep digging into her again and again had been so overwhelming. But the car had been right behind and so were the group exiting from the APS building. Temptation to look back and see the bitch's body crushed under the wheels had been even tougher to resist. The rocking motion slowed down. There was still one more to go. No time to relax. No time to celebrate. Not yet. Not just yet. The sharp steel turned in the fingers, glinting in the light. It had to be cleaned up and sharpened again. It had to be ready to get red again. Sinister laughter echoed the empty walls. Ready to get red. Ready to get red. Laughter got cut off as abruptly as it had begun. Two down, one to go-o-o. Two down, one to go-o-o.

“One brutal murder, one attempted murder which could turn into another murder if that girl dies in the hospital, another girl lined up, no evidence, no clues, no witnesses.” The big guy growled, as he paced the confines of his cabin. “If the press gets hold of this..”

“Sir, for now, people assume that Preeti Singh stumbled and fell in front the car and has been rushed to the hospital. The quick arrival of the ambulance has helped us in more ways than one. Let's keep it that way for now. Let's not give out the details unless absolutely necessary.” Salim suggested quietly.

“You mean don't let people know that there is a serial killer on the loose in the city?” The commissioner looked dubious. In his twenty six years of service, he had seen many cops. Good, bad, dirty and downright bastards. But Karthik and Salim were among the very few he was truly proud of. They, especially Karthik excelled at understanding the twisted mind of criminals.

“This guy is not a random killer. He has specific targets. I've made sure Shikha is safe.”

“Who is Shikha?” Commissioner frowned at the seemingly abrupt change in topic.

“Shikha Bose,” Karthik clarified. “The third girl among the three friends.”

“You know her?”

“He is going to marry her,” Salim imparted the news gleefully. Never mind that there was a killer out there. He couldn’t resist sharing that titbit with their boss.

“But you told me a few days back his girlfriend is his neighbor.”

“Yes sir. And he is going to marry his neighbor.”

He glanced at both his men, bewildered and slow on the uptake. “You just said he wants to marry this Shikha Bose.”

Karthik looked heavenward, as if praying for divine intervention. “Shikha Bose is my neighbor sir. She also happens to be one of the three friends.”

“You want to marry one of the girl who has made that post? God save you Iyer!” he muttered. “Stop looking at me like that. My daughter read me that post, rejected two good alliances because of that.” Karthik bit back an involuntary smile. “Provided we keep this latest thing out of the press, how are we going to go forward with the investigation? What do we have now?”

He had been to the crime scene. Not that there was much to it left with the rain washing away any evidence left by the killer. To attack again so soon after Siya’s murder meant the guy was totally out of control. For now he was operating on a particular agenda, a particular target. If that hadn’t been the case, he was sure there would have been a blood bath in the city. Siya might be his first victim but she sure wouldn’t be his last. If he is not found and stopped. Because once he gets a taste for this, targets will keep popping up. He will need little or no reason to attack.

“This at least proves that it’s someone from APS. The attack happened at the entrance. Technically within the APS campus.”

“Security cameras?”

Salim shook his head. “Nothing in that area. The one at the security gate is too far. Either it was a coincidence or he is cleverer than we thought.”

“Humph!” Like most cops, big guy wasn’t big on coincidence. To know where the security cameras were located and plan the attack according to that, it had to be an insider. Someone who knew the company inside out, has been working for a very long time. “I’ll see if I can get a warrant.” He looked frustrated and tired. “Dammit this is not the only case we’re dealing with either. A girl was raped in a moving bus and another one was raped in the office by the security guards of the same company. A school kid committed suicide within the school campus, a woman dies in a road accident and our guys go and arrest her husband and Iyer, the paperwork about the human

trafficking ring you caught is still pending...”

Karthik’s phone rang, interrupting the commissioner’s rant over the increasing crime rate. Karthik frowned at the unfamiliar number. “Yes?”

“Karthik Iyer?”

“Yes?” His frown deepened at the slightly familiar voice before clearing. He knew this one.

“This is Naresh Nadar, CEO of APS,” he confirmed. “I just heard. It wasn’t an accident, was it?”

“No.”

“Did she survive?”

“She is in surgery. Chances are 50-50.”

Naresh sighed, running a hand over his face. “I have to accept I didn’t want to believe that one of my employees is a killer. I still don’t want to believe it. But I can’t deny the possibility anymore. And I don’t want this thing to go to the press. I’m a CEO so that’s my immediate thought. And I most definitely don’t want a psychopath working at APS and killing my employees.”

“I understand. We’re trying to keep the press out of it at this point.”

“How can I help?”

“We need access to your employee details.”

“Give me your email address. I’ll personally email you right away. That way there would be no leak. If he does work for APS, a court order might alert him so let’s skip it. I’ll leave it to my legal team to think of the repercussions.”

Karthik started to like the guy. “That would really help.” He passed on his email id and thanked the guy before ending the call. “Any luck with the fingerprints at Siya’s residence?”

“Still processing,” Salim replied. “And no, they are not Siya’s,” Salim added before Karthik could ask the question. “The partial print has blood on it. Siya’s blood. The killer must’ve missed a spot while cleaning up because there was nothing else on that door, not even Siya’s prints. Considering that she would’ve have held the knob to open it..”

They had a killer who acted on his own weird rules without leaving any evidence behind. An intelligent killer was tougher to catch than the one operating on rage or impulse. He wasn’t even sure if the partial fingerprint would even do any good if the bastard is not in the system.

The commissioner saw both his juniors eyeing his brand new laptop. "Take your eyes off my laptop," he snapped. "I'll tell the guys to give lend you a couple from the outer office."

Both of them grabbed a laptop each and got to work. "Damn, I'm exhausted just looking at the size of the attachment," Salim grumbled.

"Just be thankful the women were so careful with their privacy settings. Imagine our suspect pool if we had to wade through their FB and Twitter accounts." Salim looked horrified at the mere thought. "Let's first filter out males and females, then you take half and I'll take half." They might be rough-over-the edges cops but they did know their way around the computer. Karthik especially, who had learnt quite a bit while working on a hacker case a few years back.

"Thank Allah we only have to do the men."

Karthik nodded absently, his attention already on the downloaded document. "Focus on the complaints, grievances, feedbacks, that sort of things. This one has behavioral issues especially with regard to women and that's bound to have come out somewhere and it would have increased significantly in the last couple of weeks."

"I was so pissed off at you, you know? For a long while I was just so mad and.." Shikha told Jai, gesturing with her hands. "Reet had been with me through some of the worst days of my life. Reet and Siya. They always have been my pillars of support. Unquestioning, unwavering." She smiled ruefully. "I'm not sure how it happened or why. Destiny, probably. Three of us had joined APS around the same time, became friends within a month. She had been a bubbly, cheerful woman with that dry sense of humor, blushing whenever we ragged her about you two and.." she waved her hands again in demonstration. "She used to get that dreamy look whenever she talked about you." Her smile turned into a grimace. "She lost all those things. Especially the last one year. Siya was the patient one, always advising her, stressing on the importance of relationships, what you guys had, blah, blah, blah."

Her fingers dug into her hair, messing it up some more. Not that it mattered. There was only so much mess up you can do with hair so short. "But I'm not like that. I guess I'm more cynical when it comes to relationships and stuff."

"I think you have a reason to be." Jai inserted in a quiet voice.

Surprise held her silent for a few moments. He had been so silent for the better part of two hours that she hadn't even been sure if he was listening to her. She certainly hadn't been expecting him to be understanding. "Maybe. Or

maybe I'm like a horse. You know, they tie those things to a horse so that it can't look sideways and get distracted?" Jai nodded with a wry smile. "All I could see was that she was not happy. That you were not making her happy. That she was always the one doing the compromising. But the last few days, she's been happy again Jai. Despite Siya's death, despite our tears and loss and fear, she has been happy. She told me it's like having her Jai back. The one she had fallen in love with."

Jai swallowed. It would do no good to bawl like a baby even though that's all he'd been wanting to do for more than an hour. The tension was killing him. The not knowing was killing him. He had called his parents and hers. He didn't tell them anything except that she had been in an accident and is in the surgery. Her parents were going to take the first flight out and he had told his dad to stay put. That he would keep them posted. After the surgery Ritu would need her mom. And her dad. *If* she came out of the surgery. He looked at Shikha. She had been sitting beside him, moving away only once to get herself a glass of water.

"I hated you too," he said. "You and Siya, both. Ritu never had many friends before. We had been best friends long before we became lovers and suddenly someone else had taken my place. She stopped talking to me, sharing things with me. You two took up her every free minute. You were the reason she smiled, laughed. So I resented you. And the more I resented, the more I lost her until it became a vicious cycle. In the middle of that she said she wanted kids. All I could think was, I won't have even that little of her." He shrugged. "Selfish, I know. But I promised myself that I would change. I would make her fall in love with me a-again.." His throat clogged up.

Shikha laid her hand on his shoulder. "Hey, d-don't worry. She's going to be fine. She's going to be just f-fine. I mean, she's a fighter and she has a lot to fight for. She-she is going to walk o-out of here.."

It was past midnight by the time they heard the voice they had been waiting to hear. "Excuse me?" Both of them stood up and faced the surgeon. He was still in his surgical scrubs, his face haggard. Shikha felt the icy claw of dread and judging by Jai's cold fingers gripping hers, she was not alone. "I was told that it was an accident case," the surgeon said, making it a part question and part statement.

"We don't know. The police are looking into it right now. He'll be back to talk to you," Shikha replied quickly.

He nodded. The hospital will look into it. "I think she's going to make it," the surgeon said, and smiled a smile of such pure personal triumph that she knew there had been a real battle in the O.R. "I had to remove part of the liver and

resection her small intestine. The wound to the liver, I'm presuming some kind of knife, is what caused the extensive hemorrhage. We had to replace almost her complete blood volume before we got things under control." He rubbed his hand over his face. "It was touch and go for a while. Her blood pressure bottomed out and she went into cardiac arrest, but we got her right back. Her pupil response is normal, and her vitals are satisfactory. She was lucky."

"Lucky," Jai echoed, still dazed by the combination of good news and the litany of damage. "So...she is going to be fine?" he asked.

"She needs to be in the ICU and the next forty eight hours are extremely critical as there is a high risk of secondary infection setting in. At this point I can only be cautiously optimistic. She will be shifted to the ICU in a few minutes but entry is restricted and she will be continuously monitored for the next forty eight hours."

"Will she be conscious?"

"Not for another twenty four hours. And even after that she'll be drifting in and out."

"But she'll be fine, right?" Jai pressed.

"Provided she crosses the next two days, she will be out of danger but after that her complete recovery will take four to six weeks." He gestured towards the man in suit walking towards them. "I think you need to take care of the paperwork."

Shikha moved away. "I'll call Karthik."

Thank God it was Saturday, Shikha thought, lying down on the bed. She couldn't imagine how it would've been if she had to go to work after a day... and a night like that. She and Jai had been allowed into the ICU separately for five minutes. She could barely recognize Preeti in there, hooked up to all those tubes, lying on the bed, looking so...still. Almost lifeless. The constant beep from the monitor had assured her that her friend's heart was beating. For now. No, Shikha immediately rejected the notion. Reet would pull through. She *had* to. She had been there the whole night and most of the morning, talking to Jai, each helping the other in staying positive. But by eleven in the morning Shikha had started feeling claustrophobic. The walls were closing in on her. A part of her wanted to stomp her feet and scream like a tantrum-throwing five year old that she wanted to go home. And the relief when she spotted Karthik walking towards them had been staggering. He hadn't said anything about the case other than that they were investigating. After

promising Jai that she would be back later in the day, she had gratefully slumped behind Karthik on the bike and got home. A long, hot shower, a steaming cup of hot coffee and being force-fed two sandwiches by Karthik, the relentless, later, here she was! Literally fallen face down on the bed. She didn't have the energy to talk or even think.

After giving her a long, intense look that made her feel like a bug under the microscope, he left her alone with a brisk, "I'll be in the hall if you need anything."

She inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, repeating the process, willing her body and mind to relax. Her eyes slowly drifted shut. Blissful oblivion enveloped her. Until she felt the wetness on her palms and lifted them to see. Blood! Scared, she tried to scream only to realize someone had gagged her mouth. Oh God! She was tied up and someone was coming to kill her. She could hear the sound of boots on the tiled floor. Siya! Preeti! Where were they? She had to warn them. Karthik! Her phone was lying beside her and it was buzzing. It was Karthik. She had to tell him. Hands and legs were tied but she tried turning on to her side and dragging herself towards it, squirming uselessly to at least release one of her hands. The phone stopped ringing only to start again. Karthik. Something touched her back. She rolled and found herself staring into Siya's sightless gaze staring at her, her head caved in from behind. She tried to scream. There was another body sprawled a little distance away. She tried to scream again. No. Not Preeti. No. She didn't want to die. She felt hands gripping her arms, pulling her. She didn't want to die. Karthik! Help!

"Shikha! Chellam! Elunduru!" *Shikha! Sweetheart! Wake up!* Firm hands cupped her face and shook her. "I'm right here Shikha! Wake up! Open your eyes Chellam! Look at me." With a startled gasp, she opened her eyes, her terror-filled ones meeting his determined ones. "That's it. Look at me. I'm right here. It's not real. You're having a dream Chellam. Just a dream." The grip on his t-shirt tightened even as the horror started to fade from her mind.

"I..." She swallowed, tears leaking out of her eyes, her body wracked with tremors. "I don't want to die. I don't..."

"Shhh...Vaayi moodu." *Shut up!* "You are not going to die. Not as long as there is breathe in my body."

"D-don't let me go," she pleaded, hiding her face in his neck. Later, when she was back to her rational, cynical self, she would probably cringe at the memory but in that moment, she didn't care.

"Not in this life time Chellam. Nan unnai poka vita matten," he promised, pulling her deeper into his arms, surrounding her. *Not in this life time*

sweetheart. I will never let you go. He pulled her back enough to look into her eyes. “It was just a dream. OK?” She nodded, her pulse slowly returning to normal. “I knew this would happen. That’s why I waited for you to talk about it.” His lips tilted into a half smile. “But you are one independent hussy, refusing to accept that you’re scared.”

That got a little of her spirit back. Her spine stiffened. “I wasn’t scared.” As his smile threatened to turn into a grin, she glared. But the effect was spoiled by her still-wet eyes. “I wasn’t,” she stressed. “I was just...” her voice trailed off as his proximity registered to her senses. “Scared,” she whispered.

Karthik had been sitting at the dining table, going through the APS files in the laptop when he had heard her scream his name. He had been in her room before her first scream died. Judging by the way she thrashed around, it must have been one hell of a nightmare. And it wasn’t even night. It was in the middle of the afternoon. When she was alert and awake, the sharpness of her tongue and the cool intelligence in those bottomless bedroom eyes of hers took most of his attention. Most, but not all, he thought wryly. If she had been awake and alert, he sure wouldn’t have had her in his arms on a cozy, comfortable bed with her soft baby pink t-shirt riding up her midriff and one of his knees wedged between her purple capri pants covered legs while her arms clung to his neck making it almost impossible not close the remaining inch to taste those temptingly delicious lips. She was all softly feminine and curvy but there was a layer of steel just beneath the surface that turned him on like nothing else. She was just perfect. Perfect for him.

“Are you alright now?” he asked, his voice a bare rumble.

“Yes,” she said, not thinking about it, lost in his eyes. He didn’t hesitate, didn’t give her time to think about it. She wasn’t certain she was extending some kind of an invitation, but he accepted it before she could decide. He slanted his mouth to cover hers, pressing hard until her lips parted and gave him the entrance he sought. There was nothing tentative about the kiss. He sought and he took. There was no careful restraint; he set his mouth over hers with open hunger, a hunger so intense and greedy that it stunned her. He caught her chin with one hand and held her waist with the other, then moved his tongue deep inside her mouth, touching her own tongue in blatant demand. His mustache tickled her, sending a rash of goosebumps across her skin. She sagged against him, both frightened and tempted, and he gathered her in against his hard frame. Never before had she been wanted like that, so swiftly and violently. She had been kissed only a couple of times before by her second fiancé but they were nothing, absolutely nothing like this. Karthik was kissing her with naked demand, forcing their relationship into an intimacy that frightened her. But contact with that potent body was suddenly

all she wanted. She put both arms around his neck, moving against him, trying to get closer. He was bruising her with the force of his kisses, and she wanted more. He put his hand on her breast, and her breath locked in her throat. His thumb rubbed over and around her nipple; at first it was a curious sensation, like a slight pricking of pins, then it suddenly intensified and pure sensation zinged from the nipple to her loins. She moaned aloud, frightened by the way her own body had so swiftly gone beyond her control. Karthik lifted his head. There was a hard, predatory expression on his face, the faint cruelty of arousal, and his lips were wet from their kisses. His hand remained on her breast, with only the thin cotton of the t-shirt and an even thinner lacy bra between them. His breath was coming too fast, and she could feel the hard pounding of his heart against her.

God I love him, Shikha thought dimly, not having the strength to deny that emotion in that moment. "I...you...we..." The ringing of his phone saved her from bumbling further. Both of them tensed up. She glanced at the caller id and breathed out. "It's my brother. "Hi dada," she tried to inject cheer into her voice.

"I should've turned you over my knee when you were younger Choti! How could you hide something like this from me?"

Chapter Thirteen

“How...I mean...what?” Confusion started to replace the numbness.

“And I would still be in the dark if that Karthik Iyer hadn’t called.”

Confusion turned to fury as Shikha processed her brother’s words. “Karthik called? When?”

“While you were napping,” Karthik replied calmly. He had taken Captain Saket Bose’s number the previous night when he had dropped her at the hospital but didn’t get a chance to talk until this afternoon.

“Which you should’ve done the minute all this started,” Saket interrupted from the other end.

“It’s not...”

“Not what Choti? Big deal? Someone makes death threats on my sister, kills one of her friends and tries to kill another...” The sound of his fist connecting something solid could be heard clearly. “How *could* you hide something like this? I’m calling mom and dad now.”

Shikha waited until Karthik was out of the room. “That’s *precisely* why I didn’t tell. I don’t want them to know. They’ve gone for a vacation. The stress of my broken engagements was getting to dad. You know it.”

“Yē āpanāra dōṣa naḥa!” he bellowed. *That is not your fault!*

“Yeah, well, I still feel responsible, thika āchē?” she screamed back. OK? “Listen dada, you can’t tell them. It’s my life, my decision,” she said in a reasonably calm voice.

“The hell you say,” he growled.

“Even if they do come, there is nothing here they can do. They would want me to quit the job, go away somewhere...”

“Which wouldn’t be a bad idea,” he said reluctantly. Shikha Bose wasn’t a coward and her brother knew it. Running wasn’t her style. And being a soldier, it wasn’t his either.

“You know better than to suggest something like that dada. Once all this is resolved, I will definitely look for a new job. But not yet. Not when the bastard who killed my friend is still out there. If I leave now, he might get away with it and I can’t let it happen. It’s as bad as me asking you runaway in the middle of a fight out there.” Inhaling deeply, she continued, “Am I scared? Yes. Am I ready to run? Hell no.”

Karthik exchanged the phone in her hand with a steaming mug of tea. She looked up to find another cup in his hand. "I'm out of tea powder."

"That's why I got it from my house and yes, I added the extra spoon sugar. Now drink." To Saket, he said, "Saket, Karthik here. We are investigating everyone at APS. But in the meanwhile I need someone I can completely trust to be with Shikha at all times. That was another reason I called you."

"What was the first reason?" Shikha asked. She was pissed off because she couldn't be pissed off at him for trying to protect her. For thinking of her family. And making the tea just the way she liked it. Apparently nothing escaped those cop eyes.

He sighed and put the phone on speaker. "A crank call, or even a threatening call is one thing. This is something else entirely. Your family must be kept in the loop. At least one of them."

"I'm liking him more by the minute," her brother inserted. Dammit! She was arguing with two males. Two *overprotective* males.

"But you said..."

Slamming his tea cup on the table, he rounded on her. "Don't you get it Shikha Bose? It might just as easily have been you instead of Preeti. Yesterday I had come to pick you up at the exact same spot. You had come walking out of the building just as Preeti had. I don't know if the bastard is following some shitty chronological order of his own or Preeti was a victim of opportunity. Either way, you're the only one left. He sure as hell will know about Preeti by Monday morning and this is Saturday evening."

"Couldn't you have..."

Again she wasn't given a chance to complete her sentence. "I need to solve this. I need to solve this yesterday and once your brother gets here, he will be your shadow at work while I do the hunting. He will drive you to work, stay there and bring you back. None of these points are up for negotiation." He paused before asking Saket. "So, is it possible for you to come that fast?"

"I have talked to my CO. I'll be there as soon as I can. I had already applied leave from next week on because I wanted to be there when my parents come back from US so I might be able to push it a little forward if I explain the circumstances."

"Then I need you to do it."

"Consider it done."

"Great, fine. This involves me but you guys just go ahead and ignore me," Shikha snapped at both the men.

Karthik held back his grin. "I spoke to Shikha's CEO. He'll have the visitor pass and security clearance ready for you once you get here," he said to Saket. "You can stay at APS with Shikha until this case is solved."

"Karthik, thank you for calling me."

"No thanks required."

"I'll let you know when I'll be landing. Choti?"

Taking the hint, Karthik returned the phone to her and left the room, closing the door firmly behind him. "Dada, I'm sorry, I know I should've told you. Trust me dada, after...after Preeti...after last night, I was going to call you."

"Has he left the room?" Saket asked in a quiet voice.

"Yes."

"What's going on between you two?"

"W-what? Nothing is going on. Dada! Come on! He is our neighbor, a cop and..."

"And he also knows that you have run out of tea and that you like it sweet." He exhaled. "Listen, we'll talk about this later. For now, until I get there, you take care of yourself. OK? Don't take any chances. Tumi ki bujhatē pērēchō?" *Do you understand?* "I'll be there as soon as I can." Shikha could hear him fight for control. "Dammit Choti! How did you land yourself in this mess?" he gritted out.

"It was not my fault so don't you dare say that!" she screeched, before dashing away the tear that dared to escape from one eye. "I didn't do anything w-wrong, you hear me? None of us d-did anything wrong."

The shock of hearing his sister hiccup as she strove to control her tears, held him silent for a few moments. "Shikha, hey, sis, come on now. Of course it's not your fault."

"Don't patronize me!" she yelled. "And I'm not crying. I never cry."

If anything, Saket softened his tone even more. "I'm not patronizing and I know you never cry. You are my brave sister. I read that post. It's naughty, even a little raunchy but as Karthik rightly pointed out, we've read and seen far worse ones without blinking an eye. It's no one's fault except the creep who has targeted you. Don't let anyone say anything different. Now, have that tea and I'll see you soon."

"Love you dada. Jai Hind."

That drew a pleased laugh from him. "Jai Hind."

Her good mood lasted until the phone rang again. Gesturing to Karthik she answered the call from another unfamiliar number. "Yes?"

She heard the same ghostly voice. "Two down, one to go-o-o. Two down, one to go-o-o."

Even knowing it was futile, Karthik dispatched a team to the location from where the latest call had originated. She finished her tea, freshened up and straightening her shoulders, went to Karthik for another practice session of self-defense. They had been doing it as and when they could. He was really stretched to the limit with his workload and now this investigation but still spent every free minute he had in teaching her. Once this case gets solved and he reverts back to being just her neighbor, it was going to be tough for her. Real tough. So tough that the mere thought was hurting her on the inside. She was not dumb. She knew he was attracted to her, saw her as more than a friend or neighbor. But it was just the circumstances, she told herself. She was sure the close proximity was blinding him to the fact that there was no future for them beyond that of friendly neighbors. She had been 100% serious when she'd told her brother that she would look for a new job after this. If she came out of this alive. She wouldn't be able to work at APS, the place where she had found and lost one of her best friends and almost lost another one too. Maybe she should look for a new job in a new city. It would take her away from him and his magnetic presence. A fresh start in more ways than one.

Karthik sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. It was Sunday afternoon and his eyes were gritty from lack of sleep but that had never stopped him before and it sure as hell wouldn't stop him now. He knew his body. He could go without sleep for days on end, allowing his body to relax only when the job at hand was truly done. Same was the case with food. Opening his eyes, he went to the next name in the file. There might be a note, maybe even a harassment charge. Something like that wouldn't go unnoticed by colleagues or the bosses. If they could narrow down the list basing on that, they could investigate the guy further. Not openly of course. One of his team members knew her way around hacking and Salim had a great information network. Together they can dig up life histories of anyone right down to the kind of toothpaste they used. They already had shortlisted a few guys. "Where is Shikha?" Salim interrupted Karthik's thoughts.

"Back at the hospital. Preeti took a bad turn. Some internal bleeding. Doctors took her into the surgery again. Her parents are there and Jai is refusing to go home. He has been there all the time. Says he would go back home with his wife or not go at all." He paused. "I posted one of our guys there just in case."

“Any luck with the names?”

“I have a Vittal Rao. Shikha’s boss. His wife has filed for divorce a few weeks back because he was caught with his pants down, literally, with his daughter’s friend. Talk is that the girl who has just turned major is pregnant.” Karthik glanced back at the screen.

Salim grinned. “Wonder what your Shikha thinks about him. Wait a sec. Didn’t she mention her boss being all sympathetic after Siya’s death?”

Karthik nodded. “Faithfulness is number one in that list and this guy has temper issues too.”

“Temper issues, behavioral issues, family issues...everyone has something or the other. I mean who is problem free in this world boss?”

“Killer knows the three in more than an abstract way. My gut says he has interacted with them more than once. I mean think about it. APS has nearly thousand employees. Siya wouldn’t have opened the door just because some random guy knocks and says he is from APS.”

Salim accepted the truth of that statement. “I have one Arnab Das here. Sales department. Preeti is from sales, right?” Karthik nodded. “He has been treated for depression twice now. Has performance issues. Can’t get it up apparently. That’s not there in the file of course but it was easy to get info on that guy. This could be our guy,” Salim continued to read out the rest of the information. “According to his previous girlfriend, even Viagra is not working for him and he tried to take it out on her a couple of times. A week before Siya’s murder she filed a complaint but later withdrew it. Cash settlement. Mother died when he had been a child and father passed away about a year ago.”

“There is another one here. Pravin Patel. R&D. Brilliant tech guy. Zero people skills. Shikha mentioned him too. He prefers talking to computers than humans. But here’s the thing. His mother left him and his father when he was ten and dad has had a string of women walking in and out ever since. Four days before Siya’s death his father got admitted in hospital for ...”

“Let me guess. STD.”

Karthik nodded. “That could’ve been the stressor. So right now we have three guys with probable causes and recent stressors.”

“But not enough to bring them in for questioning, let alone get a warrant.”

“Let’s try to find out where they were on the night of Siya’s murder and again on Friday night.”

“Easy enough to check APS logs on Friday but Siya’s murder was Sunday

night.” He paused. “Siya’s friend Tapan comes here, you know? Every day. Asks the same one question. Do you know who did it.” Salim shook his head. “And Siya’s father just sits there in that corridor almost the whole day.”

“Namma avanai pudippom, Salim,” *We will catch him Salim.* “Where are we on that partial fingerprint Mukund?” Karthik called out to one of his team members.

“Analysis report still pending sir.”

“Sit on that guy if required. I want it by tomorrow evening.”

“Yes sir,” Mukund snapped a salute before striding out of the room.

“What’s tomorrow’s plan? You need to go for that raid, right?”

“Yeah and big guy wants me to interrogate the bastard we caught. Shikha wants to go to work.”

“Still wants to bait herself, huh?” Salim remarked appreciatively. “You chose well Iyer.” Karthik’s grin didn’t mask his worry. “I’ll send one of my guys along with her.” Salim promised.

“Send someone who knows the meaning of subtlety. He can talk to people at APS, try to get the whereabouts of the three men on Friday or Sunday or both days. If all three checkout, we’ll widen our search.”

Preeti met with an accident? She was admitted in the hospital? The bitch was alive? How was that possible? And what accident? Fingers felt and found the knife in the jacket. The same knife had been used on Siya and Preeti. It was no stupid accident. How could she be alive? Low growls emitted from the throat. How could this have happened? What to do now? The rocking motion escalated. Something had to be done. She can’t live. Neither of them should. Frustration started gnawing the insides like a persistent hungry beast. How could this happen? Hadn’t the knife gone deep enough? Yes, it had. Even with the rain and the time shortage, the memory of it digging into the bitch’s organs was clear. And how did the car stop before running over her head? That was just not possible. Her skull should’ve crushed under the wheel. Eyes glittered at the image that thought provoked. Yes. That was what should’ve happened. But it didn’t. Why? Why? Two down... the humming seized as abruptly as it had begun. One down, two to go-o-o. One down, two to go-o-o. No. The previous one had a better tune. Two down, one to go-o-o. Fury and hatred was flooding and spreading. Something had to be done. But what? What? Take an off. Yes. That would give a chance to be in the vicinity of Shikha without the responsibilities of work hampering every step. Half of the

day was already wasted. Never mind. There was still half a day left.

It was six thirty on Monday evening when Karthik leaned on his bike just inside the APS main gate and looked casually around, not letting his gaze rest on anyone in particular but noting every face and matching them with the names and corresponding photographs in the APS database. He had what the experts call, a photographic memory. A voluptuous woman, her breasts all but spilling out of her skintight top slowed down when she spotted him. He ignored her interested glances and flirtatious smile as she strolled by him. For all her lack of subtlety, she was no fool. Scanning twice at his impassive face, she turned and walked away without a backward glance. His gaze swept the surroundings once again and he went still when he spotted Shikha walking out of the building along with another woman. He straightened and with his gaze locked on her, the back of his forefinger running over the edge of his mustache, he started walking towards her. He didn't miss the grief flickering in her eyes despite her obvious effort to smile at something her colleague was saying. He dealt with grief on a regular basis. He knew Shikha would recover because the kick-ass spirit wouldn't let her stay down for long, but he also knew it would take weeks or even months before the shadow of pain disappeared from her eyes. Before loss seized to be debilitating and became a part of her. Before the wound healed and she is left behind with just a scar. And a memory.

"No, really, how are you Shikha?"

Shikha tried to smile at Pallavi but it was more of a grimace. "OK. Going on. It hasn't been an easy week na."

"I still can't believe Siya is gone. Her seat in HR is still empty you know. And how is Preeti doing? What's happening jaar! APS has seen one death and one major accident in less than a week!"

"Still in the hospital. I think she'll be OK. They stopped the internal bleeding and pumped some more blood into her."

"Hope she comes through," Pallavi said sincerely. "And if you ever need to talk, I'm always here." She turned and her round eyes went rounder. "Holy cow! That your boyfriend?" she asked. Shikha saw Karthik. For a moment he looked like a predator. Severe, dangerous, his gaze focused on her like a laser. "Man! What I wouldn't give to have a guy look at me the way he is devouring you. Your man to die for?"

Shikha barely registered Pallavi's question. She wasn't prepared for the sudden impact of sensation, like a punch in the stomach. The element of

danger had always been a part of his personality and the full strength of it was blasting her now as his gaze swept down her before locking on her own. She swallowed in an uncharacteristic display of awkwardness. "Hey," she said, trying to appear casual. She tried to look away from him but couldn't. His eyes smiled in response. After a polite round of introductions and farewells, they walked back towards the bike. "Your guy left?" she asked, referring to the cop who had been assigned to her that morning.

"Yeah, I sent him once I got here. How was your day?"

"Tiring. I was too sleepy to pay attention and boss put me on a wringer. I didn't want to talk about Preeti so I laid low and took it." Once he had his helmet on and started the bike, she hopped behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist, something in her relaxing for the first time that day. She sighed then remembered. "There is a supermarket beside APS. I need you to stop there for a minute." He did stop there but when he got down along with her, she shook her head. "You can wait here. It won't take me more than a minute."

"I think I'll come along," he said in that cop voice of his.

She looked around and decided only bluntness would work with him. "I need to buy sanitary napkins. Do you still want to come along?"

That stopped him short as if he didn't know what to do or say. She grinned. Yeah, bluntness definitely worked. She took two steps into the store before he caught her arm, halting her. "I'll be at the billing counter. I'll see you there in half a minute."

Shikha grabbed a basket and flew through the aisles until she found the right one. She tilted her head up and went on her toes to reach the pack that she wanted. Then spotting a similar one on the lower aisle, she quickly bent and grabbed it when she felt a sudden burst of pain on her lower arm and a body jolting her from the side. She turned swiftly in that direction and holding on to her bleeding arm, screamed, "*Karthik!*"

And found herself wrapped in his tight bear hug before her scream ended. "Did you see anyone?" he asked, rapidly scanning the surroundings.

"Are you sure you didn't seeing anything else?" Karthik asked for the fourth time, pacing in the hall as she sat in the couch back at her home.

"Someone pushed me. When I turned, all I saw was a figure disappearing to the next aisle. Dark grey jacket with a hood. That's all I could get." she repeated for the fourth time, closing her eyes tiredly. It was raining outside

again, she thought distractedly. At least she wouldn't have to feel guilty of neglecting her plants. Nature was taking care of them.

To say that she was shaken up was putting it mildly. Tremors had been wracking her body all the way to the hospital where the doctor had given a local anesthetic before placing four neat stitches on her forearm. She really didn't know what happened. One minute she was picking up her regular brand of sanitary napkins and next was holding on to her bleeding arm while Karthik blocked all exits of the supermarket before calling Salim into the scene. Other customers had gathered around, watching the spectacle. Ruhi had been a surprise. She had rushed forward and held her hand in an effort to stop the bleeding before quickly wrapping her scarf around it. Once Salim entered the scene, he and Karthik had conferred with the store manager for a few minutes before the manager led Salim towards the back of the store. Thanking Ruhi, Karthik had hustled Shikha to the nearest polyclinic.

Shikha fingered the bandage on her arm. It wasn't hurting. Probably because of whatever the doctor had given her but tomorrow was going to be a real bitch, she thought. She opened her eyes to look at his stern face, flashing eyes and ticking jaw.

"It's not your fault," she said gently.

He got to his feet. "Someone tried to hurt you. I was right there, not twenty feet away when it happened. *Don't* tell me it's not my fault."

"Considering that you ended up buying those things for me along with the doctor's prescription, I should've just let you come along with me," she mumbled. "Has he been following me? How would he know otherwise? I mean I didn't tell anyone that I would be going there."

He resumed his pacing. "Something is not right. I had an eye out. Didn't notice anyone following us. And even if someone did, it was awfully stupid and extremely bold to attack you in a supermarket with so many people milling about, not to mention the security cameras."

"You think the cameras would've caught anything?"

"I didn't find a camera in that aisle. But I think there are six of them including the ones near the billing counter. Salim is looking at them right now."

Shikha nodded and tried to smile. "Thank you Karthik. Some neighbor I've turned out to be, huh! You know when you moved in and used to come in at odd hours in that bike, not allowing me to sleep or do my gardening in peace, I thought you were out on a mission to destroy all my joy. But now looks like..." she shrugged. "You were being the good cop and a neighbor, helping me out a little not realizing what you were getting yourself into..."

“Stop!” he said. It was like the crack of a whip. Crouching down in front of her on his heels, he cupped her face between his hard, calloused palms and looked into her eyes. “I am not being neighborly so put that thought out of your head Shikha Bose. I know you are not ready to hear this. I know this is not the time or the place. But I’m going to say it any way. I have fallen in love with you.”

Shock almost felled her. She jerked in his arms but he didn’t let go. So she caught and held on to his wrists. “No. I...”

“Shut up and listen to me. I know I’m not the only one. You feel it too but you don’t want to acknowledge. You’re so sure we don’t have a future together that you won’t even consider the possibility of one. But get something into your head right now. You think once this case is solved, we’ll be back to being just neighbors.” He shook his head without taking his eyes away from hers. “Not going to happen. I love you and soon, you will learn to trust me.”

Shikha pushed his hands away and got up, fear riding her high. It was one thing to fear for her life. Quite another to fear for her heart. Right now she was in danger of losing one or both. “I-I don’t. I don’t love you.”

“Look at me while you say it and I’ll back off,” he stated calmly. She tried. She really did. She looked at him and opened her mouth. But the words just wouldn’t come. Point made, he swiped his thumb over the screen. “Salim. Anything?”

“I was just about to call you. You better come.”

“Who?”

“Vittal Rao, Pravin Patel and Arnab Das.”

“All three?”

“Yes. When is her brother scheduled to arrive?”

“His flight landed. He’s on his way.”

Chapter Fourteen

Preeti kept surfacing to consciousness, like a float bobbing up and down in the water. At first her awareness was fragmented. She could hear voices in the distance, though she couldn't make out any words, and a soft beeping noise. She was also aware of something in her throat, though she didn't realize it was a tube. She had no concept of where she was, or even that she was lying down. The next time she bobbed up, she could feel smooth cotton beneath her and recognized the fabric as sheets. The next time she managed to open her eyes a slit, but her vision was blurry and darkness engulfed her once again. There was pain, but it was at a distance. The tube was gone from her throat now. She vaguely remembered it being removed, which hadn't been pleasant. She thought she saw a flurry of white coats. Hospital. She was in a hospital, she realized. Lights were sometimes very bright and dull at other times. Gradually her dominion over her body began to return, as she fought off the effects of anesthesia and drugs. With the return of consciousness, though, came the pain. It crept ever nearer as the fog of drugs receded.

She managed to make a weak gesture by moving her fingers, and croak out a single word. "Jai."

Someone, a nurse, smiled at her and said in a low soothing voice. "Welcome back. Your husband is right outside. Just hang in there and I'll send him in."

Preeti tried to nod but gave up as it seemed to take too much of an effort. Her drooping eyelids fluttered as the door made a slight swishing noise and she saw a figure slowly walking towards her. Her eyes widened. It was Jai but it didn't look like him. Dark circles under his sunken eyes, unshaven face that looked thin, almost gaunt, wrinkled clothes... My God! What happened? She moved her lips to talk but all she could croak was the same one word. "Jai."

He came closer, closer still. Until he was standing right beside the bed. As she watched, his eyes filled up. Lifting a trembling hand, he touched her forehead. "Hey."

Preeti tried to smile. Wetting her dry, parched lips, she uttered, "Hey!"

The hand on her forehead slid until it was cupping her cheek. "Welcome back!"

"Wha' 'appened?" she accompanied the question with a slight hand movement.

"You met with an accident," Jai kept his voice low, soothing, not wanting to scare or confuse her. He wanted to pick her up and hug her tight, smother her face with kisses, run his hands over her to reassure that she was here. Back

with him. He didn't do any of those things. "Don't worry," he said instead. "You'll be back to normal in no time."

"Accident..." Preeti tried to recall but her mind was too slow and numb with the drugs. She gave up after a few moments. "When?"

"Friday night. Today is Tuesday morning."

Unbelievably her lips formed a smile that spread across her face before reaching her eyes. She blinked, gesturing him to come closer. He leaned forward, taking her hand, the one that wasn't attached to the IV into his and placed a tender kiss on her open palm. "You seem to look worse than I do," and looked pleased that her speech was clearer. Then her brow wrinkled as tension crept back. "Were you hurt too? Is that why..." her fingers left his hand to trace his thin, pale face.

"Shhh. Relax. I'm fine. Not a scratch I promise you. Hey, your mom and dad are here. Want to see them? They're right outside," he sought to divert her.

"Must've been bad if they're here too," she tried to smile, drowsiness already drawing her back into its embrace. "You need to shave," she mumbled, eyes closing.

Shikha smiled her good morning to one of her colleagues at APS, hoping it covered her frazzled nerves. She had worn a full sleeved navy blue shirt to hide the bandage on her arm. Tan colored trousers, flat sandals and slim wristwatch completed her attire. Her fauji dada was right beside her, trying his level best not to look out of place in the corporate environment. But one look at him, even a rank stranger would spot him for what he was. Army. The erect posture, not to mention the army hairstyle were a dead giveaway. Added to those was the way he looked at others. Like a sniper searching for his target to lock on and press the trigger, oh so slowly. He was almost as tall as Karthik, but not as broad. Since he specialized in hand to hand combat, she wasn't worried about that. But it didn't stop her from wishing none of this had never happened.

"Don't worry about me, I have my tab and newspapers," Saket said, pulling up the chair opposite to hers to park himself. "Do what you gotta do and try to forget that I'm here."

"Easier said than done," she muttered.

"How is your friend Preeti doing? That was her husband on the phone, right?"

Shikha's smile was relieved. "Yeah. She is conscious now. Spoke to him too." Jai's relief and joy had been obvious when he had called her. *Your friend is*

going to be OK Shikha. I'm going home now for some shower and shave. Wife's orders, he'd said laughing. "What were you and Karthik talking just before we left?"

He shrugged. "Just some last minute instructions."

"What do you think of him?" she asked abruptly.

"Karthik?" He asked. She nodded. "Quiet. Intense. Watchful. A warrior who uses his brain and brawn. Can't say much since.."

"He proposed," she said, not looking at her brother, instead choosing to busy herself with her laptop.

Saket leaned forward. "When?"

"Yesterday. Just before you came."

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing," she shrugged.

"Do you like him Choti?"

Her brother wasn't the one to beat around the bush, she thought. "It's irrelevant." Since she couldn't lie to him, she tried to prevaricate. It didn't work.

He sighed. "He doesn't seem to be the kind who would say things lightly." Initially he had been relieved that his sister wasn't left broken hearted by any of the three bastards. But as time went by he had begun to realize that they had done something worse. They had broken her morale. Her ability to trust. She just didn't believe anyone would want her for herself. That she could be that special someone to a guy. "I'll talk to him," he said.

"No," she said swiftly. "I don't think...I'm sure it'll fade off soon enough and he is not misbehaving or anything..." she sighed, running a slightly trembling hand over her forehead. "Dada, just let it go. I have enough things on my plate right now, don't you think?"

"Shikha?" It was APS head honcho, Naresh Nadar.

Shikha straightened up. "Good morning sir."

"Morning. How are you?"

"Good sir. Uh, this is my brother, Captain Saket Bose." She quickly made the introductions.

Pleasantries taken care of, Naresh continued, "You take care and let me know if you need anything. I'm getting nightmares and I can't imagine what you're

going through.” His tone was low, so as not to be overheard. CEO walking up to an employee for a chat wasn’t unusual at APS of course but that didn’t stop people from darting interested glances their way. “Salim informed me that Preeti Singh is out of danger. I’m planning to visit her in the hospital tomorrow. In the meanwhile, let her family know that if there is anything APS can do for them, all they have to do is ask.” He shook hands once again with Saket. “Hope this gets resolved soon Captain.”

“So what have we got so far?” Karthik asked, forcing his fury and agitation out of his mind so that he can focus. The fact that this case was personal was beginning to get to him no matter how hard he tried to push it away.

“We interviewed all three,” Salim read out the report. “Arnab came with one of his colleagues and had been with him all the time. The colleague vouches for it and so do the security cameras. They were in the grocery section. Timeline checks out.”

“Vittal Rao was there with his daughter. Ice cream section,” Karthik muttered. “He said he was offended that we would even think of questioning him, an upstanding citizen.”

“Considering his history, a certain body part of his was definitely standing up,” Salim snickered. “Patel was there in the heat and eat food section. Didn’t move from those two aisles until one of our guys spotted him and led him to us. Rest of the customers all checked out and accounted for. A couple of them are from APS but they have joined recently and were a part of a group.”

“Did we find the knife?”

“Nope and none were wearing any kind of hooded grey jacket either.”

“Dammit!” Karthik shouted, smashing his fist on the table. “How the bloody hell can he vanish into thin air?” Running an agitated hand through his cropped hair, he paced the den.

“Karthik, none of them even looked like they had the balls to pull off something like this.”

That stopped Karthik’s pacing. “What if we’re looking at it the wrong way?” he said abruptly.

“Wrong how?”

“That post is what triggered this guy, right?” Salim nodded. “We’re working under the assumption that he doesn’t qualify one or all the points and he is enraged at the women for pointing it out.” Salim nodded again. “What if he is enraged because he meets all the points?”

“What?” Salim gaped then caught on. “He is pissed off because he is a man to die for yet no one is dying for him, figuratively speaking?”

“Or maybe he was dumped despite having everything. Looks, money, faithfulness, sincerity...”

“You’re saying the epitome of manhood has turned into a psychotic killer?”

“Think about it. You love a woman for years. Are faithful to her, take very good care of her, love her. You are comfortably settled professionally, earn well and also pleasure her in bed on a daily basis. Yet the woman leaves you for someone else.”

“And love turns to hatred,” Salim finished. “He starts thinking the women are lying bitches. They make these rules but don’t follow them. It’s never enough for them. Damn!” he swore. “We’ve to go through the employee files again.”

Karthik was already at his laptop. “Look for someone hardworking. No complaints work-wise, punctual, no non-sense type...” He shook his head. “Engio edho seriaelle Salim.” *Something is not right somewhere Salim.*

“You’ll figure it out. You always do,” Salim was confident.

“Where are the fingerprints? Mukund?” Karthik shouted for his subordinate.

“He is talking to those guys sir,” a fellow team member replied.

“Jai beta, here you go. Now, sit and eat your lunch properly. Everything is fine now. Your Ritu will be home in a few days.”

Jai looked at the steaming hot food and back at his mother in law. She had come home along with him, leaving Preeti’s father at the hospital and while he had a long, hot shower and a long overdue shave, she had cooked for him. “Thank you Maaji and she is your Preet long before she became my Ritu,” he said with a smile and dug in.

For the first time since the accident, the thought and sight of food wasn’t revolting him. But it would be a while before he slept through the night. Right now the sight of Preeti falling under his car was jerking him out every time he closed his eyes. Preeti’s mom watched her son in law eat and sighed in relief. She had been worried about her daughter’s married life after the previous visit. But apparently she had been overreacting as usual. Jai was a good guy. He was as crazy about her daughter as ever. The last couple of days they had been worried sick not only about Preeti but also about Jai. He had been in pieces and no amount of pleading, reasoning, even scolding would make him move away from that ICU.

“I’ve put a load in the washing machine,” she said, folding the dried clothes. “We can leave for the hospital whenever you are ready.” She got up and went into the guest bedroom. When she came back, she had something in her hand. “Beta, this was in that hospital cover, along with Preeti’s clothes,” she said and extended a silver bracelet.

Frowning, Jai took the bracelet. “In the hospital cover?”

His mother in law nodded. “Maybe the hospital people put someone else’s in the cover by mistake.”

Maybe. Or... Was it... “Maaji, are you sure this one was in that cover?”

“Yes Jai. The dress was totally ruined so I wanted to throw it away. When I emptied the cover, this one fell out along with her watch and earrings.”

“And those were hers?”

“Yes. The earrings you had gifted her for the wedding and the watch, her dad had given her when she got the job. I remember them well. I’ve kept them both... Jai, what happened?”

Leaving the food half eaten, he got up. “Nothing Maaji. I just need to make a call. We’ll leave soon after that.” Without another word he took the bracelet and went into his study to call Karthik. “Karthik? Jai here. Yeah, Preeti is fine. Listen, I’m sending you the picture of a bracelet. It was among Preeti’s clothes that she wore on that day. But it’s not hers. Her backpack was put in my car before we shifted her into the ambulance so it can’t be that she found someone else’s and took it with her to return it or whatever. Yes, I’m 200% sure it’s not hers. It’s a silver bracelet and Preeti is allergic to silver. Yeah. I’m sending it now.”

Karthik disconnected the call and opened his WhatsApp to check the image. Jai was right, he thought, zooming the picture. Silver bracelet with interconnecting butterflies. Definitely not something a man would wear. Thoughts raced one after the other. It was not Preeti’s and it wasn’t a man’s. Either Preeti had someone else’s bracelet in her hand at the time that she was pushed or...she had grabbed and pulled it from the killer’s hand just before she fell. If she was allergic to the metal why have it with her at all? That meant... holy shit!

“Where is Mukund?” he shouted at the whole room.

Mukund grabbed something from the printer and ran up to him. “Fingerprints sir.”

Karthik snatched the paper and scanned it quickly. *The print does not match anyone in the system. However, basing on the epidermal ridge density found*

in the partial fingerprint left at the scene of crime, it can be concluded with 75% accuracy that it belongs to a female of Indian origin.

“A woman!” he said to himself. “What?” Salim looked up from his report.

Karthik waved the report. “The fingerprint belongs to a woman. And we just found a bracelet in Preeti’s belongings that doesn’t belong to her. A feminine bracelet.”

There was dead silence in the room; then Salim said, “You gotta be kidding!” After being in the police service for so long, pretty much nothing surprised them anymore but this one had come out of nowhere. “You’re saying a woman...Ya Khuda!” Salim looked lost for words and Karthik knew he was thinking about the way Siya’s body had been mutilated. “We excluded the female employees,” he said, aghast. “But why would a woman... That post was a pro-woman one.”

“We need to go back to the supermarket video footage.” he muttered, striding towards the video room. He stopped abruptly and whirled towards Salim. “There was a woman from APS who helped Shikha. Wrapped her scarf around the wound, held her hand... Fucking son of a bitch I thanked her Salim!”

Salim sidestepped Karthik and started the video. “Let’s see where she was during the attack.”

“Ruhi,” Karthik got the name out of his memory bank. Mukund, reading his thoughts, ran back to get his laptop. Scrolling through the list from APS database, he found two Ruhis. The first one was over fifty five, married with two kids. He struck that one off and clicked open the second one. “Ruhi Anurag Sahni. Age, 27, single, works in HR.” He looked up. “That’s how Siya knew her. That’s why she opened the door for her. Ruhi was her colleague. And that’s how Ruhi got all the contact information. It was practically at her fingertips. She had spoken to both of them after Siya’s death which Shikha found pretty surprising because social niceties were not her thing.” He read through the file. “There are several complaints regarding her attitude. Mostly from women. Damn!”

“Karthik,” Salim called out, his attention already on the screen. Both of them watched the videos from different cameras. They saw Ruhi enter the supermarket, her head swirling this way and that, searching for something. Or someone. “Grey coat with a hood,” he noted. Then she disappeared. Only to appear later at the billing counter where he had taken Shikha after her attack. There was no jacket though. She must have dumped it in the clothes section, he thought. They watched her grip Shikha’s hand and tie the scarf on the injury.

“There, stop,” Karthik said at the point where he had thanked Ruhi and walked away with Shikha. “Zoom in on her Salim. A little more. There. See that?” Both of them saw Ruhi head tilted to the side, looking at her hand.

“It’s as if she is fascinated by the blood on her hand,” Salim observed.

“Shikha’s blood.”

“And she seems to be in no hurry to clean it off. Damn Iyer, this one is crazy in more ways than one.”

“Shikha is at APS,” Karthik said, alarm clawing his gut. Both men looked at each other before running towards the jeep, calling out to the rest of their team. Karthik took out his phone with one hand while he jabbed the sirens on with the other. He had to reach Shikha. Or Saket.

“Talk is that my boss is quitting,” Shikha said, coming back to her seat after a small chat with a few of her colleagues.

“What do you guys do when someone quits? Hire a totally new person or promote the one next in line?”

“Depends. Our boss plays musical chairs most of the time,” she grinned. “Everyone’s role gets changed then and everything is all over the place for a couple of weeks because everyone is new to their role.”

“So your role is going to change too?”

“Yeah. If he goes ahead with his resignation then I’ll be taking up the role of GM.”

“Promotion then,” Saket smiled. “That’s great Choti!”

“Let’s not count the chicks before they hatch dada. And I’m thinking of a job change too. Anyway, let’s see...”

“Shikha?”

Shikha found Ruhi standing beside her cubicle, twisting the handle of her handbag, looking more than a little agitated. In the last few days, especially after the way Ruhi had helped her out the previous evening, Shikha’s opinion of her had started to change a little. Soften a bit. “Hey Ruhi. Everything OK?”

“Yeah, I mean... Can you come with me to the restroom please?” She darted a quick look at Saket. “I... I need some help.”

“Sure,” Shikha agreed although she was confused. What kind of a help did this woman need that she wanted her to come to the restroom along with her? Female problem? Shrugging, she got up to follow her. Seeing her dada fall

into step beside her, she stopped. “We’re going to the restroom,” she muttered. “You can’t come in there.”

He merely shrugged. Then eyeing both women, he backed off a little. “I’ll wait in the corridor.”

“Yeah, you do that.”

With a small wave and a wink, Shikha went with Ruhi while Saket sat in one of the chairs in the corridor with a crossword puzzle. He had solved the third one when he heard a few women grumbling about the locked restroom door but ignored it until it struck him that the restrooms in corporate offices resembled those in a mall. A hall with washbasins and mirrors and cubicles with doors. His train of thought scattered when his phone rang.

“Yes Karthik?”

“Where is Shikha?”

“In the restroom. Why?”

Karthik’s breath sighed out in relief. “Listen. The attacker is a woman. Her name is Ruhi and she works in the HR. I’m on my way...”

Saket shot out of his chair. “Shikha just went into the restroom along with a girl named Ruhi.”

Chapter Fifteen

The bottom dropped out of the Karthik's stomach. With one hand he gestured the driver to plough through the traffic, a distant part of his mind thanking the fact that they were in the Whitefield office that day and not at the HQ, which was in Shivajinagar. And people in recent times were more conscious and reacted positively to the sound of a siren. Three police jeeps wailing simultaneously one behind the other certainly got them moving real fast. Signals were ignored while autos and two wheelers side stepped and four wheelers either stopped or got out of the way. How much time has lapsed? Karthik checked his watch. Thirty seconds since Saket disconnected the call. Was Shikha safe? Siya died from strangulation. According to the postmortem report, even if she hadn't been strangled and stabbed, the initial blow to the head had been so severe that she wouldn't have survived for more than few hours. He tried not to think of what Ruhi had done to Siya with a knife. And it had taken just one slash and Preeti had been fighting for life.

With a vile curse, he told Salim to direct an ambulance to APS premises and made another call. To the CEO. He quickly outlined the situation. "Get someone out there as fast as you can. Saket is already there. If Shikha is alive, the ambulance is on the way." He had to force himself to breathe before he could continue. "If she is not..." he squeezed his eyes shut, locked his jaw and completed the sentence. "If she is not, make sure no one tampers the evidence. Ruhi is armed. Warn your guys."

"OK." Naresh Nadar didn't waste time with more words. Thirty seconds later, the security personnel were split in two groups. One took the lift while the second one ran towards the stairs that would take them to the fifth floor and the restrooms located in the corner of that floor. The head of security locked down the rest of the building, including the elevators.

Stupid dumb bitch, Ruhi silently snickered. Shikha fell for the ruse so easily! And no one had been able to guess. Not even that guy who was now in the corridor waiting patiently for them to come back. Who was he? Another pitiful lover, she dismissed. Of the three bitches this one was most like that woman who had been called as her mother. Vandana. Not caring what the others thought of her, did whatever she liked and damn the consequences her family was left to face. Shikha was the same. Just look at the way she shamelessly went about even after making and breaking off with three different men! Four if you counted that muscle bound bodyguard. Five if you

add the one in the corridor. Making poor men trust her and use them until she had her fill before discarding them like yesterday's trash. And making a checklist as if the men were machines with no feelings. That hurt. That hurt so much. And whoever dares to hurt her or her father would be punished. Should be punished. Vandana was out of her reach. But as Ruhi grew up she realized there were a lot of women like Vandana. Mean, selfish bitches who hurt people without an ounce of regret. Like these three bitches. But no more. Now she found a way to silence their bitchiness permanently. From now on whoever dared to hurt her would know how it felt to be hurt. They would know the same pain but in a way that would give her pleasure. Her body slowly started to rock back and forth. Controlling it was not easy but she did it. She always did. She had work to do. Her fingers went into her handbag, tightening around the handle. She frowned at the dampness of her palms. Of course she wasn't scared. She did it before, didn't she? Twice. But the other two hadn't been looking at her the way Shikha was. Straight, unwavering, slightly frowning.

Shikha didn't know what Ruhi wanted. She wanted help but now the woman was zoning out on her. Reminding herself that Ruhi was the one who had helped her, she summoned her patience and even managed a smile.

"So, what do you need Ruhi? I have a couple of napkins in my bag if that's what your problem is." Shikha frowned as she saw Ruhi rocking back and forth like she was about to fall. But she didn't look sick. She looked...angry. What the hell! "Listen, either talk or I leave. I have work to do."

"You shouldn't have done it," Ruhi's voice was low. Almost like a whisper.

"Shouldn't have done what?" Unease slithered through Shikha's spine. She took an involuntary step back. "What are you talking about?"

"You shouldn't have made that disgusting post!" Whisper became raspy. Eerily familiar. Unease quickly turned into blind terror. Shikha knew that voice. She stared at long, deadly looking knife in Ruhi's hand. She heard the same ghostly voice again coming out of Ruhi. "Punished. Shameless women won't go unpunished. You need to be punished."

"You?" Shikha half-whispered. "It is you!" She darted a glance at the door to freedom. It was bolted at the top. And Ruhi was standing between her and the door, a creepy glitter in her eyes and a twisted expression on her face.

"You shouldn't live," she rasped. "You should die. People like you shouldn't live."

Shikha darted another glance at the knife. It trembled in Ruhi's hand before firming. Shikha inched to the side, trying to move towards the door. If she

could just get herself to the other side of Ruhi... Her dada was right outside but he didn't know. Karthik was just a phone call away but he didn't know either. Everyone including herself thought it was a guy. She only had herself to protect herself from the monster who had killed Si and almost killed Reet. No, she wasn't alone. She had the training Karthik taught her. She wasn't going to give up. Time for Shikha Bose to take care of herself for him, she decided. The vision of Siya's lifeless body in that mortuary and Preeti hooked up to all those machines in the ICU filled her with so much rage that it almost consumed her.

Shikha wasn't aware of lunging forward. Ruhi raised the knife, ready to slash. Bending low at the waist, Shikha ploughed into Ruhi, making her stumble and scream in rage. Shikha felt the first slash of knife on her back as Ruhi swung it in an arc. But the angle of attack didn't give her a chance to plunge it into Shikha. Ruhi stiffened and recovered her balance only to have Shikha straighten up and deliver a solid punch to her face. Ruhi screamed in agony and fury. Ignoring the screaming pain of her back, Shikha used that split second to try to run for the door. Ruhi's arms grabbed her from behind, one arm still holding the knife. Shikha reacted, driving her elbow back into Ruhi's gut as hard as she could. Ruhi whooshed out her breath in a violent explosion. Shikha ducked out of her hold, whirled and poked her in her eyes. She didn't have a proper angle but managed to connect squarely on one eye. Ruhi attacked her simultaneously. Shikha felt another slash on her upper arm. As Ruhi covered her injured eye with one hand, Shikha caught hold of the one holding the knife and bit into it with all her strength. The taste of blood in her mouth made her want to retch but she controlled it and in the next moment found herself stumbling back and then forward as Ruhi caught hold of her shirt collar, turned and threw her against the wall, the knife still firmly in her now bitten and bleeding hand. Shikha's forehead hit the wall and bounced back. Her vision went dim. But she recovered enough to turn and lunge sideways before the knife could pierce her a third time and landed another punch to Ruhi's ribs.

Growling, Ruhi went down, pulling Shikha along with her. Tangled together, both of them struggled. Shikha pinned Ruhi's hand, the one that was holding the knife with one of her hands. Ruhi twisted wildly, trying to break free, the fingers of her free hand going for Shikha's neck. Shikha reared back, away from those clawing fingers, a distant part of her mind registering repeated loud noises, like something hard forcefully hitting something that was equally hard. Someone was trying to break the door open. Bracing her legs on either side of Ruhi, Shikha pushed herself to standing position and started to run towards the door only to flail her hands helplessly in the air before landing hard on her front as Ruhi caught hold of her ankle and pulled. Twisting, she

lifted her free ankle and kicked Ruhi in her face with her sandaled foot. Hard. Ruhi's howl of pain coincided with another loud crash. Shikha swirled her head in time to see the door splinter and fall apart. Before she could blink her dada was upon them both. He disarmed Ruhi, shoved her onto her stomach, wrenching her arms behind her back, tying them together with a nylon rope that he pulled out from his pocket.

Dazed, she could only sit there and ask, "Where did you get the rope from?"

"One of the last minute instructions from Karthik," he said. His smile of relief disappeared just as quickly. Blood was oozing rapidly from the wounds at her back and upper arm. "I need help!" he shouted for the group of people rapidly gathering in the corridor. He left Ruhi to the security personnel who were streaming in, totally ignoring her loud screams and crouched in front of Shikha. "Choti, you're bleeding," he said, pressing his hand to the wound at her back. A girl from Shikha's team pushed through the crowd and barged in, quickly tying her dupatta around her waist to stop the blood flow while he tied his hanky around her arm.

Shikha yelped, "Hurts dada! Everything hurts," she muttered. "Karthik," she whispered, closing her eyes.

She was vaguely aware of being stretched out on the floor, then being lifted and laid down again, this time face down. Someone was slicing open her shirt at the back. She tried to move but realized she couldn't. Then she felt herself floating, jolting, moving. She heard Ruhi's hoarse cries and curses. Everyone was talking simultaneously, the words jumbling in her head. Then Karthik was there, his face pale as he grabbed her hand and held it tight in his. Sighing, she gave in to the darkness that was sucking her in. The next time she came to, she was still on her stomach, her hand was still in Karthik's and sirens was blaring somewhere real close. She tried to move again and winced again.

"Karthik," she moaned.

"I'm right here Chellam," he said, bending low, bringing his face into her line of vision. "You're in an ambulance. We're taking you to hospital. You'll be fine."

"R-Ruhi," she whispered, still numb. "It's Ruhi."

"I know Chellam," his fingers brushed the side of her face that was turned towards him, tracing the bump on her forehead where she had hit the wall. "Salim has arrested her. He's there now. You just relax. We got her. We got her," he repeated.

"I did it," she said. "I did just like you told me to. I didn't give up. I stayed

and fought Karthik.”

“I know,” he bent and kissed her forehead. “You did great Shikha Bose. I’m proud of you.”

“Dada tore the door open,” she said, her lips tilted in a small half smile.

“It’s a wonder I didn’t kill that bitch.” Shikha heard her dada’s voice from the other side of her.

“Dada?” she said, trying but unable to turn her head to the other side.

“I’m right here. Don’t try to move Choti. You’ll set off the bleeding again.” His arm touched her shoulder gently before withdrawing. Her breath shuddered out and she closed her eyes, letting the blessed darkness envelope her once again. Saket looked at Karthik who was gazing at his sister with a tortured expression on his face. “Don’t beat yourself up,” he advised quietly.

“I didn’t figure out until it was almost too late,” Karthik rubbed his face, his voice raw. “We assumed it was a guy. That was our biggest mistake.”

“Yeah but you put it together and came up with the name in time to warn me and the security guys. You called in the ambulance. Most important of all, you took the threats and calls seriously from the beginning. You taught her how to defend herself. In my book you’ve done a great job.” Karthik didn’t acknowledge the praise but the tightness around his eyes slowly relaxed. Saket saw his sister moan in pain, her grip on Karthik’s hand tightening. “You better not hurt her Iyer or I’ll pull out your guts and use them as fish bait,” he warned.

“Fair enough,” Karthik agreed.

“Yes, I remember the Sahni family,” David said, his voice shaky with age.

Karthik exhaled. Finally someone who could shed some light into Ruhi and her convoluted behavior. Irrespective of the method of interrogation, they couldn’t get anything out of Ruhi except that she was a demented female who firmly believed the three women didn’t deserve to live. Evidence was airtight so not many were actually interested in the woman’s thought process. But Karthik couldn’t let go of the why in her behavior. He began digging into her background and it led to this small town in Bihar. The only one whom he could get hold of was the man David. Retired firefighter, who had been in active duty around the time Ruhi and her parents lived in that town. It had been a long shot but it worked.

“I felt sorry for the father and daughter but there wasn’t anything anyone could do about it,” he continued.

“Can you explain further? I understand it was a very long time ago but...”

“Somethings can’t be forgotten very easily if you know what I mean. Anurag Sahni belonged to a rich, well-educated family. He came up in his life on his own capabilities. Modest, hardworking and very humble. Never one to hesitate in giving a helping hand to people in need. He was the one who recommended two of my nephews and got them into good jobs so I was on a first name basis with him.” He stopped to clear his throat. “He fell in love and got married to a woman named Vandana. A beautiful woman. Initially everything had been fine. They even had a daughter.”

“Ruhi Sahni.”

“Yes. Ruhi. But his wife Vandana...she wasn’t a good woman. About a year after Ruhi was born, her affairs started. She didn’t divorce Anurag. She wanted his money, I guess.” Karthik could feel the old man shaking his head. “I will never understand some people. Anurag and Vandana were among those. Her affairs never lasted long and every time she went back to him he took her back.” David coughed some more, ending with a wheeze. “You have to understand. This is a small town and almost twenty years back...people talked. I asked Anurag why he stayed with that woman. Why couldn’t he just divorce her? Lord above wouldn’t blame him. But he was obsessed with her. You wouldn’t understand the kind of love I feel for my wife, he said. She loves me, that’s why she keeps coming back, he insisted. Then one day she left him and their daughter and never came back. Started living with another rich guy in this very town.”

Karthik could imagine what that would’ve done to the man and his daughter.

“Not long after that, that guy and Vandana died in a fire accident. Anurag lost his mind after that. He kept insisting his wife would come back for him. Refused to leave his house, refused to talk to anyone, his only link to the outside world was his daughter Ruhi. She had been all of fourteen years old I think. Yes. I remember. She was to give her board exams the year her mother died. He was rich so I guess that took care of her education costs and things like that but it also meant she and her father were tied to this town. She had been too young to manage anywhere else on her own.”

“They didn’t have any other family?”

“I-uh I don’t know much about Vandana’s family although I heard that her father passed away after her marriage. And once her behavior came to light, his family distanced and disappeared from the picture.”

“So Ruhi was left alone to take care of her unstable father,” Karthik concluded.

“Yes. People in this town didn’t do her any favors either. Mostly women. I never can understand that nature you know? In my opinion if men are physically crueler, women are definitely meaner. The child was left to face their taunts and snide remarks. Her resemblance to her mother didn’t help. Women talk and their daughters listen. There were no friends for her at school or college. Her school years were particularly bad because Vandana had been alive. It was a girls’ school and they were mean but as time went by Ruhi became meaner. If anyone taunted or talked bad, especially about her father, she gave it back to them. Tearing their clothes, locking them in the bathrooms, burning their books... you name it, she did it until people learnt to keep away from her.” His sigh ended on a groan. “Even after that she didn’t stop. If she saw two girls talking and they glanced in her direction in the most casual way, she assumed they were talking bad about her and her father and reacted to it. The day she finished her studies, she packed her bags, took her father and left the town. Far as I know, she never returned. Even their house... she sold it through some real estate guy.”

“Thank you for your time sir.” Disconnecting the call he looked up to see Salim walking towards him. “Any information on Anurag Sahni?”

“Yeah,” he grimaced. “Father and daughter had been living in that apartment. He was unbalanced but since he kept to himself no one in the complex objected. Then one day he apparently mistook some woman to be his wife and created a huge ruckus. The woman’s husband filed a complaint and after that the apartment committee gave her an ultimatum to either get her father admitted or leave the complex.” He referred to his notes. “She owned that apartment so guess she had no choice but to get her father admitted in an institution.”

“The stressor,” Karthik stated quietly.

“According to her neighbors, the couple who filed a complaint against Anurag Sahni vacated their apartment and moved out within that week. No one knows why. As far as anyone could tell, Ruhi Sahni’s life revolved around her work and visiting her father every evening. Even on weekends.” He sighed and closed the book. “He committed suicide last night.” After a few moments of silence, he asked, “How did your Mumbai trip go?”

Karthik shrugged. Salim knew him long enough to know what that shrug meant. “Does your Shikha know?” This time Karthik shook his head. “How is she? Has she been discharged?”

“She’s fine,” Karthik smiled a little. “Discharge is today. In fact, I’m on my way there now. See you later.” He took two steps but stopped when he heard Salim’s phone ringing.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell your parents!” Preeti said. She was still very weak and had strict instructions not to get out of the bed but was declared completely out of danger, shifted from ICU into one of the private rooms a floor higher and hoping to get discharged by the end of the week. The only bad moment had been when she had come to know that Shikha was attacked. Jai had had a hard time reassuring her that her friend was absolutely fine. But once he swore by her that Shikha’s life was in no danger, she had settled down.

“Well, my dada did,” she grumbled, drawing a small giggle from Preeti. “Their plane lands tomorrow. Honestly I don’t know why he couldn’t have waited another week...” she tried to lean back in the chair, winced, straightened and winced again.

Shikha had been brought to the same hospital as Preeti. The injury on her upper arm had been relatively minor, requiring only six stitches. But the knife slash on her back had been longer and deeper, narrowly missing her right kidney, requiring eighteen stitches and a bottle of blood. The bump on her head meant she had been put through a round of CT scan, twenty four hour observation and two day hospitalization. All this excluding the minor bruises that she gained while punching and hitting that bitch who had tried to kill her. But one advantage of being in the hospital was she didn’t have to face the media circus that was currently surrounding APS. Now that the killer was caught, the whole story was out. Including the damn cursed post of theirs. Shikha was seriously contemplating leaving the hospital in a burka and keeping it on until the heat died down and it became old news.

“He would’ve been disowned by them if he hid something like this.” Preeti retorted with a grin. “Anyway, what’s your hero saying?”

Shikha’s grumpiness disappeared. “He’s been to Mumbai the day after this happened. Had it been only three days?” Shikha asked in surprise. Preeti’s nod was wry. So much has happened that she had lost track of time. Her fingers absently traced the thick bandage wrapped around her arm. “Anyway, he went to Mumbai day before yesterday for I don’t know what.”

“Aaah, so that is the reason for your glum face,” Jai remarked with a grin as he entered Preeti’s room carrying a bunch of red roses which he extended to his wife and added a gentle kiss on her forehead as his greeting.

Bye-bye marital problems, Shikha thought, looking at the couple. At the naked devotion in his eyes and contented smile in hers. Then Jai’s comment registered. “Glum? I’m not glum. Jai Singh, there are two injured people here and only one gets the flowers?”

With a grin he brought the hand that had been behind his back forward, extending a small rectangular box of Ferrero Rocher chocolates with flourish. "Since you have no diet restriction..."

"How the hell did you know these are my favorite?" Shikha asked, grabbing the box. "Uh, thank you," she added as an after-thought, making him laugh out loud.

"I don't know...maybe because Preeti gifted you with a huge box for your last birthday?"

"And you remember that?"

Jai exhaled on a grunt. "A 48 chocolate pack that got lost and I had to order it online again? Not easy to forget something like that." Perching himself beside his wife, he said, "Back to the topic at hand, your hero is back and is on his way up. I think your brother is seeing to the discharge formalities."

Preeti waited until Shikha left the room after a round of farewells, get well soon wishes and promises to be on WhatsApp before asking her husband, "Since when did you and Shik become friends?"

"Since the night we sat in that hall, waiting, praying for your life," he said, and kissed her. He felt her smile when he gently hugged her.

"So she was pissed off because her father had been a man to die for and yet her mother hadn't stayed with them?" Shikha asked. "She thought we were like her mother?" She was back home from the hospital, relaxing in the downstairs bedroom. Her dada had gone out to get some groceries and veggies, a time that Karthik used to update her on Ruhi's case.

"Yes," Karthik said, leaning back in the chair, stretching his legs out. "From what I think, she had become paranoid. In her view, you three were like her mother, wanting someone without any intention of staying with that someone. A man like her father. I spoke to the doctor of the institution where her father had been admitted. They had put him on medication a few weeks back. He had been more aware of the surroundings but when it finally sunk into him that his wife was indeed dead, how he's been all these years..." he shrugged. "Maybe he didn't want to go on without his wife or maybe he felt guilty for what he'd put her daughter through all these years...we'll never know what made him snap and kill himself."

"I know it wouldn't have been easy living a life like that," she said thoughtfully. "Judging you by an act that you had no part in. She had been surrounded by people pointing fingers at her, either pitying her or assuming

she would grow up to be like her mother, that her father was spineless to put up with something like that...I get all that Karthik but I can't bring myself to feel sorry for her." Shikha shook her head. "Not when she took Si's life. Not when she almost succeeded in taking Preeti's life too. Scars remind us where we've been. They don't have to dictate where we're going, right?"

Karthik smiled with his eyes. "No wonder I've fallen so crazily in love with you."

She looked away. "So...umm...what happens now? I mean the court case..."

"Shikha." He waited until she was looking at him once again. "Ruhi committed suicide this morning. After she got the news about her father...I guess she lost it."

They remained silent for a few minutes. So many lives lost. So many disrupted, some ruined beyond recognition. Now they had to regroup. Rebuild from the ashes of disaster. But they would never be what they were before. At least Siya's family and Tapan got a closure. The wound would probably never heal but she hoped with time, they would accept it and try to move on. Shikha closed her eyes.

"How is your sleep?"

"OK. A few nightmares are to be expected I guess," she shrugged, then all of a sudden she got tired of evasion. "What do you want from me Karthik?"

He didn't even blink at the sudden shift in topic. "I want to marry you."

"A Tamil Iyer wants to marry a Bengali? And your family is fine with that?" She didn't shift her eyes away from his face as she probed.

"A man wants to marry the woman he has come to love. And my family is ecstatic that I'm finally going to marry someone." His lips tilted in that small half-smile of his. "Amma had almost given up on getting a marumagal (*daughter in law*) and my tambi (*brother*) has already started referring to you as manni (*sister in law*)."

"You told them about me?" she squeaked and sat upright, ignoring the pain on her back.

"Yes." He bent forward and adjusted a couple of pillows for her to lean on. "And they will be here over the weekend to talk to your parents."

"And if my parents don't agree?" she persisted, stamping down on the budding hope and bubbling joy. But there was nothing she could do about the blush rapidly spreading across her face.

His fingers traced it, ending with a glide over her lips. "Then Saket and I will

talk to them.”

So her brother approved. Somehow she wasn’t surprised. “Why didn’t you get married until now? I mean you’re 32 and you said your amma had given up...”

“My job...It comes before everything and everyone. I will not leave it and I will not compromise. That means there are no guarantees on my life. One needs to be tough to accept those facts.”

If he was in danger she didn’t know how she could handle it long term. On the other hand, her dada was doing the same thing for the country and she was proud of it. What Karthik did was no different. Yes, she would have to compromise on quite a few things like broken dates and frequent change in jobs due to his transfers but yes, he was right. She was tough. She could take it. A slow smile spread across her face, lighting up her eyes until they glowed from within.

“You think I’m tough, do you?”

He grinned and pecked her lips. “I *know* you’re tough. Oh the thing I went to Mumbai for?” she nodded. “I’ve been asked to join ATS.”

“Mumbai branch?” she asked. He nodded. “You’ve accepted?” she asked even though she knew the answer. He nodded again.

So a job change and a place change for both of them. She wasn’t a great fan of Mumbai traffic but hell, it was not as if Bangalore traffic was a cakewalk. There was only one thing she didn’t want to do. “I don’t want to get engaged,” she said firmly.

He pecked her lips again. “That’s fine with me. We’ll just get married.”

“Bengali wedding or Tamil?” This time she caught his collar and pulled him closer for something longer than a peck.

“Anything. Maybe both. I don’t care.” His fingers gripped the back of her head. “Is that a yes Shikha Bose?”

Shikha’s grin broke free. “That’s a yes Karthik Iyer. Ami tomake bhalobhasi.” *I love you.*

He hugged her as tight as her injuries would allow. “Nānum.” *Me too.* “Just one thing.” She looked up questioningly. “Don’t ever change your hairstyle.” She laughed louder, winced and laughed some more before diving back into his arms.

Epilogue

Three months later, The Oberoi, Bangalore, Deluxe suite.

“Great wedding Shik. Both versions. APS turnout was good even though you’ve already tended your resignation. Will you stand still for a second?” Preeti muttered in exasperation. “When did you learn how to wear a sari Tamil style?” she asked, giggling.

“Learn? Buds, you got to be kidding. Why would I want to learn something that I wouldn’t be doing ever again?” Shikha said with a scowl, twisting this way and that. “This is all courtesy of my mother in law and her sister. I was just the mannequin.” Preeti laughed out loud, drawing another glare from Shikha. “Damn! My butt looks fat Reet!” she said, staring bug-eyed at her reflection in the full length mirror, as Preeti giggled, caught one end and started pulling.

“I think once all these yards come off, your butt will resume its normal size.”

Sure enough it did. She was looking like her usual self. Well, her usual self in a blouse and cycling shorts since the nine yards sari didn’t need a petticoat. The jewelry had been the first to go. After the last three days, she probably wouldn’t be able to look at saris and jewelry without shuddering. First the Bengali wedding in Bangalore, then the Tamil wedding the next day in Chennai, followed by reception, followed by the second night of post Bengali wedding, *kaalratri*, which meant separate bedrooms for the couple. Then Karthik’s mom wanted them to do some puja before they left for Mumbai but since Karthik couldn’t spare anymore time off and Shikha had to collect her luggage, the venue of the puja got shifted to Bangalore. This morning they had come back to Bangalore. She had wanted Shikha to wear her wedding sari again for the occasion. One look at her mother in law’s hopeful face, Shikha had caved in and agreed. After all, it was just the once. They were going to spend the night at Oberoi and leave to Mumbai by tomorrow afternoon flight since that was all the leave Karthik could spare. Her job hunting would start once she settled down at her new home in Mumbai.

“Look at it this way. You didn’t have to deal with the floral arrangements that go with long hair,” Preeti gestured to her own long straight hair.

Shikha couldn’t resist rolling her eyes. “I can’t believe he picked a fight with his mom about my hair. I mean come on, she is a nice, gentle lady yaar and considering everything, she was warm and welcoming. And that man had to

go...”

“You know, I like the fact that his mom and dad speak in English when you’re there. It’s a small gesture but a sweet one,” Preeti remarked with a fond smile.

Preeti had still been in the hospital the day Karthik’s family had come to meet Shikha and her family, hence missed out on some major fun element of the whole event. Both sets of parents and siblings had been genuinely happy and pleased, not to mention relieved that Shikha was safe and recovering well from her injuries. No one had objected when Shikha and Karthik wanted to forgo the engagement and it had pleased them no end when the couple didn’t object for getting married twice. First in Bengali style, followed by a Tamil wedding. Shikha had wanted to wait until her friend got discharged and recovered well enough to be there. They had been OK with that too. Everything had been relatively stress-free until his mom had gently asked if she would be willing to grow her hair at least shoulder length. It had resulted in a volley of words between her and Karthik. Shikha didn’t understand any of it. Her knowledge of Tamil was limited to very few basic words. Karthik’s brother, Manohar, had laughed at her wide-eyed, slightly tense look.

“Relax manni,” he’d said, “Anna is winning the argument.”

“But what are they arguing about? My hair?” He’d nodded. “I don’t mind growing it back. Honestly,” she added hastily. “This was just more convenient...”

“Save your breath,” he replied with a grin. “Anna just said there would be no South Indian wedding if you grow your hair even an inch more.”

“Point to be noted, he didn’t say no wedding,” Preeti wriggled her eyebrows, bringing Shikha back to the present.

“As if!” Shikha snorted.

“And I can’t believe you wanted to wait until after the wedding to go ahead with you know what. No, wait. I can believe you wanted to wait but him?” It was Preeti’s turn to get the bug-eyed look until both snickered. “No re, honestly, we can coin the phrase *eating up with his eyes* to your Mr Iyer, Mrs Iyer.”

“Oh man! I’m Mrs Iyer now, aren’t I?” Shikha looked genuinely taken aback. “Wait, isn’t there a movie by that name? Mr and Mrs Iyer?”

“I don’t think there is any resemblance other than the title. *She* is the Iyer in that.”

“Well, technically now, so am I and as for him waiting, I hardly said, look but don’t touch.” And he never lost a chance to touch, she silently added. Well,

neither did she. Together they had done quite a lot in the last three months. Just not *everything*.

“That’s worse. Poor guy! Showing him the feast, allowing him a taste but no meal. And thank God you guys got to sleep the previous two nights or all this would’ve been for nothing.”

One look at each other, the friends started their laughter riot once again, this time almost collapsing on the bed but managing to stop themselves at the last nanosecond, instead falling to their knees on the carpeted beside huge king-size bed. Neither wanted to disrupt the temptingly beautiful floral arrangement on it. They weren’t die hard romantics who flapped their hands at gooey stuff but hell, who could resist red roses on creamy white sheets! In the ensuing hilarity, they totally missed out on the slight sound of the keycard being swiped or the door being pushed open.

“And here I was anticipating a white sari, complete with a glass of milk in hand,” Karthik drawled, with his hands in his trouser pockets, leaning against the wall. In his dark green shirt and cream trousers, he didn’t look like a groom except for the horizontal line of vibhuti and small round kumkum below it on his forehead.

It was a toss-up who screeched louder. Mrs Iyer or Mrs Singh. “What are you doing here?” Shikha almost yelled, instinctively swirling away, showing him her back, arms crossed over her chest.

Preeti didn’t miss the roughish look in his eyes at his bride’s very typical feminine reaction. She quickly gathered her handbag and phone. “I think he’s the one you’re supposed to spend the night with buds and that’s my cue to disappear.”

Karthik extended his hand of Preeti. “Thanks for everything Preeti.” They shook hands and then with a small grin, exchanged a small hug. “Jai is waiting for you in the lobby.”

“OK. Goodnight to you both and I’ll see you...well...when I see you.” With a wave, she practically ran out of the room, into the lift and down to the lobby, straight to her husband. “Aaah, so you were assigned the duty of dropping the groom, did you?” she asked with a grin.

“Salim’s wife looked as if she was ready to pop out her kid so I offered,” he said, looping an arm around her shoulders as they walked to their car. Having become friends with both Shikha and Karthik, Jai had actively taken part in the wedding right along with Preeti. He had even laughingly told Shikha that since his wife was on the bride’s side, he would be on the groom’s.

“You won’t believe the scene that greeted Karthik up there,” she giggled.

Jai covered her mouth. "I don't want to know. I don't need that image, no matter what it is, in my head." Preeti's giggle turned into laughter.

"I miss Siya," she said, her laughter slowly fading, leaving behind a sad smile. "She would've loved all this. She was a sucker for happily ever afters."

His arm tightened, pulling her into an almost hug. It was a good thing they were moving out of Bangalore, he thought. His wife needed a change of place and Pune would be a pleasant change. Since Shikha and Karthik were going to be in Mumbai, it hadn't been hard at all to convince Preeti. She had in fact jumped at the chance.

"You know," he said, "Once we settle down in Pune, in that nice apartment you chose, I think we should plan for a kid. What say Mrs Jai Singh?"

Her answer was there in her joyous hug and in the smile that chased away the shadows in her eyes.

It was past midnight. Shikha and Karthik lay sweaty and exhausted amid the tangled sheets and rose petals. A dim light from the lamps outside forced its way through the closed slats of the blinds, preventing the room from being pitch dark. A gentle breeze from the air conditioner wafted across her bare flesh, raising tiny goose bumps. Her body was so acutely sensitive that she imagined she could feel each fine, downy hair lifting at the slight chill. Her heart was beating in slow, heavy thumps, her veins and arteries pulsing with each beat. Karthik lay sprawled on his back, his eyes closed and his chest heaving, while she was curled against his side with her head pillowed on his shoulder. Her limbs were heavy and limp, utterly boneless. How long had it been since he came into the room? Four hours? In these four hours he had taken her three times and the first time was the only time he had been slow and gentle. With every slow caress he'd won over her body, just as he had won over her love and her trust. His ferocity had been out full force from the second time on. And as demanding as his hunger had been, her response had matched it. She had clung to him, nails digging into his back, her hips lifting eagerly to meet each thrust, and it seemed as if her fire had only fed his own. She didn't know how many times she had reached satisfaction; this last time had felt like one long swell that crested then refused to subside, so that she had been awash in sensation, drunk with pleasure.

As his breathing slowed, Karthik stirred beside her. Heaving himself up on his elbow, holding her head cradled in the crook of his arm, he smiled down at her. "I missed you," he told her, his fingers digging and ruffling her already ruffled short hair, continuing in a slow stroke down her throat, over the sweep of her collarbone, to close over her breast.

He had to leave for Mumbai a mere ten days after their marriage date got finalized. Though he did make a few trips during the last three months, it had been tough on them both. Her dad had been the only one who understood that and gave them all the privacy that he could despite her mom's flustered objections. If left to her mom, Shikha knew they would've had to content themselves with phone or worse, her mom acting as a chaperone.

She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder, her eyes closing as she luxuriated in the feel of him, warm, solid and vital. "I love you Karthik," she said softly, kissing his shoulder. "Thank you."

His eyes lost their lazy contentment as he frowned. "For what?"

She gave an awkward shrug. "For everything."

"Paithiam," he murmured softly, gliding his thumb over her cheek. *Mad*. But even in the darkness, he could see the shadows creeping into her eyes. Realized her mind had wandered again into the past.

"I miss Siya," she said, her lips trembling before firming. "She would've loved our wedding. She had been with me all through and when I'm finally..."

"Shhh," he said, and rolled on top of her, entering her with a gentle insistence that nevertheless made her catch her breath, for she was sore. He braced himself on his elbows and cradled her head in his hands. "She is with you Chellam. Will always be with you," he whispered, his voice a deep rumble. Then he looked into her eyes, smiling that half smile of his. "But left to your dad, I wouldn't have been here now."

She tilted her head to the side. "Why?"

"You came here ahead with Preeti and considering that my bike is in Mumbai, I needed someone to drop me. Your dad told your brothers." His body shook with silent laughter. "They had this disturbed, slightly horrified look on their faces..."

Her frown deepened. "But why?"

"They are your annas. I'm the guy who is going to see their little sister naked," his fingers tracked and traced her curves. "Not to mention doing other things..."

After a look of sheer disbelief, she burst out laughing. And laughed so hard, he slipped out of her. "But this guy is already married to their little sister," she pointed out, smacking his cheek with a loud kiss before running her finger over his mustache, brushing it so it curved just so.

He bent his head, tickling her with it. "A mere technicality Mrs Iyer. A mere

technicality.” His lips tasted her laughter, his love chased away the shadows in her eyes.

—x—

It has been said that time heals all wounds. I don't agree. The wounds remain. Time - the mind, protecting its sanity - covers them with some scar tissue and the pain lessens, but it is never gone. – Rose Kennedy.

Other books from the Author

With You Forever..

“No. I am neither curious nor do I care. And since it’s a business deal we just signed, I won’t say thank you. I will check with my bank tomorrow evening.” Being an illegitimate daughter, Nidhi has faced enough things in her life since her childhood which included being called a bastard in front of the whole class. So entering into some kind of contract marriage is the least of her worries..especially if it means getting the money for her mother’s treatment.

“Do you love me? I am ready to fight the world for you. But you need to tell me what’s in your heart. Do you love me?”

But she hadn’t counted on meeting Abhay Shrivastav..or falling in love with him. And it was not just the contract that was holding her back. Her past has the ability to destroy her future and the present, such as it was. The temptation to hide the shameful secret of her life gnaws her insides. But truth has a way of showing itself one way or the other.

Beyond the Past

Every scar tells a story. A story that says “I survived”. But a few scars tell the story of a wound that never really healed.

Dr. Avinash Singh has a scar from his past. A past that he got over by shutting himself off from his family, his friends and the world. Or he thought he got over, until..

Until he meets Dr Juhi, an intelligent, smart, vibrant girl whose middle name spelt ‘mischief’. Yet behind all that seemingly fun attitude lay a large heart and nerves of steel. All her strength may be required to heal Avinash’s wounds. But, will that be enough? Will Juhi be able to help Avinash really heal and get his scars to tell a different story?

Bridge Over the Chasm

Happily ever after was an unknown concept to Sana and in the heart of hearts she knew when she married Vivan that it would end in a disaster. What she never realized was how tough walking away was going to be.

With her heart in tatters but pride intact, she set about rebuilding her life from scratch.

Until..

Fate pushes her to the same person she had left behind three years ago. Was this a chance to heal the rift that seemed as wide as Grand Canyon or a chance to close that chapter of their lives once and for all?

Rendezvous with Destiny

After the death of her daughter, all Megha felt was a terrible emptiness. And a hope that she could one day see the child that she had given up in a desperate attempt to save her daughter from the terrible illness.

Then destiny sends Akash into her life. But what she didn't know was that meeting him would resurrect the half-truths, secrets and unspeakable lies that surrounded the child's birth. Because it really meant she had fallen for the man who had fathered that child of hers.

Perfect Love

Is there anything called Perfect Love?

Gaurav Tagore, a guy with a dark past who scoffs at love. Nothing matters to him except the company he and his friends had built from ground up. He works his Lethal Magic on women to get what he wants – be it their warm, eager bodies or corporate secrets. Until Sanjana enters his office and his life.

Sanjana Sinha, a girl on the run from her past who is petrified at the word – Love. Her sole focus is not to draw anyone's attention on herself while she painstakingly is rebuilding her life. Until Gaurav walks into her workspace and her life.

What do fates have in store for these two scarred souls? What would happen when they meet? When the past that they are both trying to escape from

comes to stand in front of them?

Everything I do..

“All I wanted was a son. A boy. An heir. To carry the family name and the company forward into the future. Instead I got you! Two daughters. Fit for nothing except to marry someone and walk away.”

Kajal Rathore had walked out of her home and her father after that confrontation, making a life and living it on her own terms. Away from the archaic chauvinism that made her father reject her because she was not the son he wanted.

Now her father’s flailing health has brought her back to her home. And to the company that had been in her family for generations. Once Kajal had had a dream of becoming a part of that company and now fates were handing over that dream. But to claim it, she will have to confront the father who denies her, the mother who never stood up for her, the sister who needs her and the man who wants her.

“I want you to marry Kajal. I don’t..I can’t trust her with Rathore Industries. But I don’t have a choice. But if you are beside her, I would never have to worry. Marry her and the company would be yours.”

Arjun Shekhawat was deeply indebted to his boss. The man who had been his godfather and his mentor. Refusing him was not on cards. Even when it was something as personal as marriage. After all, it was a win-win situation.

But keeping the promise meant getting close to his boss’s daughter. Close enough to win her trust, to appreciate the person that she was and the secrets that surrounded her. Close enough to realize that he had unwittingly agreed to become the weapon that would one day be used against her.

A Scarred Legacy

Dr Srikar Arora. One of the top neurosurgeons in the country. An exemplary doctor and a loner by nature. His heart was well and truly locked away behind the walls as thick as the Fort Knox. Only the man who raised him as his own

knew the reason behind his life's choices. Having been a victim of horrifying child abuse and having watched his mother bludgeoned to death by his own father, he vowed to himself that the circle of violence would end with him.

Your genetics load the gun. Your lifestyle pulls the trigger. – Mehmet Oz

He was a loaded gun. And he was determined that there would be no victims like his mother. Or himself.

One fine day in walked Saanvi Grover. The vivacious intern who was fifteen years his junior, did the impossible. She infiltrated through the tight secure walls and reached his heart with astounding ease. He fought, he dodged but he was no match to her unconditional love and unwavering faith. Too tempted and too weak to resist, he made her his under the condition that they would have no children, natural or adopted, of their own.

But fate apparently had other plans. What would he do? Leave his pregnant wife because he had vowed to protect her and the baby from himself? Or prove that love was stronger than DNA?



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