

A ROYAL AFFAIR

PREETHI VENUGOPALA



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The Sravanapura Royals Book 1



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A Royal Affair
Sravanapura Royals (Book 1)
Preethi Venugopala

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*I do not love you as if you were salt-rose, or topaz,
or the arrow of carnations the fire shoots off.
I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,
in secret, between the shadow and the soul.*

-Pablo Neruda

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Acknowledgement](#)

[Without You \(Sample Chapter\)](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[WITHOUT YOU](#)

Chapter 1

London, March 30, 2009

For Jane, the route to sanity began and ended with Indian food. The subtle flavours of its ingredients had a remarkable way of erasing bad memories and bringing back the good ones. Like a psychedelic, it took her into a world she had left reluctantly. It kept her connected to the person who had introduced the delectable cuisine to her.

She had tried to forget. But Vijay—Prince Vijay Dev Varman of the erstwhile Royal family of Sravanapura, to be precise—had proved to be one unforgettable person. All these years, she had relegated him to the farthest corner of her heart with great difficulty. Even there, he had created nothing but ruckus.

She transferred the rice and butter chicken curry she had ordered from the nearby Indian restaurant onto a plate. She ate a spoonful and immediately waded into dangerous territory. Glimpses of deep brown eyes, demanding lips and sounds of laughter surfaced and swam in her mind's eye, assaulting her senses. This was the reason she'd refrained from eating Indian food all these months. Not to mention the intolerable yearning that followed.

Yet, today it had become necessary. Memories had been prodded out. Unexpectedly.

As she was wiping down her sink after dinner, her doorbell sounded. Her Mum stood at the doorstep wearing a veritable scowl. Jane let her in, wondering what had prompted her to drive from Surrey to London on a Monday evening.

"Why is your phone switched off?" Margaret Worthington demanded the moment she entered the flat. Sniffing the air, she glowered at Jane. "Indian takeaway! Again?"

Jane looked away to avoid her glare. Why had she come today of all days?

"Would you like some tea? I was about to make some," Jane asked, attempting a change in topic. But Margaret was, after all, the indisputable warrior. No one could thwart her moves.

"Yes. But before that tell me this. When are you planning to stop torturing yourself over that Indian boy?"

“Mum! You are imagining things. It is just food. I have moved on.” Jane crossed her fingers behind her back. She won’t lie again, she promised herself. Just this time.

“You are not fooling me anymore, love. Susan told me you refused to go on a date with Harry, again. Is that how you plan to move on?”

Jane would have happily wrung the neck of her traitorous friend. But she couldn’t blame her entirely. Her mother was an expert in making people talk. Seriously, the Scotland Yard should avail her services.

“I don’t like Harry. And he is my senior, the executive editor. It won’t work. But I swear, it has nothing to do with Vijay,” she mumbled, taking quick steps towards her kitchen in a bid to escape more enquiries.

“You are a bad liar, love. Right now, I feel I’m inside an Indian house than in my British daughter’s flat.”

Jane grimaced. No matter how much she tried, she couldn’t help picking stuff that reminded her of Vijay. The little brass lamp that she used as a decor piece would have fitted well into the prayer room of an Indian house. She had seen a similar one in Vijay’s room. The throw pillows were designer ones from the Indian store with a motif she remembered seeing on one of Vijay’s sweaters. The CDs she collected were of old Hindi movie songs and ghazals, Vijay’s favourite ones. They used to enjoy the soothing melodies cuddled on the sofa in his room. During the interlude, he would explain the lyrics to her. Some other trinkets were gifts from Vijay, items she should have thrown away if she really wished to forget him. But instead, they constituted her remembrance chest. Love emerged from them and often took her on trips down the memory lane.

Like her two Chinese fisherman tea bag holders. She perched them on two cups and wound the thread of the tea bags on their hooks. While she waited for the water in the kettle to boil, the two tiny figures opened up the vista of how they had come into her possession.

Jane had met Vijay at a party organised by the Oxford University Hindu Society. Being an Indophile, she had grabbed the chance to eat authentic Indian food and enjoy some Bollywood dancing. After a sumptuous dinner, she had stood in the dessert section with an empty plate, confused by the many choices. She had turned to the person next to her for guidance; it had been Vijay.

“Let me recommend these *Jalebis*. Only the one with the strongest of wills can resist these.” He had said while loading a ridiculous number of *Jalebis* into his own plate.

She had loved the sweet *Jalebis*. The lively chat that followed had made them aware that they shared more in common.

Out of the many colleges which were part of Oxford University, they belonged to the same college. Vijay was an undergraduate student in Economics and Management while her chosen course was Oriental Studies. By the time they parted, they had exchanged numbers and a promise to keep in touch.

Next day, she had turned to him for help again to clear her doubts for an assignment in Sanskrit, her subject of specialization. She had been surprised to realize that not many Indians understood Sanskrit. Luckily, Vijay was one of the few in the campus who did, making her approach him often for help. They had become best friends before long.

Two months later, Vijay had dragged her along to help another Indian girl, his classmate, to shop for a party she was hosting. At the Indian store, Jane had become fascinated by the pair of cute, ceramic teabag holders shaped like Chinese fishermen but had kept them back, since they were too expensive for her. Vijay, who had noticed her interest, had gifted them to her, ignoring her many protests.

His classmate hadn't liked it.

"Sod off. He is my boyfriend, you bitch," she had snapped at her when Vijay had stepped out to attend a call. Jane always hated confrontation and had kept aloof the rest of the day.

Vijay soon suspected something was amiss and questioned her when she refused to attend the party that night.

"Leave me alone, Vijay, I am not interested."

"Will you care to explain why?" he had asked, his voice reflecting his confusion.

"I don't want to become the third wheel, you know! You can enjoy your time with your girlfriend."

"Girlfriend? Who?"

"The host of today's party."

"What? She is just a friend. But you are more than that, don't you understand?" he had asked with an intense look in his eyes.

"But — "

“If I have ever thought of anyone as my girlfriend, it is you, Janet. I have fallen in love with you. Hopelessly.”

And Jane had lost herself in the promises conveyed by his words and his liquid brown eyes. Somewhere during the hours they had spent together, she realized, she too had fallen in love with him. Then he had touched her cheeks, a featherlight caress. With wonder, she had watched him bend down and claim her lips. The flood of feelings rendered by that tender first kiss had blown away all her doubts. She had responded, clutching at his coat lapels and crushing his lips. It had been magical. The memory made her cheeks grow warm.

The kettle whistled, ending her reverie. She poured the boiling water into the two cups and watched the tea steep. Dropping sugar cubes into them, she walked to the tiny hall where her mother was still scrutinising Jane’s belongings and handed one cup to her.

“I can’t understand you. Even after all his lies and deceit, you still love him? You broke up with him, didn’t you? Hadn’t he come home determined to talk to you and make you understand? Instead of facing him, you had run off to Aunt Molly’s place. You need to learn to face your fears and clean up your act, love.” Margaret regarded her from under narrowed eyes while sipping the tea Jane handed over to her.

Jane’s romance with Vijay had acquired green signals from her mother and other members of her family easily. He was a regular at her home during weekends. They had been a couple since the first year of college. Even during her year abroad, he had visited her home regularly. The time away had just deepened their relationship. She had understood the extent to which she loved him. Yet, never even once during the three long years had she suspected that blue blood flowed through his veins or that he was capable of lying.

Until that wretched day three days after their graduation.

Jane shook her head to ward off painful memories. She made Margaret sit on the couch and prepared herself to break the news that she had received today. How would her mother take it?

“Mum, I guess you will have to hear more about India now. I have been selected to head a team doing a documentary on the ancient monuments constructed by the Hoysala kings in South India. I have to leave for India in two weeks.”

Margaret blanched. Then she snapped.

“Refuse the offer. Or else, resign. I don’t want you to go to that godforsaken country.”

“It is a promotional transfer, Mum. Also, I will be the anchor of the documentary.”

“Whatever! I don’t want you to go. India has never been kind to the Worthingtons. Tell me you refused the offer already.”

“Mum, stop being a drama queen. I haven’t accepted it yet. But I can’t let go of such a great opportunity.”

“You can. And you will after I tell you what transpired at home today.”

Ah! So, there was some drama. In her boisterous and noisy family, everyone meddled in the other’s business if you qualified as their loved one.

What had happened now?

Chapter 2

“What happened, Mum?”

Margaret kept her empty tea cup on the side table as Jane sat across her. Her mother’s forehead wrinkled as she began to talk.

“You remember Clara?”

“Grandpa’s goddaughter?” Jane asked. Margaret disliked Clara. *What had she gone and done now?*

“Yes, the very one. She came to meet Papa after one of her world trips. She had gone to India this time.”

Jane bit back a smile imagining Clara describing her amazing experiences along with snide remarks darted at ‘poor Margaret’ who never got a chance to see the world.

“She dropped a bomb on Papa when she said she saw Daniel there, in a place called Bangalore. Imagine! The man who was supposedly dead years ago.”

“Really?! I guess she dreamt it all up while snoring away on her bed in her haunted house. Mum, you know better than to believe her.”

“She had proof with her this time. Though the man denied he was Daniel, Clara had managed to take a video of him walking away, on her phone, which she shared with us. He looked exactly like Papa. She even said he had the same loopy W tattooed on his wrist, along with the date, hour and minute of birth just like Papa’s—the reason she was sure he was Daniel.”

Jane’s mouth dropped open. Her Grandpa’s twin, Daniel, a soldier in the British Indian Army had been reported missing/dead after some regional unrest in India in 1947. At least that had been the information they had received after their many inquiries when Daniel had not returned along with the others in his regiment.

“But Mum, that is good news.”

“It would have been if Papa didn’t start insisting that he wanted to go to India as soon as possible and find Daniel himself. Imagine! In his age, he wants to become Sherlock Holmes. He started packing his bag and was asking Brian to book his tickets. I called you because you are the only person who can make him see sense. But your phone was switched off.”

“You are panicking for no reason, Mum. He will come to his senses by morning. He was very close to Daniel, wasn’t he? Remember, he used to read his letters to us after Christmas dinner, the ones talking about the

training, the wars, and the happenings in his camp in India? We used to call them Daniel's tales."

"Yes. It was his way of remembering his long-lost brother. I don't think that ungrateful guy deserved his love though. I cannot think of a reason why he pulled off that vanishing act."

"He must have had his reasons."

"Nothing should come in between a person and his family. Perhaps it is the magic of that place. It is the land of snake charmers. That is why Jane, I don't want you to take up your India assignment."

"Mum, I don't think they even have snake charmers in India anymore. They reached the moon last year via their moon impact probe. Many of my colleagues travel there for work regularly."

"You won't hear anything about your ideal place in the world, would you? Forget it. Now come with me and make Papa see sense."

"Grandpa can't just pack and go. He needs a visa to go there. It will take a minimum of two weeks to get it. Don't worry."

Just then Margaret's phone rang.

"Yes, Brian. I have reached. I am bringing Jane with me. What? —"

Her Mum suddenly went silent and gaped at Jane. Big teardrops began to form in her eyes and Jane grabbed the phone from her.

"Dad, what is it?"

Dread and sadness gripped her when she listened to her father. Her favourite person in the world, Grandpa Bill, was now in the ICU, fighting a battle with death. Daniel's news seemed to have been too sudden and momentous for his already weak heart.

Jane grabbed the car keys and dragged her dazed mother out from her flat. She refused to let her mother drive her car and insisted they go in hers. Margaret agreed without much ado, sobbing silently. Jane fought her own tears as they raced to the private hospital in Weybridge. Her brothers, Taylor and Ernie, cousins Joe and James, uncle Bob and aunt Martha were all in the waiting room, their faces tense but trying to keep the conversation positive and upbeat.

Let nothing happen to Grandpa Bill, God, Jane prayed silently. He always joked he would not leave until he saw his great-grandchildren. Jane swallowed thinking how she used to laugh it off as silly. But now, she desperately wanted him to see her babies, as and when she had them. She didn't want Grandpa to leave. Not now. Not ever.

The sterile antiseptic smell characteristic of hospitals assaulted her nostrils. The man sitting next to her got up after being paged over the intercom. A nurse entered and called her father's name. Immediately the entire family surrounded the nurse, bombarding her with questions all at once.

"Yes, he is out of danger now. No, you can't meet him now. We will page you once he regains consciousness."

It was easy for her to say so and walk off. But for them, the hours of waiting that followed were suffocating. Once the visiting hours ended, only Jane and her father, the two non-hysterical members in the group were allowed to stay back.

It was towards the early hours of the morning that they were paged. Grandpa Bill had regained consciousness. They could go and see him if they wished. When they entered the ICU, he was still groggy from the effect of medicines. A number of machines were monitoring his vitals. After holding herself together courageously for a few minutes, she patted Grandpa Bill's hands and walked out of the ICU. She then rushed out into the open courtyard at the centre of the hospital complex. She dearly wanted the cold outside air to freeze the myriad emotions running through her. Terror, helplessness, sadness...

She couldn't watch Grandpa like that. The cold air pierced through her. The trembling of her limbs intensified and she sat on a cold bench, wishing for a calming presence, a shoulder to lean on and sob. In front of her family, she always had to remain strong. There was only one person who was fully aware of all her fears. Vijay. On his shoulders, she had always unburdened her worries.

If he was here, he would have become her courage, her beacon of hope. He would have listed all the reasons as to why she shouldn't worry. But why was she thinking about him? Hadn't fate pushed him out of her life ruthlessly? Jane dropped her head in her hands and sobbed.

A few minutes later, a warm hand tapped her shoulder and she found her father standing next to her.

"He is okay, Jane. Don't cry. According to the doctors, we brought him in on time. But his heart is in a very weak condition. This stroke was waiting to happen. There are multiple blocks in his arteries. They will try to operate after he recovers. He will be back home soon."

Jane heaved a sigh of relief as her father gathered her into an embrace.

Father and daughter talked about other things to keep their worries at bay.

In the morning, her uncle and aunt came to relieve them of their role as the carers. At home, Jane rested a few hours before returning to the hospital again in the afternoon. The pattern continued for the next few days. She had taken a few days of emergency leave from the channel.

Luckily for them, Grandpa Bill was soon well on his way to recovery. Though he had to stay in the hospital for observation, he was back to being the joking, jovial person they all loved. It was on a sunny, bright afternoon, three days later that Grandpa Bill made an unusual request to her, one that Jane hadn't seen coming.

He had made her sit next to him on the bed and taken her arms in his. Dressed in the stark white hospital robe, he had looked like a fragile, scared and lost infant. She had squeezed his palms to reassure him.

"I heard you are being offered an assignment in India and you are considering whether or not to take it. I know why you don't wish to. But, accept it for the sake of this old man, child. And while there, find my Daniel. I promise you, I will hang on till you find him."

"Grandpa!" Jane had tightened her hold on his palm.

"I know it is hard to find one man from among a billion people. But promise me that you will try to bring him home. Please, my child. Think of this as my final wish." The last few words had been barely audible. His eyes, cornflower blue like her own, had welled with tears.

Jane had nodded, unable to utter a word. She would do anything for his happiness. Even if it meant having to face Vijay again. She shouldn't worry, Jane told herself, because the probability of meeting Vijay while she was there was extremely low. She didn't even know which part of India he lived. She didn't even want to know.

Chapter 3

Sravanapura, April 2, 2009

The skin around his platinum engagement ring had started itching within an hour of the ceremony. Did his finger know he was entering into the relation half-heartedly? The palace doctor had advised him not to wear it again. Now seated in his sister's room, he was listening to her rants, which had begun immediately after they had returned home.

"It is an omen, I say. This relationship is doomed to fail. I don't like your would-be bride. Can't you see that she is a faker to the core? I don't know what father saw in her. I can't even imagine her with you!"

Kritika flung her pearl necklace into the jewellery box and sat in front of the dresser scowling at Vijay's reflection in the mirror. When her brother failed to reply, she started ranting again.

"What is wrong with you? How can you sit there calmly? You should have told father you were not ready for this."

Vijay's heart was buzzing in agreement with Kritika but his mind hummed, whispering sense to him. He did not believe in love. Not anymore. He had done it once and didn't wish for the same heartache yet again. He had to be pragmatic.

And then, wasn't the idea of marrying for love a rather dubious western idea? He had nurtured it once, during university days when he was head over heels in love. With Jane. *Was?* Was he over Jane even now? She still arrived unannounced in his dreams and vanished without a trace after trampling all over his bleeding heart. Love, the most treacherous and ephemeral emotion, left in its wake only broken hearts and tears. No, he wouldn't go there. It was a bad idea.

"Why are you fuming? You aren't the one marrying her, are you? I am okay with this match. She seems like a sensible person," said Vijay.

"Sensible, my foot! Cunning, that is what she is. She and her whole family."

"Cool down. It is done. We don't go back on our promises. When it is time for you to get married, marry the one you love. Okay?"

"Yes! I won't allow our father to arrange my marriage to another greedy royal who has nothing to recommend him other than his stinking ancestry."

“Tejaswini is a bright management student and her father is a businessman with an ever-expanding business, a partner in many of our business ventures.”

“Yes, that is why I say what happened today was not the beginning of a relationship between two individuals. There were no emotions involved. It was a business merger. And what about Jane?”

Vijay glowered at her. He didn’t want to be reminded of his failure all over again.

“What about her? She left me three years ago. Even after my best efforts, I couldn’t win her back. It is a closed chapter.”

“Perhaps if you had been honest with her from the beginning, you wouldn’t have been betrothed to that faker today.” Kritika probably regretted what she had said because she slumped in her chair and buried her face in her hands.

Vijay stomped out of the room, banging the door shut, leaving it shivering in its hinges. It hurt him that Kritika knew nothing about the matter and yet she was judging him.

Back in his room, with a muttered curse, he plonked on his bed and raked his fingers through his hair. After fighting the urge for one full minute, he opened the drawer of his bedside table. With trepidation, he pulled out an album that had been opened so many times before.

Jane looked up at him from its pages with her impossibly blue eyes. Her dark-blond hair fell in waves over her shoulders, framing her heart-shaped face. He yearned to run his fingers through her curls and bury his face in them. He longed for her company, the long talks and binge eating. The photos poured out memories.

One of the photos was of both of them bleary-eyed and raising a toast. Vijay couldn’t remember who or what it was that they were toasting. But then, what did undergraduates do on a holiday? Eat, drink and party. And Vijay and Jane had been no different. Noisy parties, dancing, and karaoke.

A smile blossomed on his face when he saw the photo of him and Jane on stage, singing a duet on a karaoke night. She had been good and he had been terrible. He was never an expert in remembering lyrics anyway. Halfway through the song, he had made up some ridiculous ones. An amused Jane had joined him by inventing equally scandalous lyrics. It had turned into a laugh-riot.

Another photo had them seated in front of plates piled high with food.

“If we eat like this, you’re gonna dump me,” Jane had said looking longingly at the food.

“Why would I?”

“I might become fat and shapeless. You won’t, as you are a fitness freak. Would you love me even then?” she had asked.

“I will love you even more,” Vijay had declared. Jane had rewarded him with a sloppy kiss.

He was smitten by her charming personality and attractive appearance when he first saw her at the Oxford University Hindu Society party. Her interest in India and how much she knew about his country had surprised him completely. He had never seen an Indophile like her. Needless to say, he had fallen head over heels in love with her. However, Jane had taken a while to warm up to him. The incident with Isha, his Indian classmate, had given him an opening to confess his true feelings to her.

Vijay had grabbed the opportunity and transformed their relationship from friendship to love. When he had kissed her, she had melted in his arms that day. Her hesitant fingers had trembled and then clutched at the lapels of his coat, as though she didn’t want it to end. They had tiptoed around each other thereafter, scared whether they had done the right thing.

Then on a starlit night later that summer, they had crossed that invisible line of restraint while they had camped on the banks of the river Wey. He had seen the stars reflected in her eyes when he had kissed her tentatively. Her soft moans, as his lips branded every inch of her skin, were the sweetest sounds he had ever heard. They had loved each other with a careless abandon, celebrating every touch and caress. It had been splendid. Afterwards, they had lain awake talking, cuddled in each other’s arms, even after the campfire had died down, sharing dreams and body heat. They had greeted the dawn with silent prayers for togetherness.

They rarely fought. If they did, Vijay was the first to apologize. He valued her more than anything in the world. Even more so because he feared he would lose her if she came to know who he really was. Jane openly loathed any kind of restrictions; she was a free bird. But in his

case, rules, traditions, and protocols governed his life. He wanted to be with her like the commoner she thought he was, without the trappings of wealth or title. Also, there was the case of privacy. If the news spread that the scion of the royal family of Sravanapura, the richest among the Indian royals, was in love with her, the media would have hounded her day in and out.

Another photo showed him dowsed in foam, flour, and eggs, swigging champagne directly from the bottle. The photo had been taken during his 'trashing', the annual Oxford tradition where Oxford graduates celebrated the end of the final exams by spraying each other with foam, flour, and confetti.

He had blurted out his identity while bottles of wine and champagne were being cracked open around him.

"Look at me now, who will believe I am a Prince," he had said, grinning wide and regretting the words immediately.

"Of course, you are my Prince and I am the Queen of England," Jane had said, flashing a goofy smile. She had then straightened her crown, a popcorn container covered with sticky fluid and confetti. Raising her chin, she had strutted around looking down upon them and wrinkling her nose. His truth had drowned in laughter and nobody had remembered it afterward, much to his relief.

Vijay had made elaborate plans to reveal his identity to Jane, two days after his graduation ceremony. That evening, he had booked a table at the best hotel in Oxford, ensuring absolute privacy. He had rehearsed to explain the reasons that had made him keep his identity a secret.

When he was about to leave his room, his chief of security had appeared by his side, much to his displeasure. They had always been told to keep their distance. Never even once while in college had they given him any trouble.

"Your Highness, sorry to interfere but a situation has come up that needs urgent attention."

The news had been terrible and had devastated him. Kritika, who was a student in one of the boarding schools in London, had been kidnapped during a school trip. How her kidnapper knew her identity was still a puzzle. The family had revealed her identity only to the school management.

Vijay had hidden her presence in England from all his friends and

acquaintances, including Jane. Sticking to the original version of his lie that he was the only son of an Indian businessman, which he had fed the others had seemed the best.

Luckily, one of the securities assigned to her had given a chase, shot the kidnapper and rescued her. When he reached the site of the shooting, Vijay used his influence with the local royals and authorities to defend his staff.

The press had arrived and the whole story had been splashed all over the papers, not much in their favour. They had been portrayed as savage Indian royals who took the law into their hands. The kidnapper, a local, had been named as Kritika's secret lover. He still remembered gathering his pale and shocked sister to him and snapping at the press photographers, while she repeatedly told him she didn't know the man.

The damage done by the press proved to be irrevocable. Jane had cut him off completely. It had been so unlike her. She didn't reply to his emails or messages. Despite repeated requests, she didn't give him a chance to explain himself.

Her family refused to let him enter their house again. They said she was an adult and they respected her decision. Grandpa Bill was the only one who had sympathized with him.

"I like you, young man. But we are ordinary folks. She will not fit in your world." Those were his words when Vijay had gone to her house determined to apologize and win her back. He had almost lost his mind after losing her love.

A knock sounded at his door, bringing him back to the present, and he quickly pushed the album back into the drawer. Kritika stood at the door, with her usual apologetic look.

"Don't be mad at me. I am sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

Silence rang in the room. Vijay ignored her and picked up his laptop from the nightstand. Leaning back against the headboard of his bed, he fired it up and began checking his emails. He should tell her it was okay, he knew. But he couldn't. Her words had forced open a treasure chest of memories that had strangely tied his tongue and scrambled his brain.

He couldn't blame Kritika though. He knew that underneath her rants and anger, there was love and concern for him. But his father had not thrust the relation on him. Vijay had met Tejaswini before agreeing

to the match. He had not sought love, just a tolerable companion.

"Come on, your Highness. Don't show me your princely attitude. I apologised."

Kritika frowned as she approached him and sat near him on the bed. A sly smile appeared on her face instantly and Vijay wondered what caused it. She pulled the drawer open, which he hadn't shut fully in his haste, and found the album. She, of course, knew what it contained. The culpable sleuth. Her eyes twinkled with mischief when they met his.

"Oh, so I interrupted this, huh?" she mumbled, laughing.

Vijay grabbed the album from her hands. "Out. This moment." He spat out.

"Okay! Who wants to stay anyway? I have a feeling that you will soon seek out the girl you are hiding in that album and show that bloody faker the door." With that declaration, she fled from the room. Vijay had all the mind to go behind her and box her ears.

But one glance at the album and the frown lines on his forehead disappeared. Vijay started leafing through it again and allowed himself to get lost in the intricate tapestry of memories. A while later, he closed the album and wandered into his walk-in wardrobe. He propped himself up on a stool, opened the uppermost shelf and pushed the album inside. It would rest there along with the other memorabilia from his college days. It shouldn't have a place in his bedroom anymore.

Chapter 4

Bangalore, April 10, 2009

Tracing a lost person in a land of 1.3 billion people was not easy. Jane was realizing this the hard way.

Roadblocks populated her path. How could one find a man who had gone missing decades ago? The only possible clues were under lock and key in various government controlled archives. But she could not involve the authorities. It might endanger Daniel's life.

Jane's local contact, George was on the phone, explaining the various problems he had encountered in the search for Daniel. Even after days of sleuthing around, he hadn't found any significant success. He had got her permission to access some of the British Indian Army archives in an around Karnataka. Yet, there was no reassurance that she might find what she was looking for. In George's opinion, this was a mission that was doomed to fail.

Jane didn't want to listen to his sceptic talks. She had all the mind to throw the phone or ask him to shut up. She didn't want to leave any stone unturned and was ready to spend hours in any dusty archive to dig for vital clues.

Jane squeezed the phone between her ears and shoulders and opened the windows of her suite. Fresh, cool air entered and she took a deep breath. The air had an enchanting scent that seemed to originate from a flower bush beneath her window.

"Do send me those papers as soon as you can. I don't have much time at my disposal," Jane said, fast losing her patience.

"Ma'am, I have already sent them through a personal staff to the hotel this morning. You might receive it any moment. Your hotel is at about an hour's distance from here," said George.

It was funny how people measured distance in terms of time. Wasn't distance measured in metres? But she had to agree, the traffic in Bangalore made measuring distance using the good old measurements a thing of the past. You could remain stuck in traffic for hours and still travel only a few metres.

Jane sighed and cut the call. Now the only thing she could do was wait.

The channel had put her up in a hotel apartment in a five-star hotel situated in one of the most tranquil parts of Bangalore, away from the hustle and bustle of the town. Her colleagues hadn't joined her yet as their project would begin only a week later. Jane had come to India early to complete her personal mission. To find Daniel.

The hotel was impressive and had an old-world charm to it. It was located on the bank of a lake and greenery surrounded it on all sides. The landscaping was done without disturbing the beauty of the natural settings. The interiors with its clean line designs, paintings, and ornamental chandeliers were treats for the eyes.

Her one-bedroom apartment was clean and comfy. The service was impeccable, speedy and personalized.

If it were not for the multiple numbers of switches and lights in the bathroom, she would have agreed to live here forever. If the channel took care of the bills, that is.

The intercom in the room let out a shrill ring and she grabbed it.

"Yes, I will be there in a minute. Thank you." Jane kept the phone down and punched the air with glee. The courier had arrived.

She sincerely hoped the many phone calls, requests and follow-ups she had done during the last few days would take her further on her quest. She had to find Daniel.

Humming a tune, she walked through the corridor that led to the lobby of the main hotel. The floor was lined with beautifully inlaid marble from one end of the corridor to the other. It looked like it belonged in a palace and for a moment, she felt like a queen. A queen set out to straighten out the messy affairs of her state. Except, dressed in her prim business suit, her dark blonde hair pinned into a bun at her nape, and her blue eyes twinkling with excitement, she looked more like a corporate honcho.

A young couple, seated on a bench in the garden outside and wrapped in each other's arms, were kissing, completely oblivious to their surroundings. A strange kind of longing gripped her and her heart began to trouble her. She looked away and decided to apply the five-second rule her friend Susan had taught her.

Easy. Just count backward from five and make a statement to yourself.

Jane did the countdown mentally.

Five, four, three, two, one. Get a grip on yourself, Jane! She chided herself.

It worked. She walked ahead, determined to forget about kisses, naughty fingers, and cuddles. When she entered the lobby, she was calm once again.

The concierge greeted her after the guest she had attended to left the reception desk.

"I'm Jane, Jane Worthington. Is there a courier for me?"

Leaning to her left, the girl opened a drawer and after rifling through its contents, picked up a blue envelope.

"Here you go, ma'am." She flashed her best professional smile and handed over the bulky envelope to Jane.

Holding it close to her chest, a bright smile dancing on her face, Jane turned and dashed towards her apartment. She didn't notice the man walking towards the reception desk, engrossed in typing on his phone, and ran straight into him. Upon colliding, the envelope slipped from her hands and fell. She wanted to wring the man's neck.

"I'm so sorry. Are you okay?" A deep and low voice asked. Goose-pimples erupted on her arms and neck as she recognised the voice that had haunted all her dreams for years now. A voice she had yearned to hear for years. Stunned, she looked up and met Vijay's chocolate-brown eyes. The floor seemed to shift beneath her feet. Jane held onto the nearest pillar and regained her footing.

Vijay appeared mildly irritated by the mishap but his face crinkled into a surprised smile when their gazes met.

"Janet...." he whispered.

Hearing that single word, his own private name for her, the panic swirling inside her stilled. The tight knot within her chest unfurled. Her blood zinged with the acute pleasure of simply being able to see him again and warmth surged through her body. Jane searched his face, drinking in his familiar features. She looked for signs that indicated he missed her. His face shone, not a hair was out of place and his clothes, a dark grey business suit, fitted him like a second skin. He looked perfect, content and whole. Not shattered, like her.

She pasted a smile on her face and addressed him.

"Vijay! What a surprise! How are you?"

Some unfathomable emotion tightened his features but it was

gone the very next moment. Perhaps some of the memories had returned, Jane guessed. He addressed her with a smile that appeared artificial in every way. It was not even remotely like the warm smile that pumped love to every cell of her being, the one which touched her very soul.

“Fine, as you can see for yourself. To what do I owe the honour of your presence here?”

Her legs started to tremble from the coldness she perceived in his voice. She wiped her clammy hands on her skirt and tucked a lock of hair that had freed itself from her bun behind her ear.

“I... I am on an assignment here. I work for a London based entertainment channel,” she managed.

“Great. How long are you here?” His tone was sharp. Again, the same coldness wafted towards her. It was as if he couldn’t wait to end the conversation with her and be gone.

Her heart hammered against her ribs. She didn't want to face this cold and indifferent Vijay. She willed herself to calm down and face him. But words refused to come; her mouth ran dry.

“Not long. I plan to check out in a week,” she mumbled, focussing hard to keep the sentence proper and correct.

She wrapped her arms around her belly, attempting to soothe the fluttery feeling inside her stomach. An awkward silence settled around them. She looked down and her eyes wandered to admire the sheen on his shoe, the motif on the carpet and finally rested on the envelope that had slipped out of her hands. She quickly bent down to pick it up. Apparently, Vijay had noticed it at the same time as her for he too did the same thing and their heads bumped.

“Ouch, are you planning to kill me?”

Jane rubbed her forehead, irritation slowly replacing the nervousness that had seized her. Yes, she had all the reasons in the world to kill him. But she couldn’t and wouldn’t. Ignoring him, she bent down again and picked up the envelope. Soon, another realization dawned. The envelope was strangely wet. With a panicked cry, she ripped it open. Everything inside was wet. One of them, she was not sure who, had overturned a decorative water bowl with lotus flowers during their collision. Water had pooled on the floor and seeped into her envelope.

Her quest had failed before it even began.

Chapter 5

Jane frantically fanned the papers to avoid further damage. It was useless though. All the permission slips were now a drenched mess.

“Are they work-related papers? I will help to restore them,” Vijay said. Jane glared at him and then realized he was not at fault. He hadn’t grabbed the parcel from her hands and dipped it in water. She had dropped it in her clumsiness.

“You can’t. Everything is lost.” She blanched. Vijay’s attitude had undergone a sea-change. Concern flashed in his eyes, as the Vijay she loved emerged from beneath his mask of indifference.

“Jane, ask for more time. I will help retrieve all the lost data. I promise.”

“Time is the one thing I don’t have. This is not work-related. Something personal.”

“May I ask what?”

“I’m doing this for Grandpa Bill.” Her voice cracked at the thought of losing her Grandpa as his mischievous blue eyes danced into her mind’s eye.

“What is it about?”

“I made a promise to him. These papers might have helped,” she said, holding up the wet papers. Her legs trembled again. She clutched at the pillar.

Vijay led her to a secluded corner in the lobby and made her sit.

“Tell me about it. Maybe I can help. After all, this is my country.” It seemed sensible and the only way out for her. Jane sighed in relief. She couldn’t believe Vijay was offering to help despite their sordid past connection. But he seemed to be her best hope as of now.

Jane quickly explained to him how Grandpa Bill had come to know of Daniel through Clara.

“The possibility of Daniel being alive, though a happy news, proved to be too much to handle for Grandpa Bill. He suffered a heart attack.”

“Oh God ...”

“Now, he wants me to use my time in India to find the truth. He believes the man Clara had seen was indeed Daniel. He says he wants to see his dear brother one last time before he dies. His brother was with

the Southern Command of the British Indian Army the last time he heard from him. He was posted in Bangalore. Those papers were permission slips to access the British Archives here.”

“Don’t worry, I can help you access the archives. The British Indian Army kept elaborate records. The Southern Command had its headquarters right here in Bangalore. I’m sure we can find out what happened to him. Trust me, I wish to help Grandpa Bill.”

He squeezed her palms lightly to reassure her and she squeezed back. His calm and dignified presence was bringing back memories. Even during their university days, he could be trusted to handle any situation.

Vijay was always the most helpful guy around. He had worked on her family farms in Weybridge, Surrey once when they had run short of hands during the pumpkin harvest season. They had cleaned toilets and hotel rooms together to earn pocket money during their summer breaks. They had celebrated their small victories by camping on the bank of river Wey, talking endlessly whilst gazing at the moon, listening to the lullaby of the river while swigging wine directly from the bottle.

The decision to break up with him had been hard. She had cut off all ties with him, deleting his emails without even reading them.

Vijay’s voice addressing her ended her musing.

“You said Daniel was your Grandpa’s twin. Maybe they still look alike? We could use his pictures to trace him. What do you think?”

“Yes, they were identical twins. Clara said he still resembles Grandpa Bill.”

“Do you have any recent photo of him that we can use?”

“I have a few on my laptop. Let me get it.”

“Shall I come with you?” he asked. Jane hesitated for a second before inviting him. It felt childish to refuse.

When he entered her room, Vijay looked around. From his face, it was obvious that he didn’t like what he saw. He pulled out his phone, calling someone.

“Vijay here. Upgrade Miss. Jane Worthington to the Victorian suite. Yeah, immediately.”

“What are you doing? I love this room. And I can’t afford a suite.”

“This is my hotel. I don’t want you to stay in the hotel apartment.

You are my friend, my special guest.”

Friend. Yes, that was all she was to him now. And it was not good to misuse your friendship to fleece your friend. The Victorian suite would cost a bomb. She didn’t want it.

“Your hotel? I didn’t know that. I don’t want an upgrade. Please. First things first, Vijay. Let us focus on Daniel.” For a moment, he looked like he would disagree. But then he just shrugged.

While he called the front desk again and cancelled the upgrade, she switched on her laptop and opened the folder containing family photos. At the sight of the smiling faces of her family members, happiness flooded her heart.

“Here he is,” she said, clicking open a photo of Grandpa Bill.

Vijay leaned closer to get a better look. The three-seater couch suddenly felt cramped. His scent, a potent mixture of expensive cologne, ironed clothes and sandalwood taunted her. Butterflies came alive inside her stomach proclaiming how much his presence was affecting her. Maybe this was a mistake. She shouldn’t have invited him in. Memories came calling and her pulse raced. With difficulty, she steered herself away from the onslaught of memories and concentrated on what he was saying.

“Email this photo to me. We use a private detective agency to do the background check on our employees. I will put them on it. I think it will be easy to track a foreigner in India.”

“I will.”

Jane continued browsing through the photos in other folders too until she found what she had been looking for. A collection of black and white photos.

“Check these photos too. These are the scanned copies of the photos Daniel had sent to us before he disappeared. This is a picture of Daniel with his friend. That cavalier soldier is Daniel.”

Daniel had always been the hero in the family, the sort who featured in bedtime stories and was a dear topic of discussion when families got together during Christmas and Thanksgiving. She had often wished she could meet him and hear his story from him. Perhaps she would if all went well.

“Send these to me as well. I think — ” The ring of his phone interrupted him. He scowled at the phone screen.

“Excuse me, I have to take this,” Vijay said and walked away to attend the call. Jane emailed him the photos and then sat back, watching him talk.

He had filled out his six-foot frame and looked more handsome and fitter in his well-tailored business suit than she remembered. Probably he spent hours in the gym or perhaps it was his aristocratic genes.

Could anyone forget his chiselled face and that cute dimple? He pulled at his nose as he concentrated on what the person at the other end of the line was saying and then pressed his knuckles over his lips. His gestures and emotions were imprinted like tattoos in her brain, making her dreams about him always vivid. They were the reason she had often woken up searching for the loving face that had starred in her dreams all night.

She looked for a ring on his fingers and released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding when she found none.

“I'm afraid, I have to go now. But leave all the worrying to me, okay?” said Vijay walking towards her after ending the call.

There wasn't even a hint of anger in his eyes or voice anymore. Had he forgiven her? She wanted to know. But did it really matter anymore? Perhaps it did because she craved for his forgiveness.

With a slight bow of his head, Vijay bid her goodbye. Her heart squeezed, sensing a loss. She stood up and silently accompanied him to the door.

When he reached the door, he turned to look at her. A smile crept quietly onto his face. A genuine one, the kind she had worshipped in the depths of her heart all these years. She melted, her heart rejoiced. Too late, she knew. Yet, she couldn't help smiling back.

After closing the door, Jane leaned against it and took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the remnants of his presence. Overwhelmed by her feelings, she hugged herself and sank to the floor. The event she had dreaded had, at last, come to pass. She had seen him. Heard his voice. Felt the warmth of his presence. And it had not been like any of the horrific visuals she had dreamt of.

He hadn't ignored her and walked away.

He hadn't screamed and insulted her.

He hadn't hugged her in relief and claimed her lips.

He hadn't strutted in front of her with his arms wound around his pretty wife.

He hadn't... nothing about today had resembled her wild imaginations.

But time had wedged a distance between them. They had been together for more than an hour, yet it hadn't felt like old times. Their interaction had seemed forced initially, and then it had turned professional, like that between two colleagues. It had lacked the warmth and togetherness that marked their conversations.

Her thoughts began to run in loops, revolving around one topic, one person. To distract herself, she sat in front of the laptop and waded into work-related files and videos.

Chapter 6

Bangalore, April 10, 2009

Vijay spent the rest of the day making calls to his contacts in government offices and diplomats to procure the permits for Jane. He pursued it with the same single-minded efficiency and determination that he employed in his hugely successful business endeavours. As a result, at the end of the day, he had the papers ready on his table.

He had always thought that if fate made him meet Jane again, he would rage at her, demanding answers to the many questions that had haunted him over the years. She had left him without giving him a chance to explain. Even criminals got an opportunity to defend themselves. Anger, frustration, and sadness had been his companions for months.

However, relief and joy had flooded his treacherous heart the second he had laid eyes on her. If they had crumpled together in staggering passion, sharing rib-crushing hugs and burning kisses, it would have rejoiced.

Every second of the day, she ruled his thoughts.

Later that night, Vijay tossed and turned, unable to sleep. He lay awake, his head resting on his linked hands, staring at the ceiling. He could hardly believe that Jane was sleeping just a few rooms away. And that he would definitely see her again. Within hours. He had messaged her that he would accompany her to the various archives.

Every time Vijay closed his eyes, he saw two cornflower blue eyes. His heart raced and he wished to have the beautiful owner of those eyes near him. On his bed, their legs tangled, her breath warming his chest and his fingers roaming over her body.

He groaned when his thoughts and desires began to spin out of control. Pushing away from the bed, he moved to the open windows streaming moonlight into his room. Hands akimbo, he stared outside, seeing nothing.

He had no business thinking about her. Yet, he was doing just that. Every moment in her presence again had felt intense, almost surreal. His past and present feelings, love and anger, had warred for dominance. But love had won. Her tears had aided it further. He couldn't

see her in anguish. Ever.

Even in that prim business suit, Jane had looked breath-taking. The tips of his fingers had tingled, remembering every line and contour that lay hidden beneath those clothes. His lips had celebrated the softness of the features on her sweet face a thousand times. His ears still cherished the sounds of laughter and rapture from their times together. He missed watching sunlight turning her coppery-golden curls into pure gold.

Vijay had resigned himself to a future without her. Hadn't he? After trying in every way for months to win her back and failing, he had learned to kill the love that pulsed through his blood, screaming her name. He had thrown himself into nurturing their hotel business and made work his muse. His dedication had been such that he had built a name for himself in the world of tourism and hospitality management.

Each extra second near her today had strengthened the yearning to have it all back. His name, uttered in her lilting voice, had also awakened other desires.

His hands had itched to free her hair from the tight bun imprisoning them. She had painted her lips red, unlike before when she left them bare. He had fought the urge to claim those lips. During those moments alone with her in her room, the thirst to drown himself in her had become too strong. But it was wrong. He shouldn't even think along those lines anymore.

There were a thousand invisible barriers already between them.

He was no more a carefree student. Multiple chains and responsibilities bound him now, each pulling him in a different direction. Away from her.

Someone was now a part of his life, though not entirely by his choice. He would soon step into a marriage that would be one of convenience.

He had once dreamed of waking up next to the woman he loved and feeling truly happy. Those dreams did not matter anymore. Because his love had forsaken him.

Men in his family didn't do love. They were born to lead and command. He couldn't remember a tender moment between his own parents. Not a single sidelong glance or holding hands. The air of propriety and duty had always hung around them. They were like two

strangers, living within the same walls. At times, it had suffocated him.

Maybe it had been the unconditional love that he found in Jane's family that brought him closer to her. Days spent at her family farm were the happiest times he had known. They were one large, warm and loving entity. Unaffectedly friendly and caring. Love was their language. Grandpa Bill and his two sons had welcomed him with open arms. Not only Vijay, any friend of Jane was welcome there. They were ordinary farmers, moderately rich, who toiled on their farms to win their bread. Jane was the only one in their family who had wandered off onto a different path.

When they had declared themselves as a couple, Grandpa Bill had hunted down the best wine from his cellar and toasted them.

"There is nothing better than to sip the best wine, sitting in front of a warm hearth, with your love by your side. To Jane and Vijay; may you discover the true magic of love."

Margaret, her mother, had made a celebratory dinner and her father Brian and uncle Bob had sung some beautiful love songs, strumming their guitars. Jane had joined in and that was how he had discovered she could sing. His little princess was full of surprises.

His? Vijay sat on the chair by the window and pulled at the bridge of his nose. He could no longer think of her that way. All he could hope for was to renew their friendship. He didn't even know whether she was still single or if she had forgiven him. Or would ever. Perhaps she too had moved on. Her finger had been bare. But, there could be someone in the offing.

He would help her in this search and then they could part ways amicably. This short time with her would give him closure.

Closure! Did he even wish to attain it?

He wasn't sure. Not even one percent. Tomorrow he would seek answers; he would insist on a complete explanation from her. Yes, he had lied, but he had his reasons.

She hadn't demanded an explanation.

She hadn't questioned him about the lies he had told her.

She had merely walked away.

He would ask her how she had become the person who could tear him apart, toss away the fragments of his being and walk away.

Tomorrow. Yes. Tomorrow.

Chapter 7

Bangalore, April 11, 2009

Jane stood in front of the mirror brushing her hair, lost in thoughts. She had hardly slept a wink. Time with Vijay yesterday had left her pining for him like never before.

She absently buttoned the top button of her blue, sleek office shirt and tucked it into her black pants. Had he noticed that she looked nothing like the teenager he had once loved? She had put on weight, was a lot curvier and looked somehow fake even in her own eyes. She needed to lose a few pounds and stop loading her face with makeup. But relying on makeup had become necessary to hide the black circles around her eyes, the result of many sleepless hours and heartbroken tears over the years. Now, though she had regained her natural colour, the habit hadn't left her. She bit her lips, applied a coat of mascara and dabbed blush onto her cheeks.

They would be together all day. Vijay had called in the morning to confirm that he would accompany her around to all the archives. A full day in his company. Would she be able to act calm in front of him?

A day fighting the urge to not kiss him or fall into his arms. It seemed too painful to even contemplate. Why did things have to turn so complicated?

Jane had tried to move on. Tried going on blind dates but her heart hadn't given in. Harry, the executive editor of her channel, had pursued her relentlessly, wooed her with flowers, chocolates, and candlelit dinners. But she had felt nothing. Vijay had killed her interest in men.

Her phone vibrated shaking her out of her reverie with a message from him.

“Are you ready? Can leave in fifteen minutes.”

She messaged him a ‘Yes’ and hurriedly applied a coat of lip gloss. She patted down her blow-dried hair once more and picked up her laptop bag.

Vijay was waiting for her, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel of his sleek black BMW. Was he going to drive? Interesting! On seeing her, he leaned and opened the door for her.

Jane got in and turned to face him. He looked delectable, dressed in a turtleneck white T-shirt that stretched fetchingly over his broad shoulders and fitted black jeans. His sunglasses added a dash of glamour to his already charming looks but it somehow irritated her. She loved his eyes and it jarred to have them hidden under the glasses. She wanted to get rid of those glasses and drown in his eyes. Jane wanted to feel the smoothness of his freshly shaved cheeks. She yearned for much more but she didn't have a right to do any of that anymore.

"You don't have to accompany me, you know. You could've just handed over the papers to me," Jane said, fidgeting with the handle of her laptop bag. She didn't fasten her seatbelt contemplating whether she should trouble him further. He had all the reasons in the world to be angry with her. Yet here he was, forgoing all his other duties to help her.

Vijay leaned towards her, pulled her seatbelt and slipped it into its buckle. The clean smell of soap and warm masculinity engulfed her, triggering memories. She suddenly felt hot and uncomfortable in the closed confines of the car. Blood rushed to her cheeks.

"I have to. I need answers. I have questions too." Vijay turned the key in the ignition and started the car. The car slowly moved out of the hotel courtyard and entered the busy street outside.

Was he about to grill her about what she did years ago? In a moment of confusion and anger, she had thrown away years of friendship and love. It had not been an easy decision. She too wanted answers, didn't she?

Her heart was hammering at her ribs. It wanted all that they had back. She wished he was just an ordinary Indian guy with whom a poor girl from Surrey had fallen in love and dreamt of having a future with.

Yet the reality was different. He was nowhere in her league. Vijay was a prince, who represented the legacy of a 500-year-old kingdom. According to the hotel website, they had branches all over India. That implied his family was a giant in the real estate and hotel business too.

Maybe she should at least strive to revive their friendship. She had never met anyone who understood her every mood like he did. Clearing her throat, Jane addressed him when they stopped at a traffic light.

"Will you be able to forgive me, Vijay? I know I acted like a

coward years ago. I'm truly sorry.”

Vijay turned to her and regarded her from under his glasses. He removed the glasses, kept them on the dashboard and faced her.

“I'm sorry too, Jane. More than you can even guess. I never wished to keep my identity a secret from you. There were so many things that necessitated it. Privacy being one. Also, I cherished how you liked the real me. Not my money or the title. I had planned to reveal it on that fateful day to you, but God had different plans. After those horrible incidents, I had no clue how to convince you. You didn't answer my emails and ignored my calls. I even visited your home. Grandpa Bill told me you had gone away but didn't disclose where. You should have given me a chance to explain.”

“The day your photo was splashed in the papers, I had come to your apartment, you know? The place had been filled with paparazzi. I tried to come in but I was stopped by an old man who seemed to be your staff member. Then I heard one of the TV journalists reporting how your fiancée was with you, providing moral support to you and your sister. I'd heard enough. I ran away. Within 24 hours, my world had turned upside down. I didn't want to see your face again.”

“Fiancée? There was no one else with us. You know how the press creates stories. Describe the old man who stopped you.”

“He was tall, bald, bespectacled and thin. He was wearing some kind of a uniform, I think. A long blue tunic in silk decorated with medals and silver thread works.”

“That must have been Ravinder Rao, our security chief. The good man had stood like a barrier and faced the press. He didn't know you. If he did, he would not have stopped you. I guess I cannot blame you anymore.” The signal cleared then and Vijay concentrated on the road again.

Jane gaped at him in silence. What if she had allowed him to explain all those years ago? What if she had at least read his emails? Those what ifs would never be answered. Despair wrenched her heart. Regret pulsed in every cell in her body and tears threatened to flow out. What good did it do to cry over it now? With a huge effort, she composed her racing heart.

“I'm so sorry, Vijay. I should have given you a chance to explain.”

“Let bygones be bygones, Jane. Can we begin anew?”

“Yes, we should. I guess whatever happened, happened for the best. Look at you, really, truly the prince-in-waiting.”

“And you, a reporter as you had always wanted. At least one of us is happy.”

Jane swallowed. She was not happy. She wanted to tell him that. Did that mean he was unhappy? She had an insane urge to fall into his arms and cry her heart out, begging him to take her back into his life. But she decided to keep things light.

“Yes, both of us have managed to move on. But this reporting stuff is not as glorious as I imagined. The focus is always on sensationalizing news.”

“I do understand the hunger the press has for sensational news. The paparazzi is a headache. But I'm sure you stick to your ethics while you report. Let us make Grandpa Bill's case our best adventure together.”

“Yes. Let us do this for Grandpa Bill. He deserves it.”

They continued to talk about things that could help in their quest as Vijay battled with the insane traffic of Bangalore.

Jane soon realized that having a royal as an accomplice had its perks. They were received courteously and ushered inside the Karnataka State Archives while many others stood waiting outside in the hot sun. The staff was eager to help.

Vijay had instructed the curators about the exact details they were looking for the day before itself. Hence, papers pertaining to the period of their interest were kept ready for perusal. They found many records that held details of the various Indian and British soldiers in the British Indian Army. After going through the many records, they discovered that Daniel Worthington, aged 18, had arrived in India in 1944 as a cavalry soldier and had risen to the rank of a captain by 1946. After that, there were no records about him. They couldn't find any data about him after that anywhere. No marriage certificates or death certificates. And there were no records of him leaving India in 1947 with the rest of his regiment.

The British Indian army that kept elaborate records about each of its members had failed to help Jane in her quest.

After reading through the many sheets of old handwritten

documents in loopy handwriting, Jane's eyes had begun to hurt. A glance at her watch made her aware that it was 2 o' clock already. No wonder her stomach was beginning to emit exasperating sounds. She looked up to ask Vijay if they could take a break for lunch and saw him looking at her, ready to say something.

“Lunch?” they said together and smiled. And though she didn't want to admit it, Jane was exceedingly happy that they were doing this together.

Chapter 8

When Vijay asked her to choose between an Italian restaurant and an Indian restaurant, Jane immediately chose the Indian one. The delectable posters in the restaurant lobby, proclaiming the presence of her most-liked Indian dish on the menu, made her stomach growl more fiercely. As soon as they were shown into a private cosy corner, she ordered a spicy, Veg Biryani before even going through the menu.

“You still love Indian food, huh? I thought your hatred towards me might have spilled over to your food choices as well.”

She choked on the water she was sipping. He obviously had no clue. Whenever his memories troubled her longer than usual, she headed to an Indian restaurant and ordered the spiciest food available there. She always associated spice with him. Without him, her life had become bland. And she had hated every minute of it.

“Even if I hate you, I can’t hate Indian food. My stomach complains every once in a while. I’m addicted to it. I can even cook a proper dal-rice-roti dinner now. I can also differentiate between *Basmati* and an ordinary long grain rice. Can you believe that?”

“I’m impressed. Does that imply you found a new Indian boyfriend?”

“Boyfriend? Men are a real pain in the you-know-where. I might quit the dating scene once and for all.”

“Why, what happened?”

“I have become a weirdo-attracting magnet. My friend, Susan, sets me up on these blind dates every now and then. The latest one was a banker. He pierced my eardrums droning about stock markets and takeovers. Multi-million deals, shares, blah, blah, blah. He didn’t even allow me to open my mouth. Then he ordered food for me. Can you believe that?”

“Totally.”

Their food arrived then and they tucked into their lunch with gusto. The very first morsel of the *biryani* sent her into raptures, the unique flavours making love to her taste buds. Everything seemed perfect. The food, the ambience and the circumstance. More so, perhaps, because she was with Vijay, the person she wanted to be with.

She paused to compliment the side dish that came with the

biryani, looked up and her eyes met his. His intense eyes were focused on her face and inadvertently, she blushed. He pointed towards his own chin and then towards hers. Sheepishly, she ran her fingers on her chin and wiped away a grain of rice that had somehow pasted itself on her chin. Her heart squeezed remembering how he used to reach over and wipe away tiny splatters of food she was in the habit of accidentally spilling.

Food had always played a major role in cementing their relationship. Vijay used to love the barbecues and casserole dinners when he visited her family. And he used to take her to various Indian food outlets and make her try out Indian dishes. Perhaps he was also remembering the same things because an awkward silence prevailed throughout the rest of their lunch, reminding both of them of all that they had lost.

By the time they returned to the car, Jane was tired of the silence. To regain the easy camaraderie, she tapped him on his shoulders.

"I can't believe I just had lunch with a real prince," she said, when he turned to look at her with a quizzical look on his face.

"And I can't believe I know a star reporter. Will I get a chance to be featured on your channel?" he retorted as a teasing grin sneaked onto his face.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "As if!" And he snorted. Then they laughed. Together like they used to all those years ago. The peals of laughter wiped away years of indifference and apathy.

"To be fair, I can't believe we kept away from each other for so long. Three years. Can you believe that?"

"It was not easy for me, Jane."

"Neither for me," she confessed.

The silence that filled the car weighed heavily and he switched on the radio. Whitney Houston's 'I will always love you' began to play. The song did nothing to mitigate the tension between them. As it played, it voiced every one of her thoughts. She gazed at Vijay who seemed focused on the road. Yet, a single muscle throbbed on his jaw, giving her hope that he too was going through a similar retrospection. But men! Who could understand them?!

Vijay behaved normally once they resumed hunting through the many files laid out in front of them. Several times though, she felt rather

than saw his eyes on her. But whenever she looked up, he appeared engrossed in perusing the documents. She concluded it was all her wishful thinking. He had clearly moved on. She should seriously concentrate on the task at hand. Wallowing in her past was not going to help her in any way.

The rest of the day passed with them going around from one archive to another in the hope that some information about Daniel would present itself to them somewhere. But it was as if someone had carefully wiped out all his details. They found files containing data about many of his fellow soldiers but none about him.

“It is unbelievable. It is as if he vanished from the face of the earth just like that!” Jane exclaimed as they exited one of the last archives on their list. It sounded ominous. Had Daniel been killed and then all the evidence destroyed? Was he involved in something illegal?

Just when they’d given up all hope of finding anything about Daniel, they found a reference to Daniel, quite by chance, in one of the collections of a local researcher. It was a private journal of one of the officers of the British Indian Army in Daniel’s regiment. The researcher had bought it from another private collector. It mentioned that Daniel had been promoted to the post of Captain owing to a heroic deed he had performed. However, several pages from the book, which might have described what he had done, were missing. It was clear that someone had deliberately hunted down all his details and destroyed them. But who and why?

Jane stopped going through the files and prayed fervently for some clue about Daniel.

Just then, Vijay gave out a low whistle and called out to her.

“Isn’t this Daniel?” he asked pointing at one of the photographs in the carefully preserved photo album he was going through.

Jane rushed to him. Yes, it was Daniel. But he was not alone. A pretty Indian girl, probably in her late teens and clad in a sari, stood next to him. Daniel had her right arm tucked into the crook of his left arm. She was beautiful in a classic sort of a way. Kohl-lined eyes and flower garlands on her long curly hair. She was smiling at the camera. They seemed very much in love.

“Was he in love? They look like a married couple.”

“Yes, that is what I feel too. But then why didn’t we find any

mention of his marriage in the records kept by the army? I remember reading about soldiers getting married to locals, mostly to Anglo Indians.”

“You know what, this girl doesn’t look like an Anglo Indian. Anglo Indians adopted western attire and tried to remain true to their British roots. This girl seems completely Indian. Look at her *bindie*.” Vijay pointed to the decorative little circle in the middle of her forehead. He took out his phone and captured the photo using his phone camera.

“But why didn’t he inform us about anything? He wrote to Grandpa Bill often.”

“I can only guess. He might have got into trouble because of this girl. It would have been quite a scandal if she was an upper-class Hindu girl, which seems highly likely. She would have been ostracized from the society for marrying a foreigner. Her family would have fought tooth and nail to prevent such a marriage. People became quite heartless and often resorted to violence to preserve their honour during those days. Daniel might have had a hard time. Maybe he didn’t want to worry his family. They wouldn’t have been able to help him anyway. Being oceans apart drives a chasm in relationships.”

Jane swallowed. Did Daniel survive the fire test in his love story? Who was this girl? And what had happened to them?

Jane prayed fervently. *Please God, tell me they survived the ordeal.*

She didn’t want to even consider the possibility that Daniel had been killed. Every document she picked up after that hence frightened her. She feared she would find a document that would confirm it. It was with immense relief that she closed the last file the researcher had given them. Upon enquiry, the researcher informed them that he had acquired the photograph from an exhibition-sale of photographs from the British Era conducted by the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training. It was not even an original print, just a copy.

Jane waited until she got into Vijay’s car to call home. Grandpa Bill was well on the path of mending, her mother informed her. Upon receiving that piece of good news, she shared her own discovery.

“Jane, do you realize what that means? You might already be having Indian cousins. An Indian branch for the Worthington family. How exciting!” Margaret’s excitement permeated into her and she

beamed.

“I hope they are all safe and happy somewhere. Do pray that I find them soon, Mum.”

“You will find them, Jane. God bless you, sweetheart.”

Jane disconnected the call and turned to Vijay. In the absence of any new leads, they were both clueless about what they should be doing next.

Chapter 9

That evening, the ambience in the hotel was festive. Vijay had organized a *Kathak* dance recital in the ballroom of the hotel to cheer Jane up.

Once, while they were in college, he had taken Jane to a dance recital and she had fallen in love with the dance form. She'd looked up the dance form on the internet and told him several things that she had learnt about it. Vijay often wondered if she knew more about India than he did. He had thought it was because she loved him. But no, the girl loved everything about India. And she spent time exploring more about India whenever she got a chance. He had no answers to some of her questions about Indian history or stories from Indian mythology. He knew a few of the famous ones, but Jane often dug up the lesser known ones in her quest to know as much as she could.

Now seated in the front row, she was engrossed in watching the Kathak dancer launch into a prayer to Lord Ganesha, the patron of arts and the remover of all obstacles. If someone asked, Jane would have told them why Ganesha was invoked before every dance recital.

He stood at the entrance to the ballroom, pretending to be playing the role of the perfect host, mainly to avoid being near Jane. Several times during the day, he had wanted nothing more than to crush her to himself and kiss her senseless. *God, how he wanted her!* Even now, just watching her made him go all glassy eyed. Those blue eyes could kindle a thousand desires inside him.

Even while he had been busy looking for information on Daniel, Vijay had thought long and hard about his current life and the years he had spent with Jane. He was convinced of two things. Firstly, he wanted to break off his engagement to Tejaswini. It would be like stirring the hornet's nest. His father would be livid. But he couldn't and wouldn't go along with the sham arrangement. He had messaged to Tejaswini and invited her to come to the hotel. They needed to talk. The hotel was only a few minutes' drive from her college campus. She was a final year MBA student at IIM Bangalore. No time better to do this than when Jane was fully engrossed in the dance.

Secondly, he wanted Jane back in his life. He was ready to fight through any opposition, even if it originated from her side. He would do

it for them. Many times, during the day, he had read the silent and sublime messages Jane had been sending him. She still loved him, he was convinced of that. Whatever had driven them apart hadn't succeeded in killing the love that still burned inside them. No wonder he had lived an almost ascetic life till now. No one had had the power to entice him after Jane.

Someone tapped on his shoulders and he turned around. Tejaswini immediately swung her hands around his neck and kissed him on his cheeks.

"You couldn't wait to see me again, huh? I have an internal assessment tomorrow. I hope I get rewarded handsomely for all the trouble I went through." Tejaswini beamed at him and batted her eyelashes. Vijay cringed. He hated it when she did that. It seemed so artificial. She could act all graceful and princess-like in front of his family. But when alone with him, she became this overtly demanding creature whom he couldn't tolerate.

"We need to talk," Vijay said, removing her hands from around his neck.

"Isn't that a dialogue that is supposed to appear in our conversation years down the line? But, anyway, what is it that you want to talk about?"

"Not here. Let us go to my office."

"Office? I had expected you would invite me into your suite, finally."

Vijay snorted and led her towards his office. His office was tucked at the eastern end of the hotel lobby, conveniently located to suit his needs for privacy.

"But this is perfect too. I have always wanted to visit your office. I like it," Tejaswini continued, taking in the aesthetically decorated office.

Instead of taking the chair across him as he indicated, she sauntered over to his side and looped her arms around his neck again.

"Tejaswini, please. Listen to me. Don't make this more awkward than it already is," Vijay snapped and pushed her hands away.

Tejaswini took a step back and gaped at him.

"Awkward? So that is how you define our relationship. I assure you, your highness, I think of our relationship as a pleasant

responsibility. I haven't even once regretted it."

"God, I don't even know how to explain this to you. But I can't commit to this relationship anymore."

"Are you having an affair?" Her eyes glowed.

"Yes, if you like to call it that. I have been in love with her since long, long before I even met you. I want to marry her."

"Who is she? We are already engaged! But, okay, if this is what you want, I don't mind sharing you with anyone. We royals have seen this happening so often. Indian kings have never been monogamous, have they? But they had only one chief queen. And I will be that to you. It is simple."

Vijay stared at her, unable to believe what she was telling him. What sort of life was she suggesting? Anger welled inside him.

"Relax, Vijay. You can carry on with your affairs. But you will marry only me. I'm ready to offer whatever the other girl gives you. Try me, I might be better in the bedroom than her." Tejaswini slipped off the left sleeve of her top and sat on the arm of his chair. She ran her fingers through a stunned Vijay's hair and pressed her bare shoulders against his.

Vijay was about to push her off when he heard a gasp and the scuffle of running feet.

Looking up, he caught a glimpse of Jane, running away.

He swore and pushed Tejaswini away. This had turned to be a disaster. Jane had almost begun to trust him again. And then this had to happen.

"Tejaswini, please go away. I'm in no mood to humour you. Get out of here immediately. Know this, I can't marry you. I can't commit myself to a relationship I cannot honour."

"So, are you going to make a mockery of this engagement? I won't go without putting up a fight, know that. Love or not, I have dreamed of a life with you. My family's dignity is also at stake."

"I'm sorry. But I cannot marry you. I'm freeing you. Whether you wish to agree with me amicably or you want to put up a fight, depends on you. Goodbye, Tejaswini."

Vijay walked out of his office leaving behind a fuming Tejaswini. He had to find Jane before she staged another disappearing act. But he knew that even if she did, this time, he would follow her to

wherever she disappeared.

Chapter 10

Jane half walked and half ran back to the ballroom where the dance recital had taken a break before the commencement of the next segment. She'd wanted to understand the full meaning of the dance and had wanted the lyrics of the song, to which the dancer was dancing, translated. When she'd seen a recital last time, Vijay had told her the story behind the dance and the gestures and the performance had become a memorable one. She had gone in search of Vijay to get him to help her this time too. But, it had been a mistake. The scene she had witnessed had pierced her heart like a dagger. Her limbs were still shivering.

Her reaction only confirmed one thing. She had not gotten over Vijay. But it was too late now. However, she couldn't afford to get her heart gain control over her. She needed to remain level-headed. Finding Daniel had to be her priority. Vijay was anyway out of her league. Why did she even think otherwise?

Jane took a deep breath and concentrated on the graceful moves of the dancer. But within seconds, her thoughts wandered back to the scene she had witnessed in Vijay's office. Someone came and sat beside her and even without turning to look, she knew it was Vijay. She should talk to him. She had no right to intrude upon his privacy. She turned to him with a smile and their eyes met. Vijay's gaze seemed to search her face. She felt blood rush into her cheeks, this time from embarrassment.

"I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have walked in like that. Do forgive me."

"Jane, it was nothing. You need not apologize. Do tell me why you came in search of me. What happened?"

"Actually, I wanted to know the meaning of the lyrics. The dance seemed incomplete because I couldn't understand the lyrics. Be a good boy and explain it to me now."

"Sure. But are you okay?"

"Of course, I am. Why shouldn't I be?"

Vijay flashed a grin. Dimples appeared on his chin and something broke inside her; she would never be immune to their charm. She loved how innocent they rendered his face.

For the next half an hour, Vijay explained the lyrics and the dance to her. The dance suddenly became meaningful and so much more

enchanting. However, it disturbed her to accept the truth that the happiness she was feeling had more to do with his presence than with the dance. Perhaps she wanted to amass whatever she could get in the short time that they had together. She didn't want to let his private life affect her attitude towards him. He was her friend, nothing more. She concentrated hard on what Vijay was explaining.

The dancer onstage was performing a recital of *Krishna Leela*, based on the butter stealing episodes from Lord Krishna's life. The dancer beautifully enacted the role of the toddler Krishna with vivid expressions. Little Krishna's joy of stealing and eating butter was endearing. Jane couldn't help but smile.

The dancer also articulated his fear of being caught, but how, at the same time, he also wanted to prove to his friends that he was courageous. And then when he got caught and was taken to his mother, he gave umpteen reasons as to why he couldn't be the butter thief. '*O Maiyya mori, main nahi makhana khayi,*' little Krishna sang, explaining his reasons one by one.

The magic of the dance and the man beside her suddenly made her want to have a little toddler of her own, who would be mischievous and adorable like little Krishna. The vision of a toddler with deep dark brown eyes and silky black hair toddling towards her emerged in her mind and her heart squeezed hard. She wrung her hands and forced herself to return her attention to the recital.

After one more segment, the dance ended. Vijay invited her to have dinner with him and she didn't refuse. She was determined to stick to being friendly and nonchalant. Vijay seemed to begin but abandon his sentences. She took over and directed the conversation to Daniel, fearing he would begin to talk about the girl she had seen with him. She didn't wish to hear any such confessions.

"I have sent the photo of Daniel with his wife and that of Grandpa Bill to the detective agency we use. They will surely find some clue."

"I hope they find something soon. Once I join work, I might not find enough time to pursue the matter."

"When do you have to join?"

"In a week."

"I'm sure we will find Daniel by then."

Their food arrived and Jane forgot everything other than the aromatic dishes that waited to be tasted. When she paused in between, she looked up and found Vijay's gaze focused on her. His expression was so tender, so intimate that a deadened part of her heart stirred to life once again, yearning for more. She wanted him to tell her that whatever she had seen was an illusion, that she had misunderstood what had been happening. But, he remained silent. Painfully silent. She pulled herself together and instead praised the taste of the cauliflower *sabji* that she had voraciously devoured.

After dinner, Vijay walked Jane to her room and she quickly bade good night to him and closed her door. Then she stood staring at the closed door, thinking. Would he have come in if she invited him? If he did, it would have been a mistake, for she would have fallen into his arms. Her desperate heart wanted to feel the adrenaline rush that only his warmth could provide. Chiding herself, she walked straight to her bed and climbed in without bothering to change into night clothes. She wouldn't be able to sleep tonight anyway, she was sure of that.

Jane lay in bed reminiscing about the day that had passed. What a roller-coaster of a day it had been! First, the revelation about Daniel and then the arrival of Vijay's girl! Who was that girl? His girlfriend? Curious, she typed his name into the Google search box. She was sure the Internet would throw something as to the identity of the girl.

The trending news about him itself shattered Jane. The girl was not his girlfriend, but his fiancée. Princess Tejaswini of the Royal family of Bihar. He had got engaged two weeks ago. They were to be married in June, two months from now. He had found himself someone who matched him in every way. The girl was very pretty. She was also his family's choice.

Jane wiped her wet cheeks as she sat up cross-legged on her bed. She hugged herself and allowed herself to sob. But her misery increased with every teardrop she shed.

In a bid to calm down, she began counting backward from hundred. By the time she reached eighty, she was determined to put all this behind her. She could handle this. She needed to handle this. This mindless yearning should stop.

Chapter 11

Bangalore, April 12, 2009

In the morning, Vijay messaged her.

Brilliant development. Are you ready for a long journey? Pack an overnight bag. I will tell you all the details when we meet.

Keeping the phone down, Jane sat on her bed not knowing whether to laugh or cry. Spending another day with Vijay would be sheer torture now that she knew he was engaged. He would never be hers again. But her mission had taken a promising turn if she could believe Vijay's message. Steeling herself, she pushed away from the bed and walked into the bathroom to get ready.

Jane stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Her eyes were swollen and red from all the tears she'd shed last night. She splashed water on her face and then took a long soak in the bathtub with a cold towel covering her face. When she stepped out of the tub, the tell-tale signs of a difficult night no longer existed on her face. This time, when she looked at her reflection in the mirror, she smiled satisfactorily.

Jane called up room service and ordered a lavish breakfast. Yet when it came, she picked at the food and pushed it around the plate. Her appetite had vanished. She felt exhausted and weak. Yet, she didn't want the day to go waste. She would go with Vijay to wherever he wanted to take her. She dressed in her most comfortable jeans and her favourite black top. She decided against blow drying her hair mostly because she didn't have the energy to torture her poor curls. Instead, she applied some hair serum to allow it to curl up naturally.

Vijay greeted her in the hotel lobby. His eyes lit up when he saw her.

"You look like my old Jane." His use of 'my', instead of gratifying, irritated her. Why was he doing this? He had a fiancée. He had no business kindling the old flames inside her with such remarks. It was pathetic that his one remark could still restart a fire in her core. A pulsating pull, a zing that demanded attention. She felt the beginnings of a headache. She had nothing to say to him. After long moments of silence, he cleared his throat.

"I forgot. I have news for you. I have found out who the lady in

the photo is. I think we are very near to finding out where Daniel is.”

“Who? Where is she?”

“We are going to Mangalore. That is where the answer is. I will update you while we travel.”

Vijay refused to answer any further questions and led her to his car, which was being driven by a chauffeur that day. Would she find Daniel by the end of the day? A thrill raced through her.

Once they were settled in the car, Vijay turned to her.

“Yesterday night I was pondering over that photo. Just on an impulse, I used Google image search on the girl in the picture. And guess what? The photo threw up many images that had some similarity with the original image. Most of them were black and white pictures from the early 1940s. But the interesting fact was that the majority of the photos were about a yesteryear dancer and film actress called Rukmini Rai. I looked her up. She had disappeared from the art scene after some controversy. And the most important thing that I found out was that she married a foreigner. His name is not mentioned but he was a captain in the British Indian Army.”

Jane squealed with delight.

“Thank you, Vijay. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“Thank Google and whoever created it. I merely made use of the miracle engine.” He grinned.

Jane smiled, unbeknown to the fact that more surprises awaited her. When they stepped out of the car at the airport, a small jet plane awaited them. Vijay led her towards it.

Obviously, their family owned a fleet of jets for private use. She had never seen the inside of a private jet. The spacious passenger area could seat nine people. It had ample room for private one-on-one discussions or business meals. The aircraft cabin was high enough for Vijay to stand though she felt if he raised himself on his toes the slightest bit, his head would touch the ceiling. The luxurious cabin had handcrafted seats and the side panels were covered with white. The roomy seats could be reclined up to 180° and could be converted into flat beds.

She sat on the first seat and watched as Vijay settled into the seat next to her. A steward brought a welcome drink. She sipped it trying to

ignore how Vijay's proximity was affecting her. It was as though she was aware of every breath he took and every move he made. And now, she felt his eyes boring into hers.

"Are you comfortable, Jane? If you are scared of flying in a jet, we can shift to a passenger flight. You look uncomfortable," he said.

"No, no. It is just that... I'm not used to such luxury, you see. Just first-time nerves. Grandpa Bill would have whistled if he saw me now!" How could she tell him that it was not the luxurious plane but his presence that was making her nervous?

"Okay. We will take off in another 10 minutes. We should reach Mangalore in half an hour. Rukmini Rai has somehow agreed to talk with us. She is a recluse and prefers spending time in the dance school she has set up in Mangalore."

Jane listened with interest. This lady certainly seemed an interesting character. How did a dancer and a soldier fall in love? She couldn't wait to hear their story.

"There are so many things that suggest Rukmini Rai is the person we seek. She was born in 1928. She had debuted as a Bollywood actress at the age of 15 in 1943. She was hugely popular prior to independence but she stopped acting after independence though she continued dancing. Though why Daniel kept this marriage a secret from his family and hadn't been in touch with them is mysterious. Rukmini Rai would perhaps give us an answer."

"I cannot understand it either. I do wish my quest ends early though. I only want happiness for Grandpa Bill. He'll be happy only if he hears some news about his beloved brother."

They arrived at the quaint little cluster of buildings that constituted the dance institute of Rukmini Devi after climbing down a steep, yet picturesque stairway in the hill. Dance classes were in progress in many of the open-air stages in the institute compound. The atmosphere vibrated with the sound of dancing feet, anklets, and drums. They were led into the living room of a palatial house where they were asked to wait for Rukmini Rai.

The room spoke a lot about the occupants. There was a huge Nataraja statue made of bronze on the mantel. A piano stood in one corner and framed pictures adorned the walls.

Jane's eyes flitted from photo to photo until they landed on a

large, framed photo of a couple.

She gaped at it and turned to Vijay. His eyes reflected the same disappointment that she was feeling.

They had come to the wrong place.

Chapter 12

Mangalore, April 12, 2009

Vijay stood before the black and white wedding photo. The bridegroom was definitely not Daniel. The man seemed to be in his late twenties, was pudgy, and sported a big moustache, unlike Daniel.

Had he wasted Jane's time by dragging her down here? He could see disappointment writ large in her eyes. Just then, a voice weakened by age, addressed him.

"Yes, that is me. Hard to believe it now. I was supposedly a beauty then. Look at me now."

It was Rukmini Rai. He smiled at her. She bowed to him, acknowledging him and then shook hands with Jane. She guided them to their seats.

"What brings you here, your highness?" she asked.

Vijay narrated Jane's mission in brief and then showed her the photo that had led them there.

"Wow, she does resemble me. But no, that is not me. Daniel Worthington..." she said as if trying to recall. "I think I remember Robert mentioning Daniel. Something about him getting into trouble with the authorities. I don't remember exactly what it was. So, are you searching for this girl?"

"Yes. We were hoping it was you. My grandpa is very sick. Can you ask your husband if he knows anything more about Daniel?" Jane asked, hope returning into her eyes.

"Not possible, child. He is no more. I'm sorry to hear about your Grandpa."

They were about to leave when Rukmini Rai stopped them suddenly.

"Wait! I think I remembered something. Daniel had rescued the daughter of a very important person from bandits. His bravery was rewarded and he was promoted to the post of a captain. But some incident followed and Daniel was in big trouble. But I don't remember what had happened. I can't say whether it is my poor grey cells or whether Robert had not told me anything about that in the first place. But this is all I remember."

Jane's face lit up hearing this bit of information. Vijay could sense that she was happy to hear about the valour of a family member. He had come with so much hope here. Yes, they now possessed yet another piece of the puzzle, but still, they were nowhere close to finding Daniel.

The steep climb uphill back to their car was tough even for him. Halfway up, Jane stopped, claiming exhaustion. They paused for a while and admired the view. When they resumed the climb, she seemed relieved when he offered his arm to lean on. By the time they reached the car, she was leaning heavily on his arm and looked pale.

"Jane, what is wrong? Are you alright?" Vijay asked and then felt her forehead with the back of his palm. It was cool. Before she could answer, however, she keeled over and fell into his arms. He picked her up and shouted at the driver to hurry to a good hospital nearby.

At the hospital, the doctor pronounced that it was just exhaustion and lack of proper food. *Hadn't she eaten her breakfast?* The doctor had given her glucose intravenously and had kept her under observation. Vijay sat in a chair near her bed, waiting for her to wake up. He brushed back a curl that had fallen onto her face and sat back determined to set matters right as soon as possible.

A while later, Jane opened her eyes. Relieved, Vijay squeezed her arm. He leaned closer and kissed her forehead.

"I frightened you, didn't I? Don't worry. I couldn't sleep properly yesterday and I have been fighting a headache and exhaustion since morning."

"Silly girl, you should have told me. I could have come here alone."

"It is nothing, Vijay. I'm perfectly okay now. Let us return to Bangalore."

"I won't hear about you going anywhere now. The doctor said you should rest. A proper night's sleep will do you plenty of good. We own a beach house here. I'm going to take you there once they discharge you from here."

"Okay, as you wish, your highness."

Her smile made him want to tell her how much he loved her. How much he wanted to hug her and kiss those inviting lips. But that could wait. Let her recover. Although Jane's poor health worried him, it

had given him some hope. Jane usually got headaches and lost her appetite when something worried her. Did seeing him with Tejaswini trigger her headache? Did that mean that she still cared for him?

He would talk to her. About them. Before they left for Bangalore. He left her to find the doctor and also to make arrangements at their beach house.

“Oh my God, this is heaven! This surely is the best beach house in the world. I can’t imagine how pretty the sunrise and sunsets will look from here. I can live my whole life here even if I was not allowed to go anywhere. Thank you for bringing me here, Vijay,” Jane exclaimed when they entered into the courtyard of his beach house.

She strode towards the garden wall and looked down at the ocean looming just a few hundred meters away. Her enthusiasm made him absurdly happy. This was his dearest place on earth as well. He walked towards her and stood behind her, desperately craving her warmth. Her curls danced in the ocean breeze and teased his cheeks. Were they challenging him to take a risk?

“My great-grandfather loved the ocean. He has properties in and around most of the best beaches in India. This one is my personal favourite though. It has a special charm. And it is mine now.”

“Tell me. Will you allow me to come here as a guest once in a while? I wish I had that privilege.” She turned to him with a faraway look in her eyes.

“Whatever is mine is yours, Janet,” he said. He watched as her eyes glazed over with some emotion akin to love. After a moment, she looked away and laughed.

“Whatever is yours now will belong to Princess Tejaswini and your future brood. Not to this worthless girl from Surrey. I read the news about your engagement yesterday.”

“Jane! I wanted to tell you this yesterday itself. It is over. I have broken off my engagement with Tejaswini. I had called her to finally end it.”

Her mouth dropped open. Recovering, she asked. “Why? Don’t you love her?”

“Love? It was more like a business arrangement. Two dynasties

and two businesses were getting merged.”

“You mean, you were not happy with it and you still went ahead with it?” Jane leaned on the garden wall, crossing her arms over her stomach.

“It was not like that. In our family, elders make such decisions. There was no reason for me to go against the decision then. No reason at all. But I have a reason now,” he said and took her hands in his. He had a reason now—he wanted what they had back. He slowly pulled her towards him. She lowered her gaze and didn’t look up even when their bodies touched and his hands snaked around her waist. He tangled his fingers in her curl-ends there and tugged them slightly. She was forced to look up into his face.

“Why should I go ahead with that farce engagement when I still pine for you? Tell me. Do you not miss what we had? Do not dare say you don’t. Your eyes never lie. And in them, I can now see the love that I have been seeking all these years. I still love you, my dear Janet. In fact, I never stopped loving you.”

Her eyes filled up and wordlessly she slipped her arms around his neck. Fireworks burst in his heart. He cupped her face and touched her lips with his own. Her lips were just as he remembered, soft, so very soft. Sensations of pleasure shot through his entire body. He groaned as he felt her press closer and kiss him back. Her lips parted and his tongue hungrily explored and caressed the familiar contours of her mouth. *God, how had he lived without her all these years?* He tasted her and breathed in her scent. Her body was melting in his arms, and he longed for a warm bed. The need to claim her as his was escalating like wildfire. He broke the kiss and picked her up. She didn’t protest. Her eyes had darkened with desire. With her arms still wound around his neck, he entered the house and pushed open the door to his room.

Time became a blur and their kisses urgent the instant he kicked the door of his room shut. With searing kisses, he branded every inch of her face. Every momentous touch firmed his belief that they were souls who were not meant to be apart. Ever. She was his and he, hers. He wanted to lose himself in her. He soaked her into his consciousness as her hair swept across his face, and she worshiped his skin with her hungry, roaming fingers and lips. Memories sparkled to life in every cell of his being.

While he roughly pulled her top over her head, he felt her frantic fingers undo his shirt buttons. Years of longing drove them as they tugged at each other's clothes in a frenzy of wanting that no force in the world could stop. Swimming in the joy of their bare bodies touching, they fell onto the bed, her soft curves tantalizing his senses, their mouths nipping, stroking and marking each other.

He slid his tongue into her mouth, while his hands roamed restlessly over and teased the hardened peaks of her breasts. Her moans were driving him crazy. He rolled over, spread her thighs and wedged his hips between them. Then he entered her. In one slick move. He stilled for a minute, taking in the feel of her velvety softness. The need to lose himself completely in her took over him like a hungry beast and he slammed into her. He thrust deeper and deeper, her answering thrusts and moans driving him on. This long-awaited union took over his senses till he felt her burst into life, pulsating around him, squeezing him tight. He exploded inside her as pleasure drove through him in waves and with a groan, he spilled himself deep within her.

He clutched her tight as they lay, all tangled limbs and panting bodies. He'd thought he would never experience this bliss again, could never feel like this again. This was more than he had ever hoped for. He smiled, feeling content, as he looked at his Janet, her lips pressed to his chest, her hair tangled in his fingers, her soft body encircled by his arms.

When their breaths returned to normal, he embraced her tightly. He felt himself hardening again. Her eyes met his and she smiled—a mischievous smile that made him feel glorious from within.

He began it again then, this time slowly, dragging his mouth over every inch of her body, pausing to savour and play, strumming her senses until she began to moan and sink into the stupor he wanted to pull her into.

Chapter 13

Mangalore, April 12, 2009

Her whole body felt rejuvenated. The person who was responsible for the euphoria she was feeling was lying on the sand-proof beach blanket with his head on her lap, facing the wide expanse of the sea lapping the shore of the private cove in front of the beach house.

Serenity reigned all around them. The only sounds were of the waves splashing on the shore and the rhythmic thud of her own heart. They had talked for long after those frenzied, healing lovemaking sessions, promising themselves to each other and cementing old vows. Jane hadn't experienced this much peace in a long time. She loved Vijay like her own soul. She ran her fingers through his silky hair, loving how soft and clean they felt. He grabbed her hands and began kissing each one of her fingers slowly and sensually. She could read his intentions, so she pulled her hands away and laughed.

He protested, rolled around onto his stomach, sat up and crawled next to her. He pushed the wind-whipped hair away from her neck and nuzzled it.

"You know, the sky here has never looked as beautiful as it is today. The sky has stolen colour from your eyes and cheeks," he said pointing at the blue sky scattered with golden pink clouds, heralding a sunset.

"You are a charmer, my dear Prince! I didn't know you could deliver such cheesy lines."

"Trust me, I can be cheesier."

"Prove it."

"Okay. Listen. If you stood in front of a mirror and held up eleven roses, you will see twelve of the most beautiful things on earth."

His eyes were twinkling with mischief and it looked like he was trying very hard not to laugh aloud.

"Not bad. Keep them coming," said Jane, playing along.

"On a scale of ten, you are a nine and I'm the one you need!"

"You can do better. Try another."

"Your lips look lonely. Would they like to meet mine?"

"They won't."

“They would love to.”

“They — ” He silenced the rest of her words with a kiss that made her toes curl. Then he trailed a line of kisses to the hollow of her throat and explored the wild beat of her throbbing pulse. Blood pounded in her veins.

He cradled her face and looked deep into her eyes.

“I love you, Janet. I cannot live without you.” And he claimed her lips again.

The light of a camera flashing nearby pierced their happy bubble. A man was running away from the beach, clutching a camera. The magic of the moment vanished. Vijay sprang up and chased the man. But the man leapt over the small boundary wall, climbed onto his parked motorbike and sped away.

“Shit, I should not have sent the security and staff away. So much for wishing for some private time with you,” Vijay cursed, as he returned to her.

“God, let us go in! I don’t want my photos splashed in tabloids as the other woman in the life of Prince Vijay Dev Varman.”

Vijay grimaced. He picked up the blanket they had moved out of, folded it and walked into the house slipping his hands around her waist.

“I can change that status right now if you wish. You are the one for me. But I wish to claim you as my wife in front of the ones I love. With the sacred fire as the witness, I wish to tie the knot that will bind our souls together for the next seven lives. And we can have a church wedding too. I can marry you any number of times.”

“So, you are asking me to marry you. But I didn’t hear a proposal.”

“I don’t have a ring that would suit my princess. But can I have a yes in advance for my proposal?” He deposited the blanket on a chair on the porch and yanked her to him.

“I will think about it. If you impress me enough, I might consider becoming your wife.”

“Let me try harder then,” he said and scooped her into his arms and sauntered into the house, ignoring her weak protests.

An hour later, while they were devouring a takeaway dinner, Jane’s phone rang. It was her mother. She put it on speaker mode.

“Jane, don’t panic. Papa has taken a turn for the worse. We are

now in the hospital. He is stable as of now but the doctor says he seems to have given up the wish to live.”

“Oh, Mum,” she cried. Vijay patted her shoulders and wound his arms around her.

“Any progress in your search? Maybe if he hears anything about Daniel, he might recover faster.”

“Yes, Mum. Daniel is a hero. I’m so proud of him. I found out he was made captain because he rescued a girl, the daughter of a very prominent person, from bandits. Tell Grandpa that I will bring Daniel home within a week. He has to welcome his brother home.”

“That is such a wonderful news. Where is he now? Did you talk to him?”

“Not yet, Mum, but very soon. Tell Grandpa to stay strong and that I love him.”

When her mother disconnected the call, she slumped onto Vijay’s shoulders, feeling confused and defeated. After all their efforts, she wondered if they were going to fail. He pulled her closer and consoled her with his soothing words.

She had to find Daniel. Soon. Where was he?

“What can we do now, Vijay? All our leads are going nowhere.”

“Let me call the security agency again and check. I have forwarded his photos to a few others as well. We will get a fresh lead very soon. Keep the faith, Jane.”

While she was brushing her teeth before bed, she heard Vijay’s phone ring.

“Are you sure? That is interesting. We will be there by morning.”

His face had lit up with a blissful smile. He came to her and caught her in a bear hug.

“Get ready to fly. We are going to Sravanapura. We are closer to finding Daniel.”

“Do you think he lives in Sravanapura?”

“Not sure. But Kritika has found another photograph of the girl in the picture.”

“Who is she?”

“I have no idea, Jane. Kritika refused to tell me on the phone. I hope it is not one of her tricks to lure me back to Sravanapura so that she can meet you. It is, after all, the beginning of the yearly spring festival

tomorrow. It is gala time at the palace. Let me make arrangements to fly to Sravanapura. You take a nap till then. Tomorrow might be hectic.”

Jane didn't want to sleep but exhaustion caught up with her and before long, she slipped into a deep sleep.

At five in the morning, Vijay woke her up with a gentle kiss on her forehead.

“Wake up, sleepy head. Can we leave in an hour?” She smiled up at him, excited about the day and pecked on his cheeks. He immediately laid near her and pulled her near. *This wouldn't do*. She chuckled and pushed him away playfully. Throwing away the sheets, she then ran to the bathroom to freshen up and get ready for the trip.

Within an hour, they were airborne, this time in a private helicopter belonging to the royal family of Sravanapura.

Vijay had told her that Sravanapura was situated in the western part of Karnataka at an elevation of 1,090 meters above sea level on one of the foothills of the Western Ghats. It was known for its coffee plantations and picturesque locales, which often featured in movies too. But nothing had prepared her for the view that greeted her while they hovered over the hills that were home to the Sravanapura family.

The majestic Sravanapura palace looked straight out of a fairy-tale. Magnificent towers loomed into the sky and its many glass windows shone golden, reflecting the rays of the rising sun. The outer towers were accented with shimmering blue and golden yellow tiles, which Vijay told her were the royal colours. The palace was surrounded by gardens on all four sides. A lake with a huge fountain in the middle occupied a huge area in the front garden. Vijay pointed out the main wings of the palace that formed the shape of a rectangle with an open courtyard in the centre.

“Incredible,” Jane whispered.

Vijay's eyes lit up and he grinned, his dimples making her itch to trace their depths with her pinkie finger.

“I'm glad that you think so.”

The helicopter landed on a helipad located in one part of a 10-hole golf course created by Vijay's father, who was a former golf champion.

A long line of attendants stood to receive them and they were

ushered inside. Vijay held her hands and led her into the palace.

The breath-taking and spacious reception room they walked into was blooming with floral motifs, which were everywhere. They were on the ornate ceiling, carved on wooden panels on the doors and on the floor tiles. The pattern was also repeated on the cushions of the chairs and chaise lounges. In the next room, which was the grand hall, crystal chandeliers upped the beauty and the grandeur of the room along with exquisite furniture. Each room that they were passing through was yet another example of perfectly done elegant interiors with eclectic designs. When they reached the residential wing of the palace, Vijay stopped and addressed her.

“Rest and freshen up, dear. We will then go and search for the lady in the photo.”

Vijay summoned a maid and instructed her to take Jane to her room. Her mouth opened to form a huge ‘O’ as she entered the room. Her entire flat in London would have fit into it easily, it was that huge. The walls of the room were painted in blue: cornflower blue. The ceiling, floor, and furnishings were white.

An ornate four poster bed with soft white lace curtains occupied the centre of the room. The pure white silk sheets, the velvet cornflower blue blanket and pillow covers in the both colours on the feather soft bed, invited her to sink into them. A bunch of vases filled with fresh roses stood on a Victorian style dressing table with a silver framed mirror. One of the doors opened to a balcony that gave a breath-taking view of the palace gardens. Another side door opened into a walk-in wardrobe and dressing room. Jane opened another door and her jaw dropped.

The bathroom seemed to have dropped out of a luxury magazine’s page. The huge white tub along one of the walls in the bathroom made her want to fall into it and take a calming bath. A shower room and a cupboard for towels occupied the other wall. There were indoor plants near the sink, along with a wall to wall mirror that reflected the whole room. A cabinet near the tub held every kind of bath essentials she could dream, of with multiple choices in each category. Soaps, body-wash, shampoos, wipes, loofas, body lotions, colognes... name it and it was there.

Wouldn’t any girl barter anything in the world to be able to live

in this palace forever? Jane knew she would!

Chapter 14

Sravanapura, April 13, 2009,

After a quick bath, Jane rummaged through her backpack but found nothing that seemed to be suitable to be worn inside a palace. At last, she took out a white top with lace trimmings and paired it with blue jeans.

A while later, a knock sounded on her room. She opened the door and a maid entered with a breakfast trolley. A well-dressed girl, probably in her early twenties, had accompanied the maid. She grinned widely and surprised Jane with a hug.

“Hi, Jane. I'm Kritika. I'm sure my silly old brother has told you nothing about me, but luckily he has told me lots about you.”

Kritika dismissed the maid and pushed the breakfast trolley into the room. Jane greeted her and walked back, observing the newcomer. She did not resemble the frightened girl she had seen in the newspapers all those years ago. The girl was almost her height and similarly built. She was dressed in a sky-blue tunic top, and white leggings. Her silky long hair fell in waves to her waist. She had an elegance in the way she walked and talked, which spoke aloud of her royal upbringing.

“I'm so happy that you and Vijay are together again. I have seen him pine for you. I knew my intelligent brother would put you up in this room. Just look around; three years ago, he had re-designed this room with you in his mind.”

Jane's eyes opened wide and her eyes moved around, taking in the truth of Kritika's statement. The cornflower blue-coloured walls reflected the colour of her eyes and white was her favourite colour. She was impressed. Her prince charming was indeed one of a kind. And a sly one too.

“I want you to know another secret. This room is connected to his room. The dressing room has a door that opens into his dressing room. I'm sure my wicked brother is waiting at this moment for me to go so that he can come in here and claim his princess.”

“Nothing of the sort. I'm not averse to claiming my princess even if my wicked sister is present,” said Vijay, walking out from the dressing

room, proving Kritika right. Kritika giggled and ducked when Vijay reached out to box her ears. He gave a quick peck on Jane's cheek and she blushed.

"I approve of your selection 100%. You both look wonderful together. Didn't I tell you a hundred times I didn't like that Tejaswini girl?" Kritika declared.

"You did, my darling sister, and thank you for that. Now tell me where did you find the picture of the lady whose photo I sent you. We need to find Daniel as soon as possible."

"Come, I'll show you. You won't believe who she is."

Kritika led them through long winding corridors and climbed many staircases before they reached the royal gallery. They hurried past many famous paintings before they entered a hall displaying only black and white portrait photographs. She paused when she came to the far corner of the room and then exclaimed.

"She is gone!"

"Who is gone? Where?" Vijay asked. Kritika pointed at a blank space on the wall. It certainly had been occupied by a portrait until recently as indicated by the clean rectangular area left behind by the frame.

"I remember the photograph vaguely. But really? I can't believe it," said Vijay

"I believe she is the one," said Kritika.

"Will you both tell me who she is? What was her photograph doing in this gallery?"

"If Kritika is right, the lady with Daniel is the younger sister of my late grandfather. My great-aunt Devika. Nobody ever discusses her in this house. I have heard hushed whispers that she was part of some scandal that had shaken the palace years ago. Now I'm almost sure the scandal starred Daniel," Vijay said.

Jane couldn't believe that Daniel had married a princess. It must have been such a huge scandal. It must also have been a dangerous thing to go against the Sravanapura family, which must have been at the heights of its power back then.

"It is so hard to believe," Jane said finally, shaking her head. No wonder Daniel was still reluctant to contact his family.

"We need to visit the dower house to get more details. The only

person who can enlighten us on what exactly happened is our grandmother. She is not very active these days though. She is in her early eighties now,” said Kritika.

“Yes, I'm sure she will lead us to Daniel,” seconded Vijay.

The dower house was an elegant bungalow that faced the east, overlooking the golf course. The interiors were minimally furnished and resembled any modern house in terms of their looks and utility.

Vijay's grandmother, Indrani Devi, was reading from her tiny prayer book, seated on a mat in front of the small temple located in a corner of the hall, her glasses perched low on her nose. They waited till she finished reading. She was a picture of elegance even though she was attired in a plain snow-white cotton sari. Jane wondered how pretty she would have looked in her youth.

“Granny, this is Jane Worthington. We were classmates in college,” Vijay said as soon as Indrani Devi came and sat with them in the living room.

“Jane? Worthington?” she repeated. She narrowed her eyes and scrutinized Jane from under her glasses.

“Yes. We came here to seek answers to some questions,” said Vijay.

She wrinkled her eyebrows and pursed her lips.

Vijay passed the printout of Daniel's photograph to her. She looked at the photograph and then at them, as if her patience was running out.

“The man in the photograph is the brother of Jane's grandfather. He vanished without a trace sometime after independence and his family wants to find him. I hope you recognize the girl in the photograph.”

“After all these years? Why? Where was his family when he needed them?” she snapped.

“Ma'am, all these years my family has believed that he was dead. Please do tell me what happened to them. My grandfather is dying and his last wish is to see his brother. I will be eternally grateful if you can provide some information about them.”

“Child, I would have gladly helped if I knew where they are. I'm afraid I will be of no help in this regard.”

“But Grandma, didn't great-aunt Devika ever try to contact anyone in the family? How is it possible that a mere soldier could outwit

a powerful family that had connections everywhere?” asked Kritika.

“Didn’t I tell you I don’t know? I have no idea how he did it. God bless him. He loved dear Devika; she was the apple of his eye. He would do anything to keep her safe. Please leave, I don’t want to talk anything about it,” she said and started coughing violently before she turned away.

A man, the butler, came forward and bowed to Vijay.

“Pardon me, your highness. There are strict instructions from her doctor that she should not be subjected to any kind of stress.”

Jane, Kritika, and Vijay stood up and walked out of the dower house. Jane looked back over her shoulders and saw Vijay’s grandma walk out of the living room hurriedly, accompanied by the butler. There was no sign of the cough that seemed to have crippled her minutes earlier.

“I wonder why she acted so rude. She is never like this, Jane. I’m sorry but she is a darling most of the time,” Vijay said.

“Yes, Jane. We will try to talk to her again.” Kritika seconded Vijay.

“Maybe she didn’t like me,” said Jane.

“Nothing of the sort, Jane,” said Kritika.

“Rubbish,” declared Vijay.

A uniformed servant came near them and bowed to Vijay.

“His Majesty wants to see you in the eastern conference room, your highness,” he said.

Vijay nodded to the man and then turned to face Jane and Kritika.

“You girls go ahead. I will go and meet father. Kritika, show her around the palace. Also, arrange for some suitable clothes for Jane to wear for the party we are having in the evening. I want to introduce her to everyone. We had no idea we would be coming here.” He left after throwing a wink at Jane. Memories of how things between them had suddenly changed made blood rush to her cheeks.

“*Oi hoy*, I love the colour on your cheeks,” Kritika said and Jane snorted. “Come with me, I will take you around the palace and tell you about our history and home. After all, you are going to be the next queen.”

Kritika led her to the portrait gallery first. She showed her the picture of the first king of Sravanapura.

“This is Harsh Dev Varman, the man who established our dynasty in the late 14th century. Our kingdom is named after a month, the fifth month in the Indian calendar, Sravana, when he established the kingdom, after defeating a local warlord. Our kingdom was initially small and part of another mighty empire called the Vijayanagara empire. After the fall of the Vijayanagara empire in 1565, Sravanapura proclaimed its independence and became a separate state. Many of our ancestors expanded the kingdom and at one point in time we ruled over a large area of South India. My grandfather ruled over Sravanapura till 1950, after which our kingdom was attached to the Indian republic. My father has been the Member of the Indian Parliament from this area after my grandfather vacated the seat due to ill health. He is, hence, a powerful political persona in this part of our country.”

“You seem to be an expert in your family’s history. It will be wonderful to actually read about your ancestors. Do you have any books?”

“I have a few but they are all written in ancient Kannada script and some are in Sanskrit. Actually, I am compiling a book about the history of our family. It is proving to be a fascinating journey.”

“Wow, that is wonderful! I would love to learn more about your ancestors.”

“I might come to you for help. The current textbooks available do not do justice to the contributions made by our ancestors to this country. I want to bring to light many other aspects as well. We will talk about it in detail later. Now let me show you some of the areas the public are allowed to visit.”

She then led her through the many magnificent and imposing public courtyards and durbar halls that were decorated with wall murals and doors inlaid with ivory. Every turn in their path was opening up new marvels.

“The palace currently has 150 rooms. It was remodelled by many. The architect of the current palace was English. The architecture style is called Indo-Saracenic,” Kritika explained as they walked through the various corridors. Palace staff greeted Kritika at every corner.

“How many staff do you have?” Jane asked after they passed another employee.

“Over 200 currently. We have a hospital wing, a school wing and

also a public wing where father holds his meetings.”

“Wow! Does that include the gardeners too?” Jane asked watching a gardener prune a decorative bush. They had, by then, reached the central courtyard.

“Excluding them. An external agency supplies them.”

The garden inside the central courtyard was a delight for the eyes with local flower varieties and foreign imports nodding their heads coyly in the cool breeze.

“Wait, I will show you my favourite place in this palace,” said Kritika and led Jane down a flight of steps from the corner end of the central courtyard.

Jane let out a whoop of delight when they emerged at a large underground swimming pool hidden beneath the central courtyard. It was huge and was called the zodiac swimming pool. The twelve zodiac signs were marked across the ceiling recreating the night sky using phosphorescent paint.

After roaming around for nearly an hour, they returned back to the residential wing though they hadn’t finished the tour completely.

“Vijay will take you around again. I am sure, he will prove to be a better tour guide than me!” Jane declared she was enchanted by the beauty of the palace.

Kritika told her about many tunnels that connected the main buildings and also a longer one that led to a palace on the boundary of a kingdom safely hidden in the jungles of Sravanapura hills. Exploring them with Vijay would be a real adventure.

The first thing that met Jane’s eye when they entered her room was the day’s newspaper kept on the coffee table. Jane gasped when she saw the photos of her and Vijay from the beach plastered on the front page.

Prince Vijay’s secret tryst with a mystery girl. Playboy Prince?
Screamed the headline

“Tck, tck. The paparazzi found you. So, that is what Vijay is going to be grilled about. Bad morning. Poor Vijay.”

Chapter 15

Rudra Dev Varman was fuming when Vijay entered the eastern conference room. He hadn't ever seen his father this furious. The newspaper spread open in front of him immediately told him what he needed to know.

Prince Vijay's secret tryst with a mystery girl. Playboy Prince?

Prince Vijay Dev Varman seems determined to celebrate the last few days of his bachelorhood in style. Just weeks after his engagement, one of our reporters caught him openly canoodling with a foreigner at his beach house in Mangalore.

His blood boiled. The article had captured one of the sweetest moments of his life and painted it as something gross. He tossed the paper away in disgust and sank into a chair across his father. Propping his elbows on the table, he raked his fingers through his hair, contemplating how Jane would react if she saw the report.

"What the hell is this? Can't you be at least discreet? Is this the same girl who is living as your guest in the palace right now? Read what is written here. What will I tell Tejaswini's parents?"

The questions irritated Vijay. He met his father's gaze boldly. "Tell them whatever is written is true. I'm in love with that girl and won't marry their daughter. That alliance was a mistake from the beginning."

"What mistake? You and Tejaswini are perfectly suited for each other. Don't you know we royals marry only other royals? And who is this new girl?"

His father's words were unravelling the knots holding his anger in place. He bit his inner cheek to control the anger. He had no right to get angry at his father. He had never talked about Jane with anyone in his family, except Kritika. It had been his sacred secret.

"She is not anyone new. We were in a relationship while I was at the university. I lost her due to my mistake and the then circumstances. I won't allow it to happen again."

"You had a girlfriend while you were in university? That is news to me."

The genuine surprise on his father's face forced him to calm down. He briefly narrated their story and explained the circumstances

that had led to their separation, how Kritika's kidnapping had turned his own life upside down. From the sudden silence that filled the room, Vijay suspected that the incident was still fresh a festering wound in Rudra Dev's mind as well. After remaining silent for a full minute, he sighed and addressed him.

"Bring her to the party. I would like to meet her. What did you say was her name?"

"Jane Worthington."

"Worthington? Oh God, not another Worthington!" His father got up and walked towards the window.

Vijay stared dumbly at his father. Did he know the Worthingtons?

"Dad, what do you mean by that? Do you know anything about Daniel?" he asked tentatively, immediately connecting his father's reaction to the recent discoveries about Daniel.

"Of course, I know him. He eloped with my favourite aunt. How will I ever forget that?"

Vijay got up and walked towards him.

"Tell me, Dad. Do you know where they are now?"

"I have no clue as to where they are now. My father searched for them until his death three years ago. As far as I know, he got no clue as to where they were. He loved his sister and never forgave the fellow who messed up all his grand plans for her."

"But how did Daniel meet great-aunt Devika? From what I've heard, he rescued her from bandits."

"Yes. My mother and I were with her when that happened. I don't remember the incident as I was just five or six years old then. But my mother has often told me about it. We had gone to the *Kote Venketramana* temple to offer prayers on aunt Devika's birthday. Somewhere along the highway, a group of masked robbers surrounded our car. Those were troubled days. We mostly had soldiers around us whenever anyone from the family went out. But that day, there had been no soldiers accompanying us because of some reason. My mother told me how this brave, young British soldier on horseback, who happened to pass that way then along with a few of his other mates fought off the robbers. Daniel went after the robber who had dragged off aunt Devika and rescued her. He was badly injured in the ensuing scuffle."

“Oh! What happened after that?”

“My mother had him brought into the palace to recuperate. He fought for his life for long. He was treated by the royal surgeons and doctors. He was our guest for almost two months. My father showered him with gifts and recommended to his superiors to give him a promotion for the good deed once he recovered. Between all this, Aunt Devika had fallen in love with the handsome British soldier who almost lost his life trying to save her. My mother told me that I was the messenger boy who carried their love letters to and fro. Apparently, they would hide their letters in my pocket and bribe me with sweets to do the job. Imagine that!” Rudra Dev said and laughed. His stomach joined in and Vijay snorted.

“Oh! But why did Grandma refuse to tell us any of this when we went asking for help?” Vijay asked once the laughter subsided.

“She received enough flak from father for encouraging their relationship. She now refuses to talk about that topic. By the way, how is Jane related to Daniel? And how did you know about him?”

“Her grandfather and Daniel are twins. Grandpa Bill sent her to find Daniel. It is kind of his last wish.”

“Oh! Why didn’t you tell me about Jane while you were in University? I thought we were more like friends than just father and son. I had always thought your years abroad had changed you. But I never thought the reason was a heartbreak. I would have found a solution for it, son.”

“It is okay, Dad. It doesn’t matter anymore. We are together again. And this time, I won’t let her go. Please, Dad, don’t force me to marry Tejaswini. I love Jane.”

“Okay. But this will be a huge scandal. Especially with elections around the corner. However, don’t worry. I will find a way.”

Vijay heaved a sigh of relief hearing his father’s words.

“I’m sorry I have landed you in a soup.”

“It is okay, Vijay. This is no trouble. Marriage without love can be hell. Been there, done that. Your mother never loved me. Ours had been one of those pompous alliances where love had no role to play. I suspect she was in love with someone else but was forced to marry me. There was a huge age gap between us. I was thirty-five and she was just nineteen when I married her. We had you when I was forty. For that, I’m

really thankful to her. After Kritika was born three years later, she told me openly that she hated me. Went off to her home whenever she felt like. Vanished for months at a time. And then one day, she never came back. Her family told me it was a freak accident. But my enquiries told me it had been a drink-and-drive incident. I didn't even know that my wife drowned in alcohol on a daily basis."

Rudra Dev slumped in a nearby chair and leaned back, closing his eyes as if to shut out the unpleasant memories.

Vijay frowned. He remembered how cold his mother was towards him and Kritika. He didn't have any pleasant memories associated with her. They had spent most of their childhood away from home, in boarding schools. But he did remember smelling alcohol in her room sometime during his teens while he was experimenting with it himself. He also remembered hearing about her death. It had come unexpected yet it had not affected him much. Perhaps she didn't love her kids either. At least, she had never made them feel so. Their nannies had raised them while their mother flitted from party to party. But he hadn't known the depth of hurt his father held within him. Vijay squeezed his father's shoulders.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Don't be. I'm trying to forget all that. I'm sixty-six. All I wish nowadays is to see you and Kritika settled happily. I'm proud of how you have expanded our business empire. I believe you don't need an arranged marriage to expand it further. Your Jane can be the driving force behind you."

Vijay smiled.

"Dad, I need your help to find Daniel. Jane's grandfather is dying. He wishes to see Daniel one last time."

"I want to see Aunt Devika too. I will help you in your quest. Will see you at the party, son. Bring your Jane, okay?"

"I will. Thank you so much. I love you, Dad."

Rudra Dev got up, hugged his son and walked away swiftly.

Vijay sat there for another half an hour, planning furiously about what he hoped would be an eventful day in his and Jane's life.

Chapter 16

“You can choose from any one of these. Or do you need me to help you decide?”

Jane stared at the many Indian designer dresses hanging on the dress trolley the palace stylist had brought into her room. *Wow, they had their own stylist!*

“I think I will use your help. I cannot decide. They all look fabulous.”

“Okay, I suggest you wear this off-white *lehenga* with the blue *zardosi* applique border and satin blue top with golden thread work to go with it. It comes with this off-white net drape that has blue and gold lace trimmings.” The stylist held the *lehenga* and the top against her own body so that Jane could get an idea.

“Wow! It sure looks great.” Jane ran her finger on the delicate and exquisitely decorated *lehenga*.

“It will also bring out the colour of your eyes. Do try it on. I will do any alterations if required.”

Jane had never worn Indian wear before. But when she tried it on, the dress hugged her curves as if it was stitched exclusively for her.

“Amazing! It fits you perfectly. I will bring a few accessories to go with it. I’ll also get the beautician here, in about half an hour. Will that be okay, ma’am?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Jane sighed in relief as the stylist walked out of the room. So, this was how it was to be a royal. Phew! At least she wouldn’t make a spectacle of herself dressed in her casuals. This was supposedly a party that marked the beginning of the spring season in the kingdom. It was a 500-year-old tradition where the king would invite all his influential landlords and tenants to join him to welcome the spring. From what Kritika told her, there would be music and dance performances the whole night and a huge bonfire would be lit in the early hours of the morning to ward off all evil from the kingdom.

Vijay had not returned yet after his meeting with his father. Kritika had asked her not to worry about that as both father and son were always a team. They apparently never really had a bad moment with each other. *Did that mean that Vijay’s father would approve of their*

relationship?

She went to take a leisurely bath during which she brooded about all that had been happening in her life. Finding Daniel still seemed like a distant dream. She desperately wished for a miracle or a clue that would lead her to Daniel. She was blissfully happy because of Vijay but she wanted happiness for Grandpa Bill too.

She dressed herself up in a silk dressing gown and stepped out of the bathroom after tying up her hair in a bath towel.

When she stepped into the dressing room, the connecting door to Vijay's room opened suddenly and she shrank back in fear. Her shock turned to happiness as Vijay stepped into her room.

"Are you feeling nervous before your first royal ball, my princess?" Vijay asked, imprisoning Jane in his strong arms.

"No. Because I know you will be near me," Jane whispered to him.

"I have something for you and I want you to wear it tonight."

He handed her a jewellery case made of velvet and she opened it. A gold necklace, encrusted with big sapphires that were surrounded by tiny diamonds, lay inside. There was a pair of matching cascading earrings and bangles too.

"Oh my God, they are so pretty! Thank you."

"Only thank you?"

Instead of answering that verbally, Jane stood on her toes and slipped her arms around his waist, tilting her face and offering herself for a kiss.

Tenderly, he cupped her face with his palms and kissed her. It began as a soft, mild kiss, but soon it sizzled and smouldered. And just when his hands started roaming hungrily over her, they heard Kritika calling her name. Swearing, Vijay released her.

"Go, sweetheart. See you at the party."

He returned to his room reluctantly.

Kritika was all dressed up for the party. The stylist and another lady, who Jane assumed was the beautician, had accompanied her.

"He waylaid you again, right? I heard voices. I don't blame him. You have tortured him for so long," Kritika whispered in her ears and

Jane blushed to the roots of her hair. She would have preferred to spend time in his arms rather than getting ready for this party that was already giving her jitters.

“Do you prefer to straighten your hair or leave them to their natural curls, ma’am?”

“Leave it as it is,” said Jane, remembering how much Vijay loved her curls.

The beautician misted on a shine spray to revive and set her curls and then allowed it to cascade down her back with a centre partition. Then she started working on her face. The lady sure was talented. Jane looked like a diva by the time she was done with her.

After that, Jane changed into the outfit of the day. When she came out of the dressing room, Kritika whistled.

The stylist stepped forward and opened a box with the accessories to go with the outfit.

“I want to wear these,” said Jane opening the velvet case Vijay had given.

Kritika whooped in delight and the two women helped her wear the jewellery.

“I think you need one more accessory,” said the stylist and after rummaging through her box, came up with an accessory that resembled an ornate chain with a decorative pendent at one end. She explained it was called a *nethi chutti* or *maang tikka*, and was a hair ornament. She placed the pendant over her forehead and pinned it to her hair, stretching it and covering the hair partition. The blue stones on it matched Jane’s outfit perfectly.

“Oh my God! I can’t wait to see the reaction of my poor brother. He will be toast. You are looking amazing, Jane.”

Jane laughed nervously and smoothed the *lehenga* one more time. The stylist laid out a pair of golden ballerinas and Jane felt like Cinderella getting ready for her first ball with the prince. And she was indeed in a palace. Everything felt so surreal.

“Best selection, as you will need to be on your feet the whole night,” said Kritika, indicating the ballerinas. By then it was time to go down.

Kritika led her through multiple corridors and wings in the palace. While she walked behind her, Jane couldn’t help but wonder

whether Daniel had walked along these very corridors decades ago. Did he also look at these paintings and wall art all those years ago? Was he as nervous as she was feeling now?

Thoughts about Daniel led her into thinking about Grandpa Bill and she felt guilty that she was pursuing her own happiness when she should be looking for Daniel. But what could she do when all the leads were going nowhere. She sent up a quick prayer for Grandpa Bill just before they reached the top of the stairs that went down into the royal ballroom. The stairs were used only by the royals, Kritika told her, as they waited for the footman to announce them.

Jane wiped her clammy hands on the inner pleats of her *lehenga* surreptitiously. She bit her lips to calm down her nerves and then she saw Vijay waiting for her down the stairs. His eyes smouldered when they met hers and all her nervousness vanished in a whoosh, replaced by the confidence that was spurred on by the open admiration she found in his eyes. She walked down the stairs, her eyes focused only on him.

She had never seen Vijay in ethnic wear. He was dressed in a perfectly tailored, black, velvet knee-length jacket, which Kritika told her was called *achkan*, over ivory breech type trousers called *churidar*. Every inch of him screamed grace and power. He was indeed a sight for sore eyes. Her heart thudded and jiggled happily at the thought that this man belonged to her and only her.

Chapter 17

Mesmerized, Vijay stared at the vision coming down the stairs. How had he become so lucky to belong to this beautiful young maiden walking towards him? With every step that she descended, he fell a little more in love with her.

The sway of her hips and the tantalizing view of her midriff bared by the two-piece *lehenga* shot zings of lust right to his groin. Her mesmerizing curls had taken on a magical aura. The traditional Indian attire, the jewellery and the *nethi chutti* on her forehead made her look like an exotic Indian bride. The entire look was befitting a medieval princess. Her prince would have given anything to be free of all obligations and escape with her to some faraway island where he could fulfil all the wild fantasies that popped up in his mind one after the other.

The guests had fallen silent too and were staring at Jane. *Had his interest in her piqued their interest or had they recognised her from the tabloid?* He held out his hands to her and when she placed her hand in his outstretched hand, he felt as if he had conquered the world.

“You look like a dream, sweetheart,” he said and managed to restrict himself to just a lingering kiss on her knuckles.

Murmurs started to buzz and he knew they were discussing them. *How would they react when they knew he had broken off his engagement to Tejaswini?* He didn’t really care. All he wanted was Jane by his side, throughout his life.

“Who is she, Vijay? Won’t you introduce her to us?” His cousin Pranav, the son of his father’s youngest sister, came forward. Vijay wanted to shred him to bits for the way his eyes were devouring Jane. He glowered at him.

Vijay slipped his arms around Jane’s waist and pulled her closer as he said, “You will soon know.”

Ignoring Pranav’s bewildered expression, he walked forward looking for his father. But to his surprise, his father was nowhere to be found. Apparently, he had walked out to attend an important call. That seemed strange. When a royal party was going on, all the calls were attended by his assistant, who had strict instructions not to disturb him unless it was really urgent.

Kritika came towards him and grabbed Jane’s arms, pulling her

away from him. With a chuckle, Jane followed her. Vijay scowled at them. Jane looked at him over her shoulders and held his gaze. She smiled and he felt his world warm over under its warmth.

He looked around. Most of the guests stood staring in his direction uncomfortably. Perhaps they were waiting for him to direct them to their seats. The musicians were waiting for his instruction to begin and the butlers stood in the corridor, waiting to deliver the snacks and drinks.

Sensing his duty, he walked to the dais and welcomed the guests, making excuses for his father. He asked them to join him and his family as they welcomed spring in all its glory. The festivities, he informed them, would continue all through the night. This would be one of the most memorable nights in their lives. His eyes flitted to Jane's and he was dazed momentarily, caught in the many hopes he held for the night.

Clearing his throat, he continued with his speech. He gestured to the musicians to begin. The musicians played and a low buzz began as the guests huddled towards their tables. Some of the youngsters were leading their partners towards the dance floor. He watched as Kritika was led to the dance floor by one of their acquaintances. Before he could reach Jane, Pranav claimed her hand and led her to the dance floor. He seemed besotted with her and Vijay felt the jealousy monster tightening its noose around him.

His eyes took in how Pranav's hands were resting on the waistband of Jane's *lehenga*. If he moved his fingers an inch, they would touch her skin. Vijay stood there scowling at them, poised to rip him apart if he dared to touch her inappropriately. Jane glanced at him and all his worries vanished recognizing the love in her eyes. Was she fantasising that she was dancing with him, the way he was doing it? If he was, his fingers would surreptitiously tease and caress, and he wouldn't stop until she was melting in his arms. Another reason why he should wait. He didn't trust himself to behave when she was around. He felt like a randy teenager when he was near her. Even now, his *achkan* felt a bit too tight for his liking around his chest and he shrugged to make the feeling go away.

He walked around, forcing himself to socialize with his guests. He pasted a smile on his face for the many guests and enquired after the health of their families. He appreciated the efforts of an NGO working in

collaboration with the palace for the welfare of widows. He half-heartedly listened to business plans that he had no interests in.

If someone had asked him the details of those discussions, he would have confessed he remembered nothing. His attention had wandered time and again to how gracefully his Jane was dancing in the arms of strangers. It was a torture and yet a revelation as to how perfect she would be as his wife. She seemed far more at ease and more graceful than all those who were born into aristocratic families. After torturing himself by being away from Jane for thirty long minutes, he walked towards her, this time determined to claim her all to himself.

“May I have this dance, Jane?” he asked, and she placed her hands eagerly in his. He took her hand and graced it with an attentive kiss.

“That was nicely done. I liked it,” she said with a mischievous smile.

“Oh, I have been taught my manners, you know. We royals are always attentive to pretty maidens.”

Her smile widened as he led her towards the dance floor. It was a waltz. His hands snaked around her waist possessively. He pulled her closer to himself than was appropriate for a waltz.

“I didn’t know you were used to ballroom dances,” he said, thinking of how gracefully she had danced with the others.

“I had attended a short ballroom dance course before our high school prom to ensure I didn’t end up an embarrassment to my partner.”

“Who was your partner then?” Vijay asked her, though he didn’t understand why he wanted to know or why he was suddenly feeling jealous about a stranger.

“I didn’t go to the prom. My partner fell off his bike two days before the dance and broke his arm. The poor guy.”

“I’m happy to hear that.”

“You sound pathetically heartless, my prince.”

“I’m heartless when it comes to strangers who want to claim your attention. You are mine, my princess. Or should I remind you about how perfect we are together?” he asked softly and surreptitiously traced circles with his right thumb on the silky soft skin on her midriff. He watched with a smug satisfaction as her eyes darkened before they dropped to his lips.

He felt himself whisper something, perhaps her name. His heart pounded and his chest grew tight. He wanted to kiss her then and there. He would have if the music had not stopped then. The waltz had ended. The couples were walking out of the dance floor as dinner would be served next. Perfect, he thought, for he could steal a few moments alone with her. He led Jane by her hand frantically thinking about a place where they could get some privacy.

But when he walked out of the dance floor, his father's assistant reminded him that he had to invite all the guests for the royal dinner. He was to preside over it as his father had not returned yet.

He gestured to his guests to follow him and led Jane towards the royal dining room. It had the capacity to seat 200 people at once and was already laid out with exotic dishes according to the dining preferences of the guests. Dishes from all over the country graced the table. Yet, for the first time, with great delight, he realized Jane was more interested in him than in her plate, which held all her favourite food. Her eyes wandered and met his every now and then. He wanted dinner to be over as soon as possible. But the guests lingered and he politely watched them try out the mouth-watering delicacies and praise the dishes.

And then it was over. The guests walked back into the ballroom and he grabbed Jane's arms as soon as the last guest walked out of the dining room. He whispered to Kritika to take over the party.

Vijay smiled at Jane and led her out through the side door, aiming for the cosy gazebo at the northern end of the central garden, away from the prying eyes of his guests. He patted his pocket to check whether the little box was still there. The gazebo would be perfect for what he had in mind.

Chapter 18

Jane didn't know where he was leading her and she didn't care. The heat imprint of his palm fuelled the maddening desire that had existed throughout the dance and dinner. She wanted to be in his arms, caressed and cherished by him.

They were walking amid the floral garden where exotic flowers waved for attention, yet she wasn't seeing them. Her whole attention was concentrated on him. She couldn't speak, couldn't think anything other than follow him, recalling their time together, the passion that always made her blind. *Was it always going to be like this between them?*

A tall and beautiful Victorian style gazebo stood in the corner of the garden and he led her there. It was deserted and was lighted only by the pale blue light of the full moon that shone in the sky.

It felt magical. A scented breeze played with her curls and she felt his fingers brushing her curls away from her neck. He placed a finger on her lips and traced their contours. His lips then touched hers tenderly. Her pulse began to leap in the hollow of her throat and a moan escaped her lips. He kissed the very spot, making her pulse race faster.

He trailed a train of kisses back up along her neck, jawline and then placed a soft kiss on her lips. She was mesmerized and transfixed as his hand pressed the small of her back, inviting her into his warmth.

Vijay's lips grew more demanding with every touch and she parted her lips allowing him to explore. His tongue teased, tempted and stoked her desire. Her legs grew weak. He murmured her name, his voice hoarse with wanting. Then he pulled away and stared into her eyes, his eyes deep and dark. She could drown in them forever.

'God, Jane! You make me forget the world the second I touch you. I become as randy as a green teenager. I think you know why I brought you here, don't you?' he asked.

Jane looked at him and nodded. He leaned down and nipped her ear.

"I want you beside me as my wife, Jane. Forever. I can't bear to be away from you for even a minute more." His words touched her soul and her eyes grew wet.

He bowed to her and then dropped on one knee, holding both her

hands in his left hand. With his right hand, he fumbled in his pocket and fished out a small velvet box. How many times had she dreamed of this scene, Jane thought, her eyes never once leaving his face. And now her dream was coming true.

Before he could present it to her, someone came forward and grabbed it from his hands. Vijay leapt up, stood and glared at whoever had done it.

It was his father, His Majesty Rudra Dev Varman.

Rudra Dev didn't even acknowledge Jane's presence.

"Come with me now. We need to talk."

Vijay gaped at his father and then back at Jane. He seemed as shocked by his father's interference as she was. *What was happening? Hadn't his father agreed to their relationship?*

"Father, this is Jane. I want you to — "

His father raised his right hand to silence him and refused to listen to Vijay any further.

"That can wait. But what I want to tell you, can't. Come with me this moment."

"Whatever it is, you can tell me in front of Jane." Vijay's voice trembled with suppressed anger.

"I don't think so. I will wait in my office. If you don't follow me there in another five minutes, I will disown you. And I'm serious," Rudra Dev said and stomped away from the gazebo.

"I don't understand. What has happened to him? He looked quite out of his element now. I apologize for his behaviour."

"It is okay, Vijay. Go after him. Find out what is troubling him. I will wait for you in my room."

"Thank you, Jane. I will make up for this, I promise. And I have lots to tell you about Daniel." He placed a quick kiss on her lips and patted her cheeks fondly. When she quietly urged him to go after his father again, he ran his fingers through his hair, turned around and followed his father.

Jane simply didn't know what to do next. She sat on the bench inside the gazebo pondering about what had happened. From absolute bliss, she had suddenly fallen into a cavern of uncertainty. When none of her thoughts gave satisfactory answers to the troubling questions in her mind, she got up and walked towards her room as if in a trance.

Suddenly she remembered Vijay's parting words. *Had he found some new information about Daniel?* That gave her hope.

When she was about to cross into the residential wing, Vijay and his father came out from a door a little farther from where she stood. Both of their faces looked equally troubled. Vijay had changed out of his party outfit and was wearing a shirt, and formal trousers now. He was listening to his father attentively. He shook his head and said something to his father. Just one word from the sentence floated towards her and hit Jane straight in her heart.

Tejaswini.

Was Tejaswini the cause of whatever was happening now? Or were they discussing how he had broken off with her?

Nothing made sense. She watched them till they disappeared down the corridor that led to the basement. Jane knew it led to the private parking area of the palace. *Were they going out? Where were they going?*

She returned to her room, deciding to wait for Vijay. Anyway, she wouldn't be able to sleep tonight.

She pushed open the door and her eyes fell upon a figure sitting on the couch going through a magazine. It was not someone she had expected to see there. Dread clenched her gut. What else was waiting to pounce on her?

She curtsied and Indrani Devi, Vijay's grandmother, patted on the vacant space beside her on the couch.

Wordlessly, she went and sat next to her. Indrani Devi turned towards her and smiled. She touched her cascading earrings and admired the necklace adorning her neck.

"You look beautiful! You do resemble the young Daniel I remember. Such a handsome young man he was! No wonder Devika fell for him."

Why had the sulking lady from the other day suddenly turned amiable and loving? She was calling him handsome and talking fondly of him. Indrani Devi was certainly one mysterious old woman.

Was she about to tell her about Daniel? Was she going to finally know the details about Daniel? A new energy coursed through Jane and she turned fully to face her.

"Do you know anything about Daniel? Please help me find him."

“I can lead you to him. But I need some promises.”

There. There it was. The hint of a hidden agenda.

“What promise?” she asked, contemplating what her demand would be.

“You will leave the palace before Vijay returns. I will arrange for someone to take you to Daniel’s place.”

The words fell like lightning on Jane and an involuntary gasp escaped her.

“Is this some kind of a trap? Why should I leave? I promised Vijay I would wait for him.”

“You will not wait for him. You will leave,” said Indrani Devi, arrogance, and power giving a manic aura to the enigmatic lady.

“But why? I love him,” she said unable to find any other argument that could give her a reason to stay at the palace.

“You believe he loves you? Sravanapura royal men don’t value love. They only value power and century-old traditions. Just because he has been playing around with you, he won’t make you his wife. That requires you to belong to a royal family. Though for the world I can’t understand the difference between the blood of a royal and a commoner. Child, you are young. Don’t waste your time pinning your hopes on Vijay. I saw what happened at the gazebo. His father will make him do what his own father made him do. He will marry that Tejaswini, whom he does not love. Another woman’s suppressed sobs will torture the walls of this palace yet again. Sravanapura men are heartless. They are a cursed lot.”

Indrani Devi paused and panted. The passionate outbreak seemed to have knocked the wind out of her. She coughed and gestured towards the water jug. Jane quickly poured a glass of water and handed it to her. She recovered soon and leaned back onto the couch. She closed her eyes and wrapped her sari around her as if the warmth of the garment would give her the much-needed strength.

Jane watched her patiently. The old lady spoke again after a few minutes.

“Leave, Jane. Fulfil the promise you made to your grandfather. I once managed to rescue a Worthington from the cruelty of the Sravanapura Royals. Yet, poor Daniel suffered enough. If you come into the family, the hunt for Daniel will intensify once more. Not only by our

family but the media will also smell the scope of a good story. Forgive me, if it is possible for you. I know you have already gone through a heartbreak because of Vijay. Trust me, you deserve a better life. Not one that will consume and imprison your soul with unseen chains and rules. Go, child. I will ask Raghav to take you to Daniel. He wishes to see you,” said Indrani Devi.

Stunned by her words, Jane stared at her.

“But how did you know about Vijay and me? Vijay said he hadn’t told anyone about us.”

“No. He didn’t tell me. Kritika blurted it out to me in the excitement of finally seeing you two days ago. And I knew I had to protect Daniel’s family. Sravanapura men are cold-hearted ogres. My husband had vowed to kill his own sister for bringing shame to the family by falling in love with a foreigner. What did he know about love? All that mattered to him was money and family pride. The bastard,” she said.

Indrani Devi’s outburst left Jane tongue-tied momentarily. Had she suffered at the hands of her husband?

“Where is Daniel now? How is he?” Jane asked, turning the topic back to Daniel.

“He is fine. I own a residence in Goa. My husband had gifted it to me the day Vijay’s father was born, the day I’d given him an heir. It has now been converted into a luxury resort. I no longer own it. I bequeathed it to Devika after the death of my husband. Daniel’s sons run it now.”

“Sons. How many uncles do I have? Do they have kids?”

“Of course, they have. You have a fully thriving lineage of Worthingtons in Goa. Go visit them. And take Daniel with you to Surrey. He is waiting for you to join him to go and finally meet his family. I will keep the Sravanapura men in the dark about this entire thing. We need to. To protect Daniel and his family. I know for a fact that Vijay’s father is continuing his search for Daniel and Devika.”

“I will go, ma’am. I want to meet them too. Just tell me one thing. Did you get Devika’s portrait removed from the gallery?”

“Yes. I had asked Raghav to keep an eye on Kritika to get further details about Vijay’s plans. Raghav informed me that he heard Kritika talking to Vijay about Devika’s portrait. And she also mentioned Daniel.

I became worried. I had it removed.”

Jane stared at the lady who had gone against her own family to help Daniel and Devika.

“Before you go, I want you to handover your phone to me. Also, leave a note to Vijay. I will tell you what to write.”

Reluctantly, Jane handed over her phone to Indrani Devi. It didn’t matter. She could email Vijay. She had her digital diary too that held all her phone numbers. And she believed in Vijay.

But her priority now was Daniel.

She sat down and wrote a note to Vijay as dictated by Indrani Devi. With every word that she wrote, she knew she was throwing away all hopes of happiness she had weaved with Vijay. When she signed her name at the end, a teardrop slipped from her lashes and fell onto the paper. It smudged her name. Perhaps it was an omen. Sadness and anger cruised through her veins and she glared at Indrani Devi.

“I love him sincerely, and he loves me too. Why are you making me do this?”

“You will not understand. Trust me, if your love is strong enough, he will return to you. But you don’t know Sravanapura royals the way I do. They always take the easy way out.”

“You are wrong about Vijay. He will prove you wrong.”

“He might. Or he might prove that he belongs to the same mould as other Sravanapura men. I will pray, though, that he isn’t like the others. But if he is, rest assured that you don’t deserve him. Find someone better.”

“I have faith in him and our love. He will come to me. I’m sure of that.”

“May you be correct.” Indrani Devi’s face was devoid of any emotion as she got up to leave.

Raghav, her assistant, suddenly appeared near her, as if he was waiting for her to finish, and led her out of the room.

Half an hour later, Jane left the palace, all her belongings hurriedly packed into her overnight bag. When she was about to leave the room, the maids arrived to change the sheets. Vijay wouldn’t even find her scent in the room.

As the car passed the gates and headed north, Jane turned to take in a last glimpse of the brilliantly lit palace that had won her heart but

would probably never be her home.

Chapter 19

The hospital lobby was teeming with reporters. The royal bodyguards parted the crowd to allow Vijay and Rudra Dev to pass through.

Engrossed in the party, Vijay hadn't been aware of the drama starring him that had unfolded in the world outside. Tejaswini had attempted to kill herself after posting a suicide note on Facebook, blaming him and the media for prompting her to take the extreme step. At the palace, when his father had informed him and explained why he had stopped him from proposing to Jane, he had immediately forgiven him for thwarting his chance of happiness with Jane.

"Tejaswini is tottering on the line between life and death. I don't want her curse to fall on you or Jane. Right the wrongs you have done before embarking on a new life with Jane." His words had made sense completely.

In his haste to be back with Jane, he had handled the breakup with Tejaswini recklessly. He should have managed it better. But what happened couldn't be undone. All he could do now was to make things as right as he possibly could.

"Tell them what I asked you to say. There is no other way now. We will find a solution once the furore dies down," his father whispered in his ears as the group of reporters surrounded them with microphones and television cameras.

"Your Highness, what is your reaction to this incident?"

"Your Highness, who is the mystery lady in the photograph?"

"Is it true that you have broken off your engagement with Princess Tejaswini?"

"What do you have to say about the FB post?"

Questions were being fired at him from left, right and centre. Vijay paused, turned around and faced them.

"I'm in no mood to answer these ridiculous questions. But I wish to make one thing clear. Whatever happened today is the effect of the false tales the media has been spreading about me lately. We have initiated legal actions against the tabloid that carried the slanderous article. Again, I clarify, I have not broken off my engagement with Tejaswini. Please leave her alone. This is a sincere request."

With that, he whirled around and walked away ignoring the rest of the questions. He could hear the buzz reach a peak as the journalists shot questions after questions at him hoping for an answer.

Vijay and his father went straight to meet the doctor-in-charge.

“She is out of danger now. We have kept her under observation. She had swallowed a full bottle of sleeping pills. Luckily her friend found her and brought her here before it was too late.” The doctor reassured them and answered all the questions Rudra Dev asked, patiently.

Vijay bit his inner cheek to keep calm. He had never expected this.

He had always considered Tejaswini to be a bold person. The news about him and Jane might have felt like public shaming to her and her family. After all, the photo of her fiancé canoodling with another woman had been splashed across the front page of a national newspaper. He should have been cautious with Jane. It was not fair to her too. He had sent his lawyers to the newspaper office but it had already succeeded in inflicting damage.

He was allowed to enter the ICU to visit Tejaswini for a few minutes. She was sleeping under the influence of the medicines. The sight of her pale figure lying there amid the many machines that were monitoring her vitals sent a zing of guilt spiralling through him. He wanted to apologize to her.

When he came out of the ICU, Tejaswini’s father approached him.

“I’m sorry, son, for the reckless thing that she did. She was never like this. She knew enough not to believe in the press. Don’t know what prompted her to take this extreme step. Please forgive her thoughtlessness.”

“No, uncle. I should apologize. I hope she forgives me when she recovers. But I promise I will right all the wrongs I did. I will wait till she regains consciousness.”

So, he waited outside, along with his father, discussing the happenings of the day together with several other things they needed to attend to. He decided against calling Jane to inform her about the developments. It would be better if he told her about this latest development in person.

It was close to midnight when he was called in to talk to Tejaswini, who had finally gained consciousness.

When he entered the ICU, his gaze met hers. Tejaswini's eyes were two big pools of grief. They had lost all their liveliness. God, what had he done to the girl?

He hurried to her bed and stood by her bedside. He picked her hand and squeezed it lightly. As though that gesture had not been expected, Tejaswini sobbed aloud.

"Please Tejaswini. Don't cry. I'm sorry for putting you through all this. You didn't deserve this."

"No, Vijay. I'm sorry. I'm so ashamed of myself. I don't know what opinion you have of me now. I was never this foolish. Tell me you don't hate me," she said.

Vijay wiped the tears that flowed out of her eyes and patted her cheeks.

"I don't hate you. Now rest well and recover. Become the bubbly girl I know. Didn't anyone tell you that tears don't suit you?"

She shook her head and smiled. Vijay felt the grip of guilt easing slightly from around his heart. He then spent the next ten minutes teasing her about inventing this new tactic to escape her exams. She denied it vehemently but he laid out the many reasons as to why he thought that was the case. When he came out from the ICU, he was breathing calmly again.

What a tragedy it would have been if she had succeeded in taking her life. He had always been surrounded by strong women. He had never seen any of the women in his family in tears. Either they hid their sadness well or were adept at pushing them away by pretending to be too engrossed with their duties as a royal.

Even Jane was an expert in hiding her real emotions. Poor Jane! He couldn't wait to tell her what all had transpired in the brief hours they had been apart.

Just the thought of her brought a smile to his face. On his journey back home, his thoughts ran to her constantly. How pretty had she looked at the party! Would she have changed out of that alluring outfit? If not, he would have fun removing it, pausing to adore the portions of her skin it had hidden. Slowly, he would take her as if it were their wedding night, and she his alluring bride.

It was around three in the morning when Vijay finally returned to his room. He quickly locked his door and ran towards the connecting door. He wanted to surprise her. Yet, he pushed open the connecting door silently and entered the dark room.

Something was different. He felt it the instant he entered the room. The light of the moon sifting into the room through the windows shone brightly upon an empty bed. He switched on the room lights just to make sure his eyes were not playing tricks on him.

Where was she? Was she with Kritika? Were they having a girls' night together? Maybe they were. He decided to check. Just as he was about to walk towards Kritika's room, which was at the end of the corridor, his eyes fell on a folded piece of paper on the coffee table. It was held in place by a paperweight shaped like a beautiful Easter egg.

He picked it up and opened it to find Jane's neat handwriting. What surprise had she planned for him? He plonked onto the couch and began reading.

Vijay,

Whatever happened today has opened my eyes. I'm leaving.

I'm unable to cope up with the bizarre happenings and way of life of your family.

I feel suffocated and humiliated.

Please don't come in search of me and torture me further.

Let it be a clean break this time.

Goodbye,

Jane

What? He laughed aloud, fully assured that she was playing a prank on him. Yet, when he looked around, every nook and corner of the room screamed out to him the truth of her words. She was gone. He reread the letter and the first sentence itself winded him. His father forcefully taking away the ring from him flashed before his eyes. He ran his fingers through his hair and pulled at the strands. Taking out his phone, he dialled Jane's number. The call didn't connect. The computer recording trilled in his ears that the number was switched off.

He couldn't believe it. Just to assure himself that it was all a joke, he pulled the doors of the wardrobe open, fully expecting to find Jane's

belongings. But the bare cabinets seemed to mock him.

He called Kritika next. After her phone rang for long, Kritika picked it up.

“Where is Jane?” he asked without any preamble.

“Are you drunk? How will I know? She left the party with you. Did you both have a fight?”

He didn’t reply. He just didn’t know what to say. Perhaps sensing from the long silence that something was wrong, she asked if he was alright.

He was anything but alright. He disconnected the call and began kicking at anything that he found near him. A small decorative bronze statue of a dancer clattered towards the corner first. Next, he threw the paperweight that had held the ominous note in place at the window and it fell out into the garden outside, after shattering the glass window. He picked up the throw pillows on the couch and flung them hard on the floor.

The door to Jane’s room swung open and Kritika entered. One of the throw pillows landed right at her feet.

“Vijay, are you crazy? Why are you creating this mess?”

He glowered at her.

When she didn’t get any reply, she looked around.

“Jane left?” she asked tentatively.

This time he nodded. After thrusting Jane’s note into her hands, he trudged out of the room feeling defeated.

Chapter 20

The long car ride to Mangalore airport and then the long hours waiting in the airport threw revelations upon revelations on Jane.

At the airport, she bought a magazine and began reading it to pass time. It was nearing three in the morning and she had hardly caught a few winks of sleep the entire night.

“These royals beat the politicians in creating scandals hands down, I say.” Jane heard a man comment to his spouse as he was passing by. The word royal caught her attention. Following his gaze, she stared at the newsflash scrolling on the huge LED television screen in the waiting area of the airport. Her eyes widened and she walked closer to hear what was being said.

The news anchor talked about a suicide attempt by Tejaswini, Vijay's fiancée. What a shock it must have been to Vijay!

Her heart went out to him. She felt awful. She should be near him, he might be going through hell. Should she call him? But how? She would call him from Daniel's home, she decided.

The anchor guided the viewers to the press statement given by Vijay late last night. His fond face made her heart race, but each word he uttered reinforced the doubts sown by Indrani Devi.

Whatever happened today is the effect of the false tales the media has been spreading about me lately. We have initiated legal actions against the tabloid that carried the slandering article. Again, I clarify, I have not broken off my engagement with Tejaswini. Please leave her alone. This is a sincere request.

Really? What did that say about their relationship?

As the news anchor continued to extoll the virtues of the scion of the erstwhile royal family of Sravanapura and narrated the royal love story, which had turned sour due to the interference of the media, Jane felt bile rise in her throat. She closed her eyes to shut out the news and turned away. She dashed to the nearest washroom and cast away whatever was left in her stomach. The retching didn't stop until she threw away bitter, acrid bile.

Jane splashed cold water repeatedly on her face until she found some semblance of calm. She had only herself to blame. She had welcomed this sure disaster with open arms, caught in Vijay's empty

promises.

What did he gain by playing with her emotions this time? Was this his way of getting back at her? What a fool she had been! All the tall hopes she had harboured crumbled into a heap of nothing.

Taking a deep breath, Jane closed her eyes. She returned to her seat and slumped into it. Someone tapped on her shoulders and she found Raghav with their boarding passes. Their plane would leave in a few minutes.

Their flight landed in Goa at four in the morning. During the hour-long ride to the Daffodil Resort, Jane gave up fighting sleep and nodded off. When she opened her eyes next, their car had stopped in front of the sprawling resort. A giant neon-lit welcoming board declared the presence of its own private beach, lagoon and tropical riverside gardens within the resort.

When she alighted from the car in the courtyard of the hotel, a familiar face appeared at an open window in the porch and Jane did a double take. *Grandpa Bill*? And then she realized it must have been Daniel. Happiness bubbled inside her and flushed out all the sadness. The door opened and Daniel stepped out, his face lit up with a bright smile. He was a leaner and fitter version of Grandpa Bill. Goa suited him certainly. Or perhaps it was the love of the smiling lady who stood next to him. Jane had no difficulty in recognizing Devika. She looked different but had aged gracefully. Her silver hair fell in curls onto her shoulder and there were laughter lines around her eyes. Her body was slender but fit.

Daniel spread his arms in welcome and Jane ran into his arms. When his warm hands closed around her, she sobbed in relief. It felt like being back in Grandpa's arms.

"Welcome to our home, Jane. You don't know how happy I'm to see you," said Daniel. Devika came forward, patted her cheeks and embraced her.

"Grandpa Bill wants to see you! Please let us all go as soon as possible."

"Yes, Jane. I have booked tickets for all three of us for an early morning flight tomorrow. Finally, I have decided to make use of the visit visa I had applied a month ago from Bangalore."

"God, it must have been then that Clara, Grandpa Bill's

goddaughter, recognised you!” Jane said, connecting the dots.

“Oh, was she Bill’s goddaughter? The woman nearly gave me a heart attack. Hearing a stranger addressing me as Daniel, I almost ran off from there. I thought I was going to be caught finally.” Daniel shrugged and shook his head as though just remembering it made him nervous. Jane quickly explained all the drama that had transpired in Surrey after Clara’s revelation.

“So, you were planning to visit us?” Jane asked.

“I was planning ever since Devika’s brother passed away. Last month, I decided it was time. Indrani found an agent in Bangalore who helped me get the papers ready.”

If Daniel had turned up at their home, she would probably have never met Vijay again. And she would not have been heartbroken again, Jane thought, pain making it difficult for her to breathe.

Raghav left for Sravanapura after spending a few minutes to rest and refresh himself.

Jane drank a cup of coffee and ate a sandwich. While she ate, Devika sat with her and they talked. She was pleasantly surprised by Devika’s posh British accent. She revealed she had acquired it because all her governesses had been English. Also, she had roamed frequently all over Europe with her family before marriage and hence she was well-versed in French and German as well. They, in fact, had residences in London and Paris, among other places.

“I wish to hear more about your childhood. I thought Indian royals, especially the women, rarely left India.”

“Oh, no! My grandfather and father were liberals. They roamed the world and we were given proper education. By the late nineteenth century, Indian royals were often part of the London season. Many of the marriages were fixed there. My father found my mother during a ball in London, if the tales are to be believed. We used to love travelling because it gave us a reprieve from the strict rules and regulations we had to follow in and around the palace while in India.”

“Fascinating! Tell me more about your childhood. And your memories of London.”

“Later, child. Now go and rest. You appear so tired.”

Devika led her into a spacious and cosy bedroom and ordered her to rest till it was time for breakfast. Jane fell onto her bed and sheer

exhaustion overtook her. Hours later, she woke up to birdsong and distant sounds of waves crashing.

The memories of the previous night came to taunt her immediately. Jane took a deep, calming breath and tried to concentrate on what lay ahead. She got up and walked into the bathroom. The bathroom mirror reflected a tired and unhappy girl who was still dressed in the party outfit she had worn last night. She didn't want to be that girl who had dreamed a magical dream. The dream was over. She peeled off the garment and tossed it into a laundry bag in the room.

Jane stood under the warm shower and allowed its warmth to surround her. Her treacherous heart yearned for the warmth of two strong hands instead. She allowed herself to shed stormy, heart-wrung tears. One last time, she promised herself, allowing the tears to be washed off with the bath water. She wouldn't mourn the loss of her love. She had done it once, and that was enough. This time, perhaps it had not been love. She hardly knew what it had been. It must have been lust. Why then couldn't she brush it off like a one-night stand that had been magical while it lasted?

She pulled on a T-shirt, and capris and wandered into the main lobby of the resort. Even then, all she wanted to see was Vijay's fond face, to hear his voice, run into his arms and forget everything. It was happening all over again after a gap of three years. The first time it had been brutal, it would be harder this time. Her heart had learned that it could have a second chance and now yearned for another.

Handling heartbreak was never easy. She squeezed her eyes shut but it failed to shut out the memories of love. Could she forget how he always made her feel special, desirable, and innately good?

"Jane, you are up. I was coming to check on you. Come, let me serve you breakfast." It was Devika, coming out of the resort's office. Jane greeted her with a hug. Devika talked non-stop, telling her about her sons and grandkids. She had two sons. One of them was into the hotel business and the other was a heart surgeon. They had three resorts and had plans to expand their business further.

"I'm amazed by how you people managed to remain undetected all these years. You were up against a powerful family."

"Oh, we would have been caught within hours if Indrani hadn't helped us. Using her influence, she helped us to reach here where she

had powerful relatives. For a long time, we lived in and around Goa moving from house to house, never staying in the same place for long. When the fire died down eventually, recognizing the scope of tourism in Goa, Daniel started a bed and breakfast. Oh, by the way, he is not Daniel Worthington anymore. He is now Subodh Roy, a Bengali Anglo Indian settled in Goa.” Devika laughed after declaring that.

“What?”

“He adopted Hinduism and rechristened himself, inventing an Anglo-Indian parentage. One day, while I was pregnant with my elder one, he came and declared his new name. He said it was dangerous to retain the Worthington surname. He wanted his kids to live a life free from fear. He still goes to Church occasionally though and also accompanies me to temples.”

“Wow! What a story. But tell me, why didn’t you people return to England? It would have been easier, right?”

“At first, we didn’t have the financial means and it was also too dangerous. Indrani had informed us that my brother had employed investigators to follow our trail and once or twice we had come close to being found. Then as years passed, we fell in love with this place. Goa became home.”

Daniel’s family resided in the back wing of the resort. The room given to her was part of the family wing. The rest of the rooms were all occupied.

“There is no dearth of tourists here. In fact, some of our guests are like permanent residents,” Devika continued as she guided her towards the dining room.

In the family dining room, Jane was greeted by a cacophony of voices ranging from that of babies to adults. The whole family except Daniel was seated around the table waiting for breakfast to be served. Devika did the introductions. Both her uncles, Dheeraj Roy and Dhananjay Roy, got up and embraced her. Their wives, Shanti and Sheela, followed suit. Dheeraj was the hotelier and Dhananjay the heart surgeon. Both of them had two kids each. A boy and a girl for Dheeraj and two girls for Dhananjay. Dheeraj’s daughter, Keerthi, a fashion designer married to a local businessman, was also visiting. She seemed to be almost of Jane’s age.

“I’m sorry, I so want to get up and greet you. But I will just spoil

your clothes,” Keerthi said. She was busy feeding porridge to her six-month-old who was busy spitting out half of it on his mother’s dress.

Jane felt someone tug at her capris and she looked down to find a cherubic toddler looking up at her.

“Are you my new aunt Jane?” she asked flashing an adorable smile.

“I am, cutie pie. What is your name?”

“Ahana.” She giggled when Jane scooped her up and planted her on her hips. Ahana was Keerthi’s eldest child. She had inherited her grandmother’s black curls and her grandfather’s blue eyes.

“Such a sweet name.”

“So, you went and introduced, yourself to aunt Jane? Good girl. Now allow her to eat breakfast. She will be here all day today. Come here and finish your breakfast,” Keerthi said to her. Ahana wiggled down from Jane’s hips and ran to her mother.

Time just flew as she got acquainted with her new relatives. Jane had called home using Daniel’s phone and had told them the good news. Everyone was happy. Except her.

While she sat on the beach with little Ahana on her lap, listening to her babbles, Jane felt a painful tug at her heart. Will she ever have a kid like this of her own?

Then another thought dawned. They hadn’t used protection when they had made love. It hadn’t occurred to either of them then. They had been driven by lust and longing. But, it hadn’t been her fertile time. She was due to get her periods in a day or two. There was no chance that she would get pregnant. The realization brought an unusual pang. Would it be bad if she had a baby that would remind her of Vijay, of those magical moments of love? It was madness, yet she wanted it. Earnestly.

By the time they landed in Heathrow the next day, Jane knew the baby would never come. She was experiencing the familiar stomach cramps. Another dream had died before it spread its wings.

Chapter 21

Sravanapura, April 15, 2009

Vijay had spent the better part of the last two days searching for Jane. He had no idea where she was. Her phone was still switched off. He had sent multiple emails to her. No reply had come. She hadn't checked out from his hotel. That meant she would come back for her belongings. Yet, with each passing hour, his patience was running out. He had to find her. He had called all his contacts in the aviation industry seeking help. He would know if Jane flew out of India.

Everything seemed like a nightmare. Hadn't she promised to wait for him? What had happened in the interim to make her hate him? And what about Daniel? Or did something happen to Grandpa Bill?

Her absence was slowly making him insane. He had drowned in alcohol to wipe out unhappy thoughts. But it had only turned things worse.

The day before, he had visited Tejaswini in the hospital. She had appeared cheerful and peppy as usual. On an impulse, perhaps also due to the influence of the many glasses of whiskey he had downed, he had leaned near to give her a peck on her cheeks. And then her light brown eyes had somehow taken on a hue of blue and the lips had suddenly transformed before his eyes. He had kissed her lips hungrily and moaned Jane's name like a frenzied prayer. It was when he felt Tejaswini pushing him away with disgust that he realized his folly. It was not Jane. He had scampered out of the hospital room after muttering apologies to Tejaswini.

He spent the night shut up in his room, drinking away to oblivion. Sometime during the early hours of the next morning, he opened the connecting door to Jane's room and wandered in, drinking directly from the bottle in his hand. He had lain on her bed trying to trace her scent, her warmth or anything that would have made him feel her presence. After rummaging through the drawers, he found a small hair clip shaped in the form of a butterfly that he remembered having seen on her hair. Clutching the tiny butterfly inside his palm, he fell asleep on her bed.

And that was where Rudra Dev found him the next morning. He hadn't asked anything. He left a few aspirins and a glass of water on the bedside table. Vijay had gratefully swallowed the tablets and then plonked back into the bed.

By mid-morning, he dragged himself off to his room. After a bath, he ordered a light breakfast and checked his phone for messages and emails. Everything felt worse than last time. He had been so close to his happiness but it had slipped away from him again.

In the evening, his father summoned him and asked him to accompany him to the hospital. Tejaswini was getting discharged from the hospital. After passing half the distance in silence, his father began to talk.

"Do you know that your grandfather was not the actual heir to our kingdom?"

"No. Wasn't he the eldest in the family?"

"No. He had an elder brother, Hari Dev Varman, two years older than him. They were like best friends and did everything together. They were one lively pair. Hari Dev was much adored by the people and other royals alike. He was a very good cricket player as well. He played for India."

"And then?"

"He fell in love with an English opera singer while on a tour to England with the team. He wanted to get married to her and brought her to the palace. My grandfather would not even hear of such nonsense and sent her back to England. Hari Dev threatened that if he wasn't allowed to marry her, he would drink himself to death. And he did just that. He died when he was twenty-five. My mother told me about this when I fell in love years ago with someone outside nobility. You can imagine why your grandfather was so against love. He even lost his younger sister, whom he adored, again to love. To an Englishman. No wonder, he was among the first of the South Indian royals to support the nationalist movement. He wanted the English removed from the Indian soil forever."

Vijay understood why he was being told this tale. Was his father going to tell him to forget Jane? He braced himself for his next words. But his father surprised him again.

"I like Jane. I won't ever become a hurdle in the path of your

happiness. But don't waste your life pining for her if she doesn't need you. Love cannot be forced, son. If she is yours, she will come to you. When I saw you passed out on her bed today morning, I felt as though history was repeating itself."

Vijay felt his father's hand on his shoulder and he swallowed.

"No, father. I promise. I will not touch alcohol again. I feel ashamed of myself. Everything happened too suddenly and left me confused," he confessed. His father gave him a pat on his shoulders.

They remained silent for the rest of the trip, each consumed by his own thoughts.

They were headed to Bangalore where they would remain for the next two weeks. Vijay was planning to lodge a missing person report if he couldn't locate Jane within a week. Something about the way she had gone away was making him uneasy. Where was she?

Once they reached Bangalore, Vijay and his father visited the hospital where Tejaswini was being treated. She hated staying at the hospital. Vijay wanted to make sure she was alright.

Vijay first called on the doctor-in-charge to enquire about Tejaswini. He learned her father had signed a bond to get the discharge. The doctors wanted her to undergo a psychiatric evaluation as they suspected she might try to commit suicide again. But the family had refused.

"I'm clearly against this discharge. The effect of sleeping pills may take up to a week to clear. Only then we can be sure if it was a pretend suicide or a real attempt," said the doctor.

"Pretend suicide? What do you mean? Who would take sleeping pills and risk their life?"

"Some do. To emotionally blackmail others. The dosage of the pills will determine the danger they pose. Depression is a common cause for such acts. So, we want to keep her under observation. But she is not ready. What can we do? I want you to make her understand."

"I will try. Let me talk to her family," said Vijay and walked out.

He paused in front of Tejaswini's room when her giggles reached him. He was about to knock when he heard her speak.

"Yes! You are a genius. Your plan worked. Like you said, he is giving me more attention than before. I'm sure he has packed off that bitch by now. Can you believe that he was whispering her name while

kissing me? I almost wanted to strangle him.”

“Good that you didn’t. Your father badly wants this marriage to go through.”

Vijay forgot to breathe hearing the conversation. He had heard what he wanted to hear. Instead of making him angry, it cheered him up. He waited another minute before knocking on her door.

Tejaswini was lying on the bed when he entered, her mother playing the nurse. He acted like the perfect fiancé, enquired after her health and gave her the flower bouquet he had got for her.

He walked out of the hospital with a grin on his face. The conversation he overheard had made the path ahead of him clear. At least his conscience won’t prick him anymore when he officially ended the engagement.

When he walked out from the hospital lobby, his phone pinged with an email. An email he had been expecting since long. His face lit up with a smile that refused to leave his face for a long while thereafter. Cameras flashed as he walked to his car. He frowned at the photographers.

Were they so starved for news? Hadn’t they clicked his pic when he had walked in carrying a bouquet for Tejaswini?

Chapter 22

Surrey, April 15, 2009

Jane hadn't imagined the scene at the hospital to be like this at all. She had expected an emotional reunion with the brothers shedding lots of tears. Instead, Grandpa Bill had scowled royally and gone quiet when Daniel entered the room. He refused to talk to him even as Daniel sat on his bed and explained the many reasons that had made this separation and secrecy necessary.

"You scoundrel! Couldn't you drop a line to me? To your brother? Who the hell would have found out?" snapped Grandpa Bill breaking his silence after long. Jane, who was sitting beside him, patted on his shoulders asking him to calm down.

"I would have done it. But so many things were at stake. I was up against a very powerful family. Devika belongs to the royal family of Sravanapura."

"The royal family of Sravanapura? Good lord, isn't that Vijay's family?" asked Grandpa Bill, addressing Jane. She nodded.

"I loved the chap. Jane had a fallout with him while in college. So, Jane, you are not the first Worthington to fall in love with a royal. Perhaps we have that thing in our blood. We attract royalty." Grandpa Bill chuckled.

"Were you in love with Vijay?" The question came from Daniel. Jane sat without answering. What could she say? That she was still in love with him?

"Of course, she was. But she chickened out when she discovered he was a royal. The poor guy came here determined to win her back. Is he still single? We can send a proposal via Daniel. You are also related to a royal now." He flashed a smile at Devika whose eyes were focused on Jane. The room suddenly felt claustrophobic. She needed to get out.

What would they say when they came to know of the events that had transpired between her and Vijay this time?

"As if I can go to them! Billie, will you forgive me? I'm leaving if you will continue to sulk at me."

"Forgive you? Of course, I won't. I shall consider it if you bring

me a pint now though,” said Grandpa Bill. Daniel laughed aloud and hugged Grandpa Bill hard. Daniel gestured to Devika to come and sit near him.

Jane got up from the bed and allowed Devika to take her place. She slipped out of the room when the talk slowly drifted back to the topic of Vijay and the Sravanapura royals.

That night, each member of her family took turns to talk and get close to Daniel and Devika. Her brothers Ernie and Taylor had all turned up. It was a full house. She pretended to be happy even though she couldn't help but remember the last day of her stay in Sravanapura. The news flash she had seen the other day kept playing in loops in her mind.

After dinner, while they gathered in the drawing room to chat while watching the evening news, Jane bade everyone goodnight and retired to her room to seek some quiet to brood over things. Also, she had to check her email to find out if there were any updates regarding work.

She took out the laptop from her bag and switched it on. Her inbox had several new emails. Her heart began to thud at her ribs when she found a familiar and dear name among them. Vijay's.

What did he have to say? Hadn't she seen enough?

He seemed to have been furious when he had sent the first mail. It just read,

WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?

The next two emails also asked similar questions. Except that he seemed to have calmed down. The final and latest one tugged at her heartstrings and hope blossomed in her heart along with love.

Dear Jane,

Run wherever you want to, but remember you cannot run away from me forever.

We belong together. How can you forget that?

I long to have you in my arms again. You are torturing me.

Where are you, darling?

I will never stop loving you.

Yours,

Vijay

How could he write this to her after declaring to the whole world

that he was still engaged to Tejaswini? According to him, wasn't she just a creation of the media?

Or had he called off his engagement with Tejaswini?

Curious, she typed his name into the Google search box and clicked enter.

There were many articles trending about him. The one on top was titled, *"What is the secret behind his smile? Have they decided on a wedding date?"*

The article contained pictures of Vijay arriving at the hospital with a bouquet. And then one of him leaving with a satisfied smile on his face. For a full minute, Jane stared at his smiling face. If not for his help, the voices wafting in from her living room wouldn't have been this happy. She turned her attention back to the article. It also had a picture of Tejaswini, clicked during their engagement. The visual of their almost kiss she had witnessed came back to taunt her and she quickly skimmed the article and closed it.

Tejaswini was being discharged from the hospital. Most of the other articles were on similar lines. Even her hospital stay was being celebrated. *Was the media so obsessed with the royals everywhere in the world?*

She opened Vijay's final email again and contemplated whether to answer it. Why should she answer? Hadn't he woven a similar web of lies during their college days? She had believed every word he had uttered and then the truth had caught her unaware. Just like this time. Jane shut the laptop with force.

She had no inkling as to how they lived their life. During the brief hours she had been at the Sravanapura Palace, she had felt like she was in the midst of a modern fairy-tale. The twists and turns had been unnerving to the core. Yet, it was magical while it lasted. And the magic had been entirely due to his presence.

She had to find a way to stop obsessing over him. That was her last thought before sleep claimed her.

Chapter 23

Surrey, April 16, 2009

The next day got over in a flash. Daniel dragged her to visit old friends and relatives.

Jane was amazed when she learnt that Devika had been to the Buckingham Palace when she was eight years old where she had been presented to the queen. She recalled incidents and famous personalities she had met during their visits to London. In fact, she had also attended finishing school in London.

“We had a house near Regent’s Park, the Dev Palace. I don’t know if the family still owns it. I would love to visit it once more. I might never return to the Sravanapura Palace in this lifetime. Is it possible to visit it?” she said while they were returning from lunch at a family friend’s place in their car. Taylor who was driving the car, asked Ernie, the gadget geek in the family to search online. Google informed them that Dev Palace was a private property and still belonged to the royal family of Sravanapura. And that visitors were not allowed.

Devika’s face showed her despair. Daniel took her hand into his and squeezed it.

“Don’t worry dear. We will find a way.”

While they were getting out of the car at their place, Daniel’s phone rang.

“Who might this be? It is a local number. I better pick this up.” He walked away to attend the call.

When he returned, he called Taylor and asked him if he could take him to a nearby pub.

“Devika, that was an old neighbour. He wants to meet me for a drink.”

“You go ahead. I will go in and rest for a bit,” said Devika. After Taylor parked the car in the family garage, he and Daniel went out to meet the friend

The whiff of coffee welcomed them home and Jane plonked herself onto the couch and Ernie slid next to her. Devika left them and wandered towards the kitchen. When Ernie switched on the TV, Jane

snapped at him.

“Turn it off. Give me some peace of mind.”

“You go off to your room if you crave peace. I want to watch a movie.”

“Ernie, switch it off. Or watch it from your bedroom,” said Jane’s mother coming in with a tray full of freshly baked scones and coffee.

Ernie scowled at Jane and switched off the television. Both the siblings continued bickering till Devika returned to the room.

Daniel returned after an hour. His face was bright and he seemed to have had a merry time.

“Darling Devika, God seems to have heard you. Young Peter, my friend’s son is the caretaker of the Dev Palace. He has invited us all to visit the place tomorrow morning. The family is not expected to visit anytime soon, so we can stay the day there if you wish to. Isn’t that the best piece of news I have given you in a while?”

“It indeed is.” Devika’s face lit up with a smile.

“And I want everyone to accompany us. We might never get a chance to visit a royal house again!”

Everyone started chattering excitedly but Jane didn’t want to be a part of it.

“I have seen the Sravanapura Palace. This might not anyway be as big as that. I think I will skip it.”

“No, Jane. I want you to come. I want to show you the place that holds a very special place in my memories,” said Devika.

Daniel seconded her. Ernie began teasing her for making such a fuss about a simple visit.

Jane succumbed to the pressure and agreed. In the evening, Grandpa Bill returned home and the happiness quotient in the house rose by another notch.

London, April 17, 2009

In the morning, they all left the house for London, with the exception of Jane’s mother who stayed back to look after Grandpa Bill. Grandpa Bill was advised not to travel for a while and rest. He had grumbled and complained all morning when he learned where they were

all headed.

The Dev Palace stood out among the other houses situated on the eastern side of Regent's Park because of its elegant neoclassical design. It was a terrace house and the prime location, which presented panoramic views of the prestigious Regent's Park, made it one of the most desirable properties in the area.

The royal insignia of Sravanapura, a galloping horse in steel, pinned over the nameplate was the first symbol of royalty they encountered.

A man dressed in a prim suite, who must have been Peter, stood at the door. He raised his right hand in a welcome gesture when Daniel stepped out of the car. He came forward and greeted them warmly.

"I'm so glad I could meet you, madam," he said as he held the door open for Devika to step out. Devika got out and folded her hand and said '*namaste*' to him, and he immediately repeated the gesture and sank into a deep bow before her. The man sure was used to bending low to royalty every now and then.

Jane's heart fluttered. A collective sigh of awe resounded when they stepped into the reception area of the three-terraced house. It was two floors high with intricately carved plasterwork in the ceilings and masterpieces of art displayed on the ivory coloured walls in ornate gold frames. An immense marble staircase, carpeted with a red Persian rug, ended in an arc in the broad balcony above.

"Please make yourselves comfortable," said Peter guiding them towards a gold-and-white salon on the right. He walked away, as they bundled into the salon chattering in excitement.

"Oh, there are other visitors," whispered Taylor to Jane gesturing to two other people seated in the salon. Jane's palms and feet went cold when she recognised the two Indians, the two Sravanapura royals, seated in the gold and white salon. Jane heard Devika gasping, though Daniel appeared strangely calm.

"Welcome, Daniel. I'm so excited to meet you, Aunt Devika," said Rudra Dev Varman as he embraced Daniel like an old friend.

Jane stood rooted to the spot staring at the unexpected scene unfolding in front of her.

"Jane, won't you say hello? I hope you remember Kritika," said Rudra Dev, his lips curling into a smirk. Kritika came forward and

hugged Jane.

Jane stood frozen for a few seconds trying to compose herself and then returned Kritika's hug. She smiled feebly at her.

Her eyes wandered around seeking the one royal she desperately wanted to see. As though answering her unasked question, Rudra Dev said, "Vijay asked us to convey his regards to you all. He is quite busy with the impending marriage and all his business dealings. But he is eager to meet the Worthington line of his family as soon as possible."

Chapter 24

London, April 17, 2009

Jane's stomach clenched and she felt nauseated. Even as she continued to stand like an immobile statue, witnessing what should have been an impossible scenario, introductions were made. Rudra Dev and Kritika chatted with all her family members like they were friends meeting after a long while.

At last, she found her tongue and addressed Rudra Dev.

"I don't understand. What is happening? Will anyone explain?"

"Don't you think you owe us some answers? You were the one who vanished from our house without any explanation."

Jane swallowed. She closed her eyes and took a calming breath.

"Sorry, but I was obliged to leave. I had promised someone that I would leave in exchange for the information about Daniel's whereabouts."

"Yet, you could have trusted Vijay. He helped you all along, didn't he?"

"I don't want to justify my actions, but I don't regret them. Everything seems to have happened for the better as the recent developments show."

Rudra Dev wrinkled his forehead and narrowed his gaze.

"So, you thought you could fool us and get away? Is that all you wanted? It didn't matter to you that you played around with our feelings. We were a means to the end, weren't we?"

"Dad, stop it. Don't you think Jane is allowed to make her own choices? She made her choice like Vijay made his. Anyway, because of her, you are finally reunited with great-aunt Devika."

"Oh, I would have found her soon. Even before mother confessed to her role in helping Aunt Devika, I had zeroed in on the Daffodil Resort, based on my search since the last few months. It wasn't difficult, was it, to figure out given the several hour-long chats to that particular number from the Dower house? But let bygones be bygones. Let us forget everything and start anew. What say, aunt Devika?"

Devika looked at Jane. She clearly wanted this new beginning but

she was concerned about her. Jane smiled at her and turned away. Now she had turned out to be the outsider. She wished she was back in her room where she could sink under the covers and hide from everything.

“Kritika, why don’t you show Jane around the house?” Rudra Dev said.

Jane had no wish to go around the house where she felt like an impostor. Yet, when Kritika came near and led her out of the salon, she followed. Kritika showed her the kitchen and dining area and the impressive larder, cloakroom and staff accommodation spread over the ground floor.

“Jane, I apologise for how my father behaved with you. I’m with you. I would have done exactly the same thing and I know father approves of it too. It is just that he likes to put his weight around a bit to intimidate people. Ignore him, okay?”

Jane nodded but she didn’t say anything. She kept on walking as they climbed the white marble staircase and reached the balcony that led to the master bedroom on the second floor.

“This house is steeped in history. It has hosted many famous personalities from India’s past and present, including many former prime ministers and presidents. This wide reception hall is one of the four we have in the house. On this floor, we have only the master bedroom, with its en-suite bathroom and dressing room. It is huge and boring. We will skip it as my father is occupying it as of now. I want to show you mine and Vijay’s rooms. The views of the Regent’s Park from our balconies are breath-taking.”

Jane listened silently to her talks even as she wished she were elsewhere. She wished she were back in that cosy beach house in Mangalore, the time when she had been the happiest, or that moment when Vijay had gone down on his knees at the gazebo in the palace garden. She bit her lips as tears pricked at the back of her eyes. For two days, she had lived in a fairy-tale. It had then died prematurely. Her prince had turned out to be a traitor. Yet again.

They had reached the third-floor landing.

“This is my room and that is Vijay’s. That one at the end of the corridor is a guest bedroom. Let us go into mine.”

Kritika led Jane into a spacious bedroom furnished in the Indo-western style. The majestic four poster bed and the dressing table with a

silver framed mirror were clearly Victorian. But the plush leather couch and the bean bags in front of a LED television set talked about the modern taste of the occupant. A maid came in with a glass of juice and a plate of scones just then. Kritika led Jane to the couch.

Jane took a sip from the juice and kept it back. She desperately wanted to be alone. She clutched at her upper arms as thoughts rioted in her head.

Kritika urged her to finish her drink. She shook her head. Her chest constricted with conflicting emotions. Wordlessly, Kritika led her out of the room. Stopping suddenly, she turned and faced her.

“Jane, I had envied the love you and Vijay shared. I had wished for such a love to enter my life. I never thought you would give up on it so easily. Why Jane? Why did you do this to him?”

“What did I do Kritika? Even though I promised your grandma that I would break all ties with him, I was determined to email him explaining everything. But obviously, he doesn’t love me anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, I heard the statement he gave to the press, telling the world that everything was fine between him and Tejaswini. I don’t want to be the thorn in his path. He is free to choose the life he wants.”

“That was all a lie. A charade he had to play. He loves you. He went into a drunken stupor after you left. It was only after father had a talk with him that he stopped drinking. You should have trusted him.”

“It is too late I guess. He has made his choice. I wish him happiness.”

“Jane, all this is just a thin wall of misunderstanding. I’m telling you, it would collapse the minute you both sit down and talk.”

“I wish I could.” Tears were starting to pool in her eyes and Jane looked away to hide them.

“I think you should,” Kritika said as she pulled her into a hug.

She then opened the next door in the corridor and held it open for her to step in.

Jane stepped into a spacious and magnificent bedroom that immediately reminded her of Vijay. The room even smelled a bit of his elusive, tangy cologne. Jane ran her fingers over a photo on the wall—it was of Vijay, probably taken during his university days—thinking fervently how much she would like to see him again. At least once more.

The door clicked shut behind her. She whirled around to ask Kritika when he planned to marry Tejaswini. Instead, she faced the subject of her thoughts leaning against the door, with one foot resting on the ground, another on the door and his arms crossed over his chest. His intense brown eyes looked straight into hers.

Jane searched his face trying to recognize the emotions clouding his handsome features. His eyes were asking a thousand questions, but were also offering himself to her. A ghost of a smile played around his lips. Jane felt her own lips twitch in an answer and she finally allowed them to curl into a full-blown smile.

Chapter 25

Vijay had decided he would meet Jane again, right when he realized she had run away. Again. He had fantasized about it in a multitude of ways in the last few days. He had thought of where he would meet her, what he would say to her and how she would look like then. None of it, though, even closely resembled what was happening, thanks to his father's elaborate and tactful conspiracy.

How did he bring Jane here? Did his father do this because he considered himself partly responsible for their estrangement? He had known his father was having guests and had stayed in his room to avoid whoever it was. He wasn't in a mood to socialize. He had been getting ready to visit Surrey and confront Jane when he had heard her voice outside his door. In the last few minutes, when he had been eavesdropping on the conversation between his sister and her, he had prepared himself to rant about how she had again failed to trust him.

But now that he had pushed Kritika out of the room with great difficulty, to secure a private audience with Jane, his tongue was unwilling to cooperate. Now that their eyes had met, nothing seemed to matter. The tantalizing smile playing on her lips proclaimed she was his.

She was wearing a floral dress, similar to the ones she used to wear while they were in college. Large pink and blue flowers were scattered on white muslin. Her luxuriant curls spilled over her shoulders and shone in the sunlight that filtered in through the window panes. The flowers on the dress rested on her curves enticingly and sent fresh darts of desire rushing through his blood.

He pushed away from the door he was leaning on and walked towards her, his eyes glued to hers. He stopped a mere step away from her and entreated his heart slamming against his ribs to calm down. It didn't listen and began to pound when she raised those cornflower blue eyes, glazed with love, to his. His arms went around her, crushing her to him. His mouth swooped down and claimed her lips as her hands glided over his shoulders and up behind his neck. He plunged his tongue into her mouth that had opened already to receive him. He relished the sweet softness of her mouth and with each stroke lust surged through him.

"I missed you, Jane," he whispered against her lips and she pressed herself closer to him. He deepened the kiss.

But soon he felt her stiffen in his hands. And she pushed at his chest to free herself from his arms. Puzzled, he let her go.

"I forgot. You are no longer mine. You are still bound to her. God, how could I forget that?"

"What? Didn't I explain to you everything? Don't you believe I love you?"

She walked further away from him. She rubbed her palms against her dress and then crossed them across her belly.

"I also heard your press statement where you declared you were still engaged to her. You made it sound as if I were a figment of the media's imagination," she said, wanting to hear his explanation.

He walked over to her and cupped her face. "Jane, Jane, listen." She pulled at his hands and he let her go.

She moved to the open window and stood there, looking out, refusing to face him.

He sat on his bed and raked his fingers through his hair. Then he punched the bed and got up. He should explain it all to her.

"It was all a trap. A cleverly engineered plan by Tejaswini and her mother. She staged the whole drama and posted a note on Facebook blaming me for forcing her to take that extreme step."

Jane's right hand flew to her chest and she took a step away from the window. Toward him. Encouraged, he continued.

"The initial reports were that she was critical. I could be arrested if she died. I had to listen to my father's wise words and play along, blaming everything on the media. I came to your room to explain after we returned from the hospital. But you were long gone."

"I can explain that. When I went to Goa, I had no plans to be away from you. I was just playing to the tunes of your grandmother to get to Daniel. She even took away my phone and dictated that note I left for you. I was determined to email you everything at the first chance I got. But then I heard your press statement and I was devastated."

"Don't you think you should have asked me for an explanation? Why, when I was on the verge of proposing to you, would I suddenly give such a statement?"

"I'm sorry. I should have trusted you. I almost lost you again."

"Oh, I had no plans of losing you again. I was determined to pursue you and drum the fact into that stubborn brain of yours that I love

you. And that I will always love you.”

“I love you too, Vijay. More than you even realize,” she mumbled.

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. With a sigh of relief, he went to her. He slid his arms around her again and gathered her to him. He rested his chin atop her head and waited for his pounding heart to calm down. Jane relaxed against him as if the only place she wanted to be then was inside the circle of his arms.

He led her to the couch and made her sit. Then he hunkered in front of her and looked deeply into her eyes.

“Janet, I have been thwarted twice already when I tried to do this. So, I have been carrying around this tiny box in my pocket ever since. Can I take it out now?”

As if in answer, someone knocked on his door repeatedly. Ignoring it, Vijay took out the tiny box and pulled out the gleaming ring. He looked into her glowing face and quietly said.

“There is no one in this world who is dearer to me than you, Janet. You're the only one I'll ever want. Will you marry me, sweetheart?”

Jane nodded.

“I will, Vijay. I love you,” she whispered and extended her left hand. Her hands quivered as he slipped the ring onto her ring finger. He kissed her fingers and then dropped a quick kiss on her lips.

“It is beautiful,” she said admiring the gold ring encrusted with diamonds and a big sapphire in the centre. He had purchased it together with the necklace and earrings she had worn on the day of the spring party.

The knocking on the door had by now turned into pounding. Exasperated, he got up and walked towards the door.

He opened the door and Kritika dashed in. She hugged Vijay screaming ‘Congratulations’ and then ran to Jane. She hugged her tight, shouting, “I'm so happy! Congratulations! Show me the ring, show me the ring.”

“You are the most annoying sister ever! Do you know that? I had to hurry through my proposal because of you. You were listening at the door, weren't you, shameless creature?” Vijay threw a throw pillow at her.

“Of course, I was. I wouldn’t have missed it for anything in the world,” said Kritika, dodging the pillow and flashing a wicked grin at them.

Jane giggled.

“Wait... Vijay, don’t you want to meet the original lovers who were in a way the reason you met again? And you both should thank father for setting this all up expertly.”

“Daniel and great-aunt Devika are here? How did that happen?” Vijay asked.

“It wouldn’t have happened if father hadn’t thrown a full-blown tantrum in front of grandma. He emotionally blackmailed her into spilling all the beans the other day. I had seen her leaving Jane’s room on the day of the party. And he had doubts of his own about her being involved in Daniel’s case. We both worked together.”

“You both kept me in the dark even though I shared everything with you! Don’t I have the best family ever?” Vijay was grinning wide.

“Relax, bro! You got the best surprise ever!”

When they entered the salon, all faces lit up and Rudra Dev got up along with Daniel.

“Jane, do I see a ring? Did he propose? That is my boy! He is a man of action!” Rudra Dev said, his grin mirroring the one on his son’s face.

“Daniel, Devika, I’m so happy to meet you.” Vijay hugged Daniel and then touched Devika’s feet who blessed him.

They all sat down. Peter brought in a plate of Indian sweets to celebrate the family reunion and the betrothal.

“Tell me Daniel, is Peter really your friend’s son?” Jane asked wanting to fit in the last piece of the puzzle.

“No. It was Rudra Dev who I met yesterday. He said he wanted to meet me alone before he met Devika. And that he wished for Devika to return to the palace and take her rightful position in the family. The mention of Indrani’s name was enough for me to trust him. But Peter is indeed the caretaker here.”

Vijay’s eyes met his father’s and he mouthed a ‘thank you’ to him. He would thank him properly later, but the moment demanded that he just say it to him.

“So, when are we going to hear the wedding bells?” Devika

asked, directing her question to Vijay and Jane who were sitting together on a three-seater couch.

They both looked at each other and smiled. Vijay spoke, “We haven’t decided.”

“Amma insisted that I should push for a May wedding. She even found out an auspicious time after a consultation with our family astrologer. May 16th is what he suggests. Would that be too early?”

Vijay muttered, “Too late.” He would have been happy if they were to wed today.

His objection was vetoed by the rest of the group. Even the bride-to-be!

“It is just a month away. I have dreamed of this day all my life. I almost can’t believe my dream is coming true,” Jane whispered when he had finally managed to pull her away from the chattering group that had become busy pondering over guest lists, wedding planners, flowers and the likes.

“It is our dream, Janet. I’m the happiest man alive on earth today.”

He cupped her face and slowly rubbed his lips over her lips cherishing their softness. He then kissed her, fully intending to make her a very happy woman.

Chapter 26

Sravanapura, May 16, 2009

At the first light of dawn, Jane woke up to a universe of music. A lively band of birds was performing in the garden of the apartment complex on the grounds of the Sravanapura Palace, the current residence of Devika and Daniel. The notes sounded like a wedding song, reminding her of her soon to be husband. Were they celebrating a wedding too?

Jane picked her phone and there was a message from Vijay.

“Good morning, love. They have scheduled a lot of rituals for me to perform. Right now, I am covered in an oil that smells of sandalwood and turmeric. You would die laughing if you see me now.

Will be out of reach the whole morning. But if you really need to talk, send me a note via anyone at the palace. And be cool, okay? Everything will turn out fine. Can’t wait for the moment when you will become mine forever.”

Jane smiled. She was not worried. And she was eager to be his forever.

Vijay’s family and extended family had welcomed her into their home and hearts during the official betrothal ceremony in London. They already treated her as one of the family. Her family had gone all out too and the supposedly small ceremony had become a grand function, on par with a wedding. And she had worn a white wedding gown to fulfil the wishes of her family of seeing her in one. Vijay had looked handsome in a three-piece suit. The media had celebrated their love story and her channel had secured the official rights to broadcast the engagement ceremony. She had become a celebrity overnight. The paparazzi had begun camping in front of their home. It was only after reaching Sravanapura that she had finally felt free to breathe. The twenty-four-hour security retinue blocked the entry of media or any guest without permission into the palace grounds.

Devika and Daniel were now officially residing at Sravanapura and were playing hosts for the bridal party. The last few weeks had been

unbelievably hectic. Every minute of her day had been packed with meetings with planners, stylists, and interviews with the media scheduled almost every day. She met Vijay rarely as his time was equally in demand for the various activities. Most of their conversations were through messages. They were not allowed to meet in private like they wished to though Vijay at times sneaked in during the night to steal a kiss and more.

The mehndi on her hands was a scarlet red bordering on blackish maroon. The patterns reminded her of perfect and intricate filigree work.

“My brother loves you immensely. Here is the proof,” Kritika had declared when she had seen the colour the henna paste had left on her hand and feet.

Jane didn’t need any proof though. One look at Vijay’s face was enough to convince her that she was the love of his life.

The Sravanapura Palace framed by the windows in her room looked festive with fairy lights adorning every pillar and tower. With the scenic ranges of the Western Ghats in the background, it seemed like a star shining in the picturesque dawn.

The house was slowly stirring into life. She heard the sounds of footsteps passing her door, muffled commands in low voices and the chatter of bands of servants. Jane kneeled down near her bed to pray to the creator for a blissful start to her new life. Her prayers turned out to be words of gratitude than any new request. She thanked the creator for the many blessings he had showered on her. She was blissfully happy by the time she finished her prayer and sauntered dreamily into the washroom to start her day.

Leaning over the sink, she turned on the faucet and splashed her face with warm water. She rubbed a mild aloe cleanser slowly in circles over her face as she contemplated what would be a momentous day in her life. By the time she came out of the bathroom after a leisurely bath, she could hear impatient knocks on her door.

When she opened the door, her mother barged in along with Susan, Devika, the palace beautician and a few other relatives. It was time for her to get transformed into a bride. They made her turn, twist and sit for a series of seemingly never-ending grooming routines.

The lessons to wear and manage a *sari* with Kritika had paid off well. She felt confident that she could carry her red and gold, silk bridal

sari like a true princess. Elaborate necklaces, hair ornaments, earrings, bangles and even a tiny nose ring were pinned in place by steady hands. Many strings of jasmines along with beautiful hair ornaments adorned her plaited hair. Once they finished, they guided her towards the full-length mirror where she was allowed to see a glimpse of the beautifully decked bride for a few seconds. Before she could even register how strange yet lovely she looked, she was being ushered out and into a limousine that would take her to the palace's wedding hall.

A bunch of flower girls welcomed her and led her to the *mandapa*, the stage where the wedding would be held. Kritika received her and led her to her seat next to Vijay, facing the sacred fire that would be the heavenly witness to their union.

Vijay sat to her left dressed in a golden silk *achkan*. He wore a richly bejewelled turban made of silk and gold threaded lace that matched it, looking truly royal. His whispered words of admiration upped her confidence and the panic in her heart vanished. He urged her on with a warm smile as the officiating brahmins began the pooja. Thanks to the many Sanskrit lessons she had taken at the university, she was able to follow the instructions without any difficulty, much to the surprise of the priests who were initially translating the instructions for her. She did the rituals praying for their love to last till eternity. Kritika had already explained to her the various rituals and ceremonies in great detail.

The rituals had begun with Vijay performing the *Ganapati pooja*, invoking Lord Ganesha for an auspicious beginning. She performed the *Gowri pooja* invoking Goddess Parvati, sincerely praying to the Goddess to help her begin her new life auspiciously.

Soon it was time for the *kanyadan*, where her father gave her away to Vijay, followed by the exchange of garlands made of jasmines. Next came the *mangalya dharana* or the tying of the nuptial knot. The most important part of the ceremony was the *saptapadi*, the seven steps around the holy fire. The ritual required them to complete seven actual circuits around the sacred fire or *Agni*, which was considered the witness to the vows they made to each other.

During the *saptapadi*, the couple made seven promises to each other for a happy and prosperous life. Once they completed the *saptapadi*, they were bound together by an unseen bond by the power of

these vows.

Jane had hearted the vows when she had heard them. Each vow addressed one important aspect of their relationship like their mutual love, responsibilities, nurturing each other and the importance of remaining faithful to each other. Her favourite vow was the final one where they promised each other true and everlasting companionship. Her husband was to be her best friend for life.

Once they completed the seven steps, she was seated on Vijay's left, implying she had now become closer to his heart. The crowd cheered and blessed them by showering them with rose petals and the blessed rice.

According to Hinduism, once the marriage was solemnized the two souls were joined for seven lifetimes. Would seven lifetimes be enough for them? Perhaps not, because she would never tire of seeing the glitter of love in his eyes, Jane thought. Vijay looked at her just then and smiled as though his thoughts were similarly engaged.

From then on, Vijay stood by her side as they met and greeted the many guests and posed for photos with the dignitaries. Time seemed to plod like a snail, in slow motion.

A visit to the family temple followed and then there was lunch. A high tea had been arranged for some dignitaries before the formal wedding reception. Each occasion required a change of costume. Yet, the entire day pulsed with the joy of their togetherness, a heady mix of something intimate and wonderful, because Vijay was beside her.

Later that night, they were seated in the palace hall waiting for the guests to leave after the wedding reception. None of them seemed to be in the mood to leave though.

"I have been mentally undressing and kissing you since long. It is sheer torture," Vijay whispered in her ears. She chuckled. His warm fingers discreetly stroked the bare skin at her waist left uncovered by the sari. Heat zinged right to her core and she trembled slightly. Jane gazed at him, their eyes locked and remained in place until someone cleared their throat audibly near them. It was Kritika.

"I know the party is taking longer to wind up than expected. But now that the main dignitaries have left, I think you can say your goodbyes and leave. No one expects you to stay, you know," she said with a wink.

“Thank you, dear sister! That is the wisest thing you’ve said today.”

With that, Vijay and Jane stood up and they set out to say their goodbyes as politely as possible. Vijay’s eagerness increased once they exited the hall. When they reached his door, he scooped her up in his arms and crossed the threshold.

“Welcome to my world, wife.” He put her down at the centre of the room. Jane took in the aesthetically decorated room and stopped at the inviting four-poster bed. Vijay’s hands snaked around her waist and pulled her close. She tilted her face, offering her lips for a kiss. Vijay obliged with a lingering kiss. She kissed him back with all the love she felt.

“Janet.” He nuzzled her neck. She loved it when he called her Janet, especially in a voice that had turned husky with passion. She pressed her face into his neck.

“God, how I love you!” he whispered hoarsely as his mouth captured hers again. His fingers fumbled with the pins holding her sari in place and she surrendered herself completely to him.

Their lovemaking was tender, to begin with. He lingered over her, teasing her, tormenting her with caresses and kisses. But it turned passionate soon, both of them striving to pacify the hunger they had kept bridled inside all through the past weeks. He said her name repeatedly and made her come alive under him. Their togetherness held a new meaning as they were now bound by sacred vows forever. Before long, they were lying sated in each other’s arms having shared the gifts of pleasure that only love could give.

Vijay closed his eyes, cuddling her. Jane rested on his arm, making it her pillow. She ran her fingers over his stomach, letting them wander lower. She felt his breath catch. She laid her cheeks on his chest and listened to the steady beat of his heart.

“Janet.” He pulled her closer and she could feel the evidence that her touch had stirred him to life again. “Go to sleep, darling. I know you are exhausted. We have a lifetime ahead of us to celebrate our togetherness,” he said pulling her tighter to him.

She kissed the hollow at his throat as if she hadn’t understood him. She heard him swear.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” he mumbled hoarsely, his fingers

raking her hair. He rolled her over onto her back, pressed her into the pillows, his body covering hers in a quick and smooth motion.

“I won’t,” she said and closed her eyes, inviting him again into her world.

The night turned into a celebration of their love. He could evoke a stormy, tumultuous passion inside her with a mere kiss. And she loved every one of them. Her love for him was rooted in her soul, and she would never tire of his kisses.

Nothing would satisfy her craving for him. Ever.

The End

Acknowledgement

This book began as a short story, but it was not destined to remain one for long. I am grateful to the creative spirit who persisted to pester me till I gave it this shape.

I am blessed with a wonderful family who supports me in every way. Thank you, Venugopala Kasaragod for being my pillar of support. Thank you my dear Akshaj for being my stress buster and for boosting my spirits by assuring me I am the best mom in the world even when I was feeling like a complete failure.

I have always been fascinated by Indian royalty. You can find the wide-eyed wonder of a tiny girl, who visited the Mysore Palace first time during her school days, reflected in the pages of this book. I owe a lot to my parents who took me with them wherever they went and told me stories and answered my never-ending questions. Especially my father, Dr. K. Kunhikannan. I am grateful to my mother, Panchali, who has been the voice of reason in our family. Thanks to my siblings Dr. Mini and Dr. Sunil Kannada to whom I can turn to for guidance any time.

I was initially apprehensive about writing a foreign character, that too of a native English speaker. So, I made her an Indophile, someone who loves everything about India. Also, love is universal, isn't it? Soon, she took on the shades of a particular Indophile friend of mine. Thank you, Jean Spraker, I have not known another Indophile like you. I hope you like Jane.

I read through multiple books about Indian royals while researching this book, the main ones being 'A Princess Remembers' by Maharani Gayatri Devi, 'The Ivory Throne' by Manu Pillai, 'The White Mughals' by William Dalrymple and 'Pataudi, the Nawab of Cricket' edited by Suresh Menon. I am thankful to these authors for giving me a rough framework to create the Sravanapura Royals, a fictional royal family bearing the legacy of a 500-year-old dynasty in South India, with a modern outlook towards life.

I am thankful to the creators of many Vlogs on YouTube which chronicled the lives of Oxford students. I am particularly thankful to [Simon Clark](#) whose video about the Oxford graduation ceremony gave me new insights to the story I had created, prompting me to change

certain key scenes.

A doctor friend is always a boon. Thank you, Dr. Amrita Basu Misra for clarifying my many doubts. You are a gem.

This novel owes a lot to a group of writers I am part of. The idea to convert my short story into a novel came from there. Special thanks to Saiswaroop Iyer for being my first beta reader and Adite Banerjee for being my accountability partner for the daily writing goals. Sudesna Ghosh, Ruchi Singh, Vandana Shankar, Reet Singh, Paromita Goswami, Esha Gupta and Devika Fernando, thanks for the encouraging words and support you people gave.

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I designed the cover photo but I have two wonderful photographers to thank for the photos used. Photo of the girl is by [Roksolana Zasiadko](#) and seemed exactly like the Jane in my mind. The photo of the palace is by [Paul Morris](#). Both photos are from [Unsplash](#).

Last but not the least, thank you dear reader for picking this book. Hope you love the family I created.

As always, the family I created held yet another story within it. The Sravanapura Royals Book 2 is progressing steadily. It will tell the story of Kritika, Vijay's sister. I hope to bring it to you soon.

Love,

Preethi Venugopala

Mail to me: authorpreethi@gmail.com

Visit my website: www.preethivenugopala.com

Tweet to me: @preethivenu

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Without You (Sample Chapter)

Chapter One

“The earth has music for those who listen.”

— George Santayana

June 20, 2010, Sreepuram

Returning to the place your heart loves to call home is always ecstatic. For me, home was Sreepuram, a picturesque coastal village in North Kerala.

Opening the car windows, I breathed in the pleasant, distinctive smell of the freshly bathed soil. The grey, evening sky showered its greetings on me with tiny rain droplets. My heart joined in the celebration, meting out an ecstatic drum roll. A whole month in Sreepuram, while it looked radiant in rain-drenched green.

Grandma often said that though God threw Adam and Eve out of Eden, he created many slices of heaven on earth for them. One of those heavenly slices was Sreepuram. It was a traveller's dream with ponds, rivers, hillocks, coconut palms and extensive paddy fields. The Arabian Sea guarded it along its western border. Visitors cherished its magnificent sunsets and serene beaches. Every season brought out a different shade of beauty in my Sreepuram.

My prayers had come true at last after three long years. My hectic engineering course had chained me to Bangalore during all my previous semester breaks. Every summer, I had missed Sreepuram.

By the time our car entered the courtyard of Grandma's house, the rain had strengthened. Grandma, whom I called Ammamma, was waiting on the porch with an ear-to-ear grin. Even in this pouring monsoon, she appeared bright like a daisy on a sunny day. As usual, she was attired in her spotless white cotton sari with her silver hair neatly pulled into a bun.

The moment the car stopped in the outer courtyard, I darted towards her, allowing the rain to embrace me. Ammamma received me with a hug but immediately chided me.

“Oh, Anu, you never change, do you? Running around like a whippet,” she said, inspecting my rain-kissed curls.

“Come on, Ammamma, don’t scold. Couldn’t resist the temptation,” I said. She tweaked my ears playfully.

Following the aroma of the filter coffee, I ended up in the dining room. Inspecting the casseroles, I found what I had expected. Appams, the soft rice pancakes with lacy edges and a soft centre and chicken curry. The chicken curry lured me with its heavenly aroma of spices. The sight elicited a growl from my stomach.

“Ammamma, my stomach is rioting. The Titanic can sink in my mouth now if it tried. I am not waiting any longer to attack this feast,” I said. I pulled back a chair and opened the casseroles, ready to devour as many appams as possible.

“Crazy girl, you look like a wet hen. Go dry your hair and change your clothes. The coffee and appams can wait,” Grandma said, closing the casseroles back.

“Ammamma, please, let me first fill my tummy,” I tried one last time, but in vain.

After a speedy dress change into dark blue Capri pants and a white top with lace trimmings, I sat down to calm my raging hunger.

“Mmmmm, what an appam, Ammamma!! If you had given this to Shakespeare, he would have written a thousand sonnets about it,” I said as I closed my eyes, letting the appam dipped in spicy chicken curry romance my taste buds.

Grandma chuckled but urged me to stop talking and eat. I obeyed her without much ado.

It was almost twilight. The sun had begun to wane its lights and a cool zephyr brought in the fragrance of blooming jasmines. The peal of the bell broke the silence, which had slowly settled in after the initial hustle and bustle of vessels.

“Ah, who can that be?” Grandma said, getting up to answer the door.

“I will check, Ammamma. It might be the kids,” I said. I had a kids’ gang which gave me company during my holidays. I washed my hands and rushed to open the door.

Instead of the gang, a stranger stood on the portico with a small polythene bag in his hands. A salesperson, I assumed, inspecting the smartly dressed young man.

“Yes?” I asked, summoning up my most apathetic look.

“Is Arundhati aunty here?” he asked. Was he a publisher or a journalist? I wondered.

I forgot to mention. My Grandma, Arundhati Mukundan, is an award-winning poet and author. After Grandfather’s death seven years ago, she had gone into depression. Later on, one of my aunts had discovered a collection of poems Ammamma had penned during her hours of darkness. After much coercing from her children, she had agreed to publish them. Her book had become an instant bestseller. She won the state award for literature that year. She had now added two more poem collections and a semi-autobiography to the list. Hence, publishers and journalists often visited.

“And you are?” I asked. Before he answered, Grandma entered the portico to receive the caller.

“Oh, Arjun, it is you! Come in. Wonderful to see you again,” she said with a huge smile on her face. The stranger’s face too had lit up with a bright smile.

“I came to give you these tablets. They are from Vishal,” said the stranger passing the small carry bag to her.

The names Arjun and Vishal, said together, rang a bell inside my brain. This is Arjun?! If I had it right, he was my cousin Vishal’s best friend, Dr. Arjun. He was the one who had been Vishal’s strength when Uma aunty, Vishal’s mom, underwent a critical operation to remove her inflamed gall bladder. The one whom Vishal said he trusted with his life.

Arjun had taken over the routine check-ups of Ammamma, whenever Vishal was unavailable. She had told me how well-behaved and loving he was. I had developed a crush on him just by hearing the praises they heaped on him. Yes, without ever having beheld him.

My interest in the visitor piqued a thousand times. I watched him with a renewed interest.

Standing before me was an immensely handsome youth. His hair was perfectly in place. Even at this hour, his white shirt was spotless and wrinkle free. His black trousers hugged his long athletic legs. He looked like a Greek god with his dark brown eyes, thick eyebrows, chiselled features, and whitish complexion. Even though I was 5’ 5”, I felt like a dwarf standing in front of him. Any sane girl would have fallen for him instantly if she were in my place. I was, of course, sane.

“Thank You, Arjun. It is for Devi, our family retainer Gopu’s

wife. She had a headache and Gopu had gone to Bangalore. I was expecting Vishal to bring it. I haven't seen him in weeks," Grandma said, while I continued my stealthy scrutiny from behind her.

"He was on his way here. But an emergency case came and he had to return to the hospital. I was coming this way, so I offered to help," explained Arjun.

"That was so nice of you, Arjun."

"Who is this, aunty?" enquired Arjun, gesturing towards me.

"This is my granddaughter Ananya. Anu, this is Vishal's friend, Dr. Arjun. He is also a neighbour now," said Grandma, conducting a mutual introduction.

"Hello Ananya, nice meeting you," said Arjun, with a smile.

I bestowed on him my best smile and greeted him back with a quiet 'Hi'.

"What do you do?"

"I am in my final year of engineering," I said. To my amazement, a sudden attack of nervousness seized me. Wasn't it okay to be nervous when one was in the presence of one's long time crush? Moreover, what a 'crush' it had turned out to be!

"Wow, great!" he said.

"Come on inside, son. Have some tea."

"No, Aunty. Thanks. I will leave now. Mum will be waiting," said Arjun, walking down the portico steps. Huh, he couldn't wait to escape!

Grandma and I watched as his white Toyota Corolla pulled off from our gate, turned a corner, and moved out of sight.

"You said he is our neighbour. When did that happen?" I asked, as Grandma and I returned to the dining table to finish our coffee.

"Do you remember that plot in the east, where that old shop used to be? They constructed a new house in its place two years ago. He lives there with his mother. Poor boy, his father passed away last year in an accident."

"But Ammamma, I remember you telling me that the plot belonged to a relative of yours, someone named Madhavan."

"Yes, yes, Rajashekhar, Arjun's dad is his son. So, we are distant relatives too," said Grandma, helping herself to another cup of coffee.

A group of three kids came in then, putting an end to our

conversation with a shout of “Yippee...Anu is here” and dancing in glee around the table.

It was Anamika, Achyuth, and Deepak, all three of them members of my vacation gang. Anamika aka Ammu though only nine years old was the chatterbox of the gang. Achyuth aka Achu, her brother and elder to her by three years, was the genius of the group. Deepak, their cousin, was Achyuth’s age and looked almost like a twin to Achyuth.

“Anu, you have become so stylish and pretty! Just look at your hair. Wow, now you look like a cross between Aishwarya Rai and Madhuri Dixit,” declared Ammu. A big fan of Bollywood movies, she walked around and inspected me closely.

I had allowed my short curly hair to grow out of its boyish bob-cut and had styled it last Christmas, in the layered style popularized by Madhuri Dixit. As my eyes were greyish green, like that of Aishwarya Rai, Ammu had given her verdict. I chuckled.

“Thanks, cutie,” I said. I pinched her cheeks, making her squeal with laughter, “All three of you have grown so tall.”

These kids helped me relive the days when, along with my four cousins, I had wreaked havoc in this place during our vacations. Though I had turned twenty last November, I loved being a child, which I became when I was with them.

With my cousins, Kishore, Navneeth, Naveen and Vishal, now grown up and working, vacations had become a lonely affair. Then these kids had moved into Sreepuram during my school vacation six years ago. The time spent in Sreepuram had become fun again. At that time, Ammu was barely three. I took full advantage of being the eldest in the gang. I cheated and challenged them on adventures in which I was already an expert.

Being the lone girl among Grandma’s five grandchildren, I had done everything under the sun that elders insisted a girl should not do. I was sprightly and mean, according to my cousins. Nevertheless, we were always a team. We fought like cats but managed to love each other despite it. Even now when we were together, we were capable of bringing the roof down. Any place would instantly start to feel like home.

I had many nicknames too, thanks to them.

I was 'Cat' owing to my grey eyes and sharp nails, the name given by Kishore, my eldest cousin.

Due to my pale skin and ability to climb compound walls, Navneeth had christened me 'Lizard'.

The most popular name was 'Monkey' because of my prowess in climbing trees. Nobody could beat me in that.

My cousins were the reason that I became a tomboy. I hated girly stuff and dressed in trousers and t-shirts just like them. My wardrobe had more jeans and t-shirts than churidars or skirts. Bless those, who started the trend of girls dressing up like boys.

In my engineering class, I was the odd one in a class overflowing with gorgeous girls. Did I regret that? No. Boys were better off as friends. They had no interest in me. It was not because I was ugly. Perhaps my lack of feminine grace drove them away. I was merely their tomboy friend with weird coloured eyes.

"How long is your vacation this time, Anu?" Deepak's question ended my reverie.

"I will be here till the 18th of July." Enthusiastic cheers from the trio greeted my answer.

We spent the rest of the evening merrily exchanging news and I distributed the gifts that I had brought for them from Bangalore. Ammu squealed with delight when I gave her a box full of colourful hair clips and bindies in varied designs. Achyuth rushed out to fill his water gun, his gift, from the courtyard pipe. Deepak and I shared a common passion for arts and so, I knew that he'd like the oils pastels that I had got for him. Ammamma came out onto the portico then, where we had settled on the decorative wooden benches that bordered it, to break up the cosy get together.

"It is getting dark, kids. Go home now. Anu is not going anywhere for the next one month. Run before your parents arrive with a stick."

At the mention of their parents, they bundled out of our house, chattering excitedly and promising to come the next day.

The rest of the night passed in unpacking and settling into my room. Devi, Gopu's wife, who was also the household help, had cleaned and prepared my room. The fragrance of Sambrani, a kind of incense, that she had lit to freshen up the room still lingered. The cupboards

smelled of mothballs, and the window curtains were new. The monsoons had cooled down the temperature and a thick blanket, folded into a perfect rectangle, lay at the foot of my bed.

Grandma must have come to inspect the room a hundred times. She was a compulsive perfectionist. Her love was evident in every little thing that was present in the house. It was soothing to be back. The moment I entered it, something had unwounded within me.

Right after dinner I fell onto my bed, exhausted, unaware of the twist my life was about to take.

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Blurb:

Dr. Arjun enters Ananya's life like a whirlwind, bringing with him the spirit of young love.

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Will time allow her heart to heal and forget Arjun?

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The story explores the depth of young love beautifully and adds just the right miracle at the end to spice up the story. I loved the twist the author throws at the end.

~ **Ruchi Singh, Author (Take 2, Jugnu, Hearts and Hots)**