

*A raw, gritty and intense
love story that begins from hate...*

Bound
by

HATED

(The Singham Bloodlines Series)

MV KASI

Bound by Hatred

[The Singham Bloodlines Series]

by
MV Kasi

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DESCRIPTION

Can HATRED turn into everlasting LOVE?

Dev Singham was a privileged son, born into the wealthy, powerful Singham family. London bred and educated, he grew up to be a suave industrialist whose dating life included a constant string of beautiful celebrities. Everyone—especially women, adored him. Except for one woman. She was the woman he hated yet desired the most. She was also the only person who had the power to mess with his head. Now that Dev was working with her, he had to constantly control his urge to either strangle her or kiss her.

Sabitha Prajapati was an illegitimate daughter whose presence was barely tolerated in the Prajapati family. After facing several trials and tribulations, she ultimately grew up to lead the downtrodden, violent Prajapatis. In order to help with the upliftment of her people, Sabitha agreed to work alongside her sworn enemy. She made it very clear that she wasn't going to allow the privileged, cocky, arrogant princeling to seize her control and power. But each time they fought or worked together, something other than hate twisted inside her heart.

Will these enemies let their hatred thrive? Or will they look beyond their tragic pasts to give in to the burning desire they felt towards each other? Find out in this raw, gritty and intense love story—Bound by Hatred.

WARNING: This is a fictional romance story that transports you to a different world that has no restraints or boundaries. Please proceed with caution as the book contains violence and sexual content that is recommended for mature reading audiences.

A STANDALONE romance of the BESTSELLING series with 1.5 MILLION+ Amazon kenp reads—THE SINGHAM BLOODLINES

EXCERPT

They attacked each other while trying their best not to kill one another. They both knew they couldn't risk one of their deaths, as that would stop the crucial Singham-Prajapati wedding from taking place the next day.

The fight came to a standstill when Dev Singham had her pinned on the bed, holding both her hands in one of his. Sabitha bucked and struggled, but he used the entire weight of his body to keep her pinned.

"Give up!" he commanded.

She stopped struggling and looked at his face. They were both panting loudly, tired and bleeding from their injuries. She knew she had to think quickly. She cannot give up. Would not give up. She had to be the bride Abhay Singham chose the next day.

But first, she had to get rid of the bastard on top of her.

Slowly, she widened her eyes and then deliberately dropped them to his lips. She even pushed out her chest as much as his weight on her allowed.

Immediately, his breathing sped up even more as he stared at her lace-and-satin-clad chest that was generously exposed in that position. His eyes returned to hers as he searched her face. His pupils widened and glittered predictably—filled with lust.

Maintaining eye contact, she parted her lips slightly in invitation. The next instant, his mouth was on hers, hungry and intense. Her hands were let go as he used both of his to run them frantically over her body.

Her body trembled at his touch, and tingles passed all over her, but she ignored the reactions.

Slowly, she reached towards her upper thigh.

Even the obvious sound of the knife sliding out of the sheath did not distract him from his desperate movements. He was still kissing her while trying to push her nightdress above her hips.

Through the shivers, she brought both her knees closer to her chest, and kicked him hard in his stomach. As soon as he fell back on the bed, she sat up with a smooth move, and stabbed him in his thigh.

He looked at her in shock for several moments before roaring in pain and outrage.

Before she could get down from the bed, he lunged and grabbed her leg and held it. Even as she kicked at him with all her might, he held tight with one hand while with the other hand he slowly pulled out the knife stuck in his

thigh.

“Aaarghh...” he roared again in pain as the last of the tip of her knife slid out of his flesh. She was almost sure he would stab her with it, but he threw it away on the ground before pulling her back completely onto the bed.

They struggled again, but due to his rage, he was able to overpower her easily with sheer brute strength. “Let me go, or I’ll kill you,” she hissed while she continued to struggle.

“If you behave like an animal, I’ll treat you like one,” he gritted as he almost crushed her wrists in his hands and dragged them close together.

She saw him pull one of the bed-curtain ties. He used it as a rope to tie her to one of the bed posts.

“You are not going to ruin it for my brother and everyone. You’ll remain in this bloody room until the wedding takes place tomorrow.”

She struggled while trying to free herself, but the knot he had tied, only seem to get tighter. “Let me go, you bastard,” she yelled in frustration.

He got down from the bed and stood next to her, grunting in pain as he looked at the knife wound in his thigh. “Fuck!” he shouted when he noticed that his wound was bleeding profusely.

Then glaring at her one last time, he limped towards the bedroom door and walked out, shutting her inside.

MV Kasi's Books List

The Revenge Games Series

SOULLESS (Book #1)

RUTHLESS (Book #2)

The Singham Bloodlines Series

BOUND BY REVENGE (Book #1)

BOUND BY HATRED (Book #2)

THAT SAME OLD LOVE

THE HOLIDAY AFFAIR

THE CAPTIVE

CHAPTER 1

Dev Singham took a deep drag from the cigarette in his hand and blew out smoke rings into the air.

He was standing next to a cottage by the scenic Singham Lake that separated the Singham, Prajapati and Senani provinces. The fragrant smell of wild roses that grew in abundance around the area permeated the air, making him feel nostalgic. Apart from the sounds of birds and insects chirping, it was entirely quiet and peaceful. Even the horse he had ridden was quietly grazing near a patch of wildflowers where he had tied it to a tree.

Dev knew his grandmother and brother would be upset to know he had come on his own without any security guards tagging along. But he was almost twenty, and he was sick of being so sheltered from everything going on around him.

It wasn't as though he was ignorant of the danger. In fact, he knew more than enough about the past and also the ongoing violence that led to the danger. However, he was confident enough to know he could protect himself in case of an attack.

He knew how to shoot and even fight without any weapons. He had been training since he was a child. And even though it was difficult to find trainers in London who allowed a twelve-year-old to learn how to shoot or box; with the right kind of influence and sweet talk, he was able to convince a few underground street fighters to teach him to defend himself.

He absolutely loved to box. Until he had begun to learn boxing, he used to get into a lot of trouble at boarding school. Whenever anyone had dared to tease him or talk trash about his brother or family, he had used that opportunity to get his aggression out. For that reason, even though the secret underground fighting was revealed, his brother didn't put a stop to it. The planned and disciplined fighting was much better and it had also significantly reduced the number of complaints from school.

Although London was a major part of his life, Dev knew he belonged in his ancestral home—the Singham Estate. The place where his ancestors dedicated their lives to develop the province.

But the most compelling reason why he wanted to move back was his grandmother. She currently lived in the Singham Mansion by herself. Dev

was named after her and even looked very similar to her. Dev simply adored her. Apart from his brother, she was the only family he had left.

Abhay was already planning his permanent move to India in a couple of years and Dev intended to do the same as his brother whether everyone agreed with that decision or not.

To hell with higher studies.

Life at Oxford was mostly booze and girls anyway with classes and exams thrown into the mix. He was doing well with business school to be able to graduate well ahead of schedule.

He groaned internally, thinking of the argument he'd have to have with his brother regarding the move. Although, Abhay was only a couple of years older, Dev considered him as a father figure and not just his older brother. Even though Dev put up a fight sometimes, he respected Abhay enough to follow his advice most of the time.

It's obvious that Grandmother needs us. Abhay will have to agree.

His thoughts were distracted when he heard rustling in the trees. Immediately he grew alert. Throwing the cigarette down, he crushed it with his boot while he watched the dense trees surrounding a part of the lake.

He had only taken a couple of steps towards the trees to investigate, when he saw a girl rushing out into the clearing and running towards him.

He was about to reach for his gun, but he noticed the girl appeared unarmed. As she got closer, he also noticed she was very pretty and quite young.

Not that young, he realized when she stood within a few feet of him. She seemed to be around his age.

"Well, hello there," he said with a smile.

When the girl didn't respond, he stopped checking out her tempting, curvy body that looked very attractive in the simple and plain ethnic wear. He looked at her face. She appeared tensed and worried.

He gave himself a mental slap. He wasn't supposed to check out or romantically associate himself with any of the local girls in the Singham province. Abhay had warned him about that not too long ago when Dev began dating girls back in London.

Until then, Dev had not looked at any of the local girls in a romantic sense. But the beautiful, sweet and innocent face of the girl combined with a sinfully tempting body, simply took his breath away.

The distinctive golden tan of the girl with thick, dark and long eyelashes

along with the full pink lips indicated she probably belonged to the settlers who had come to their province and also the neighboring provinces a few decades ago. The women among those settlers were exotic looking and beautiful. They were also highly coveted, but unfortunately the settlers had very high moral codes that did not allow for any marriages or any kind of romantic association of outside their class.

It wasn't like Dev was really looking for any long-term romance. He just wanted to flirt and have harmless fun. At most, he might convince her to kiss before the summer holidays ended and he returned to London.

He looked into her unusually beautiful eyes. He knew most of the settlers had green eyes. But this girl had brown eyes. And they were quite unique. Many different shades of brown coexisted within those almond shaped eyes, making it was difficult to look away from them.

"Hi, are you lost?" he asked, continuing to smile. He had been told by a lot of his girlfriends that his smile was quite lethal. He believed them, since it had always worked for him in the past.

But his smile didn't seem to melt her. "Please, help me!"

"For a pretty girl like you, anything. What help do you need?"

Her eyes began to reflect fear. "We need a place to hide. My aunt's men are after us."

Dev frowned. He shook his head slightly and focused on the situation rather than her face. "We? Who are we?"

"My... boyfriend and me. We need to hide right now. Please, help us." Her beautiful eyes filled with tears, making them even brighter.

Shit, she had a boyfriend. Dev was hugely disappointed about the fact. Pushing aside the feeling, he decided to be a gentleman and help a damsel in distress.

"You and your boyfriend can hide there." He pointed at the small cottage by the lake. "There is a small room in the cellar that is hidden under the bed."

"Thank you!" she said gratefully, before turning towards the trees. "Raghav. Come quickly!" she called out in a louder voice.

A nervous looking boy of similar age came out of hiding and stood next to the girl. Dev asked them to follow him. He took them inside the small cottage his family owned, along with several others around the lake and the estate.

He pushed aside the bed and opened the shutter on the secret hideaway. The girl went in first before giving her boyfriend the clearance. Only then did

the boy go inside to join her. When she was about to close the opening of the hideaway, she looked at Dev. "Thank you," she softly said before closing the shutter of the hideaway.

Dev stared at the closed shutter for a few moments.

What a waste. She could definitely do a lot better than the guy who needed her protection.

With that thought in his mind, he pushed the bed back in its place, concealing the opening completely.

He went out of the cottage and lit another cigarette.

Barely a few minutes later, Dev heard a commotion. He saw a group of men coming out of the trees. Immediately, he put a hand into his pocket, touching the gun, in case it was needed this time.

None of the men pulled out a weapon. As they came closer, he saw the tense looks on their faces.

"Did you see a young girl around eighteen years, running away with a boy?" one of the men asked.

"Nope."

The men tensed even more listening to Dev's reply.

Dev wasn't sure whether they were Prajapatis or Senanis. They hadn't asked him either. All of them seemed preoccupied with trying to find the runaway couple.

"We would like to look inside the cottage. It's very important that we find them as soon as possible."

Dev shrugged. "Be my guests."

The men returned within ten minutes after having searched the small cottage thoroughly.

They were about to leave, when Dev casually asked them. "Why are you searching for them?" Even though the girl had a boyfriend, he was fascinated by her. He was curious to know who she was.

"The girl is Sabitha Prajapati," a man replied, looking fearful. "Harshvardhan Prajapati's daughter and also one of the heiresses to the Prajapati Estate. Neelamma wants us to find her."

Dev was about to take another puff from his cigarette when he completely froze.

Harshvardhan Prajapati.

The man who had brutally killed Dev's mother, Arundhati Singham, leading to the temple massacre that also took the lives of Dev's father, brother and many other innocent victims.

The girl was the daughter of the murdering bastard.

Images flashed in Dev's mind along with the smell of burning flesh, overwhelming his senses. Hate and bile rose as he recalled the pain and agony of losing both his parents and younger brother. All because of the Prajapati family. Especially Harshvardhan Prajapati.

"Have you looked under the bed?" Dev asked grimly. "There is a small room hidden underneath."

The men's eyes lit up before they hurried back inside.

Less than ten minutes later, there were screams and sounds of struggle coming from the cottage.

"*Let us go! Leave us alone!*" Dev could hear the girl's shouts as she was dragged out by two men. She was sobbing and struggling to escape their hold. Meanwhile, her boyfriend stood passively, looking terrified and resigned as one of the men held him.

The men stopped in front of Dev. "Thank you for telling us where they were. We are new to this place, but we heard death would be preferable to what would have happened to us if we hadn't found them."

The girl stopped struggling for a brief while and her eyes widened with comprehension as she looked at Dev.

Dev kept his eyes locked on her shocked face. "It was my greatest pleasure to help," he answered grimly.

"Let's go! Our ride is here," one of the men said.

Dev saw a jeep coming through the clearing and it stopped right in front of the cottage. A man jumped out from it and came running towards them. "What the hell are you all doing on the Singham lands? Let's get out before we are all killed!"

"Singham?" The man holding the girl asked in shock. He turned and looked at Dev with a tensed look. "What is your name?"

"Dev Singham."

Everyone visibly tensed even more. Dev knew he was taking a huge gamble when there were five Prajapatis against him.

"Shit, he is one of *the* Singhams. We can't harm him, or Neelamma will order our executions."

The men stared at Dev for a while before nodding grudgingly and

walking away from the cottage to the jeep.

Just before the girl was pushed into the vehicle, she turned and looked at Dev. This time, her unusual eyes were filled with hate.

As their eyes met, Dev felt a strange stillness settle over him. He felt spellbound as a feeling of strong premonition began to take over. A warning screamed inside his head that Sabitha Prajapati was going to be of a huge significance in his life, and that she would rip it apart and turn it upside down, changing him forever.

With great difficulty, he shook off the illogical feeling. And then, keeping his eyes locked on Sabitha Prajapati, in a deliberately casual manner, he blew another smoke ring into the air.

CHAPTER 2

SEVEN YEARS LATER...

Sabitha was at the dining table, having breakfast with her grandfather in the Prajapati Mansion.

On a few rare mornings, when her grandfather was able to make it, she tried to spend an hour or so with him. She usually updated him with the general progress and events occurring within the Prajapati Estate and the province.

“... I think this will be good for all of us, Grandfather,” she told him softly.

As usual, her grandfather approved or disapproved with his eyes—the only way he had left to communicate. After the Singhams had shot and killed his wife, they had shot him several times in his back, badly damaging his spine and completely paralyzing him.

Since then, a lot more killings had happened in the Prajapati and Singham families.

Sabitha shook her thoughts away from the past. She hated delving into it.

She continued with her breakfast and was almost done when she heard a huge antique clock on the wall strike seven. Dabbing her mouth with a clean napkin, she snapped her fingers, pointing to her cup.

One of the men, who hovered around the large dining table, jumped to attention and came towards her with a steaming pot. “M-madam. C-coffee,” he stammered.

Sabitha gave him a curt nod to go ahead, but the man was so nervous, his hands trembled and he spilled the coffee outside the cup and onto the table.

Immediately, his eyes widened further in terror. “I-I’m so s-sorry, m-madam,” he frantically said.

Sabitha frowned at the mess, especially at the few drops that had spilled on her shirt from the table. The man began to clumsily dab the spilled coffee with a napkin, making it an even bigger mess. “P-please! Don’t k-kill me! I’m so s-sorry, m-madam!”

“Get this fool out of here,” she ordered softly.

The next instant, two men appeared and escorted the loud, sobbing man

out of the dining hall.

When the sobbing noise faded, Sabitha frowned. “Who was that, Dhruv?” she asked. She didn’t have to turn to know Dhruv was standing right behind her. Dhruv was her bodyguard who also doubled as her personal assistant. Unless he was instructed by her, he was always close by.

“New recruit, madam,” Dhruv replied. “I’ll make sure he’s not allowed inside the household until he’s ready.”

Sabitha nodded and got up from the chair. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Grandfather.” She kissed a wrinkled cheek lightly before walking to the main door.

She tried to wipe away the stains of coffee with the wet napkin that was offered to her. “Shit, these stains are not going to disappear, and I don’t have time to change now. We have to be there at nine.”

Handing back the wet napkin, she strode to the SUV that was waiting for her outside.

“Sanjay,” she addressed the man waiting next to the SUV. Sanjay had been working at the Prajapati Mansion for a while—almost three decades. He was the caretaker of the estate and handled issues within the province.

“Yes, madam?”

“About the discussion we had last night... I want you to go ahead with it.”

“But madam, we had also discussed that it’s very risky, and that—”

“Do it.” Her soft order cut him off.

Sanjay inhaled sharply, but he didn’t protest further. He nodded his head. “I’ll be done by the time you return home.”

“Good,” she said before climbing into the SUV. “Let’s go.”

As soon as the SUV drove out of the Prajapati Mansion’s tall, iron gates, Dhruv began to brief her about the day’s schedule and the details surrounding it.

When Dhruv finished, he had a small frown on his face. “I’m not sure if this will work out, madam. All of our people hate the thought of working with the Singhams. Personally, even I think—”

“Stop.” Sabitha’s quiet order cut off whatever Dhruv was about to say. “This project is critical to our people. And I want you to take the lead responsibility for maintaining peace as the work progresses. Understand?”

“Yes. I understand, madam.”

“Good.”

Sabitha looked ahead as the SUV was driven along the dusty roads towards the canal construction site. She knew what Dhruv had voiced was a legitimate concern. It wasn't going to be easy for the Prajapatis to be working alongside the Singhams. But like she had just said, the project was critical for the Prajapatis—not just for their development, but also for their future survival.

The drought had taken a toll on the people. Unlike the Singhams, the Prajapatis did not have good access to drought-resistant crops or other modern technologies.

A feeling of guilt and helplessness rose within Sabitha for not being able to provide such things to her people. Unlike Abhay Singham, she did not have the necessary education or even the contacts to bring such developments to her people. All she could do was pump in money to get basic necessities such as food and water transported to the Prajapati province along with exporting the ethnic goods.

But the way things had been happening lately, she knew with it wasn't a sustainable plan. Her share of the Prajapati money wasn't entirely bottomless. But it was all she could do.

Until now.

With the canal project finished within a year or so, there would be water for the crops. And the manufacturing units would ensure the people were properly employed and busy, keeping them away from the feud.

Only if the Prajapatis and Singhams don't kill each other first.

It was going to be hard to maintain peace. But she was determined.

Sabitha looked ahead as the SUV drew closer. Soon, it stopped in front of a large temporary structure, right next to the Singhoor Dam.

Immediately, her eyes were drawn to a figure of the tall, well-dressed man.

Standing outside at the construction site—lording over everyone—was the person she absolutely hated.

Dev Singham.

CHAPTER 3

Sabitha stepped down from the SUV, feeling the palpable tension in the air.

After Anika Prajapati and Abhay Singham's wedding, the relationship between the provinces had improved significantly. But whenever Dev and Sabitha came together, people braced themselves for fireworks.

Tamping down the need to shoot the man in front of her, Sabitha walked towards him.

"Singham," she greeted in a formal tone.

"Prajapati," Dev Singham's deep voice greeted back in a similar tone.

On the outside, they both appeared civil for the sake of their people. Hundreds of families depended on what would transpire between the two of them. For that reason, Sabitha shook the extended hand offered to her. A large, tanned and surprisingly rough hand enclosed hers.

Sabitha felt her skin crawl with the brief, firm shake. At least she told herself it was disgust she was feeling, and refused to let any other thoughts bombard her mind.

Dev Singham showed her a polite hand. "Follow me," he said and led the way to the large structure.

As she walked behind him, Sabitha gave his attire a quick cursory glance. He was dressed formally in an expensive shirt and trousers. The top few buttons of the dark blue shirt were open due to the warm weather outside. An expensive pair of shades sat on his nose, concealing his eyes along with his expression from the world outside.

Even though Dev Singham looked as though he stepped out of a magazine cover with his extremely smooth and polished looks, Sabitha knew he was a violent, blood-thirsty bastard.

Her people feared him. And most of them were also in awe of him.

A few years ago, when Dev Singham and his brother had moved back to their ancestral home, despite Neelambari's orders, not to attack the Singham family, some of the Prajapati men had still gone ahead and attacked the Singham brothers. At that time, they were riding on the Singham lands with just their grandmother.

The Prajapati men had thought they were easy targets. But Dev Singham

had responded by going at the Prajapati men with an axe. And because of the way he was dressed at the time, the Prajapati men apparently mistook his skill with a weapon.

Sabitha had personally seen the aftermath of what Dev Singham had done to the Prajapati men.

Since then, Dev Singham had bloodied that particular axe several times in a gruesome way. Until Abhay Singham intervened. To avoid more such bloody battles, Abhay Singham had sent his brother to the city.

Sabitha knew that unlike his cool-headed, sensible older brother, Dev Singham was a hot-headed, cocky, arrogant and brutal bastard. He was also a privileged playboy who was used to the luxuries and comforts afforded to him.

Even though she had heard that he managed several such projects and units before, Sabitha had severe doubts about Dev Singham's capability to be able to manage the entire project without his brother intervening multiple times.

"The workers' area," his deep voice explained. He also explained that the workers could meet and rest there.

Sabitha took in the details of the large temporary structure the Singhams had built next to the project site. She was still surprised at the generous gesture Abhay Singham had extended to the Prajapatis. They were to share the canal and manufacturing units.

She had heard the offer had been extended to the Senanis as well. However, the Senanis had apparently declined.

"These are our office quarters." Dev Singham had led them out of the workers' area to a semi-private space. Two large rooms were built right next to each other with a common wall.

Sabitha frowned. "Why are we away from the workers?" she asked.

"The workers won't be able to relax with us breathing down their necks all the time," he answered coolly as he led her to one of the rooms and opened the door.

Sabitha saw a decent-size office along with a small semi-private bed and bath at the back.

"This is my office," he said. "You have a similar one next to mine."

She gave a curt nod and was about to head there when he stopped her. "I need to speak with you," he said and went into his office, expecting her to follow him.

She turned to Dhruv. "I'll be right back," she told him. "Meantime, check the set-up of my office and see if anything is needed."

She then went into Dev Singham's office.

He was waiting for her. "Be seated," he ordered, indicating to a chair while he sat on a throne-like leather tufted chair.

A soft click of the door indicated it had closed automatically behind her, shutting them both from rest of the world.

"What's the matter, Singham?" she asked. "Too delicate for outdoor work? You need a bed inside your fancy office for your beauty rest?"

She knew it was childish to snipe at him, but his entire demeanor grated on her nerves. He was acting as though he was in charge, and she was his underling who was there to work for him.

A sneer formed on his annoyingly perfect face "I can afford it, Prajapati," he said while eying her coffee-stained clothes with disgust. "But don't worry, I won't send you the invoice for all the luxuries I put in *your* fancy office."

Sabitha's jaw clenched. "Whatever this entire project is costing, you know damn well that the Prajapatis are pitching in their fair share."

"Yeah, yeah. We'll see how long before you ask for a *small loan*."

She refused to dignify his taunt with an answer. "What did you want to talk about?" she demanded.

He opened a drawer and pulled out a few papers from a file and placed them in front of her. "Go through these documents."

She frowned at the papers in front of her. "We already finished signing the necessary paperwork a few weeks ago."

"Just a few more simple additions about our workers' schedules. Read them and approve it now, so I can confirm by end of today."

She continued frowning at the papers. "I'll call my lawyer and ask him to take a look at it first."

"That's not necessary. These are just informal documents you need to be made aware of. Your signature is not required. You just need to convey the message to your people."

She shrugged. "Maybe, but I'd still prefer someone other than me to look at it first."

He was quiet. And then, slowly his eyes scanned her face before falling to the documents in front of her.

He did that a couple more times, until his eyes slightly widened as

though he figured out something shocking. “Damn! It is true, then. You are illiterate. You can’t even read or comprehend a simple—”

Before he could finish, Sabitha stood up, and whipped out her gun, and pointed it towards his head. “Don’t push your luck, Singham,” she said in a menacing tone. “Or your brains will be splattered all over your fancy office desk. I’ll just call it an unfortunate accident.” She let a small smile play around her lips. “Although, personally, I think it would be a very fortunate event.”

She saw his hands clench. The next moment, he grabbed her wrist, and she was shoved back into the chair. “Don’t ever point your weapon at me again.” He looked pissed as he came around the desk towards her.

Sabitha watched him impassively. “That’s going to be hard. Because each time you open your stupid mouth, I’m tempted to draw my weapon. Sometimes, not even that. Just your mere presence is enough.”

He leaned closer, putting his face barely a few inches away from hers. She could smell the familiar and subtle cologne. “Well, darling,” he said. “The feeling is mutual. However, I suggest you control yourself. Or your people will soon have to resort to begging or fleeing your province.”

Sabitha placed her palm on his chest and pushed back, shoving him away from her before getting up from the chair. Immediately, she rubbed her hands on her thighs, wiping away the feel of him.

“You don’t have to worry about my people,” she said coolly. “I will. Just keep your mouth shut when it comes to my personal things. Unless you have something to discuss about our official work, don’t communicate with me.”

She picked up the papers from the desk and strode to the door, opening and shutting it behind her. She felt his burning glare all the while on her back.

CHAPTER 4

Dev was agitated.

He was tempted to either go on a rampage with his axe, or break open a scotch bottle at nine-thirty in the morning. Just so he could maintain his cool and not strangle *her*.

Sabitha Prajapati brought out the worst in him.

He could hear her voice through the office walls as she softly questioned one of her men who read the document aloud to her.

What was Abhay thinking when he had asked Sabitha Prajapati to personally oversee the project on behalf of the Prajapatis?

Dev was fine when the offer was extended to the Prajapatis. But what he hadn't expected was having to work with *her* on a personal basis. He had expected the Prajapatis to hire someone on behalf of them to oversee the set-up.

He took a deep breath to calm down.

Sabitha-bloody-Prajapati.

Every encounter with her always had her ridiculing him and riling him. She was also the only woman who had the power to mess with his head.

His temple throbbed where she had pointed a gun at it a few minutes ago making him recall the first time she held a weapon and similarly threatened him.

It was quite ironic. Because at that particular time, he had been celebrating the occasion of getting all the necessary approvals for this very project.

ONE YEAR AGO...

Dev splashed water on his face to remain awake.

It was only ten at night, but he was damn tired. The past week, he had been working long hours to finish some critical tasks within his units while also balancing his evening and night hours socializing with the high-profile bigwigs in the city.

Since Abhay was not easily accessible and preferred to stay in the family home, most of the social interactions were carried out by Dev.

Dev didn't mind. He knew Abhay had his hands full trying to maintain peace within the Singham province.

So it was mostly up to Dev to build and strengthen the Singham network. He used his persuasion skills, his natural charm and the skills he learned from business school to achieve that purpose. As the result, he already knew most of the bigwigs personally and was also able to pull the necessary strings to get the jobs done.

He was just glad his and Abhay's hard work was going to pay off.

Singham province was soon going to have the necessary projects to bring in water and employment to its people.

Abhay, in his usual style, decided to celebrate the occasion by having a quiet evening at the Singham Mansion. For a change, Dev had wanted to do the same as his older brother.

But just as Dev was about to drive back to Singham Estate, he had been ambushed.

Kritika, a well-known actress he had been dating for few months had come to his office. He had been canceling their dates over the past few weeks due to his workload. And so, she had insisted that she join him at the Singham Estate.

Dev had never brought any of the women he dated to the Singham Estate. He preferred to keep both those worlds apart. But this time, he had made an exception and agreed.

Since he hadn't wanted to take her to his ancestral home or the Singham Lakehouse, he took her to one of the five cottages within the Singham Estate.

Big mistake.

This particular cottage held other memories from seven years ago which were clouding his brain. He felt a strange kind of unease, but was determined not to recall that deceptively innocent face with striking multi-hued brown eyes.

"De-e-v-v. I'm waiting, baby. Come out soon," a seductive voice of a woman called out from the bedroom.

Dev sighed again as his doubts about having to spend a weekend with Kritika grew stronger. Until then, Kritika and he had been meeting for only a few hours at a time. Like all his dates, he took her to a few social events with him, after which she took him to her place where they spent pleasurable time

in her bed. He usually left soon after. And like his usual dates, they hadn't had an opportunity to talk much since he was busy socializing with other contacts at the events.

But now, after having spent time with her in his car while driving from the city to the Singham Estate, he realized they barely had anything in common. In fact, he found the one-sided talk about various topics of gossip, partying and shopping, quite annoying. She was also too clingy.

Even though he had made it quite clear that he didn't do serious relationships and only dated casually, she was still planning events months into the future.

He groaned. He was going to let Kritika know it wasn't working out. It would be awkward as hell as he would have to accompany her on the drive back to the city.

With that thought in mind, Dev opened the bathroom door and strode into the bedroom.

Shit!

Kritika was sprawled over the bed in a seductive pose wearing lingerie that revealed way more than it covered.

"Do you like it, Dev?" she asked with a sultry smile that earned her millions of fans across the country.

Dev slowly grinned. "Love it."

I'm such a bastard. I'm definitely going to hell because of this.

And to hell with those other memories. I'm going to enjoy myself and create new memories here.

Those were his last thoughts before he took up her tempting offer.

Dev should have guessed it was easier said than done. Because, fifteen minutes later, he was having a tough time.

"Dev! Oh my God! Dev! You are the best, Dev! The best!"

What the hell?

Never in his twenty-six years did Dev have any performance issues. Closing his eyes, he tried hard to focus and to shut out the annoying noises. But as soon as he closed his eyes, those damn thick-lashed, vivid brown eyes flashed in his mind along with the memories.

Kritika's moaning and groaning continued to get even louder and dramatic. "Oooh, Dev, you are the man! Take me like you can't help yourself!"

Had she always been this way? Making such fake noises?

Shit, this is torture. And why the hell am I feeling guilty because of those bloody memories?

A minute later, unable to bear it any longer, Dev moved away and sat up.

“Baby, why did you stop?” Kritika whined with a practiced pout.

“Listen, Kritika. I’m sorry, but this is not working out. I think we should take it easy—”

Before he could finish speaking, Kritika began screaming. The sound was so loud and shrill that he thought his eardrums would shatter.

What the hell?

He realized a few seconds later that she wasn’t looking at him, but at something behind him. Before he could turn to investigate, he felt a sharp object placed under his throat.

He froze immediately.

Kritika continued to scream, making his head throb.

“Shut up,” a soft command was issued by a vaguely familiar woman’s voice.

Immediately, Kritika stopped screaming, only to break into terrified muffled sobs.

Mindful of the knife at his throat, Dev slowly drew the blanket next to him and threw it over Kritika, covering her nearly naked body. The next instant, he was grabbed from behind and thrown into the chair and held down by two burly men.

Sabitha-bloody-Prajapati stood in front of him with a small smile playing on her face as she twirled a red and green jeweled knife in her hands.

It was almost like she had been conjured there because of his memories of her that night. He almost didn’t recognize her since he hadn’t seen her up close for nearly seven years. But her thick-lashed, vivid brown eyes remained the same. He also recognized the small diamond nose ring and her long hair she wore in a similar plaited style as before. But the soft, rounded cheeks of a teenager were gone. They were replaced by prominent high cheekbones. And unlike the traditional clothes she had worn the last time he had seen her, she now wore a cotton shirt and khaki-colored trousers.

Even though he hadn’t seen her in person over the years, he had felt her constant presence in his life as she tried to make it a living hell.

He recalled how his favorite horses were stolen, his bikes and cars were burned down or blown apart, and she had also ordered several other petty things to be done that drove him insane. In turn, he had also ordered her

vehicles to be blown up, and destroyed her personal property until Abhay had intervened and asked him to stop.

“Heard you were in the neighborhood, Singham. Wanted to say... hello.” Although her voice was soft and even, he heard the underlying taunt like a loud jeering.

When he didn’t say anything, her smile grew infinitesimally. “I just wanted to be polite, you know, considering how we might be family pretty soon,” she said, reminding him of the recent alliance.

In order to end the decades-long feud between their provinces, Neelambari Prajapati had sent a wedding proposal between her niece, Anika, and Abhay.

It only took a day for Abhay to accept the proposal while Dev had mixed feelings. On one hand, Dev was still not ready to forgive or forget the past, but on the other hand, he knew the people of their respective provinces badly needed peace to be restored.

And so, Dev had some of his men investigate Anika Prajapati thoroughly in order to check the validity of the proposal. So far, he hadn’t found anything suspicious. In fact, whatever he had found about Anika Prajapati made him think she might be the right fit for his brother.

Anika Prajapati was a soft-spoken, well-educated woman whose career as a medical doctor led her to helping and healing people—unlike the savage in front of him who only either injured or destroyed.

A woman’s muffled sobs broke through Dev’s thoughts. “Please. Please don’t hurt me. Please. Please...”

Dev knew there was no one near Kritika. Sabitha Prajapati and her two men were the only ones who had broken into the cottage. And right then, they were busy surrounding him to be bothered with anything else. Nevertheless, he knew Kritika’s fear was real.

“Let her go,” he said quietly, keeping his eyes locked on Sabitha Prajapati’s face. “Her car is outside and she can leave on her own. Your enmity is with me.”

Sabitha Prajapati smiled, but her smile was brittle and didn’t reach her eyes. “How very noble of you to say that, Singham. One would think you were used to saving damsels in distress.” Her eyes turned even harder. “But we both know the truth, don’t we?” she asked softly, reminding him of how he had ruined her elopement with her boyfriend.

Before he could say something, she turned towards the bed. “Get out.”

As soon as the soft order was issued, Kritika scrambled out from the bed. She was still in her lingerie, but she didn't bother throwing on any other clothes. She simply grabbed her purse and ran towards the door to get out.

Soon, he could hear the sound of the engine as the car started and then the loud squeal of tires as she hit the accelerator before driving away from the cottage.

Sabitha Prajapati continued to twirl the jeweled knife in her hands, watching him. "Seems like the rumors I heard about you are all false, Singham. For a supposed playboy, your technique in bed must have sucked. In fact it must have sucked so badly, the poor woman couldn't wait to get out when I interrupted your lackluster performance."

When he didn't respond to her taunt, she strode closer to him while running her eyes impassively over his naked body.

She stopped a foot away and held her knife to his throat. He felt the blunt edge of the knife pressing into his skin as she slowly ran it from his throat in a downward path, until she stopped an inch above his groin. Despite his feelings, his body began to get painfully and fully aroused.

A small smirk formed on her face as she watched his arousal. "I wonder what would happen if I cut this offending thing off," she remarked. "I'm sure I'll be doing the female population a favor. And also... the Singham bloodlines will have to continue only through your brother. Not a bad idea, huh?" she taunted softly.

When he still didn't reply, she moved the knife back up and nicked his throat.

He felt the sting but refused to flinch.

He continued to watch her as she ran her finger on his throat and brought it closer to her face. "What do you know," she continued taunting softly. "The great, purebred Singham blood looks just like a commoner's blood."

Dev felt the simmering rage within him rise rapidly. "You have crossed a line with this," he told her in a menacing tone. "I have left you alone all these months because of the possible union between our families."

Listening to his threat, her smile turned lethal and she placed the knife back at his throat. "There is no line to cross, Singham. It's always been a war. Even if the wedding takes place, it will continue to be a war between the both of us. Just because you are losing, don't whine and hide behind our families."

Dev's rage erupted. "If you want a war, I'll give you a fucking war," he hissed, struggling while he was held back by her men. The knife nicked his

skin several times due to his movements, but he ignored the pain.

There was a soft laughter from Sabitha Prajapati as she watched him. “I’ll be looking forward to seeing you try, Singham,” she said. “Oh, by the way, the new red Ferrari you bought... it looks even better in ash.”

“You—”

Before he could complete, sounds of approaching vehicles could be heard from outside.

“Ma’am, we have to go,” one of the Prajapati men told her in an urgent tone. “We are on the Singham lands, and there are just the three of us.”

The knife held at his throat was moved away and Sabitha Prajapati let out another small smile. “Remember this day, Singham. You were at my complete mercy. I could have easily slit your throat or just plain castrated you. But I didn’t.”

PRESENT...

Dev’s blood continued to boil as he recalled the rage and helplessness he felt when Sabitha Prajapati had held him at knifepoint and left him naked in every way that night. Since then, they had clashed several times, each time trying to get the upper hand over one another.

Sabitha Prajapati was like a bloody hurricane—only twice as destructive when it came to him.

Some of the Singham men had been outraged on his behalf and wanted to plan an attack targeting only her. But he had stopped them.

Sabitha Prajapati might be the most cunning, violent, and dangerous bitch like everyone in the provinces believed. But she was *his* prey. Only *he* would get back at her for the things she did to him.

He took a deep breath to calm down and not think about how badly he wanted to get back at her. He had to repeatedly remind himself of one fact.

Sabitha Prajapati was not only his enemy but also his bloody ally.

However, despite the repeated reminder, he had to take a few more deep breaths to calm down.

Dev knew it was going to be a herculean task to work along with her over the next few months.

CHAPTER 5

Sabitha listened keenly as Dhruv read the document aloud to her.

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” she said when Dhruv finished. “But make sure you add the notes about the specific days when the Prajapatis would be busy with the local fair and festivities. The Singhams can compensate with more people during that time, just like we would when they are busy with theirs.”

Dhruv nodded and marked the dates on the calendar provided. Even though Dev Singham had told that her signature wasn’t necessary, she signed on the document. “Take a copy of this and give one to Dev Singham. After that inform the managers we had appointed to meet us in an hour.”

“Sure, madam.”

Dhruv made a copy of the document using the copy machine in the office and left with the original papers. As soon as the door shut softly behind Dhruv, Sabitha sighed and sat back.

Her eyes fell on the copy of the document lying on her office desk. As usual, the words barely made any sense to her at the first look. Slowly and painfully, she managed to comprehend the first two words before giving up.

Dev Singham had called her an illiterate.

Even though she had reacted badly to it, it had been one of the better abuses hurled at her because of her lack of reading and writing skills. Growing up, she was called retarded, slow, or just plain stupid.

It didn’t matter that she displayed her intelligence in various other forms. The fact that she couldn’t read or write made everyone think she was intellectually challenged.

As a child, she was beaten and abused by various tutors her aunt had employed to educate her. Each tutor who came in succession after the previous one had been fired, turned out to be more brutal.

They had starved her and beaten her, saying they would drive out her insolence, that she wasn’t trying hard enough, and that she was simply lazy. It didn’t make much difference to them or her aunt when a doctor finally diagnosed her and gave a proper medical term for her disability.

Dyslexia.

A disorder that involved difficulty to learn to read or interpret words,

letters and other symbols, but does *not* affect general intelligence.

In her case, it was a genetic disorder.

“It’s okay, sweetie. We don’t need to know how to read or write. We have people for it.”

Her father, Harshvardhan Prajapati, had suffered from dyslexia, too. But during his time, rather than diagnose it properly, they chalked his reluctance of wanting to study or write to his hyperactivity and natural male aggression.

So, unlike her uncle, Yashwanth Prajapati—who had gone for higher studies in London and settled abroad after marrying a woman of his choice—her father had dropped from school at a very young age and remained in the Prajapati province all his life. Until he was ultimately killed and branded a murderer.

Despite her attempts, Sabitha knew how closely she was following in her father’s footsteps.

Is that how it would end for me, too? Be branded as a savage murderer and then be shot dead one day on a street like a dog?

She hadn’t always chosen this life. She had been forced to do so.

All because of Dev Singham.

SEVEN YEARS AGO...

After getting caught at the Singham cottage, Sabitha was dragged back to the Prajapati Mansion.

Two men held her in the courtyard overlooking the balcony of her aunt’s suite. A crowd began to gather while Sabitha sobbed with helplessness.

She had thought she and Raghav had almost succeeded in their elopement. They were going to build a new life for themselves in a city that did not include violence or humiliation. She had thought she could finally escape from having to spend the rest of her life being called the murderer’s daughter who had started the feud.

“Neelamma is coming out!” someone from the crowd yelled. It was followed by the noise that was emitted as the large, heavy doors leading to the balcony were opened.

Neelambari strode out and looked down at everyone. “Bring her closer!”

she commanded in an angry voice.

Sabitha was dragged closer until she stood just below the balcony. Her hair was pulled to tug her head back, until her eyes met with that of her aunt's. Sabitha could only see the blurred form of her father's sister.

"You have proved once again you are a daughter of a whore," Neelambari spat out. "But unfortunately, you also have the Prajapati blood running in your veins. And I promised my brother I'd take care of you."

Sabitha remained quiet as she heard the words her aunt often repeated over the years.

Daughter of a whore.

Promise to a brother.

Sabitha knew her aunt barely tolerated her presence in the Prajapati Mansion. After Sabitha's mother had died in childbirth, Harshvardhan Prajapati had brought his infant daughter to his home. And when he was killed, Sabitha became her aunt's responsibility.

Sabitha didn't understand why her aunt couldn't just let her go? Why continue to make her suffer in this grim life?

"Give up that boy, and I will spare you," Neelambari ordered. "I will also let you live the rest of your life in this mansion until your death."

Sabitha's reply was immediate. She didn't even have to think about it. "No. I won't."

Neelambari's eyes widened with rage at her niece's insolence. She took a step closer and leaned on the balcony rails, her eyes locked on Sabitha's.

"You have always been stubborn even as a child. But I know just the way to bring you in line." She looked at the men holding Sabitha. "Tie her up! And take that boy away and tie him in the other courtyard."

Sabitha was dragged away and tied to a tree in the courtyard with her front facing the tree trunk. She didn't put up a struggle because she knew it would be of no use.

"Whip her! And don't stop until I say so."

As soon as her aunt passed the order, Sabitha felt the searing sting of the whip as it met with her back. Her nails dug into the tree bark, but she controlled herself and didn't cry out.

"Make them harder! If you go easy on her, you'll be whipped as well," her aunt threatened the person who was whipping.

The lashes continued to fall, and Sabitha endured it silently. She closed her eyes and focused on her future.

When this is over, Raghav and I will try running away again. This time I'll make sure we'll succeed.

Raghav was the head cook's son. He had a passion towards cooking just like her. They had fallen in love with each other and were to run somewhere safer. Somewhere far away.

Sabitha recalled the plans she had made along with Raghav.

Raghav and she would find a small house to live in. And in front of the house, they would open a small stall to sell homemade snacks and tea.

Even though she couldn't read or write, she knew she was a good cook. She had spent most of her childhood hiding in the kitchens where she had learned to cook. Whatever dishes she had prepared, people had told her she had a magic touch.

She was confident her plans would work and with the money they'd earn, she and Raghav would be able to afford to stay in a decent-sized house, preparing for their future.

Sabitha didn't know how long she was lost in her plans, but soon the pain became unbearable and darkness took over as she lost consciousness.

The next time Sabitha opened her eyes, the sun was shining hot from the sky above. She didn't know how much time had passed since she had been tied to the tree until she gained consciousness.

Her lips felt dry. They were so parched that simply moving them made them split.

She wanted to ask for water, but she stopped herself from begging. She knew if water was allowed, she would have already been given some by then.

Soon someone informed her aunt that she had gained consciousness.

Sabitha was dragged in front of her aunt again, and she heard her aunt asking the same question.

"Promise to give that boy up and remain here with me."

Sabitha's tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth. She used all her energy to utter one word. "No."

The whipping continued for three days.

Sabitha was even starved, but she still refused to give up on her future.

On the fourth day, when Sabitha gained consciousness, she was lying on her bed with her face down. Her back felt as though it was on fire.

She felt a cooling balm being applied on her back by someone.

“Tch tch. Look what you made them do to you,” a familiar woman’s voice scolded. The woman was her mother’s cousin who worked as a healing woman and midwife within the Prajapati Estate. Eighteen years ago, she had been the one to even deliver Sabitha.

“You are just like your mother,” the woman said with exasperation. “Stubborn as a mule. Even though Shaila knew Harshvardhan loved someone else and wouldn’t ever marry her, she still wouldn’t give up on him or her love. She shunned our society and had a relationship with him and bore you outside the sanctity of marriage.”

Sabitha didn’t respond. She was in too much pain to even bother thinking, let alone talk.

A few minutes later, the door banged open. “Has she gained consciousness? Madam wants her brought in.” Sabitha heard a man’s voice ask.

“She can’t come with you right now. She’s still too weak and injured badly.”

“Madam ordered us to bring her if she is awake. We can’t ever refuse madam. Step aside.”

Sabitha felt arms grab her and pull her out of the bed. Her legs felt weak, and she couldn’t support her weight. The men held her up and dragged her upstairs towards Neelambari’s room.

They stopped and let her collapse on her knees, right outside the open door of her aunt’s suite. She knew they were waiting for her aunt to come near the door to speak to her.

Even during her childhood, Sabitha was never allowed to go into her aunt’s room. Her aunt was a big stickler of the class system. The fact that Sabitha’s mother belonged to a supposedly lower class, made her less than the personal maids her aunt had employed. Only the higher-class maids were allowed inside the room to clean or bring food.

A large chair was placed behind the doorway within the room. A few minutes later, Neelambari appeared and sat on the chair with her arms resting on top. She watched Sabitha with a closed expression on her face.

Sabitha felt exhausted as she struggled to keep her eyes open.

“Will you give him up now?” Neelambari asked softly.

Sabitha watched her aunt through half-closed eyes and whispered out a single word. “No.”

Instead of going into a rage as Sabitha had expected, Neelambari slowly smiled. "I'm proud of you, my dear niece. Today, you have proved to me you are a true Prajapati woman. We never ever give up."

Sabitha didn't say anything. She couldn't. She wanted to ask what her aunt had done to Raghav, but her eyes kept shutting and exhaustion was taking over.

"This iron will and grit you have, you are meant for greater things," her aunt's voice continued speaking. "You have the makings of being a great leader to the Prajapatis. Over the generations, our women always led. From now on, I will personally groom you."

Sabitha shook her head faintly. "I don't want that life," she whispered. "I want freedom."

Her aunt watched her quietly. "Why? Because you want to be with that boy and lead a pathetic, dreary life, living in a small shack somewhere?"

"Yes," Sabitha replied. "I prefer that life over this."

Neelambari was silent again. Then she sighed. "I truly wish I could grant that life to you, my dear. Only if I was convinced what you and that boy have is true love and worth giving up all of this."

"I want to spend my life with him," Sabitha replied.

"I know. But *he* doesn't want to spend his life with you anymore."

Sabitha shook her head. "He does want me. Please, let us go so that we can be together. I'll give up my money, my assets, everything. Just let us go."

Neelambari was quiet and appeared to be contemplating. "I know what you feel for him might be real. But he isn't worth it. He trapped you for your money, my love. When he realized you would probably try to give it all up, he ran away."

"No. He promised to be with me and that we'd start our life together without the Prajapati money or power."

"He lied," said Neelambari. "Or maybe it wasn't a lie as such, but that boy was definitely not man enough to keep his promises when things got tough."

Sabitha pushed aside her exhaustion. "What did you do to Raghav?" she asked.

"Nothing much. But whatever little was done... with barely five lashes, he begged to be free. He also made another promise. And this time it was to me. He told me he'd never step into the Prajapati province again."

Sabitha shook her head. "You are lying! You must have killed him!"

Panic started to take over her.

"I'm not lying," Neelambari replied calmly. "Talk to him," she said, and asked one of the maids to fetch a phone.

The maid dialed a number, and when the phone began to ring, it was handed over to Sabitha.

Sabitha heard the familiar male voice answer.

"Hello?"

"Raghav," Sabitha whispered as sheer relief of him being alive took over.

There was a deep inhale on the other end. "Sabitha?"

"Raghav, are you alright? What did they do to you?"

"I'm fine. I'm in the city now."

"Please come here and take me with you, Raghav. My aunt said if we stand together, she will let me leave from here. I have everything planned—"

"I'm sorry Sabitha," Raghav said softly, cutting her off. "I can't. I can't risk being stuck in that brutal world again."

"Raghav, what are you saying?" Soon, another kind of panic began to slowly take over.

"I'm sorry I promised you that we'd escape and build a life together, but I can't keep my word."

"But Raghav, you know very well that I—"

"I'm sorry, Sabitha. Please, forgive me. But I can't help you."

"Raghav, please. I'll make sure you are safe when you come here to get me. Please listen—"

"I'm sorry."

"Raghav—" The line was cut.

Sabitha frantically hit the redial button, but the automatic message of the phone being switched off was played. She tried it a few more times, but the same message was repeated.

Sabitha stared at the phone blankly as shock began to take over.

"I'm sorry, my dear," Neelambari said softly with regret in her voice. "Men can never be trusted when it comes to matters of the heart. You give them everything—your love, your devotion. Everything that you have. But what do they do? They'll still betray you in the worst way possible."

Sabitha was in too much of a shock to react or respond.

"That boy barely took five lashes before he began begging for his life, saying he would leave you. I admit I had promised him some money if he

went away. But if he really loved you, he should have endured it. Like you did.”

Sabitha just continued staring blankly.

She couldn't recall when and how she had been taken back to her room. But that night, and the following nights, whenever she lay awake, she felt the crushing defeat when she realized she hadn't yet escaped from the dreary, violent life.

Her aunt had been right about one thing. Sabitha didn't want to give up.

Over the next six months, she tried to escape over twenty times. Each time, she was dragged back and tortured. She finally gave up trying after the sixth month.

PRESENT...

Sabitha recalled how she had been in that state of shock and defeat for a very long time after her last attempt to escape. A year later, the shock wore off and she had hardened her heart. She had taken up the offer her aunt had made and allowed her to be groomed to lead the Prajapatis.

She had decided that instead of trying to escape from the violent, dreary life, she was going to embrace it full on and come out of it a winner.

Which she ultimately did.

She began to set up her own set of rules. One of them was to never let anyone see her fear again.

She could either continue fearing everything—or she could be the one everyone feared. Sabitha knew which choice she had to ultimately pick to survive her brutal world.

She had very few memories of her father. Harshvardhan Prajapati had been killed when she was five. She still remembered how she would go running to him whenever she saw him. He had always laughed loudly or was smiling at her as he picked her up and swung her high in the air while she squealed with joy. He had also given her presents and treats. He spent a good amount of time with her whenever he could. Like her, he was well-educated even though he couldn't read or write. One of the things she remembered pretty clearly was a famous saying he often taught her about fear.

“A fearless warrior dies only once, but a coward... dies a thousand

deaths.”

When she had been caught during her last escape attempt and dragged back to the Prajapati Mansion, for almost a year she had felt as if she had died a thousand deaths already.

And as time went on, death didn't scare her anymore. She knew she was living a dangerous life where she could be killed at any moment. But if death wanted to take her, she would go like a warrior.

During her training, and while she had taken up the reins to the Prajapati Estate, she eliminated everyone who opposed her or disrespected her. She led the people not only through her sheer will but also through brutality. Ultimately, people not only feared her but also respected her. She surrounded herself with brutal men who followed her orders without questioning her.

But no matter how many rules or how many things she had done to lead the life she did now, she couldn't forgive Dev Singham. Because of his betrayal, she lost *the* most precious thing in her life.

For that alone, she felt the need to destroy him each time she saw or thought about him. The fact that he was a privileged and unpredictable egoistical man also added to her hate.

The next few months were going to be extremely hard. She had serious doubts about whether she could work next to him without killing or causing him serious harm at some point.

CHAPTER 6

“We found his identity. He’s going by the name Samuel Mathews,” Abhay Singham’s voice stated on the speakerphone.

“That’s good. But do we know where he’s escaped to?” Dev asked his older brother.

“Not yet, Dev. But we will soon.”

Abhay and his wife, Anika were still in San Francisco, following the trail of a missing person.

“It’s been close to two weeks, Abhay.” Dev’s voice carried frustration. “I’m getting impatient. I want to join the hunt and get some answers soon.”

Dev was still shocked and outraged that Raidu whom everyone had presumed to be dead, along with Dev’s parents during the temple massacre was still alive. Raidu had not only been Dev’s mother’s personal bodyguard, but also a good friend of Dev’s father. Abhay had spotted Raidu two weeks ago. Since then, Abhay and Dev had been trying to get hold of Raidu who seem to have disappeared on purpose.

“The investigators are doing everything they can, Dev.”

Dev knew Abhay was right. Dev had sent his best private investigators to follow the trail of Raidu. The investigators were able to use the camera feeds that had captured Raidu being chased by Abhay and noted the taxi number Raidu had gotten into.

Unfortunately, the taxi had dropped Raidu off at another crowded public location where he had disappeared. But using the camera feeds along with the latest software of facial recognition, they were able to track Raidu’s identity.

“We already know where he used to live and work,” Abhay continued saying. “That’ll give us some insight to where he might have gone.”

Dev frowned. “Okay. I’ve asked the investigators to continue making use of the new technology my team will provide to print out pictures of how Raidu would look currently in disguise. They’ve sent some old pictures from our parents’ album.”

There was a pause. “You bought that company?” Abhay asked.

“Yes. I just finished the paperwork yesterday. I didn’t want legal hassles or privacy concerns later on with the investigation.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you. However, I don’t know if we can get to Raidu any sooner because of this.”

“I know we will,” Abhay stated confidently.

Dev was equally confident, but unfortunately he didn’t have Abhay’s patience. “I’ve asked the investigators to look at his bank details along with any credit card information and check for any activity.”

“Yes. They are already on it,” Abhay said. “What about Malini’s search?”

“As far as I know, Malini knows nothing. She doesn’t seem to have a clue that her father is alive. I had someone do a thorough search of her room. Nothing significant. And her bank account—apart from the monthly check deposits from Singham Estate—no other activity.”

Abhay sighed tiredly. “Anika had already guessed as much.”

“How is Anika doing?” Dev asked. A few days ago Abhay and Anika had called him and given him the good news of becoming an uncle soon. Anika was excited, and Dev had teased her saying Abhay was going to pray really hard that the child doesn’t turn out to be a handful like how Dev was during his childhood. Anika had laughed, saying the child was definitely going to be a handful.

Dev felt happy for them. He loved them both since they were the only family he had left.

“Anika’s doing well,” Abhay replied. “She’s going to miss her family when we get back. I’ve invited them to visit us before the birth of our child.”

“That’s good. You know people are going to go crazy in both the provinces when they hear the news about the Prajapati-Singham heir.”

“Yes. We’ll announce it when we get there.” There was a pause. “It’s the third province I’m more concerned about. They are going to increase the attacks and cause trouble.”

Dev frowned. “They already are. And I’m not too happy you are not allowing me to handle them my way, Abhay.”

“That’s because your way would involve you cutting all of them down with an axe. That’s not going to help in the long run, Dev.”

Dev knew Abhay was right.

Mostly.

“Are the Senanis causing any trouble at the site?” Abhay asked.

“Yes. But we have enough men. And... the Prajapatis are also pitching in with the security.”

Dev grudgingly admitted to himself that the Prajapatis were well-trained like Singham men. Between the Singhams and Prajapatis, they had managed to stop all the attacks from the Senanis.

“Good. How’s the rest of the planning and set-up coming along?” Abhay enquired. “I hope there is good progress by now.”

“Things are moving along fine.”

When Dev didn’t elaborate, Abhay pressed him. “Define fine, Dev. You know this is important for us. I hope you are working with Sabitha Prajapati without any issues—”

“I am,” Dev snapped. “I’m being as cooperative as possible with our mother’s murderer’s daughter.”

“Dev,” Abhay said in a warning tone.

When Dev didn’t respond, there was another tired sigh from the older Singham brother. “Dev, I have told you this several times. Sabitha Prajapati is family now. You have to get along with her for our people’s sake. And besides, if you were really the kind to hold people responsible for their father’s sins, then why didn’t you have a problem with Anika? You have always been cordial and friendly with her, right from the beginning.”

“Anika is different.” Dev was aware that his tone sounded defensive. “Anika has never held a gun or a knife against me. She saves people’s lives for God’s sake.”

“Well, that’s because Anika grew up under different circumstances. She hasn’t held a gun or a knife against you because you never taunted her like you did with Sabitha.”

Dev was getting irritated. “Let’s drop the conversation, Abhay. It’s quite late here. Almost two in the morning, and I’m tired as hell. I’ll call you back later in the morning.”

There was a pause. “Okay. Take care,” Abhay said softly before ending the call.

Dev stared at his phone. He knew Abhay was worried about him. Abhay was one of the few people who knew and had witnessed his dark side. Abhay was also the only one who could keep Dev’s beast leashed and locked inside.

Dev felt guilty. He didn’t want Abhay to worry that his younger brother would snap and go on a bloody rampage when he wasn’t around to control it. Instead, Abhay should be celebrating his upcoming parenthood along with his beautiful wife with peace of mind.

Dev knew Abhay had always thought his younger brother was prone to

violent urges because he had lost his parents at an early age. Which was only partly true. But Dev held a secret from his big brother that only his grandmother, Devasena, had been aware of.

That secret was the sole reason for his violent urges.

The smell of burning flesh slowly began to fill Dev's senses. Before all his senses became overwhelmed with the images from the past, Dev shook his head and distracted himself by recalling the conversation he just had with Abhay.

Dev's tired brain grudgingly acknowledged what Abhay had just said did hold some truth. He shouldn't be holding Sabitha Prajapati responsible for her father's sins. If he were a bigger man, he could look past the father's sins.

Unfortunately, he wasn't.

He still hated her. And it wasn't like *she* was the forgiving kind either.

He was annoyed that she had the upper hand most of the time during their battles. And even when she wasn't battling with him directly, she still managed to agitate him.

Sabitha Prajapati not only intruded his mind but had even begun intruding his damn body.

After she had held him at knifepoint that particular night, he hadn't been able to be with a woman properly since then. He just could not get his body to cooperate. Each time he had kissed a woman or tried to be with a woman, *her* face flashed in his mind, exciting him while also horrifying him at the same time.

Rather than being his usual controlled, smooth and attentive self to his dates, he turned aggressive when he kissed his dates, scaring most of them. A few got excited with that side of him, but he couldn't continue as he was too disgusted by the very thought of being able to get excited only when *her* face flashed in his mind.

She was ruining him.

Dev's mind automatically went to the night when he had ruined her plans to seduce Abhay. That night he had kissed her. He kissed her the way he had wanted and she even allowed him to—at first. But later, when she realized his identity, the little bitch played him. Only to stab him in his leg later on.

The memories of that night ran through his mind. Soon, he realized he was breathing fast. He was even aroused—painfully so.

He got up from the bed and paced around the room to calm down while trying to ignore his body's reactions. But he couldn't calm down. Images of

her face and the feel of her body under him kept flashing in his mind.
He hated the fact that he wanted and craved his enemy.

CHAPTER 7

As soon as Sabitha's SUV stopped in front of the site, she gave Dhruv the last of the instructions. "Have all the lead engineers and managers we hired assemble in the main meeting hall. I want to speak with them before the training begins tomorrow."

"Yes, madam."

Twenty minutes later, Sabitha was annoyed when Dhruv didn't call her to let her know he had everything ready and they were waiting for her to address them.

Dhruv came into her office with an uncomfortable look.

"Why is there a delay?" Sabitha demanded.

"Madam, they are all with Dev Singham. He's been speaking with them since early this morning along with rest of his team. He has asked you to join him if possible."

"I see," she said quietly.

Dhruv stayed silent.

"As soon as he's done, let me know. I need to speak with him privately."

"Sure, madam."

Sabitha felt a simmering anger grow within her.

Who the hell did Dev Singham think he was?

She had gone through hell to become the person she was today. She wasn't going to simply sit back and allow a privileged, cocky, and arrogant prick to grab her power and control.

Dev Singham was going to get a piece of her mind soon.

It took close to two more hours until Dev Singham gave the engineers and managers a break. She was finishing up with her calls with the transportation company when she heard him return to his office next door.

Immediately, she got up went towards his office. She knocked on the door just once and not bothering to wait for his answer, she strode inside.

His head was still bent over the document he was reading. "I thought you would join me in the meeting after you arrived. Didn't you get the message from me?" he asked in a casual tone.

She sat in the chair and glared on top of his head where his hair was styled in a deliberately messy manner. "Don't ever order my men without my

explicit permission,” she said with a soft menace.

He looked up from the document and watched her with an unperturbed look. “Your men?”

“Yes. My men. Prajapati men and the men I hired on behalf of my province.”

He sat back in his chair. “They are no longer exclusively your men. Especially when they are at the site and drawing salaries from the company,” he said coolly. “Singhams or Prajapatis. If they are working here, they are employees—employees who need to be trained and instructed as soon as possible if we want to meet our aggressive schedules.”

Sabitha frowned. She knew what he said was right. It annoyed her to no end that he sounded rational while she had been the one sounding immature. “Fine,” she acknowledged. “What was the meeting about? And why wasn’t I told about it earlier?”

“As you already know, the Senanis’ attacks have increased quite a bit lately,” he said. “We stopped another one early this morning. I wanted to provide detailed instructions regarding safety to the management before the actual training begins tomorrow.”

“I see.”

“I also told them we needed to keep a close watch and one of us will be there most of the time to oversee the shifts.”

“I’ll be here as much as possible,” she said.

“Good. I’ll send you my schedule. Sometimes I have to leave for my commitments in the city. I’ll give you prior notice when I want you here.”

“Fine.”

He didn’t add anything else. He simply watched her silently.

Sabitha felt his eyes on her like a physical touch and suppressed a shiver.

“What?” she snapped.

He shrugged. “Just wondering what damage you might have done within these two hours when you thought I ordered *your* men.”

“I didn’t,” she said coolly. “Unlike you, I’m not prone to explosive tempers or impulsive attacks without finding out the cause first.”

“Oh please!” He barked out a laugh. “So the amount of damage you did to my property was you being cool-headed and logical?” he asked in disbelief.

“Yes,” she replied coolly. “I knew it was your personal property and not that of the people.” She gave him a sweeping look. “It was either destroy

your property or kill you. Be thankful for the choice I picked.”

The bastard smirked. “Your threats are quite adorable, Prajapati,” he said in a deep mocking tone. “I think you need a better purpose in your life. It’s quite sad how much time you spend thinking about me. What do you do each night? Lie in your bed thinking of ways of getting back at me?”

He chuckled. His chuckle sounded dark with absolutely no humor in it. “Probably, even the women I date don’t think as much about me as you must do. What other things do you think about me during the nights?”

Sabitha felt her temper rise at his words, but she maintained an outward cool. “Don’t worry about my purpose or who I think about during my nights, Singham.”

His eyes heated while he gave her another sweeping look with the smirk lingering on his face.

“When is your brother getting back and taking over this project,” she asked casually.

As she predicted, immediately the smirk left his face. Instead, an angry scowl took over.

Good.

“None of your damn business when he’s returning,” he growled. “And even if he returns, he’s not going to be involved in the project work. So stop dreaming of working with him and luring him somehow. You already know what the bloody contract says and who you would be working with until the set-up completes.”

He glared at her. “You’ll be working with only *me*,” he more or less shouted. “If you can’t handle the amount of work, then whoever the Prajapati’s assign will be working along with only me. Is that clear enough?”

He was furious. She could feel his anger radiating off his body.

She shrugged. “Fine. I’ll come early tomorrow to oversee the training. Send your schedule to Dhruv.”

He didn’t reply.

She continued to feel the heat of his glare on her back as she got up and left his office.

When she reached her office, Sabitha rubbed her arms to get rid of the goosebumps she got whenever he was around.

Even though she hated him, there was some sort of awareness between them that grew each time they met or interacted. It annoyed her to no end, and she tried very hard to ignore it.

She could hear him in his office. He was barking out instructions at someone. He was still angry and Sabitha knew the reason why.

Dev Singham thought she was still after his precious older brother. She had deliberately made him think that way.

But, of course, he didn't simply get that idea out of the blue. He thought that way because it had been true at one point. There had been a time when she had genuinely harbored an idea to marry Abhay Singham for several reasons.

She might have succeeded in her plan. Only if Dev Singham hadn't tricked her out of it.

Sabitha clenched her hands into fists trying to control the memories of that night from rushing in. As usual, it was a losing battle. Her heart began to thud as memories of the night filled her mind, making her feel conflicted between anger and something else she didn't want to acknowledge.

CHAPTER 8

It was close to two in morning. Dev had gone to bed just three hours ago, only to be woken up by a call from one of the investigators.

As soon as the call was over, he placed a call to his brother. "Have you heard?"

"Yes, just got off the call," Abhay answered.

Raidu apparently flew to India. The investigation teams were trying to find out where he had gone after landing.

"I somehow suspected he would return to India," Abhay said in a grim tone. "But I didn't know when and from where he would take off."

Dev sensed frustration and disappointment in Abhay's voice that was similar to how he felt.

"That doesn't make any sense, though," Dev remarked. "Why would Raidu fly to India where he knows we have more power and network? We would be able to track him pretty easily here."

"Not if he has contacted someone equally powerful."

Dev frowned. "Like who?"

There was a pause. "Anika thinks her aunt might be helping Raidu or is involved somehow."

"Neelambari Prajapati?"

There was a sigh. "I know it sounds unlikely," Abhay said. "But Anika feels very strongly about it. She even wants to prove wrong some of the things we have taken as facts until now."

"Such as what?"

There was another pause. "She wants to tell you about them in person when we arrive home."

Dev blinked a couple of times, trying to keep his tired eyes open. He didn't have the energy to insist on knowing those facts right away.

"I'm sending two more teams to join the search in India," Dev informed his brother. "They'll probably start from the location Raidu landed."

"That's good. We already have whatever we could find on Samuel Mathews."

"Yes. I've asked the team to figure out how he got to the United States as well."

Dev could hear Anika's voice in the background speaking to someone. "Are you and Anika planning on staying there for much longer?"

"No," Abhay replied. "We'll fly home in a few days."

Dev ended the call and sighed deeply. He had three business deals that required back-to-back phone meetings to attend the next day. After which he would have to oversee the training at the site.

Although he was damn tired and his calls would start in less than four hours, he called his lead investigator again. They discussed the details and the investigator gave him the strategy the team was planning on using to find Raidu.

Dev was about to end the call when the investigator's next remark wiped away his sleep completely.

"What did you just say?" Dev asked to confirm if he had heard correctly.

"You asked us a couple of months ago to find out whether there was anything suspicious about Sabitha Prajapati. We sent a report clearing her. But I just found out that she's been trying to look for someone as well. I don't have many details yet. All I know is she's hired many different companies for the search, one of whom leaked the information to me."

Dev frowned. "Get me the details. Raidu is the top priority, of course, but have someone tail Sabitha Prajapati again as well."

Dev ended the call and lay on his bed.

Who the hell was Sabitha Prajapati trying to locate? Was she searching for Raidu? Were Anika's theories about Neelambari Prajapati helping Raidu escape, true? Why would Neelambari do that? And if Neelambari was helping Raidu, then why would Sabitha have to *search* for Raidu? She should already know where he was located.

There were too many unanswered questions.

But one thing Dev knew for sure was that one had to keep their enemies closer. And so he would ensure he spent as much time as possible keeping a close eye on Sabitha Prajapati.

CHAPTER 9

Sabitha returned home after a long day at the site. Dev Singham had scheduled back-to-back training for the management since early that morning. By the time they were done, it was quite late and everyone was exhausted.

It had been that way for the past two weeks.

Dev Singham was still at the site to oversee the night shift, just like he had been most of the times since the planning work had started. The man was trying to kill himself and everyone around him.

Feeling famished, Sabitha was about to head for dinner when she saw her aunt. Neelambari was sitting in the large living room next to the dining area, flipping through some magazines.

Even though Neelambari no longer held a self-imposed promise to stay in her suite, due to her thirty-year-old habit, she preferred to stay there.

Sabitha knew her aunt stayed up because she wanted to find out something.

“Sabi,” her aunt greeted with a smile. “You seem tired, and you look like a mess.”

At Neelambari’s comment, Sabitha felt even more tired. She groaned internally wondering if she would get to hear another of those ‘talks’ about how a Prajapati woman needs to dress and carry herself.

“What do you want, Neela? I’m rather tired and also in a hurry.”

When Sabitha had taken control of the Prajapati Estate, her aunt insisted that she be addressed as ‘Neela’. She didn’t want to be called as ‘aunt’ because it apparently made her feel older. Sabitha didn’t care either ways, and so she simply addressed her aunt as ‘Neela’.

Neelambari’s nostrils flared when she saw the impatient look on her niece’s face, but she pasted a determined smile on her face. “I heard from someone that Abhay Singham is returning home in a couple of days along with his wife. I wanted to know if you heard anything else about them.”

Sabitha frowned when she heard her aunt refer to Anika as simply ‘the wife’. Until a few months ago, before Neelambari’s visit to the Singham Mansion, Neelambari wouldn’t stop talking about Anika, her dearest niece who was the epitome of pure and innocent womanhood.

Sabitha knew there was a confrontation of sorts between her aunt and cousin in which her cousin must have had the upper hand. Sabitha hadn't asked what had transpired and neither did she care to know.

"No. I haven't heard anything either," Sabitha replied. "I'm surprised your spies didn't root out the information to you by now."

Neelambari raised her chin. "I promised Abhay Singham I wouldn't spy on his wife or her family. Unlike his late father, *I* always keep my promises."

Sabitha raised an eyebrow. "Then how did you find out Abhay Singham and Anika were returning home in two days?"

"I got that information because Dev is apparently making arrangements in the Singham Temple to receive his brother and his wife."

Sabitha frowned. "You are spying on Dev Singham?" she asked.

Neelambari smiled. "Not exactly spying when most of the boy's life is splattered all over magazine covers."

Sabitha highly doubted if information of Dev Singham making arrangements in a temple was newsworthy. She was too tired to argue or care about it right then.

"This boy," continued Neelambari, pointing at Dev Singham's picture in a magazine. "Even though he doesn't look much like his father, his charm and magic with the ladies is very similar to that of Vijay's. It was a known fact that women had always thrown themselves at Vijay, both in London and also within our three provinces. But Vijay never strayed or betrayed me in any way."

Sabitha found the entire conversation creepy and disturbing. It wasn't the first time her aunt spoke as though thirty years hadn't passed since Vijay Singham broke off his engagement with her aunt.

Neelambari sighed dreamily, lost in her memories. Sabitha didn't bother speaking anymore and walked to the dining area. She knew how her aunt got when she was lost in the past.

Sabitha sat down for dinner and summoned for her estate manager.

As usual, she was alone at the large dining table. Her grandfather joined her only during breakfast time, and Neelambari still preferred her meals brought into her suite.

Sabitha was a creature of habit. Even as a child, she sat at the same huge table for every meal, just so she could feel like she belonged to the Prajapati family.

"Madam," greeted Sanjay.

He stood a few feet away from the table, ready to update her with the happenings around the Prajapati estate and province. “Two more teachers left, madam,” he said. “They didn’t carry their belongings with them when they went. They pretended they were going on leave.”

“How many days has it been since they left?” Sabitha asked quietly.

“Seven days. They were supposed to be back by this morning.”

“I see.”

“We have already placed another ad for more teachers,” Sanjay added hurriedly.

“Were the ads posted internationally as well?”

“Yes, madam.”

“Raise the salaries to double of what we are currently offering.”

“But madam, the salaries are already unusually high. It will seem—” He broke off when Sabitha turned to look at him. “I will double the salary in the ads, madam.”

Sabitha indicated to the serving woman who was placing food in a plate to stop and leave. The woman left quietly.

Sabitha realized she barely noticed what she ate these days. When she was younger, she had always been curious about food and asked questions of what went into the dish so she could replicate the same if not make improvements. Now, food was simply sustenance.

“Did the shipping company come back with their offer?” she asked while continuing to eat.

“Not yet, madam. I’ve called them this morning as well. They still think it is risky coming this far.”

“We’ve already discussed a neutral point outside the three provinces.”

“I have told them the same, madam. But they think it’s risky because Senanis will still try to intercept them and destroy our goods.”

A significant income for the Prajapatis was from the ethnic goods they made and sold online. A shipment company came every week to collect the goods to export them around the world. Since Sabitha had set up the business model five years ago, there was a revolving door of shipment companies. At first, the Singhams destroyed the goods, and after the Prajapati-Singham wedding, it was the Senanis who took over the destruction.

“Tomorrow I’ll speak with the shipment company owner personally.” She was done with her meal. Pushing her chair back, she got up. “You may leave,” she instructed Sanjay.

Nodding his head, the old man left. Sabitha watched him for a couple of seconds. She recalled how the dynamics between Sanjay and her had changed drastically in the past six years. Until six years ago, he was a fatherly figure to her who sometimes took her along with him and his son to ride within the Prajapati province.

Dhruv was Sanjay's son. He had also been Sabitha's playmate and a good friend during childhood. But once she rose up to take charge, she deliberately changed the dynamics she had with everyone around her. Along with their respect, she wanted everyone to fear her. Only then did all the opposition against her leading the Prajapatis stop completely.

However, sometimes she did feel that for the sake of leading her people effectively, she had alienated herself from the basic human softer emotions.

After dinner, Sabitha was going past the living room when she noticed her aunt and the maids had left for the night. Her eyes fell on the glossy magazine her aunt had been reading.

She didn't know why, but she reached for it and took it along with her to her room.

She took a quick shower and slid into her bed, feeling bone tired. She usually listened to one of the audio books in her collection before retiring for the night.

Ever since she had discovered there were audio books, she hadn't stopped making use of them. Even as a child, she somehow managed to save the money she was given for her clothes allowance to buy audio books. Those books opened up a new world for her.

Using them, she had learned science, history, geography and many other subjects that wouldn't have been possible due to her disability. She listened to financial and business courses and even heard the speeches of various entrepreneurs. Along with the help of highly-qualified people like Dhruv, Sanjay and several others, she was able to manage running the Prajapati Estate.

A yawn escaped her.

She had been up since four that morning and would have to get up even earlier the next day. She knew as soon as she closed her eyes, she'd pass out.

But she reached out to the magazine that she had placed next to her bed on the nightstand.

She stared at it for a few seconds. Even if she could read, she didn't think any of the content within a gossip magazine would ever interest her, but it was the man on the cover who had caught her eye.

Dev Singham.

As usual, he was well-dressed. He was wearing a three-piece suit. He wasn't facing the camera but was speaking to someone next to him while his hand was wrapped casually around a woman's waist. The woman standing next to him was clinging to him while looking straight into the camera with a pout.

Sabitha stared at the woman for a while. The woman had a beautiful face, a glamorous hairdo and expensive-looking clothes and shoes. She had placed a manicured hand on Dev Singham's broad shoulders. The bright red nails matched perfectly with her lipstick and shoes.

Sabitha's eyes fell on her own unpainted nails and the calluses on her fingers. She stared at her fingers for a while. And then, she flung the magazine away and turned off the lights.

CHAPTER 10

“A hearty welcome to our savior!”

“May he or she be blessed with the Singham power!”

“May he or she break the curse and shower us with God’s blessings!”

Amid the loud cheers, Dev felt a chill pass through his body.

He blinked. And then, he blinked again. But it didn’t work. The gruesome images kept flashing in his mind along with the smell of burning flesh.

Reaching towards his neck, he opened a couple of top buttons on his shirt. But that didn’t help either. He still felt suffocated. He tried to move again, however he couldn’t force his body to cooperate.

Cheers continued, and people shouted in joy as they welcomed the news of the Prajapati-Singham heir.

Soon, the images and the smells of half-burned bodies dominated all of Dev’s senses.

“Dev?” a deep voice called out to him from his side.

“Dev?” a woman’s softer voice called out as well.

Dev felt the world spin and the temple walls closing in around him.

“Dev? Are you all alright?” Anika asked as she stepped towards him. Abhay was watching him with concern as well.

Dev couldn’t answer. He had to get out. He needed to get out of the place that brought the memories. He began to walk away towards the temple gates.

“Dev!” he heard Abhay calling him. But Dev continued walking away towards the car, ignoring everything and everyone.

As soon as he got into his vehicle, he started the engine and drove away in a hurry, the sound of squealing tires attracting attention from everyone.

He knew Abhay and Anika could easily get home using any of the other cars that had arrived at the temple, celebrating their return and the news of the pregnancy.

A shudder passed through Dev’s body as he saw the image of the Singham Temple in the rearview mirror.

He hadn’t visited the Singham Temple or any other temple since he was a seven-year-old. He just couldn’t. But since Anika and Abhay had wanted to

pay a visit to the Singham Temple before going to the mansion, he joined them.

Big mistake.

After meeting them at the airport, he should have dropped them at the temple gates and driven away.

His heart was still pounding inside his chest with helpless panic.

Except for his late grandmother, nobody knew the real reason why he didn't visit temples. They thought he didn't believe in God or he was one of those people who simply liked shunning cultures and traditions. They were wrong.

He not only believed in God, he also had a healthy respect for traditions and culture. He just could not visit a temple.

Because temples reminded him of the massacre that had happened twenty years ago. The aftermath of which he had not only witnessed in person but also recalled quite well.

"... and then, I won my father's jewelled knife as a prize."

Seven-year-old Dev's eyes were widened as he listened to his grandmother's childhood adventures. Whenever he and his family visited Singham Mansion during the holidays, his favorite time was when he spent time with his grandmother. She not only told him about all the exciting adventures, but she had also taken him and his brothers to the Senani lands where she grew up.

"Show me the knife!" Dev demanded excitedly.

His grandmother smiled. She took out a jewelled knife from a sheath that was tied to her waist. He had seen it hundreds of times before, but he had always been fascinated by it.

He touched the handle reverently and saw the glinting of jewels in awe.

"I gifted it to your grandfather after I married him," his grandmother said with a poignant smile. "He carried it with him until he passed away."

Dev had never seen his grandfather. A bad man had killed him before Dev was born.

Dev held the knife. "Can you teach me to throw it like you did when you were young?" he asked excitedly.

"Sure. I can show you."

He began to sit up on the bed when his grandmother laughed and pushed him back gently. "Not right now, my little monkey," she said. "When you get

better.”

Dev scowled. He was stuck in bed because of a stupid fever.

His parents had taken Rana to the temple for some important occasion. But since Dev was sick, they left both Dev and Abhay with their grandmother.

Dev knew his older brother didn't mind being left home. In fact, Dev knew Abhay must be in the huge Singham library with his nose buried between old and musty books.

Dev didn't mind being left behind as well because it meant he could listen to more of his grandmother's stories.

“Fine,” Dev said with a sulky pout. “Then tell me another story,” he demanded.

With a laugh and then a kiss to his forehead, his grandmother began another story. He had heard this one before as well, but he wanted to hear it again and again.

The story was just about to get to the most exciting part when a loud knock interrupted them.

His grandmother's maid entered inside with tears in her eyes.

“What is it, Sitamma?” his grandmother asked.

“Devasena... we just got—” The woman broke into sobs. “Vijay and Arundhati. And even our Ajay—” The woman broke off again and kept sobbing.

“Dev, I'll be right back,” his grandmother said and led her maid outside.

A few minutes later, his grandmother was back. She looked shaken. “Dev, I have to go out urgently,” she said. “I promise I'll finish the story later. I'll send someone to stay here with you. When Abhay returns, tell him I'll be back in a few hours.”

Dev didn't protest. He waited in his room for a few minutes.

Soon he became restless. Seeing his normally composed grandmother look so shaken, he wanted to know what had happened.

Getting down from the bed with shaky legs, he went towards the door and peeked outside. He didn't see anyone, but he could hear loud wails and shouts coming from downstairs.

He slowly sneaked down without anyone noticing and went to the entrance. Several cars were driving away from the mansion. He saw a few more that were taking people from the mansion to some place. He opened the door to one of the cars and slipped into the back and hid under a seat.

After a while when the car stopped, Dev waited until the driver and the man sitting next to him left the car.

The first thing he noticed as soon as he opened the door and got out of the car—was the flames. The once golden shrine of the temple was filled with ash and flames that almost reached the sky.

The next thing he noticed was the hundreds of bodies that lay on the ground, some of which were burned. The smell was so strong and vile it made Dev throw up.

Feeling shaken, he walked among the bodies where several people were sitting next to them, wailing loudly. He stopped when he saw a familiar piece of almost burned cloth covering a half burned body. He recognized the bright red cloth with a gold border that his mother had worn that morning.

“Oh God!” a woman wailed. “They killed them. Our Arundhati and Vijay and even our Rana! How could they do this!”

“It’s all because of this dog!” another woman said, kicking a dead body of a man lying near the feet of his mother.

Dev just stared at the bodies of his mother and father. He could barely identify the body of his younger brother since it was burned beyond recognition.

He didn’t know how long he stood there, simply staring.

“Dev!” He heard his grandmother’s voice. “Oh my god, Dev,” she said and hurriedly picked him up, turning him away from the sight of his parents.

Dev saw that his grandmother was crying. Tears ran down her red-rimmed eyes. “Who got you here? You are not supposed to see any of this.”

Dev closed his eyes at the memories of what his seven-year-old eyes had seen that day. By the time his grandmother had found him standing next to his parents’ bodies, it was too late. Those images along with the smells were forever infused in his brain.

He hadn’t ever told Abhay what he had seen or even that he had been to the place where the massacre happened.

On that particular day twenty years ago, Abhay had remained in the library the entire day until their grandmother gently broke the news to him that their parents were gone forever because they had died in an accident.

Dev hadn’t said anything at that time. In fact, he had been so shocked and traumatized by what he had seen that he wasn’t able to speak a word for nearly six months after the massacre occurred.

Through the years, he had suffered from nightmares and was prone to violent outbursts where he took out his aggression on other people for even the simplest of mistakes. He had also fantasized about wanting to kill the people who had taken away his parents and most of his family from him.

But unfortunately, the people directly responsible for the death of his family had also died in the massacre.

Dev shook his head and blinked rapidly to clear the red haze that formed in front of his eyes.

He realized that his phone was ringing and answered it.

“Dev, are you okay?” Abhay’s voice asked from the car speakers.

“Yeah. I’m fine. I just remembered I had to go to the site for an important meeting.”

There was a loaded silence. Dev knew his brother didn’t believe that excuse, but fortunately, Abhay didn’t demand an explanation.

“Come home soon,” Abhay said softly.

“Yeah, I’ll be back in the evening.”

Ending the call, Dev continued to drive towards the site.

Over the years, even though he had several opportunities, he hadn’t told Abhay about what he had seen as a child. He wanted Abhay to remember their parents like they were before they had gone to the temple. Not the bloody and half burned mess he had seen.

Soon, Dev reached the site.

The first person he saw there was Sabitha Prajapati—daughter of the man who killed his mother and was responsible for the massacre.

Giving her a hate-filled look which she returned in equal measure, he strode into his office. He was determined to get through the project planning and set-up as soon as possible.

CHAPTER 11

“Dev?”

Dev looked up from the documents in front of him when he heard the familiar soft voice of a woman.

Anika Singham, his sister-in-law stood in his home office, watching him with an uncertain look instead of her usual smile.

“What’s up, sis?” he asked.

Slowly, Anika’s face eased into a smile. “Dev, I need to talk to you about something. Well, I wanted to discuss this before with you, but I wanted to do it in person.”

Dev put aside the documents in his hand and stood up to lead his sister-in-law to the cushioned chair next to him. It had been over a week since Abhay and Anika had returned.

“Sure. You can talk to me about anything. How is my brother treating you these days?” he asked.

Dev knew Abhay and Anika had fallen in love. The glow on Anika’s face and the constant looks his brother and she exchanged made it quite obvious.

“Abhay is fine. Just a little overprotective. I have to keep reminding him I’m a practicing medical doctor, and that I already know what is safe or unsafe for our baby and me.”

Dev smiled. He knew his brother quite well. Abhay was as controlling as one could get. He had become that way since he had to take on the responsibility for the Singham province at an early age.

There was also the fact that Abhay had to take the responsibility of his wild younger brother who had been out of control most of the time during his childhood and also a few times until recent years.

“What did you want to talk about?” Dev asked.

Another look of uncertainty passed over Anika’s face. Dev had realized that even though Anika had the Prajapati eyes, looking at her, didn’t agitate him. Anika’s sweet smile had a calming effect on everyone near her.

Whereas whenever he saw *her*...

“Dev... I’ve heard things have been uncomfortable and tense at the construction site. I just wanted to see if I can help ease that tension a little

bit.”

Dammit! Why did everyone keep reminding him of ‘her’ all the time!

“What do you mean?” he asked with a small frown. He knew Anika was right. Even though the work was progressing well, there was a palpable tension among the people at the site.

Anika took a deep breath. “I know you have a lot of differences with my cousin. I just wanted to see if I can help ease the tension between you both —”

His frown grew in size. What he had with Anika’s cousin could hardly be termed as ‘differences’. It was simply straight up hate. “I appreciate you trying to help me, Anika, but it’s not something anyone can do or say to help. There is too much history—”

“Exactly,” Anika interrupted. “I think everyone is behaving the way they do because of the history. But I want you to know that I dug up a few things that might question some of the things that were spread as facts.”

Dev was quiet. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to discuss any part of the past. But since they had been on the hunt for Raidu, the past was featuring a major role in their lives.

“Such as what?” he asked.

Anika watched him closely. “Everyone knows Sabitha’s father, Harshvardhan Prajapati, accidentally shot your grandfather. He had only intended to shoot your father in his arm as a warning, but your grandfather came in between to protect his son. Later, when your grandfather passed away, my uncle was quite devastated, and even offered to take whatever punishment the Singham family would give.”

Dev knew that already. “Yes. I’ve heard that from my grandmother. So?” he asked.

“I don’t think Sabitha’s father murdered your mother, Dev,” Anika said softly.

Dev got up from the chair. No, he was definitely not equipped to handle that part of the past. “Anika, I appreciate—”

“Please hear me out completely, Dev, and come to your own conclusion after I finish.”

Dev knew Anika was embroiled in their past as much as Abhay and him, trying to trace Raidu, and also to find out what had happened at the temple twenty years ago. “Alright, go ahead,” he said softly.

Anika pulled out a paper from a leather-bound book and gave it to him.

“This is one of the many letters Harshvardhan wrote to your mother before and after she was married.”

Dev frowned. “What are you implying, Anika?” he asked.

“I’m trying to say that Harshvardhan Prajapati was in love with your mother. Although, your mother just treated him as a good childhood friend. They grew up together in neighboring provinces and met each other on several occasions. In fact, Harshvardhan Prajapati loved your mother deeply. He even wrote her letters and sent them to London, wishing her happiness each time she had a child. I don’t think a man like that is capable of killing someone he loved so much in such a coldblooded way.”

That information threw Dev off completely. He reluctantly took the letters from Anika’s hands and read through some of them.

“Maybe he was the kind of person who thought if the woman he loved didn’t belong to him, then he would make sure she didn’t belong to anyone else.” Even as he said that, Dev realized there was no conviction in his voice. The person who had written such letters didn’t seem like a zealous lover. He sounded more like a soft-hearted well-wisher. However, he didn’t want to believe the sincerity of the letters. What if it was a farce to make his mother think or even trust Harshvardhan Prajapati?

“Maybe my uncle was the zealous kind,” Anika replied gently. “But there is the possibility he wasn’t that way and the letters were written from his heart. Which means there is possibility he wasn’t the one who killed your mother. If your dislike towards my cousin is due to the fact of who her father was—”

“It’s not,” he interrupted. “It’s not just because of who her father was.” Or at least not completely. Too much had happened between the both of them for it to change into personal hatred.

Anika nodded. “I just hope you will be able to forgive and forget some of the blame placed on my uncle when the truth comes out.”

He was quiet, but he eventually nodded.

“Thank you,” she said with a small smile. “And Dev,” she said in a gentle tone. “I just want you to know that... sometimes, those who pretend they are cold-hearted and emotionless... are the ones who are protecting the biggest hearts.”

Dev nodded once again in understanding. Anika must have initially thought Abhay didn’t care for her.

Dev’s grandmother had said that Abhay was more like his namesake,

Abhimanyu Singham. He had a lot of love on the inside, but was guarded and reserved on the outside. Dev was apparently more like his father, Vijay Singham. Dev wore everything on his face. Even as an adult, Dev hadn't hesitated to hug or kiss his grandmother whenever he greeted her.

Despite having a short temper and a wilder nature, Dev was more demonstrative when it came to affection. Even though he had only been seven when his parents had passed away, he recalled many cherished moments he had spent with them in London. He recalled how his father always smiled at his mother, kissing her tenderly on the cheek or simply touching her in ways to show he cared. Vijay Singham was a man who hadn't been afraid to show his love and affection towards his family. Both Arundhati and Vijay Singham had been physically demonstrative with each other and their kids.

"I think my cousin is guarding a big heart, too," said Anika. She bent forward and affectionately kissed Dev on his cheek before leaving his office.

Although, Dev couldn't just simply give Harshvardhan Prajapati the benefit of doubt based on a few letters, Dev slowly began to think and view his past interactions with Sabitha. He realized that from his end, he had been driven by hate mostly because of who her father was. Sabitha Prajapati had simply been reacting to that hate.

However, Anika was wrong about Sabitha. Dev didn't think Sabitha was cold-hearted or emotionless because she was protecting her heart. Sabitha was that way, simply because she was cold-hearted and calculating, along with being brutal.

CHAPTER 12

Sabitha was standing at the construction site, monitoring the progress. Her mind wandered to the phone call she had received an hour ago.

Another lead.

It was an address in another city. It wasn't the first time she had received an address from the investigators. Like each time, even though she knew the probability of becoming disappointed was quite high, hope filled her heart. She pulled out and clutched the pendant of her waist chain, rubbing the small silver heart softly.

Her thoughts were interrupted by loud shouts. A crowd had gathered and they were leaning over the safety railing, looking at something in the water below.

"What's happening?" Sabitha asked Dhruv who was standing next to her.

She went towards the commotion.

"I'm not sure, madam," Dhruv answered, following behind her.

When she went closer, people noticed her and made way for her. And then she saw it.

A woman was caught in the rapids of the river. That morning, they had opened one of the dam gates to let the water partially into one of the canal channels that had previously been dug.

They had taken every possible safety precaution while planning the project. Despite that, how the hell the woman fell into the water, she had no clue.

"Find a long rope and bring it quickly," Sabitha instructed.

The woman was still conscious with her head above the water. She was flailing her arms, calling for help.

People watched as the woman kept going under the water each time.

"Who was in charge of the safety today? Give me the name whose head is going to roll tonight."

Everyone watched Sabitha nervously, but did not give a name.

"Madam, the woman's name is Durga. She's from our province. We heard that she had been telling someone this morning she wanted to collect a few pebbles for her son. She might have gone in and slipped under."

Hell, the woman had a child. How could she be so foolish to risk her life for some stupid pebbles?

“Where is that rope?” Sabitha barked out as she watched the woman helplessly.

“They are trying to find one that is long enough, madam.”

“Well, ask them to bloody hurry up! And take it down to the shore rather than the bridge,” she instructed.

People looked nervous. Both the Singhams and the Prajapatis—including her—didn’t know how to swim. Only because most of them were born when there was a bloody drought with barely any water body to dip into, let alone swim.

The only water body was the Singham Lake which was also one of the most dangerous places in the province as it was the volatile border between the Singhams, Prajapatis and Senanis.

Just when she saw someone carrying a rope and heading towards the shore, there was a loud splash behind her.

Someone had leaped into the water from the bridge.

Sabitha watched in disbelief as the person began to swim towards the drowning woman.

She couldn’t see the person clearly as it was getting dark, but she could make out that it was a man, and he swam with powerful strokes against the rapids.

The man reached the woman in no time and dragged her up the water, keeping her head above the surface. Wrapping a hand around her now limp body, he began to swim using one hand.

“Don’t just stand there like imbeciles. Throw the bloody rope into the water,” Sabitha shouted from the top as people gawked at the sight.

The rope was thrown, and after a few tries, the man grabbed it.

Ten minutes later, the tall, muscular form of Dev Singham appeared on the shore, dripping and carrying the unconscious woman in his arms. He placed the woman gently on the ground and began to pump her chest, performing CPR. A few tries later, the woman coughed and threw up the water she had swallowed.

Soon, the doctor stationed at the construction site took over. He was checking the woman’s vitals and speaking with her.

By the time Sabitha went down the steps to the shore, Dev Singham was walking away towards the office building while several men of his fussed

around him.

Sabitha turned towards the woman lying on the ground, still looking pale and weak. She wanted to snap at the woman for being so foolish and taking such a bloody risk, but her words died when her eyes fell on a small knot on the woman's sari that the woman was clutching.

Sabitha saw the smoothly-rounded pebbles through the wet cloth that the woman had collected for her son.

"Make sure she's dropped home and given proper rest for the next week," Sabitha instructed softly. Then frowning, she walked away to speak with the Project Managers regarding the safety protocols.

Shit, I'm becoming a weak fool.

For some reason, the sight of the woman still clutching the bloody pebbles moved her.

Thirty minutes later, after ripping apart the managers who were in charge of safety, Sabitha went towards the office rooms.

Standing outside a room, she paused for a few seconds to take in a deep breath.

There was no dancing around it or putting it off until later. She had to thank Dev Singham for saving a Prajapati's life.

She knocked on the door twice and waited. Part of her hoped he wasn't inside or had left for the day. But she knew that was not remotely possible. Dev Singham put in extremely long working hours at the construction site—longer than hers. He was the first one to arrive and the last one to leave. Most of the time, he even stayed the night to oversee the night shifts.

During the first week of their work, Sabitha realized how useful that little bed and other luxuries placed within the office were. She, herself, had spent a few nights in the office when there was some issue or the other during the work week.

She and Dev Singham had been working according to the planned schedule. One of them was always present during most of the night shifts. Since she had other commitments at the Prajapati Estate, he was the one who stayed most of the nights.

"Come in," a deep voice commanded from the room.

Sabitha opened the door and went inside. She suddenly stopped short when her eyes fell on the sight in front of her.

Dev Singham was pouring an amber-colored drink into a glass while wearing just a stark white towel around his hips. His hair was still wet, and

his clothes were drying on the back of a chair.

“What?” he asked before looking up. His mouth froze on top of the glass when he saw who it was.

Sabitha felt a small shiver pass through her as their eyes met.

Feeling annoyed with her silly reactions, she strode forward to one of the chairs and sat down. She frowned when the silence continued for a while and he didn’t say anything.

He was watching her quietly while taking a sip from his drink.

“Well?” she asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

He still didn’t speak. He slowly came closer and leaned against the edge of the office desk with his drink in hand.

He was barely a foot away from her.

If that was his way of trying to intimidate her, he was failing. But he didn’t glare at her or say anything. He just continued staring.

The silence grew longer and more uncomfortable.

Why the hell wasn’t he asking her what she had come for? He was the first to snap and sneer whenever he saw her. Feeling annoyed about wasting her precious time, she decided to get it over with. A couple of shipments were expected late that night, and she had to be there ensuring it reached the Prajapati province safely without being intercepted by the Senanis.

She looked Dev Singham in the eye. “Thanks,” she said.

He cocked an eyebrow. “Thanks? What exactly are you thanking me for?” he asked, continuing to watch her lazily as he took another sip of his drink.

His deep voice sounded sinful.

Her eyes automatically were drawn to his well-shaped lips and then down towards the rest of his exposed body. He was all muscle with well-defined abs under his tanned skin. But unlike most of the Singham or Prajapati men, his body did not have bulky muscles with veins popping out. Instead, he had sleek, smoothly-shaped muscles containing unleashed power.

He looked so damn good-looking, it pissed her off that he was blessed with such looks.

She felt torn between wanting to touch his ridged abs on his stomach and wanting to smash his smug, knowing face on his desk.

Controlling both those instincts, she blanked the expression on her face. “I wanted to thank you for today. Even though you might have known the woman was a Prajapati, you didn’t let your personal feelings come into play

and saved an innocent life.”

He didn't say anything. His eyes lingered on her face and then slowly ran over her clothes.

She was wearing her usual and practical work clothes of a simple cotton blouse with comfortable khaki trousers. But the way he was running his eyes made her think she was seated in a provocative way in front of him in barely there, flimsy clothes.

Another involuntary shiver ran through her body.

Ever since she had taken up the reins of the Prajapati Estate, due to the nature of her duties, she was mostly surrounded by men. She was so used to commanding them and working alongside them on a daily basis that she considered herself as one of them. Most of the time, she forgot she was a woman. A woman who could have needs—physical needs.

Dev Singham had been the only one who always reminded her of that fact.

Goosebumps broke on her skin again as he continued to hold her eyes with an intense look. She could feel the tension and something else crackle between them as he stared and stared.

Whenever he watched her, she had always seen something in his eyes apart from the hate that unsettled her. Like always, she tried ignoring it.

But she couldn't this time. She watched helplessly as his hooded eyes slid to her lips again, tingling them, reminding her of the time they had kissed. Or rather when he had kissed her.

His eyes continued to stare at her lips as he put his drink on the table and slowly leaned towards her until the subtle smell of his expensive cologne enveloped her completely.

She didn't know why, but she stayed frozen while her heart thudded with anticipation.

His lips were barely a few inches away when a knock on the door made her jump.

“Dev, your nine o’ clock appointment is here. I’ve asked him to wait in the meeting room,” she heard Dev Singham’s assistant say from outside the door.

Sabitha blinked a few times. And then, she got up from the chair quickly.

Her eyes fell on the thunderous scowl on Dev Singham’s face. She didn't know whether it was because they were interrupted or whether he realized he was just about to kiss his sworn enemy.

Without a word, she went to the door and pulled it open where Dev's assistant greeted her politely. Nodding in acknowledgement, she went into her office before collapsing on the chair.

What the hell was that?

She wanted to shake herself for what she had almost done. And that, too, with Dev Singham. How could she be so shallow and almost give in because of mere good looks or physical attraction?

Not only did they hate each other, he was also a notorious playboy. If she ever gave in to their inconvenient attraction, he would not only gloat and hold it as a victory over her—he would also destroy her completely.

CHAPTER 13

A week later, Sabitha was instructing Dhruv and a few other men when she heard a knock on her office door.

“Come in,” she said, half expecting it to be Dev Singham’s minion with some or other document or instruction, but surprisingly it wasn’t.

It was Anika Patel. Or rather, Anika Singham.

Sabitha knew that Anika and Abhay Singham had returned. Her aunt especially wouldn’t stop talking or asking each night whether or not she had heard anything from Anika. Neela had alternately looked fearful and anxious. Although Sabitha was mildly curious about her aunt’s reaction, she still had no interest or the energy to find out what was bothering her.

“Sorry for interrupting. If you are busy, I can wait outside or come back later,” said Anika.

Sabitha wondered what she and her cousin had in common to talk about. Regardless, she asked Dhruv and the men to return later.

“Be seated,” Sabitha indicated to a chair. Her eyes automatically fell on Anika’s stomach.

Sabitha had heard the news of Anika’s pregnancy. The Singhams and Prajapatis had been whispering excitedly while they speculated whether Abhay Singham would have a son or daughter first. And whether the child would finally break the curse of the drought.

“I’m sorry to just drop in without informing you first, but I needed some help,” said Anika.

“What kind of help?” Sabitha asked.

Anika bit her lip, looking uncertain.

Sabitha didn’t say anything either to encourage or to discourage her cousin.

After a while, Anika took a deep breath as though bracing herself for an angry outburst or rejection. “I’m investigating something important, Sabitha. For that, I need help from you. Help to spy on our aunt.”

Sabitha frowned. “On Neela? What information do you need on Neela?”

“Well not information precisely, but handwritten letters. Neelambari wrote letters to Vijay Singham while he was studying in London. I’ve seen a few of them. I’m sure he must have written some back as a reply. I have a

feeling she must be saving them somewhere, either in her room or at the library. I want those letters.”

Sabitha knew that if Vijay Singham had written letters, her aunt would have definitely saved them somewhere. “Why do you need those letters?” she asked. “As far as I know they must have been written more than thirty years ago.”

“You are right,” said Anika. “The letters would be that old. I need them because personal letters can contain a lot of insight and information.”

“Insight and information about what?”

“I’m trying to prove that the feud which started thirty years ago was not entirely warranted.” Anika’s look softened. “One of the most critical things I’m also trying to prove is that your father, Harshvardhan Prajapati, did not kill Arundhati Singham.”

There was a loaded silence.

“What makes you say that?” Sabitha asked quietly. “My father was pretty well-known for his aggression and hot temper.”

“Yes, but he was also known for his big-hearted and charitable ways,” Anika said gently. “I’ve read about him in letters Arundhati Singham wrote to Vijay Singham. And I’ve also read letters she got from your father.”

Anika told Sabitha what she had learned from the letters and how she didn’t think Harshvardhan Prajapati was capable of hurting Arundhati Singham.

After Anika finished, Sabitha watched her cousin. “My father couldn’t read or write, Anika. He was dyslexic,” Sabitha declared softly.

Anika looked stunned, but she immediately composed herself. “Maybe he was, but he must have asked someone else to write those letters on his behalf. Even if he hadn’t personally written them, those were his words and feelings on paper.”

Sabitha thought about it. During her childhood, she had seen her father dictating letters. “Alright. What exactly do you want me to do? You want me to—” Before Sabitha could complete the sentence, the door burst open, and Dev Singham strode in with a thunderous look on his face.

“Anika. Are you alright?” he demanded.

Anika nodded. “I’m fine, Dev. I just came to have a chat with my cousin.”

“You came here on your own? You weren’t summoned?” he asked, throwing Sabitha a glare.

For a change, Sabitha didn't get offended. She knew Abhay and Dev Singham must have found out about how Anika was tricked into visiting India by Neelambari. Sabitha also had a huge part in making that happen.

"Yes, I came here of my own will. I wanted to ask for Sabitha's help," Anika answered.

"With what? How can she help us with anything?" Dev Singham asked.

"I wanted Sabitha's help in finding the letters that your father wrote to Neelambari, Dev. I feel we might get some insight as to what happened."

Dev Singham frowned. "Even if those letters could be useful, why would *she* help us?"

"I can help," Sabitha coolly interrupted. "But I can't find the letters by myself."

Sabitha watched as understanding dawned in Anika's eyes. Anika now knew Sabitha would not be able to identify the letters even if she found them.

"I'll join you in the search," Anika said softly.

Sabitha nodded. "I can arrange for you to come to the Prajapati Mansion —"

"No!" Dev Singham snapped. "I don't trust you not to do something." He turned to Anika. "I know even Abhay is not going to be happy to know you are going to the Prajapati Mansion."

"Dev," Anika gently interrupted. "I know you feel protective of me, but please, I can handle my aunt. Trust me."

Dev's expression softened. "It's not that I don't trust you or think you can't handle someone, Anika. It's just that you are not completely aware of what people here are capable of doing. If you want to go, let me come along with you."

Anika looked thoughtful, and then she beamed. "I think that'll work quite well, Dev. You can keep my aunt busy while Sabitha and I check her rooms."

"No, it's not advisable for you to be alone with her either."

"Dev!" Anika protested.

"You can stay with our bodyguards while I join—" Dev gave Sabitha a sweeping look, "*—her* in the search."

Sabitha listened quietly as her cousin and Dev Singham went ahead and made the plans. She had an impassive look on her face as she observed Dev Singham watching her with a look that was a combination of anger, suspicion and something else she couldn't define.

Sabitha also noticed how Dev Singham spoke as though he considered Anika to be a part of his family. She didn't know why, but that part surprised her a little. If anything, Sabitha thought Dev Singham hated anything or anyone having to do with the Prajapatis.

"So, can I come to the Prajapati Mansion tomorrow and we can implement our plan?" Anika's voice asked, interrupting the staring contest.

Sabitha dragged her eyes away from Dev Singham to look at Anika who looked excited and was filled with anticipation rather than dread.

"I'll make the necessary arrangements," Sabitha said quietly.

That night when Sabitha went to bed, she thought about Anika's revelations.

Was it possible that her father had not killed Arundhati Singham?

Sabitha had wanted to ask Anika more, before Dev Singham interrupted them like an avenging angel. She was still not offended by the fact that he thought Sabitha might harm Anika. In fact, something about the way in which Dev Singham had looked and spoken to Anika made Sabitha feel restless inside.

Dev Singham had been protective, caring, and tender towards his brother's wife.

Sabitha now identified the feeling that had restlessly churned inside her. Yearning.

Ever since her father had died, no one had ever been protective or shown any kind of tenderness towards her. She had always wondered what it would be like to take that kind of affection for granted from family or a loved one.

Sighing at her maudlin thoughts, she turned the lights off and went to sleep.

CHAPTER 14

“You went where!”

Dev watched in amusement as his brother’s usually cool and reserved voice sounded loud and outraged. Dev had just come to the library, carrying a few documents requiring Abhay’s signature on them.

Anika was at the library, too, and must have apparently just revealed what she wanted to do.

“How could you go to the site and meet your cousin on your own!” Abhay demanded.

“Will you just relax? I knew Dev was at the site when I went to meet Sabitha.”

Dev could see his brother wanted to say more but controlled himself when he saw the challenging glare on his wife’s face.

“I told you I wanted the letters. I know Neelambari must have saved them all. Sabitha promised to help me find them.”

“Then let your cousin find them and send them to you.”

“She can’t read. So, Dev will help her search while I keep my aunt busy.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

“It’s not. But if you are worried, then join me while I distract my aunt. Sabitha and Dev can search for those letters.”

“Why would your aunt speak with you?” Abhay demanded. “You more or less challenged her authority the last time you saw her. She will not simply welcome you with open arms.”

“Oh, she will,” Anika said in a confident manner. “She will because I’m carrying Vijay Singham’s grandchild in me.”

Abhay frowned in confusion. Dev couldn’t blame him.

Dev was still confused about what Anika was trying to prove with the letters. But even if there was the smallest chance of having some clue to the past, he was willing to cooperate with Anika’s plan.

“What are you trying to prove, Anika?” Abhay asked.

Anika sighed. “You already know I have a strong gut feeling that your aunt was involved in some way or other for what happened with our parents. I just wanted to start by proving my suspicion that she was in love with your

father.”

“Even if she was. What does that prove?” Dev asked curiously.

“It proves she wouldn’t just meekly accept to marry the brother of the man she loved.”

“Anika,” said Abhay in a gentle tone. “I already told you, love. People who grew up here give a lot of importance to family honor. Even if she weren’t in love with my uncle, Ajay Singham, Neelambari would have agreed to marry him for the sake of our people.”

Anika shook her head. “I know that sounds more reasonable, but Neelambari Prajapati is a selfish woman. Sabitha had told me the same thing as well.”

“Maybe so,” said Abhay. “But when it comes to marriage, they always made decisions based on what was good for their land and people. When the time comes, even your cousin most likely will do the same.”

Dev frowned. “What do you mean?” he demanded.

Abhay looked at him. “Apparently, there have been talks going on to propose an alliance between Revanth Senani and Sabitha Prajapati.”

Everything went silent.

Dev tried to process what his brother had just said. He knew Abhay wasn’t the kind to say anything unless he had concrete proof.

Sabitha Prajapati—married?

“I hope you have other copies of that document,” Dev heard Abhay’s voice say dryly.

Pulling himself together from the red haze that seemed to dominate his vision and mind, Dev slowly looked at his hand. His hands were fisted tightly, and the document he held was crumpled within.

Dev took a deep breath and got up from the sofa. “Yes. There are other copies. I’ll send them to you through someone.”

Abhay and Anika were watching him with curious looks on their faces.

“Excuse me,” he told them as he left the library.

Dev didn’t understand why his heart was beating faster.

What was it that he felt? It was a strange feeling. It felt as if he had suddenly been kicked in the stomach and left breathless.

Was he feeling... upset?

Maybe he was.

He could definitely try and reason that irrational feeling.

He was upset because... he didn’t want two of his enemies uniting and

causing trouble for the Singhams.

Yes, that must be it.

Yeah, right. Like you really believe that.

Dev ignored the snickering voice inside.

CHAPTER 15

Sabitha was standing in the living room at the Prajapati Mansion.

“Dhruv?”

“Yes, madam?”

“Ask all of our men and the maids not to go up to the middle floor until I pass an order.”

Dhruv paused for a second before nodding his head. “Sure. I’ll inform them right away, madam.”

As Dhruv walked away, Sabitha recalled the last time she had passed a similar order to him. It was the night before Anika and Abhay Singham’s wedding.

The night Dev Singham tricked her out of seducing his older brother.

The memories of the night always kept intruding her mind. For some reason she had felt more than just resentment about his trickery. What she felt was much more complicated.

Her heart began to thud as memories of the night filled her mind. And this time, she allowed herself to recall every moment.

FOUR MONTHS AGO...

“Has my package arrived?” Sabitha asked Dhruv as she headed up the stairs to her room in the Prajapati Mansion.

They had just returned to a home that was bustling with activity. Preparations were in full swing for the wedding of the decade.

“Yes, madam. I’ve called and confirmed. The package has been placed on the bed.”

“Good. What about the message?”

“Done as well. I have sent a written message to the room where Abhay Singham is currently staying.”

Sabitha walked purposefully towards her bedroom. Just before she opened the door, she turned to look at Dhruv. “I’m not to be disturbed until the morning. Even in the morning, if I don’t show up at the dining table for

breakfast, don't come looking for me."

At her instructions, Dhruv's face became even grimmer, but he nodded. "Yes, madam," he said in a robotic tone. "I'll personally make sure you are not disturbed until later tomorrow."

She nodded curtly and slipped into her room, closing the door behind her.

She knew Dhruv didn't approve of what she was about to do that night. Considering he knew what was in the package and in the message she'd sent earlier that evening, it wouldn't take a genius to figure out what she'd planned.

She was going to seduce Abhay Singham.

She should have slept with him much earlier rather than pick the night before his wedding. But for some reason, she couldn't get herself to take any action before. Not that there had been many opportunities where she could easily reach him.

She took a deep breath. She reminded herself that apart from wanting the uninterrupted access to the Singham power and reach for her personal reasons, she was also taking this step for the sake of her cousin.

It was quite stupid of her, but she could not forget the look on Anika Patel's face when she was told she would be forcibly married to a stranger. Then there was also the look on her cousin's face when she had witnessed the killing of a greedy bastard. That bastard was responsible for destroying the transport trucks carrying a week's supply of water and food for the people. He even dared to use his pregnant wife as an excuse as though he wasn't planning to abandon his wife and child to reunite with his mistress in the city.

Even though Anika was older than her, the shock and the helplessness reminded Sabitha of how she was until eighteen, before being thrown into this brutal world to either die or survive.

The clock struck midnight, indicating it was time.

Remember why you have to do this.

Taking another deep breath, she looked down at herself. She was wearing a seductive nightdress under her long wrap. Maybe the long, knee-length lavender lace and satin dress wasn't too seductive by other's standards, but she drew the line at humiliating herself with something she wasn't comfortable with.

Grabbing a key, she slipped out of her room, and walked towards the wings where the groom was staying. She had specifically made sure the room

with better privacy was allocated to Abhay Singham. She didn't want anyone to hear them in case something went wrong with her plan.

Slowly, she opened the door and pushed it open before closing it softly behind her.

Apart from the moonlight, the room was mostly dark.

Her eyes adjusted within a few seconds, and she could see Abhay Singham's tall figure standing near the balcony door. She couldn't see his face as he was turned towards her, facing the room. He stood very still and made no attempt to acknowledge her presence.

She slowly walked to him. "I'm here to offer myself. Because I want you to marry me tomorrow instead of my cousin."

She supposed she should at least try and sound seductive or sugarcoat what she was offering, but she wanted Abhay Singham to have no doubts about why she was in his room.

"I know this must surprise to you," she continued saying softly. "But I feel we make a better match. My world is similar to yours and I'm more than willing to be your wife."

There was no response from him.

She had heard that like her, Abhay Singham was a man of few words and made decisions pretty quickly. Which was good—especially considering he wasn't saying anything to oppose what she had just proposed.

She stood in front of him. "My people will be happy to accept you as my husband and lead them by my side," she stated. "If anyone opposes our union, we can deal with them. Together, you and I can bring back the past glory to our provinces."

He was still silent.

Why the hell wasn't he saying anything? Was he having serious doubts about me because of my past? Or maybe because he had seen Anika and was already besotted with her beauty?

But Sabitha knew men were predictable creatures. Even the most intelligent ones sometimes made decisions based on what was hanging between their legs.

Bracing herself, and keeping the end goal in her mind, she closed the remaining distance between them until the tip of her breasts brushed his hard chest. "I'll give you the sons and daughters our people crave for continuing the bloodlines. All you have to do is accept me tonight and marry me tomorrow."

She heard the swift intake of his breath, and the change in his breathing—it grew harsher and heavier. Feeling encouraged, she reached for his head and pulled him down until her mouth met his.

Thankfully, he didn't resist. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

The next few moments were a blur. It was as though she had unleashed something within him. His mouth latched on to hers in a deep, hurtful kiss. He lifted her off the ground, and carried her in long strides to bang her back against one of the bedroom walls while covering her body with his. His tongue invaded her mouth.

Abhay Singham was one horny bastard.

She continued to tolerate his brutal kiss and felt his arousal as he held her up against the wall. His hands ran all over her—feeling the shape of her breasts, then her waist and then her rear as he clutched her to pull her hard against him.

After a long moment, his mouth finally parted from hers. She felt it moving towards her ear. “How far are you willing to go tonight?” he asked.

The moment she heard the familiar deep voice, she was stunned. She struggled and pushed him away from her. Then groping for the switch next to her, she turned on the lights. Then without a pause, she spun around with her fist flying, aiming towards the man's head. But her fist met with his palm.

She glared into the face looming above her.

The man towering over her was not the man she had come to seduce. Instead of the harsh, rugged features of Abhay Singham, this man looked completely different.

Everything on this man's face was nauseatingly movie-star perfect. The high cheekbones, the strong sharp nose, the soft pink upturned lips—that were now stretched to a smirk—made him look dazzlingly perfect. The only thing that made him appear ruthless was the hooded eyes of a predator.

Unlike Abhay Singham's impassive face, this man had an expressive one. At the moment, his face displayed a primitive satisfaction along with lust and hatred.

It was Dev Singham. Her most hated enemy.

Slowly, he braced a hand on the wall above her head, leaning down towards her, enveloping her in his expensive cologne.

Sabitha clenched her jaw. Until then, even though she had come for the sole purpose of seduction, she couldn't force her body to feel anything apart from cold determination when she was kissed and groped in the dark. But

looking at the man in front of her, she felt something that she hadn't felt in a very long time, maybe even ever. Something she had promised herself at eighteen, she would never feel.

Her lips, which were kissed by him moments ago, began to tingle, and her nipples peaked. Her entire body hummed in arousal. The fact that Dev Singham brought out those obvious reactions—pissed her off.

The bastard grinned in satisfaction as his eyes lowered to her thinly-clad chest. Before he could speak again, she pulled her head back and smashed it against his nose. Immediately, she brought her knee back just far enough to kick him in the crotch. But before her knee could connect he moved away from her.

“You—” he began, but she didn't let him finish speaking. She kicked his legs out from under him.

As soon as he fell, she dug the sole of her foot hard into his neck, glaring down at him. “Do not *ever* put your lips, or your hands, or even the air that you breathe out on me. Do you understand!”

His nose and eyes flared in response. The next instant her foot was twisted, bringing her down to the ground. She was pinned there with the weight of his body, while he wrapped his hands around her throat, his thumbs pressing on the spot where her pulse beat rapidly.

Fury burned in his eyes as he looked at her. “I was taught never to hurt a woman, but you are fucking pushing it!”

“I was taught the same thing. Would you like me to apologize, little bitch?” she snarled, pushing her thumbs to his eyes, forcing his hands to let go of her throat.

They struggled on the ground. She fought dirty. She used her teeth and nails. When he somehow managed to get up, she attacked him once again. She dug her teeth into his arm making him roar out in pain. When she didn't let go, he picked her up and threw her into the nearest furniture. The edge of a heavy dresser banged into her hips.

Ignoring the pain, she stood up and grabbed a heavy stool in front of the dresser and brought it smashing against his side. He had been checking the bite mark that was bleeding where she had just bitten him. He howled in fury as the heavy stool hit him.

This time, he came at her.

They attacked each other while trying their best not to kill each other. They both knew they couldn't risk one of their deaths, as that would stop the

crucial Singham-Prajapati wedding from taking place the next day.

The fight came to a standstill when he had her pinned on the bed, holding both her hands in one of his. She bucked and struggled, but he used the entire weight of his body to keep her pinned.

“Give up!” he commanded.

She stopped struggling and looked at his face. They were both panting loudly, tired and bleeding from their injuries.

She knew she had to think quickly. She cannot give up. Would not give up. She had to be the bride Abhay Singham chose the next day.

But first, she had to get rid of the bastard on top of her.

Slowly, she widened her eyes and then deliberately dropped them to his lips. She even pushed out her chest as much as his weight on her allowed.

Immediately, his breathing sped up even more as he stared at her lace-and-satin-clad chest that was generously exposed in that position. His eyes returned to hers as he searched her face. His pupils widened and glittered predictably—filled with lust.

Maintaining eye contact, she parted her lips slightly in invitation. The next instant, his mouth was on hers, hungry and intense. Her hands were let go as he used both of his to run them frantically over her body.

Her body trembled at his touch, and tingles passed all over her, but she ignored the reactions.

Slowly, she reached towards her upper thigh.

Even the obvious sound of the knife sliding out of the sheath did not distract him from his desperate movements. He was still kissing her while trying to push her nightdress above her hips.

Through the shivers, she brought both her knees closer to her chest, and kicked him hard in his stomach. As soon as he fell back on the bed, she sat up with a smooth move, and stabbed him in his thigh.

He looked at her in shock for several moments before roaring out in pain and outrage.

Before she could get down from the bed, he lunged and grabbed her leg and held it. Even as she kicked at him with all her might, he held tight with one hand while with the other hand he slowly pulled out the knife stuck in his thigh.

He roared out in pain as the last of the tip of her knife slid out of his flesh. She was almost sure he would stab her with it, but he threw it away on the ground before pulling her back completely onto the bed.

They struggled again, but due to his rage, he was able to overpower her easily with sheer brute strength. “Let me go, or I’ll kill you,” she hissed while she continued to struggle.

“If you behave like an animal, I’ll treat you like one,” he gritted as he almost crushed her wrists in his hands and dragged them close together.

She saw him pull one of the bed-curtain ties. He used it as a rope to tie her to one of the bed posts. “You are not going to ruin it for my brother and everyone. You’ll remain in this bloody room until the wedding takes place tomorrow.”

She struggled while trying to free herself, but the knot he had tied, only seem to get tighter. “Let me go, you bastard,” she yelled in frustration.

He got down from the bed and stood next to her, grunting in pain as he looked at the knife wound in his thigh.

“Fuck!” he shouted when he noticed that his wound was bleeding profusely. Then glaring at her one last time, he limped towards the bedroom door and walked out, shutting her inside.

She remained there until she was freed by Dhruv who had become suspicious when she didn’t show up for the wedding.

PRESENT...

Sabitha could still recall how it felt when Dev Singham ran his hands all over her in a demanding and possessive way. It was almost like the bastard had static under his skin. With his every touch, she had felt sparks and electricity.

Dev Singham had looked and felt like a sin. A sin that her body involuntarily craved sometimes.

Had she been anyone else, and without the history between them, she was sure his seduction would have worked that night.

Even though the episode had been quite humiliating and made her feel enraged, she had relived his touch several times during some nights.

She would rather shoot herself in the head than ever admit that to him.

Shaking off the thoughts of him from her head, Sabitha continued to prepare for the arrival of the Singhams. They were to arrive within a few hours.

Thirty minutes later, everyone was cleared from the middle floor. Only

Neelambari along with a couple of her personal maids were in her suite. Sabitha knew Anika's presence would clear them all out as well.

"How dare that ungrateful brat come here unannounced!" Neelambari's booming voice reverberated across the Prajapati Mansion.

Sabitha knew one of her aunt's spies must have called to notify her about spotting the Singham vehicles on the Prajapati lands.

"Sabi! Sabi!"

Sabitha sighed when she heard her aunt frantically calling for her. When Sabitha deliberately didn't respond, her aunt and the personal maids hurried down the stairs.

"Sabi!" Neelambari continued calling.

Sabitha looked at her aunt impassively. "Yes?"

"Your cousin is heading here. Do you know why she is coming?" Neelambari asked with panic-laden eyes.

Sabitha shrugged. "Dev Singham wants to go through some urgent documents with me. He has to take them with him when he leaves for the city. Anika must be joining him." She gave her aunt a level look. "Do you want me to inform them to go away because you are too upset to receive them?" she asked.

Neelambari's nostrils flared. "No! I am going to meet her. I'm not upset. I'm Neelambari Prajapati. No one can shake my calm."

Ten minutes later, Neelambari along with a swarm of maids and guards waited in the receiving room.

Soon, the Singham vehicles arrived. They were received by the Prajapatis with Neelambari standing at the top of the stairs watching everything with a regal look.

When Anika got out of the car and took a few steps towards the mansion, Neelambari's expression changed drastically. Sabitha frowned as she watched her aunt stare in awe. But it wasn't Anika Neelambari was watching, she was staring at Abhay Singham with a rapt look.

Then as though in a trance, Neelambari went down the steps and stood in front of Anika and Abhay Singham. With trembling hands, she touched the barely visible bump on Anika's stomach.

"The Singham heir," Neelambari whispered in awe.

"Yes," said Anika. "I want us to set aside our differences so my child can get to know his or her grandmother. The Singhams and I give the sole credit of this heir to you."

Sabitha felt Anika was laying it on a bit too thick, but Neelambari bought it. Neelambari was egotistical enough to lap up everything Anika said to her in praise.

“Make way, everyone!” Neelambari shouted in glee. “The Singham heir has arrived to our Prajapati Mansion. Let us celebrate this occasion!”

Neelambari threw in a series of orders to the people to have delicacies prepared along with various gifts that she wanted to send along with Anika to the Singham Mansion.

Dev watched in amusement while the Prajapatis scrambled around like headless chickens following Neelambari Prajapati’s orders. Meanwhile, he ensured Anika and Abhay’s bodyguards stayed close. Ravi who was Anika’s personal bodyguard gave a subtle indication to Dev that everything was clear.

Nodding back to Ravi, Dev turned to Sabitha Prajapati who was observing everything with her usual closed-off look.

He went closer to her. “Shall we?” he asked.

Nodding regally, she began walking away.

Dev followed behind her, watching her as she strode through a hallway and then up a flight of stairs. His eyes were glued to her long, thick plaited hair that was swishing about her perky ass.

He felt extremely annoyed with himself for not being able to look away from that part of her anatomy. She wasn’t just some random woman he could be checking out. She was Sabitha Prajapati—his enemy.

Unfortunately, his eyes or the rest of his body along with his mind didn’t seem to be understanding of the fact. He finally looked up when she stopped in front of a room and slid something out.

He thought it was a key, but he realized that it was the same jewelled knife she had used to stab him in the leg the night before Abhay and Anika’s wedding.

Instead of feeling rage, he was disgusted with himself when he began to get painfully aroused. He watched with reluctant awe as she efficiently and successfully broke into her aunt’s suite using just the knife.

The woman in front of him had always managed to get him hard no matter how he felt about her. He tried to avoid her as much as possible. But each time he thought he had gotten rid of her, she blew back into his life like a fucking storm, ripping apart his mental peace and leaving a mess behind.

What was it about her, he didn't know. He wasn't willing to examine what he felt for her, but it was obvious that lust was one of the primary feelings.

However, he also realized that the burning hatred he used to feel towards her was slowly waning off as days went by and they worked together.

He shook away his confusing thoughts and focused on the task at hand. He watched her as she took a few steps inside her aunt's room and slowly turned around. Something about the way she was taking in the details of the room, made him think it was the first time she was entering it—which would be crazy. This was her house. The house she grew up in.

He watched as she used the knife once again and broke into another attached room which was the bedroom. She took a couple of steps inside and suddenly stopped short, making him bump into her. He had to hold her waist to stop her from toppling over.

As soon as she found her balance, she turned to glare at him before she shoved his hands away from her as though he carried a contagious disease.

He glared right back. Before he could ask what her bloody problem was, he froze when his eyes fell on the walls of the room.

It wasn't just a room. It was more of a bloody shrine.

There were picture frames of different sizes. And each and every frame had the picture of only one person.

His father's.

"This woman is a bloody lunatic who is obsessed with my father," he said in disgust.

Sabitha was quiet. She was observing the frames closely. "There are handwritten letters, too," she said softly.

He went towards her and stood next to her. She was right. They didn't have to search the room. The letters were freaking framed and hung on the walls in plain sight. He quickly scanned them. They were written by his father when he had been studying in London.

"We might not have much time. We need to hurry before someone comes up looking for something in Neela's room."

Dev dragged his gaze away from the letters. "Take pictures of the letters on these two walls, I'll get the ones there," he instructed.

For a change, she didn't argue or snap back at him. She began to click pictures using her phone. He did the same on his phone.

As soon as they were done, she turned to him. "Let's go."

After she carefully locked the doors, they headed down the stairs.

“Haven’t you seen those framed photographs or letters before?” he asked.

There was a long pause before she answered. “No. I haven’t been to my aunt’s suite before.”

He frowned. “No one was allowed into your aunt’s room? Even for cleaning?”

“A few maids are allowed.”

Something about her tone and words bothered him. “Why weren’t you allowed? You must have gone to speak with your aunt in her room on occasion.”

She was silent and her shoulders were stiff.

Then it dawned on him. The realization made him angry. No, not just angry, but furious. And his anger wasn’t directed at Sabitha Prajapati.

He was furious with Neelambari Prajapati. The woman hadn’t allowed her own niece into her rooms. He was pretty sure Neelambari didn’t allow her niece to touch her either, only because Sabitha Prajapati’s mother had apparently belonged to a different class.

He hated that kind of narrow-minded thinking. But he knew a lot of people within the Singham province believed in the class system, too. He and Abhay had tried many times to change their mind-set, but it had been ingrained over the decades and passed through generations of people.

“I’ll send the images to Anika,” Sabitha’s voice interrupted his thoughts. He nodded grimly.

When they had almost reached the bottom of the stairs, Dev saw a few Prajapati men waiting there. “Madam,” said one of the men.

“Resume free access to the middle floor,” Sabitha instructed them softly. The men nodded and left them alone once again.

“I’ll see you later at the site,” she softly said in an offhand manner. Before she walked away, she threw him a look. She stared at him with a strange look in her eyes for a few moments. And then, she simply turned away and continued walking away.

Dev followed behind her as she went back to the receiving room. His eyes stayed glued to her and observed her as she stood at a distance, next to a wheelchair, speaking with her grandfather.

CHAPTER 16

Later that night, Sabitha had just finished listening to a documentary on engineering marvels. Pulling out her earphones and placing them on the nightstand, she turned off the lights in her room.

She slid under her bed covers, hoping to fall asleep as usual. But unfortunately, her mind remained alert and kept her from feeling sleepy even though she was tired.

She didn't know why her mind was on overdrive. As far as she was concerned the day was quite uneventful.

Sure, the Singham family had visited and there was a lot of commotion done by her aunt, but luckily, there was no bloodshed or any kind of tensions that erupted that day. Two men, each belonging to Singham and Prajapati, respectively, had apparently started an argument about something. But since they were instructed beforehand, the rest of her men were able to intercept and take the arguing parties aside to warn them to either cut it out or face consequences.

The only thing that bothered her, were the finances. During dinner, Sanjay had given her the breakdown of expenses for that day. Several expensive gifts had been sent from the Prajapati Mansion to the Singham Mansion that afternoon.

Sabitha wished her aunt would open her eyes and bother about the Prajapati people's basic needs than be more concerned about such unnecessary show-offs.

It wasn't like Sabitha felt Anika didn't deserve any such gifts. It was quite the opposite. Sabitha knew Anika was a genuinely kind and caring person who deserved everything she wanted. And Sabitha knew Abhay Singham could easily afford to buy his wife anything her heart desired. Unfortunately, the Prajapatis couldn't. At least until the canal and units were operating as planned.

Sighing tiredly, Sabitha picked up her phone. She had already sent Anika the pictures she had taken of the letters in her aunt's room. Once again she began to think about Anika's theories.

Was it possible her father had really not killed Arundhati Singham?

The very few memories Sabitha remembered of her father, also indicated

that he wouldn't have killed. Harshvardhan Prajapati was capable of feeling love. He loved his daughter and he had loved his sister, brother and father immensely as well.

Sabitha slid out the jewelled knife from under her pillow. She lovingly touched the emeralds and rubies that were embedded on the handle. Her father had gifted the knife on her fifth birthday. It was most likely an odd gift in other people's eyes, but it had been perfect for her even when she was five.

Sabitha didn't think her life would change in any way if her father was proven innocent. However, if he was indeed innocent of that crime, then she did want to bring justice to her father's character and memories among the people.

Who could have killed Arundhati Singham if it wasn't her father like everyone thought?

Sabitha knew Anika was trying to prove their aunt had information about what happened at the massacre or maybe Anika even thought their aunt might have caused it. Sabitha knew Neela was capable of murdering someone very easily. But after several years of listening to and also having seen the proof of Neela's obsession with Vijay Singham, Sabitha didn't think Neela would ever hurt Vijay Singham. Neela had even ordered the Prajapatis not to harm or even touch Vijay Singham's sons.

Sabitha sighed once again. She wished she could assist Anika more by opening up an investigation, but she didn't want to. At least not yet. Not until she found *them*.

Sabitha's sole and utmost priority in life was to find them. Compared to that mission, everything will have to take a backseat for a while.

Sabitha stared at the phone screen in her hands. Even though she couldn't read, she looked at the zoomed images of the letters. She wondered what the bold handwriting of Vijay Singham said in those letters. Over the years, despite Neela's constant references to Vijay Singham, Sabitha had never been curious about him. But now, she wondered what was it about him that still made Neela obsess even after several decades.

Sabitha recalled how her aunt had made a casual observation that Dev Singham was like his father when it came to charm and his ability to attract women's attention. Sabitha was yet to see proof of Dev Singham's *alleged* charms, but she couldn't dispute his ability to attract women.

Despite her hate towards him, she loathed to admit that she herself had been attracted to him at times. Although she always ensured she held a shield

against that inconvenient attraction.

But that particular afternoon, when Dev Singham had felt outraged on her behalf, because her aunt discriminated against her mother's class, she felt a large dent form in the shield.

Maybe he wasn't all that bad. Sure he was still an over-privileged princeling who thought no end of himself at times, but he was also capable of displaying empathy and affection.

Maybe Dev Singham wasn't a complete bastard.

CHAPTER 17

“Our company is one of the best when it comes to building facial recognition software, Mr. Singham. Pretty soon we are going to be light years ahead of our biggest competitors.”

“I know,” Dev replied. “That’s why I have decided to invest.”

Dev was speaking with the CEO and founder of a company that specialized in not only building facial recognition software but also could interpret how a person would look when they aged or were in disguise. The investigators were already making use of similar software to track Raidu, but the software wasn’t advanced enough to identify if he had a good disguise.

“We are genuinely excited to have passionate investors such as you for our company, Mr. Singham. I know you have already either purchased or invested in other startup corporations such as ours.”

The CEO had done his homework. Contrary to what some people believed, Dev did not simply run the Singham industries. Right after he had graduated business school, he used part of his inheritance to invest in several small start-up companies that he believed in. Luckily, his risks paid off, and he was able to increase his investments and profits several times over without touching any more of the inherited money.

“That’s good to hear, because I like being personally involved in all of my investments.” He was about to add more when he stopped when he heard someone calling his name.

“Dev!” a woman’s voice called out again.

A frown marred Dev’s face as he turned to see who had interrupted him. When he saw who it was, his expression hardened. “Tia,” he greeted in a guarded manner.

Lately, he noticed that Tia Mathur was turning up wherever he went. He knew they had a few common social circles, but the way she clung to him each time and the photos that kept turning up in the magazines, hinting they were a steady couple had started to bother him.

“Can I steal Dev away for a while?” Tia asked the man Dev had been talking to.

“Sure,” said the man, smiling at the famous pretty face who was batting her eyelashes at him. “I’ll set up a meeting with you next week as we had

discussed, Mr. Singham.”

Dev nodded even though he felt a bolt of irritation at Tia’s presumption.

Tia clung to his hand and led him towards the main house where a large social event was taking place that night. Dev had already met with several people and closed a couple of deals. He was done for the night and wanted to leave soon.

“I was in the middle of an important discussion when you interrupted me, Tia,” he said when they were out of ear shot of other people.

Tia pouted. “You are always ignoring me these days, Dev.”

He frowned with impatience. “Tia, I’ve already told you several times. I’m busy and I don’t have time for—”

“I know. I know,” she said. “But like I told you, I don’t expect you to take me out or commit to me. I just want to be your friend, and be there when you need to talk to someone.”

Dev sighed, not believing a word she said. His ‘friend’ had been chasing away other women who had come to speak with him.

“I’m going to be leaving in a few minutes,” he said. “I’ve had a long day and have an even longer one tomorrow.”

Tia watched him with a determined smile. “I understand. I’ve heard that the canal and manufacturing units’ construction have started in your province and you are leading them. I’m very fascinated and want to know more about them. Will you take me there soon?” she asked with fake enthusiasm.

“No.”

At his blunt answer, her smile faltered, but she still stayed by his side.

Ignoring her, he went into the house to use the washroom in the guest bedroom. He splashed water on his face to remove some of the tiredness. He didn’t want to stay in the city that night. He wanted to return to the Singham Estate.

He typed a quick message to his chauffeur to pick him up in a few minutes. When he stepped out of the washroom, his ‘friend’ was waiting outside. Completely naked.

“What the hell are you doing, Tia?” he snapped, losing the last of his patience.

“Come on, Dev. Stop playing hard to get. We both know you want me. I want you, too.” She moved closer. “Take me now, Dev. Take me like the beast that I’ve heard some women whispering in awe about you. Show me how much you want me.”

“I don’t want you,” he said coldly. He was done being chivalrous. It wasn’t getting him anywhere. A few months ago, he would have taken up the offer without his conscience bothering him. But now, he just couldn’t stomach having sex with a woman whom he had zero interest in.

Tia put a hand on his crotch and slowly licked her lips with her tongue in a suggestive manner. “I can make you want me in no time,” she said in a seductive tone.

He wasn’t in the least bit turned on with the display. But that didn’t seem to deter her. She was about to pull down the zip to his pants when he caught her hand. “That’s enough. Stop embarrassing yourself,” he said.

She finally seemed to notice the hard look on his face because it slowly dawned on her that he was being serious. “But I’m... and you...”

His face softened a little when he saw tears welling up in her eyes. Sighing, he picked up her clothes and handed them to her. “Listen to me Tia. You are a beautiful, successful woman. Most men would find you extremely desirable. I’m just too busy, and I have a lot going on. I’m not available to see anyone.”

She began to dress while looking at him with hopeful eyes. “So maybe later when you are not busy? You’ll be willing to see me then?” she asked.

He stifled a groan. “I don’t think you should wait for me. There are a lot of good men who are fighting for a chance to be in your company. You should see one of them.”

She shook her head. “No. I’m going to wait for you,” she said with a determined look. “You are definitely worth the wait.”

When she left the room, Dev sighed tiredly.

He was used to women throwing themselves at him.

He wasn’t being cocky or arrogant in acknowledging it. Because he knew it was a fact. He knew he had the good looks he inherited from his family that drew the women to him. He also knew that more than his looks, it was the old Singham money and power that made the entire deal of being Mrs. Dev Singham even sweeter for some ambitious women.

And it was public knowledge how much he had inherited.

The inheritance was huge—the kind that would allow several future generations to live comfortably without having to earn a living. However, he refused to live off his inheritance. He had worked doubly hard to earn his own money and to prove to himself that he could make it in the world without his family background.

But as much as he still enjoyed the high he got each time he closed a business deal, unlike before, he no longer felt excited about dating or scoring with a new woman each time.

The fact that he had outgrown temporary flings even though he was only twenty-seven, didn't trouble him. What troubled him was that his mind was completely and undeniably filled with only one woman.

Sabitha Prajapati.

He didn't know why he was so fascinated with her. Especially because she wasn't like the glamorous women he had dated most of his life. Granted, he found her quite impressive and accomplished based on what he had observed so far and knew about her. But he still couldn't figure out the intense fascination that sometimes bordered on obsession with her.

Maybe it was her beauty. Sabitha Prajapati held a timeless beauty that shone through even though she didn't apply makeup or wear beautiful clothes all the time. She had the kind of face that would be more suited for a portrait on the mansion walls rather than on a magazine.

An image of Sabitha Prajapati's life-size portrait hanging on the Singham Mansion walls flashed in Dev's mind, jolting him.

What shocked him the most was the fact that he didn't mind her portrait being there. In fact, some part of him felt it belonged there—right next to his.

What the hell?

He must be going crazy. He recalled reading about one of his ancestors who had gone crazy because of a woman. Maybe the crazy ancestor's genes had been dormant in him until now.

Otherwise, why else would the news of a possible alliance between Sabitha Prajapati and Revanth Senani make him feel insane? The very thought of her being with someone, made him feel like going berserk.

Logically, the alliance would help the Singhams.

Because whatever he had heard about Revanth Senani's reputation, and whatever he knew about Sabitha Prajapati, everything pointed to the fact that she would end up killing Revanth Senani within a day of their marriage, ridding the Singhams of the bothersome Senani.

But Dev just couldn't stomach the thought of her being with any other man. Even when he had hated her with a passion, he still couldn't bear that thought.

He recalled how much it had enraged him when he found the letter she had sent to Abhay. The letter was to 'discuss' the details of another

possibility of making the Prajapati-Singham alliance even stronger. He had intercepted the letter before it even reached Abhay and took the room that had initially been assigned to the bridegroom. During the night that followed, he had ensured that he completely sabotaged Sabitha Prajapati's seduction attempts and also her dreams of being Abhay's wife.

Dev didn't feel guilty about it.

Even without their family histories, Dev knew Abhay and Sabitha would have made a terrible couple. Dev had been studying people long enough to know that fact.

Abhay was a controlling man due to the circumstances in his life. And controlling men preferred submissive women. Or at least softer and gentler women like Anika. Dev knew that Sabitha Prajapati wouldn't have a submissive bone in her body. He also knew that she was the kind of person who would want to be involved in every little decision taken when it came to the people. If they were trapped in a marriage, Abhay and she would have ended up being miserable together.

Dev didn't know since when during the past few weeks did his feelings towards Sabitha Prajapati begin changing. He no longer felt angry with her. He also realized he did not harbor any intense hatred towards her. She was not to blame for what happened with his parents.

One thing that terrified him about his recent change in feelings about her was—that without his previous anger and hate, he had nothing to buffer him against her potent lure.

CHAPTER 18

“We think that’s him.”

Dev was seated with Abhay and Anika in the enclosed office along with the lead investigator who was showing them pictures and updating them with the status of the investigation.

The pictures were very grainy, but one of them showed the enlarged portion of the man’s neck with the green and red patterns which must be the tattoo.

“Yes, it appears to be him,” Dev remarked. He put the pictures back on the table. “Where were these taken?”

“Many places, but they are from ten days ago.” The investigator explained how Raidu, after landing in India, immediately began to travel to remote places. “The problem is that most of these places lack internet or even cameras placed in public areas. It’s hard to track someone without the use of technology. We had to use the old-fashioned way of showing his photograph around to people and asking them whether or not they had seen him.”

“Any recent leads so far?” Abhay asked.

“Only a few. We are checking their validity.”

“Any information on which airport he flew from to the United States?” Dev asked.

“We don’t know yet. We have been searching the archives of many travel agents around the cities closest to the Singham province. But we haven’t found a passenger with his name or the alias he had been using.”

Twenty years ago, there weren’t options for online bookings. People had to use a travel agent or purchase a ticket at the airport. Dev knew it wouldn’t be an easy task for the investigators to get that information.

“What about the investigation on Neelambari Prajapati?” Anika asked. “Anything linking her to Raidu?”

“Nothing so far,” the investigator replied. “We just have information that she had you and your family followed. She still has a few people keeping eyes on you. But nothing linking her to Raidu.”

The investigator looked at Dev. “Sabitha Prajapati is not searching for Raidu.”

“Then who is she looking for?”

“We don’t know exactly who, but we know she’s looking for two females.”

CHAPTER 19

“How can you lose them again?” Sabitha asked the man on the phone icily.

“We have been trying to find out what happened, madam. We got the information just an hour ago. But by the time we reached—”

“It’s the same bloody excuse each time. I’m sick of it. I need results, not excuses.”

“We understand, madam. I—”

Sabitha ended the call and threw her phone on the office desk with frustration.

Every bloody time with every bloody agency she had hired over the years, it was always the same. She was going crazy, hitting a dead end each time.

“*Madam...*” There was a faint voice calling out from the door.

“Come in,” Sabitha ordered.

“Madam, another delivery.” Dhruv was holding a large bouquet of flowers with a grim look.

“Next time, don’t ask me,” she said. “Trash them. Better still, let the delivery man know that he’ll have no hands remaining to continue delivering in the future if he comes anywhere close to the site again.”

Dhruv nodded and took the offending package away.

Sabitha sat back in the chair sighing. It was already dark outside with thunder and lightning along with a slight drizzle. She knew she had to stay at work that night. Her men were too tired to drive back to the Prajapati Estate. Their day had started the previous morning and they couldn’t catch any proper sleep.

It had been close to two months since the projects had started. The planning and initial set-up was progressing well with no major glitches.

It was also surprising that she even had a resemblance of a cordial working relationship with Dev Singham. Without any bloodshed, they spent long working hours together, going over the details of the project plan, and making any changes that were necessary. She realized that Dev Singham was more experienced at dealing with projects than her and had made several good suggestions.

After calling her an illiterate on the first day, he never brought up the fact she couldn't read. She had expected him to mock her in some way or other, but he was fine when Dhruv helped her during their meetings requiring some paperwork.

Sabitha also grudgingly admitted to herself that Dev Singham was a good employer. Unlike the Prajapatis, the Singhams addressed him by his name. She observed that he spent a good amount of time with the workers, laughing and mingling closely with them. He listened to their concerns and took quick actions when needed.

Surprisingly, the workers, in turn, did not take him for granted like she had expected them to. They still respected him and followed all his orders.

And on a personal front, each time she saw or met Dev Singham, apart from giving her a quick sweeping look from top to bottom, he did not make any disparaging comments.

For a change, Dev Singham was being reasonable and didn't give her a reason to want to kill him.

Yet.

She was glad things were moving smoothly because she was spending more and more of her time at the site rather than at the Prajapati Mansion. Especially because her aunt was getting on her nerves lately.

The Senanis had sent a proposal which her aunt wanted her to seriously consider.

Revanth Senani wanted to marry her.

And instead of simply sending the proposal formally and waiting for an answer, the fool was also making a nuisance of himself. He kept sending gifts to the Prajapati Mansion. When she sent them back with warning messages, he still continued to send them.

During the past couple of days, he even began to send flowers through a delivery service to the construction site. Sabitha knew she had to deal with him sternly to remove the ridiculous idea from his head permanently. She just needed to think of a more diplomatic way without causing any major bloodshed.

A loud knocking interrupted Sabitha's thoughts. Before she could ask the person to come in, the door opened and slammed shut while the tall figure of Dev Singham strode in to sit in front of her.

She wanted to snap at him for taking the lenience, but she stopped due to the look on his face.

He banged his open palm on her office desk causing things on it to jump and shake. "What the fuck is this?" he growled.

She frowned. "What the hell are you referring to—" She broke off when her eyes fell on the little card with a note that had come with the flowers.

Anger erupted inside her. "You went through my private property?" she demanded.

His jaw was clenched in anger and a vein popped on his temple. "It is no longer private if my enemy, a bloody Senani, sent a fucking love note to my personal property." There was an obvious outrage in his tone.

"Personal property? I have an equal share in this project, too, Singham. And besides a warning has already been sent not to allow the Senanis to send any deliveries here again."

"Why was he sending the note in the first place?" he gritted out.

She frowned. "None of your business."

"It is my bloody business. Answer me!" he roared.

She watched him with a menacing look. "Get out," she ordered softly.

Immediately, he got up, and instead of walking out of the door as she had ordered, he came around her desk and placed his hands on either side of her chair, caging her.

"Why. Is. He. Sending. You. Fucking love notes?" he demanded again.

She looked at his blazing eyes. "I'm giving you ten seconds to step out of my office before I start to shoot."

The softly uttered threat she issued made him even more agitated. He leaned even closer. "I will not allow him even to touch you, let alone marry you!"

That threw her off. She frowned. "What?" she asked.

Her brain tried to process what the crazy bastard looming over her just growled out. Hadn't she just been admiring the asshole a while ago for being reasonable and professional? She took back her words. He was still an arrogant and hateful bastard.

"I'm not letting anyone else get you!" he growled into her face again, before closing the gap and capturing her lips with his. She felt his hands fisting in her hair as he tugged her even closer. His tongue parted her lips and found its way in until his taste exploded inside her mouth.

She was too stunned at first to react immediately. Then ignoring the goosebumps and tingles that erupted on her body, she bit his tongue hard until he let go of her hair and jerked back.

“What the hell do you think you are doing, you crazy bastard!” she snapped, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, trying to remove the addicting taste of him.

Her breath was coming out in loud pants just like his. And seeing the look on his face as he watched her with anger and something else she couldn't define, her blood began to heat even more until it felt like it sizzled.

The tension and awareness she had tried very hard to ignore whenever he was around her began to take over.

Then something snapped inside her.

She grabbed on to his hair with both hands and smashed their mouths together. His taste exploded inside her mouth again. This time, she let it consume her completely.

She was so lost in the kiss and the intense feelings which took over her body that she only vaguely realized he had pulled her out from the chair and had placed her on the desk. His hands were frantically exploring her body over her clothes.

Meanwhile she clutched his shirt and pulled it apart, ripping the buttons. She ran her hands greedily over the ridges on his chest before moving even lower. Her hands fumbled as she tried opening the belt buckle. When she made frustrated noises, he reached down without pausing their kissing and undid his belt and the buttons of his trousers in no time. As soon as he was freed, she held him, making him groan out loud.

She felt his fingers opening her shirt buttons and then unbuttoning her khaki trousers without her help. She raised her hips when he began to push her trousers down her legs. She was about to raise her hips again for her panties when he held them, but she felt the tug and then the sound of the material tearing as he ripped them off her.

He dragged her to the edge of the desk and roughly pushed her thighs further apart. Before she could brace herself completely or hold on to him, he entered her in one swift move and groaned into her mouth.

She cried out. She felt the pressure of his size stretching her as it filled it completely. It stung, and burned, even while pleasurable tingles ran through her body.

He had paused, but only briefly. Before she could completely adjust to his invasion, he began to move.

He tucked his head in the crook of her neck and shoulder and thrust. He moved in powerful, fast and desperate movements, making her gasp each

time while her body hummed in intense pleasure and pain. She clutched his shoulders hard, and dug her heels into his back.

He grunted in pleasure as he slammed into her. He drove so hard and so deep into her that she felt as though he wanted to either meld their bodies together permanently, or kill her by trying to split her into two.

Within what felt like barely a few seconds, her legs began to tremble as she felt a pressure build inside her. She tried hard to control the feeling, but she couldn't.

Bolts of pleasure shot up from within, making her muscles tense even more while her heart slammed faster. Soon, she lost her control completely as ecstasy ripped through her body, starting from her toes and through her core to the top of her head, making her cry out loudly due to the sheer force of it.

She opened her eyes in shock as she lay on the desk. She felt paralyzed and helpless as her body continued to shake with her intense orgasm while the man on top of her continued to grunt into her neck and slammed into her with an incredible force.

Her orgasm went on and on.

Soon, the sounds of his grunts grew harsher and more ragged indicating he would join her. She watched him in a daze as he reared up and threw back his head, exposing his powerful neck with corded veins. Baring his teeth like an animal in pain, he thrust hard one last time before he roared out his release and collapsed on top of her.

Long moments passed by, and she continued to lay in shock as she held his sweaty, trembling body in her arms. She could still feel the aftershocks that ran through his body and they caused similar quakes within her.

CHAPTER 20

Dev woke up slowly to the faint smell of roses. With a smile, he reached out a hand next to him on the bed, but his hand met with an empty space.

His smile turned into a frown when he heard a familiar clicking noise. When he opened his eyes, his frown melted away while the sight in front of him aroused him instantly.

Sabitha Prajapati was standing next to the bed with a thoroughly rumpled look, pointing her gun at him.

The gun he ignored, but the woman holding the gun took his breath away.

Her hair was a complete mess. Her lips were swollen and red, and he could see the small bruises over her neck. He grinned with the knowledge that there would be similar bruises in other places over her body.

His body heated even more as he recalled quite clearly how she looked under the shirt she now wore. She had small tattoo of a thorny red rose on her hip.

He had never found tattoos to be sexy in any way. But on her... combined with the delicate chain around her waist, he found it so hot, he more or less attacked her like a starving man.

"Get out of my bed," Sabitha's voice interrupted his lustful thoughts.

When he didn't move or say anything, her eyes fell on his stiff arousal. "You are disgusting," she snapped.

Stopping himself from grabbing her and pulling her on top of him, he sat up lazily. And instead of getting off the bed as she had ordered him, he leaned back. "You know, men aren't the only ones who have obvious signs of arousal," he said, looking pointedly towards her aroused nipples that were visible through her shirt.

"Shut up. And get out of here before I begin to shoot," he heard her say.

He dragged his eyes away from her chest to look at her face. His eyes lingered on her plush and carnal mouth which had always made him think lustful thoughts. But currently her lips were pressed together, the only indication of her anger. Rest of her face remained blank.

"I said, get out," she repeated.

As a response, he yawned and stretched, and then placed his arms behind

his head. Sunlight streamed in through the window next to him.

He smiled when her eyes fell on his bare chest and stayed. She stared at him as though she wasn't sure if she was mesmerized or disgusted.

"You are getting repetitive, darling," he said in a deliberately bored tone even though his blood heated in his veins as he recalled the memories of the previous night. "You already asked me to get out last night. But we both know how it ended." He didn't know why he was taunting her. But he wanted to see a reaction on her face, rather than the closed-off look.

Her eyes moved away from his chest and fell on his face before flaring wide with anger. She re-pointed the gun towards him.

The next instant, she pressed the trigger.

A loud noise filled the room. The cement, plaster, and wood shattered next to him. He felt a splinter piercing his arm as it lodged deep into the skin.

Trying hard not to flinch or react in any way, he casually slid the jewelled knife out from under the pillow and began to dig out the splinter from his arm.

"How dare you touch my knife!" he heard her ask in outrage.

Gritting his teeth, he kept his eyes down on the task and eventually removed the splinter before throwing it away.

He felt her movements as she strode closer. The knife was snatched away from his hand. "Do not ever touch my things!" she snapped.

He lost the fight to maintain his cool.

He glared at her. "If you recall, last night, I have already touched more than just your bloody knife," he grated.

Her neck and ears reddened visibly. "Last night was a mistake. I don't ever want you to talk or mention it again. Now get out!"

Dev was furious. The woman in front of him was the only one who had the capability of making him angry or upset within a split second. Before he gave in to the urge of strangling her, he got off the bed. He deliberately loomed over her in his naked and aroused state. But she didn't step back or flinch at the anger blazing in his eyes. Her eyes were spitting equal amount of fire as she stared back.

Fury filled him that she had pressed the trigger even though he knew she had deliberately pointed the gun a few inches away from his head towards the wall. Before he was tempted to grab her to either spank her or kiss her swollen red lips, he walked towards her office desk where his clothes were lying on the ground. He pulled up his boxers and trousers and then put on his

torn shirt. He grabbed his phone and went towards the door. Then turning back to glare at her one last time, he walked out and banged the door shut behind him.

Bloody, exasperating woman!

He knew that even though she currently hated herself for enjoying their night together, she had wanted him as much as he did her.

He walked into the shower in his office and stood under the spraying water. He felt the stings burn on his back where she had scratched and also bitten him in passion, reminding him of how after he had her on the desk, he had carried her to the bed where she had been with him every step of the way. They went at it all night, until faint morning light came through the windows. And even then, when their movements had turned sluggish and clumsy, they had both been reluctant to end it anytime soon. Until exhaustion had finally taken over, and they passed out in each other's arms.

Then why the hell was she behaving as though she had been a reluctant innocent virgin and he was a villain who had forced her into it?

He clenched his fists in anger and frustration. He had always been a slave to his desire when it came to her. Having her only increased that desire. But he knew he needed to keep away from her as much as possible, or they would either end up sleeping together again, or she would succeed in shooting him, ending his agony.

Right then, he wasn't sure which choice he preferred. Being stuck in a constant loop of lust and hatred or getting shot at.

CHAPTER 21

“We found him.” Abhay’s voice sounded ominous over the car speaker.

“Where?” Dev asked.

Raidu had been like a wily fox. He had constantly been changing locations and disguises to escape the investigators. Each time there was a lead, either Dev or Abhay had flown to those places to verify. This time, Abhay had gone to check.

“He’s badly injured and at a hospital,” said Abhay.

“Shit! What happened? Our investigators supposedly tracked him there just yesterday.”

“I know,” Abhay replied. “But when I flew there, we were told he hadn’t come out of his hotel room in a while. We found him lying in blood with gunshot wounds.”

“What the hell?”

There was a tired sigh from Abhay. “Yes. Definitely hell. But he’s alive. Barely. He’s unconscious.”

Dev tried to think why and who would try to kill Raidu. “The hotel cameras—”

“None at the hotel or around surrounding places.”

“Phone?”

“No. He didn’t carry one. He used cash and pay phones everywhere he went. He took every precaution on the earth to escape us.”

“Who the hell tried to kill him? And how in the hell did they get to him before us?”

“No idea, but it’s no accident. Because whoever found and shot him, did a thorough job. They left absolutely no clues whatsoever for the police or our investigators.”

Dev felt frustrated. “Some kind of professional?”

“Yes, definitely a professional.”

“But that hitman or whoever the hell it was... they weren’t that thorough if they didn’t ultimately kill Raidu.”

There was a pause. “The doctors have told me that all the shots went through areas which were non-life threatening. Almost like—”

“The hitman wanted Raidu to stay alive,” Dev finished. “Still doesn’t

make sense, Abhay.”

“I know.”

“So now we need to find who the hell hired this hitman who did a thorough job and yet wanted his victim to stay alive.”

“Yes.”

Dammit. Another search. “Are you going to stay there until Raidu gains consciousness?”

“No. I’ll fly back soon,” replied Abhay. “I’ll bring Raidu along if he’s still alive until then.”

“Okay. I’ll help make arrangements to release him to us. I can have some papers prepared to claim we are his family.”

Dev’s frustration continued.

But until Raidu woke up and told them what happened on the day of the massacre, they would be left in the dark.

“Is everything else fine?” Abhay asked.

“With what in particular?”

“Nothing in particular. I was asking in general.” There was a pause. “But is there anything particular you want to talk about?”

“No. Everything is going great,” Dev stated. He realized that a small amount of frustration and anger leaked through. However, Abhay didn’t push him for an explanation or ask any questions.

“Alright, I’ll get going then,” said Abhay. “I’ll probably stay at the site tonight. So call me if you need anything before you leave tomorrow.”

“I will.”

Dev drove to the site, while making several phone calls following up with his other commitments and businesses. He was glad he was busy enough during the day and most nights not to think too much about things that worked him up.

But sometimes, memories of what had happened with *her* a few weeks ago on that particular night and the following morning after crept in, frustrating and angering him.

And despite what had transpired between them, he still maintained a working relationship with her so they could get their jobs done efficiently. The only time he had to ask her a personal question was to check whether their night would have any consequences. Seeing Anika one day as she gently held her stomach while reading a book at the library made him realize that fact.

But Sabitha Prajapati had looked as cool as a cucumber when he asked her the question.

“No,” she answered curtly.

“Care to elaborate on that?” he asked. “I didn’t use protection that night. So I’m assuming you use a contraceptive of some kind to be able to say you won’t get pregnant from our night together.”

Her expression turned icy. “What I use or don’t use is none of your business. However, I do know I’m not pregnant.”

“How?” he demanded. “As you must recall, we had sex several times that night. Any of those times could have made you pregnant. It’s still too early to find out for sure, but I need a confirmation either way.”

Her eyes flared as she lost her icy composure. “I told you not to talk about that night!” she snapped. Then taking a deep breath, she watching him coolly. “I am on birth control pills, so you don’t have to worry about me falling pregnant with your child and ruining the precious Singham bloodlines.”

Even though he knew her taunt was deliberate, it made him angry enough to storm out of the room.

He was sick of moping like a jilted lover, even though they had barely spent an entire night together. But he continued to brood and fret while he thought of her.

Maybe it was the fact that he stood on the opposite side of the glass. Usually it was him who broke things off with women and the women tried to persuade him to stay.

However, when it came to *her*, he was shoved out or rather shot at to get the hell out of her bed. And it happened after the best sex he ever had.

It wasn’t as if he had never had good sex before. He did. In fact, most of his partners were almost as skilled as him in bed, making it extremely pleasurable.

But there’s good sex, and then there’s sex that blows your mind, making a person crave it like a drug.

Maybe I should erase the memory of her with some other willing woman who would be more than happy to be in my bed. That would get rid of the thoughts of her.

But he already knew he wouldn’t. Which meant the thoughts and memories of *her* would continue to fester in his mind, eating him away like a

bloody disease.

He took a deep breath. *No. I will not allow her to intrude my mind anymore. I'm done thinking about her. I'd rather focus all my energy on getting answers from the investigation and my work.*

Deep inside he knew it was a losing battle.

CHAPTER 22

“Madam, a fight has broken out between some of our people and the Singhams. Two people have been reported injured.”

Sabitha frowned at the interruption. She had been speaking with her contact on the phone. “Keep me informed. Even if it is late, call me when you get any updates,” she told the person on the phone.

She ended the call and frowned at Dhruv. “Why haven’t you or one of our men stopped it?”

“We have been trying to handle the increasing tension from the past three weeks, madam. But I feel your intervention is needed at this point.”

“What’s the problem? Things were going fine the first two months. What happened all of a sudden?” she asked.

“We don’t know the actual reason either, madam.”

“Okay, let’s go.” She picked up her gun and tucked into her holster before stepping out with Dhruv.

A crowd had formed, and several men were throwing punches at each other.

Sabitha took out her gun and fired into the sky, making everyone freeze. She went towards the crowd and stood in front of two bleeding men who had been throwing punches at each other.

“What’s happening here?” she asked. “Why are you not at your assigned jobs?”

Everyone fell silent.

“Somebody better start talking, or there will be hell to pay,” she said in a menacing tone.

People shifted uneasily. One of the Prajapati men whom she recognized stepped forward. “Madam, it’s the Singhams, they have been speaking disrespectfully to us. They feel they are doing us a favor. We—”

“What about you all?” another man snapped. “Have you not started talking about the feud and what happened twenty years ago when there was an order passed not to?” The man who had spoken was a Singham.

Before she could rip at both the men and people around to stop behaving like children, the crowd parted. Dev Singham strode into the circle like he was the bloody emperor.

“Who shot a gun, despite the order I had passed about not firing weapons at the site?” he demanded.

There was silence.

“It was me,” Sabitha answered him coolly.

His eyes fell on her and he watched her for a couple of seconds before turning towards the crowd. “Get back to your work. Even if there is the slightest of delay in the schedule, the person responsible will be answerable to me.” With that, he threw her another look before striding away with his entourage.

Sabitha felt annoyed at his brief dispassionate look.

Two weeks had passed since *that* night. Ever since then, they had been sharing cold vibes whenever they met to discuss the progress or issues at work.

Apart from a brief conversation with him reminding her they hadn’t used any protection, they didn’t talk about that night. She had told him she used contraceptives. And instead of looking relieved, she felt he had looked at her with suspicion.

Not that she was offended that he didn’t believe her easily. Considering, she never dated or saw anyone, it did seem odd that she used protection. But in her world, and in her position, where there were enemies ready to attack and destroy her at any moment, she didn’t want to take any chances. She was always protected in case any unwanted assaults happened.

Sabitha’s eyes remained on Dev Singham until he disappeared from her vision.

She sighed out loud. She knew she had behaved badly the morning after their night. But at that time, she had been too shocked and embarrassed about how easily she had forgiven him regarding the past and let her basic instincts take over.

Over the past six years, she had survived due to the control she had on herself. But one touch from Dev Singham, she lost her control completely and gave in.

As she headed back to her office with Dhruv, she gave instructions. “I want to be informed as soon as possible if something like today happens again. This is important for us. I don’t want any hiccups in our project.”

Dhruv nodded. “Yes, madam. I will. You have been busy with other things so I tried to handle it myself.”

She frowned. “What started this tension in the first place?”

Dhruv looked uncomfortable, which was rare. “There’s been some speculation, madam.”

“What kind of speculation?” she asked. “It better be legitimate. You know I hate gossip.”

Dhruv nodded. “We heard someone talking about things not being well between you and Dev Singham. Some of our people think that this project will likely be stopped before the set-up is done.”

“I see,” she said calmly, even though she was frustrated. It wasn’t like she and Dev Singham had been super friendly before. How the hell did they know things weren’t as comfortable as before? “Have the people assemble at the usual place. I’ll address them this evening when people from both the shifts are present.”

Dhruv nodded and left her office.

Sabitha sat back with a sigh. She couldn’t let things get worse when so much was at stake. She supposed she had to bite the bullet and make peace with Dev Singham.

Even though everything inside her rebelled at the thought, she knew it was the right thing to do. With that thought in mind, she strode out of her office and knocked on his door.

She heard his deep voice, commanding to come in. She hesitated for a couple of seconds before opening the door and going inside.

He was typing something on his laptop and hadn’t looked up until she reached the chairs and took one. When he looked up, his eyes flared, and he watched her.

He had a broody look. His lower lip stuck out with the slightest of pout, making him appear sulky.

She felt tempted to bite that lip.

Annoyed for having such stupid thoughts, she frowned at him. Instead of saying something, he continued to watch her silently with the same look.

She somehow knew he would let the silence continue until eternity, and she had to be the one to break it. So she spoke first. “We need to compromise and come to some understanding between us,” she stated.

Immediately, the brooding look transformed into a scowl, making him appear even sulkier and damn attractive. How the hell someone could look more attractive with a sulky look, she didn’t understand.

“What exactly are we compromising about?” he asked.

“We need to put our pasts behind us and try to be civil to one another.

There is a lot of insecurity and uncertainty amongst our people that's affecting their work."

Before she could even finish talking, he got up from his chair. His face was no longer broody or sulky. He looked fierce as he stalked towards her like a predator.

He stopped right next to her and loomed on top of her. "Oh really?" he drawled. "Suddenly you decide to waltz in here, sounding like *you* are the mature adult here, talking about putting our pasts behind us, when it was *you* who behaved like a toddler with your temper tantrum two weeks ago, shooting at me and what not."

"I—" She broke off not knowing what to say. For the first time, she felt a loss for words.

He was right. She had reacted badly that morning after their night. "I admit. I might have reacted a bit more than usual."

He raised a thick masculine eyebrow.

"Okay fine. I overreacted that morning," she admitted grudgingly.

"Why?"

She frowned. "What do you mean why? Wasn't it obvious?" she asked.

"Not to me. As far as I understand, we had a mind-blowing pleasurable night that we both enjoyed, and the next thing I know, you were shooting your gun at me."

A shiver passed through her when he spoke about their night. Ignoring it, she focused on the discussion at hand. "You know quite well it wasn't as simple as that."

He watched her closely. "You mean, at that time our past was driving your behavior?"

She nodded.

"Then how about now?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" she asked with a frown, not quite following him.

"You said you reacted badly because our past was still between us. A few minutes ago, you mentioned you wanted to compromise and come to an understanding for the sake of our people and put our pasts behind us."

"Okay." She had no idea where he was going with it.

"Would you still react badly if we were to spend another night together?" he asked.

A jolt passed through her. "There won't be another night," she said firmly.

“Why not?”

“Because I...” She desperately searched for words to find an answer. “Because I don’t want to. It wasn’t something I’d like to repeat,” she finished. Her lie sounded lame to her own ears.

At her obvious discomfort, a smirk passed on his face. “You were lucky that I had our offices sound proofed a few weeks ago, or the entire site would have known that you had enjoyed being with me,” he said.

This time she scowled. “I told you not to discuss that night!”

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” he stated.

“What isn’t?” she snapped. The man in front of her always kept her on her bloody toes.

“If our people think we are together as a couple with a possibility of a future alliance, they would relax and feel much more secure. You can get rid of Revanth Senani as well. I know your people would prefer another close alliance between the Prajapatis and Singhams, rather than with the Senanis.”

She frowned as his words processed through her brain. “I’m not the type to play such childish games, Singham.”

“I’m not either. What I’m suggesting is we can be together temporarily, get rid of our common enemies while also having a relationship of sorts.”

She looked at him like he had gone mad. “No.”

At her blunt answer, his eyes lit up in challenge. Then deliberately he leaned closer to her, caging her in the chair. “Come on, Sabitha,” he said in a deep tone that slipped right into her belly, fluttering it.

It was the first time she had heard him use her name. And it also didn’t come out as a curse. It sounded like sin.

“Admit it, you enjoyed our night together,” he continued.

She hands flexed and curled into the arms of the chair. She tried to shake away the spell he was trying to weave around her. “That doesn’t mean I want a repeat of it.”

“Don’t you?” he whispered in her ear, making her break into goosebumps. “Don’t you want me doing all those filthy things to you again?” His husky tone made her blood heat up with memories.

She felt him place his soft yet strong lips against her neck. She wanted to push him off, but she also didn’t want him to stop. Even as she felt torn, her back arched as his lips continued to caress her neck and her cheek.

She recalled how during their night together, he had bitten into her neck, her ear, and then her lips while kissing her. He wasn’t just a good kisser. He

was a *damn* good kisser. And the things he had done to her that night were indeed quite filthy.

“Don’t you want me to make you come hard like the last time?” he continued asking. “Not just once, but over and over again, until you begged me to stop, and until I decided you’ve had enough.” He began to remind her of the things he had done to her that night in graphic detail.

Although a part of her was pissed at his vulgarity, another part was getting terribly turned on. Tremors began deep inside her body as he continued saying crude words in his deep, gruff tone. She tried to control herself. Master her body’s reactions like she had been doing for several years.

But she lost control when she was with Dev Singham.

She knew that part of her reacted that way to him that night due to her inexperience. She had only been with one man. And that was several years ago as a teenager.

She and Raghav were only eighteen when they had made love. And when she had initiated the act, it ended up being a clumsy fumbling between two curious teenagers. Even though it had been a bit painful because it had been her first time, she still recalled how sweet she had found the act.

But Dev Singham didn’t make love. It wasn’t sweet either. He had sex like an animal.

And you enjoyed every second of it, a wicked part of her mind whispered.

Images of that night filled her mind. She recalled how he had carried her from the office desk and tossed her on the small bed at the back of the room. She had laid there unable to move, feeling boneless and replete. She could only watch him with transfixed eyes. Meanwhile, he had locked the door and returned, standing in his naked glory and simply watching her.

And when he moved, she recalled how her heart had thumped loudly in her ears. She had watched the lean lines of his well-defined muscles while he stalked towards her like she was his prey. The throbbing between her legs grew in intensity while she had watched him move his hand up and down as he held his arousal. Her heart had almost burst out of her ribcage when he crawled on top of her and looked down at her with a hungry, predatory smile.

He had gone at her like he was trying to kill her. In a way he did. He had made her come over and over again that night.

He even made her watch.

“Open your eyes and watch us,” he had demanded.

And she did. She had watched every little thing he did to her. At one

point, when she had tried to move away due to her over-stimulated sensitive nerves, he held her in place, leaving bruises in the soft inner flesh of her thighs while his lips, and his tongue, and his teeth continued to wring out more pleasure. It had felt like torture—pure delicious torture. It had felt like bolts of electricity passed through her as his relentless mouth and hands pushed her to the edge.

Sabitha took a deep breath, trying to control her body as it came alive with the memories.

“Wasn’t it an amazing night?” he asked.

She felt him pick up her hair and push it over her shoulders, letting the heavy weight of the plait fall on her chest. Then his lips met with the sensitive skin behind her ear, causing her to shiver involuntarily.

“Let me dirty you up again in the best possible way,” he said huskily. His fingers wrapped around her plait, tugging it slightly and slowly moved down its length. When his knuckles brushed against her breasts lightly, they sent bolts of electricity through her body.

Sabitha had even dreamed of him during the ensuing nights. She had woken up with her heart pounding in her chest and an intense throbbing between her legs. She had felt on edge, getting irritated and aroused at the same time. She felt hollow and empty when she went back to sleep again.

“You’ll love it,” he promised, biting her ear lobe with a pressure that was close to pain. But it only made her shiver in pleasure.

“This time, I’ll even let you finish what you wanted to do to me,” he said in a hot whisper.

Her heart pounded, and her core throbbed as she continued to listen to his dirty talk.

Why am I allowing him to touch me? And why is my body still reacting to him so intensely?

Slowly, she turned her head and looked at him. He was watching her with glittering eyes and a hooded expression that she now recognized.

She stared at him for a while, feeling at war with herself.

Before her logical brain could direct her actions, she grabbed his hair and smashed her lips to his.

Their lips clung while he grabbed her hips and picked her up from the chair. Wrapping her legs around him, he took her to the back of the room.

He dropped her on the bed while continuing the kiss.

Immediately, they clawed at each other. She pulled his shirt up, and then

her hands explored his shoulders, chest and trailed down the hard muscles of his abs. She felt the heat of his hardness against her stomach. Meantime, he caressed her breasts, palming them in his large hands and making her moan into his mouth.

She pushed him away and rolled on top of him, and ripped the top two buttons of his shirt to kiss his neck and chest.

He groaned, but then he grabbed her face and pulled her up to look at her intensely. “Whatever this thing is between us...” he said between heavy breaths. “...we both know it has always been there... and that it will always be there. I’m fucking tired of fighting it. Agree to this,” he demanded.

She didn’t reply. She pushed his hands away from her face and bent down to twirl her tongue on his nipple and bit it, making him groan again.

“I’ll agree, but I have a condition,” she said as she ran her tongue on his abs.

“What?” his voice rasped.

She moved to his other nipple. “No commitment to our people. We won’t speak of a possible alliance. We should be able to end this when I say so. Of course, you can choose to end it anytime, too. No arguments.”

His hands tightened on her hips, and he flipped her until he was on top in a dominant position. His mouth landed hard on hers in another bruising kiss. His tongue warred with hers before he pulled away to look at her. Even though his face indicated possessiveness, he growled out, “Deal.”

CHAPTER 23

Dev watched Sabitha Prajapati as she put her clothes back on. When she came into his office that evening, he had expected to feel anger, hatred, or some sort of primitive satisfaction. But this feeling of mad excitement and joy, completely threw him off.

He now knew he definitely was a crazy bastard like she had called him a few weeks ago.

He didn't know what made him propose an affair with her, but he knew he wanted her. Wanted her every way he could get.

"Come to a cottage with me tonight," he suggested. There was one that was close to the site, but far enough to offer them privacy.

"I can't," she replied softly. "I need to be home by seven in the morning. I have several other commitments. And also, I can't just leave my men here to go off with you."

"We can be back before dawn. It's less than thirty minutes away from here. And your men can babysit themselves during the night."

She shook her head, but her face indicated that she was tempted.

"Just the two of us with no one else to disturb us," he said. "No hurried coupling, but a long night of sin. You can scream as loud as you want."

She watched him with an even look. "I know you are trying to manipulate me into agreeing with you, Singham," she said.

He smiled. "Of course I am. I haven't even begun to have my fill of you," he said. "I've been thinking so much of us being together, and what I would do to you."

Her eyes heated. "You've been thinking about me?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, pulling her close. He pushed her on the bed, and rolled on top of her before putting his nose on the crook of her neck and inhaled deeply. He let the smell of roses fill his lungs.

She threw her neck back, giving him more access. Slowly, he ran his tongue over the length of her neck, causing her to shiver. "Tell me you've been thinking about me," he demanded.

He had wanted her to feel at least a fraction of what he had felt during the past few days.

"I have," she admitted softly.

“Tell me how much,” he insisted, placing a trail of bites from her neck to her chest.

“A lot,” she said, clutching him.

“Then come with me tonight.”

“I can’t,” she said. “After we address our people, I have to go home. I have a few other meetings tonight, and I’m taking my grandfather to the city for a small surgery tomorrow.”

“I see.” He felt disappointed that she wouldn’t be at the site the next day.

She wiggled under him and pushed him away, until he fell next to her on the bed.

“Let’s go,” she said softly. “The next shift is going to start soon. People must have started assembling.”

She pulled her long hair in front of her and began adjusting her clothes, looking tempting as hell. She finished straightening completely. Then grabbing her phone and gun from the top of his desk, she went towards the door.

Just before she opened it, she turned until he could see only her profile.

“I’ll come to the cottage tomorrow night,” she softly said before she left.

And just like that, as though he were a teen boy with his first crush, he couldn’t wait for the next day to come. He hurriedly put on his clothes so he could stand next to her to address their people together.

CHAPTER 24

“Madam, we would like you to use another room we have specifically prepared for you.”

Sabitha looked at the nervous middle-aged man who was part of the hospital management. She and her men were standing outside a meeting room of an exclusive private hospital owned by her grandfather’s friend. Over the years, her grandfather had been brought there for check-ups and sometimes surgeries.

“We are fine with this one here,” she said. “We are expecting a few people to join us here as well. What time is my grandfather going to be discharged?”

The man threw her a desperate look. “Most likely by five in the evening, madam. But please accept our hospitality. The room we have prepared for your meeting is much more comfortable and larger.”

Sabitha frowned at the man’s insistence. Then shrugging slightly, she followed him along with her men to a private wing. As soon as the man opened the door to lead them inside, she and her men drew out their weapons and pointed them into the room.

Inside the large personal meeting room along with several of his men was Revanth Senani.

Her unwanted suitor.

“Sabitha, welcome,” he said with a shark-like smile.

Immediately, she felt a bolt of irritation. “You are going too far with this,” she said in a warning tone.

Sabitha had already warned him repeatedly not to make a fool of himself. But he was still pursuing her. The flowers had stopped, but other elaborate gifts like pieces of Senani heirloom jewellery and saris began to arrive which she promptly returned with warnings.

Her aunt was bouncing with glee that a rich and powerful man was pursuing her niece for an alliance. Sabitha hadn’t discussed much about it with her aunt, but it would be a cold day in hell before she considered the man in front of her as her prospective groom.

On the outside, Revanth Senani was quite handsome in a conventional way due to his inherited genes. But his reputation of being cruel and sadistic

to the women of his province was well-known and widespread.

She shuddered internally with disgust when his cold, dead eyes swept over her.

“I’m sorry if my presence somehow offends you, Sabitha,” he said in a seemingly polite tone. “We recently bought this hospital. When I found that Virendra Prajapati was being admitted here for surgery, I decided to pay my respects.”

Sabitha didn’t buy his reason for being at the hospital to meet her grandfather. But she knew that Senanis might have bought the hospital. Unlike the Singhams or even the Prajapati’s, the Senanis invested all their money exclusively outside their province.

Even though only the Senani family living in a mansion continued to flourish, the rest of the families in the province lived almost in poverty. The fact that Senanis declined Abhay Singham’s offer to join the canal and manufacturing units’ projects had irritated her even more.

“I don’t have time for this,” she said coldly. “I want you to stop bothering me about the marriage proposal. I’ve already given you my answer.”

“I know,” he said with a slow smile. “But I’m convinced that one day you’ll develop a soft corner for me in your heart.”

She found his smile creepy as hell. It looked unnatural. She had heard that he barely showed emotion on his face—unless it was during the time he deliberately hurt or tortured women.

“I wanted to apologize to you on behalf of my people,” he continued saying. “I heard a few of them are causing trouble with the transportation of your goods.”

Sabitha didn’t bother responding. She knew there was a good possibility of Revanth Senani knowing and maybe even encouraging his people to cause trouble for the Prajapatis. But without concrete proof, she couldn’t voice her doubts.

“Please have a seat, Sabitha. Let’s use this opportunity to discuss if I can help you in any way with the shipping company or anything else.” He waved at someone. “Would you like coffee or tea and what kind of snacks would you like while we talk?” he asked.

“We are not talking,” she stated. “I have important things to discuss in private with my men. I’d appreciate if we are provided some privacy.”

Revanth Senani continued to watch her with his dead eyes. “Sabitha, you

need to stop viewing me as your enemy,” he softly said. “I know you are not ready yet, but I’m okay to give you time to adjust to the idea. You will ultimately be my queen. I promise to take over all your responsibilities and worries and rule your people along with mine.”

Sabitha controlled herself from clenching her fists. She didn’t want to show any visible reaction to the man in front of her. Unlike her or the Singhams, she noticed how Revanth Senani had used the word *rule* as opposed to *lead*. The fact that he thought he would be doing her a favor by taking over her responsibilities—which meant seizing her control and power—was even more offending.

She looked him in the eye with an even colder look. “All you have proven to me by spouting the nonsense you just did—is that you are delusional. Leave, or my men and I will find another room.”

Revanth Senani let out a short laugh. However, looking at the vein bulging out from his neck, Sabitha knew he was angry. “You are more stubborn and headstrong than I had expected,” he said. “My parents and grandfather warned me about this, asking me not to pursue you. But I’m glad I didn’t listen to them.”

He gave her another sweeping look. “You are exactly what I need. I’m not going to listen to anyone who speaks against our union. Even the fact that your cousin was responsible for the death of my younger brother does not affect how I feel about you. Although I’m very impatient by nature, I’m willing to wait for you.”

Sabitha ignored his rant. She was about to instruct her men to find another room when Revanth Senani ordered his men to leave. He followed right behind them.

Giving an internal sigh of relief, she went ahead with her scheduled meetings and discussions.

By the time Sabitha was done with all her meetings and her grandfather was discharged from the hospital, and they reached the Prajapati Mansion, it was quite late. She met with Sanjay as usual while having dinner. He briefed her about things that needed her attention at the Prajapati Estate.

As soon as he was done, she went to her room and freshened up. A few minutes later, she went down and was about to get into her SUV when she saw Dhruv on the other side, trying to accompany her.

“I’m going on a personal errand, Dhruv. I prefer to go by myself,” she said.

Dhruv looked taken aback. She watched as his eyes widened slightly as comprehension dawned. His jaw clenched, but he nodded and got out of the vehicle.

Sabitha didn’t care or try to defend herself. Although she did care about the well-being of her people, she did not care what they thought about her as long as they did not openly display any disrespect towards her.

By the time she reached the cottage, it was close to midnight. She saw a sleek sports car parked outside and dim lighting coming from within the cottage.

Getting down from her SUV, she went to the door and pushed it open. She barely took a step inside before she was grabbed around her waist by hard, powerful hands and banged against the wall.

Dev Singham attacked her mouth as though he had been starved. She kissed him back with an equal hunger.

CHAPTER 25

Sabitha continued to meet with Dev Singham at the cottage most nights. During the day, they worked together at the site where their people were much more at ease with each other.

One of the units' initial planning was almost completed with only finishing touches remaining. Sabitha knew starting that plant would help her people tremendously. She was quite happy with how things were proceeding.

She truly enjoyed working with Dev Singham. He was extremely knowledgeable and patient with her while explaining how things worked. But sometimes he did drive her crazy by arguing about some obvious decisions they had to make. She somehow suspected he did that for a reason.

At the moment they were at the cottage.

"Tell me you like this," a deep growl demanded next to her ear.

She was on the bed on her hands and knees while Dev Singham pounded into her from the back.

"I like it," she gasped. It was the truth. She really did. In fact, she loved it.

"Tell me you love it so damn much because you know you belong to me."

She moaned.

"Tell me!" he demanded. "Say you are mine!"

"Ughh..." She groaned, feeling close to shattering. "Maybe I should have also put the rule of gagging you or taping your mouth shut whenever I wanted," she said between gasps.

She felt his lips stretch on her shoulder as he smiled. She knew he got off on her snapping back at him or threatening him with bodily injuries. He liked it so much that each time she did it, he got even more animalistic.

He began pounding into her like a lunatic, his movements turning frenzied. When her release came, she screamed. She literally saw stars behind her eyes as her body shook with all-consuming pleasure that ripped through her body.

He joined her soon, roaring into the night before collapsing on top of her. Then groaning, he rolled away and pulled her close until she lay half on top of him.

It took her a while before she could catch her breath to speak. She raised her head from his chest to look at him. “You knew damn well I was right this morning during our meeting, but you still argued. Just so I would stay angry and have angry sex with you tonight,” she accused.

A grin broke on his handsome face. “Ah. Figured it out, did you,” he said. “Admit it. It worked. That was a spectacular performance from both of us.”

She shook her head in exasperation but smiled. It had been quite spectacular.

She placed her head back on his chest and they lay quietly, each lost in their own thoughts. Listening to his heartbeat under her ear, she watched the soft glow of the moonlight outside the window. She knew she had to leave and be home to resume her duties for the next day.

With a reluctant sigh, she was about to move away to get off the bed, but he held her tight.

“I have to leave,” she said softly.

He held on to her for a few more seconds until he slowly let her go. He watched her as she began to pick up her clothes that were scattered all over the cottage.

“I have to be in the city tomorrow for an important meeting that was scheduled in the last minute,” he said.

She nodded, even as she felt slight disappointment.

With both their work schedules, it was a miracle that they were able to meet as often in the little cottage. She knew he had a huge presence and responsibility in the manufacturing and corporate sectors due to which he also had to socialize heavily. She had no idea how he managed to balance both the worlds, but she admired how he did it in style.

He looked as comfortable in suits socializing with the high-profile bigwigs as he did with the workers at the ground level.

The man was a human dynamo.

She finished putting on the last of her clothes while he continued to watch. The way he lay on the bed and watched her, she was half tempted to join him and simply cuddle with him for the rest of the night.

Cuddle? Where the hell did that come from?

She was definitely not the kind to cuddle. Before her lack of sleep made her do crazy things, “I’ll see you at the site tomorrow,” she told him softly before walking out of the cottage.

As she drove towards Prajapati Mansion, she realized that being with Dev Singham was more than just extraordinary.

It was thrilling and exciting. And at times, even frustrating. But lately, each time she left him, she also felt confused and conflicted. He had become like a drug she had become addicted to. Even though she knew it wasn't going to end well for her, she still kept coming back for more.

But like the man she was seeing, she decided to live for the moment and not think too much of the consequences.

CHAPTER 26

Raidu was still in a coma. It had been close to two months since Raidu was found shot in his hotel room. Dev was frustrated that all the information stuck in Raidu's head would either remain a secret if he died or they'd have to wait a long time. However, according to the various doctors who had checked Raidu, he was supposed to have made a full recovery.

"Did the doctor agree?" Dev asked Abhay as he drove back from the city to the Singham province after a long day.

"Yeah. I'm flying the doctor to the hospital first and then will arrive home by evening," Abhay's voice spoke through the car speakerphone.

"You don't have to go each time to speak with the doctors, Abhay. I can go for those too. Anika will want you by her side at this time."

"I know. But you already have too much on your plate with the rest of the investigation and other obligations. Besides, Anika was the one who suggested that I personally go since I spoke to this particular doctor. Anika is anxious to bring Raidu out of the coma as much as us."

Dev knew even though Anika was close to being six months pregnant, she sometimes still accompanied Abhay to meet with various doctors or meet with investigators to find out the progress. The discussion he had with her the previous night was still bothering him.

"Abhay, last night, Anika was telling me that she thinks Raidu was following orders either from Neelambari or someone working with her."

"Yeah, she told me that before as well," Abhay answered.

"We've both been thinking in similar lines, too. That Raidu followed someone's orders. I don't think Raidu would ever follow Neelambari Prajapati's orders, though. Because at the time of the massacre, the feud had already started. The Singhams and Prajapatis hated each other."

"Yeah. Logically it doesn't make much sense as Raidu has no loyalty or motive to follow Neelambari Prajapati's orders. But we can't keep guessing. Unless Raidu wakes up, we won't be able to find out the truth."

Dev could feel Abhay's frustration. It had been close to four months since Abhay saw Raidu in San Francisco for the first time. It wasn't a long time in other people's standards, but with the influence and amount of involvement they had so far, Dev had expected to find out the answers much

sooner.

“Still nothing on the man who shot Raidu?” Abhay asked.

“Nothing. The police are still frantically trying to provide us with some information. The investigators are equally baffled.”

Dev gave the details of what they had uncovered so far which didn't amount to much. After he ended the call, he sighed tiredly. He was about to take the road that led up to the Singham Mansion, but he slowed down and took a diversion instead.

He knew what would make him forget everything and bring peace to his mind.

The same place he had been visiting for over the last two months.

Pulling over next to the road, he sent a text message which had only one word.

Cottage.

CHAPTER 27

“Say you are mine!” Dev growled as he moved his hips in slow movements.

“No!” Sabitha Prajapati snapped back from under him even as her nails dug into his shoulders and her heels dug into his ass, clutching him closer. “And you are getting very repetitive, asshole,” she hissed out.

“Then tell me what I want to hear! Say you are mine!” he growled. A slow smile took over his face. “Asshole? Baby, you are giving me ideas for later,” he chuckled.

He saw the sexiest scowl on her face as she gritted her teeth.

“Shut up. And move faster!” she instructed, clutching him tightly. Her face was filled with lust and desperation, similar to his.

He groaned and almost lost control. Gritting his teeth he somehow managed to stop from doing as she instructed. He didn’t know why but he kept insisting on asking her to say those words, even if she wouldn’t mean them. He just wanted to hear her say she was his. The primal thrill of hearing those words from her would simply be outstanding.

“I won’t go any faster,” he said, deliberately keeping up the slow pace even though it was a torture for him as much as it was for her. “I will go on like this all night, unless I hear those words. I’ll keep you on the edge, not allowing you to come. You want to come, don’t you?” he softly taunted.

Her beautiful eyes narrowed. Her legs and hands slowly slid away from him. The next instant, she shoved him hard with a force that had him automatically move to an upright position. And then she sat up with a smooth move and pushed him hard once again until his back hit the mattress.

With a determined look on her face, she climbed on top of him.

Soon, he forgot what he wanted her to say.

Much later, delicious smells wafted in the air. Dev was sitting on a dining chair in the small kitchen of the cottage with a smile spread across his face.

Sabitha Prajapati, the most cunning, violent and dangerous woman in the

three neighboring provinces was... cooking.

He watched as she moved in smooth, confident and graceful movements while she prepared the meal. He had noticed that she was always graceful. Even when she moved on top of him, and his eyes rolled over with pleasure, sometimes he forced himself to keep his eyes open, only because he wanted to watch her move. There was an effortless sensuality in all her movements.

Over the past weeks, the little cottage had turned into their own paradise and also their war zone. He had never seen or even met someone like Sabitha Prajapati before.

She was beautiful, strong, fierce and fiery. She was also a brilliant leader for the Prajapatis. He had grudgingly known that fact even when he had hated her, but now that he didn't hate her anymore, he realized how much she had done for her people. Her brain was constantly at work. She not only asked him and the architects and engineers plenty of questions on how things worked, but she also had an amazing photographic memory.

Never had he debated on topics such as business management or some random physics and math theories while he was in bed with a woman. She was even curious about sex. She wasn't a naive virgin or anything, but she had not been very experienced. However, she was a fast learner. She always watched his face whenever she took him in her mouth or pleased him in other ways. Just like he knew what she enjoyed the most, she had already figured out about him, too.

She fascinated him in other ways in bed as well. Until her, he was only used to submissive women or at least women who pretended to be innocent and meek. They liked following his orders both in and out of bed, making them seem like they were sweet and helpless while he was in charge completely, taking care of their needs.

He had always been and also rather enjoyed being the dominant one. But with Sabitha Prajapati, he had to fight for that dominance, and earn it. She bit him, scratched him and cursed him during their struggle for dominance. And when she finally submitted to him in bed, giving up complete control, it was more than spectacular.

It wasn't just her who lost control—she also made him lose control as well when he was with her. He gave in completely to his animal instinct when he claimed her.

His eyes fell on her sweetly curved ass. For once he was glad she refused to wear any of his shirts which would have covered his current tempting

view. Even though he had told her he didn't mind, she didn't touch any of his personal belongings.

Right below the simple shirt she had worn that day, he could see the reddened ass cheeks. He would have felt guilty about it if he hadn't felt how hard she had climaxed because of those spanks he had delivered during the heat of the moment.

Dev grinned recalling how she had also threatened him just a few minutes ago, saying she would cut off his 'family jewels' if he spanked her hard again.

He had wanted to be gentle the last time, but she always awakened something primal in him that wanted to claim her and possess her completely. And only when he did, the beast inside him calmed.

Even though he was more than exhausted due to his long work week and especially because of the sex marathon they just had, his body was still primed and ready to go again, wanting to claim her. The only thing that stopped him was the jewelled knife in her hand that she was using to cut something in an extremely efficient and precise manner.

"What's so funny, Singham?" she asked, throwing him an offhand look.

"I was just thinking that if I were to tell people that the most dangerous woman in the province was cooking, no one would believe me. And also that if that knife weren't in your hands right now, you would have been bent over that counter, shouting my name."

She raised a regal eyebrow and went back to cooking. He could see the tiny smile that was hovering over her lips while she fought not to let it out completely.

They had been meeting at the cottage for a little over two months. Sometimes they ended up getting hungry after their heated and intense sessions. At first, she began to stock up on a few snacks, and then later, she began bringing ingredients for making quick simple meals.

When he had asked her about where she had learned to cook and why, she had simply shrugged.

"I learned cooking when I was a child. At some point, I had wanted to be a cook."

She had surprised the hell out of him when she revealed that information. But apart from that little tidbit, she didn't share anything much of her life. And neither did he talk about his. He knew bringing their pasts as a topic of

conversation might affect what they currently had between them.

“By the way, I forgot to thank you this morning,” she said while bringing two steaming bowls towards the table. “The agency you contacted is sending the teachers tomorrow.”

“You are welcome, Prajapati,” he replied with a smile.

“I just hope they stay for a while.”

“Don’t worry, they will,” he reassured. “We have used this agency before for the Singhams as well. The teachers are quite passionate and determined. They are not in it solely for the money.”

She nodded and placed the bowls on the small table between them and was about to sit while adjusting her shirt, when she suddenly froze. Her hands kept patting around her waist as panic filled her eyes.

“My chain,” she said in an urgent tone. “I lost my chain somewhere.”

Leaving the food, she ran towards the bed and began searching.

Frowning, he joined her in the search. “Relax. It must be lying somewhere in the cottage. I saw it on you early this evening.”

She wasn’t listening. She frantically ripped off the sheets and pillow cases and continued to search.

A few minutes later, he found her chain lying next to the bed under the night stand. “I found it,” he said.

He watched her as her body slumped in relief.

He went to her and gently put it around her waist and tightened the clasp which had come loose.

“Thank you,” she murmured, looking unusually uncomfortable and embarrassed.

Something tightened in his chest when he saw her off balance. “Let’s go eat, I’m famished,” he said with a smile, trying to ease her discomfort.

She smiled a little in return, and they went back to their meal. But as soon as they had finished eating, she insisted on leaving right away.

That night when he watched her drive away, he realized he was no longer content with how little he knew about her.

He wanted to know why the privileged daughter who lived in a mansion had wanted to be a cook.

He wanted to know who had given her the waist chain and what significance it held.

He wanted to know more about the faint but obvious pale criss-cross lines that covered most of her back.

He wanted to know why she hadn't learned to read or write when she was such a passionate learner.

He wanted to know everything about Sabitha Prajapati.

CHAPTER 28

Dev was going over a few spreadsheets when there was a loud blast and the ground underneath his feet shook.

Immediately, he got up and ran out of his office towards Sabitha's. "Sabitha!" he shouted, opening the door with force and almost knocking it off the hinges.

Sabitha was standing in middle of the room, placing her gun in the holster.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Yes. What happened?" she asked as they hurried out together.

"No idea. I just heard the blast. I think we might be under attack. I want you to leave while I tackle this. I'll call you when everything is cleared."

She turned and glared at him even as they broke into a run. "Have you gone mad?" she snapped. "I'll never leave when my people are in danger. I'm not a bloody delicate flower to be kept safe while the big, strong men save the world. Never say such things to me again."

Even though he was worried about her, he grinned. "Fine."

As soon as they reached outside, they saw the dust that had risen in the air. Coughing through it, they went to where the people had gathered.

"What happened?" Dev asked one of his men.

"Some kind of grenade, I think."

"Send our men to search the perimeter," Dev ordered. "I'm sure whoever did this is still around."

Meantime, Sabitha scanned the surroundings. "Dhruv," she called out softly.

Her bodyguard appeared from somewhere out of the dust like a mirage. "Yes, madam?"

"I want you to take some of our men to join the Singhams in the search. I want whoever is responsible for this, standing in front of me alive by end of the day today."

"Sure, madam," Dhruv replied and disappeared back into the dust.

Meantime, Dev and Sabitha checked whether anyone was badly hurt and also assessed the damage done to the construction.

"It'll probably put our schedule behind by a couple of months," Dev said

grimly.

Sabitha frowned. "We'll hire more workers to make up for some of the delay."

Dev nodded, knowing it was the best solution.

An hour later, one of the men was caught.

"Tell us who the hell sent you to do this!" Dev shouted as he punched the man who was strung upside down in one of the backrooms.

Apart from the painful grunts and groans as he was beaten, the man had remained frustratingly silent.

"Tell us!" Delivering one last kick, Dev turned away in disgust, wiping the sweat off his forehead.

Sabitha was seated in the room, watching everything while her personal bodyguard briefed her about something.

"We know he's a Senani," Dev told Sabitha. "I have a feeling the order might have been given by someone within the Senani family."

Sabitha nodded, and then she got up from the chair to walk towards the man. "Name," she said softly as she stood a couple of feet away.

The man remained silent, but Dev could see the visible trembling.

Everyone had heard about Sabitha Prajapati's torture methods. There were rumors about the brutality involved. He had heard someone saying that people who were tortured by her preferred death. Some had even said the sound of her voice featured in the victim's nightmares over and over.

Dev was about to witness it in person.

"I'm giving you a minute before I handle you my way," she said.

Dev noticed how she always spoke softly. She barely raised her voice with anyone. He was sure that soft tone scared the shit out of people more than any loud yelling would.

"Your minute is up," she declared after a few moments passed.

She began circling the man. "Thousands of people... working round the clock... just so they could improve their living conditions and provide a better future for their children. And what do you do?" she asked, extending her hand. "You collaborate with some people who want to get back at us for petty reasons."

A thumbscrew was placed into her palm by her bodyguard.

"Let's start with your right-hand thumb first, shall we?" she said. "Just

so we can make sure you won't be able to throw a grenade once again, destroying all of our hard work."

The man's breathing became noisier.

Soon screams filled the room as Sabitha used the thumbscrew.

The man broke down after two fingers and gave them a name.

Sabitha was washing the blood off her hands in the small sink set up in her office, when the door to her office opened. She grabbed a napkin to dry her hands.

She deliberately didn't look up.

She knew she would find a disgusted look on Dev's face. Even the staunchest man would have his stomach turn after witnessing what she just did. She told herself she wouldn't feel disappointed if Dev told her they couldn't continue their affair anymore.

She supposed it was better to end it when they had good memories of their time together.

When the silence continued for too long, she looked up to see why he wasn't saying anything. Her hands paused at the expression he held on his face. There wasn't any disgust on his face.

The bloodlust was evident in his wild eyes, but there was also another kind of lust.

"That was so fucking hot," he growled, slowly coming towards her.

She frowned. "What was?"

"You. What you did to that man."

That threw her off completely. "You find torturing someone, hot?" she asked.

"No. I find *you* torturing some bastard who damn well deserved it, hot. I could barely stop myself from taking you on the spot right there." His eyes blazed as he stopped in front of her and looked at her.

She shook her head. "You are crazy to be thinking of me that way while I torture someone."

"Why?" he asked, reaching out and rapidly unbuttoning her shirt. "I have every right to be thinking that my girlfriend is hot when she scares the bloody shit out of the bad guys."

"Don't call me that!" she snapped, but then a small smile escaped her.

He smiled in a predatory manner. "You *are* my girlfriend, baby," he said,

cupping her breast in a possessive manner. “The hottest girlfriend a man could ever have. Damn, that scene is getting me revved up like crazy. I hope you don’t mind that I’m going to be skipping the foreplay. I’ll make it up to you later at our cottage.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t get too excited, Singham. It’s a common enough thing for me to do when required.”

“I know. But I haven’t seen you in action before.” He managed to maneuver them onto her bed.

“You are crazy,” she gasped, clutching him. As usual, both her body and mind were more than ready and prepared for him.

“Yes, baby,” he grunted. “Crazy for you. Only you.” He covered her mouth, mingling her pleased gasps she uttered along with his groans.

She let herself go, giving up complete control as he determinedly took them both towards the finish line.

Much later, after they gave orders and oversaw part of the clean up, they drove to the cottage. They resumed where they had left off.

It was almost dawn, when their bodies cooled and they lay quietly next to each other.

Sabitha frowned. Dev’s hands were wrapped around her body and he lay behind her, not touching her in a sexual way. It was almost like a cuddle.

Then he did something even worse. He lazily lifted her hand and began tracing the lines on her palm before bringing it closer to kiss it softly.

She squirmed out of his arms, feeling uncomfortable.

He dragged her back and held her again as though she was his damn teddy bear.

“Singham, you better let me go. I’m not wired for cuddles or hugs,” she warned.

He chuckled and pulled her even closer. “That’s where you are wrong, Prajapati. I know you’ll enjoy them. If not, then you better get used to them. Just like you will have to get used to enjoying my company when we go on dates.”

Sabitha frowned. He might be right about the cuddles, but he was not right about the dates. “I’m not the dating kind, Singham.”

He turned her towards him and watched her with a smirk. “Then you better start being one. Considering how much you make use of my body, the

least you could do is pamper me and buy me dinner.”

“You are such an ass,” she said with another smile.

He grinned. “I know I am. But come one, Prajapati. Indulge me. Your treat.”

“You always make the women you are dating pay for the dinner?” she asked with amusement. “No wonder they don’t stick to you beyond a short amount of time.”

He laughed. “Nope, I always pay. But you are going to be an exception.” He looked thoughtful. “But you know what? Let me take you someplace first. I’ve been planning to take you there for a while. And then we can go on that dinner.”

She thought about it and nodded. “Fine, but let me first see whether I can make some time to free up an evening.”

He grinned, looking as though he had won a lottery.

She knew she had to leave in few minutes, but she refused to go back to cuddling. She pulled his head closer. “Kiss me,” she ordered softly.

Immediately, the smile disappeared from his face and his eyes hooded with a predatory look. “Sure, madam,” he said, mimicking her men. And then he drawled, “With utmost pleasure,” before attacking her mouth.

His large hands groped her, making her moan before he rolled on top of her.

CHAPTER 29

They had to wait for ten days until they found an evening where both of them could make time for their date. Sabitha had tried to tamp down her anticipation as their day drew closer. However, unlike most women, she did not have any fancy dresses to wear for their date. She knew she could have easily ordered one, but she decided to wear what she was most comfortable in.

She was glad, because Dev Singham picked her up from their cottage wearing jeans and a t-shirt. He looked different as she was used to seeing him mostly in his formal wear. While he looked effortlessly good-looking in formal wear, in informal wear, he looked positively mouthwatering.

“Stop looking at me like that or we’ll end up being late for our date,” he said with a warning laugh before he escorted her into his sleek sports car and drove them to the city.

A couple of hours later, the car stopped.

He held her hand as they headed towards a building. Sabitha expected him to be taking her to a show or something along those lines, but never the place she stood in front of.

“You are taking me to a gym for our date?” she asked in surprise.

“Not just a gym, a fight club,” he said. He was grinning, and he looked excited.

She smiled. “You want to get your butt kicked again in front of an audience, Singham?”

He laughed. “Yup. That and can’t wait to show you off. Especially your moves.”

Taking her hand in his, he took her inside. Everyone seemed to know him, and they threw curious and surprised looks at her.

He handed her a parcel. “Alright. There is no women’s changing room because this is a men’s only club. But you can change here while I wait outside.”

Inside the parcel was a tank top and tights, similar to what she had worn during their last practice. After changing into them, she stepped out.

“Dammit!” he said with a mock scowl. “Bad move on my part. I should have gotten you a sweatshirt and loose track pants. Last time, during our

fight, I was busy ogling you and getting my arse kicked.”

“I know,” she said with a secret smile. “That’s why I had worn them in the first place.”

He burst into a loud laugh. “That was quite cunning and devious of you, Prajapati.”

She smiled. “I fight quite dirty and rely mostly on my instincts.” She ran her eyes over him. “You are quite a distracting sight yourself, Singham,” she added. Apart from wearing gym shorts, his toned, muscular body was completely bare.

“Well, show me all your moves,” he said, leading her out of the changing area.

A strange lightness and happiness took over her as she went along with him to a fighting ring that had been cleared for them.

Over the next hour or so, they fought. She loved how he didn’t hold back on her. He gave it his all. And whenever he got a strike on her, he simply explained the technical aspects of the fight moves and showed her how to attack from a different angle.

She absorbed everything and was more than impressed. A primal part of her loved that he was not only strong enough to take her on, but also win over her. That is, of course, if the fight was to be fair. The last time, at the Singham Estate, she had pretended to be in distress to fool him into letting her go before she began choking him with her legs.

He continued to spar with her. Soon they were sweaty and breathless and a little tired.

He stopped after they finished that round. Then slowly he pulled her close to place a soft kiss on her cheek, not caring that they had spectators. “Ready to move on to the next part of our date?” he asked.

She nodded.

He held her close and led her towards the shower area. On the way, she caught him scowling at men who stared at them.

“I didn’t think this through completely,” he said after a while.

“Think what?”

“How it would affect all the men. I don’t blame the poor buggers, but I’m not happy about it either.”

“What are you talking about, Singham?”

“A hot girl who loves to fight... they are all drooling over you, the idiots.” He let out a growl.

She laughed at his silliness.

An hour later, Sabitha was seated in a swanky restaurant opposite an impeccably dressed Dev Singham.

“I’m underdressed for this place,” she said softly while looking at the other women.

“Doesn’t matter what you are wearing. You look beautiful. Overdressed or underdressed and especially when not dressed at all, you always look stunning.”

She smiled at his compliment. “I think I know why the women keep swarming around Dev Singham.”

He laughed and signaled the server to take back their menus. Since she didn’t drink alcohol or any sugary soft drinks, she took a small lemon wedge placed on the table and squeezed it lightly into her water.

“How come you can’t read or write?” she heard him asking her. She had asked him to place an order for her since she couldn’t read the menu.

She looked up from her drink. She noticed that he didn’t ask that question in a negative way. He looked genuinely baffled and curious.

“I can’t believe that someone like you, with your kind of drive and ambition would simply not want to learn how to read or write. There must be some strong reason.”

She took a sip of water. “There is,” she replied. “I’m dyslexic.”

He was silent.

“Dyslexic means—”

“I know what dyslexic means, Sabitha,” he said quietly. “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

She shrugged. “It’s not something I would randomly blurt out to people or would have as part of a conversation. And besides, I wasn’t sure if you knowing that fact would have changed anything between us.”

He was frowning. “It definitely would have. For a start, I would have ensured that I had some audio files made for you along with the documents and plans we discussed during our meetings. You wouldn’t have needed to rely completely on others.”

“If it’s an important document, I have at least two or three people look at it before approving it,” she said matter-of-factly.

He nodded in understanding. Just then, the server came back with the

drinks and appetizers. They waited until he finished serving a few portions into their plates and left.

She took a bite of the fish appetizer, and it melted in her mouth. Cornflour, red chili sauce, and some mild spices. Since she began to cook again, her interest in learning new recipes increased.

“To what degree does having dyslexia affect your reading ability?” Dev asked.

“A lot,” she answered. “Mine is a severe form. My brain can’t process any of the words I see. I know how the alphabets are supposed to look, but on paper my brain doesn’t recognize them correctly. Each time it’s different so I can’t keep guessing either.”

“I see.”

“And it’s apparently genetic,” she added in an offhand way. “My father was dyslexic as well.”

His hand froze as he was about to take a sip of his drink. “Your father couldn’t read or write?”

“No.”

She watched his face closely as he processed that information. She knew that until then, he probably had the benefit of the doubt regarding her father being his mother’s murderer, because of the letters her father had allegedly written to his mother.

“I see,” he said after a while.

To her surprise, he put his drink away and reached for her hand. Then bringing it closer, he kissed it. “That doesn’t make *any* difference to me when it comes to us,” he said softly.

She understood what he was saying. An unwanted emotion rose up within her at the look on his face and his gesture. Feeling confused, she pulled her hand back and rose up from the chair. “I need to use the ladies’ room,” she murmured before fleeing his presence.

When she went into the ladies’ restroom, she leaned against the polished granite counter and looked at herself in the mirror.

What are you doing? she asked herself.

This wasn’t her. She did not go on dates with a man. She did not spill her secrets or guts to a man. The fact that Dev Singham was that man, should be causing alarm bells to ring inside her head.

“Excuse me,” a woman’s voice interrupted her mini panic attack.

Sabitha turned and saw two women standing in front of her. They were

dressed glamorously which suited the restaurant. One of the women even seemed familiar for some reason.

“Are you here with Dev?” that particular woman asked.

When Sabitha didn't answer her, the woman smiled. “I'm Tia Mathur, Dev's girlfriend.”

CHAPTER 30

Dev was waiting for Sabitha to return to their table.

He knew he was getting in too deep and too fast when it came to her. She must have sensed it as well before running away from him. But he was sick of fighting how he felt.

He wasn't exactly sure what he'd call it.

Falling?

No, not falling. Because falling took time.

He was crashing. Crashing into whatever feeling that was making him constantly crave her.

"Dev!" a woman's voice screeched from somewhere close.

He turned to see a woman rushing towards him. She appeared familiar, but he couldn't place her. She must be one of the socialites who frequented the same circles as him whenever he was in the city. "Yes?" he asked politely.

"Dev! Please come with me," she said, looking terrified "Tia! That woman is about to kill Tia!"

He frowned, and then it dawned on him. He got up from his chair and followed the woman into the ladies' restroom.

The sight that met him stunned him.

Sabitha was holding her jewelled knife against Tia Mathur's cheek. Tia was crouched on the floor, sobbing uncontrollably and apologizing to Sabitha repeatedly.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please, forgive me. Don't hurt me."

Dev went closer.

Tia Mathur saw him and immediately began to cry harder. "Dev! Please save me. This woman—" she broke off when she met with Sabitha's eyes.

"Help me, Dev," she whimpered.

Dev slid an arm around Sabitha's waist and kissed her cheek softly.

"Baby, what happened?" he asked.

Sabitha shrugged. "Nothing much," she said in a quiet, yet casual tone. "I was just freshening up when your *girlfriend* decided to interrupt me and threw in some words about how you were simply using me. She didn't stop there. When I didn't react and ignored her, she went on to insult me."

He looked down at the terrified woman. She had been following him around for a while, making a nuisance of herself. “As you can see, my *girlfriend* is quite possessive. She doesn’t like it when other’s claim themselves as my girlfriend.”

Tia Mathur just whimpered again.

Sabitha slowly moved the knife away. “If I *ever* find that you had been within a kilometer range around him, the next time I’m not going to stop with just a threat. I’ll carve up your pretty face in such a way that even the best plastic surgeons in the world won’t be able to fix it. Understand?”

Sabitha’s voice was soft and filled with menace. Tia broke into loud sobs.

“I won’t ever talk to him or be anywhere close to him. Please! I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Don’t cut my face!”

Dev smiled at Sabitha. “Let’s go, baby. Our dinner must be getting cold.”

Sabitha slid the knife back into the sheath and went along with him. She stopped to look at the other woman who was cowering against the wall.

“If I ever find out that you or your friend are spreading *any* rumors about Dev or me, I will personally hunt you down and punish you. Understand?”

The other woman rapidly nodded, shrinking back even more.

Dev led Sabitha back to their table. He reluctantly let her go when she sat back in her chair.

“Fuck, that was so hot,” he said. “I can’t bloody wait to take you back to my penthouse tonight. I’ll make you use that knife to threaten me while you ride me hard.”

Sabitha rearranged the napkin on her lap in smooth movements before beginning to eat in a graceful manner. “You have the weirdest fantasies, Singham,” she stated with a smile.

He grinned. “When it comes to you, I guess anything you do is so bloody, freaking hot.”

She let out a small laugh.

“So?” he asked. “You are quite possessive about me, huh?”

“You said that. I didn’t. I was just ticked when she commented on my hair. I rather like my hair.”

He laughed out loud. “I rather love your long, beautiful hair, too. Especially the smell of roses. So much that whenever I can smell a rose somewhere, I get hard. It got me into a few embarrassing situations lately. “

She laughed.

They began to talk about their project and their people. Dev realized how he no longer felt intense hatred towards the Prajapati people as well. They were just like his people, having similar challenges and problems due to the long-held feud.

Soon they were done with dinner, and he drove them to his penthouse where he did convince her to enact his fantasy along with a few others.

Sabitha stared at the sky outside the penthouse bedroom window.

Dev's arm was wrapped around her with her back flat against his warm chest. Their legs were also intertwined, as though he was determined to link every part of their bodies.

She was no longer opposed to cuddles. He had been right. She loved to cuddle.

She felt him shift slightly, and then his warm lips pressed against her bare shoulder. "What are you thinking?" his deep voice asked.

"Nothing much," she answered. "What about you? How come you are unusually quiet?" she asked with a smile.

He held her hand and linked their fingers together. "I'm trying to figure you out," he answered.

"Oh? And have you reached to any conclusions about me so far?"

"Several," he replied, kissing her ear. "One being... that there's no one else like you in this world. And I'm one lucky bastard to be able to hold you like this in my arms."

Sabitha's heart beat faster. "You don't have to charm me, Singham," she said softly. "I'm already in your bed."

As soon as the words left her mouth, he moved away, making her miss his warmth. The next instant he pushed her until she was flat on the bed, and then he moved on top of her, caging her completely. There was no amusement or any lightness on his face. "This is not me trying to use some lame pick-up lines, Sabitha. I really mean it."

She shook her head while also shaking off the strange feeling of hope creeping up on her. "It's just the attraction talking, Singham. We've both been through so much together; I'm like a challenge or a hunt to you right now. Your new interesting toy. As soon as you begin to get bored, you'll go back to your usual—"

He didn't let her finish. He covered her mouth with his and kissed her. His tongue thrust and swept against hers in a dominant and possessive way until he got the response he wanted.

Then he raised his head. "Attraction, challenge... those words are way too tame to describe how I feel for you," he said. "Yes, I do admit when I look at you, I want to completely conquer you. I want to be buried deep inside you, become a part of you, while I watch your face when you come, knowing it is *me* who is making you feel that way."

He leaned and kissed her again. This time it was a gentle kiss. "But lately, I have realized that as much as I enjoy watching your beautiful face as you come, I also enjoy seeing you smile at me."

Sabitha took in a deep yet slightly shaky breath. "That's not how it's supposed to be between us, Singham."

"I know. But that's how I already feel about you."

A voice inside her was shouting at her to say she was beginning to feel that way with him as well. But she didn't say anything.

He continued watching her closely. "I saw them, you know," he stated quietly.

"Saw whom?"

He took a deep breath. "Our parents."

She just stared at him, feeling stunned.

"You father's body was lying close to my mother's, near her feet," he said. "That image is branded behind my eyes. I hated him for taking away my mother and let that hate transfer to you for the longest time." He looked at her intently. "Now, I don't."

"Why are you telling me this," she asked softly.

"Because I know you were trying to remind me tonight that you are my mother's murderer's daughter. I want to tell you again that it doesn't make a difference about how I feel about you."

She was quiet, processing what he said. She knew that over the weeks, she had somehow forgiven him about what transpired in their past as well. But despite that she was not willing to take chances when it came to caring for someone.

Because caring was equivalent to weakness. And people could easily exploit weakness.

He was watching her with an expectant look. She knew he wanted to probably hear from her that she was beginning to feel the same way about

him. "It's getting late. I need to leave," she told him instead.

He didn't get upset like she thought he would. He kissed her again, this time a deep, toe-curling kiss before he pulled back and smiled. "One last time to end our date in style, Prajapati?" he asked.

As a reply, she pulled his mouth back on hers.

As their bodies joined together, she realized that somehow Dev Singham managed to touch the deepest part of her in his own way. There was a strange spell he wove whenever she was with him. With each joining, she felt an invisible thread binding her to him.

She wondered how many times she could be with him, until those threads got strong enough.

She also knew she had to cut off those threads soon, before it was too late and she felt bound to him for eternity.

CHAPTER 31

Over the next few weeks, things fell back into schedule at the site. More people were hired, and the work continued to progress during the day and nights and also over the weekends.

“Only a month remaining before we hand this over,” Sabitha said with a deep sigh. According to the contract, until the initial planning and operations commenced, she and Dev would be leading the projects and then pass it on to managers they had hired together.

“Yes. But don’t sound so sad, Prajapati. You’ll still have frequent and regular, unlimited access to my amazing body,” a laughing reply came.

Since their *date*, they fell into a more easy relationship. She wouldn’t exactly call it a relationship, but they spent whatever little free time they had with each other. Along with their heated sessions, she enjoyed their banter and talks.

He didn’t push her or ask her what she felt about him. And even if he did, she wouldn’t have answered him, because she herself didn’t know what she felt for him. All she knew was with the life she led, she preferred to think about the present rather than the future.

She also knew that after the month was over, she would slowly distance herself from him by spending very little time with him as there would be no professional need. Once they stopped seeing or touching each other regularly, the bond they had formed would automatically break. She could then ignore the urges she had to always be close to him, hear him, and touch him.

Maybe those urges had nothing to do in particular with Dev Singham. If he had been some other man she was working closely with and had an attraction to and respected him—it probably would be the same.

Yeah, right.

A part of her mind mocked the very idea. Because she knew it was him. Just Dev Singham who had the ability to attract her.

Ignoring the thoughts, she watched him.

His grin had turned wicked, making her laugh while also awakening a primal hunger in her.

“Anytime in between our visits to the cottage—” he drawled. “—If you feel the need, just give me a buzz and I’ll try to appear, primed and ready to

go, as soon as possible,” he said.

She shook her head in exasperation. She was about to snap at him for presuming about their future when she heard a faint and familiar sound of a soft plop. The very moment, she also saw his body flinch, and his grin disappear.

“Shit,” he muttered softly, before dropping down next to her on the ground. There was a small hole on his shoulder with a trail of blood oozing out.

Her heart stopped. “Dev!” she shouted as she kneeled next to his prone body.

Before the shock took over, she forcibly slipped into her practical mode. “He’s been shot. Prepare the vehicles! We have to go to the hospital now!” she instructed to men who ran towards them.

One of them handed a shirt to her, and she placed it on the wound, applying pressure to stop the blood from flowing out too much. A few men went towards the direction of where the shot had come from.

“Dev,” she whispered, looking at him. She lifted his head from the hard ground and placed it in her lap watching him as his eyes began to glaze over.

It hurt like hell, and Dev’s vision was blurring at the corners. But he kept his eyes open to see the most beautiful sight in the world—Sabitha Prajapati, his cold-hearted, fearless dragon looked absolutely and wonderfully terrified.

He was lying on her lap. He tried to smile and succeeded only a little. “Is this... all for... me?” he rasped out the words with great difficulty.

“God, Dev. Help is arriving. Just hang on for a while. Don’t close your eyes.”

“See...you *do* care... a little bit... for me...” He began to wheeze. “Come on baby... give me... one last kiss.”

“Shut up, you bastard!” she shouted and held him closer, her lips meeting his forehead. “Don’t you *dare* die! If you do, I’ll drag you back from the pits of hell and kill you myself!”

He tried to smile again. “Baby... I... “ Before he could finish, the darkness enveloped him completely.

Shock took over. Sabitha's hands and body continued trembling as she hurried through the hospital corridor where Dev was being taken. "Where in the bloody hell are all the doctors!" she asked when she didn't see anyone in hospital scrubs. Most of the Singhams and a few Prajapatis had gathered. But no doctors.

"WHERE ARE THE DOCTORS!" she shouted again, placing a gun on a man's head who had received them when they arrived at the hospital.

"T-They are with Dr. Singham," he rushed out the words. "They are preparing for the surgery inside an operating room."

"Ask them to hurry the hell up! He's losing a lot of blood!"

A minute later, Anika came towards them hurriedly and instructed the attendants to wheel Dev into the surgery room.

"Will he be alright?" Sabitha demanded.

"I hope so," was all Anika said before rushing into the operating room.

Sabitha watched as the doors shut, and the light turned on, indicating the ongoing surgery.

Her panic rose even more.

To calm herself, she began to pray hard.

She prayed to her mother's gods, her father's gods, and any and every other god in the universe. She didn't know how long she had been pacing the hospital corridor when she saw Anika finally coming out of the operating room.

Sabitha rushed towards her. "Tell me he's okay."

Anika nodded. "He's fine now. Luckily, it wasn't anything major. The bullet didn't pass through anything vital."

Sheer relief passed through Sabitha. "Is he awake? Can I see him now?" she asked.

"He's lost a lot of blood, so he's going to be unconscious for quite a while. But you can see him."

"Thank you," she said before rushing inside the operating room.

Sabitha almost broke down at the first sight of his handsome, familiar face, looking so peaceful.

Then the realization hit her hard.

It was too late to break the bond she had with him. She was tied to him already. She also realized how empty her life would be without him.

Her panic rose again.

Everything was fine when she was alone. She might have felt dead

inside, but she was fine with it. But now, she wasn't. The beautiful bastard lying on the hospital bed stole her heart and held it in his large hands.

She held his hand and picked it up in both of hers, feeling his warmth.

"Dev!" A man's shout that could be heard from outside shattered the peace. "WHERE IS MY BROTHER!"

Abhay Singham strode into the room and stopped short when he saw his younger brother lying unconscious.

"He's fine, Abhay. Calm down," Anika told her husband.

"What happened?" Abhay Singham demanded. He was looking at Sabitha who was sitting next to Dev.

"We don't know who shot him yet. I'll find out soon," Sabitha replied calmly. She'll find out who did this and rip out that bastard piece by piece until he begged for death and mercy.

Sabitha spent the next few days, taking care of the project. It upset her greatly when the body of the man who had shot Dev was discovered the next day. He had preferred to kill himself than be captured by the Singhams.

In the evenings, after finishing her work, she drove to the Arundhati Hospital where she slept in the room Dev was currently placed in.

Soon, he was shifted back to his home. That evening, she simply drove to the Singham Mansion.

As soon as she reached there, she approached one of the girls working in the garden outside the mansion. "Show me where Dev Singham's room is," she ordered softly.

The two teenage girls looked at each other. "Dev is injured. He's still recovering," one of the girls said.

"I know. That's why I'm here to see him. Take me to him."

The girls appeared hesitant. "I'll call Anika. I'll let her know that her cousin is here," the girl said before hurrying inside the mansion.

The other girl looked at Sabitha warily.

"I'll meet Anika later. First, take me to Dev's room," Sabitha demanded softly.

When the girl just stared at her, Sabitha lost her patience and just went into the mansion. The other teenager was returning, but not with Anika. Some other woman who held an angry look on her face was headed her way.

"Meena, don't take her to Dev," the woman told the teenager. She looked

at Sabitha with a furious look. “Get out of here! We all know you hate Dev. He was shot when he was next to you. You think we are all stupid not to put two and two together?”

Sabitha watched her calmly. “I don’t know about others’ stupidity, but yours is quite obvious,” she said.

“How dare you—”

“Stop,” Sabitha cut her off. “Take. Me. To. Dev’s room. Right now.”

The woman watched her with a look that was a combination of anger but also a healthy dose of fear. Sabitha wanted to shake the woman in frustration.

She wanted to look for Dev herself. But the damn mansion had hundreds of rooms. And if she checked every room, it would be nearly morning by the time she found him.

Before Sabitha lost her cool and issued another threat, she saw Anika and Abhay Singham coming down the stairs. “Sabitha,” Anika greeted, looking surprised.

Sabitha gave Anika and Abhay brief nods in return. “I’m here to see Dev.”

“He’s still asleep when I last checked. But I can take you to him,” Anika offered softly.

Seeing other people, the bothersome woman once again riled up. “Anika. You know Dev hates her. She must have been the one who shot—”

“Malini.” Abhay Singham’s one word shut up the other woman.

Sabitha followed Anika up the stairs. They walked along a corridor and stopped in front of a room. Unable to wait anymore, Sabitha pushed open the door and hurriedly strode in.

There was a sitting room and then inside was a large bedroom where Dev was lying on the bed with his eyes closed. Seated next to him was an old woman who must be monitoring him.

“I’ll stay here tonight. You may leave and return in the morning,” Sabitha told her.

The old woman looked shocked, and her eyes met with Anika’s.

“That’s fine, Sitamma. My cousin will stay here watching over him. Come back when she calls for you.”

At Anika’s assurance, the old woman nodded and left.

Sabitha sat on the chair next to the bed where the woman had previously sat. She watched Dev’s face as he lay on the bed.

His face was still and peaceful, making her restless. She realized how

much she missed his mischievous smirks and heated smiles. She wanted him to recover soon.

“He’s running a slight fever,” she heard Anika say to her. “His body is fighting an infection caused by the bullet wound. His fever should break in a few days.”

Sabitha didn’t remove her gaze from Dev’s face. She picked up the sponge lying in a bowl of water on a stand next to the bed and squeezed it. Then gently she dabbed it on his forehead to cool his body temperature.

Sabitha continued to visit Dev each evening and stayed by his side until the morning. And each time she visited the Singham Mansion, she saw Anika and Abhay Singham exchanging brief glances, but they did not stop her from visiting or staying with Dev.

A week had passed, and she had only seen Dev slide in and out of consciousness a few times because of the heavy doses of medication.

On the seventh night, she woke up to a hand touching her cheek.

She woke up with a start and saw Dev’s eyes watching her. He appeared to be completely lucid. Before that, even though he had gained consciousness, his eyes had looked delirious and glazed due to the high fever.

“Hi, baby,” he rasped out with a smile.

She smiled back at him. “That was quite a long nap, Singham,” she said, her voice husky with sleep. “I had to deal with all the work you left me with while you lazed around in bed for the past ten days.”

A chuckle broke out from him.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Much better. But very thirsty,” he said.

Before she could get out of the bed to bring him some water, he laid a hand and stopped her. “I can get it,” he said and slowly sat up. Then reaching out, he took the bottle placed next to his bed and drank some water.

“Let me call Anika to let her know you have woken up.” Sabitha looked for the phone number in her contacts.

He stopped her again. “No. I feel fine.”

He leaned against the pillows and watched her with a smile.

Sabitha felt uncomfortable. She knew she cared for him a lot, but she wasn’t sure it mattered much in the grand scheme of things. During the past ten nights, as she slept close to him, she thought about them being together in

a practical sense. Each time, she ended up concluding that it would only bring more complications to her already complicated life.

But despite that reasoning, she had kept returning to his side the next day.

“I have to leave now,” she said. “Let me call Anika and ask her to check you once. She’ll call Sitamma who has been taking care of you all this while.”

He smiled. Then slowly his hand reached towards her to run his fingers through her hair. “We need to stop pretending,” he said.

“What?” she asked softly.

“We need to stop pretending as though we are not important to each other. I’ve known for a while that you are important to me.”

“Dev...”

He caught her hand in his and brought it closer to his lips before kissing her palm. “Something here,” he said as he placed her palm on his heart, “and here,” he said as he moved it to his temple, indicating his mind, “tells me that we should be together.”

She said nothing, but simply looked away from him as always.

He caught her chin and made her look at him. “Did you know, my parents and my grandmother have always said that I wore my emotions on my face. So, I know you can see what I feel for you.”

She took a deep breath. “I do know that you like me...”

He laughed. “Like you?” he asked and then looked at her with an expression that struck deep into her heart. “It’s more than just liking, Sabitha,” he said. “It’s a longing. And the kind of longing I have towards you is not just sweet or romantic. Even the mere thought of not having you in my life anymore makes me feel like my guts have been ripped out.”

He cupped her face. “Tell me you don’t feel even a fraction of that and I’ll back off.”

She watched his face that was filled with desire, hope, and most importantly—longing. “I feel it, too,” she admitted softly. “The thought of losing you made me feel...” she didn’t find the words to convey how devastated she had felt about the possibility of him being gone.

A smile lit up his entire face.

At that moment, Sabitha knew she was no longer going to fight it. She was tired of fighting it and pretending to be heartless. Was it so wrong to give in to what her heart wanted her to do?

Something she thought she would never crave—now meant the world to her.

He raised his arm, and she snuggled right next to him.

She spent the rest of the night in the Singham Mansion, lying in the arms of the man who held her heart.

CHAPTER 32

“I know that look.”

Dev grinned. “What look?” he asked his older brother who sat across from him at the dining table.

“The same look I had while falling in love with my wife,” Abhay replied. Then he frowned. “Well, maybe I didn’t wear that look on my face, but I felt that way on the inside.”

Dev laughed. “Well, I hope it convinces the woman I’m about to propose to consider spending her life with me.”

Abhay smiled. “You want Anika and me to come with you to speak with Neelambari Prajapati?”

“No. I want to ask Sabitha first, before making it official. Let’s just say, my little dragon is a tough nut to crack.”

Abhay looked amused. “How does it feel having to work for it? Usually, women are lining up to be with you.”

Dev laughed once again. “It makes one’s life quite interesting. And very exciting.”

Dev had known for a while that he was in love with Sabitha. He hadn’t fought hard to stop his growing feelings. Maybe he should have. But each time he was with her or held her, it had been a free fall.

For the first time in his life, he felt like he belonged to someone without feeling trapped in anyway. He felt that both of them together... they could reach for the stars. It was ironic that the most allegedly violent and dangerous woman was also the one who calmed the beast inside him.

With her, he felt peace and could be his natural self.

With her, he felt like he was finally home.

Losing most of his family at an early age had taught him that nobody was there forever. It was the reason why he had always chosen to live for the moment. He knew he wanted to spend the remaining moments of his life with Sabitha.

He was sure Sabitha already knew he loved her and wanted to spend his life with her. If she didn’t, then he would tell her repeatedly until she believed him. He wanted her to accept him without any doubts in her mind regarding his feelings towards her.

He just hoped she wouldn't keep them waiting for too long, because he couldn't wait to begin their life together. He also couldn't wait to declare to the entire world that they would be together forever.

"Where is Anika?" Dev asked. "I haven't seen her come for breakfast in a while. Is she okay?"

"She's fine. She's just resting longer during the mornings."

Anika's pregnancy was beginning to show. Dev noticed how radiant and happy she looked even though she was tiring easily these days.

An image of Sabitha being pregnant flashed in his mind, making him even more excited. He grinned, thinking he probably would have a tough time trying to convince Sabitha to take it easy on shooting guns or using her knife while she was pregnant. And she would most definitely shoot him if she found out how many kids he was planning on having with her.

He knew he was jumping way, way ahead, but he couldn't contain his joy and eagerness. He had even started to look for lands in the city where Sabitha and he could build their house—not just a house but a place where they can build part of their future together. They would spend their time shuttling between Prajapati Mansion and their city house to balance both their worlds. He had already been talking to a few real estate agents who were supposed to show some options during the next week.

Dev hurried with the rest of his breakfast. "Alright, see you later, big brother. Wish me luck."

Abhay smiled at the eager look on his younger brother's face. "Good luck."

Dev drove to their cottage where he had asked Sabitha to meet him that morning. He noticed her vehicle was not parked outside.

He grinned recalling he had kept her awake pretty late the previous night. It had barely been six hours since they both had driven away from the cottage. Maybe she hadn't woken up yet.

He waited.

An hour later, he sent her another message, asking her if she was awake or running late due to an errand.

There was no reply.

It was unlike her, because she was always on time. If not, she at least sent him a message or called to let him know she was running late.

He waited for another hour before deciding to drive to the Prajapati Mansion.

As soon as he reached there, the first thing he saw were the grim faces of her men waiting near the entrance. It wasn't like he had seen them looking jovial anytime, but the tensed looks were unusual. Worried, he asked, "Is Sabitha alright?"

Dhruv, her personal bodyguard nodded.

"Where is she?" Dev asked.

"Madam is inside, talking to Neelamma," Dhruv answered.

Frowning, Dev went in. He was led into a sitting room by the man.

Sabitha was standing with an expressionless look on her face which did not change when she saw him. Next to her was her aunt who had a wide smile on her face as soon as she saw him.

"Dev Singham," said Neelambari. "What an unexpected surprise, my boy. Come join us in our celebrations. Sabi just broke the happy news to me."

Did Sabitha guess and let her aunt know about my intentions?

Dev smiled politely at Sabitha's aunt.

"The Prajapatis and Senanis are going to unite soon," Neelambari announced excitedly. "My Sabi has agreed to marry Revanth Senani. You are the first one outside of our family that we are sharing this news with."

Dev whipped his head towards Sabitha. She still did not say anything or let anything show on her face.

"Sabi, tell him," Neelambari prompted her niece. "Tell him you will be a Senani bride in no time. I can't wait to welcome another grandchild soon into this house."

Dev had heard enough. He went towards Sabitha, grabbed her hand, and pulled her out of the room. He wasn't familiar with the Prajapati Mansion, but he kept walking past various rooms until they were far enough and had a modicum of privacy.

Sabitha went along with him silently, making him feel even more insane.

When he saw a partially open door, he slipped inside pulling her in and shutting the door. Sunlight streamed into the room from the windows making everything bright and visible.

"What the fuck was your aunt talking about?" he demanded.

She remained silent for a few more seconds before she answered. "My aunt was speaking the truth. I'm marrying Revanth Senani."

She spoke the words that shook his entire world in an almost listless

tone.

“Why!” he shouted, losing control.

“You must have heard that the talks had been going on for a while. I finally made my decision last night. It wasn’t easy, but it’s what I have decided.”

“I don’t believe you,” he said. “And when last night? When I held you in my arms and told you I loved you? Or when you showed me every way possible you felt the same?”

“I’m sorry for having misguided you like that.”

“Fuck the sorry, and tell me what’s going on!” he demanded.

She looked out of the window. “I never told you I wanted to spend my life with you, Dev,” she said softly.

He pulled her close and held her face in his hands, making her look at him. “You didn’t have to use the words. I knew it in your actions and words. Even now, my heart and my gut are telling me you still love me and want me. What’s happening, baby? Tell me why you are doing this.”

She watched him with a torn look. “This is not love, Dev. No one falls in love within three months. Especially people who have hated each other most of their lives.”

“We both fell in love despite our hatred,” he told her firmly. “People do fall in love within a short span. My parents did as well. My father had known my mother most of his life, but it took him just a few days to fall in love with her when he saw her again after a long separation. It was the same for my grandparents as well. People and feelings can change. Our hatred disappeared before even we came together for the first time.”

She shook her head. “We are not your parents or your grandparents. I have made my decision, Dev. I’m marrying Revanth Senani.”

His anger shot up when she uttered the bastard’s name. “Why Revanth Senani? What does he have that I can’t offer you?” he demanded. “I have more money, more power, and damn bloody more sense than him. Why are you doing this? It doesn’t make any sense.”

She stayed silent.

He caught her shoulders. “You should belong to *me*,” he said, his panic and anguish leaking out. “I already belong to you. Don’t do this to us.”

Sabitha closed her eyes, as though shutting his face from her sight. “Dev, please leave. I’ve made my decision. I’m not going to change my mind. Please don’t go back on your word regarding our deal. We should be able to

end our relationship without any arguments.”

“Fuck the bloody deal,” he said angrily.

She opened her eyes. “That’s the problem with you, Dev. You don’t think about others,” she said. “The truth is I don’t want to be with someone like you. I don’t even trust you, and you are way too unpredictable. You remind me so much of my father. He was unpredictable, too, and used to have an explosive temper at times. Everyone knows what happened as a result.”

“Bullshit!” he said. “I admit that sometimes I am selfish, impulsive, and short-tempered. I also know I can get out-of-control at times and be hard to handle, but I have never done a wrong because of it. And as far as we know, it has yet to be proven your father was responsible for the massacre. Stop deflecting from the real truth and tell me what’s happening!”

“I already did, Dev. The other main reason is that my people need peace. My marriage with Revanth Senani will bring peace within our provinces. Please don’t make me regret our... our hook-ups.”

He felt anger growing inside him as she tried to downplay what they had between them. “You know very well, what we had was more than just some random hook-ups. You wouldn’t even have been with me in the first place if you hadn’t thought I was a worthy man.”

She looked away.

The tightness in his chest grew, and he turned her towards him and held her hand. “You know damn well that you are the one for me. I know you want to throw it all away for some strong reason. But I need you to trust me and tell me whatever is bothering you.”

He felt her hand tremble within his. “No, Dev. You are wrong. I don’t believe in things like love or belonging. I’m not that kind. I just want our thing over,” she said calmly.

“No. You are lying. I know it.”

“You don’t know much about me,” she said.

“Maybe not everything. But what I know is enough. The rest I’ll discover during our lifetime together. Just give me a chance.”

She was silent as she watched the floor, hiding her eyes from him.

He raised her hands to his lips. “Give me a chance, Sabitha,” he repeated. “A chance to prove myself to you. A chance for you to trust me completely. A chance for us to be happy together.”

Taking a deep breath, she pulled her hand away from his grasp and

looked up with a determined look. Then moving closer, she placed it on his chest where his heart was thumping painfully and longingly underneath.

“You are right,” she said softly. “Maybe it doesn’t have to be over. We still have a lot of pent-up lust and unresolved feelings between us. So what if we marry other people? We can still keep meeting at the cottage. Nobody needs to know. And even if they do, so what? Who’s going to stop us from—”

“Shut up,” he said softly with menace.

She stopped speaking and watched him impassively.

He was slowly beginning to believe she was serious about marrying another man.

And even though that would destroy him, he still didn’t want to ruin the memories of what they had between them. He savored every moment they had spent together. It hadn’t been just about scratching an itch—it was more than just skin deep. His heart and feelings had been involved from early on. He had thought hers had been, too, at the end. But apparently he had been wrong.

CHAPTER 33

Sabitha watched as Dev angrily strode out of the room. She knew he was striding out of her life, too. The man she had known intimately and grown closer to over the past few months was a very proud man. By offering to cheat and also telling him she had chosen to marry another man, she had cheapened their relationship, ultimately distancing herself from his heart.

She tried to ignore the painful tightness within her chest.

She already knew from personal experiences that life could be cruel and unfair.

She also knew she had to do what it took to survive. But she never thought she had to hurt the person she deeply loved.

Rage grew within her, and she walked out of the room towards her aunt who was still seated in the chair, browsing through a magazine.

Something inside her snapped when she saw Neelambari behave like everything was normal. She drew out her gun and pointed it at the older woman. Her hand trembled as she pulled in every reserve of control to not press the trigger.

Neelambari's eyes met hers but did not flinch or panic. "You already know you can never press that trigger when it comes to me. And this is not the first time we have had a repeat of this scene."

At her aunt's soft taunt, Sabitha closed her eyes as she tried to control her instincts of pumping bullets into the heartless woman in front of her. Slowly, she lowered the gun in defeat and opened her eyes.

Neelambari sighed. "Sabi," she said in a gentle tone. "I know you are hurting now, my love. But like I said, Dev Singham is not meant for you. He is a high-born man with Vijay Singham's blood running through his veins. He cannot marry a woman whose mother was a whore and a woman with your kind of past. Narmada Senani will be his wife soon. She was brought up in a sheltered and protected environment. She will be the one to carry Dev Singham's children in her womb, ensuring the purity of Singham bloodlines."

Neelambari rose from the chair and walked up to Sabitha. "You will find happiness, too, my love. Revanth Senani is a high-born man, and yet, he still wants you. You made a good decision to consider his proposal."

Sabitha didn't reply. She threw a look of utter disgust at her aunt before

walking away.

Neelambari watched as her niece swept out of the room in disgust. She knew she could only control and manipulate Sabitha so much. Eventually, her niece would break through the temporary hold she had over her. Sabitha was the kind who liked to grab control and power and demand even more.

Neelambari shuddered thinking about the day her niece would find out the truth.

Before that happened, she needed to get in touch with someone who could help her.

Later that night, after a long, grueling day of taking care of the Prajapati Estate issues, Sabitha went to bed.

She stared out of the window at the moonless night.

Since her childhood, the darkness had always dominated her life. She had stayed mostly indoors to avoid the loathing looks people directed her way because of who her father and mother were. Even when she took control later, she was filled with darkness in order to do some of the things she did to maintain peace and order. But after being with Dev, she had felt she could embrace the light along with happiness.

And now... she was forced to turn her back on him as well.

For the first time in six years, Sabitha Prajapati wept that night.

CHAPTER 34

“Dev.”

Dev looked up from the document he had been studying when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Abhay was standing next to him in the office at the Singham Mansion.

“Yes?”

“I’ve been calling your name for a while, Dev.”

“Sorry, was busy. I need to send this out by tomorrow.”

Abhay sighed. “Dev, you are killing yourself slowly. I want you to take a break for a while.”

Dev looked at his brother for a few seconds and laughed. It sounded slightly bitter to his ears. He really must look like shit if his big brother who worked him quite hard to keep the beast at bay was saying that.

“I’m fine, Abhay.”

“You are not, Dev. You have barely slept the past two weeks.”

Dev was silent.

“Dev, tell me how I can help. I’m unable to see you like this,” Abhay said in a gentle tone.

Dev shook his head. “There is nothing anyone can do. I’m fine,” he said. And then he paused. “Or at least I will be fine soon. I’ve decided to consider the Senani’s offer. We’ll have to go there next week for the talks.”

Abhay didn’t say anything.

A week ago, the Senani head had called Dev and proposed an alliance.

“Your brother has broken the promise given to us along with the long-held tradition. We are expecting you to make the necessary reparations. Marry my granddaughter and make things right between us.”

Dev hadn’t even entertained thinking about the offer. But he knew he probably should. Because he refused to pine for a woman who threw him and their love away like it was nothing, all for the sake of duty. If she could do it, so could he.

But he still craved her. He briefly thought about considering the offer she had made to him. They were not married to other people, yet. Maybe until

then, he should take her ruthlessly till she was out of his heart and mind completely.

However, he knew that would be impossible, and it would only work against him. He would simply end up binding himself even more to her while she used him for her physical needs.

CHAPTER 35

“... She is very accomplished. She can sing like a nightingale and dance with such grace...”

“... Very well versed about the families’ histories. She’s looking forward eagerly to be a Singham bride...”

“... Sorry that her parents couldn’t make it here since this was set up in the last moment. They are out of the country currently...”

Dev only half-listened to the conversations around him. All his focus was on the couple standing behind the elders.

His hands were clenched as he noticed Revanth Senani’s hand wrapped around Sabitha’s partially exposed waist in a possessive manner. The bastard’s fingers were playing casually with her delicate waist chain. Sabitha didn’t protest or show any visible reaction. She simply looked at everyone as they conversed.

He watched as Revanth Senani bent his head to whisper something into her ear. Sabitha’s face remained impassive, and she didn’t respond in any way.

Dev was tempted to get up and rip out Revanth Senani’s hands from their sockets ordering him not to touch the woman who didn’t belong to him.

“She doesn’t belong to you either,” a voice inside Dev’s head reminded him.

Despite that fact, he still could not bear it. He wanted to bring death to the leering bastard. He wanted to tear the bastard’s body to pieces, organ by organ. In fact, he wanted to rip out Revanth Senani’s fucking soul.

It took a tremendous amount of control on Dev’s part to keep his beast at bay which desperately wanted to get out, to wreak havoc and claim the woman he loved.

He realized that as much as he still loved her, he also hated her with an equal amount of passion. He hated her for what she had done. For what she was doing. For the betrayal. And for giving up on them.

“...Dev. Dev?” Dev felt a hand on his shoulder and heard someone calling his name. Tearing his eyes away from Sabitha, he turned. Anika was watching him with a worried look.

“Dev, the Senanis were asking if you have any questions.”

He shook his head. “No. As long as...” He had forgotten the name of his prospective bride. “... all concerned parties are willing, I’ll think about it and make a decision soon whether or not to go ahead with this alliance.”

“Dev,” Anika said urgently. “Maybe you should also have a chat with Narmada alone somewhere before you make any decision—”

“I’m fine,” he replied. He threw another cursory look at the Senani woman whom he was supposed to consider marrying. She was pretty, he supposed. However, she kept staring and blinking at him incoherently without saying anything.

His stomach turned at the thought of touching some other woman while his heart and body still wanted only Sabitha.

He looked away, and his gaze automatically fell towards where Sabitha had stood. His heart jolted when he realized both Sabitha and Revanth Senani went missing from the room.

“Good, we’ll wait for your answer then,” said one of the Senani heads. “As soon as you confirm, we’ll start looking for an auspicious date and set up an engagement day.”

“The marriage will have to happen right after the engagement,” an old woman commented. “As you can see, our Revanth is quite impatient. He is already challenging the fact of having to wait until his sister gets married first. And also we all would prefer if the Senani heir was to arrive *after* the wedding has taken place.”

Everyone laughed.

“With these two marriages, we hope to bring peace to our lands and people,” Neelambari Prajapati declared.

There were murmurs of agreement.

“I’ll call and give my decision by the end of the month,” Dev stated. The end of the month was barely three weeks away.

Sabitha felt her heart break over and over again. She just couldn’t stay and watch the man she loved committing to another woman. Even though she knew she had been the one to more or less push him away, it still hurt like hell.

He may be out of her life physically, but she knew he would always be a part of her. She wouldn’t be able to get over him even if she wanted to.

During the talks, she had felt his eyes on her. For a brief moment, she had held his stare and she flinched at what she saw in them. His eyes held betrayal while he glared at her as though he hated her and loved her and also missed her—all at the same time. She couldn't hold his stare without breaking. So she had to look away and pretend she wasn't affected.

"Right here," said a male voice from next to her.

Revanth Senani was leading her towards somewhere outside the Senani Mansion. They had stopped inside what appeared to be a pool house. A pool house with a large bed.

"What is the meaning of this?" she asked him coldly. She hadn't been paying attention to where he was leading her. She just wanted to get away from the talks.

"Nothing unusual. Just a place where I come to relax and pass the time," he said.

She frowned. "I don't appreciate you bringing me here." She realized the creepy bastard had every intention of bringing her here to try to get her into bed. He had been whispering compliments into her ear and also about how he couldn't wait for their wedding night.

"Come on, Sabitha, we are both adults here. As you already know, I want you quite badly. Let me show you how much..." he said, holding her waist and caressing her skin with his fingers.

"I am not interested. And I don't appreciate anyone touching me without my permission," she snapped, pushing his hands away from her. She had let the bastard paw her before because she didn't want to create a scene or raise any suspicions.

His hands remained at his sides, but he leaned closer. "I know you like getting touched," he whispered. "I've heard rumors about you letting Singham touch you. If you allowed him, then why not me? I'm offering marriage. I'm just eager to put the Senani heir into you as soon as possible. With a mother like you, I know my son will be a born warrior."

Sabitha shoved him away from her.

"I did *not* accept your proposal," she told him coldly. "I only agreed to *consider* it. And what I did in my past is none of your business. Get that fact quickly through your head. Understand?"

Revanth Senani watched her with his dead eyes before smiling. The smile still creeped her out and she felt disgusted in his presence. She recalled how the maids in the Senani household had looked terrified of him. She now

knew the rumors had been right. He and his late younger brother were creepy, sadistic rapists who were used to torture and hurt unwilling women. But because of their looks and money, they had always found fresh new victims easily outside of their province. A few of the victims, who did not stay quiet even after money was offered, had apparently ended up missing or dead.

“Have no doubts about it, Sabitha. We *will* marry. If you want to enjoy the chase, do it right now. Because I’m hungry and impatient.”

“Don’t presume to know what I want,” she said. “The only reason I stayed quiet and didn’t correct anyone who thought I’ve already accepted your proposal was due to my own personal reasons. You better come up with a plan to tell them the truth.”

CHAPTER 36

“With these signatures, we can officially close the contract.”

Sabitha was with her team in a meeting room listening to a lawyer. Seated opposite to her was Dev Singham along with his team. They were signing off the last of the handover documents for the management to take over the rest of the construction and operations.

“Sir, madam, do you have any questions?” the lawyer asked.

“No,” Sabitha answered. The meeting had lasted a couple of hours. And during that time, she had kept her eyes on the table, looking at the papers and the words on them. Words that she couldn’t read.

“Sir?” the lawyer asked.

“We are good,” Dev’s deep voice answered. “If there is anything, I’ll contact your team directly.” There was a pause, and she felt the intensity of his stare increase. “I want everyone except for Sabitha Prajapati to leave this room.”

At his order, the lawyers and his men immediately stood up to leave. But her men stayed. They didn’t move from their places next to her.

“Leave now, or your bodies will have to be removed from this room.” The threat was uttered with a calm menace.

Even then, when her men hesitated, Sabitha turned to look at Dhruv. “Go. Wait outside. I’ll join later,” she said softly.

Dhruv looked uncertain, but he nodded and left with the rest of her men. As soon as the door shut with a soft click, Dev rose up from his chair and came towards to her and stood right in front of her.

Bracing herself, she slowly raised her eyes to his face.

“How are you?” he asked softly.

It took her a while, but she somehow managed to choke out the words with great difficulty. “I’m fine,” she said.

He watched her face, his eyes lingering on the shadows under her eyes. But he didn’t say anything about how she didn’t seem fine. She knew she looked beaten and devastated.

He moved closer to her and reached out a hand. She didn’t flinch or jerk away when his fingers gently held her hair that had escaped, and tucked it behind her ears. And then, placing his hands on the armrests, he slowly

leaned further until his nose was at her nape.

She felt him as he inhaled deeply.

"I miss the smell of roses," he said. "I miss you, too. I miss you a lot, baby," he added.

Her lips trembled.

"Don't you miss me?" he asked in a tone that pierced her.

Dev Singham was the most confident and charming man she had ever met. He was even cocky and arrogant at times. But never like this.

Listening to his vulnerable tone, Sabitha felt her control splinter. She clenched her eyes shut and dug her nails into her palms. She tried hard not to let a sob escape from her.

She did miss him.

She missed seeing the easy smile on his face. She missed the affectionate kisses on her cheek. She missed the heated kisses on her lips.

She missed the man who held her heart.

"Why?" he asked in the same vulnerable tone.

She didn't say anything. Couldn't. Her throat felt too choked up.

She felt his finger stroking her cheek softly while his lips moved on her forehead, and then downward on her cheek. She didn't realize she had been crying until she felt him capture her tears with his mouth as he trailed his lips softly to her jaw.

"Tell me why we can't be together?" he demanded softly.

She knew she couldn't let him see her like this. She finally pulled in every reserve of control she could muster to speak out.

"I c-can't, Dev," she said, her voice catching. "I can't be with you. We are simply not meant to be."

"Don't say that," he said with emotion. "Just tell me why you're pushing me away," he asked, this time in a pleading tone.

Her vision blurred as tears continued to fall. She didn't try to control them anymore.

"Because I don't love you," she repeated the same lie. "I'm with someone else now. I want you to leave me alone," she whispered.

She heard him take a swift intake of breath before he moved away from her. Immediately, she felt the loss of his warmth and presence.

She opened her eyes, only to find him watching her with anger and betrayal. Anger she understood. But it was the betrayal that broke her heart all over again.

She knew he must be thinking that the last few months when they had been together, meant nothing to her. He must have also thought she didn't love him enough to fight for him.

He was probably right. Even though she loved him, it wasn't enough to fight for him and their future.

She watched as his expressive face showed her every emotion he felt. Along with anger and betrayal, there was also hate creeping into it.

She visibly flinched at the sight.

Before they had come together, they had truly hated each other. She was used to seeing that look before on his face and had even rejoiced in it.

But now... the hate-filled look cut her deep.

He continued watching her with that look for a while. And then he turned away and left the room, making her feel cold and empty once again.

CHAPTER 37

Dev spent the next few days flying all over the country whenever he received the smallest of leads regarding the identity of the person who had shot Raidu. He had just returned from one such trip and had fallen into an exhausted sleep in the office chair at the Singham Mansion when Abhay woke him up.

“Dev.”

Opening his groggy eyes, Dev saw the grim look on Abhay’s face. “What happened?”

“Virendra Prajapati passed away last night.”

Sabitha’s grandfather had passed away. “Give me ten minutes, I’ll join you.”

Abhay nodded. “Are you okay?” his older brother asked.

No. I’m not okay. I want the woman I love to love me back and want me in her life.

Dev knew his thoughts sounded pathetic in his own mind, so he didn’t voice them out to his brother. “I’m fine,” he said instead.

Two hours later, Dev, Abhay, and Anika were at the funeral held at the Prajapati Mansion.

Neelambari Prajapati was wailing loudly on her father’s body. Everyone stood in grim silence.

For the first time, the feud was put aside. The Prajapatis, the Singhams and the Senani family were present to pay their respects to the family head.

After Dev paid his respect, his eyes searched for Sabitha. He finally found her standing quietly in a corner with a somber look on her face. Dev knew Sabitha was mourning because he knew she was quite attached to her grandfather even though he couldn’t talk or communicate much.

He went towards her, wanting to offer comfort. But he stopped midway when he saw Revanth Senani reaching her first and talking to her.

He was just about to turn away when her eyes met his. He saw the grief in her eyes and for a second, he even imagined her looking at him as though she needed his comfort. But then it was gone. Her face smoothed and she looked away. She didn’t speak with Revanth Senani either, she just walked away.

Dev automatically followed her, wanting to offer his comfort, but he was stopped by Revanth Senani.

Both the men had a stare down. Even though Revanth Senani looked at him with a blank expression, he could feel the rage emitting from him.

“Stay away from her, Singham,” he warned. “Don’t think I’m blind or dumb not to notice what is happening right in front of my eyes.”

Dev didn’t bother replying him. His eyes continued to search for Sabitha.

“Stop sniffing after someone else’s woman. If anything, you should be wooing my sister who will soon become your wife.”

Dev’s eyes met Revanth Senani’s. “I haven’t agreed to the alliance yet,” he replied coolly.

“Maybe so. But whether or not you marry my sister, it doesn’t make any difference to Sabitha or me. We are going to marry soon. If you intervene... it’s not going to end well for you or your people.”

Dev wanted to punch the bastard in front of him. But out of respect for the occasion, he controlled himself. “Don’t ever threaten my people again,” he warned. And then he gave Revanth Senani a sweeping look. “What’s the matter, Senani? You have to warn off every man who wants to speak with your fiancée during her grandfather’s funeral? Seems kind of sad that you are that insecure.”

Revanth Senani’s jaw clenched, but he didn’t say anything.

Disgusted, Dev walked away before he ended up in a brawl. He had been itching to pummel that bastard for a while. Even though he had the last word, the victory felt hollow. He still could not believe that Sabitha would prefer to tie herself to someone like Revanth Senani.

Feeling beaten, Dev walked out of the Prajapati Mansion, intending to return home when he received a message from the investigator. The lead turned out to be negative.

Disappointed, he was about to get down the last of the steps from the mansion when he saw an old man wearing priest’s robes trying to climb up the stairs using a walking stick.

“Let me help, Father,” he said and guided the man through the mansion’s flight of steps. When they reached the top, the priest was out of breath. Dev decided to wait until the man could go in and get help from someone else.

“Thank you, my son,” said the priest. Then he sighed. “I never thought I’d outlive even Virendra. He was quite a man. Always so tolerant and generous. Quite tragic what happened with him and most of his family.”

Dev nodded politely.

“His sons, Harshvardhan and Yashwanth, were equally tolerant, too. But unfortunately, once they were killed in a tragic accident, the tolerance within the provinces became very low. Most of our missionaries left within a few days.”

Something nagged within Dev. “Father, do you recall anyone who wasn’t a missionary, but had left at that time?”

The priest smiled. “A few of them, yes. Some of them call me from time to time and check up on me.”

Dev took out his phone and showed him Raidu’s picture. It was a picture from nearly twenty-five years ago, but it was all they had. “Do you recall seeing this man leaving along with the missionaries?”

The priest squinted. “I’m not sure. My memory and eyes are getting weak,” he said.

Dev felt a crushing disappointment.

“But I’m sure Father Mathews might know whether or not that man joined the group as they left. He was quite young at that time.”

Mathews? It was the same last name Raidu ended up using. Was it a coincidence?

“What’s Father Mathews full name?” Dev asked.

“Samuel Mathews.”

Dev felt a jolt. It cannot be that big of a coincidence. “Where can I find Father Mathews?” he asked in an urgent tone.

“He’s traveling. He should be back in ten days.”

“Can you give me his contact details? It’s very important.”

The priest shook his head. “He mentioned he could not be contacted in that remote place.”

“I see. Can I still get his details from you later this evening?”

“Sure, my boy. My doors are always open for anyone who needs my help.”

Dev summoned one of his men to take the priest inside while he went towards his car.

It was a long shot, but he somehow had a hunch, and it made more sense that Raidu took help of someone within the provinces to help him escape. Instead of only trying to find out who had tried to murder Raidu, Dev also wanted to know the identity of who had helped Raidu escape.

CHAPTER 38

A week had passed since Virendra Prajapati's funeral. So far the progress made with the investigations were moving at a snail's pace. Except for an unexpected one.

Dev was currently at the library, reading a journal.

He had already read his grandmother's journals several times before, but he felt like reading them that night once again. His favorites were the journals his grandmother had written when she was a young girl.

When he and his family had visited the Singham Estate while he was young, he recalled the times his grandmother sometimes sat him on her lap. She told him most of her childhood adventures as stories. He had loved listening to them and made her repeat the same stories over and over again, asking her a lot of questions.

Because of his curiosity, she had even taken him and his brothers to visit the places in the Senani province where she had spent her childhood.

Dev couldn't help but notice the similarities between his grandmother and Sabitha Prajapati. Both women were beautiful, strong, and fierce. They were also natural leaders who had taken up the reins to lead their people towards peace during the most violent and brutal of times.

Sometimes, Sabitha also reminded him of his gentle mother. Like his mother, Sabitha loved to cook. During their time together at the cottage, she had experimented with simple recipes. He had caught her watching him when he took the first taste of some of the dishes she had prepared. Her eyes had always brightened as soon as he complimented the dish.

His heart felt heavy inside. He knew Sabitha Prajapati was it for him. No one would ever come close to being like her in his life. And even if he couldn't spend his life with her, he knew there was no way he could ever think of tying himself to any other woman.

It wouldn't be fair to that other woman. That woman could be the most beautiful or accomplished, but in his eyes, she would always remain the second best or a pale shadow compared to the woman who would always have his heart.

He would call the Senanis the next day to let them know of his decision to decline their offer. They were not going to be happy and might even cause

more trouble. He would also have to warn his people and Abhay to remain alert before he broke the news to the Senanis.

“Not able to sleep?” a familiar soft feminine voice asked.

He looked up from the book towards the library doorway. “No,” he replied. “I’m waiting for an important call. How about you? My niece or nephew still keeping you awake during the nights?”

Anika smiled. “Yeah. Woke up to another strong kick,” she replied.

He wanted to smile back at Anika, but it hurt to see her eyes that were so similar to that of her cousin’s.

Day in and day out he had been trying very hard not to remember Sabitha or the memories of them together. But the thoughts of her never really faded from his mind. He was stuck in constant hell.

“Dev... are you okay?” he heard Anika ask.

He mentally shook himself. “Yeah, I’m fine,” he replied.

Anika gave him a look as though she didn’t quite believe him.

Before she could question him more about anything else, “Did Abhay call you to let you know he’s returning tomorrow?” he asked.

“Yes. I saw his messages and called him a few minutes ago. He told me he’s spoken to the doctor I had recommended and convinced him to make some time to fly here.”

Dev nodded and was about to say something when his phone rang. “Excuse me,” he said and picked up the call immediately.

“We found them,” a man’s voice announced on the other end. The man also gave him a few details that stunned Dev.

“Alright. Keep them both safe. I’m on my way there right now,” Dev instructed.

As soon as he hung up the call, he dialed another number. The phone rang several times. Dev was almost sure the call might not be answered, and he was about to hang up to head there, when the call was answered.

“Sabitha,” he said. “We found them. The ones you have been searching for. I’m having a flight chartered for us to leave right now.” He gave her the location details.

Sabitha just listened quietly and didn’t ask him any questions about whom he was referring to. “I’ll be there in thirty minutes,” she said. He could hear the anxiousness in her tone.

Anika was still standing near the library doorway, watching him silently with a curious look.

“I’ll have to leave now, Anika,” he told her, walking towards the door. “If I don’t speak with Abhay before he arrives tomorrow morning, do let him know I’ll be back in a day or so.”

She nodded. “I hope things work out,” she said softly. “I’m really rooting for you both.”

When he reached her side, he leaned and kissed her on her cheek softly. “Thank you,” he said before hurrying outside.

While the car sped towards the hanger area, Dev tried connecting the dots together. He still couldn’t. But he somehow knew that he might finally find out the reason she had decided to give up on their love.

CHAPTER 39

Sabitha watched quietly while Dev spoke to someone on the phone. As soon as she got the call from him, informing her that they had been found... she knew.

She had hurried out of her room and then out of the Prajapati Mansion to jump into her car and blindly drive to the location where he had asked her to meet him.

He had led her into the small plane and sat across from her in one of the seats. Maybe he knew she felt high-strung, so he didn't attempt to ask her any questions or speak with her.

Her heart pounded inside her chest in anticipation. She had been waiting for this moment for a very long time. She had sacrificed so much and even let her aunt dictate to her because of this. She took in a deep, shuddering breath as nervousness began to slowly take over.

She jumped when she felt a hand covering hers. "We'll land in an hour. Catch some sleep if you can," he said softly.

She nodded and rested her head back on the seat and closed her eyes.

Two hours later, her heart continued to beat anxiously while she trembled in anticipation. They had landed an hour ago from where they were picked up by a car and driven to a non-descript house in a seemingly residential neighborhood.

First thing she saw as she opened the small gates were the dark-uniformed guards placed right outside the door. She walked past them hurriedly into the house and stopped short.

Her eyes barely glanced at the familiar face of a middle-aged woman who watched her with trepidation. All of her concentration was on the small child who was clinging to the woman. The child's sweet little face looked fearful.

Slowly, Sabitha walked towards them. "Leave this room," she softly ordered the armed guards standing on either side of the woman and child. The guards were probably scaring the child.

Even after the guards left, the woman visibly trembled while hugging the child close to her. The child clung back.

Sabitha relaxed her face and put on a smile even though she was nervous. She stopped in front of the small sofa where the woman and child were seated, and knelt down in front of them.

“Sahana?” Sabitha called out softly. Even though her lips were trembling, she tried to continue smiling to ease the child.

The bright green eyes of the little girl peered at her, but she didn’t respond.

“Don’t be scared, Sahana. I’m your—”

“No, you are not!” the woman shouted fearfully. “You are not her mother!”

Anger erupted within Sabitha as she looked at the woman who had once been like a surrogate mother to her. “Sahana is my daughter, Bina. I know that you kept her in hiding all these years upon Neelambari’s orders.”

Sabitha wanted to grab the woman and throw her out so she could have the moment alone with her daughter. But her daughter clung to Bina watching with terrified eyes.

Bina shook her head vigorously. “I’m telling you the truth. Sahana is not your daughter. She is my granddaughter. Your son died seven years ago as soon as he was born.”

Sabitha’s hands trembled as she controlled herself from picking up her daughter and moving her away from the mad woman who helped in abducting her baby and keeping her away all these years.

“Please, believe me, Sabi. This is my granddaughter. Neelambari just lied to you saying she’s your daughter.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Sabitha said. “I’ve seen some of Sahana’s pictures while she grew up. She looks like my mother. She has the same eyes. I know —”

“That’s because your mother was my cousin! Green eyes are quite common within our people. That’s the reason why Neelambari had my daughter and son-in-law slaughtered mercilessly! So she could steal their child and pass it off as yours.”

“That is not true,” said Sabitha. It came out as a whisper. Because she knew her aunt was capable of doing that.

“It is true,” Bina said in anguish. “I was the one who had delivered your baby. You had lost consciousness during the birth, but I saw with my own

eyes that your son was stillborn.”

“W-where was that baby’s body then?” Sabitha asked, her voice catching as tremors slowly began within her.

“The baby was secretly buried in our community’s graveyard. Neelambari refused to have the usual last rites of a Prajapati.”

Sabitha felt the air leave her lungs in a rush.

The woman continued talking. “A day later, my daughter and son-in-law were murdered. Neelambari summoned me and asked me to take their baby and disappear. She threatened my granddaughter and me with death if I didn’t follow her orders.”

Sabitha just stared, her eyes wide and shocked. Her mind was refusing to accept whatever she was hearing.

CHAPTER 40

Dev was standing a few feet behind Sabitha, silently watching everything.

The woman began sobbing uncontrollably. “Neelambari is going to kill Sahana and me as she did with my daughter and her husband. I don’t want anything happening to my Sahana. Please, save her!”

The woman held Sabitha’s hands. “Please, Sabi. Save Sahana! Don’t let anything happen to my granddaughter! She’s just an innocent child!”

Sabitha just continued to stare at the little girl.

The small girl clung to her grandmother and began to cry in small, frightened sobs.

Dev moved closer and stood right next to Sabitha. “Nothing will happen to you or your granddaughter,” he told the woman. “We promise to keep you both safe. The child is frightened. Please take her inside your room while we sort out the details for your safety.”

“W-who are you?” the woman asked.

“I’m Dev Singham.”

Listening to his last name, some of the fear left the woman’s eyes and she looked at him with hope. She wiped away her tears and picked up the child to go into an adjoining room.

Sabitha and he were the only ones in the small living room.

His heart felt heavy as he helplessly watched Sabitha still staring blankly where the little girl and the woman had sat.

He knelt down and placed his arms around her. He just held her without saying anything.

Silent tears ran down her cheeks. “I can’t believe this... I’ve waited six years for this moment,” she whispered. “Six long years to be united with my daughter. That had been the only thing driving me to keep going. And now...”

“We’ll get the blood tests and the DNA tests done,” he told her gently.

A shudder ran through her, but she didn’t say anything.

Two hours later, Dev flew them all to the city. A doctor was summoned to draw out some blood from Sabitha and the child. Their hair samples were also provided.

Dev had the woman and child placed in a high-security guesthouse that belonged to the Singhams. Making sure they were comfortable, he then drove Sabitha and him to his penthouse.

Sabitha had been silent all the while.

“Have the results available within a day,” he instructed on the phone as he drove.

After he ended the call, he turned to see if Sabitha was doing okay. She was just watching the road ahead. “We will have the results available by tomorrow,” he informed her softly.

“I know what the results will be. Bina was speaking the truth,” she said in a deadened voice which worried him.

He didn’t say anything. He didn’t want to offer empty words until the proof came out.

Soon they reached the penthouse.

“You haven’t slept for a while. Get some rest,” he told her, gently nudging her towards the bed. “I’ll be in the other room next to you. Call me if you need anything,” he said.

She didn’t say anything. She went towards the bathroom quietly and shut the door.

He didn’t want to leave her alone. He wanted to stay right next to her and hold her while she slept. But he felt torn. She was engaged to be married to another man. Even as everything inside him rebelled, he turned and was about to leave. But he stopped when he heard the sobs.

They weren’t gentle or soft. They were loud, keening wails. The kind a person let out when their heart broke due to extreme grief.

Listening to her cry that way made him feel like his own heart was breaking.

He opened the bathroom door and went inside. She was sitting on the floor against one of the walls with her legs folded up and her head bent down.

He dropped down next to her and held her as she let out her grief. And when she was too tired to even cry, he carried her to bed.

Fuck morals. He was going to comfort the woman he loved when she needed him.

He lay next to her on the bed and held her as she slowly slipped into

sleep.

CHAPTER 41

Sabitha slowly gained consciousness. She tried to open her eyes which seemed swollen shut along with feeling bone dry and gritty. As soon as she opened her eyes to a slit, she noticed she was in Dev's place. Fresh tears leaked out of her eyes, making her cheeks sting where the previous tears had dried on them.

The last hours of hell were not a part of a nightmare.

Her baby had died six years ago.

"Sabitha," she heard Dev's deep voice calling her gently from behind. She then realized that a hand had been wrapped around her and was holding her close in a comforting way.

Slowly, wiping away her tears, she turned to face him.

He watched her quietly and didn't ask how she felt or whether she was fine or not. Which was good, because she felt like her heart was ripped out of her chest and she was not fine. She was sure he knew both those facts.

"How did you find out?" she asked, her voice sounding raspy.

"I had you investigated before we had even started the project," he replied calmly. "My investigators came back with the information that you were hiring another investigative company to search for someone. I asked them to find out more. Even when we both got together... I didn't drop it, because I wanted to find out more about you."

"I see."

He didn't apologize and neither did she expect him to. She probably would have done the same.

They fell into silence.

A few moments later, he reached out to his phone. "Let me check how long much longer the results will take."

"No," she said. And then, she took in a deep shuddering breath. "I know my son died, Dev," she told him softly. "Because I remember the last two days before I had given birth. I hadn't felt my baby move then. Even the doctor had told me he couldn't hear the heartbeat. But I still had hope."

"Who told you that your baby was alive?"

"My aunt and a few people I trusted." Sanjay had been one of them. She let out a bitter laugh. "I was a perfect pawn for my aunt. She kept me locked

in my room during most of my pregnancy because she didn't want people to know about it. I kept trying to run away whenever I had the chance and she sent her men to drag me back. But finally, she found a brilliant solution to make me toe the line. It wasn't that hard to fool a stupid, desperate eighteen-year-old girl who would believe everything she was fed when it came to her child."

Sabitha shook her head in disbelief. "Over the last six years, I hadn't ever stopped to think of challenging her whether or not it was really my child. I was so bloody blinded by my desperation that I didn't even bother to question some of the things that were contrary to logic."

"What were you told?" he asked gently.

"My aunt had told me my baby was born, but she sent it away. She told me my daughter brought shame to our family by being born a bastard like me. But if I were to listen and do everything she said, she would bring my child back to me without any harm."

She unlatched the chain around her waist and brought it closer. The chain had belonged to her late mother. Within the chain was a small heart-shaped pendant. Sabitha opened it to see a miniature image of a baby. But only the upper face.

"Whenever I demanded proof to know my child was unharmed, she only kept sending me partial pictures such as this," she said in anguish. "Just the eyes or a picture from the back. She said she didn't want to send me an entire picture because I would be able to find her easily then." Sabitha shook her head. "How could I be so stupid to simply have believed her."

"That's not being stupid, Sabitha. You were being a mother who was willing to do anything for your child's safety."

"Yes. I did do everything she asked me to do in the name of my child. Even things I didn't want to do." She closed her eyes as self-loathing rose up in her. "Everyone sees me as this fearless woman. It's all a huge farce. All I am or ever was—is a bloody puppet."

Dev held her face with a fierce look. "You are wrong," he said with conviction in his voice. "Your aunt might have gotten some leverage on you initially, but it's all you who did everything. It's you who guided your people towards a good source of livelihood. It's you who led them as any good leader would. You didn't have to do all that, but you did, and you continue to do it still."

"But how could I have just believed her," she said in anguish.

“Because that’s being human. I would do the same,” he said. “If someone were to tell me my family somehow made it alive, and even if there was less than 0.001% probabilities, I would still be willing to do anything to have them back with me. I wouldn’t be demanding proof either. Especially if that would put them in danger.”

She took a shuddering breath and let his words play through her mind. Dev held her and they lay quietly.

After a while, he kissed her forehead. “You should eat,” he said. “You haven’t had anything in the last twenty-four hours.”

“I’m not hungry,” she replied. Then stirring, she slowly sat up. “I need to get back home.”

He nodded. “Alright. Bina and her granddaughter will be safe in the Singham Mansion. I’ll ask—”

“No,” Sabitha quietly said. “I will take them home with me. They belong with their people. They have suffered enough being away for this long.”

He was quiet. “What about your aunt?” he asked.

Sabitha looked at him. “My aunt will no longer be a threat to them or to anyone,” she said with a cold, intent look. “I’m going to kill her.”

CHAPTER 42

Sabitha arrived at the Prajapati Mansion around noon. Dev had insisted on accompanying her. As soon as the vehicle stopped in front of the mansion entrance, she got out and strode purposefully inside.

When she reached her aunt's suite, she saw it was locked from the outside.

"Where is she?" Sabitha demanded.

"She left last night after she heard about you leaving to go somewhere," Dhruv answered.

"Where did she go?"

"We are not sure, madam. She didn't tell any of us."

"Who drove her?"

There was a pause. "My father," Dhruv answered.

Sabitha clenched her hands into a fist when the last of her doubts had cleared. She had always known that someone was helping her aunt, letting her know the progress of Sabitha's investigation in finding Sahana.

Sabitha had suspected everyone except for Sanjay. For some reason, Sabitha believed Sanjay was loyal to her more than to her aunt. That was one of the reasons why she had even believed Sanjay when he told her that her baby had survived and had been taken away.

"Find them," Sabitha ordered quietly. "Hunt them both down and bring them back alive to me." Sabitha didn't want anyone else to kill her aunt. The amount of torment and pain she had been put through by her aunt would in no way be compensated by someone simply shooting a bullet into her.

Dhruv nodded without any arguments. Sabitha knew that although Dhruv loved his father, he valued duty above everything else.

Dev spoke to her men, giving them the details of his investigators and asked them to contact them.

Sabitha watched as some of the men left. "I can't believe she managed to escape this quickly," she said with frustration.

"We'll find her," Dev promised.

They dropped Bina and her granddaughter at their home where they had a tearful reunion with the rest of their relatives.

Sabitha watched them quietly from a distance.

After a while, Bina left the group and came closer. "Thank you, Sabi," she said with tears in her eyes. "I never thought I would ever see my home again before I died."

Sabitha nodded. "You will be safe here. I have asked someone to take care of all your needs. If you or Sahana need anything else, call for me."

Sabitha gave instructions to one of the men before walking away from her mother's people.

She closed her eyes and then opened them again when she felt the reassuring squeeze of Dev's hands. "Dev, you should get back home, too," she said quietly when they walked towards the car.

"You want me to leave?" he asked.

"No," she replied honestly. "But—"

"Then nothing else matters," he said, cutting her off before she could voice her reasons. "I'm staying by your side until you want me to leave."

Sabitha didn't argue. She still felt emotionally drained. And selfishly, she wanted him next to her.

When he began to drive them to Prajapati Mansion, she looked at him uncertainly. "Can we go to our cottage?" she asked.

His eyes flared with an unnamed emotion, but he nodded.

Sabitha lay in the arms of man she loved. She felt at peace and drew comfort from the place which had been a safe haven where she could just be herself, and forget her responsibilities and worries.

Dev had been quiet for some time. He seemed lost in thoughts. When he felt her gaze on him, he looked at her. "Can I ask you something?"

She nodded.

She saw a tormented look on his face. "Were you pregnant when you were running away with that boy, all those years ago?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied softly.

Dev looked utterly devastated. "I'm so sorry, baby," he said. "Because of me, you lost two of your loved ones."

"No, I didn't, Dev," she said, holding his hand in hers. His touch had the power to comfort her immensely and she hoped hers had the same effect on

him. She looked into his eyes. "I realize now that what I had with Raghav for a brief while wasn't love. I was more in love with the idea of living a life of freedom away from the violent world." She laid a hand on his cheek. "I didn't lose my son because of you. I lost him because of my stress. You were just involved in my first attempt to escape. After that, I had tried escaping many times, and each time I was dragged back home. I hated the thought of bringing a child into that environment."

She looked away from him as she voiced the thought that had been running through her mind since she accepted the fact that her baby was stillborn. "Maybe my son died because he knew I dreaded bringing him into my violent world," she whispered.

"Don't say that. I know you must have wanted your child badly. You have been searching relentlessly for over six years and doing everything within your power to keep that child safe."

Fresh tears spilled out from her eyes as soon as he said that. She threw her arms around him and cried into his neck. She clung to him and spilled out some of her sadness. Through her tears, she felt him rub her back gently while he murmured words of comfort into her ear.

After a long while, when her sobs subsided, she pulled away and wiped her tears, feeling embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"It's okay to need me, Sabitha. I need you, too. There is no shame in needing someone we love."

"You still... love me?" she whispered in wonder.

"Of course, I love you," he said, looking at her as though she was mad to ever doubt him. "I've already told you I will always love you. There is no before, or after, or in-between for me. You are the one, the only one for me."

Her heart sped up as she heard him say those words. "What about the alliance with the Senanis?" she asked. "You are supposed to marry Narmada Senani."

"No. I'm not," he said. "Before I called you to let you know about Bina and Sahana, I had already made up my mind not to go ahead with the alliance."

Hope began to flourish within her. He wasn't committed to someone else.

She threw her arms around him. "God, I love you, too. I love you so much and I missed you," she said.

She kissed him with longing and he kissed her back. But when their lips

parted, he watched her with a vulnerable look on his face. “What about your alliance? Are you still going to marry Revanth Senani?” he asked

“No,” she replied. “I had never intended to go through with it. I gave him a firm no as my answer a few days ago.”

A smile broke on Dev’s face and he pulled her close to capture her lips once again. The kiss continued for a long time until Dev pulled away to watch her face. “Marry me,” he said. “I don’t want anything else coming between us again.”

Sabitha hesitated. She didn’t doubt that he loved her or that she loved him equally. But marriage... If it had been any other man she wouldn’t have had any qualms about marrying due to cold and selfish reasons. She was willing to marry Abhay Singham in order to gain Singham power and find her daughter. But at the same time she had been prepared for her husband’s hate when the truth came out. And also, by the time Singham people found the truth of her past and her child, it would have been too late to do anything. Because Singhams didn’t believe in divorces.

But now, even if Singham people wouldn’t know about her past since there was no child, she couldn’t do that to Dev. She knew that at some point the truth about her past would leak out, and Singhams would shun her. Dev would have a battle in his hands.

She wanted Dev’s love, but not at the cost of him being odds with his people.

“Dev... I do want to spend my life with you. But we don’t have to get married...”

A frown marred his handsome face. “What are you saying, Sabitha?”

She took a deep breath as doubts slowly crept into her mind. “Before we broke up, I knew I wanted to spend my life with you. I wanted to tell you about Sahana and everything about my past. I knew you loved me enough to look past it and ignore it. But I don’t expect us to get married.”

“Why?”

“Because of my past, Dev,” she repeated. “I was with another man, I even had his child. And the Singhams—”

He pulled her closer, not letting her finish. He held her face in his hands. “You were wrong. I can’t ignore your past and I won’t even try to,” he said, making her stomach jump with dread.

Then there was a smile on his face that threw her off.

“I don’t love you *despite* your past, Sabitha. I love you *including* it. I just

love you. All of you.” He kissed her hard on her lips. “I don’t give a shit about what other people have as criteria for the suitability of a wife. For me, the only criteria I have is that it has to be *you*. Just you.”

Sabitha smiled, even though it was a wobbly one. But more doubts crept into her. “That’s not the only thing, Dev,” she said. “When we broke up, I had a lot of time to think. I tried to reason with myself why it was for the best,” she confessed. “Because even if we loved each other, I don’t know if it can work between us on a long-term basis. You need someone who will be by your side all the time. Someone who doesn’t have other major obligations like I do. I have to be with my people, and you have to run your companies. I don’t—”

“Don’t, Sabitha,” he said. “Don’t even think of asking me to let you go. I can’t do it. I don’t think I’m strong enough to do it again.” He held her face with his hands and stared down into her eyes. “I told you before that you are everything to me. I meant it.” He kissed her powerfully, letting her know how he felt.

“But how, Dev? We can’t be together most of the time. At least, physically.”

“It’s true that I want you next to me until eternity. But the way I see it, I will stand next to you when you lead your people, and you can join me whenever you can in other places when I take care of my businesses.”

What he said made sense. But how practical it was, she didn’t know. “Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes!” he answered and held her as though he was afraid she would try to get away from him or talk him out of being together.

She knew it wasn’t going to be an easy path for them to be together. But none of the things she wanted the most in her life were. The only good thing about having a hard life was that one becomes good at overcoming obstacles if not completely eliminating them.

She watched his face as hope, worry and love warred on it. Placing a hand on his chest where his heart thumped. “Okay, I’ll marry you. Now, make love to me, Dev Singham,” she demanded softly.

His heartbeat sped up under her palm. A look of relief passed over his face along with a familiar heated look in his hooded eyes. “With the greatest pleasure, my love,” he said.

Not wasting any time, he rolled on top of her and kissed her again. His lips didn’t leave hers when he quickly removed her clothes. She moaned in

protest when she felt the loss of his touch as he began to remove his. And then his weight was back on her again.

“Now,” she whispered, wanting to feel him deep within her.

His kiss returned and she felt his hands holding her hips with a firm grip.

She softly gasped when she felt the familiar burn of him slowly sliding inside her body. She clutched him close. Tears welled up in her eyes. At that moment, she felt everything was right in her world even though it wasn't in reality.

“I feel like I'm finally home,” he rasped, echoing her thoughts.

Then placing his head against the crook of her neck, he began to move, thrusting hard. Soon she was lost in the feelings the man she loved built in her.

The pleasure increased in intensity with each hard and fast thrust.

“Look at me, baby,” she heard him say. And when she slowly opened her eyes, she saw his possessive look along with his longing.

“Say you are mine,” he demanded softly as he continued to move within her with an intensity that made her eyes roll back in pleasure.

Each time they had been together, he had always asked her to say she was his. And each time she had refused to do it. Not anymore.

“I'm yours,” she gasped, meaning it. She pulled his mouth towards her and kissed him hard. “Tell me you are mine,” she demanded in return.

“I'm yours. Forever,” he said before hurtling them towards the finish line.

CHAPTER 43

Dev stirred when he heard a phone ring. Groaning softly, he opened his eyes to the most beautiful sight in the world.

Sabitha Prajapati was finally lying in his arms next to him.

She stirred as the phone continued to ring.

He kissed her on her forehead before he moved away to answer the phone.

“Dev.” The investigator’s voice sounded urgent.

The last of the sleep disappeared. “What happened?”

“I’m calling to say we found the priest. He’s on his way to the Singham province right now.”

“Don’t contact him directly. Let me talk to him first,” Dev replied before ending the call.

“What happened?” Sabitha asked him sleepily.

He turned towards her and saw her concerned look. “The man who was supposed to have died in the massacre along with our family was found alive.” He told her about Raidu and how Raidu was almost killed and in a coma, and then about the priest and the investigation done so far.

Sabitha listened to everything quietly. “You should go now, Dev,” she said.

“Come with me,” he said, unwilling to leave her alone.

“No. I need to go home. I need to resume my duties. With Sanjay gone, there must be a lot of pending work. Call me whenever you are available again.”

He watched her uncertainly.

“I’m fine, Dev. Please go,” she insisted.

He kissed her. “I’ll be back soon, I promise,” he said.

Dev dropped Sabitha at the Prajapati Mansion before driving to the church where Samuel Mathews was headed.

Dev and Abhay were seated at the church, speaking with Samuel Mathews. The priest, though tired from a long journey, agreed to meet with

Dev and Abhay.

“We are sorry for intruding on you this way, Father,” said Abhay.

“That’s okay, my son. I’m more than happy to help you both.”

“Father, we are trying to get some important information about a man who had left our province nearly twenty years ago.” Abhay showed an enlarged picture of Raidu. “Do you recognize this man?”

Samuel Mathews stared at the picture for only a couple of seconds before he began to nod his head. “Yes, my son. I was the one who helped him when he wanted to convert to Christianity. He even picked my name as his, to show his gratitude.” The priest smiled. “I even converted the child he brought in.”

There was silence. Everything froze within Dev. He felt Abhay stiffening next to him as well.

“We didn’t know Samuel had a son,” Abhay stated in a casual tone.

“How old was Samuel’s son at that time?”

“No, it wasn’t Samuel’s son,” the priest replied. “It was an orphan that Samuel had wanted to drop off at an orphanage. But since there was a lot of unrest within the province at that time, I requested Samuel to drop that boy in one of the other orphanages I had recommended.”

“How old was the boy?” Dev asked.

“I’m not really sure, since it’s been twenty years. Maybe around seven or eight.”

Rana had been five when he had been killed during the massacre. But like all the males in their family, Rana had been a tall child who could be easily passed as a seven or eight-year-old.

“If we show you a picture of a child, would you be able to identify him?” Abhay asked.

“The child seemed frightened at that time. He was clinging to Samuel most of the time. But I’ll try.”

“We’ll be back with a picture, Father. Meantime, can you also give us the details of the orphanages you had recommended at that time?” Abhay asked.

“Sure. I don’t remember the exact list, but I can give you the names of the orphanages I would personally recommend.”

While Abhay continued to note the names and locations of the orphanages, Dev stayed silent, feeling extremely torn. His heart desperately wanted to believe that it was his younger brother, but Dev knew it wasn’t possible. He had seen the burned body of his brother, lying next to his

mother.

But unlike his parents' or his uncle's body, the body of Rana had been beyond recognition.

What if Rana escaped the massacre? What if the child with Raidu turned out to be Rana?

The drive to Singham Mansion was quiet.

Dev didn't want to voice his doubts out aloud. He didn't want Abhay to have hopes of the child turning out to be Rana, only to be disappointed.

Dev knew he owed Abhay the complete truth.

He took a deep breath. "Abhay," he said. When Abhay turned to look at him, Dev forged ahead with the secret he had been keeping from his brother for a while. "I was there at the temple. Right after the massacre. I saw the bodies of Mum and Dad. And even Rana and Uncle Ajay's bodies."

Abhay looked stunned, but he didn't interrupt Dev with questions. He listened quietly as Dev told him everything that he had seen as a seven-year-old child.

"Is that why you wouldn't visit temples?" Abhay asked softly. "They remind you of what you had seen?"

Dev nodded.

"What if the child is Rana, Dev? What if like Raidu, Rana made it out alive even though he was presumed dead?"

"I desperately hope that turns out to be the truth, Abhay," Dev told him.

Two hours later, they returned to the priest with an old picture of Rana that was taken on the day before the massacre.

The priest squinted. "I can't say for sure. But that appears to be him. Like I had said, the child was too frightened and he clung to Samuel."

Despite the vague answer, Dev felt the budding and desperate hope grow in size exponentially.

As they drove back home, Dev's eyes fell on the picture of his five-year-old brother. Rana was looking at the camera with a huge, wide smile. Dev recalled how Rana and he were always up to some mischief or other together. While Abhay had been a serious child, Rana and Dev got into trouble re-enacting their grandmother's adventures in London.

Dev had mourned the loss of his playmate and brother for twenty long years. He knew he was opening his heart to more hurt and disappointment if

they pursued the search.

Taking a deep breath, he looked at Abhay. “I’m going to ask my team to start simulating Rana’s images. They will show us how he’d look now at twenty-five.”

CHAPTER 44

“Whom are you going to send those letters to, papa?” Sabitha asked.
“To a fairy that lives very far away from here, sweetie,” Harshvardhan Prajapati replied.
“Where does she live?”
“In a place called London.”
“Is she pretty?”
“Yes. She is pretty.”
“Prettier than my mother?”
“No, sweetie. Your mother was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. And you look just like her.”

Sabitha was standing in Neelambari’s room, looking for clues to know the whereabouts of her aunt. As she stared at the letters on the wall, she was reminded of the letters her father had sent to someone.

She now knew that her father was sending letters to London, where Arundhati Singham had lived for a decade. Immediately, she called Dev.

“Sabitha,” he said. “Is everything alright?” She could hear some background noise. Dev was outside.

“Yes, I’m fine. I just wanted to say that Anika was right. My father couldn’t have killed your mother. I just remembered my father sending those letters to London. He always spoke fondly of your mother.”

He was quiet for a couple of seconds. “I feel that’s the truth, too,” he said. “There are a lot of lies that have been fed to our people as facts. We’ll uncover them soon, baby.”

Dev told her about what the priest had said and what Dev and Abhay assumed.

Sabitha was stunned. “Let me know if you need help from my investigators, Dev. I can join the search as well.”

“Thanks, baby. Abhay and I have it covered for now. Just keep an eye on Anika. With Neelambari on the loose, we are worried about Anika’s safety.”

“Where is Anika?”

“At the Arundhati Hospital. She’s with the doctor who has come to

revive Raidu.”

“I’ll go to her and ask her to stay with me until you both return.”

“Thank you. I love you, baby.”

“I love you, too,” she replied softly before ending the call. She wasn’t really the demonstrative kind. But it had felt so natural saying those words to him.

She called for Dhruv.

“Yes, madam?”

“I want you to take up Sanjay’s responsibilities until we can find a replacement.”

Dhruv nodded.

“I’m going to visit my cousin. I’ll be bringing her back with me. Have the security and vehicles prepared.”

Sabitha reached the Arundhati Hospital where Anika was staying temporarily.

“I’m fine, Sabitha. Abhay and Dev need to stop worrying about me so much.”

“Neela is gone, Anika.”

Anika frowned. “Gone? What do you mean?”

Sabitha gave a short version of what had happened in the last couple of days.

“I see,” Anika said gently.

“Neela knows she’s cornered. Until she knew about your pregnancy, she had viewed you as a threat. She knew you were digging into the past. And now that she knows Dev had helped me find Bina and Sahana, she must have received information regarding the rest of the investigation.”

“I had a feeling she already knew about Raidu and she was the one who hired a professional to kill him.”

“No, I’m sure Neela knew nothing about Raidu,” said Sabitha. “If she did, she would have attempted another attack. I would have also heard something about it from my men.”

Anika frowned. “If not Neelambari, then who? Who would have ordered that hit?”

“I don’t know. But I want you to stay close to me until Dev and your husband return.”

“I can’t, Sabitha. I have an appointment in the city to meet with another doctor. He has flown half way around the world to help us with Raidu’s condition. I have to meet him in the evening.”

Sabitha didn’t want Anika to go to the city by herself. “I’ll come with you,” she told Anika.

Sabitha accompanied Anika to the city. By the time they arrived, it was late afternoon.

“Two more hours until Dr. Batra’s flight lands. We should grab lunch,” Anika suggested.

Sabitha sent her men along with the Singham bodyguards to check whether the restaurant was safe. Twenty minutes later, they came back with clearance.

During lunch, Anika kept the conversation going. At one point, she broached a difficult subject.

“How do you know for sure the child you found wasn’t yours?”

Sabitha took a deep breath. “I just knew Bina was speaking the truth. And also the DNA results confirmed it.”

“I’m sorry,” Anika said softly.

Sabitha just nodded.

Anika continued to talk. Sabitha found it odd to discuss personal topics with anyone. Until then, she had only spoken to Dev, and that, too, they didn’t really get a chance to talk for long.

“Dev loves you a lot, Sabitha. I have seen how he went crazy and was devastated when he thought you were marrying someone else.”

“I know.”

“I was terrified when he briefly considered an alliance with the Senanis. Have you spoken to Narmada Senani?” Anika asked.

“No.” When Sabitha was made to accompany her aunt to be a part of the talks, she was only going through motions. She hadn’t really greeted or spoken with any of the Senanis—apart from Revanth Senani who wouldn’t just shut up.

“That girl looked drugged,” Anika stated. “I couldn’t be too sure because I was seated far away, but I’m sure she was on some kind of medication.”

Sabitha frowned. “I see.” It was quite possible. Revanth Senani and his grandfather were the kind to force an unwilling woman into an alliance.

“Whoa!”

“What happened?” Sabitha asked, becoming instantly alert.

“Nothing. Just a strong kick.” Anika patted her stomach, looking at it with a soft smile. Then immediately her head whipped up with a horrified look. “I-I’m so sorry,” she said. “That was inconsiderate of me. You just found out about your baby—”

“I’m fine, Anika,” Sabitha told her. “You don’t have to be cautious around me and watch what you say. I understand. I’m not the kind to shatter just because an expecting mother is excited to talk about her baby.”

Sabitha had felt a twinge in her heart when Anika spoke about the baby’s kicks. She recalled how excited she had been when she had felt her baby move within her. Even though her world had been dark and she was imprisoned inside her room by her aunt, the baby’s movements and kicks had been the one to comfort her.

But Sabitha didn’t want to be stuck in the past. Her people needed her still. And she was determined to find her aunt. She also wanted to help the Singhams in finding out the truth of what had happened during the massacre.

Anika got up from her chair. “I need to use the restroom. I’ll be right back,” she said.

“I’ll come with you.”

“That’s not needed, Sabitha. Trust me if you were to accompany a pregnant woman for all the restroom breaks, you’d be spending a significant time there.”

“That’s okay. Let’s go.”

Anika continued to talk. “God, I miss having a girlfriend to talk to. There’s not many my age at the Singham Mansion. There’s just Malini, but she’s always so sensitive about every little thing. It gets exhausting to talk to her. And my sister, Myra, has started to complain about her falling asleep during her classes because I’m keeping her awake to talk to her during her nights. And Abhay... well, let’s just say there is very little talking involved when he sees me. His excuse is that he finds me even more irresistible with the bump. As if!” There was a dramatic eye roll.

They reached the ladies’ restroom. “Wait outside in the hall. We’ll only take a few minutes,” Sabitha told the bodyguards.

Once inside, Anika continued to talk across the bathroom stalls. Sabitha smiled as she heard her excited chatter. After she washed and dried her hands, she checked her phone for any messages while Anika adjusted her maternity dress and continued talking.

Suddenly Anika fell silent.

Sabitha looked up from the phone and froze. Four armed men stood inside the ladies' washroom and one of them had a gun pressed to Anika's head. The other three pointed their guns at Sabitha.

Sabitha wanted to attack them immediately, but she stopped when she saw Anika watching her with terrified eyes.

Sabitha instantly knew that the men were Senanis. They were not sent by Neelambari to attack Anika. In fact, these men were after Sabitha.

Sabitha also knew that the men wouldn't harm her. However, they would have no qualms about hurting Anika.

"Come with us quietly or we'll shoot her in the head right now," one of the men said.

Sabitha looked at Anika and held her eyes. "You will be fine. We'll get out of this situation and you'll be back at the Singham Mansion soon. Just remain calm. Okay?" she said softly.

Anika trembled, but she nodded her head.

"Follow behind us and if you try to speak or alert anyone..." The man let the unspoken threat linger in the air.

Sabitha's hands itched to whip out her knife, but she controlled herself. As expected, one of the men grabbed her handbag and removed the gun from it.

She followed behind them calmly. When she didn't see either the Singham men or her men, her suspicion grew. Someone had informed the Senanis that she and Anika were at the washroom. Not only that, but they managed to somehow distract the men keeping guard.

The men stopped when they reached the backside of the restaurant. Two SUVs with tinted windows were waiting for them with the engines running.

The men tried to separate Anika and her, but Sabitha resisted. "I want my cousin in the same car."

"You don't have a choice. We are the ones with the guns here," one of the men snapped at her.

"Put us in the same car and I will come without protest. Don't fight me on this," she told him softly with menace in her voice.

The rest of the Senani men looked at each other with uncertainty and shifted uncomfortably. But the man who was probably the leader of the group didn't budge.

Another man tried to intervene. "I think we should listen to her and do as she says. She's going to be sir's—"

“No! I’m in charge here. Not this bitch. Get in!” the leader said and knocked the butt of a gun on Sabitha’s head.

On instinct, Sabitha caught his throat with both her hands and began to crush his windpipe. He began struggling and tried to pry her hands away from around his neck, but she didn’t budge.

“Stop!” one of the men standing around shouted. It sounded like a plea rather than an order.

Sabitha continued to squeeze the throat until the man slumped.

Then shifting a step away from the prone body, she glared at the rest of the men who were pointing their weapons at her, but watching her warily.

“Put this man in the other car and bring my cousin here,” she ordered.

Hesitating only for a few brief seconds, they did as they were told.

She saw that Anika looked relieved when brought into the same car.

Over the next few hours, as predicted, the car headed towards the Senani lands. It stopped in front of a farm house.

Sabitha observed everything with a grim look. She noticed how the place was decorated with flowers and other things indicating a wedding was going to take place. She also noticed a makeshift wedding dais that was built on the front lawn.

As soon as they reached inside the farm house, she saw him.

Revanth Senani.

He was dressed in wedding attire. And when he saw her, he came towards her in purposeful strides.

He caught her chin in a firm grip. Sabitha didn’t flinch even though she was expecting him to hit her.

“Who hurt her?” he demanded instead, his eyes falling on the bruise on her forehead.

There was silence.

“Tell me right now, or by God I’ll burn you all alive!”

“Sir...” the leader of the group who had kidnapped Anika and Sabitha came forward. “She was causing trouble and not listening to our instructions and resisting—” Before the man could finish, Revanth Senani shot him multiple times.

“Get the body out of here and get the place cleaned up!”

Revanth Senani’s men scrambled to follow his instructions. Meantime, he pulled her towards the dais.

“I have already told you that I didn’t want to marry you,” Sabitha told

him in a quiet yet firm tone.

He stopped and then he glared at her. “You don’t have a choice this time. Either cooperate with me or I will personally cut open the baby out of my brother’s murderer’s stomach and send it to the Singhams as a souvenir.”

Sabitha looked at Anika who was standing at a distance, holding her stomach protectively with a terrified look.

“How do I know you won’t harm her or the baby even if I agree to marry you?” Sabitha asked.

“I give you my word,” Revanth Senani snapped.

His promise meant shit to her, but she couldn’t do anything about it. “I’ll give you my word, too. Send my cousin back to the Singhams and I will marry you as soon as I get the confirmation she is with them.”

Revanth Senani’s eyes flared with further rage. The next instant, he slapped her hard. It was done with enough force for her to lose her footing and fall onto the floor.

“Don’t try to use your cunning tricks with me again!” he shouted. “You think I don’t know that the moment I let your cousin go, you will attack me like a bitch and fight me until death?”

“Don’t hurt her!” Sabitha heard Anika shouting and sobbing out loud.

Revanth Senani glared at Anika. “Take that bitch away and throw her in one of the rooms. Wait for my order as to what to do with her.”

Anika’s shouts began to fade as the men dragged her away. Sabitha felt her cheek throb where Revanth Senani had hit her. She looked up at him with loathing. “If you are planning on hurting my cousin and her baby anyway, why do you think I would cooperate with you?” she asked calmly.

He bent towards her and gripped her hair painfully before dragging her to her feet. She didn’t protest or try to escape his hold.

“Because, my dear soon-to-be-wife,” he more or less hissed out. “I know that you would delay her death by as much time as possible, thinking that the fearless and undefeated Singham brothers would burst in as the fucking saviors. But guess what? Before your fucking lover gets here, we would be married, and I would have fucked my wife closing the alliance.”

Sabitha was silent.

“How can you think my people will accept you after this?” she asked quietly.

“You will convince them. Or there will be an even worse feud than before.”

Sabitha saw huge holes in his logic. But looking at his crazed eyes, she knew he was way past listening to any reasoning or logic.

She recalled Anika's trembling form and her stomach where an innocent life was sheltered. She even recalled Anika's excited chatter about her baby. And Sabitha especially recalled with painful detail how it felt to lose a child.

Slowly, she let the numbness settle over her. "Alright, I will marry you and do as you say. I'm holding you to your word of not harming my cousin or her child."

At her defeated tone, Revanth Senani didn't look victorious. He slapped her once again. "You should be proud to be a Senani bride! Not resign yourself to it!" he shouted into her face.

Sabitha couldn't even reply as her mouth and lips felt swollen and numb due to the pain.

He dragged her to the dais and pushed her down and then sat next to her for the ceremony.

"Sir, we have clothes and jewellery prepared for madam," someone suggested.

"Not needed!" Revanth Senani snapped. "I want to get this done as soon as possible." He looked at the priest. "Continue! Finish it quickly or you'll face my wrath," he ordered.

The priest looked terrified and hurried through the ceremony.

Sabitha remained numb throughout the ceremony.

She remained numb when she was made to sign the official documents registering the marriage, making it legal.

She even remained numb when she was dragged into a bedroom that was decorated for a wedding night.

CHAPTER 45

Dev was seated in a large conference room with Abhay and the rest of the investigative team. They were looking at the various images that were being displayed on the slides projected.

“Stop,” he said.

He stared at the image of the man’s face on the screen, and then turned to look at Abhay.

Abhay was also looking at the screen with a stunned look.

“I think we should use this one,” Dev told his brother.

“This almost looks like—”

“Grandfather,” Dev finished. “Yeah, I know. Grandmother had always said that Rana looked a lot like Abhimanyu Singham.”

The image on the screen was the result of the simulations based on the childhood pictures of Rana. The image on the screen showed how Rana would look at the age of twenty-five.

“Confirm this image,” Abhay added.

The investigative teams were now re-directed to work on finding the orphanage where the child who was with Raidu had been sent to. Dev and Abhay had asked them to temporarily shelve the investigation on finding the identity of the person who shot Raidu.

“Bring us the identities of men who resemble this picture,” Dev told the lead investigator. “But like we already said, have more people search for that orphanage location first.”

The man nodded. “Technically it shouldn’t take us long. The list has only five names on it. But since the records are going to be twenty years old...”

“I don’t care how much money it’ll take to speed up the process. We need to see a quick turnaround. This is the top priority,” Dev stressed once again.

Abhay was about to add more instructions to the team when his phone rang. Abhay frowned when he looked at the screen, and then immediately his entire body tensed.

“What happened?” Dev asked.

“They have Anika and Sabitha.”

Dev's heart jolted in fear. "They? Neelambari and her men?"

Abhay looked at Dev. "No, the Senanis."

Rage erupted within Dev. The bastard Revanth Senani must have been the one who took them. But how did they manage to take Sabitha that easily? He knew she wouldn't follow behind the Senanis calmly.

Immediately, the answer came to his mind.

Anika.

The bastard Senanis must have used Anika as leverage to get Sabitha to cooperate.

"They better be unharmed or the fucking Senanis will all burn," Dev declared.

Abhay looked similarly enraged. "I know it must be Anika who sent the location of where exactly they had been taken. So they must be okay for now."

While Abhay made arrangements to fly to the Senani province, Dev called Dhruv. Dhruv told him Sabitha had not taken him as a bodyguard that day. Instead, two of her other men went along.

Dev already knew who was with Anika that day as her bodyguards. Which meant, one of Sabitha's men had betrayed her.

"Did you call the Senani head to let him know of your decision?" Abhay asked as they drove to the location where their plane would be awaiting them.

"No. Not yet. I wanted to warn you first. I'm not going forward with the alliance."

Abhay nodded. "I didn't expect you to," he said. "Then why the hell did the Senanis decide to strike before they even knew of your decision?"

"Because of Revanth Senani. Sabitha had already told him of her decision."

Worry and fear tore through Dev's heart as he thought about what could happen to Sabitha.

God, please let her be alive.

He kept chanting those words in his mind. But Dev knew the woman he loved, quite well. She was not the kind to take any kind of defeat or attack, lying down. He prayed hard for her to be the one to come out of this alive and as a winner.

Anything else would simply destroy him.

CHAPTER 46

Sabitha looked at the room she was dragged into.

“Take off your clothes,” Revanth Senani’s voice commanded.

When Sabitha didn’t move or say anything, he came towards her. He watched her with a cold look for a few seconds before placing his hands on her and ripping her shirt. “If you don’t want to do it yourself, I will be more than happy to help you with the rest,” he hissed out. And then, he pulled his long, wedding shirt over his head, baring his upper body. “Two minutes,” he warned. “If you are not lying on the bed, naked and waiting for me, it will not end well.”

Sabitha’s heart thudded. She didn’t want him finding her knife. She went towards the bed and stood next to it and began to shed her clothes calmly. Her hands trembled slightly as she undressed.

Get a grip on yourself, Sabitha’s mind commanded. You are stronger than this. It’s just a body. Skin and bones and flesh. What’s the worst thing that can happen to it? It’s not like he can violate your mind.

Sabitha closed her eyes briefly and then opened them again to focus.

She was Sabitha Prajapati. A leader. A fighter. A survivor. She was capable of withstanding anything.

She shed the last of her clothes and placed them neatly next to the bed.

Her so-called husband was already naked, but luckily his attention was on a small bag placed on a table in the room.

Revanth Senani was poking a syringe into his arm. She didn’t know what exactly it was, but she knew it had something to do with the abnormally large bulging muscles with veins running all over his body.

Removing the needle from his skin, he watched her. “This will keep me pumped up for a week. The Senani heir will be in your belly by then,” he promised.

Sabitha couldn’t stop the disgust from showing on her face. Her eyes slid over his nude body. “With such small family jewels, I doubt if that’s possible even after a decade,” she taunted softly. He had unusually small testicles which she guessed as a side effect of some kind of testosterone or steroid shots.

At her softly uttered taunt, Revanth Senani’s dead eyes clouded with

anger. He walked towards her and stood in front of her.

The sudden blow to her face was not unexpected. Even though she had braced herself, it still hurt.

“You are a rude bitch. I let your behavior slide before. But now... as my wife, you need to exert more control and watch every word you say to me.”

Sabitha’s cheekbone hurt where he had punched her. Before she could touch her tender eye with her fingers, he held her arm in a painful grip and dragged her towards the bed.

Another strike knocked her on top of the mattress. Before she could catch her breath, hands wrapped around her throat, choking her. Dark spots appeared in front of her and Sabitha was sure she would pass out, but the grip loosened suddenly. She coughed and gasped as she drew in air.

“Sabitha,” she heard Revanth Senani say quietly, while he ran his finger on her chin to wipe away the blood that was trickling from her split lip. “I don’t want to hurt you like I do with my other women. Because believe it or not, I actually love you.”

When Sabitha didn’t move or respond to his insane declaration, he sighed. He crawled on top of her and kissed the corner of her eye gently. “You made me do this to you,” he said. “Why couldn’t you have simply agreed to marry me? Why did you have to betray me, too?”

She closed her eyes, not wanting to see his face.

He slapped her again. “Look at me when I talk to you!” she heard him shout.

But she kept her eyes firmly closed. The blows to her face kept coming and along with them came the apologies and his rants.

Sabitha knew that the man on top of her might violate her body soon. She braced herself for it. Or rather, she was resigned to the fact. There was only one thought that kept her still and from reaching for her weapon. And it was that even if a hundred men violated her, she would not be impacted. Because only her body would be taken. Nothing else that mattered would be touched.

Only Dev Singham had the ability to touch her heart and soul. He was the only one who could light up her world and burn together when their bodies joined.

No one else could or will ever be able to do so with her.

Unlike the violent man who had forcibly married her and was hurting her, Dev was always fierce yet gentle with her. Dev took from her as much as

he gave back. With Dev, she had always felt safe and secure, cherished and loved. Desired and wanted.

Images of Dev's hooded predatory looks along with his melting smiles flashed behind her eyes.

"*My beautiful gypsy,*" Dev had lovingly called her sometimes. She even loved how he said her name or called her 'baby' in an endearing way.

"*Sabitha!*"

She heard Dev's voice calling out to her. She heard it again, this time being called in a frantic way.

Was that my imagination? she wondered.

But she heard the voice calling her name over and over again.

It was Dev.

That meant Anika must have been rescued and safe. She knew Dev and his brother would make sure of that.

Immediately, keeping her body still, she moved her hand back towards the pillow and felt underneath it. Her fingers met with the handle of her knife.

She opened her eyes and turned her head and looked up at the man above her. Revanth Senani was touching himself with frustration. It was obvious that whatever chemicals he kept injecting into his body had another major side effect.

She was glad.

He was so lost in frustration that he wasn't focusing on anything else.

Sabitha's eyes fell on his throat where the pulse beat rapidly, carrying the life-giving blood. Slowly she removed the knife from its sheath under the pillow where she had hidden it before. Then without a pause, she brought it out and slashed it across his throat, severing the jugular.

She turned her head sideways as the warm blood sprayed on her. Then shoving away the gasping man from her, she got off the bed. She picked up her torn shirt and wiped her face and upper body of the blood.

That's how Dev Singham and his men found her.

The other men left immediately, but Dev stood frozen for a few moments at the sight of her naked and covered in blood.

Sabitha numbly noticed that Dev held a bloody axe in one hand which he probably used to kill someone outside and also to break down the locked door.

They just stared at each other for a few split seconds while noises of the struggle outside and the sick, gurgling sounds being emitted by the man lying

on the ground, continued.

Dev broke the trance as he moved towards her in rapid, long strides. As soon as he reached her, he unbuttoned and shrugged off his shirt and put it around her body. While she buttoned, he moved towards the man lying on the ground.

She heard the grunts from Dev as he kicked the man. It was followed by the hacking noises as he used the axe.

A few moments later, she went around the bed and saw what Dev Singham had done to the man who for a brief while had been her husband.

She didn't flinch at the sight.

It was definitely going to be hard for the Senanis to perform the last rites for Revanth Senani.

Dev continued with the hacking. "Dev," she whispered softly. He stopped midway as he raised the axe for another strike. "He's gone, Dev," she told him.

Dev's nostrils flared and he gave one last hack and left the axe embedded in the body, or whatever was remaining of it.

He came towards her, his eyes still wild and filled with bloodlust. But when he reached her, he held her face gently with both his hands. He kissed her softly on her forehead, and her eyes, and the tip of her nose, and then on her lips. He took a shuddering breath. "Let's go, baby. We'll burn this whole damn place," he vowed.

Sabitha nodded. She grabbed her knife to strap it around her leg and took the gun he handed to her.

Sabitha watched the flames consume the building, taking with it some of the memories of the last few hours.

She felt Dev's hand taking hers in his and squeezing it in a reassuring manner. He then brought it up to his lips and kissed it. "Let's go home, baby," he said, gently pulling her towards the waiting cars.

Sabitha saw Anika waiting in one of the cars. Anika gave her a weak smile, looking close to exhaustion. Abhay was right behind them. He slid into the car and held his wife close.

Dev led Sabitha into another car and sat next to her. He held her close as well.

The drive was quiet and Sabitha felt exhausted. She didn't allow any

thoughts or emotions to process at that point. She was fine with feeling numb.

Dev seemed to understand and stayed silent. He didn't let go of her hand and held her close to him against his chest, kissing her hair over and over as though to make sure she was real and with him.

CHAPTER 47

They reached the Singham Mansion during the early hours.

Dev was just done soaping Sabitha and then himself. He was washing away the blood from their bodies.

Sabitha watched him as he focused on her completely as he gently reapplied the soap on her where there were probably still traces of blood and cuts. When he touched the corner of her eye where it was still tender, she involuntarily flinched slightly.

His eyes looked haunted. "I'm so sorry I wasn't around or couldn't come sooner," he said.

"Dev, you were almost at the other side of the country. You came much sooner than I could ever expect."

He shook his head. "I should have stayed closer and not left your side when things were that tense."

"But they weren't tense at that time," she told him quietly. "It's not your fault. Revanth Senani was only after me, it had nothing to do with you not forming an alliance with his sister."

He ran a shaky hand on her face. "But I should have considered that possibility, too. That man was obsessed with you. I should have let the investigators or Abhay handle searching for Rana—"

"Dev," she gently interrupted. "You know that I'm not helpless or that I need saving. You can't be next to me all the time. In fact—"

"In fact, what?" Dev asked when she broke off abruptly.

She took in a painful breath before she could say the next words. "In fact, you are not obligated to be with me at all," she said softly.

He froze. "What?"

She took in another deep breath. "Your men saw me, Dev. They think I was raped."

He looked at her with slightly widened eyes. It was obvious he had thought the same.

"I wasn't raped, Dev," she clarified softly. "I slit his throat before he could get to me. But I want you to know that I understand. I know Singhams are true believers of purity and bloodlines. Me being partly from a lower-class was already pushing it, along with the information of carrying another

man's child. And if your people think I was—”

“Stop,” he said quietly.

She saw the hurt look on his face. “Do you think so less of me that you think I’d give you up for the sake of some foolish prejudiced people?” he asked.

She was quiet.

“I love you,” he said with so much emotion that it shook her. “I’ll keep on loving you, no matter what. Even if the whole fucking world burns down if we are together, then so be it. I belong to you and you belong with me. Do you understand?” he demanded.

Sabitha’s practical mind knew it wasn’t going to be easy. She knew there would be violence and bloodshed involved if Dev ever announced that he was going to marry her. People at the Singham province will not allow a lower-class woman who they think was tainted by their enemy to ever enter the Singham Mansion as a bride. If it were just a few people who would oppose, she herself would have dealt with them in her own way. But there were thousands of them. The level of destruction they could possibly cause would be horrific.

He held her face to meet his eyes. “Tell me how can I make you understand that I love you unconditionally, you stubborn woman!” he said in anguish.

Then he took deep breaths as though he just realized he was shouting at her. “I’m sorry,” he said gently. “You’ve been through a lot already. Let’s just not talk about how other people won’t accept our union.”

She nodded.

He turned off the shower and dried them. Wearing one of his clean and warm shirts, she let him guide her towards his bed. He tucked her into the crook of his arm as they lay on the bed.

“Singham men do not believe in bullshit like purity or bloodlines, Sabitha. At least not the men in my family,” he said softly.

She remained quiet.

“My mother was raped before she got married,” Dev added softly.

“What?” Sabitha was shocked. She didn’t know or even hear about such a thing happening with Arundhati Singham.

“It was right after my father broke off his engagement with Neelambari Prajapati,” he said.

“Who did it?”

“Three men from the Prajapati province,” he replied. “They were pissed about the fact that my father was breaking a long-held tradition to marry a woman of his choice. They had attacked her when she was alone and almost left her to die. They thought Vijay Singham wouldn’t accept a woman who wasn’t pure and was violated in that way where she could possibly be carrying someone else’s child.”

He looked at her with an intent look. “The men were wrong. It just made the love my father had for my mother even stronger. Until then, my grandparents weren’t too convinced about breaking the tradition, but seeing my parents love for each other, they relented. Especially my grandmother. She was proud of my father. The people strongly opposed even though my mother grew up at the Singham Estate and they loved her. There was a lot of violence, but my grandparents and father dealt with them. It took time, but ultimately the people *had* to accept. And when they did, they had nothing but love towards my mother and her children.”

Sabitha felt moved as Dev narrated the gut-wrenching tale of his parents. She also recalled hearing hushed whispers about how Vijay Singham had hacked down four Prajapatis with an axe before he broke the tradition and had gotten married. Apparently, it had been the first and last act of violence. Now she knew those rumors were not only true but also the reason for that violent act.

“Don’t you feel any lingering hatred towards me because I’m a Prajapati and we did all this to your parents and family?” she asked.

“No,” he answered. “Not anymore. I used to be stupid and immature earlier. My grandmother had been right when she kept teaching Abhay and me that each and every person should be held responsible for their own actions. Since I began falling in love with you, I realized the same.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Maybe we cannot change our people’s mentality or their beliefs overnight, but I refuse to compromise on our future or our love because of them. I guess I take after my father when it comes to that,” he said with a smile. “When a Singham man falls in love, it continues to burn bright until he takes his last breath.”

Her own breath stopped when she heard him say those words. “It’s not going to be easy,” she said softly.

“I know, the best things in life never are. I never even expected it to be easy in the first place.”

She turned to see him, but she could see with only one eye. The other eye

was completely shut closed. He cupped her face with one of his hands. “Do you know what I see whenever I look at you?” he asked.

“What?” she asked softly.

“When I look at you, I don’t just see your face. I see my entire future,” he said. “I see our marriage. I see our children. I see us fighting. I see us making up. I see us growing old together. In my version of the future, we are quite lucky, because I even see us dying together. I see my forever in you.”

She watched him as her vision blurred due to tears. “I want all those things in my future, too. I want my forever with you,” she said in a wobbly voice.

He smiled and kissed her gently. “We’ll make it happen, baby.”

She believed him. Because Dev Singham was not going to allow anyone to come between their happiness. She knew that for her, he’d first try and convince everyone of their love. If that doesn’t work, he’d pick up his axe and cut down anyone who opposed their union or those who would speak against her or try to harm her. Although that fact would horrify most women, it warmed Sabitha’s heart.

And so, even though she felt sore and knew he was probably sore too, she kissed him deeply with all her pent-up desire and love.

When their lips parted, she saw that his eyes were heated with a familiar look. The next instant, he rolled them until he was on top. She wrapped her legs around him, running her hands all over him, greedily taking in the feel of him.

Holding her face within his hands and kissing her, he slid in slowly, joining their bodies and also their souls together.

Everything grew hazy and dreamlike except for the man above her who moved inside her with slow, yet powerful strokes. And when she came, she felt the sharp, blinding pleasure that made her feel like she had burst into flames and burned to ashes, only to be reborn again.

She felt cleansed of the ugly memories of the past few hours.

Dev watched as Sabitha slept next to him. He couldn’t fall asleep. His mind was still on overdrive—with panic, worry, fear and rage.

It had been that way since Abhay received a message with location coordinates from an unknown number, which like Abhay had guessed, was Anika who had sent it.

As soon as they reached the guesthouse, Abhay went in search for Anika while Dev shouted Sabitha's name over and over. It didn't even register in his mind when he cut down the men who tried to stop him from finding her. He was driven purely by instincts.

And then, he found her. When he saw her, relief hit him hard, immediately followed by sickness. He had felt sick. Horribly sick when he saw Sabitha, bloody and naked with a swollen, bruised face.

Someone had hurt the woman he loved. The red haze that had descended on him before he entered the Senani guesthouse became even darker. He had picked up his axe and gone at the sadistic bastard.

The voice in his head that asked him to destroy the person who hurt his woman. He had kept hacking and hacking. Cutting through flesh and bones. Over and over and over again.

Only when he finally registered Sabitha's soft voice telling him that the animal had died, did he stop.

Dev took a shuddering breath, not wanting to think about what could have happened to her. He almost lost her.

He watched her face and ran a finger over her bruised cheek. Even with a swollen black eye and heavily bruised and reddened face, she was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

He was not going to allow anyone to come between their union. He knew Sabitha's concerns were realistic. He wasn't naive to think that the people at Singham province would easily accept his decision of making Sabitha a Singham bride. He knew there would be violence. And he knew there was a high possibility of the Singham people never accepting her.

But for the woman lying in his arms, he was willing to take those risks.

CHAPTER 48

Over the next few days, Dev stayed by Sabitha's side even though she knew he was anxious about the search for his younger brother.

"Dev, I'm okay. You should go. I was caught unaware before, but now I'm taking the necessary measures. The bodyguard who betrayed me was the only one who had turned rogue," she said.

The man was from the Prajapati province. He had worked for her as a bodyguard for nearly two years, but he had some inflated opinions about whom he thought Sabitha should marry. According to his last words, he had wanted her to be a Senani bride rather than be Dev Singham's whore.

"I know, baby. But Abhay and our team are handling it quite well. And I'm not here just for your safety. You have been feeling unwell lately. I can't focus when I know you need me."

"I'm fine—"

"You are not," he said. "Otherwise we wouldn't be sitting in a hospital."

Sabitha wanted to argue that he had dragged her there even though she didn't want to come. But she stopped when the door to the hospital waiting room opened. Anika came in. Sabitha felt a sliver of alarm cross within her when she saw Abhay Singham joining his wife.

But Anika was smiling, easing most of Sabitha's alarm.

"What is it?" Dev asked. "Is she alright?"

"More than just alright," Anika replied excitedly. "Sabitha is twelve weeks pregnant!"

There was utter silence.

Sabitha's mouth fell open in shock. Pregnant! And twelve weeks? That meant... she had gotten pregnant when Dev and she had started meeting at their cottage.

"Yup, I know that look," Anika's amused tone cut through the silence.

"But.... but... how?" Sabitha asked, still in shock. "I've always used... and even he used..." She was at loss of words due to the news.

"The Singhams," Anika chuckled. "They are damn good swimmers."

"But..." Sabitha looked at Dev for answers.

Dev had a wide and an extremely satisfied, proud grin.

Sabitha tried to glare at him, but his grin and the joy on his face was

infectious. She got over her shock quickly and let happiness take over.

Dev closed the distance between them and swept her up in his arms and kissed her noisily on her mouth. Sabitha kissed him back with equal vigor.

“Aww... I miss living through the moment when we found out about our baby. I want that again soon!” she heard Anika say.

“I think we should first let our child be born before I can help you relive such moments again,” said Abhay Singham’s amused voice.

Sabitha had forgotten the fact that there were other people in the room.

Dev must have forgotten, too. He looked raptly towards the barely visible bump. “Our forever has already started, baby,” he stated before sealing his promise with another deep kiss.

Epilogue

They were at the Singham Lakehouse.

“Seriously, how many cottages have you Singhams built?” Sabitha asked in amusement. She has been to three of them including the Lakehouse.

Dev laughed. “Probably five or six. We’ll visit the rest in the coming months,” he teased.

The Singham Lakehouse had a breathtaking view on the outside—especially with the setting sun. “Why the Lakehouse? Why not our cottage?” she asked.

“Family tradition.” He didn’t elaborate. Neither did she ask him to. Because she was distracted by the look on his face as he watched her.

Her heart began to thud as he closed the distance between them.

“I love you, you know that, right?” he asked, cupping her breast and then moving his palm lower to settle his palm over her heart.

“You’ve repeated that thousands of times, Singham,” she said softly.

“It’s good that you remember, Mrs. Singham,” said Dev, stressing the Mrs.

That morning, they had gotten married in a small, low-key ceremony with just Anika and Abhay in attendance.

“It’s good you know that I love you because I am going to do some really filthy things to your body that might make you question my love and devotion to you,” he said.

“Oh yeah?” she challenged softly, seeing his hooded, predatory smile.

“Yeah,” he drawled. “I thought I would make slow sweet love to you because it’s our wedding night and we are at the Lakehouse where generations of Singhams brought their newly-wedded wives here to begin their marriage. I thought I would make you feel cherished and worshiped. But then, you decide to wear *that* for our wedding night.” He pointed and looked in an accusing manner at her sheer nightdress Anika had gifted her for the occasion.

Sabitha laughed. “Are you sure it’s the nightdress?” she asked. “If I recall, you were giving me similar heated and accusing looks during the ceremony as well.”

“Hell, yes. You looked breathtaking. And your wedding attire reminded me of the one you had worn to Abhay and Anika’s wedding. I hated you at

that time and I wanted you gone from there. But first, I wanted to throw you on the dais and do some filthy things to you before I sent you on your way.”

Sabitha laughed once again.

She and Dev have come a long way since. In barely a year, the feelings of hate had transformed into a deep, abiding and everlasting love.

She hadn't prayed much before. But she knew that going forward, she was going to count her blessings every single day.

She would thank God for giving her Dev Singham. She also knew there would be times when the man she loved would drive her crazy to curse him sometimes, and maybe even threaten him with bodily harm. But no matter what, at the end of the day, he made her happy and he made her feel alive. She loved him so much that sometimes it felt unreal and dreamlike.

She knew everything in their world wasn't magically okay. It was far from being perfect. They still had a lot of challenges. Neelambari was still missing and the hunt to find her was still ongoing. Dev was still frantically looking for his younger brother. And both she and Dev wanted to know what had happened at the temple before the massacre took place. Dev also wanted to announce their wedding to their people as soon as possible.

But while obstacles and the problems of their lives remained, whenever they were with each other, nothing seemed that big or unconquerable. They knew they would ultimately accomplish what they set their minds to.

They spent every spare minute they could find with each other, discovering things and falling more in love with each other.

Sabitha's thoughts were distracted when her husband picked her up and carried her to the bed. He placed her on it and crawled on top of her, balancing his weight on his arms. His bulging muscles and the possessive look on his face heated her blood.

She smiled sultrily. “I don't need slow or sweet love, Singham. Give me all you have,” she ordered.

“First, tell me you are mine,” he demanded softly as he picked up her thigh and held it in a firm grip at the crook of his elbow.

“I'm yours,” she replied.

As promised, Dev did do things that weren't sweet or romantic. Luckily for them, she didn't want sweet or romantic all the time. She preferred dirty and raw.

She wanted their breaths to mingle while they gasped for air.

She wanted their gazes to collide while they lost control.

She loved watching him as he lost his control while she pleased him, and she loved the feel of being at the edge on top of a mountain when he drove her insane and out of control.

She felt nothing but mind-blowing pleasure that night while the man who filled her heart and soul—also filled up her body.

Much later into the night, when their need turned into a slow simmer, he became tender. He ran his nose gently over her cheek and neck before he began to place soft, gentle kisses over her face and then her body. When he reached her stomach, he lingered. He placed several kisses where their child was resting inside.

His eyes held hers. “Forever,” he said.

“Forever,” she confirmed softly.

The End.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for reading *Bound by Hatred*.

I had a wonderful time writing the second part of the series. It was especially awesome bringing a character such as Dev Singham to life. The way I had imagined his characterization is as a charming, cocky, arrogant and overall a good-hearted, strong alpha hero. Watching a man such as him fall hard in love was simply breathtaking. Hope you loved him, too. :)

The woman Dev fell in love with was more than a perfect match for him.

Sabitha Prajapati's characterization is not that of a typical romance heroine. During the first part of the series, her role was that of an anti-heroine. Despite that, her character remained close to my heart. If you have read any of my previous works—you must already know, I love exploring shades of grey in my female leads. :)

Hopefully, in *Bound by Hatred*, I was able to redeem and also convince what an awesome character Sabitha is. Even though she had a dark past, troubled childhood and a disability such as dyslexia, she overcame the obstacles to rise and lead her people. She is a true leader who is not only intelligent and strong, but also fierce when required.

Hope you loved reading Dev and Sabitha's journey as a couple.

Please do rate and review *Bound by Hatred* on Amazon and Goodreads! :)

Thank You

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Enjoy the sample of the #1 Bestselling Romantic Suspense... THE CAPTIVE



DESCRIPTION

Nina Bhupati was a lucky woman. Her husband, a political figure and business tycoon, loved to keep her in the lap of luxury. Rich, handsome, and caring, he was also what most women dreamed of as an ideal husband.

But their fairy-tale life blew apart when Nina was kidnapped and held hostage.

Between the distraught husband who badly wanted her back, and the brutal, determined man who was bent upon shattering her soul, Nina must survive her days as—THE CAPTIVE.

WARNING: This is a fictional romance story. Please proceed with caution as the book contains content that are intended for mature reading audiences.

NOTE: This is a full-length, STANDALONE romance novel that has a thoroughly satisfying happily-ever-after ending.

--The Captor--

When he kidnapped her, all he expected was a weak, pampered rich woman. What she actually was completely different. She was a fighter, a survivor, a wily seductress, and a genuinely beautiful and giving soul who

destroyed some of the darkness that lurked inside him. The more time he spent around her, the more he became addicted. And before he knew it— he was falling in love with the wife of his enemy...

--The Captive--

When she was taken, all she knew was that her captor was dangerous. He had snatched her from her fairytale life, so he could use her as a tool for his revenge. But each time she spoke to him, and spent time in his company, he made her heart feel things it shouldn't. Under the cold, hard and cruel layers, she saw the real man. Soon, the lines were beginning to blur between what was needed and what she actually wanted...

EXCERPT

Nina hated the wait.

She sat in the corner of the room with her back against the wall and her eyes trained on the door. She was sure her captor would return to torture her painfully for stabbing him in the arm.

She felt a crippling exhaustion in her body due to lack of sleep during the past few days of her captivity. Her head kept falling forward, trying to reach for the comfort of sleep. But each time it did, she jerked it back up, refusing to give in to sleep, especially when she was at her most vulnerable.

She didn't know whether attacking him was a logical move. But when he had stalked her in a slow, unhurried manner, with menace radiating from his body, demanding his knife back, he had looked like a hunter who had cornered his prey. And she, his trembling, whimpering prey.

Her mind had instantly rebelled at the comparison of herself with a prey. She wasn't weak. She had never been weak. Even when the odds were heavily stacked against her, she had always fought back. So, not making it any exception, she had sliced his arm.

And now, the thought of what he could do to her was tearing her apart.

Will he come to her room tonight? And if he did, what would he do? Will he follow through his threats?

She thought about the video taken to send to Suraj. Her captor had spoken about the follow-up videos. She didn't have to guess about his intentions of what the later videos would contain.

Nina's thoughts threatened to take her into darkness to escape into a place where there would be no worry or fear.

Don't you dare give up!

She shivered and rubbed at her trembling arms as her mind ordered her not to give in to fear. But even as she talked herself into being brave, her heart almost stopped when the door to the room opened.

Her captor entered the room once again.

Amazon Link: www.smarturl.it/TheCaptive