

A Hasty Hookup

WALLFLOWER SERIES BOOK 1



Varsha Dixit

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF 'RIGHT AND WRONG' SERIES

A HASTY HOOKUP

(Book 1 of the Wallflower Series)

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Dedicated to all my readers . . .

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“Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much.” - Helen Keller

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And the biggest thank you to all my readers. You all enrich and empower the writer in me. Thank you for making me the author I am.



NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

My 'Wallflower Series' is an ode to historical romances I have enjoyed reading immensely. My love for historical romance started with 'Pride and Prejudice' and continues to date. Elizabeth Bennet was the first Wallflower I fell in love with.

"She might be on the shelf, but love doesn't pass her by in the end. These are romances where the heroine is a spinster, is on the shelf, or is considered an old maid by society (even if it's by choice). Also included are heroines who have limited marital prospects because they are wallflowers." ~ Goodreads

In the historical romances I read, I saw 'Wallflowers' as headstrong women with opinion and gumption to go against the stereotypes imposed by society. The kind of woman I am and the kind I know.

What is life without friends? I truly believe that friends are the family we choose. It was the story of two friends that birthed my bestselling 'Right and Wrong Series' and in the 'Wallflower Series' I give you four friends.

'A Hasty Hookup' is set in contemporary times and is the first book in this series. I hope you enjoy it as much as I enjoyed writing it. A humble request: please don't forget to leave a review (of any length) on Amazon and Goodreads. Reviews convey what this book meant to you, and is an immense source of encouragement to the author. So please do leave a review. Thank you and happy reading. ☺

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CHAPTER 1



Late Evening, May 2017
Singapore

The 6:00 pm breeze was laden with moisture and flowed through the streets. It twirled a few yellowed leaves past the cheerful and busy café with a blue and white awning. Dark green lamp posts with oval lights stood inconspicuously on either side of the street, adding a touch of cheerful glow to the city's evening illumination.

Taxis and buses slowly crawled on the multiple-lane roads. Tall buildings, some with faux brick fronts and some with tinted glasses, flanked the street on either side.

The sidewalks were crammed with pedestrians, some carrying workbags and some colorful shopping bags. An odd bicyclist emerged here and there between the pedestrians. Humans of all ages and genders, either in the weekend spirit or walking fast toward it, peppered the area.

In all that hustle bustle of a Friday evening, a woman sat still under the blue and white awning. She fiddled with the beads on her bracelet as her onyx eyes skimmed the [*junta*](#) around her. She was Gina Bansal—a by-product of the Indian society of the nineties and a direct product of an Amritsar couple, Satinder and Malti Bansal's fornications when they had attended a friend's wedding in Patna. A classic example of the adage [*Begani shaadi mein Abdullah deewana!*](#)

Gina had moved to Singapore after her twenty-third birthday. And today she was a month shy of her twenty-eighth. Her move wasn't marked by teary-eyed '[*pahunchte hi phone zaroor karna*](#)' goodbyes at the airport. It was, however, marked with tears—Gina's solitary ones. Sometimes when Gina was in a how-the-fuck-did-this-happen-to-me mood, she saw her move for what it was—an equal and opposite reaction to love, sex and [*dhokha*](#).

A lukewarm cup of coffee sat on the wrought-iron table collecting

dewdrops, and a laptop bag coming apart at the seams was slung at the back of her chair. Her gray pants reflected the overhead gloomy sky and were teamed with a simple black and white blouse. Gina had come to the café straight from her job of a senior developer at a telecommunications company.

Her shoulder-length thick brown hair had a tendency to curl at the ends and was tied in a rigid ponytail. Gina's heart shaped face—that was once fuller—had dark wide eyes that held an expression of serenity, a sharp but short nose above a plump mouth and a soft chin. If only one bothered to glance at her hands would they notice her fingers with nails bitten down to the skin, incessantly pulling at the blue and white beads of the bracelet around her slim wrist. Her therapist had recommended Gina to use the bracelet as a technique to control her anxiety. Five years ago, the anxiety had been so intense that it had reduced Gina to a shivering mess—collapsing on public bathroom floors, train platforms, grocery stores etc. *If I'm ever famous, there'll probably be a city tour called The Places Gina Turned Nagin on the Floor*, she thought, in rare moments of humor. There was once a time in Gina's life when humor wasn't rare.

With medications, therapy, repetitive exercises and a lot of help from the eighty-year-old Marwah Aunty—her only relative in the country—Gina had managed to become one of those women who lived on their own and earned for themselves. The modern-day equivalent to [*Jhansi ki Rani*](#) minus the sword, the horse and the kid. However, there was no dearth of battles for such queens.

‘Good evening!’ A familiar voice broke in. People were rare in her life too, except this voice.

Gina raised her head. ‘Hi, Ritesh! Why this sudden meeting? We always meet on Saturday afternoons.’

The 5'9" man was two years older than Gina, and had a chubby face, rectangular glasses, thick brows, and a soft body. ‘Can I get some coffee first?’ He went inside the café to place his order.

Gina swallowed heavily but forced herself to stay quiet. A break from routine jostled her equilibrium. And this meeting wasn't routine.

Ritesh Chug came back in a few minutes and took a seat across from her. Gina kept watching him steadily. He chugged some of his coffee, smiling amicably. Gina pushed the bracelet on her wrist side to side.

Some of the dark liquid stuck to Ritesh's upper lip, he did not bother wiping it. ‘So, how was your day?’

Feigning composure, Gina picked her cup too. ‘The usual.’ She smelled her coffee, letting the fragrant smell bathe her face. Some of her anxiety melted.

‘Yoga and work?’

Gina nodded, taking a small sip—her mother’s often-spoken and always-enforced training “Eat and drink like a lady” apparent. Her mother had obviously grown up around women whose mouth could only open five millimeters. Gina sometimes wondered if mom knew about club sandwiches or blow jobs.

‘You haven’t missed yoga or work for a single day in, what, three years?’

‘Four!’ Gina smiled mildly.

‘That shows that you are a reliable person.’

Gina hid the lower part of her face behind the cup. *Why is he complimenting me? Ritesh has never done that before. Is he going to ask me for a loan? I do have some money saved.*

Ritesh pushed his glasses higher on his nose. ‘We have known each other for a long time, right?’

‘Hmm.’ *Wow. It must be a big amount. Do I have that much? What does he need it for?* Gina took another sip.

‘And you like me, right?’

Oh my God! Does he want my entire inheritance? I have nothing! Gina’s nod was brisk. Putting the cup down, she sat back and her hands slid from the top of the table to under it. Her fingers reached for her bracelet as she tried to read Ritesh’s expression, but his thick glasses and the evening light made it hard.

Ritesh reached forward, placing his hands on the table between them. ‘I like you too. A lot. That’s why I spend all my weekends doing things with you.’

Tingles broke out on Gina’s skin. *Grocery runs, dry cleaning pickups and sitting side by side at libraries for hours, speaking maybe in all of ten sentences—are considered ‘doing’ things? Her gaze moved upwards. Binging on [chaat](#) or Chow Mein from [thelas](#), watching nonsensical horror shows, spending hours in malls, going for long drives in the rain, talking for hours on the phone, sitting on the terrace and making out from dusk to dawn—isn’t that considered ‘doing’ things?* A wishful expression crossed her face.

Ritesh took Gina’s silence as encouragement. ‘I spoke to mummy and she had a wonderful idea. And I second it.’ He leaned forward as his eyes

gleamed. ‘Gina, you and I, we should get married.’

CHAPTER 2



Gina pulled the bracelet all the way back and let go. It snapped forcefully against her skin. *Ouch!* Some involuntary tears sprung to her eyes. She kept staring at Ritesh.

‘Say something, Gina!’ He wiped his forehead.

‘You want to marry... me?’ Gina stuttered.

‘Yes. I have to get married someday. So do you.’ Ritesh pressed. ‘Then why not get married to each other? You must be lonely. Mummy said that a woman living alone has to be very sad and lonely.’

Gina felt hysterical laughter bubbling in her throat. *Doesn’t your mummy live by herself?*

Ritesh kept going. ‘With our joined incomes, we will have to rent only one apartment. A two-bedroom will do. We can spend more and save more. Then even mummy can come and live with us. I don’t want kids and I don’t think you do either? A small wedding perhaps. Mummy, and maybe two or three co-workers from both our sides. You are an orphan, right?’

Briefly, Gina closed her eyes. *I wasn’t delivered by a stork, silly man!*

‘And instead of all the stupid amount people spend on honeymoon, we can take a nice room in a hotel downtown or plan a trip to the wonderful Saratoga Resort.’ Ritesh paused, his lips pursed thoughtfully.

All Gina could do was stare at Ritesh as he kept making ‘wonderful’ plans, probably right up to her funeral, which Gina hoped would not happen for the next fifty years.

‘I think even mummy wants to see the resort. We should probably take her along. Why don’t you read up about the cheapest and fastest way of getting married here? I will tell mummy.’ A shy smile broke out on Ritesh’s face as he adjusted his glasses. ‘She will be so proud of me . . . of us. Gina our lives will be happy and peaceful-’

Gina thrust her hand toward him. ‘Hold my hand, please. Please!’ Her hand wasn’t the steadiest nor was her voice.

Confused, Ritesh slowly took her hand from the sides like he was holding an object. Gazing at their hands, her thin fingers, his thick ones peppered with curling black hair, Gina waited. And waited . . . No sparks or quivers broke out in her. Her stomach did not clench nor did she experience any shortness of breath.

Get out of my life, you witch! You are not a woman, you are a death curse. You burn everything you touch. Get out of here before I kill you. I never want to see your face again. Never. Some repressed memories surfaced. Gina felt her head throb.

Ritesh gave a nervous cough.

Gina stared at their clasped hands. *Once, I let someone in my life who was considered a dream catch. Yet he took everything from me. Is Ritesh the kind of a person I should be with? A compromise? Maybe. A compromise is a good thing. As long as I know exactly what I'm getting into. Zero expectations! Does Ritesh know me? Do I care? He can become the reason I move on. The reason I pick a fight I want to, I'm entitled to, but scared to do it alone.*

'Gina?' Ritesh's voice was uncertain.

Gina glanced up. 'I will marry you.'

Ritesh's answering smile pushed up his rotund cheeks on either side, his eyes disappearing into his own flesh.

Gina pasted on a smile and withdrew her hand. Her palms felt clammy. *Good lord, what did I just do? Oh my God! Oh my God! Don't panic. Keep breathing.* Her hands disappeared under the table and her fingers began attacking the bracelet like a famished dog gnawing at a bone.'

Ritesh sat back his expression smug. 'So congratulations to you and to-'

'There is something you should know about me.' She paused and drew in a deep breath. 'I'm separated.'

Ritesh blinked, confused. 'Separated from?'

A flicker of irritation passed over Gina's usually composed face. 'From my husband. I'm married.'

CHAPTER 3



Around the same time

A farmhouse on the outskirts of Pune

A dark brown, custom-made desk with ornate legs occupied a great section of the pristine room with white marble floors. A broad leather chair sat on one side of the table while two tussar-silk upholstered chairs occupied the other side. Behind the desk were floor-to-ceiling French doors that opened to the garden. Thick maroon curtains hung over the doors that allowed minimal natural light inside the room even in daytime.

Handmade tapestry and original art hung on the sleek gray-colored walls. A thick rectangular maroon carpet with an intricate design was rolled out in the middle of the very masculine room. Copper lamps with cream shades threw light near the desk.

The large opulent room had a lone occupant. A tall man with thick black hair with grey at the sides, a straight back, broad shoulders, slim hips and long muscular legs sat behind the desk. Thirty-five-year-old Retired Colonel Ojas Purohit.

Ojas's face was partially in shadows due to the dim light as he studied the latest contract negotiation email. The contract was for a small arms protective inserts and his company was the middleman between the manufacturers in Japan and the Indian Army's Defense Logistics Department. If the deal—a seven-year contract—went through, which it most likely would, his company would earn millions. *I will earn millions!* His generous lower lip hitched to a side in what seemed like a smile.

Ojas's self-congratulatory thoughts were put on a hold as his cellphone rang. It was his brother Puru, younger to him by four years.

Looks like he read the email. Ojas answered it with a drawl. 'Happy, little brother?'

'Not quite.' Puru's voice was brisk.

Ojas sat straighter as his smirk vanished. 'What happened?'

'The manufacturers want a face-to-face meeting with you.'

'Not happening!' Ojas retorted. His fingers began to drum restlessly on the table.

'Why not? You are the man who made this deal. You did all the ground work, the negotiating, supervised the legalities, paperwork... everything. Before they sign it, they want to meet you. They are requesting the meeting to be fixed next month.'

'Or?'

'Or they won't sign this deal. They are a traditional conservative firm. They are insistent on a face-to-face meeting. I can't put it off anymore. It is only a one-time thing. They are ready to fly you first-class at a date of your choice-'

'No!' Ojas barked into the phone. 'That is not going to happen.'

'What is wrong with you?' Puru raised his voice. 'You haven't left that damn farmhouse in nearly five years. This is a huge deal and all that the company is asking for is one meeting!'

Ojas clenched his jaw. 'I said NO! No meeting. Let this deal go, there will be others.' His voice was cold.

Puru stayed silent for a few seconds and then said, 'Mom and Dad will never say it to you. But you, big brother, are a coward. A damn coward.'

Ojas's chuckle was foul. 'Look who is calling me a coward! A man who hasn't even killed a spider in his life! You broke our family tradition and chose not to fight for the country. You let grandpa and dad down. You chose to hide behind books and you-'

'Courage has nothing to do with one's profession but everything to do with one's character, which is something you obviously don't understand. As for letting our folks down brother, between both of us, you are winning by a landslide.'

Ojas tried to interrupt Puru but the latter was unstoppable. 'Regarding this meeting, you have a month to decide. I'm not going to say 'no' to them right now. If not for yourself, then show some spine for those who work for us and their families. But dependability is not your strong suit now, is it?'

Family, especially younger siblings, always know what salvo to fire to make a gaping hole in the older ones. Why should only Porcupines get quills? 'Not everyone will let you off the hook as easily as your wife did.' Puru said.

'Shut the fuck up P-' Ojas heard the click in his ear. His brother had hung

up. ‘Fucking *chutiya!*’ Ojas grabbed the nearest object and flung it across the room. The jade letter opener flew sharply through the entire length of the room and made a sharp metallic clink as it fell and rolled on the floor, breaking into pieces. Ojas breathed in deeply. His chest felt tight and his fists curled at his side. At the mere mention of his wife, rage filled his body. Ojas opened the drawer on his side and closed it forcefully. The papers on his desk shuddered. ‘Shameless hussy!’ He thumped the table with his fist. ‘You better never come in front of me. I swear I will . . . I will . . .’

His cellphone rang. ‘Shut up!’ Ojas roared and grabbed the cell. It was the next possession of his to experience a short, unanticipated, and fatal flight.

The cell broke into more pieces than letter opener had. ‘Vinay!’ He bellowed.

The door to his office immediately opened.

‘Yes, Colonel!’ A man of average height, and not much older than Ojas, was quick to enter the room. Vinay Dhaliwal, Ojas’s personal assistant, was dressed in a plum-colored safari suit with a rectangular leather bag hanging from a strap on his right wrist. He studied the broken cell with little reaction.

‘Arrange for women for tomorrow.’ Ojas barked, his eyes narrowed to slits. ‘And I need a new phone.’

‘Yes, Colonel.’ Vinay left the room.

Ojas reached out for a thick black walking stick with a silver knob. He maneuvered himself out of the chair and slowly limped to the door. The pain in his heel had increased over the last few months. His doctor had visited him last week, driven him to the X-ray and MRI facility, studied the results and given advice that wasn’t new. An operation to extricate the shrapnel embedded in his anklebone was most critical. The nerves in his foot and his ankle muscle were dying. *I’m already a cripple. Who cares if it’s a little or a lot? Only if the bullet had struck my heart instead of my foot!*

‘Vinay!’

Again, the door opened in a fraction of a second.

‘Do you like to hang right outside my door?’ Ojas did not hide his irritation.

‘What can I do, Colonel?’

‘When Kamal comes in tomorrow, tell him I need some letters typed. I have dictated them and the Dictaphone is on the desk.’ Kamal was his twenty-something secretary.

Ojas stopped next to the door where some of his gallantry awards hung on

the wall. ‘Vinay, if you won’t throw these away, can you bloody store them where I can’t see them?’ Nostrils pinched, Ojas walked out of the room.

CHAPTER 4



Coffee Shop, Singapore

‘You are what?’ Ritesh’s croaked. Some spittle collected at the side of his mouth.

‘Married but separated. It’s been almost five years since the separation. I was married for a little over a month.’ Gina’s shoulders slumped. ‘It was the worst mistake of my life!’ Her mouth twisted and her eyes glittered. The past still pinched her present.

Even five years later it hurt to remember. Her husband was like a destructive tornado that ravaged, pummeled and ripped things in minutes that had taken a lifetime to put together. What remained now was debris of her former life and her former self. *My life can now be truly described as a ‘once upon a time. . .’* Some bile bubbled in her stomach.

Ritesh still appeared in shock. ‘But not divorced?’

‘No.’ Gina stayed hunched in her chair. Her eyes had a glazed look.

‘You still care for your husband?’

Gina’s chuckle was harsh and she choked on it. ‘He is a bastard!’

Ritesh gasped. He rubbed his head, his fingers digging into his skin. ‘You have shared so many things about yourself but you never mentioned this once.’

I only told you things I could bring myself to tell. Things that don’t mean jack. Things that don’t hurt, things that don’t remind me of a time when I used to be whole. ‘Sorry!’ Gina avoided his eyes.

‘I will have to tell mummy!’

‘Of course. I understand if you don’t want to mar . . . marry me!’ Gina kept stumbling on the word. Three years ago, she had bumped into Ritesh in this very coffee shop. They had lapsed into an easy conversation while waiting for their orders. Ritesh was a recent arrival from India and homesick Gina, who had been living in Singapore for two years, had felt obliged to enlighten

him about reasonable and cheap places for food, groceries etc.

Gina experienced no butterflies as she talked to the stranger nor felt any lecherous vibes coming from him. Neither did every cell in her body sing like a canary as Ritesh's fingers accidentally grazed her elbow. For those very reasons she didn't fling the hot coffee in his face and dash out.

A conversation over coffee led to another coffee next week, a lunch a month later . . . and in a foreign country Gina made her only friend.

'Gina, are you going to get a divorce?'

She snapped out of a stupor. 'What?'

'I'm asking will you get a divorce or not?' Ritesh was now rubbing the side of his nose. The humid Singapore weather made him sweat in the most uncomfortable places. Gina had seen him scratch his ass more times than she would like to remember.

'Yes, of course!' Gina's reply was sharp and quick. 'In due time.' Her voice lost some of its determination.

'Due time? Does your husband live here in Singapore?'

'No, he is in India.' *I think!*

'You haven't been to India in the last five years, right?'

Gina nodded.

'Five years is a long time to stay separated. Divorce should be quick if he doesn't contest it. Then we can marry. Mummy is not going to be happy with this news!' Ritesh already seemed to have moved on to thinking about other women.

Gina sat there blank, staring at the paved bricks of the pavement. *He won't contest it. He was actually yelling at me to divorce him.*

'Gina, don't waste any more time. Start the divorce process. At least I can tell mummy that you are on top of it. I can talk to your husband or maybe mummy can. No conjugal visits since you separated?'

Gina winced. *Ewww . . . gross!* 'No, no conjugal whatever!' Her cheeks flushed. 'And you don't have to. I will talk . . . talk . . . to him.' Gina straightened and put her fist softly against her mouth, chewing the inner lining of her cheek. Pulling at the bracelet wasn't enough; she had to eat her own skin. Just the thought of having to talk to "him" made her sweat in uncomfortable places like Ritesh did.

Ritesh wiped his head with the back of his shirtsleeve. 'You see how well we suit each other, don't you?' He leaned forward, his hair flopping on his forehead making his face seem rounder. 'We are meant for each other, Gina.'

Ritesh's innocent words hit Gina like a kick in her stomach. Pain slammed her head. Her body turned to ice in the sweltering humidity of the Singapore evening. She had heard these words several times before. Another man, another voice—decadent like chocolate, the kind that made her want to curl her toes. Once upon a time . . .

We are meant for each other, Gina! Sometimes his voice was cajoling, sometimes husky as his fingers trailed against her cheek, or he murmured against her heated skin as he placed lingering, wet kisses down her soft stomach, seeking to taste her most private places. Sometimes he grunted the words as he climaxed, buried deep inside her, their naked flesh hot and quivering, his bare muscular arms holding her slim ones above her head. Gina would moan and writhe as he continued to ram into her, his hot breath whispering in her ear. *You are mine forever, only mine!* Slipping out of Gina, he would roll to the side while holding her close to his slicked and hard chest as she cuddled into him, pushing her soft breasts against him. Sated and relaxed, they would either talk with their hands intertwined or drift to sleep from which Gina knew her husband would rouse shortly in the most delicious way—his mouth and tongue busy on her breasts!

The painful hardening of Gina nipples under her white and black blouse brought her out of the memories. *Shit!* She tightly crossed her legs to subdue the tingles. Her estranged husband's spicy all-male smell with a hint of clove wafted in her nose like they were back in their narrow bed. *My body still remembers him.* Closing her eyes tightly, Gina yanked the bracelet back with such force that it snapped and broke. The beads scattered and rolled around on the pavement.

CHAPTER 5



Two weeks later
Singapore

Gina leaned against the wall of her office building as she made the international call. The receptionist repeated a trite greeting and then transferred the call to Gina's lawyer, Ms. Sabina Akhtar.

'Hi Gina!'

'Hi Sabina! How's it going?' Gina chewed on her thumb even as her insides clenched. 'Any word from the other party?' She had promised Ritesh that she would get this divorce quickly and even speak with her estranged husband if she had to. But it was easier said than done. Just like it was one thing researching websites that offered diving off the plane and totally another thing to actually get on the plane to jump off.

'Not a peep.' The lawyer's voice was colored with frustration. 'I have sent them a notice by registered mail. Heard nothing. Then last week sent them a copy of a signed affidavit asking for a divorce. Again nada!' Sabina paused. 'Why don't you just pick up the phone and talk to him?'

There's a reason why [saara shehar mujhe Lion ke naam se nahi janta hai!](#) Gina pushed her ponytail that was sticking to the nape, aside. 'Ummm. I don't know.'

'How urgently do you need this? After all you have lived for five years without it?'

Gina recalled Ritesh constantly badgering her about the divorce. Even his 'Mummy' was enquiring about it. And in all that pressure Gina had realized something—she too wanted this divorce. Now that she had started the proceedings, she wasn't going to back down. She wanted her former life back, the one she owned before 'him.' Once upon a time wasn't good enough anymore.

Planting her legs apart and straightening her shoulders, Gina spoke. 'When

I got married, Sabina, I was a naïve and gullible girl. The kind to believe in happily-ever-after and soulmates. My husband exploited me. He rushed me into marriage and then was quick to throw me in the gutter!’ Gina’s lip curled upward into a sneer. ‘However, today I’m not naïve nor gullible, but simply determined. I now see the rain for the mess it creates, nothing romantic there! I strongly debate the existence of ‘soul’ and understand the word ‘mate’ only in nautical terms—officers of varying subordinate ranks aboard a ship.’ Gina paused. Her chest was heaving and two spots of color appeared on her cheeks.

Sabina stayed quiet.

Did my crash course in self-awareness put her to sleep? Gina wondered.

‘If you are so determined then just come down here and meet that blasted husband of yours and convince him to give you an uncontested divorce. If he signs the application, the divorce will be quick and easy; you both have been living apart for almost five years. There are no children involved, no property, no pets. Civil matters like a divorce can happen quicker between amicable parties. He might want to move on in life too. Five years is a long time. Do you even know if he is alive or dead?’

Gina’s heartbeat did a funny somersault. *Dead? Only If I were so lucky!* ‘Is there no other way to get this divorce without me having to come to India?’

‘Nothing quick!’

Gina exhaled noisily. ‘Fine. Let me see what I can do! Thank you.’ Hanging up the phone, she rested her head on the wall and closed her eyes. *What do I do? Who do I ask for help?* A word darted in her head out of the blue. *Wallflowers!* Gina’s eyes popped open, shining. And then dimmed. Another thought followed, a more realistic one. *But will they help me after what I did?*

CHAPTER 6



After work that day.

Reaching her tiny one-bedroom apartment, Gina wheeled her bike—her mode of everyday transport—inside the apartment, parking it in the short corridor between the kitchen and bedroom. She glanced at the laptop resting on the coffee table near the sofa, her gaze pensive.

Then she went on to kick off her pumps, remove her bra and put some water for tea. Flopping down on the worn green sofa, Gina played with the new bracelet on her wrist. *I'm going through bracelets faster than toothpicks.*


Her eyes strayed to the laptop again. She was like a smoker staring at the nicotine patch, knowing it is good for her yet scared to put on the first one. This life of exclusion and isolation was now Gina's comfort zone. She was scared, very scared, that only chaos and heartache would follow if she tried to get back to her old life. Gina tucked her knees under her chin and wrapped her arms around them. The kettle let out a shrill whistle. Making herself some tea, Gina went into her bedroom but her eyes kept peeking at the laptop.

A few minutes later.

'Bloody Hell!' Gina stomped out of her bedroom, grabbed the laptop, went back to her room, and climbed on top of her simple box mattress.

Her fingers flying on the keyboard, she logged into a chat group. Gina's message was brief.

Hi Wallflowers. This is Wallflower #2. The Pretty Awkward One! Hope everyone's doing well. I'm sorry I have not been in touch for a while. I'm in a bit of a bind. Need to talk to you all. Hugs! She hit send.

Gina quickly typed another message and sent it before she could change her mind. *Hope you all remember me! I never stopped missing you all.* 

Gina shifted her laptop away and waited. Leaning back, she stared at the bare wall in front of her, sipping her tea. Her wait was all of 300 seconds. A new message alert chimed on her machine.

The Feisty One Wallflower #4' had replied. *What the hell, bitch????? What the fuck? Where the fuck have you been???? FYI The Duchess, Wallflower #3 just texted me and wants me to tell your skinny ass. . .seriously this is so darn stupid, I don't know why she can't tell you herself. Anyhow, she wants me to tell you that she—no—we all are mighty pissed at you. So yeah, where the F are you and what kind of an effing bind are you in? And what does your high and mighty royal ass need from us wallflowers? ARE U OKAY, GINS?*

Gina read the message a few times. A smile tickled her lips and moisture pricked her eyes. 'So freaking you Ky!'

She quickly typed back. 'It's a long story. Can we skype?' Gina added a broken heart emoji and sent the message.

For five years, these very friends, her Wallflowers, had been her 24/7 besties, soulmates, frenemies, spiritual gurus, and every other relationship out there. *And I was the same to them!* Gina wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

She checked her laptop, there was no new message. Uncrossing her feet, Gina went to the second-hand chest of drawers in the bedroom. Opening the last drawer, she bent down, twisted her torso and stretched her hand trying to reach the back. Her fingers encountered some bed sheets but she kept going. Her fingers finally found pieces of laminated paper taped to the wood. Very carefully, Gina scraped the tape away. Her back was beginning to hurt. Two pictures came loose and fell in her hand. She brought them out carefully and sat back on the floor, placing the pictures side by side in front of her.

There it was—a picture of her three friends taken during the second-year college picnic. On the edge of the mossy green pond with several lotuses, stood Kyra Saigal in a pair of printed shorts and a tie-and-die shirt tied at her slim waist. Her hair was cut in a pixie style, her wide mouth grinning as she held up her middle finger to the photographer.

Ahead of Kyra, cross legged, sat Doyal Barua, her chin resting on her hand and a book lay open in her lap. For once, Doyal had agreed to read a book other than an academic one. Kyra had arranged for some banned erotic literature, just for that picnic and just for Doyal.

Doyal was smiling a rare smile, her straight black hair blew slightly in the

wind. The entire hostel had been in love with Doyal's delicate northeastern features and hair.

Gina's fond gaze moved to the last girl in the picture, the one who sat closest to the camera. The President and Chairman of the Wallflower Club, Meher Chaudhary! *'The Shy One' My BFF!* Gina lovingly trailed her fingers over Meher's face—her friend whose height might be 5'3" but her heart was 8'10". Meher was always ready to help anything and anyone; from a baby bird that fell off its nest to bank robbers trying to get away from the police. The latter had been a genuine mistake; the robbers had been caught eventually.

Gina sighed. 'You all must have changed so much!' Her voice was thick. She now turned to study the other photograph, another group picture. Gina's parents, older brother and sister-in-law, older sister and brother-in-law and Gina, sitting in the middle of her family, a baby in her arms—Mimi her brother's two-month-old daughter. 'Mimu! You must be almost five now.' Gina pressed her hand to her mouth and her voice cracked. She took in the look of pride in her father's eyes. Not looking at the baby but at Gina. Her father had loved her, revered her. The only girl he loved more than his mother, he'd say.

'But now you hate me Papa, don't you?' Gina hugged the picture close to her chest even as her throat closed. Except for her father, no one had broken ties with her but to the rest of her family she was more like a distant relative who existed in another galaxy. Gina sniffed loudly.

Gina, I have spoken with Marwah Aunty, Chunu Bhaiya's naani. She lives in Singapore. She will help you settle there. I will send her the money. It is best if you live away from us. We all need to heal from the hurt and shame you have brought to our door. And that is only possible if you go away. Those were her mother's parting words when she had visited Gina in that hospital room, nearly five years ago. *And stuck in that hospital bed, all I could think was who the hell is Chunu Bhaiya?* Gina's wry smile melted quickly. The pain was slamming her from all sides.

When she had reached out for the pictures, Gina knew she had opened a Pandora's box. Memories that she had tucked away in the back of her mind swarmed her. She lay back on the floor, holding the pictures close to her chest. Seventeen hundred and ninety-eight days of repressed memories were visiting; they would be staying with her for a while. Tears ran from her eyes over her cheeks, down her chin and splashed on the brown carpet.

Gina kicked the still open drawer. ‘I hate you!’ She was yelling at the third picture still taped to the back of the drawer. She had not burned it in hot flames or ripped it in a million pieces and stomped her foot on that face like she had itched to do. She had kept the picture of her estranged husband Ojas Purohit. *So that I always know what Satan looks like.*

CHAPTER 7



Two days later
A flight from Singapore to Delhi, India.

‘PHssssh!’

Gina jerked in her seat. *How much can people pee and poo in a four-and-a-half-hour flight? International flights are like an all-you-can-eat buffet that comes with a side of a toilet.* Gina smacked the airline pillow, which was like a large pin pad. Lumpy and uncomfortable!

‘This is normal in the back rows.’ A stout middle-aged woman with glasses and short, salt and pepper hair, remarked.

‘I booked my tickets last minute.’ Gina’s smile was polite.

‘Visiting family in Delhi?’

‘No, I’m going to Bengaluru.’

‘Aree!’ The woman sat up concerned. ‘You are on the wrong flight. This one is going to Delhi.’ Her loud voice was attracting the attention of other passengers.

‘I have a connecting flight from Delhi to Bengaluru.’ Gina shifted her bracelet back and forth.

‘Oh okay. I got worried!’ The woman gave a relieved smile.

Gina nodded and reached out in front of her seat. She took out a pair of headphones the airlines had provided.

‘Why did you book your tickets in a hurry?’

‘Last minute plans.’ Gina focused on unraveling the wire around the headphones.

‘I hate flying!’ The woman remarked. ‘I don’t like their food.’

Gina nodded, keeping her head lowered. *I saw how much you ate and how quick!* ‘Hmm.’ Gina picked up an airline magazine.

‘Can I use this arm rest? My shoulder is hurting.’ The lady nudged Gina’s elbow off the armrest between them.

Gina squirmed to a side. She saw the lady was using the whole of the other armrest too. A thirteen- or fourteen-year-old girl was seated on the woman's other side.

‘You are married?’

Gina turned, her smile kind. ‘Yes, I’m married. But I’m going to get a divorce so I can get married again. So, you can say that I’m married and engaged simultaneously!’

After her very candid confession, the rest of Gina’s flight passed peacefully—except for the young girl’s snicker from the other seat and the noisy flush.

CHAPTER 8



A few hours later
Outside Indira Gandhi International Airport

Gina walked out of the automated glass doors of the Delhi airport, wheeling a small trolley behind her. She was hoping to wrap up her work in a week's time. Airlines Crew in different colored uniforms, travelers and those who had come to drop them off, occupied most of the space outside the airport. Large blue and white digital displays showed the arrival and departure times of flights. Announcements from the inside of the airport could be heard outside. The smell of coffee, food and car fuel was strong.

Gina walked to the curb, the strap of her corduroy bag digging in her shoulder. Putting on her shades, she sat on her trolley bag, watching the cars driving past her. She breathed in. *Yup, definitely India, definitely home.* Her fingers played with the bracelet on her wrist. She had twenty similar ones packed in her suitcase. Gina considered herself quite done with her naagin-on-the-floor days.

And then she saw the jeep. A bright orange with camouflage stripes on the side. It stood out amongst the usual cars, vans and taxis. Gina saw the occupants. *No shit!* She got to her feet and waved frantically. Her heart threatened to jump out of her body with the joy of seeing those you love. They saw her too. The driver of the jeep cut across lanes ignoring the horns that went off in the wake.

The jeep screeched right in front of Gina.

'*Saaali!*' The driver, a woman with a pixie haircut and a wide mouth, jumped off and came around to her. Gina was enveloped in an embrace that smelled of incense, oil and body sweat. Her shades bumped against her nose but Gina returned the embrace with equal warmth and then broke apart. 'Kyra!' Gina ran her eyes over her friend and fellow wallflower, The Feisty one!

Kyra was reed thin, around five inches taller than Gina and dressed in loose khakis and a navy-blue cotton shirt. Greek leather sandals encased her feet and her face and arms were a warm shade of brown. Kyra spent a lot of time in the sun for she was a journalist with a top news syndicate and traveled all over the world at the whiff of breaking news.

‘It’s so good to see you, G-Spot!’ Kyra rubbed Gina’s forearms. ‘That’s my new name for you! Like it?’ Her voice was naturally husky.

Gina wrinkled her nose. ‘I like your jeep more!’

‘My lovely [gaddi](#)!’ She poked Gina’s side. ‘They don’t have food in Singapore?’

‘You sound like my mom!’ Gina pulled her bag closer and then her smile faded. *Mom!* She hadn’t said that word in years even though she had thought of her often.

Kyra rushed her. ‘Let’s go, G-spot. [Dilli](#) traffic is not famous for its patience!’

Gina hurried behind Kyra, nodding at the woman sitting in the passenger seat of the Jeep, her head covered by a silk scarf—The Duchess, Wallflower #3, Doyal Barua. Designer turquoise glasses sat pretty on a pert face. She wore simple but expensive gray sleeveless dress, showing a pair of well-toned arms, a Rolex watch and a slim diamond bracelet. Doyal looked every bit of the rich successful woman she was. Looking at her, no one could say that she grew in a house where the combined monthly income of her parents was a mere 12,000 rupees and apart from Doyal they had seven other kids to feed. Talk about a rags-to-riches story fueled by sheer hard work and will power.

Gina opened the back door and stepped in. ‘Hi Doyal!’

‘Hmm!’ The modern-day Sophia Lauren turned around and tipped her glasses down to glance at Gina. ‘I have cancelled some very important meetings today. I’m flying to Bengaluru with you. I own an apartment there.’ She turned back.

Kyra put the key in the ignition. ‘Essentially G-Spot, what this means is that Doy is mad, but not very.’

Gina could only give a limp smile. She knew Doyal, a typical Type A personality, was going to spend a tortuous amount of time reminding Gina of how she was not doing right by herself or others. Her flaws, her weaknesses, her bad decisions were going to be examined under The Doyal Microscope. Her spine and gut would be reworked and her slow roast by Doyal was going

to burn much, much more than the one AIB did. In colloquial terms, [*Gina ko bumboo lagne wala tha!*](#)

The jeep roared to life. ‘To Wallflowers and our bullshit!’ Kyra took her foot off the brake and the jeep shot off.

CHAPTER 9



Later that night
Farmhouse on the Outskirts of Pune

Something soft trailed down his bare chest, the sensation pleasant and arousing. Ojas stirred in his sleep and smiled. It was a hand. A woman's soft hand! He knew her touch. He remembered her fragrance—lilies mixed with rose water. Innocent and sweet! His lips relaxed in his sleep. The soft fingertips slowly travelled from his bare chest, stroked his flat stomach and then caressed his cock. He was already hard as a rock. *She arouses me like no one else.* The hand wrapped around him. Ojas jerked, his hands fisting the silk sheet, and groaned. Somewhere in his subconscious he knew he was dreaming of her. A good dream for a change! Nothing that included blood or death.

Now she was stroking his shaft urgently. Ojas felt he would explode as his body twitched under her strokes. His lips parted and his breath quickened as the strokes increased in tempo. A soft moan escaped his lips.

Silky hair caressed his stomach, she was about to take him in her mouth. 'Yes, Colonel! Come for me! Oh, you are so big, so thick!'

The woman's voice pierced the sleep-induced haze that surrounded Ojas. *It's not her!* He shot up, reflexively smacking away the woman leaning over him. She slid from the bed onto the floor.

'Sorry!' Not caring for his nakedness, Ojas reached down, grabbed the woman by shoulders and helped her sit back on the bed. 'What the hell are you doing here, Sylvia?'

'What did you do that for?' Sylvia replied, adjusting her scanty lingerie so that it revealed more of her olive-skinned lush body. 'I was trying to make you feel good.' She placed her hand on Ojas's knee and moved it upwards slowly.

'Stop it!' Ojas pushed her hand away. His voice was hard unlike a part of

him that was quickly going soft. 'Why are you in my bedroom?'

'Oh, c'mon Colonel!' Sylvia pouted her crimson colored lips, glancing at him through her long fake eyelashes. 'I just thought we could have some more fun.' She leaned forward, displaying her ample cleavage, and smiled seductively. 'I share my body with you. Can't you share your bed with me?'

Ojas's lips thinned as his face hardened. 'You sell your body for a price, Sylvia. And I bought you for a couple of nights. Just like I bought this bed, mattress or my slippers. Don't confuse sex for something else. And you only stay in the guest room. Now get out and let me sleep.'

Sylvia jumped off the bed. 'You are a jerk!' She accused in a shrill voice. The same crimson lips that had widened in a sultry smile seconds ago were now knotted in annoyance.

'Of course, I am!' Ojas stretched his arm over his head indifferent to her jibe. 'Now get out! And if you ever pull a stunt like this you are not coming back. My rules, my terms!'

Sylvia's anger was quick to disappear. Ojas was her most handsome customer, a great tipper and did not ask her to do kinky or disgusting things like some of her other rich customers did. Sometimes she imagined herself in love with him. 'Sorry! So sorry, Colonel. This will not happen again!' She groveled.

Ojas waved her out of his room and waited till she closed the door behind her.

'Bloody hell!' Ojas smacked the sheet and rubbed his forehead. He was a light sleeper and he knew that now he would not be able to go back to sleep. He glanced at the glow-in-the-dark bedside clock. It was 3:43 am.

Slipping off the bed, he limped to the window and pulled the curtains back, running his eyes over the lavish garden of his farmhouse. He rarely ventured out in the day. Soft lights placed strategically all over the grounds added an artistic beauty to the old trees, manicured bushes and hedges and tinkling fountains.

Big comfortable house, a booming business. I have it all. Even sex, paid for. Yet I'm like a grizzly on steroids. Ojas yanked the curtains, closing out the beautiful sights. He limped to the bathroom, his limp more pronounced without a cane to lean on.

I don't have my life. The army! That stupid girl took it away and so much more. If only I could make her as unhappy as she made me. She's probably shacked up with some man, her family fawning over her.

Ojas slammed the bathroom door. It sounded like a cracking shot in the silent house.

CHAPTER 10



Next day
Bengaluru

The sleek German car drove slowly, going past the bungalows in the posh Indira Nagar and stopped across from a two-story house behind dark iron gates with spikes. Doyal's driver turned around and nodded at her.

'We are here.' Doyal turned to Gina who sat fidgeting in the back seat.

'Hmm!' Gina nodded but did not glance at the house, only kept fiddling with her bracelet. She was experiencing acute acid reflux. Just being in the lane brought back so many memories. Memories that in the making had left her weak-kneed and melted her heart into a puddle, but now they slashed her. *This is where it began. The first time I saw him. The first time he saw me.* If Gina could turn back time, the first thing she would do was erase that evening like it had never happened.

'C'mon, Gina!' Doyal said impatiently. 'The sooner you move the sooner this thing gets over. Who waits five years to end a shitty non-existent marriage?' During the college days Doyal used to wear rectangular glasses with thick black frames that hid three fourths of her face and her hair was always tied in a top knot. Today's Doyal's had a tight slim body, with sleek long black hair, alluring almond shaped dark eyes, fair complexion, sharp nose, high cheek bones and small mouth and was any man or woman's dream come true. Except, currently for Gina she was a nightmare. A pushy pragmatic nightmare!

'You are right as always but why this sudden hate for me Doyal?' Gina made no move to step out of the car, just kept playing with the bracelet. Her ears were throbbing and she shook her foot incessantly. *Don't you dare faint, Gina Bansal.* 'We were pretty tight once. You should understand why I'm such a basket case.'

Doyal snorted while studying Gina with narrowed eyes, tapping her

perfectly manicured fingers on the leather console between them. ‘Should I push you out?’

Gina clutched her seat belt in a death-like grip, her mouth clamped defiantly. ‘You can try!’

‘Fine. Keep behaving like an idiot.’ Doyal glanced at her designer watch. ‘How can women like you give men like him such power over you?’

Gina turned to her. ‘Have you ever wanted to dive out of a plane?’

‘No!’ Doyal snapped.

‘Well, then you won’t understand!’

Doyal rolled her eyes and exhaled loudly. ‘[Tum khelo apni chudi se](#)! I have to be in a consolidation meeting in less than two hours and then I have fly to Australia. So why don’t you relax and while I go kick that idiot’s ass? After that I’m coming back to kick yours.’

‘Doyal! Doyal!’ Gina was talking to her friend’s back. *Why couldn’t Meher be here?* Chewing on her lower lip, Gina observed Doyal stalk past the iron gates and disappear into the house Ojas Purohit lived in with his family.

CHAPTER 11



Taking quick confident steps, Doyal crossed the road and slapped the iron gate a few times. It shifted back after making a creaking noise, signaling it was unlocked and unmanned. Pushing it further open, Doyal went inside. The bungalow was a two-storied stone structure with a manicured rectangular garden on one side. A running fountain sat in front of the house making soft tinkling noises. Doyal saw some movement on the side and turned.

A tall man with his back to her was watering a soil bed that had been recently planted. He was dressed in a navy-blue short sleeved faded T-shirt and knee-length Bermuda shorts that had mud spots all over it. His strong muscled calves were peppered with sparse black hair and signaled at hours spent in vigorous activity. On his feet he wore simple blue and white Bata flip-flops.

Doyal grimaced. ‘Why the hell am I eyeing a gardener’s ass?’ She cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled. ‘[Maali](#)! Ae Maali! Call Ojas Purohit outside.’

The man’s head jolted at Doyal’s voice but he took his time turning around.

Coffee colored smiling eyes met Doyal’s steely face. Her expression wavered a bit.

The face of the man in front of her was rugged and framed by moussed thick auburn hair, a long nose and a wide mouth. The man wasn’t classically handsome yet there was something about his craggy features that made one want to catch a second or a third glimpse.

Doyal knew in an instant that this man was no gardener. He held an air of authority. The man walked to her, his gait self-assured and expression patronizing. Doyal did not know the man but she knew that expression well; she had seen it too many times in boardrooms, and every place where she was pitted against a man. The look on every man’s face that thought he was better than her just because the society had imbibed entitlement in his gender’s

DNA.

Doyal's shoulder stiffened and she schooled her expression into that of indifference. Nothing pleased her more than to cut such men to their size. *The cockier they are, the harder they fall!*

Doyal worked thrice as zealously as any other man or woman to achieve the position of CEO of a billion-dollar software firm and she was always fighting to keep it. Authority and confidence was Doyal's second nature and in first impressions she conveyed it through expensive but chic clothes, natural and flawless makeup and a hair style with no single hair out of place. However, something about the man walking toward her, the pipe with trickling water held loosely in his hand, told her that he wasn't impressed by her. He seemed amused.

'And who might you be?' He asked, taking his time perusing Doyal from the tip of her expensive shoes to her carefully made-up face. Doyal used every bit of her will power to not glance down and double check that all the buttons and zips of her expensive business suit were closed.

'Get Ojas or get the hell out of my face.' Doyal skimmed her eyes over him like he was a fly buzzing in her orbit.

'Get the hell out of my house, little girl!' The man mocked Doyal mimicking her words.

Doyal inhaled sharply. Unknowingly, he had made fun of the one thing that Doyal was most conscious about—her height. She had stopped wearing blouses a long time ago that so much as hinted at a cleavage for it was easy for men to glance down her blouse, especially because of her height. [Deepika Padukone](#) wasn't the first woman to realize that cleavage wasn't just another irritating place where hair grew but a place that garnered much attention from perverts, men old enough to be fathers and grandfathers. 'Wow, another douchebag! You must be definitely related to Ojas.'

The man raised an eyebrow and then grinned. His smile was boyish. 'You need some cooling, little girl!'

Doyal was unprepared for what he did next. A cool spray of jet hit near her shoes and water fell on the ends of her calf-length skirt.

'What the hell, you baboon? You idiot!' Stepping back hastily, Doyal waved her fists in the air. 'Those shoes cost me rupees 20,000. That skirt cost more than you earn in a year. I will have you arrested-'

Her anger only made the man chuckle. 'Arrested for what? Wetting a trespasser on my property? A very rude one at that?' He dropped the pipe.

Before Doyal could react, Gina's quiet voice interrupted them. 'Puru!'

CHAPTER 12



Gina moved past the gates. She had once fantasized that this house will be her future home. His husband's family would be hers, their children would someday play in this garden. [Sooraj Barjatya](#) movies hangup! But some dreams ended because of the morning alarm or a full bladder and some because they were actually nightmares.

'Gina!' In his hurry to reach her, Puru took quick steps around the hedge that separated the driveway and the garden. Doyal had to jump out of his way or be run over. He took Gina by her shoulders. 'Where did you go? Where were you? How are you?'

Gina was surprised as Puru pulled her into a quick embrace. She stayed stiff in his arms.

Sensing her rigidity, Puru dropped his arms and stepped back, his expression awkward.

It's not your fault. It's just that you remind me of your hideous brother, Gina wanted to say but her lips felt stayed stuck to each other.

'Dad and I and tried to get in touch with you. But your family never-'

'I'm filing for divorce, Puru!' Gina's eyes were flat like her voice.

'Oh!' Puru opened his mouth to say something but then paused, unsure.

'So Ojas needs to give her that. ASAP!' Doyal joined them. She was glaring at Puru.

Puru flicked an irritated gaze at Doyal and then addressed Gina. 'You are sure that is what you really want?'

Before Gina could reply, a voice interrupted them. 'What is she doing here? Get her out of my house!'

The three pivoted to face the woman who stood on the front steps of the house. Kamla Purohit, mother to Ojas and Puru. Kamla was tall with a heavier upper body and thin legs, hair with some gray pulled back with a wire hairband. Behind Kamla stood a tall man in his early fifties, Jatin Purohit. He was trim, his demeanor distinguished and his face lined with wrinkles still

classically handsome. Both wore exercise gear and big sneakers.

'Pyar hi andha hota hai!' Gina's mother had remarked after meeting Ojas's parents for the first time. In that singular sentence Gina's mother had mocked Kamla and Jatin Purohit's love marriage, complimented Jatin Purohit and called him blind simultaneously, called Kamla Purohit ugly, and of course dissed her own husband. Indian proverbs were like Vaseline—worked just fine for all cracks.

Puru walked toward his parents. 'Maa, please!'

Gina clamped her lips. Bittersweet feelings flooded her, leaving her more debilitated than before. It was like waking from a long coma only to realize that some wounds were still raw. Once Ojas's mother had welcomed her with great love but now her expression was that of a man-eating tigress. And Gina was that man.

Doyal moved closer, trying to impart Gina strength by her closeness. 'Don't let them scare you. You still have to face your husband.'

Gee thanks! Where is a cliff, O practical pragmatic Doyal, pray tell? Gina felt panic jostle with the blood flowing through her body. She was back to pulling at the bracelets. 'Maybe we should come back another day.' she whispered.

'No, you are doing it now! You are not wasting another minute of your life on these people.' Doyal gripped Gina's elbow. 'C'mon!'

'I want her off my property.' Kamla Purohit hollered coming down the steps, followed by her husband.

Puru stopped next to his mother. 'Please, hear her out!'

Her husband put a hand shoulder on his wife's hand. 'Gina is the daughter-in-law of the house. She has a right to be here.'

Kamla cocked her head to the side and narrowed her eyes. 'Today she remembers she is the daughter-in-law when she wants a divorce.'

Puru stiffened. 'How do you know she wants a divorce? Gina just told me that, like right now!'

'So, you did receive all the letters her lawyer sent. Then why the hell hasn't anyone responded to them?' Doyal interrupted.

'Respond to what?' Kamla shot back. 'Help her hurt my son more? Suddenly she shows up here and expects all of us to do as she bids. Where-'

Gina took a step forward. 'For the last five years I have been living in Singapore alone. Do you have any idea how hard it is to make a house in a new country all by yourself? Live every day of every month and every year

without anyone you can call your own? No family, no friends, no money?’ Gina spoke calmly like she was reading off a book. ‘Your son took everything from me—my love, my family, my self-respect and you did not say one word of censure to him. Not one! Elders lead by example. I would never want to disrespect any of you, but today,’ Gina paused. ‘My anger is justified Mrs. Purohit, not yours!’

The silence that followed was complete.

From behind, Doyal whispered in Gina’s hair. ‘In my head I’m slow clapping for you.’ She then addressed the Purohit family. ‘Call Ojas here! This divorce needs to get started today.’

Puru eyeballed Doyal who glared right back at him. Kamla was now sulking, keeping her body turned sideways, her arms crossed over her chest.

‘Ojas moved out of the house soon after he was discharged from the hospital.’ Ex- Brigadier and Gina’s father-in-law, Jatin Purohit spoke. ‘Why don’t you come inside, Gina? Have a cup of coffee with us?’

‘Your lady friend can come in too if she is capable of any pleasantness.’ Puru’s usually friendly face was hard.

‘You folks deserve pleasantness?’ Doyal mocked raising a shapely brow.

‘Doyal, please!’ Gina addressed the Purohits. ‘Doyal is a good friend and here to help me. Please just tell where I can find. . .find,’ Gina swallowed. ‘Find Ojas.’ Her eyes silently pleaded her father-in-law.

‘Puru, give Gina Ojas’s address!’ Jatin Purohit said turning sharply on his feet. His tone did not brook any further discussion from anyone.

CHAPTER 13



Next morning
Pune Farmhouse

Stepping out of the shower, Ojas limped to the sink and grabbed its porcelain side. After a ninety-minute workout his body felt taut, yet his muscles were relaxed and his foot hurt less. Ojas knew it was momentary. In a few hours his ankle and leg would start cramping. He carelessly combed his hair. When in the army, he had been a stickler for always being impeccably dressed. *My one son looks groomed all the time and the other looks like a goon.* His mother would often remark criticizing Puru's love for his casual unkempt state and wrinkled clothes.

But times had changed. *As for letting our folks down brother! Right now, between both of us, you are winning by a landslide.* Remembering Puru's most recent accusations, Ojas threw the comb and stared at blank wall above the sink, a nerve ticking in his clenched jaw. Mirrors were forbidden in the farmhouse. If the rear-view mirror had not been mandatory to safe driving Ojas would have it removed from his cars too.

Ojas walked out of the bathroom, still dripping water, a towel wound around his waist. The sunlight flooded the room with natural light. 'Bloody idiot!' He cursed his house help, ignoring the ringing cell phone on the nightstand. 'He forgot to close the curtains again.' Ojas did not waste a second in enjoying the lush green and colorful fauna that grew outside the windows. He hauled the thick velvet curtains across, blocking any light that could cause reflections around him.

The cell rang again. Ojas walked to it, glancing at the name. It was Puru. He ignored the call. 'What the fuck do you want? More bloody accusations!' Ojas yanked off the towel and leaning against a sturdy armoire, he stepped in his under clothes. Opening the cupboard, he grabbed an ironed trouser and shirt. The hair could be messy but his clothes were always ironed, crisp like

currency notes. Even though Ojas worked out of his home office and rarely ventured out of his farmhouse, he always wore business attire.

The cell phone was now acting like a verbose person in the room, refusing to quiet down. Ojas answered the phone, a scowl riding his face. 'Look I told you no face-to-face, I don't care-'

'Gina was here!'

Ojas froze; his mouth moved but no words came. He stumbled and had to grab the armoire for balance. He came unhinged just at the utterance of her name. He felt dizzy, his heartbeat thundered in his body and sweat broke out on his face. NO! NO! NO! The words in his head were so loud that they seemed to drown out all the sounds of the outside world. Just hearing her name made her real, as if she were standing in front him. Ojas saw Gina's face, every line, every groove, every feature. Not a single detail forgotten!

Fuck! Ojas had hoped that repressing all memories of his estranged wife would eventually erase her from his memory. But he had forgotten nothing about the face he had seen so many years ago. *Yesterday the shrew came in my dreams and today she appeared in flesh and blood.*

'You there?'

Ojas grunted and found himself sitting on his bed. He had no recollection how he had moved from the armoire to the bed. *What if she comes here?* Ojas began to sweat profusely.

'Bhai?'

'Are you sure it was her?' He mumbled.

'C'mon, I don't have such a bad memory, even though she has changed.'

Ojas opened his mouth to speak and then realized what he was about to ask so he shut it. But then his lips moved on their own accord; he couldn't help himself. 'How has she changed?'

'Like we all do, some more some less.' Puru replied, evasive.

'What did she want?' Ojas's voice sounded like that of a chronic smoker.

'She wants a divorce!' Puru did not beat around the bush. 'Maybe she is ready to move on with someone else?'

A red haze covered Ojas's eyes. His fingers dug sharply in the ironed shirt in his hand. *Move on with someone else.* It felt like someone had put a blazing poker on his skin. Anger swelled his guts. *How dare she?* Ojas shot to his feet unsteady. 'Till hell fucking freezes over!'

Puru snorted. 'Why shackle a woman you don't want yourself and she obviously doesn't want you?'

Ojas's nostrils flared. 'Stay out of this, Puru! She will never be free of me.' Ojas knew he was shouting. He saw Gina's face—her round eyes tilted at the ends, sweeping lashes, the petite nose, her rounded cheeks that he knew were soft to touch like a fluff of cream, and her fleshy slightly-protruding mouth—the mouth he had spent hours tasting and loving! But now he felt no desire, just rage and anger against her. *She cost me my friend's life, my leg and my career.* His fingers clenched around the cellphone.

'She wants to meet you.'

Ojas's chuckle was harsh. 'That girl has a death wish.'

'I gave her your address.'

'You did bloody what?' Ojas bellowed.

'Dad asked me to. Gina just looked, she just looked . . . never mind!'

I don't care what she looked like! Ojas gritted his teeth so hard that his jaw hurt. 'She just looked what?' He heard himself ask.

'Different, I guess.' Puru finished.

'What the hell, Puru? Of course, she would. It's been almost five years. You and I look different . . .' Ojas trailed off. *What am I saying? I look like a monster.'*

Puru chuckled. 'I just wanted to see if you would ask.'

'Why don't you focus on your fucking life instead of shitting all over mine?' Ojas flared. His brother was right. *Why did I have to ask?*

Puru paused and then said. 'Good luck, Bhai. Looks like you are going to need it!' he hung up.

'Bloody idiot!' Ojas muttered bitterly, his insides heaved and a hollow feeling awoke in his stomach. He hurriedly wore his shirt, rubbing down the creases the best he could. He ignored the tremor in his fingers.

'Vinay!'

His P.A popped in his head after a quick knock. 'Yes, Colonel?'

'Arrange for the women!'

'They were just here. Twice in a month? You have never. . .' He trailed off noticing Ojas's gaze narrow threateningly. 'Sure!'

'I want them for a week. Pay them twice their usual rates. They should be available for as long as I want them.' Ojas's attention was fixed on a random spot on the wall, a faraway look glazed his eyes even as his hands looped a belt around his trousers.

Vinay cleared his throat. Ojas snapped, his attention back to his P.A. 'What?'

‘There is no belt. Should I get you one?’ Vinay made a move to come inside the room.

‘I can get my own fucking belt!’ Ojas turned his back to the door. ‘Just do what you are told.’

Vinay closed the door and kept walking. Grimacing as if he had sipped apple cider vinegar, he pressed the buttons of his cell. The woman he was going to call was his least favorite—a pimp.

A sound of loud crash erupted from behind the door he had just closed.

Vinay wasn’t shocked. His boss had once been an able bodied, energetic, physically active person. His disability had left him with limited movement and unlimited frustration. And the walls of his house were paying for it.

Even as Vinay waited for someone to answer, he wondered why Ojas, who was a creature of habit, was bringing the escorts back twice in a month. The women always came like clockwork in one or two months.

Is Colonel finally tired of being alone?

CHAPTER 14



Next day
Outskirts of Pune

‘Are you sure about going alone?’ The short bespectacled woman driving the car asked Gina.

‘I have to, Meher. Doyal and Kyra have knocked some sense into me. I have to tie the loose ends in my life.’ Gina sighed, gazing out of the window. She felt a soft touch on her hand as her friend patted it.

‘You are not Doyal, Kyra or me. Took me some time to realize but really, Gina, we all are our own people. You do what works best for you.’ Meher knocked Gina’s cell as she put her hand back on the steering wheel. ‘Sorry!’

Gina’s smile was wry. Now, Meher might be an accomplished doctor but she was an accomplished klutz since donkey’s years. ‘Don’t encourage me to do as I please else I will run away. Back to Singapore.’

‘Bite your tongue!’ Meher wrinkled her short nose. ‘But why Singapore?’

‘I hate long flights.’

‘The flight to Pakistan is even shorter.’ Meher said with a stoic face.

‘Their serials are all that I can take, thank you!’

‘What about Fawad Khan?’

Gina pursed her mouth and narrowed her eyes. ‘Uhh pass, we have *Sidhartha Malhotra*. He has dreamy eyes and he is tall!’

They laughed. Gina was the first to sober up. A familiar melancholy wasn’t far from her mind. *It has been so long since I laughed that my laugh sounds weird to me.*

‘You left me all alone with those two crazy women.’ Meher grumbled. ‘Do you know how hard it is to be around Ky and Doy? Especially when they always see you as someone who doesn’t measure up to their standard of inner strength and might . . . which are higher than *Burj Khalifa*.’ Meher pushed her [*chunni*](#) higher on her shoulder as she pressed the accelerator. The red car

sped smoothly on the not-so-busy highway. 'I feel more worked than a soda dispensing machine in a college canteen.' Meher ate a yawn.

Gina chuckled. 'Where have you been hiding this wit, Meher?'

'Under the sheets!' Meher gave a mischievous look.

'Is Fawad Khan under those sheets?'

'Even better!' Meher winked. 'Fawad and Sidhartha.'

'Oh my, you tart!' Gina laughed. 'What have you done to my [*sati savitri*](#) friend?'

Meher kept her eyes on the road but she sucked on her lower lip. 'Sorry, did that sound obscene?'

Gina tapped her shoulder. 'Are you mad? I was just kidding. What happened to the "we are our own people" advice?'

Meher gave her a sheepish look. 'Wit maybe much, but confidence is still in the ditch!'

Gina rolled her eyes. 'You should be pretty confident and plenty strong, Miss Successful Orthopedic Surgeon.'

'Nahhh! I'm a bloody human conveyor belt.' Meher made a face. 'I'm still studying. A senior MS student who essentially passes surgical instruments to the know-it-all surgeons.'

'You pass things?' Gina chortled. 'How many do you drop, Meher?'

Meher's smile was lopsided. 'Not a single one. Can you believe that?'

Gina turned to her. 'Hope you don't mind my asking, but if you are a not a full-fledged doctor yet, how do you afford the fancy apartment and the swanky car?'

'Courtesy aunt Heer.'

'That stinking rich aunt of yours? She pays for your apartment and car?' Gina asked.

'Yup. And for my medical college.' Meher shared. 'Before you left, do you remember I was determined to do it all? MBBS, MS!'

Gina nodded, feeling some guilt. Wrapped in her problems, she had never checked to see if Meher or any other Wallflowers had fulfilled their dreams.

'But Abba refused to pay my fees. [*Zabardasti ki shaadi ya ghar se nikaala*](#) were my only two options.'

'Yikes! Then?'

'Then nothing! Heer Bua, a distant but not disinterested relative, came over in her fancy black Rolls and reminded Abba how he owed her husband a big amount of money from an old loan. *Phupha* is like Ambani of our community

and he has only two weaknesses.'

'[*Shabab and sharab*](#)!' Gina mocked.

'Nope. Heer and Heer!'

'Please continue.'

Meher smiled. 'So long story short, Heer Bua paid all my college and other expenses. They brought me closer to the Sun.'

Gina gently tugged Meher's cheek. It was soft to touch. 'You deserve all this and more, Meher. I'm really happy for you. Listen, don't get offended but can I ask you something?' Gina's expression was hesitant.

'Why are you being so formal, Gina, ask ya?'

'Kyra was saying your Bua is now a big shot erotica author. Like really explicit stuff.'

Gina saw Meher's face turn red. Just like her, Meher too blushed easily.

'Hey, I did not mean to embarrass you. You should be proud of her. Her writing has to be damn good. Kyra was telling me that she has sold a trillion copies. I saw nearly every woman on the plane reading that book. I didn't know then it was your aunt's.' Gina was quick to placate.

'I'm proud of her.' Meher kept her eyes on the road. 'She does have a way with words. Plus, she was one of those lucky married couples who had a rip-roaring sex life. She tells me that Uncle is insatiable even in his seventies.'

Gina shifted in her seat. 'Good for them.' Why the heck does the mere mention of a lusty husband remind me of him? *Because he too was insatiable. Always lusting for your body, eager to take you anywhere and everywhere.* Gina closed her eyes to shut the voice in her head and crossed her legs tightly. She blurted the first thing that came in her mouth. 'How come none of you got married?' Obviously, marriage and divorces were only things playing on her mind.

'No clue. We are aptly named 'Wallflowers' for a reason, I guess.' Meher changed lanes. 'So, tell me something about your fiancée. Is he hot?'

Gina thought of Ritesh's chubby face with thick brows, a round stubby nose and a wide mouth. 'He's really nice.'

Meher giggled. 'So, your soon-to-be-ex is still hotter of the two!' She clucked her tongue. Gina's look of hurt did not go unnoticed. 'Sorry, me and my big mouth!'

Gina ducked her face hiding her pained expression. 'It's okay. Looks are not everything.'

'Really? Since when?' Meher's eyed danced wickedly. Her cell rang just

then and she glanced down at it and groaned. 'It's the hospital. What the...?
It's never good when they call me on my day off!'

CHAPTER 15



45, Tulip Road
Pune

Gina stood on the side of an isolated road that was flanked by thick trees in all shades of green. The scent of flowers and soil was strong in the air.

For the last fifteen minutes Gina had been pacing back and forth. *What, Meher? What horrible timing for you to be called to the hospital?* Meher had to rush for an emergency, a multiple vehicle accident on the highway. However, she had arranged for a taxi to take Gina the rest of the way to the address Puru had given them.

Clutching her bracelets, Gina checked both sides of the wide curving road and crossed it. Today she was wearing two bracelets just to be sure. '[Jaal tu jalaal tu aayi . . .](#)' she repeatedly chanted what her [Nani](#) had taught her when she was five, to help her battle her fear of the dark. Gina still feared the dark; it left her paralyzed. And it was the darkness of an evening soon to become a night that propelled her toward a gate that lay few feet from her. Gina approached it with wary eyes. *I can't believe I'm going to do what I'm going to do. And truly all by myself! Shit!* Gina halted, her face pale, her breath harried.

The loud honk of a car that was coming fast at her caused Gina to jump out of the way. '[Pagal hai kya?](#)' The angry driver yelled, going past her.

[Aap mujhe kitne ache se jante hain, bhaisahab.](#) Gina wanted to call back but her throat was parched. Nausea and nerves were making her temples throb. Her stomach felt like a bottomless pit and her hands wouldn't stop trembling. Gina hugged her bracelets; pulling them wasn't enough.

Just fucking do it, G-spot! Kyra's voice boomed in her head. She wasn't alone.

Gina, the best thing about a self-created mess is that it does not require a crowd to fix. So freaking fix it. Doyal's voice added a finishing touch.

Chicken!

You can do this Gina . . . if you want to that is. Meher's words, even in Gina's thoughts, weren't pushy.

'Damn you, Wallflowers!' Gina gritted her teeth, looked around for some kind of knocker or doorbell around the gate. Her heartbeat boomed in her ears and sweat pooled in her armpits. Unlike the other farmhouses Gina had passed on the way, this one had nearly ten feet high boundary walls. In the fast fading light, the broken glass peppered on the top of the boundary walls appeared dull like her eyes.

Gina spotted a guard post to the side of the smaller door. She walked up to it and peeped inside the bars. She saw two guards inside. They noticed her at the same time. Gina beckoned one of the uniformed guards. Her voice was hoarse. 'I'm here to meet Ojas Purohit. I'm-'

The guard she was addressing interrupted her and said to his colleague. 'Three today!'

They laughed amongst themselves.

Gina did not like their leery expression, looking down her simple round neck T-shirt that had slipped a bit as she hunched to look through the bars. She straightened away from the bars. 'Listen-!'

'Come, you! Come inside.' One guard beckoned Gina to go to the iron doors as the other went to open it from the inside.

'Ojas Sir in his bedroom.' The guards kept laughing as they walked back to their post.

'*Gadhe!*' Lowering her head Gina hastily walked into the paved driveway and then stopped short. *Bedroom?* She chewed her lips and looked around, as lost as a puppy off a leash. 'I must have misheard the moron, he must have said drawing room!' Gina exhaled. 'Drawing room, that's what he said.'

Gina halted as she came upon steps that led to a red-tiled porch. She raised her head and looked around. She was facing a large white structure with a stucco exterior and gabled roof. Large and dark arched windows were carved in the exterior. Tall blue and red pots placed aesthetically in corners added a touch of color to the white exterior. *What a house!* Gina raised her head and took in her surroundings. She could see acres and acres of green land that had turned a shade of dark olive in the evening light. At some distance she could see a large oval swimming pool that seemed to be covered with a tarp.

Sounds of muted laugh came through the front door that was open. Ignoring her racing heartbeat, Gina went up the stairs. Very slowly! She saw

cameras facing the entrance. She had seen several of them on trees in the driveway. *Who is Satan scared of?* Reaching into her bag, Gina took out the affidavit she had brought with her. *Should I ring the bell or simply walk in?* She remembered the guard's words. *Three today!*

If he is expecting company then company he is going to get. Time to get embarrassed, Ojas Purohit. Gina's mouth curled upwards even as she felt some sweat trickle down her back and her legs felt wobbly. She stepped over the threshold. The inside of the house was opulent to the point that it was gaudy. Thick red velvet drapes hung everywhere, blocking all of the outside light. Flamboyant velvet furniture was spread all over the living room. Large obscene art showing couples engaged in most crude and explicit sex acts adorned the wall. '*Cheee!*' Gina whispered, her expression boggled. *Is he working in the porn industry now?*

Gross! Gina averted her eyes even as the hair on her nape bristled. Holding her bag close, she passed the living room to an equally decadent dining room replete with a dominating black wooden table with gold paneling. Eight chairs with golden backs sat empty around it. Obscene art and draperies were a theme throughout out the house. Gina rubbed her forearms and grimaced. *What the hell is this place?*

Sounds of someone speaking in low tones fell on her ears. It sounded like more than one woman. Gina turned in a corridor and went past a few shut doors until she came upon a large double paneled door, which was ajar. The sounds came from behind it.

Gina gently turned the handle on the door and pushed. It swung open soundlessly.

In the dim light, a man sat on a leather wing-backed chair. His head was tilted back showing a corded neck. His hair was long and his shoulders were wide. His white shirt was open down to his stomach, laying bare his muscled brown chest peppered with scant but dark curly hair. *Blood!* Gina flinched and then realized that it wasn't blood but simply nail polish on the hand of a skimpily clad woman, caressing the man's stomach. The other woman, in equally exiguous lingerie and long cascading hair moved over the man, her hands and mouth touching and fondling him in places most intimate. Their touches interspersed with soft whispers. Gina heard their whispered words and her mouth went dry.

Gina felt the color in her cheeks and the heat in her body rise. There was something deeply disturbing and yet erotic about the still man and the women

who seemed to be worshipping his body, their movements slow and graceful. His eyes still closed, the man lowered his hand and moved it over the bare breast of the woman who was kissing his neck. As he fingered her nipple, Gina felt her breasts tingle within the cup of her bra. The woman moaned in his ear and Gina licked her suddenly dry lips. The erotically moving silhouettes in sparse lighting were mesmerizing, weaving a web of desire around Gina.

Gina wanted to look away but desire unfurled between her legs. The man lowered his face toward the woman's upturned parted lips and Gina saw him clearly.

The earth heaved under her feet and a gasp escaped her loose lips. Gina covered her mouth but the tiny sound alerted the man and he raised his face toward her. Their eyes met. Something came and went in his face. Gina felt like a deer trapped in the headlights.

'Darling, you never said there was going to be a third?' Drawled the woman who had been nibbling on his neck. Trapping Gina's startled eyes in her sultry gaze, she ran her fingers possessively over the man's chest. Gina felt something curdle in her chest.

'Gina!' The man's voice was husky. He pushed away the woman working on his neck and the other one moved away on her own. He moved his hair away from the face, bringing attention to the jagged scar that ran from under his left ear to the jaw.

'Ladies, say hello to my wife!' Ojas pushed away from the chair. His open shirt fell further, flapping along his long-muscled body. Gina's eyes snagged on the bulge in his crotch and she quickly glanced away.

'Foursomes are a lot of fun, darling!' Ojas stretched out his hand to Gina, his full lower lip curved into a wide smile. It was a cruel smile. His eyes glittered.

Gina glanced at Ojas's hand, then his face and then at the women who were staring back at her with much curiosity. She did not wait for a second longer. Turning around Gina fled from the room.

CHAPTER 16



Gina ran through the house, her feet thudding softly on the shiny marble floor. She felt as if the house with all its obscenities and vulgarity was closing on her, the walls about to fall on her head. She finally stopped at the porch steps and held the nearby pillar for support. Her body was shaking with several emotions clashing in her. Her thoughts were scrambled worse than eggs in a skillet. *The womanizer! The cad! Two women? I just saw a threesome. Divorce just got easier.* Gina clamped her lips even as unexpected moisture filled her eyes. *How dare he? Fancy effing house, multiple sex partners! He is living like a king rolling in gluttony, while I have been rotting away on a damn island.* Gina felt betrayed all over again. Dumped, cast aside like a piece of nothing. Gina's hands curled at her sides and she gnashed her teeth. *I'll teach him a lesson. No, not again! Never again!* She wrinkled her nose. *I'm not going to cry . . . I'm not going to-*

'You dropped this as you were running away!' Ojas's voice was smooth as honey.

For a few seconds, Gina stayed where she was without turning. *Should I just keep running? The gate is not that far. Screw the divorce!*

And then The Duchess spoke in her head. *You have only two options, Gina. Either fight the jerk or fuck his happiness!* Gina smiled an eerie smile. *Maybe I can do both!*

Taking a steadying breath, she pivoted.

Ojas Purohit, her husband whom she had not seen in the last five years, stood leaning against the front door of his house. He had not bothered to button up his clothes and the shirt dangled on his side, continuing to show his ripped upper body. His loose cotton pants sat dangerously low on his abdomen. His hair was longer than she remembered and tousled, his feet bare; like some hunk made simply for the pleasure of women.

But I know how ugly he actually is and how immune I am! Gina pointed at the affidavit in her hand. 'I want a divorce.' She tilted her chin, secretly

proud of her steady voice.

Ojas smiled but it was more of a sneer. ‘The last time we were in the same room, you promised that you would never divorce me.’ His voice was low, his manner flirty. Gina felt her cheeks grow warm at the reminder. ‘You also promised that I would have to spend my life tied to you. You were going to be my wife forever.’ Ojas drawled. Nothing in his posture or expression hinted that he was stressed on seeing her.

Would Pablo be ever nervous? Gina, of late, had been watching a lot of Narcos on Netflix. She swallowed heavily. ‘For an old man you have a good memory even though it’s somewhat spotty.’ She saw his pupils widen briefly. *Good. Be surprised, you jerk, you gigolo!* She gulped but continued. ‘When last time we were in the same room, what I actually said was that I would make your life miserable as long as I live.’ Her voice shook when she raised it so Gina paused, taking a breath. ‘I had said, “you would see me in hell before I divorced you.” And look where I am? I must be in hell because I’m in your disgusting sick house.’ Her eyes kept shooting lasers at him.

Ojas’s mouth twitched. He did not seem impressed. ‘Grown some claws, puss-’

‘Shut up! Just give me this divorce.’

Ojas wrinkled his forehead, his look thoughtful. ‘Correct me if I’m wrong, but doesn’t one have to ask something for it to be given? And I don’t remember you asking for a divorce.’

‘Your moth-’

Ojas was unstoppable. ‘I know it’s hard for you to follow logic. You were always pretty . . . and dumb!’

Gina’s hand fisted at her sides. ‘Listen, don’t speak-’

‘So, you are here for a divorce?’ Ojas waved the paper in front of her. ‘What a pity! And here I thought you wanted to renew old memories.’ He suggestively ran his eyes over Gina’s body, his gaze lingering at her breasts. ‘Do you remember when we first had sex?’ His voice deepened and his gaze became hooded. ‘You, the eager virgin, ready to please her experienced lover. You had developed quite a taste for my flesh, remember sweetheart, just like I had for yours? You had so many nicknames for me in bed. Stud, lover, baby . . . should I keep going?’ His voice was honeyed.

Gina broke their eye contact, running her gaze over the pots and plants. *They are words, only words!* She chanted repeatedly in her head, rubbing the bracelets up and down on her arms, uncaring of the tiny hair it pulled. ‘Are

you still in love with me?’ Her voice was cool, unlike her heated cheeks and body.

Ojas stepped out of the door, leaning heavily on a black walking stick. Gina’s gaze lingered on the stick. *So, he never healed. Good!* She raised her eyes. All suggestiveness had disappeared from Ojas’s face. A vein pulsed in his forehead. Gina experienced some satisfaction that she had hit a nerve. ‘What the fuck did you say?’ He growled.

There was a time he wouldn’t even utter ‘shut up’ in front of a female. A time of impeccable manners and kind words—a time of deceit. Gina’s eyes were lackluster, wearing the expression she had been wearing for so many years. ‘I asked if you are still in love with me? Why else would you say no to divorce me?’ She challenged.

Ojas glared at Gina briefly and then laughed, not the most pleasant sound! ‘You are even more stupid than you look.’ He ended his laugh abruptly. ‘That was enough amusement for the next ten years.’ He tossed the paper at Gina. It fluttered and fell into the space between them. ‘No divorce. Now get out of my house and go back to wherever you crawled out from. Come back when you turn eighty.’ He turned around and limped back inside the house. His stick making a ‘clack clack’ sound against the tile. ‘I have some *real* women waiting for me.’

‘And you are a *real* jackass! Some things never change!’ Gina called out.

Ojas stopped and whipped his head to look over his shoulder.

Gina flinched at the hate in his eyes. She felt like someone had walked over her grave.

‘Listen, you little bi-’

Gina didn’t let him finish. ‘No, you listen! I have met someone and I want to marry him.’

CHAPTER 17



Ojas went numb. Anger rolled over him in waves. *How dare you? How dare you even think of marrying someone? I will never let that happen. Over my dead body, you witch! Over my dead body.*

‘Are you going to say something?’ Gina watched him, her eyes worried.

Ojas then realized that the threats and accusations he thought he was hollering had just been in his head. He took a step forward then stopped. His fingers gripped the silver knob of his cane so tightly, they hurt. He wanted to shake Gina. But then she swung her gaze away from him. Ojas halted. His eyes ran over her profile under the harsh porch lighting. This was not the Gina he knew or remembered. The woman in front of him was gloomier than an abandoned building. Her hair was tied in an unforgivingly tight ponytail. Her cheeks were sunk in and held little color. Her clamped lips, like the rest of her, were dull. Her worn T-shirt was a washed-out shade of blue and hung at the ends and her ill-fitting jeans seemed to have been brought from a flea market. Her sandals were simple, revealing her unvarnished toes. The only jewelry she wore was the simple leather-strap watch and some bracelets on her wrist.

The years have not been kind to her! Ojas waited for the gratification to follow that thought but it did not come. He frowned. *I have no sympathy for this criminal woman. Never! ‘Never!’*

Gina swung her face back, her brows raised. ‘What do you mean, never?’

Ojas fumbled over his words. ‘Never . . . I will never give you a divorce!’

Gina opened her mouth but Ojas silenced her with a sharp strike of his stick against the tiles. ‘Stop groveling! Come to my office.’

Ojas limped back inside the house.

‘What?’ Gina watched his retreating back then shook her head and picked up the fallen affidavit from the floor. *Idiot. Just now he said get out and now he is saying come inside.* [*Bloody baingan, langda baingan.*](#) She dusted some dirt off the papers. ‘Come to my office!’ She grunted, mimicking Ojas. ‘I’d

rather come to your execution! By hook or by crook, you will sign this damn paper, baingan.'

CHAPTER 18



Black masculine shoes with silver buckles stopped in front of her. Gina glanced up.

A man in his forties, in a gray safari suit stood in front of her. A leather bag on his wrist completed his outfit. His eyes seemed the kind that had seen much in life. And right now, they were focused on her.

‘Vinay Dhaliwal, Mr. Purohit’s PA. I’m sorry I was not there to meet you when you came . . .’ He paused and lowered his eyes and fidgeted with the large silver watch on his wrist. ‘And for what you must have seen. I didn’t know Colonel was. . .is married.’ He trailed off.

‘It’s okay. This marriage is just a formality.’ Gina’s voice sounded strained to her own ears. She raised her hand still clutching the piece of paper. ‘Mr. Dhaliwal, could you please have him sign this?’

‘I’m sorry, Ma’am, I can’t do that. I can’t even have Colonel take his medications on time.

‘But-’

‘Please come with me. Colonel wants to see you. If you could follow me, please.’

‘Colonel, my foot!’ Gina shouted. ‘Maybe if you hid his meds altogether, we all would be in a happier place. Except for God, of course.’

Vinay turned around. ‘Please, follow me.’

Squaring her shoulders, Gina walked back into the tawdry decorated house. ‘I hate these interiors.’

‘Me too, Ma’am’

‘Please call me Gina. I won’t be here for long.’

Vinay nodded, but kept walking. He paused outside a closed mahogany door. ‘Mr. Purohit’s office.’ He left her there.

Gina heard the sound of women’s voices coming from behind the door. She stared at the door, her insides churning worse than water in a jacuzzi. *Shit! Not them again! They don’t really seem like regular women. Hookers?*

Her hand hovered over the door. *Are they doing it? What do I do?* Gina stepped away from the door. *But he did call me.* Defiant, Gina stepped back to the door, her hand raised to knock.

The door opened from the inside and one of the two women Gina had seen getting intimate with Ojas leaned seductively against the door.

‘Come in!’ Sylvia’s kohl lined eye ran over Gina with obvious disdain.

Clutching the affidavit in front of her, Gina walked into the office, her heart thundering against her ribs.

‘Whatever did he see in you?’ Sylvia whispered as Gina went past her. Just for a fraction of a second Gina faltered, but she continued inside the room that seemed like a dungeon with dark interiors and dim lights.

Ojas sat behind the desk but he wasn’t alone. The other woman with pretty features sat on his knee. His piercing gaze was fixed on Gina even as his fingers stroked the woman’s bare waist. Something akin to amusement swam in his eyes.

‘I can come back later. Take all the time you need to finish your orgy.’ Gina felt some pride at how composed her voice was even though she felt like jumping across the desk and slapping the grin off his face.

Before rage could make her do something really stupid, Gina pivoted, walking back to the door.

‘If you step out of the door, you can say bye to that divorce you are here for.’ Ojas’s smooth voice halted her.

Gina turned around, her nails pushing down into her palms. She let Ojas see the hate that filled her. All for him.

‘Oh, don’t be mad, pussy,’ Ojas patted his leg and smiled, his eyes gleamed under his lashes as his thick lower lip curved. ‘I saved a leg for you too. Have a seat!’

Gina found it hard to breathe. ‘I’d rather sit on a burning log than your leg!’

‘Oh, poor Gina, you still think so highly of yourself.’ Ojas crooned. ‘You don’t get to sit on my leg anymore. The invitation was for sweet, sweet Sylvia!’

The woman who had opened the door walked past Gina, looking at her over her nose. She snorted loudly.

What a lady! Gina watched Sylvia drape herself on Ojas’s unoccupied knee.

‘You can park yourself there.’ Ojas pointed at the chair across his desk.

Gina pulled the chair out and sat down. Her mouth was clamped tightly. She averted her face as she saw his hands rise up on the women's shoulders, stroking their skin. A lover's touch! *Yuck!* Gina felt like thousands of maggots were crawling over her.

'Say hello to my beautiful friends, wife.' Ojas commanded.

Sylvia waved her fingers at Gina and the other girl, who was younger of the two, lowered her eyes. 'They are honest and hardworking, unlike someone else in the room.' Ojas purred. Sylvia laughed loudly at that. And the other one gave a contrived smile. She still did not look in Gina's direction.

Gina felt like breaking something on Ojas's head. 'They could be beautiful but definitely not honest, for they have to fake desire for a cripple.'

For a few seconds, the room went completely silent. Gina's chest rose and fell with the overwhelming loathing for the man in front of her.

Ojas threw his head back and laughed. Gina and the two others watched him in surprise. When he lowered his head, his eyes were like two shards of stone. 'Give me that paper!'

Gina drew the affidavit close to her chest, her gaze suspicious. 'What are you going to do with it?'

'Rip it into pieces and throw them on your face.'

'Asshole!' Gina got to her feet, pushing the chair back noisily. She backtracked to the door holding the paper close. 'Call for me when you are done playing these stupid games and with this jackass behavior. We'll talk then.'

'Stop right there.' Ojas's voice was low and threatening, his eyes narrowed.

Gina smirked. 'What are you going to do? Chase me down?' *I'm actually enjoying taunting someone with a disability. How horrible am I?*

With unexpected speed Ojas leaned forward, dislodging the girls perched on his legs. He picked the vase sitting on the right of his desk and flung it right across the room, hitting his target right where he wanted. Smack dab center.

CHAPTER 19



The vase flew across the room. Gina jumped back. The vase hit the wall and shattered less than a foot away from her. Stale smelling water and some flowers hit her shoulder and the side of her face.

One of the woman's gasp rang out loud as the two jerked away from him.

Ojas leaned forward, his elbow resting on the desk, pinched nostrils the only sign of his fury.

'Are you mad? You could have hit me!' Gina stuttered. Her body shook even as her mind grappled with the unexpected violence.

'A pity I missed then.' Ojas sat back and pulled the arm of the girl closest to him. She resisted.

'Fuck you, mad man! Fuck you!' Gina stepped out of the room and slammed the door hard behind her. 'He is mad! Bloody lunatic! [Paagal!](#)' Gina shouted loud enough for her voice to penetrate the door, even though she held on to the door handle.

'Ma'am are you okay?' The PA rushed in. 'Is everything-'

'He threw a vase at me. A bloody vase! Really heavy.' Gina hissed, not letting go of the handle. 'If he had a good aim, he could have hit me. He hates me that much? He almost broke my face, bloody mad man!'

'Colonel has a good aim, Ma'am. I am sure he was not aiming to hit you.'

'Excuse me?' Gina let go off the handle. She shook her head and her ponytail slapped the side her neck.

'His aim is very good. He never misses.' The P.A. repeated.

Gina stared at him, speechless. Then she shouted. 'Are you saying he didn't hit me on purpose? Are you?'

Vinay nodded.

Gina threw her head back and shook her fists in front of her. "You all have lost it!"

CHAPTER 20



Next Day Morning

Some trucks passing outside the farmhouse made a strange rumbling sound that woke Ojas up. A slow pain in his neck was the first feeling that came to his conscious mind. Something hard and not his \$2000 eiderdown pillow pinched the back of his neck. He flexed his shoulders and raised his head. He found himself in his office chair. His mouth tasted bitter and he could smell his rancid breath. Ojas shifted his foot and heard the clink as his bare foot hit a glass tumbler. A night of isolated revelry. Belching, Ojas scratched his chin, feeling the bristles breaking out on his jawline. *Gina!* The mere memory of her name brought Ojas swiftly out of his lethargy. He got up from his chair, holding on to his desk. His vision wasn't the clearest and he had to blink several times before he attempted walking. He almost fell to the floor at the first step. His ankle throbbed like someone had tied barbed wire around it. *They could be beautiful but definitely not honest for they have to fake desire for a cripple!* Gina's mocking words reverberated in his head. They stung Ojas more than the discomfort in his injured ankle.

'What a lovely wife I have!' He gritted his teeth and walked to the door as upright as he could, ignoring the stick leaning against his desk. With every step, his breathing became labored. The pressure on his ankle increased exponentially. Ojas clamped his jaw tightly. He felt his anklebone would rip through his skin any second. Sleeping in an uncomfortable position had made it worse. 'Oh jeez!' He fell heavily against the door. A harsh laugh escaped his mouth. *I have followed a routine, a god damned routine every day for the last so many years. And that woman shows up and hours later I'm behaving like an imbecile.* 'Fuck this shit!'

Ojas glanced at the timepiece on his desk. It was close to 5:30. After dinner he had sent the escorts off to their usual rooms. Yesterday, he had not been in the mood for women. He only wanted the booze. He drank to the point of

oblivion and thus ended up the sleeping in the chair.

‘I need a whole bottle of aspirin.’ Ojas came out of his office. The house was quiet. He limped into his bedroom, this time leaning heavily on his walking stick. On his way he caught sight of the damp garden and driveway. *Unpredictable Pune rains!* Ojas knew his foot was about to get worse. It always did after the rains.

After doing his morning ablutions and his stretches, which were particularly painful today, Ojas stepped out to go back into his office nearly an hour later. The chair outside his office was occupied.

‘You don’t look too well, Colonel.’ Vinay got to his feet.

Ojas grunted and continued to his office. ‘Have the cook bring some cold milk and dry toast.’ The thought of his usual breakfast of eggs and sausage turned his stomach. ‘When does Kamal get in?’

‘Around 8:30 or 9:00.’

‘That is more than two hours away. I’ll just type some letters myself and he can format them.’ Ojas had his hand on the door handle.

‘Colonel, what should I do with Ma’am?’

Ojas turned. ‘What Ma’am?’

‘Sir your wi- Ms. Gina. She is still here.’

Ojas scowled. ‘How dare she stay in my house? Who allowed her inside? Did you?’

‘Sir, she’s sleeping on the porch. . .outside.’

Ojas paused. ‘She slept outside the whole night?’

Vinay nodded.

‘It rained last night!’

‘I’m sure she didn’t sleep comfortably.’ Vinay was speaking to Ojas’s back.

Ojas unlocked the front door and swung it open. He did not have to go far to find Gina. She had pulled two chairs together to form a makeshift bed. Her head rested at an awkward angle on the top of the wooden frame of one chair and her feet were up on the other. Her body rested in an uneven curve. Soft snores came from her parted lips.

Ojas stared at Gina, free to study her face unobserved in the golden light of the rose-colored morning. Nothing much had changed since last night. Even while relaxed, her face was thinner making her cheekbones more pronounced. Her eyes had crescent shaped shadows on which her thick lashes rested. Her mouth was fleshy and pale pink and just as distracting as he

remembered. Ojas quickly moved his eyes from her lips to the top of her limp ponytail, the crumpled loose tunic and her unflattering jeans. Her top had ridden up to the side and he saw the cluster of three light-brown colored moles on her pale skin. Something stirred in him. *Once upon a time I loved to kiss those!*

The Gina he knew had a penchant for bright colors and clothes. Unknown to Ojas his eyes became gentler. *Seeing what she wore the first time I had met her I had almost walked away from her. And does she still have that clown dress?* Her mouth was the kind that smiled easily, dark eyes that shone with no shadows under them and cheeks that flushed easily. At one time her face reminded him of a pale pink rose bud moistened with morning dew. But the woman asleep in front of him was like an eroded, bleached out version of that girl. It was like switching off the lights in a room and all that remained were the shadows.

When Ojas's eyes moved back to Gina's face he saw her dark eyes were open and fixed straight on him.

CHAPTER 21



Gina woke up to find Ojas watching her. *My husband!* ‘Hey.’ Her mouth softened with the beginning of a sleepy smile. A thrill shot in her every time she saw her handsome husband. Her eye moved from his brow to his cheeks. Gina blinked. ‘What is. . .?’ She pointed at the zigzag dark brown scar running down the side of his cheek. ‘Ojas!’ Alarmed, she tried to sit up. Two strange things happened together. Her bed broke in the middle and she fell to the cold wet ground and something gave her a stinging smack in the face. Her purse. *Why am I sleeping with a purse* was Gina’s thought even as her butt stung from the fall. ‘Oww!’ Her moan was low but audible. She stretched out her hand to Ojas who kept watching her, his eyed hooded. *Why isn’t he helping me?* Gina looked around and she saw where she was—on the porch of someone’s house—and her bed were two hard, prickly cane chairs. Her eyes fell on the bracelets jangling on her wrist and her dreamy state of sleep fell away. Gina covered her face, pulling in a few deep breaths. *Gawd! How could I smile at Satan? When will my past stop sneaking up on me?*

‘Do you plan to ever get up from the floor or have you decided to marry it next?’ Ojas spoke from above her head. Like cytoplasm fills a cell, sarcasm filled his voice.

‘Shut up!’ Gina attempted to sit up but a sharp pain shot though her neck and shoulder blades. Her butt was still smarting. Looking up, Gina caught the smug smile on Ojas’s face.

‘You are trespassing.’ Ojas looked down at her.

Bastard didn’t even offer me his hand. ‘Just the sign the paper and I will leave.’ Avoiding the urge to rub her backside, Gina got to her feet.

‘What paper?’

Gina tried to raise her brow but a yawn caught her by surprise. She had been up most of the night; strange place and stranger sounds. She hurriedly covered her mouth.

‘You still yawn like a kitten.’

Gina became still. Ojas just had uttered something he used to say to her in happier times, times when even her yawns earned her endearments and kisses from him. *Past is an equal opportunity offender.* It was Gina's turn to brandish a smug smile.

Ojas cleared his throat and the tips of his ears turned red. His stupidly spoken words had transported him to a time when Gina was his oxygen. He squashed those memories. 'Was the paper white with a pink stamp?'

'Yes!' Gina snapped flexing her shoulders, as the pain now seemed to have progressed from her shoulders to the back of her head. "Was?" She frowned. The thought kick started some butterflies in her stomach and her fingers dived for the bracelets.

'That paper?' Ojas pointed with his finger.

Gina turned to where Ojas was pointing.

Her hand flew to her chest. 'Shit! Shit!' Gina dropped her purse and ran to the paper floating in the puddle of water a few feet from the chairs. 'No! No! No!' She yanked the paper up, which had absorbed water like a piece of cotton. It was streaked all over with black ink, and none of the words were legible. 'How could you, you monster?' She wailed glaring at Ojas.

'What the hell did I do?' Ojas clamped his lips even as his eyes twinkled.

'You think this is funny?' Gina came angrily at him, her now-wet shoes making squelching sounds. She stopped inches away from him. 'If you had signed this yesterday I would not have had to sleep outside and the paper would not have slipped from my hands and got wet. It's all your fault.'

Ojas pulled the paper from Gina's fingers.

'Hey!' Gina tried to grab it but he was quicker.

Ojas crumpled it and tossed it back on the floor. All humor was gone from his face that was now hard as granite. 'Now more the reason for you to fucking get out of my house!' He turned around. He had barely walked a few steps when he felt a soft thump on his back. He pivoted holding onto his walking stick. 'Did you just hit me?'

"Yes, yes I did!" Gina shouted baring her teeth, her hands making big sweeping gestures. 'Because you are being so stupid. We don't give a rat's ass for each other. Why won't you just give me the damn divorce? Back then, you wanted the divorce!'

'And back then you didn't.' Ojas jeered. 'Shit happens. People change. Now I like this absentee marriage. Gives me an excuse me to fuck women and not commit.'

Gina flinched.

‘Too harsh for your delicate ears, Queen?’

Gina’s hands curled at her sides. He had used part of an endearment from the past, except it had been two words—his queen. *Hateful man!* ‘Women let you touch them only for money? We are such a generous gender.’

Ojas’s face tightened and his skin appeared to be stretched over his bones. He leaned in. Gina braced herself to take flight.

‘If you are so generous then give me some fucking peace and leave.’ Ojas turned away and retreated to his house. ‘And for God’s sake, brush your stinky mouth.’

‘You have kissed this stinky mouth enough times.’ Gina said without thinking. Then she paused and immediately turned away from him. *What am I saying?*

‘Idiot.’ Ojas said loud enough for her to hear.

‘Stupid.’ Gina retaliated, hiding her panicked expression from him. *What am I going to do now?* She reached out for the soggy affidavit.

Ojas shut the front door. ‘Demented woman!’ he muttered, walking back to his office.

‘Should I have the security throw her out?’ Vinay asked, following him.

‘Heck yeah!’ Ojas took a deep breath and paused. ‘No, wait. Give her some food and ask her to leave. If she still doesn’t, then call the police.’ He commenced walking and then paused. ‘No. Don’t call the police. Just come and get me.’ Ojas took some satisfaction in slamming the door so hard that the adjoining walls shook.

CHAPTER 22



Vinay glanced at the closed door of Ojas's office and then at the front door through which he could see Gina's silhouette. Taking out his cell, he quickly called a number.

Puru answered in two rings. 'Gina has arrived has she?'

'How did you know, Puru Sir?' Vinay spoke in a hushed tone, walking toward the back of the house where the kitchen was.

'When was the last time you called me, Vinay? It's always me calling you to check on your mad boss.'

'Sir, Ms. Gina is here and Colonel is behaving very badly with her. Very angry and very rude.' Vinay was always a gentleman, especially to the opposite sex, to which his wife of twenty-five years would readily vouch. She had two affairs and he still accepted and loved her like she was his goddess.

'Listen to me. Make sure Gina stays. You have to keep her there. It is very important. Keep them around each other.'

'Sir, Ms. Gina gives it back to the Colonel. They both make each other really angry. They might end up hurting each other. Badly.'

'That is music to my ears! It's high time Bhai got some shit back. Someone to make him as miserable as the crap he dumps on the rest of us.' Puru chuckled. 'You are my wingman now, Dhaliwal. Don't let those two separate. Make it happen, Brah.'

Vinay stood quietly, wondering if Puru was using him as a pawn to finish off his older brother for inheritance.

'I know what you are thinking.'

Vinay glanced at the phone. He wondered if he had said something aloud.

'Trust me on this one. The Brigadier agrees too. We were just talking about this scenario yesterday.' Puru shared. 'I can have Dad talk to you.'

'No Sir, it is okay. I'll do my best.' Now Vinay knew he could not say 'no' to what Puru was asking. Vinay had immense respect for Senior Purohit.

'Do whatever you need to do, Boss. We're counting on you, brah!' Puru

ended the call.

Vinay stared at his phone and quietly wondered, *why does Puru Sir keep calling me bra?* He glanced down at his chest. His wife had been telling him that he had put on weight for some time now but he had been hoping it was around his stomach. Vinay sat down on a chair in the cozy dining nook, next to the kitchen. The cook, Paley Khan, who had been working for Ojas since he had moved to Pune, handed him a cup of Coffee. '[Koi Mar gaya, Vinay Bhaijaan?](#)'

['Marne wala hai. Mein.'](#) Vinay dialed another number.

CHAPTER 23



Fifteen minutes later.

A knock on the door made Ojas jerk his eyes away from the desktop screen. Even if the Prime Minister of the country had emailed him in the last few minutes, he would still not know for he had not read a single email all this time. He just sat there, his mind completely occupied by the thinner and fiercer version of his wife who was causing him a lifetime of anger and headache. *And she has been here only for twelve hours!* Sitting straighter, he called out. The knock revisited his door. 'Come in!'

It was Vinay.

'Did she leave?' Ojas did not understand the dread that filled him as he waited for Vinay's answer.

'Sir, Kamal is gone!'

'You sent Kamal off instead my wife?' Ojas raised a singular brow.

'No, Colonel. Kamal texted me that he has gone on an indefinite leave to his village. His [Chachi](#) is sick.'

Ojas slammed his fist on the desk. 'It's not his mother dammit. It's just some Chachi. Fire him.'

'But, Colonel!'

'Wait. Pay him two months' salary and then fire him.'

'Colonel, his Chachi raised him since he was a child. She is his mother.'

'His Chachi is his mother?' Ojas sat back, his expression puzzled.

Vinay shook his head vigorously. 'No, no. His mother died in childbirth so his Chachi raised him.'

'And you could have said this in the beginning and saved ten minutes of my time.'

Vinay gave a helpless shrug.

'Call some staffing company and ask for a temp.' Ojas paused. 'Did she leave?'

‘No, Sir. Ma’am says she will only leave if you sign the paper.’

‘She has no damn paper. It is wetter than a leaf floating in a pool.’

‘She asked me for a hairdryer.’

Ojas muttered some obscenities.

‘Maybe we should call the police.’

‘No.’ Ojas picked up the paper-weight from his desk, and turned it back and forth in his hand. His eyes were narrowed as he studied the glass infused with various colors. Vinay moved back.

‘Maybe, Colonel, you should ask her to do something that she won’t be able to do and promise to sign the paper only if she does it. And when Ma’am fails then she will have to leave . . .’

Ojas put down the paperweight. ‘Repeat that.’ So, Vinay did.

A strange smile grew on Ojas’s face. ‘You are a genius, Vinay.’

‘Colonel!’ Vinay spoke hastily. ‘I meant while the staffing company sends a temporary replacement, maybe Ma’am can be your secretary.’

Ojas leaned forward, his shoulders slumped. ‘What? Where is the fun in that, Vinay?’

Nervously, Vinay touched his glasses. ‘You can make it . . . as fun or not fun as you would like.’ His Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat furiously.

The strange smile was back on Ojas’s face. ‘I think I’m falling in love with you.’ His chuckle, for once, held genuine mirth. ‘Get Gina here. Before that, send the women in.’

‘They both are taking showers.’

‘They are taking it together?’ Ojas enjoyed the blush on Vinay’s face. ‘I’m kidding. Send the women in first and then my wife. Also, have Paley bring in my usual breakfast. I have changed my mind. I’m suddenly very hungry.’

CHAPTER 24



‘I’m so stupid! How could I drop you?’ Gina held the paper by its end. Her signature had run and was just a dark blot on the paper. The affidavit was ruined, but Gina continued to hold it for she knew if she let it go, all her strength might desert her. The majority of her savings had been spent on the trip to India and lawyer’s fees.

She put the paper down very carefully on the nearest chair and curled her hands above her head. Her thoughts were jumbled, her eyes darted around and her fingers were twitchy. *I’m broke mentally and financially. But that doesn’t mean ghanta.* She paced rapidly around the chair. *He can’t ruin me twice.* She paused and brought her hands to her sides. *[Yeh divorce toh hoga, even if I have to hold a gun to his temple.](#)*

Gina exhaled noisily. She was worried that if she ever got her hands on a gun she might actually shoot her husband. *[Dharti ka bojh.](#)* Gina rocked on her heels. ‘Wallflowers. They will surely have a way to fix this.’ She scrambled and pulled her cell phone out of her bag. ‘Dammit! Discharged!’ She ran her fingers through her hair.

The front door opened. It was Vinay.

‘Did you find a hairdryer?’

‘I got you some breakfast, Ma’am.’ Vinay extended the tray of food toward her.

‘I don’t need food. I need . . . I need. . .’ Gina sat down with a thump on the chair that had been partly her bed last night. Vinay sat down in another chair after placing the tray on the table between them.

‘I’m not hungry.’ Her mouth was clamped and Gina kept her eyes on the garden beyond the porch. ‘How can someone so ugly live in a place so beautiful?’

‘Colonel did not get that scar on purpose. It is a memory of a very painful time in his life.’

‘I’m not talking about the scar on his face.’ Gina met his eyes squarely.

‘I’m talking about his soul, his thoughts, his deeds.’

‘Oh.’ Vinay wiped his glasses with a handkerchief that he had extracted from his trouser pocket. ‘Please eat something. Colonel wants to meet you.’

‘He can go and fu- jump in the well.’ Gina stared at the damp paper, her fingers gnawing at her wrist.

‘Ma’am, I think he might have changed his mind about the divorce. You should talk to him.’

Her heart twitched, Gina sat up, excited. ‘Did he say something to you? He is ready to give me a divorce?’

‘You should talk to him after you eat and freshen up.’ Vinay smiled. His smile was quick to come and go. ‘Once you are done eating, I’ll show you to the bathroom.’

‘The bathroom would have a hairdryer, right?’ Gina asked, greedily biting into the tomato cucumber sandwiches. ‘Thank you for this and for talking some sense in that man. I’m sure you had something to do with it.’

Vinay’s smile grew at an alarming rate.

That’s a strange smile. Gina lowered her eyes and focused on the food, which she could enjoy now. Ojas was finally ready to work with her.

CHAPTER 25



Minutes later, Gina was back in the house. She stuck close to the P.A who was taking her to a washroom.

‘Right there!’ He pointed at the closed door.

Gina gazed at him, suspicious. ‘No tricks, right?’

Vinay smiled ‘No.’

Gina walked into the room. It was a bedroom and it was occupied.

The younger of the two women Gina had seen making out with Ojas sat on the bed. A textbook and a notebook lay open in front of her. She froze upon seeing Gina, a pen between her fingers.

Gina too stared at her surprised, but she was the first to speak. ‘I’m looking for a bathroom.’ She held up the unopened toothbrush and travel-size toothpaste in her hands.

‘It’s that door.’ The woman pointed to her left.

‘Is the other woman in there?’ Gina asked.

‘No, she is not here. She is in the other room.’

‘Oh.’ Gina felt her already stale mouth turn bitter. ‘Of course. He likes it in the morning too.’ She stepped forward.

‘Sylvia is in another room and not with Colonel.’

Gina shrugged.

‘We get separate rooms so I can study. I want to be a lawyer.’

‘A lawyer and hooker? That’s a new combo.’ Gina scoffed, almost at the bathroom door.

‘Even I would be angry if I found my husband with prostitutes.’ The woman’s words stopped her.

‘He is nothing to me.’ Gina asserted.

‘But he is something to me.’ The woman said softly. ‘Something nice, something good.’

‘Listen,’ Gina planted her hands on her hips and stared at the woman. ‘He is nothing nice, nothing good. Don’t fall for him. He will use you and trash

you.'

The woman shook her head. 'I'm not in love with him. How can someone like me dare to love someone like him?'

'Why, you don't have a heart? If you have a heart, you will end up doing stupid things. Mark my words.' Gina sighed. 'What's your name?'

'Silky.' The woman blushed.

'Really? Is that what your parents named you?' Gina scoffed.

'No,' She hesitated. 'It's Vidhi.'

'That's better.' Gina nodded her head. 'Good luck with your exams.'

'May I say something?' Vidhi asked, her demeanor tentative.

Gina flipped her ponytail and shrugged.

'Colonel is not bad. He is just angry at the unfairness of what happened to him.'

Gina stared at her bug eyed, and then blurted. 'Are you kidding me? You are saying what happened to him was unfair. You? Who is selling her body probably for money, for family or some equally sad reason?'

Vidhi's silent gaze proved Gina's assumption to be a fact.

'So, tell me Vidhi, who has it more unfair? Him or you? Answer honestly.'

'Colonel is the one paying for my education and higher studies. My Madam, . . . Madam Shaila won't pay for all this. Colonel even gave his home as an address for all my college correspondence.'

Gina stared at her hands. 'So?'

'He never forces us to do anything we don't want to.'

'You make it sound like he's a saint for doing that.' Gina grumbled. 'No woman should ever be forced to do anything she doesn't want to.'

'He hasn't touched us since you've come!'

Gina experienced a twitch in her gut. 'I haven't . . . ' she trailed off.

'A man's needs are different from a woman.'

Gina's expression was bemused. 'Now *you* sound like a man.'

Vidhi leaned forward. 'It might mean nothing to you or it might, but I have to tell you. I don't lie. Colonel is very clinical with us. There is no passion or love like you say, between us. It's just a job for us and a chore for him. Some months, all the Colonel has us do is join him for dinner. Don't believe that Sylvia, she is after-'

'Please, please don't.' Gina shook her head.

'He likes us in red and never lets us wear lavender. Do those colors mean anything to you?'

Gina froze. *'Thank you, sweetheart. Now every time I see red I will think of you and not the blood spilled from bodies. Wear this for me often, Gina.'* Ojas's deep-throated words murmured over her naked skin as he slid the crimson peignoir off her body slipped out of a memory. *And lavender was the color I was wearing when we had sex for the first time. The time I gave him my virginity.*

Vidhi coughed.

Gina jerked. 'I don't want to know. It's hurtful-'

'Why does it hurt you? I thought you hate him.' Vidhi asked, her head cocked to the side.

Gina bit her lip. *She sure can be a lawyer.* 'Umm! I do hate him. Hate him very much. And I'm hurt because he is living such a comfortable life while I have been living an isolated and unhappy life. It's bloody unfair.'

Vidhi turned her wrist so her forearm faced up. Gina gasped seeing the ugly welts on her arms that ran up from her wrists to her elbow. They seemed like old whip marks. 'I have many more such marks and not just from one man.'

Gina pressed a hand to her mouth, her eyes slanted downward. 'I'm so sorry!'

Vidhi hid her bruises. 'Like I just said, Colonel is not bad. In my profession, we remember customers not by what they do but by what they don't.'

CHAPTER 26



After freshening up, Gina came out of the bathroom. Her faded blue top was replaced by something much sexier and unforgettable—faded gray!

Gina glanced around. The room was empty. Vidhi's books were organized neatly on the nightstand.

Finding a plug point, Gina put her phone on the charger and headed out of the room. The Ojas she knew and the one Vidhi claimed to know were inherently as different as the Indian sitcom vamp who wore sleeveless blouses showing a hint of cleavage and the ideal [sanskari bahu](#) who celebrated [tyohars](#) not even found in the [Panchangam](#).

Gina stepped out of the room and the P.A stood there, patiently waiting. 'Please come. The Colonel is waiting for you.'

They walked in silence to the office and Gina waited till the P.A left. Somehow, she could not find the strength nor the will to go inside. Ojas's hateful words, his debauched and cruel actions, were all the proof that Gina needed. *He has become even more hateful that I remembered. The present is even scarier than the past. What a surprise!*

Colonel is not a bad man. Vidhi's earlier spoken words came to her mind but Gina pushed them aside. *Everyone measures goodness by the worst that has happened to them.* She simply pushed the door open and walked in. Ojas was the first person she saw, sitting in the leather chair behind the large cluttered desk. The rectangular bright floor lamp behind him threw shadows on his face, hiding everything except his gleaming eyes like that of a predatory animal. The thick curtains cut off nearly all of the natural daylight. They were not alone. Gina skimmed her eyes over Vidhi and Sylvia.

Sylvia was wearing a new negligee that showed more of her ample curves than hid them. *She's in her work clothes.* Vidhi avoided Gina's eyes.

'Another hideous top.' Ojas sneered, the tightness around his eyes and mouth suggested that he was holding back something. 'You were never much fashionable but that thing reeks of, reeks of. . .'

‘Cheap stuff!’ Sylvia offered, a spiteful smile on her fuchsia colored lips.

Gina refused to rise to the bait. ‘You wanted to see me?’

‘Ojas, I thought you like your women sexy.’ Sylvia’s eyes derided Gina’s high ponytail, makeup-free face, and her simple blouse tucked in her jeans and the canvas shoes.

Ojas gave a humorless laugh. ‘Sheath your claws, darling. It too early to bring those out.’ His gaze stayed fixed on Gina’s face.

The Gina standing in front of him had taken pains to look as unattractive and drab as she possibly could. Cheap clothes and no makeup made her look younger and vulnerable, especially when she was trying to stay strong. Ojas could see through her now, just like he could five years ago. She was breaking eye contact with him often, she was breathing through her mouth intermittently, and her fingers were softly drumming against the side of her leg. *Oh yeah, she is nervous! The run-down appearance, the cheap clothes are just to fuck with my mind. Gina’s famous mind games. But not anymore. Now it’s my turn to play.* ‘Have a seat.’ Ojas said through stiff lips.

‘I want the divorce.’ Gina tilted her chin as she stepped forward.

‘Ah, because you are in love?’ Ojas picked up a pen only to toss it aside with much force. The pen bounced off the things on his desk, mostly paper, and just stopped short of falling. ‘So, you want to marry again? You sucked at it last time.’

I sucked because I was married to you, dimwit! Gina clamped her mouth, remembering his PA’s words. *I think he might have changed his mind about the divorce.* Gina fought to keep her expression neutral. ‘People change. Things are different now.’

Ojas’s fingers on the arm of the chair twitched. He wanted to indulge in his favorite sport of recent times—hurl something. Seeing the object crash, splinter and shatter into several pieces brought him some satisfaction. Right now, he needed a shelf full of objects. *How dare she move on? How dare she be happy?* ‘But how will you get the divorce? Your precious affidavit is gone. . .in the rain!’

Much like the bimbos that accompany the villain in Bollywood films, Sylvia tittered.

Snapping her head up, Gina retorted. ‘Adultery is grounds for a divorce.’

Ojas’s smile was instant and fake. ‘But not for a quick one! How about you marry in your late forties? You will be too old to have kids by then.’

Kids! Gina felt her skin crawl. She could only stare at him.

Ojas stopped, taken aback by the intense pain that crossed her face. He leaned forward. 'What happened?'

The past! The past happened. You know nothing. Gina shook her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. 'Nothing. I don't have your knack or talent for these diversions. Just tell me what it will take to get a quick divorce?'

Ojas did not say anything but simply watched her. Gina felt her skin tingle. She looked into his eyes and for a second she forgot everything else. Just for a second. She blinked and glared at him.

'You know darling, as for adultery, what is a man supposed to do if his young bride goes running? And keeps running for five years? My legs might not work as before but everything else does, even more than when I was with you.'

Gina felt herself flush. Sylvia laughed, and even Vidhi hid a smile. Gina gritted her teeth. 'Again. . .what will it take to get a quick divorce?' She emphasized on the word 'quick.'

'All right, big girl. Here are my terms.' Ojas propped his elbows on the desk casually, but his eyes gleamed. 'Work as my secretary for two weeks and at the end of the two weeks, I'll give you a quick divorce.' He too emphasized on the word 'quick'.

CHAPTER 27



Later that day
Meher's Apartment

'Your tea.' Meher handed Gina a cup. 'Please don't look so miserable. Why didn't you just say no to him?'

'Thanks.' Gina took a small sip. 'Did not say 'no' as I really want that man gone from my life. Whatever it takes.' She wiped her eyes with an overused tissue. 'Sorry Meher, I just feel so horrible. He was so mean. The creep just didn't care! We were meeting after five years and he did not even say a hello!' She put her cup down. 'Just insults and so much hate and angst, throwing freaking things around. He's gotten worse. It's like Evil square two or Evil two square... you know what I mean.' Gina took a short breath. 'You should have seen the house. It was dark and disgusting and so vulgar. And hookers! Oh my God, hookers!'

'Ssssh!' Meher squeezed Gina's shoulder. 'We will find a way to rid you of that [chutiya](#). And hookers are people too, Gins.'

Gina sipped her tea. It was nice and sweet, just as she liked it. '*Chutiya*, I haven't heard that one in a while. I missed Hindi *cuss words*.' She rubbed her forehead. 'And I know about the hookers being people, I did not mean it like that. I'm just frustrated,' She paused. 'Did you just say we will find a way? We?'

'The Wallflowers, of course.'

'No, no.' Gina hurriedly put her cup on the nightstand. 'No Meher, please. I can't bother any of you. I'm going to do this on my own.'

'You are not on your own anymore, *Gadhu*,' Meher rolled her eyes. 'We Wallflowers stick together.'

'I can't drag you all in my shit.'

'Shhh. We need your shit which will be a distraction from our shit.' Giving her a wink, Meher got up and walked to the desk in the room. 'This is not

going to work.’ She said, staring down at the ruined affidavit.

Gina got off the bed and joined her. The two friends stared together at the piece of paper smeared all over with black and pink lines.

‘Yup, it’s not going to work. I’m screwed.’

‘I’m sure we can do something.’ Meher reached for her cellphone. ‘I will call Doyal and Kyra. Doyal probably has a team of lawyers at her disposal.’

Gina clasped her hand. ‘No, stop Meher. Promise me you won’t call them. Promise me.’

‘Oww, you are hurting me.’

Gina immediately let go. ‘Sorry. Promise me, Meher. Not a word of this to those two.’

‘But-’

‘No buts, I’m going to handle this on my own.’

‘How?’

‘Don’t freak out please. Can I use your laptop?’

Meher nodded and moved to the side, allowing Gina to pick the laptop from the desk. ‘Yeah, sure. Why did you say “don’t freak out”?’

‘I’m emailing my boss Vince. I’m resigning, citing family reasons.’

‘Stop! Why are you resigning? Don’t do that, crazy.’ Meher sat down quickly next to her.

‘Because I have a new job offer—that of a secretary. And I’m taking it.’ Gina puckered her mouth.

‘What the heck, Gins? Are you mad? You are not going to work for that man!’

‘I have to, Meher! I’m done running from my past. I’m tired of being holed up in a foreign country, away from you guys. *Meher [beta, acche din ke liye kuch to kharab jhelna padega](#)*.’ Saying so, Gina furiously typed out an email.

Meher caught her hand. ‘Stop being so impulsive. Ojas will make your life miserable and you know that.’

‘He has already been doing that and for so many years. At least now there is an end in sight. Two weeks and then I’ll be free of that man forever.’ Gina shrugged her hand free and resumed typing.

Meher reached over her and picked Gina’s cup and sniffed. ‘What are you drinking that I’m not?’

Gina exhaled loudly. ‘Now that I’m here and I have got over the first meeting fear, I want this divorce badly. Like so badly I can’t even describe.’ She raised her hands. ‘Water to fish, roadies to MTV, scams to politicians. . .

Do you get the drift? I won't allow even a hint of that man in my life.'

'Ginny this new version, Ojas 2.0 worries me.'

Gina pressed 'enter' on the keypad. 'And sent. Too late now, Meher. I'm set to fight fire with fire.'

'Doctor's advice: wear a helmet to work!'

CHAPTER 28



The sound of a door closing loudly caused Ojas to jerk his head. He groaned; bricks seemed to be holding down his head. ‘Fuck!’ His mouth was dry and bitter. He felt bile come up in his throat like a rising wave about to crash. Already on the floor, he somehow crawled on his fours and managed to reach the dustbin in his room, throwing up violently. It was pure acid coming out of his esophagus. It burned his tongue.

Weak and spent, he simply collapsed on the floor. The cool marble floor against his cheek was a most welcome sensation. Within seconds he slipped back into welcome oblivion.

Sometime later, he woke up again. Soft familiar hands were doing something soothing to his face. He knew that touch. ‘Gina!’ He whispered hoarsely.

‘Shhh! Just rest, you drunkard!’ Her voice came from far away.

Ojas kept his eyes closed even as his lips gave a hint of a smile and he fell asleep, snoring as loudly as a train leaving the station.

Standing above him, Gina studied the man snoring most obnoxiously as he lay sprawled on the floor. She nudged his foot with her shoe but he did not move a bit. ‘Wow, you are really wasted.’ She pinched her nostrils, the smell of barf being strong in the room.

‘He is. Colonel finished two bottles in one night! He has never done that.’ Vinay shared, standing on the other side above Ojas.

‘He is going to have a really bad headache when he wakes up.’

Vinay glanced at Gina. She was smiling.

‘Just let him sleep it off. Some aspirin, dry toast and a glass of cold milk when he wakes up. Do let him know, please, that I did show up to work and I saw him like that.’

Vinay followed Gina out of the room. ‘Colonel recognized you when you touched him. Even when he was so. . .’

‘Lucky guess or maybe some things are hard to forget.’ *My touch and his crap.* Gina rolled her eyes ‘I’ll come back tomorrow morning around 9:00. And please hide all the booze in the house. See you-’

‘Colonel was upset about the vase incident . . . I think that is why he drank so much.’

‘Don’t, please don’t!’ Gina put her hand out. ‘Don’t make excuses for his inexcusable behavior. I said the same thing to that girl Vidhi the other day. Life is rarely fair but that cannot be a reason to be harsh to others or a jackass, an asshole, a cad, a *kutta*. . .’ Gina realized that she was more emotional about this than she thought. She was running out of breath but not cuss words for Ojas. Seeing the P. A’s stricken expression she trailed off. ‘Sorry!’

‘It’s okay!’ Vinay adjusted his glasses.

‘One cannot use their hurt as an excuse to hurt others.’

Vinay met her eyes squarely. ‘Maybe the Colonel needs to hear that from someone.’

‘Sure, from his maker.’ Gina said that and immediately felt like biting her tongue. Confusion flickered in her eyes. *Why don’t I want him dead?*

CHAPTER 29



Around 4:00 pm

Ojas opened his eyes only to close them within seconds. *Who left the bloody curtains open?* His stomach rumbled loudly. He turned and caught a glimpse of the side of a food tray jutting out on the nightstand. Staggering forward, Ojas grabbed the plate and tore into the cold bread and the colder milk. For the last two days he had been drinking way more than he ever did or had ever done. *Drinking is the only way to forget that woman!* He kept tearing off the bread with his teeth. *Escapism or amnesia?* ‘Hell, at this point in time I’ll take both.’

When Ojas had shared his condition for getting the divorce with Gina, he was sure it was her turn to throw something at him. But no! She had stared at him for a few seconds with her big dark eyes and then turned and walked out of the house, not uttering a single word. And the worst thing had been that he had waited for her to come back. He wanted her to tell him her decision. Even if it was a ‘fuck off, you madman,’ he wanted Gina to say it to his face. That need for her to come back even though Ojas was sure he would throw her out again, caused such confusion in him that he polished off scotch like he was drowning himself in alcohol. And now he was paying for it badly. *All her bloody fault!*

His hand reached out for more bread but the plate was empty. *Gosh the smell. . . damn, looks like I threw up. No wonder I’m so famished.*

Hobbling, he made his way to the kitchen and pulled out the first thing he saw in the fridge. Chicken Biryani. He sat on the table and dug his fingers into it.

‘You can warm it in the microwave.’ Vinay appeared at the door.

Ojas jerked. ‘Vinay, I swear you are a freaking ghost or something. [*Kahin bhi aa jaate ho*](#). Do you ever sleep?’

‘Colonel, the salary you pay me-’

‘Money is cheap for me. Now let me eat.’ Ojas’s words were muffled because of the food in his mouth.

‘How are you feeling, Colonel?’ Vinay placed a glass of water in front of him.

Ojas took a breath. ‘Like someone took a dump on me and then flushed me down the pot!’ He took some time to chew the food. Every time his jaw moved, his head throbbed.

‘I threw up in the room somewhere.’ Ojas put down the bowl and clutched his head.

‘We had that cleaned.’

‘We?’

‘Mrs. Purohit and I.’

Ojas looked up. ‘My mother is here?’

‘Not your mother, Colonel, your wife.’

‘What the hell! Gina is here?’ Ojas stilled. His eyes immediately went to the P.A, willing Gina to appear there. She didn’t.

‘No, Colonel, she was here in the morning. She has agreed to your condition. She will be back tomorrow.’

She is even more foolish that I thought! Even though his head throbbed when he smiled, Ojas did exactly that.

CHAPTER 30



Next Day Morning

Ojas read the Professional Services Agreement between his company and another for the umpteenth time. He would read one sentence and forget the one before. His fingers kept unbuttoning and buttoning the top button of his shirt. And he had to keep clearing his throat every few minutes. Ojas knew he was distracted and he also knew why.

Because of the woman waiting outside his office! Gina had been sitting there for over forty minutes. His cell beeped. Irritated, Ojas pushed his hair behind his ear and typed. 'Stop texting me, Vinay. I bloody know she is sitting outside.'

He flipped the cell back and forth between his fingers. After being discharged from the hospital five years ago, he had become a recluse, adopted a lifestyle that pushed the people closest to him away, barricaded himself in the farmhouse passing time between work and whores. But since Gina's arrival his ironclad concentration and discipline were gone like cake in a kid's birthday party. It was like it never existed.

Now his grandiose plan of torturing his young wife did not seem as smart as it did yesterday. Yesterday, she had not only seen his sorry ass sprawled drunk on the floor, she had bloody taken care of that sorry ass. *All fucking Vinay's fault! He should have never let her in.* He kicked the desk with his good foot.

There had been a time when Gina was his world, his everything. All Ojas thought of was her. He couldn't wait to live every moment of his life loving her. Love and longing mixed together were headier and more addicting than any drug in the world. Her pout and her curvy body had blinded him with desire. Her sweet smell drove him wild. He kneaded or suckled her soft round breasts with their chocolate tips like they were some rare exotic fruit he could not get enough of. Her curved waist, her stomach, her fair creamy thighs. .

.they were all known to his mouth, hands and his body. He had taken her tight, sweet center in every possible way. Gina and he, so often, had loved each other till they were too tired to move, their bodies slick with their mingled sweat, the skin fragrant with the smell of sex.

Once Gina had overcome her shyness, she had become more than he could want or dream in a woman. Matching his ardor with her. His innocent wanton! Ojas felt himself become painfully hard. 'Dammit.' Just like his mind had not forgotten an inch of her face, his body too remembered her.

But neither had Ojas forgotten the pain she had bought on him. He could never forget that she was the reason his ankle was devastated beyond repair. She was the reason his best friend was dead. A friend who had only been twenty-two.

Ojas's hand curled on the sides. His soul felt cleaved because of the struggle. Memories were crawling over his anger like a slowly moving, creepy form, threatening to trip it.

The reason I became handicapped. The reason a man was blown to bits. It's on her! Then how can I want her? I should keep her away from me, as far away as possible because my randy cock still lusts for her. Ojas kicked the desk again. *And what the fuck did I do? I invite, no, I force her to work for me!* Ojas rubbed his eyes. *I need my head fixed first, not my ankle.*

The door to his office opened and Ojas looked up. His nemesis stood there.

CHAPTER 31



Anger had left red spots on Gina's cheeks. 'How much longer are you going to keep me waiting?'

Ojas didn't say a word, just watched Gina steadily, his face clenched.

Gina's gaze wavered under his unflinching stare. She looked away. Even after so many years and so much hatred between them, Ojas affected her like no other person she had ever met. He pulled her in so many directions at once. She felt like slime in a kid's hand.

Yesterday, when she had seen him bare chested in his thin pajamas, a familiar heat had flooded her body. Seeing his wide shoulders that she had once clung to helplessly as he had plunged into her over and over again, nearly caused her to swoon in pleasure. The muscled chest peppered with sparse dark hair through which she had run her fingers and kissed often, a glimpse of the flat stomach that she had caressed so many times was enough to send tingles through her spine. Gina remembered clearly what Ojas's thin pajamas hid; his manhood that had given her so much pleasure, tightly snug between her legs and thrusting deep inside her. Gina was thankful that Vinay had been there in the same room with her. *Would I have peeked?*

'Why are you blushing?' His expression was pinched.

'I'm not blushing!' Gina snapped. 'Just angry and frustrated.'

'Join the club, sweetheart.' Ojas matched her irritation.

'Why are *you* frustrated, you have those women!' Gina regretted the words the moment they left her lips.

Ojas, who had been in the process of reaching out for something, stilled. His mood seemed to darken. 'Is that why you are frustrated? Because you haven't screwed your fiancé for the past day or two?'

Gina avoided his eyes and clamped her mouth in a tight line. 'So, where do you want me to start?'

'Come around the desk, I'll show you on the computer. Based on the RFP, write up a one-page company overview.'

‘RFP?’

‘Request for Proposal. It is for the Defense Ministry of Italy.’ Ojas moved the chair, peering into this computer.

Gina hesitated. *How does he switch so easily from personal to professional?*

‘Have you ever written a company overview?’ Ojas kept clicking on the keyboard.

Gina stayed where she was. She opened her mouth but closed it again, unsure of what to say.

Ojas tilted his head back and narrowed his eyes. ‘Are you here to work or to stand in a place and grow roots?’

Wrinkling her nose, Gina and walked over. Her steps and face were wary. The spicy tang of his cologne reached her nostrils. ‘Company overview? If you have a sample I can use it as an example.’ Trying to maintain maximum distance, she leaned over Ojas’s shoulder. Gina wasn’t far enough though.

With alacrity, Ojas swiveled his chair around and pushed it back as his hand shot out and grabbed Gina’s wrist, pulling on her forearm. She did even not have the time to utter an ‘Oh’ as she fell forward, off balance and landed awkwardly on his lap. Her hair swung over to the side of her shoulder. Gina struggled in his lap even as Ojas wrapped an arm around her waist and with the other he tugged her nape forward. ‘You are still my wife.’ He declared his voice hoarse.

‘What are you doing?’ Gina squeaked, as she tried not to notice the warmth of his palm against her neck that awakened some tingles there.

‘Easing your frustration, sweetheart. Don’t you remember that I used to be quite good at it?’ Ojas’s voice was soft as he drew Gina’s fleshy mouth closer to his lips. He had not been prepared for the sudden rush of pleasure on feeling her weight on him. He was hoping to fluster and scare her, but the familiar and subtle scent of lilies mixed with rose water wafted from her skin, enticing and alluring. And just like that he was lost; consumed with the passion to taste his wife. His lids felt heavy, and every cell of his being was centered and focused on the feel and scent of the woman in his lap. The past had tripped his anger. All Ojas knew in that moment was that he had to touch Gina’s pale lips with his or he would lose whatever sanity he possessed.

“Ojas!” Gina pushed against his chest. Her voice was breathless, reacting to the feel of his muscled legs under her. Her body remembered the feel of him against her and it was pure physical pleasure that robbed her head of any

other thought. His warmth and smell were swarming her in the most delicious way. She could feel her body melt against Ojas's hard strength. His face was so close, so close that she could count his lashes. Gina felt powerless to stop him and she did not want him to stop. She could feel her skin going flush, her lips loosening as her arms and legs relaxed. 'Ojas!' Her voice was throaty.

'Why does my name still sound so alluring on your lips?' Ojas sounded in pain even as his gaze bore into her. Gina saw her inner conflict reflected in his inky gaze. Unconsciously, she leaned into him.

Groaning, Ojas lowered his head and fused his mouth with Gina's lips.

Fifteen minutes earlier, Ojas had never planned on kissing his wife senseless. But now even a million dollars would not make him stop. Nothing could stop him. Just like Ojas had not forgotten Gina's face or her smell, neither had he forgotten how to kiss Gina.

Ojas sucked on Gina's full lower lip. His tongue teased the contour of her mouth. Gina closed her eyes and her head tipped back in a way that the position offered more of her lips. Their faces touched and turned in unison so they could deepen the kiss. Warm skin met warm skin. Soon his tongue was urgently stroking her lips, demanding entry into her mouth. Desire licked at Gina's already crumpling resistance like a hot flame. Her lips loosened under his.

Ojas did not waste a second. His tongue thrust into Gina's mouth stroking, mingling and mating. He was drinking her like he had been starving for her. Ojas moaned. Her mouth and her taste were heavenly, better and more consuming than he remembered. It was like he was being reborn; every nerve in his body and every sense of his was singing. He had to have more. Gina was bringing him back to life.

Still clinging to Gina's parted lips, Ojas pulled her close, so close that her breasts were crushed against his hard chest. His hand holding her nape had moved to her back, stroking it, and his other arm snaked around Gina's waist, resting on the soft underside of her breast.

As Ojas shaped her lips to his, Gina felt a rush of sensations flood her body. Pleasure and desire bathed her from her head to toe and everything else in between. Kissing Ojas was like tasting nectar. His salty taste mingled perfectly with her sweetness. She never wanted him to stop kissing her. Her body arched against him, frustrated, wanting to feel more of his muscled body. Gina mewed and Ojas shifted sideways, letting her body rub and melt into him. He knew how she liked it.

Gina ran her hands up his torso, sculpting and stroking his muscles with her palm. Her tongue teased his, drawing him deeper into her mouth. She had missed human touch these last five years. No one had hugged her, held her hand or even given it a squeeze. And now the human being who had introduced her to the pleasure of the flesh and the warmth of a lover's embrace was holding her. And kissing her like he would never let go.

Through her thin top, Gina could feel the heat of his hand right under her breast. Her nipples tightened in anticipation of his touch. She longed for his hand to move up. Gina twisted, moving her breast closer to his hand. Ojas groaned. Eyes closed, Gina's lips smiled, relishing the power she had over him.

Ojas pressed lingering kisses to the side of her mouth, his nose rubbing her soft skin, their cheeks brushing against each other.

Something wasn't right. Ojas realized what it was, even as their lips found their way back to each other. Her hair. He couldn't feel Gina's lustrous locks brushing his face. His hand rose up to her tied hair. 'Your hair. . .' Ojas's voice was raspy and his movements jerky.

Gina moaned in protest. She wanted his mouth back on hers. He too wanted the same. Ojas fused his mouth with hers again.

This time the kiss wasn't tender; it was demanding, it was possessive. Ojas's tongue plunged into Gina's mouth even as his lips cupped her fleshy ones.

Ojas led the kiss, his tongue stroking and sucking hard on hers. Gina matched his ardor, sliding her mouth closer onto his. She had no recollection when her arms went around Ojas's corded neck. Their skins were flushed, breathing erratic and their heartbeats raced.

The only sounds in the room were the wet sounds their mouths made as they mated and the soft creaks of the chair as Ojas and Gina moved restlessly in each other's arms.

Ojas slipped his hand under her blouse and his fingers slipped inside her bra and cupped her soft and silky breast. His hand kneaded her breast. Gina's whimper of pleasure was drowned against his lips. Ojas moaned, desperate for more. His fingers grasped her nipple and rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger. Gina's fingers dug into his shoulders and she arched her back. She could feel her center becoming wet. Ojas pressed hungry open-mouthed kisses from her mouth to her jawline and down to her neck. His hand continued to pull, tug and stroke her breast and nipple. His tongue found the

pulse beating at her collarbone and licked it hungrily, soft grunts arising from his lips.

Gina thought she would die of pleasure. She had a sudden urge to rip off their clothes, straddle him in the chair and ride him. Ojas had similar thoughts, for his other hand began to raise her blouse up.

The sudden tone of a cell phone froze them both. Gina's eyes shot open and Ojas's hand stilled at her breast. They looked at each other. Disheveled, their breathing erratic, their lips reddened and swollen from kissing and they both had dark hues sitting on their cheeks. For a miniscule second their eyes met. Ojas's gaze was cautious and hooded and Gina's confused and tremulous. The only thing common in their gaze was the desire still hovering in the depth of their eyes.

Ritesh! That one word caused Gina to act. She skittered off Ojas's lap. 'Let go of me!' her voice was hushed and raspy, her legs and hands not the steadiest. She held the side of his desk for support.

Ojas glared at her for a few seconds, buying time to control his breaths. 'Gina, you are so bloody easy. One kiss and you were melting in my arms. And I didn't even need to throw any money.' He sneered in a thick voice.

Before Gina even realized her hand flew across his face. Shocked, she stared at the spot on Ojas's cheek that was turning dull red. Ojas watched her, his gaze steely but he did not say a word. That unnerved Gina more. She turned around and fled the room.

'Vinay, send the women.' Ojas roared even as Gina disappeared from his view.

CHAPTER 32



Gina sat down heavily on the porch steps and lowered her face to her knees, covering it with her hands. Unbidden tears flooded her eyes. *Shit! What did I just do? I kissed him like a tart. Where is my self-respect?* A tortured sob escaped her mouth. *He's right, I am so easy.* Her stomach knotted remembering the feel of Ojas's passionate kisses and her ardent reaction. 'Nooo!' She moaned. *Had the phone not rung, how far would I have gone?*

Gina raised her head, wiping her eyes. She licked her lips and was shocked to taste Ojas on them. She took her bracelets and started squashing them in her fingers. Distance and time had not diminished her desire for her ex-husband. And then he had just nearly split her in two with his last sentence. *Send the women!* he had shouted. Gina covered her mouth with her fist.

She had never felt lonelier and more exposed than she did in that moment. 'I can't do this any longer. I'm not strong enough.' She clamped her mouth. Her mind was shutting down. Too many thoughts to process. Taking deep breaths, she focused on forgetting what had just happened. Easier said than done. Taking out her cell she opened WhatsApp and repeatedly dialed a number till Ritesh answered.

'Gina, is everything okay? I'm at work.'

'I'm coming back, Ritesh. I'm done here.'

'Your husband agreed to the divorce? He signed the affidavit?' Ritesh's voice was an excited whisper.

Gina repeatedly wiped her mouth of all foreign taste. 'No, He's asking for the impossible.'

'What is he asking?'

'He wants me to work as his secretary for two weeks. Only then will he give me the divorce.'

'You are not a secretary. Why does he want you to work like that? Hold on, let me go to the conference room.'

Gina waited until she heard the click of a door. 'Because he is an asshole.'

Ritesh took some time in saying, 'You never use language like that.'

Gina wiped her mouth again. 'Sorry, It's the company I'm keeping nowadays.'

'What is your husband's name?'

Gina shook her head. *I don't want to breathe the same air as him and you are asking me to say his name?* The memory of her locked in Ojas's arms rushed to Gina's mind.

'His name, dear?'

Gina could imagine exactly what Ritesh must be doing this very minute—pushing his glasses higher on his nose. And she could also imagine exactly what Ojas must be doing with Vidhi and Sylvia. Her imagination was making her head throb. *I'm thinking of two men at the same time . . . does that make me easy?*

'His name, Gina?'

Gina clicked her tongue. 'Ojas Purohit.'

'Spell his first name.'

'Seriously?'

'I got his last name. The first name, please?'

'O-J-A-S.' Gina wondered what Ritesh was typing.

She did not have to wait for long to find out. 'Gina! Your husband is a very rich man. Do you know what his net worth is?' Ritesh sounded giddy. That should have warned Gina.

'How does that even matt-'

'Gina, you are going to be a rich divorcee. We will have a lot of money!'

Gina stood up. 'What are you talking about?'

'Mummy was angry with me when I told her that I had let you go on your own. She said it is a man's job to protect his wife . . . his would-be wife.'

Gina started pacing. 'Ojas!' She bit her tongue. 'I mean Ritesh, sorry. We both earn enough to live comfortably. Living by myself I have become pretty independent. I will-'

'Gina, Gina! It is very good to be independent. But one has to be realistic. I know it is a man's role to provide for the family. Believe me, listen to me when I say that this way we can and mummy was saying-'

Gina made an impatient sound in her throat. 'Ritesh, just remind me to never let you meet a few friends of mine. Make sure I never put you in the same room with Ky or Doyal.'

'You have friends?'

Gina might have been offended by Ritesh's questions five years ago, but now she wasn't. 'I have a few. Close ones. Wallflowers.'

'What powers?'

'Nothing. So what else was Mummy saying?'

'She was saying that we should make your husband pay for deserting you. And now we know how rich he is, we should definitely look at that angle. Convince your husband.' Ritesh had never sounded more excited. Oh, okay, maybe a tad more when his mom was coming to visit him.

Gina panicked. 'Absolutely not, Ritesh! I will not ask him for single paisa of his money.'

'But Gina-'

'Not a single paisa! Take it or leave it.' Recoiling, Gina's leaned back.

'Fine! Fine.' Ritesh capitulated. 'Please don't say no to working for him.'

'But Ritesh, what he is-'

'You never told me about your divorce, Gina. If you had told me about it maybe I would have thought twice before falling in love with you. But now we have come so much ahead in our relationship . . . Even mummy has started thinking of you as her daughter-in-law. Don't disappoint us anymore, Gina. You have to get this divorce.'

'I tried.' Gina exhaled noisily. 'But you don't know what that man did. . . ' She dropped her chin to her chest and pressed her eyes remembering the kisses and caresses she and Ojas had just shared. Five years ago, guilt was what had caused her to give up all that she cared for. And guilt had found her again the moment she had come closer to Ojas. *That man is a menace.*

'Gina, please don't be so difficult. You promised you would get divorced and we would marry. You promised!'

'I'm trying, Ritesh.'

'Then try harder and just say yes to Mr. Purohit. Look dear, you have no family. All you have are mummy and I. We have to work together. Even though you will be a divorcee, I'm more than ready to marry you. And don't worry about a single thing here. I will speak to your boss here. I'll talk to Vince.'

Are Ritesh and the Wallflowers the only ones I can call my own? Another thought registered. 'Holy Cow!' Gina's face paled. 'Shit! I just resigned. Ritesh cannot . . . I'll go mad with the questions he will ask. All the money-talk he is doing, he will probably have a heart attack knowing that I will not be earning a paycheck till all this gets sorted. Gina rubbed her brow. *I have*

to request Vince to disregard my earlier stupid resignation email and ask for leave instead; paid or unpaid doesn't matter. 'Listen Ritesh, I have to go.'

'Okay. But you say yes to your husband. I will come and visit you soon.'

'No!' Gina's response was quick and sharp.

'I just explained why you have to say 'yes' to work for him.'

'I said 'no' to you coming here. I don't want you to bother yourself.'

Ritesh sighed. 'It will be an inconvenience for sure. But our future is at stake.'

'No, I got this. I have to go. You take care and I will talk to you soon. Bye, Ojas.' Gina hung up quickly. And then she realized. *Shit! I again called him Ojas. And fuck! I have to work for Ojas.* Gina felt trapped between the two men. She pressed her stomach that was feeling like a hollow bottomless channel. *Why couldn't I be a lesbian?*

CHAPTER 33



And just like that, Gina started doing something she had never thought herself capable of—work for a man she abhorred to be with a man she thought was right for her.

Doyal and Kyra had been informed of her decision. Kyra had heaped a string of cuss words on her head. Even the sweet and kind Wallflower Meher was calling her an idiot. The only Wallflower to support Gina was, surprisingly, Doyal. She labeled Gina's decision to work for Ojas as 'getting the job done.' However, Gina could not bring herself to share the visceral burst of intimacy between her and Ojas with the Wallflowers. The shame of that act was like a monster eating her from within.

Doyal had drafted an agreement, which clearly stated the clauses.

- The agreement is strictly for ten business days, Monday through Friday.
- Gina will not be asked to do anything she is uncomfortable doing.
- At the end of her tenure, Gina would receive from Ojas Purohit a signed petition agreeing to the divorce.

From the other side, the response had been quick. 'Whatever. Get your ass back here and start working.' Gina knew it wasn't the P.A writing back. The agreement was signed.

Nearly seventy-two hours after their impromptu kissing marathon, Gina found herself back in front of Ojas's farmhouse. This time the guard's behavior was so respectful as if she had grown a pair of [lal battis](#) on her head. Vinay was there to greet her.

'Welcome to Serendipity.'

'What?' Gina's gaze was blank.

'That's the name of the farmhouse.'

A chuckle burst forth. 'Serendipity, really? Was [Kasai Khana](#) taken?'

Vinay just smiled and requested that she follow him, which Gina did in slow motion that was more like freeze mode. Vinay showed her the desk and chair where she would be working: a short distance from Ojas's office and faced his door.

Gina bit her lip as her glance kept finding its way back to the closed office door. She had come to work extremely uncomfortable and remembering [*Hanuman ji*](#) . . . again. Either her prayers had caught *Hanuman ji* at a good time or Ojas was most indifferent to her, thus least interested in making an appearance. 'This is the only desk? Can't I sit somewhere else?'

'Sometimes Colonel's secretary, Kamal, would sit with Colonel-' Before Vinay could finish his thought Gina was quick to sink into the chair.

'This is fine.' She said with finality.

For the next thirty minutes, Vinay enlightened Gina about her computer login, password, printer location, phone and fax number among a few other things.

The phone on her desk rang. Gina saw the extension '100' flash.

'That's Colonel. You should answer it.'

Gina stared at her phone. She heard Vinay's words but her brain failed to comprehend or do as Vinay requested. Freeze mode was back.

Vinay answered it. Gina could hear Ojas's sharp tone from where she sat and from the tip of her ears to the tip of the chin turned red. Panic was making her nauseous. Bracelet play was back. *I can't face him. I just can't.*

'I'll be right back.' Vinay disappeared into the office. He was quick to come back, carrying a green colored file.

'This is the file of all his credit card statements and receipts for the last two months. Please reconcile the two and then file them from the oldest to the most recent. In the bottom-most drawer on the left side, Kamal, Colonel's secretary, keeps recordings of all conference calls. They are filed by date. If you could start transcribing the ones he wasn't able to, that will be very helpful.' Vinay showed Gina where the headphones and tapes were kept.

'Can I get a new pair of headphones?' Gina's voice was hushed.

'Sure.' Vinay found her a new pair. 'You will get a one-hour lunch break from 12:30–1:30. I will come and get you. You can eat in the kitchen and lunch will be provided.'

'Thanks. I forgot to bring my lunch.'

'No problems. So, are you ready to begin? Any questions, Ms. Gina?'

Can I work with you only? Gina gazed up longingly at Vinay's face. 'No,

you have explained quite well.'

For the first two days of working for Ojas, Gina did not see him at all but she did hear him from time to time. Loudly. Times when he yelled at whoever he was speaking to on the phone, see his intolerance toward her when he went trigger-happy with the red pen on the letters and meeting minutes she typed up. His slashes all over the printout appeared like someone had thrown blood on it. *I'm not bloody Wren and Martin! How the heck am I supposed to know how to write a perfect letter?* She would mutter and get down to making those corrections.

However, what left Gina shocked was the throwing. In the last so many years it seemed Ojas had developed quite a pitching arm. A stapler, a cellphone and a cup—Gina had counted three things broken in two days. For some reason that really enraged her. It made Gina itch to launch things right back at him. Her therapist had warned her that her anxiety could make her aggressive. *The worst five years of anxiety could do was make me a floor-hugger, and a few hours with that man and I want to break bones and crack skulls.* Gina glanced at the multiple bracelets dangling on her wrists. *I think I'll be chewing your beautiful beads soon.*

Sharp at 12:30, Vinay would come and lead Gina to the kitchen from where came the delectable smells. Vinay would join her for lunch but it was a quiet affair. Gina saw the cook prepare an elaborate tray, which she was sure was for Ojas and roll it away to his office.

The third day around lunch time Gina and Vinay were eating quietly. Gina finally asked a question that had been bothering her for a while. 'I don't see Vidhi and the other woman around?'

'They are gone. They only come here once a month.' Vinay shifted in his seat. 'I'm sorry you had to meet them.'

Gina shrugged her shoulders even as she increased her pace of eating. Less chewing, more swallowing. 'It doesn't matter.' *Liar!* Then she asked another one. 'How long have you been with him?'

'A little over four and half years now.' Vinay put down his spoon with a loud clink. 'I'm sorry, I did not recognize you at first as there are no pictures of you in the house.'

'It's okay.' Gina kept working on her pasta.

'But the maid who cleans the house recognized you.'

Gina looked up. 'How?'

'Please don't tell Colonel, but she said she saw a picture of you in his

drawer. Next to his bed. Inside the . . . drawer.’ Vinay wiped his brow.

A tremor went through to her. Gina paused, her back ramrod stiff. She did not want to feel anything, not even anger for Ojas. She hid her feelings with buffoonery. ‘Have you heard of [*Kala Jadoo? Tona totka?*](#)’

Vinay the gentle soul looked like she had driven a blade through his heart. ‘Mrs. Purohit!’

Gina put out her hand. ‘Call me anything but that.’

‘I agree.’

Gina and Vinay both swung to the voice. Ojas stood at the door.

CHAPTER 34



Gina felt her stomach drop at Ojas's sudden appearance. *The abominable Snowman does exist.* She quickly averted her eyes. Addressing Vinay, she said, 'I'm almost done. I will be going outside soon.' This was Gina's routine for the last two days. After lunch she would always go out for a walk in the garden. The garden at this time of the year was overflowing with blooming roses, sweet smelling jasmines, colorful riots of carnations and a pond with palm-sized lotuses and koi fishes. However, Gina always found herself walking near the tarp covered pool. Being a water-baby, this was one thing she indulged in a lot, even in Singapore—swimming.

'Sit down.' Ojas made his way in. 'I have work to discuss.'

'But this is my lunch time.' Gina raised her eyes to him but her protest died on her lips. As her eyes sparred with his indifferent gaze, she was the first to look away. His kisses were still fresh on her mind. Her lips positively tingled.

Ojas did not react or taunt Gina, but walked into the room leaning on his walking stick. She noted his clean shaved, fresh-from-the-shower look. His hair was damp and carelessly brushed, bringing focus to his hooded lids, a Greek nose, a perfectly shaped mouth, a narrow chin and strong jaw line. The scar on his face added a dangerous and rakish touch to his persona. His tall lean physique was clad in gray trousers that sat well on his muscled butt and the sleeves of his powder blue shirt were rolled at the elbows, showing muscled forearms. Gina felt the temperature in the room go up by a few degrees. *How does he manage to stay so buffed and muscled? How does he exercise?*

Ojas caught Gina staring at him. She immediately dropped her lashes. *Shit!*

'Baba, should I lay the food on the dining table?' Paley Khan asked.

Please say yes. Just leave! Gina stared at her plate but it could have held pebbles and sand for all the attention she was paying to it. Just like her appetite had disappeared, she too wanted to follow suit. Her body was positively bristling at Ojas's sudden appearance. In the kitchen that was

bathed in the natural light, Ojas appeared more masculine, his presence looming over her.

‘Here is fine, thank you, Paley.’

“Colonel, please sit here.” Vinay shot to his feet. ‘I’m done. If you don’t mind that is.’

‘Why would I mind, Vinay? I’ll sit there if you are sure you have finished. I would not want to rush you.’ Ojas extended his hand and pulled the chair further back to sit as he was taller than Vinay.

Gina gazed at Ojas through her lashes. *So normal? Did he hit his head on the way to the kitchen?*

Ojas kept up an easy conversation with his cook and his P.A as he ate. He asked about menus, groceries and some repair work required around the house. He did not address Gina even once, which suited her fine. She used that reprieve to control her heart that was constricting like an acupuncture ball in a toddler’s hand. Her heartbeat was doing the mad dash from one point of the emotional spectrum to another.

He’s screwing with my head. Gina moved her food on the plate without taking a bite.

‘What’s wrong with it?’

Gina kept pushing her fork on the ceramic plate, making minimal sound. *Focus Gina, focus. He’s just a man.*

‘What is wrong with your food?’

Gina looked up, surprised. Ojas was staring straight at her. His expression was hard to read. ‘What?’

Ojas put his knife and fork down, his actions clean and meticulous. Gina tried not to stare at his long fingers or remember their texture on her skin.

‘Repeating for the third time. What is wrong with the food?’

‘I’m done.’

‘Then you can leave.’ Ojas resumed eating.

Gina felt dismissed. ‘But you said you wanted to talk about work.’

Ojas met her eyes. ‘And you said this is still your lunchtime. So, I didn’t.’

Gina stared at him and Ojas stared right back at her. His gaze was clear and Gina felt like he was peeking in her head. Some butterflies thought it was a good time to visit her gut. Self-consciously, she cleared her throat.

The intercom on the kitchen wall buzzed. Vinay answered it and listened to whatever the guard was saying. He put his hand over the receiver. ‘There is a Doctor Meher to see you, Ms. Gina.’

Ojas threw his fork down. 'Damn! No guests allowed. It's not your bloody house.' Gone was the congenial man.

If it was my bloody house you think you would be bloody sitting on the dining table? 'It must be something important.' Gina protested. 'Meher would never come here otherwise. Nobody would come here otherwise.'

Ojas glared at her. 'Spare me the dramatics.

'Please, it must be important.'

Ojas ran his eyes over her face. Gina found his gaze magnetic. She quickly leaned back in her chair. 'Fine. Let her in.' Ojas tossed over his shoulder. And then he said to Gina. 'She does not step inside the house.'

Gina got to her feet noisily and carried her plate to the sink and rinsed it. Ojas continued to watch her intently from his seat. 'I would never let my sweet friend inside this obscene and vulgar house.' Flashing a fake smile, Gina walked out.

Ojas turned and watched Gina till she exited the corridor. Then he turned and pushed his plate away. 'Water, Paley.' He kept staring at the chair she had just vacated. For the last two days he had been hiding in his office, avoiding Gina. He heard her voice and even imagined that he could smell her from behind that closed door. From his office window he had watched her come in and leave, his gaze unknown to her . . . ravenous. Today he had not been able to stay away any longer. He had to see her or he would go mad.

The fleeting moments he had spent with Gina in his arms, his lips meshed with hers, tasting her, her sweet fragrance on his skin, had unleashed another kind of hunger in him. A hunger that wasn't simply skin deep; it came straight from his soul. A hunger for those days before he became disabled, a hunger for the time his family and friends had been part of his life, a hunger for laughter, a hunger for love. But the hunger that permeated every cell of his being was the hunger for Gina. He wanted her, no, needed her. He wanted to consume her and be consumed by her. A few minutes of desire had melted five years of anger and much more. Ojas pushed his plate away, uncaring of the food that spilled out of his plate. 'Fuck!'

CHAPTER 35



‘Oh my gosh, Gins! Look at that one. Is that position really possible? On swings?’ Meher was in her lab coat and stood in front of a picture that covered nearly half of the wall. It was a mass orgy. Meher appeared totally enthralled by it.

‘Meher, don’t look so fascinated by that depravity.’ Gina tapped Meher’s shoulder once and then again. ‘You are not supposed to be in here. Let’s get out of here for your sake and mine. I don’t want you contaminated by this filth.’

‘Don’t be such a prude.’ Meher giggled, moving from one picture to another.

‘I’m not a prude!’ Gina frowned at Meher’s back. ‘Also, you are not supposed to be inside the house. That man will throw a fit among other things.’

‘Don’t be so scared. Let me just see all the pictures on these walls. Please!’

Gina kept glancing over her shoulder in the corridor. ‘Why are you here, Meher?’

‘What? I came to farmhouse next door.’

‘What the hell is she doing inside?’ The bellow made Gina and Meher pivot.

Gina saw Meher’s startled gaze. *Oh, now you are scared?* ‘I brought her in.’ Gina wrapped her hand around her torso, staring back at Ojas.

Ojas’s eyes dropped down to Gina’s arms. A tiny memory flickered in his head—Gina’s tell-tale sign that she was lying or nervous or both. He flickered his eyes to the shorter woman on Gina’s side. Another memory found its way—Meher Chaudhary. Amongst Gina’s friends, Meher was the one he had been very fond of. He had once imagined her a sister of sorts. And the way Meher was looking at him right now made Ojas feel worse than he had in a long time.

‘Send her away.’ Ojas walked back to his office.

‘What’s wrong with your foot?’

‘Shhh!’ Gina shushed her, but Meher was walking past her.

Ojas gritted his teeth. His fingers were beginning to itch.

Meher stopped in front of him. The top of her head came up to his forearm.

‘You are walking with a stick. What happened to your leg?’

Ojas could not bring himself to snap at her. ‘Why are you still here?’ He gave her his fiercest scowl. It had scared men twice the size of Meher but she looked up at him unfazed, only curious.

‘I’m a surgeon. Well, almost . . . and Orthopedics is my specialty.’ Meher rattled off. ‘I could take a look at your leg.’

‘I have a doctor who is not almost a doctor but an actual one. Go away, please.’ Ojas stared above her head.

Standing behind them, Gina’s lips slackened. *Go away please? That’s all she gets?* [*No cheekhna chillana, no gali galoch?*](#)

‘I shall ignore that slight!’ Meher gave her usual carefree smile. ‘No, seriously tell me, what happened to your leg? What did the doctors say?’

Ojas sighed. ‘Please leave, Meher! I’m a foul man to be around.’

‘I second the foul part.’ Gina muttered.

Ojas swung around. ‘Get your friend-’

‘A cup of tea or coffee or water. Please!’ Meher pleaded with Ojas, her lower lip jutting out. ‘I’m really thirsty and it’s quite a drive to the city from here,’ she pressed, wrinkling her nose. In her Gandhiji glasses and curls tied up in a ponytail at the top of her head, Meher could pass as a teenager.

Ojas raised his brow, seemingly not buying her act, but his words belied his thoughts. ‘Water is all you are getting.’

‘I’ll get it!’ Gina hurried past them. ‘Wait for me outside, Meher.’ Her narrowed eyes sent Meher another message: *Stay away from that man!*

CHAPTER 36



Ojas waited till Gina left the room. Then he glanced at Meher and the front door. “Like your friend said, wait for her outside.”

Meher crossed her arms, her expression stern. ‘You all should not have abandoned Gina.’

Ojas flinched. ‘You all?’

‘You, her family. . .’

Ojas kept staring at Meher, trying to gauge if she was lying. He realized she wasn’t. He turned and squeezed his eyes shut, like someone with a chronic migraine would do. ‘Her family?’ His voice was hoarse.

‘Yes, her parents, her brother. I think only Gina’s sister kept in touch with her on and off. And she isn’t the nice one in the family.’

Ojas’s eyes snapped open, his expression bleak. ‘Why are you telling me all this?’

‘Why not?’ Meher’s eyes behind her glasses tipped up challengingly. ‘The kind of man that you have become, this news will only make you happy, right? Knowing that you are not the only one who slashed her heart?’

‘I did not know!’ Ojas gripped the head of his stick. His legs felt unsteady. ‘I did not know.’ He repeated.

‘But now you do. And there is more . . . anyhow now you know why we, Wallflowers, are going to kick your ass every time we cross paths.’ Meher paused long enough to pull her coat lapels closer. ‘Like my friend asked, I’m going outside now. Weird but lovely décor, by the way.’

CHAPTER 37



Gina came back with water. She found Ojas standing there still as a statue, his shoulders hunched. There was no sign of Meher.

Gina narrowed her eyes. 'Where is Meher?'

Ojas raised his head slowly. 'Outside. Please get her tea or coffee. Whatever she likes.'

'Don't order me like a servant.' Gina snapped. *Did he just say please?* There was something odd about his face.

'Don't secretaries get coffees?'

Gina knew when she was losing an argument. 'Fine!' She flounced away.

Ojas waited only until she was gone. He limped out of the house as fast as he could. He found Meher sitting on the steps.

'You, young lady, have a story to complete.'

Meher looked up at Ojas, not the least bit intimidated. 'What is wrong with your leg?'

Ojas bit off a cuss word. He was fast losing his fondness for Meher. 'You don't need to know.'

'Right back at you!' Meher got to her feet. 'I guess I'll see you around. Bye.'

This time Ojas did not hold back on the cussing. There was no pause in her stride. 'Fine! I'll send you the god damned medical file through my P.A. Which hospital do you work in? And not a word about this to your friend.'

'Where is the glass of water?'

Ojas understood what Meher was asking. 'She is getting you something else instead. Something that will take longer to make than a glass of water.'

'Ah!' Meher came back and sat on the steps, showing him her back. 'After what happened at the hospital, Gina's family was livid at her and ordered her to get out of their lives. Her dad, specifically. He was very adamant. He felt she had shamed him and the family name. There was no forgiveness for her. So, Gina has been living by herself all these years in Singapore. And just by

looking at her, it is not hard to guess that she has not been having a darn rollicking time, right?’

When Ojas made no sound, Meher turned around, curious.

He was clutching a wooden post, his color pale, his face contorted.

Meher knew she had sunk in the knife. Now it was time to twist it. ‘Thanks to you, in one day Gina lost everyone she loved. And those who didn’t leave her, she left them herself. And then she comes back after five years, looking like what she does, and behaving like she does and goes straight to the one person who took it all away from her. Brave or desperate? What do you call her?’

Ojas closed his eyes. He felt like someone was going after his organs with a blowtorch. ‘You are lying. You are her friend. Why should I believe you?’ His jaw was clenched.

‘Go check all the pictures of her family on their social media. Not a single picture of Gina. Not a single one.’ Meher swallowed and then continued. ‘There is no denying that you lost a lot but so did Gins. You blamed her, her parents blamed her, your parents blamed her and when she disappeared, guess what we blamed her too. And I’m positive Gina blamed herself for letting you into her life. She must have hated herself. Thank God she did not try to commit suicide or something stupid like that. Can you imagine her gone, dead?’ Meher wiped her nose with the back of her hand. ‘All her life Gina drew her happiness from the ones she loved, but then she did a Mount Olympus sized mistake—she let you in her life.’ Meher glared at him over her shoulder. ‘You, Mr. Ojas Purohit, should come with a statutory warning: Association with this product may cause fatal damage. Avoid at all costs.’ Meher got to her feet. ‘You can stuff the water and the coffee.’ Rattling the name of her hospital, Meher walked to her car. ‘Send the files by tomorrow.’

‘But now she had found happiness, she is with someone.’ Ojas’s voice was raw with pain.

Meher glared at him. ‘You drove her away and so don’t sound so shattered. And frankly speaking, given her choice in men, present company included, I’m more worried than happy about that.’

CHAPTER 38



Sometime later, when Gina came out with a cup of coffee, there was no sign of Meher or her car. Ojas too had disappeared.

Where did she go? He must have done something to her. Placing the cup on a table, Gina ran to Ojas's office. She knocked on the door.

'Get out!' Ojas roared.

Startled, Gina stepped away from the door. *He sounds furious. I have to know what he did.* She turned the knob and slowly pushed the door back.

'I said, get out!' Ojas bellowed, but Gina was already inside. The room was in darkness, all lights were off and the curtains were pulled all across the windows. Ojas's face was lit up eerily in the blue light of his PC as he sat hunched over it.

Something is wrong. Gina felt her chest tighten. 'What have you done with her?'

'Get the fuck out, Gina.'

Gina did not hear or understand the pain in Ojas's voice. But she saw what he was about to do.

Ojas picked up the paper weight and threw it with all the force across the room. He never anticipated what Gina would do next. Even Gina never anticipated what she would do next.

'Enough!' Gina put her hand out to stop the air-borne projectile.

'Nooo!' Ojas yelled.

It was too late. The four-pound paper weight that had been thrown with a forty-mile speed hit her hand with tremendous force. Her bones snapped.

'Owww!' Gina dropped to her knees, holding her hand that burned like it was on fire. Flames of pain shot from her hand to every cell of her body.

'Gina! Gina!' Ojas jerked to his feet. In his haste to reach her, he forgot his stick and stumbled, losing his balance. His head crashed into the side of a ceramic pot as he hit the ground. His forehead stung and something wet and metallic trickled down his face—blood. Uncaring, Ojas continued to drag his

body forward. 'Gina, sweetheart!' His voice was ragged. He could not see her face for she was on her knees on the carpet, doubled over. Her soft whimpers filled the room.

Gina bit her lip but her tears kept coming. Her fingers wouldn't stop burning. Through her tears she saw her hand had swollen and her forefinger hung at an abnormal angle. Blackness mottled her gaze. She keeled over. Ojas caught her.

CHAPTER 39



Two days later
Meher's Apartment

'Here *didi*, sit up, *chai pee lo*,' said the young house help as she entered the room dressed in a crisp pink sari, her thick hair oiled and neatly braided.

'Thanks, Sheela.' Gina shifted up without moving her right hand that was resting on the small round pillow next to her. Sheela helped Gina to sit up.

Sheela sat in front of her and helped Gina sip the ginger tea. 'What would I do without you?'

'Nothing, because your right hand is broken, no?' Sheela laughed at her own joke.

Gina cast a glance at her fingers, immobile in the cast. The cast would come off in a week. She was diagnosed with a hairline fracture of her forefinger. Her thumb and palm were swollen and the color of an eggplant. Doctors had prescribed painkillers that helped with the pain to an extent.

After the paper weight slamming into her finger, Gina did not remember much. All she remembered was Ojas clasping her against his chest, stroking her head. Not saying much but holding her hurt hand aloft, taking care to not let it move as his driver hit the potholes on the road.

Gina also remembered the hospital where Ojas had raised hell, offered truck-loads of money and then bellowed his connections until Gina had been tended to. In all that chaos and agony, Meher had descended like an angel, calming him down.

There was no doubt that Ojas's behavior was obnoxious, but to Gina it had brought quick help. Examination, X-ray and the cast had happened at lightning speed, compared to the time it took in some hospitals.

'Toast?'

'Sure, thanks.' Gina pointed at the remote. 'Pass me that, please.'

'Sure, thanks.' Sheela mimicked Gina, handing her the remote.

Meher emerged from her bedroom, her hair still wet from a shower.

‘Doctor Didi, tea?’

‘Please, Sheela. Thank you, and toast too.’

‘Sure, thanks.’ Sheela grinned, going in the kitchen.

‘What was that?’ Meher asked, sitting across Gina.

‘Don’t ask.’ Gina rolled her eyes. ‘We have a mimicry artist for a nurse.’

‘How’s the hand, [mareez?](#)’

‘You tell me, Doc?’

‘The swelling seems to have reduced. What about the pain?’

‘It has reduced a bit. I was able to sleep quite a bit last night. Thank God it’s not the left hand.’ Gina mouthed.

‘You are not a leftie, then why are you thankful that it’s not the left hand?’

Meher took the remote from Gina’s hand and put the TV on. ‘News?’

‘Hmmm.’ Gina flexed her shoulders. ‘If my left hand was fractured [toh manual kaun pakadta be?](#)’

Meher laughed and nodded at the kitchen. ‘Sure, thanks.’

‘Ewww!’ Gina grimaced. ‘No thanks.’

Meher sobered. ‘So, Gins, really your hand came in the door?’

‘Stop asking the same question in different ways. This was an accident.’ Gina shifted in her seat.

‘Hmm. Wanna wrap your arms around your torso?’ Meher gave her a mock glare.

‘What?’ Gina raised an eyebrow.

‘Don’t tell me that you don’t know!’ Meher’s eyes widened.

Gina’s face was blank.

‘Oh my God, when you are lying you always wrap your arm around your boobs.’

Gina threw her head back and laughed. ‘Bull! What a perverted imagination. I didn’t think doctors could spin such tales.’

Meher poked her tongue. ‘But auth- Never mind.’

Gina narrowed her eyes ‘What were you about to say?’

‘How did you get hurt?’ Meher curled her lip.

‘The door, Meher. The door.’

Meher nodded and glanced sideways. ‘Want to wrap your arms around your boobs, Missy?’

‘Wanna hold my manual, Missy?’ Gina raised a brow.

‘Ewww!’ Meher sobered. ‘Seriously Gins, if this was an accident, then

why is that beast of your husband taking such great care of you? Food is coming from his house. Two nurses are coming in rotation to take care of you. And that P.A keeps texting me like forty-eight times in twenty-four hours.'

Gina clucked her tongue. 'He is probably scared that I will sue him because it happened in his-'

'Toast, you *Didis!*' Sheela breezed in carrying a large wooden tray.

'Fuck you Didis has a better ring to it than toast you.' Meher whispered sitting up straighter.

Gina smiled. 'Who are you? What did you do with my prude and prejudiced Meher?'

'Toast off!'

CHAPTER 40



Several kilometers away

Ojas sat in his chair, his head resting on familiar black leather. His clothes were rumpled. Body odor clung to him like the low clouds over mountain peaks. Even though it was morning, the only light in the room came from the lamp behind him. His eyes were red-rimmed and closed only to jerk open again.

A soft knock on the door did not get Ojas's attention until it increased in tempo and volume. 'Come in.' His voice was dull.

Vinay came in. 'Colonel, Paley Khan wants to know if he can bring your breakfast?'

Ojas simply grunted. Vinay turned to leave.

'How is she?' Ojas's voice was low.

'I spoke to Sheela. Ms. Gina's swelling has reduced and so has her pain. She slept well last night.'

'When did the doctor visit her?'

'Yesterday.'

'And we are sending food there?' Ojas asked, closing his eyes. The shadows under his eyes were beginning to creep into his gaunt cheeks.

'Every meal, Colonel, and plenty every time.'

Ojas raised his head. 'Thank you, Vinay. You do a lot for me. Thank you.'

Vinay hesitated and then asked. 'Should I arrange for the girls?'

Ojas's rested his head back in the chair. He had not slept for over forty-eight hours. 'No. But do arrange a hotel room for that girl who is studying. She had mentioned that her exams were close.'

Vinay left the room and Ojas went back to staring blankly at the walls. His mind wasn't as quiet as his mouth. The soft thud of the paper weight hitting Gina's hand, the pain that had crushed his chest on seeing Gina hurt, hearing her whimper in agony, the wetness of her tears on his chest plagued his being

every minute for the last two days. He had never felt more crippled than he had felt in those few hours. And wiser.

Wiser, for now he knew that for the past five years he had been living a complete lie. He may have thrown Gina out of his life but he had completely failed in doing the same to his feelings for her. The hate had been momentary and the anger only skin deep.

The knocks came back. *Maybe Vinay is the one who needs to be thrown out.* Ojas scratched the band-aid on the side of his forehead—a souvenir from that painful afternoon.

Vinay came followed by Paley Khan. They each rolled in a cart. The cook brought the food and Vinay brought the spirits.

‘Please eat the food, Baba. Shall I make you a plate?’

Ojas waved Paley off. ‘I’ll eat later. Just leave the cart here.’

The cook exited, knowing that Ojas would not keep his word. The past few meals had come back like a bird had picked on it.

‘Isn’t it too early for the alcohol?’ Ojas slumped forward on his desk.

‘It makes you feel better!’ Vinay adjusted his glasses.

Ojas exhaled noisily. ‘It just helps me to forget. Doesn’t help me feel better. Did you take care of the other thing I asked you to do?’

Vinay nodded. ‘Yes, Colonel! But . . . are you sure that is what you want. . .to do right now?’

‘That is what I have to do right now.’ Ojas rubbed the back of his neck, his movements weary. ‘Last night I walked around the house and counted seventy-three dents in the wall and the floor.’

‘I will get someone to fix those dents.’ Vinay offered quietly.

‘The walls are not the only things that need fixing around here.’ Ojas said. He hoped Vinay could not see the tear streaks that had dried on his face. ‘Find me the best therapist in the City and get him or her to visit me. Pay them whatever they want.’

‘Yes, Colonel.’ Vinay beamed. ‘You are doing the right thing.’

‘Some burdens are too heavy to bear, Vinay.’ Ojas rested his face in his hands.

Vinay stepped closed. ‘Colonel, what happened with Ms. Gina was an accident. She is recovering quick.’

‘Gina’s pain is not my only cross to bear. I bear others.’ Ojas’s voice was muffled by his hands.

Vinay’s expression conveyed his confusion.

Ojas raised his face and Vinay saw the sheen of moisture in Ojas's eyes.
'Your brother's death. I see it now. It wasn't Gina's fault. It was mine.'

CHAPTER 41



A week later.
Friday evening

Homeless, jobless and missing a working hand. Gina wasn't watching TV but glaring at it. Her spirits were as low as a body buried under the ground. She was tired and frustrated of being cooped up in the house and of her dependence on others to do things for her. Before her migration to Singapore, Gina did not even know how to open a bank account but now she was used to doing it all on her own starting from earning a paycheck, to paying the bills, to cooking, to budgeting, paying taxes, balancing a check book. . . . *Wonder if Daddy and Ma would even recognize me. I'm not their spoiled brat anymore.* A glum smile lifted Gina's lips. Thinking of her parents made her feel worse than she already did. With the depression also came a knowledge that she could survive, that she had survived a lot. *I'm the Sanjay Dutt of my life. I shall keep bouncing back.*

Since her injury, Ojas had provided round-the-clock care for her, daily doctor's visits, enough food to feed a colony and his PA's texts overwhelmed Meher to the point that she was thinking of getting a new number or moving cities, whichever was easier to do.

Gina still felt some latent anger towards him. *It won't kill him to call me and ask how I'm doing? After all it was because of him that I got this damn injury.* Gina glanced at her hand. The cast had come off and except for the forefinger that was still slightly swollen around the joint, the rest of her hand had completely healed and looked good.

Gina's eyes drifted to the view through the balcony door.

Why did I tell Meher and the others that my hand had come in the door?

Her depression gave her headaches that felt like barbed wire wreaths wrapped fiercely around her head. But no tears. *I have no more to shed.* Gina touched the top of her head and then glanced at her hand. Today it was dry.

But that day it wasn't. At the hospital, after being registered her first dose of painkillers as she lay on the bed awaiting the cast, Gina had brushed her hair and her fingers had come back wet and sticky. *Did I hit my head too?* Gina had sniffed the liquid. It had no smell but an accidental brush of her fingers against her lips and she had tasted it. It was salty. Gina realized she was tasting tears. *But how?* Gina had wondered while lying in the white clinical bed, alone in the room. *My tears would have trickled down my face. How did they get on top of my head? Gravity gone upside down?*

And then Meher had entered the room followed closely by Ojas and another man, who by his uniform appeared to be hospital staff. Gina had felt so much rage and all of it for Ojas. He had again caused her pain and today's act was pure violence. Gina had made up her mind; she was going to call the police on him. Ojas was loudly berating the man to hurry with the cast. [Abhi anger mein chilla, kal dard mein jab police ke dande padenge.](#) . . . Gina narrowed her eyes in his direction and just then Ojas had glanced at her and quickly looked away.

In that small glance, Gina registered one big detail. Ojas's eyelids were puffy and glistening. *He has been crying.* Gina recalled the damp spot on top of her head. *Ojas had cradled me against his chest in the car, my head tucked under his chin. So, gravity is still working the right way.*

Bemused, Gina had sat back on the bed. As the technician had moved her hand, Gina experienced a fresh jolt of pain. A large warm grip had found her other hand curled on the bed sheet. Gina opened her eyes and found herself looking straight into Ojas's dark eyes. They had not spoken a word but had just kept staring at each other. Her pain seemed to ebb away when she saw in the depth of his eyes that he shared it. Sometimes words weren't necessary. After the hospital, Gina had not gone to the police but to Meher's house.

Why am I so confused-

The shrill sound of the doorbell broke into her thoughts.

'I'll get it, Didi.' Sheela emerged from the kitchen wiping her hands.

'Thank you.' Gina straightened her hair and the cushions around her on the sofa.

'Hi, G-Spot!' Kyra walked in followed by Doyal and Meher.

'Oh my God. All Wallflowers under one roof!' Gina extended herself for an awkward round of hugs. Doyal simply patted her shoulder.

'Abe, you break your hand then who else will come? Mayawati?' Kyra sat on the ottoman next to her.

‘Like the surprise?’ Meher asked, putting her phone on the charger.

‘Love it . . .thank you.’ Gina pulled at the side of her eye, silently blaming the medicines for her emotional state.

‘Okay, no [rona dhona](#) please! Just tell me how the heck did this happen? Did that man hurt you?’ Doyal wasted no time in coming straight to the point.

‘No, Doyal, it was an accident. There is that heavy door.’

‘Chal, let’s go and see that door?’ Kyra gestured at Gina to stand up.

‘What?’ Gina floundered.

‘Let see that [kile ka darwaaza](#). Come, let’s go?’ Kyra persisted.

‘Oho, stop badgering Gina.’ Meher’s voice boomed in the room. ‘Since when did wallflowers start disbelieving each other?’

The other three stared at her in surprise. Mice rarely bellowed as Lions.

Kyra jumped to her feet, advancing with her fingers outstretched. ‘Since when did you start talking back to me, [moti](#)?’

‘No! No! Not that!’ Meher shrieked as Kyra chased her around the apartment. Meher was ticklish beyond belief. Gina laughed seeing the antics of the two.

‘Stop, you idiots! Meher, take care of your guests. I demand food.’ Doyal called out, settling comfortably on the sofa next to Gina.

‘Me too.’ Gina grinned, feeling her frustration ease.

‘Stop, Kyra!’ Meher paused panting. ‘Today’s menu is chicken biryani and lamb biryani. Courtesy Mr. Purohit.’

‘Today’s menu?’ Gina asked.

‘Lamb for me.’ Kyra chimed.

‘Chicken for me. No rice, though.’ Doyal piped. ‘I have put on two kilos.’

‘Shut up, Doyal.’ Gina, Kyra and Meher spoke in unison.

‘But seriously, what menu?’ Gina asked.

‘Ya, what menu?’ Kyra asked drinking from Gina’s cup, which held some lukewarm coffee. Like old times, the cup was passed between the four of them.

‘So, I forgot to tell you one little thing!’ Meher grimaced. ‘I tell that P.A of Ojas what I want to eat the night before.’

‘What you want to eat? Nice, moti!’ Kyra high-fived Meher.

‘Stop calling me moti.’ Meher gave a mock frown. ‘Anyhow, he thinks it’s me telling what Gina wants but actually it’s me telling them what I want.’ Meher giggled, sitting cross-legged on the floor near Doyal. ‘Smart move, no?’

‘Thank God you have good taste in food!’ Gina rolled her eyes. ‘When that *sheera* came, I should have guessed.’

The doorbell rang again.

‘Did you get a fifth wallflower while I was gone?’ Gina asked her friends.

‘No fucking way!’ Kyra answered.

‘Let me see.’ Meher answered the door.

It was a courier for which she signed, bringing the yellow envelope inside. ‘It’s for you Gins.’

Gina’s expressions were puzzled. ‘For me? My hand. Open it for me, Meher?’

Meher opened the envelope and took out the stapled pages. She skimmed over them and dropped it in Gina’s lap. ‘It’s your lucky day, honey.’

Boggled, Gina glanced down at her lap.

Meher shared with the other two. ‘Ojas sent her the divorce papers. Signed and sealed.’

Gina did not say a word but just kept staring at the pages.

‘Nice!’ Kyra and Meher fist-bumped each other.

‘And he’s giving her a crazy amount of money as a settlement.’ Meher added as she turned to Gina. ‘[*Aaj toh lottery lag*](#) . . .’ She trailed off.

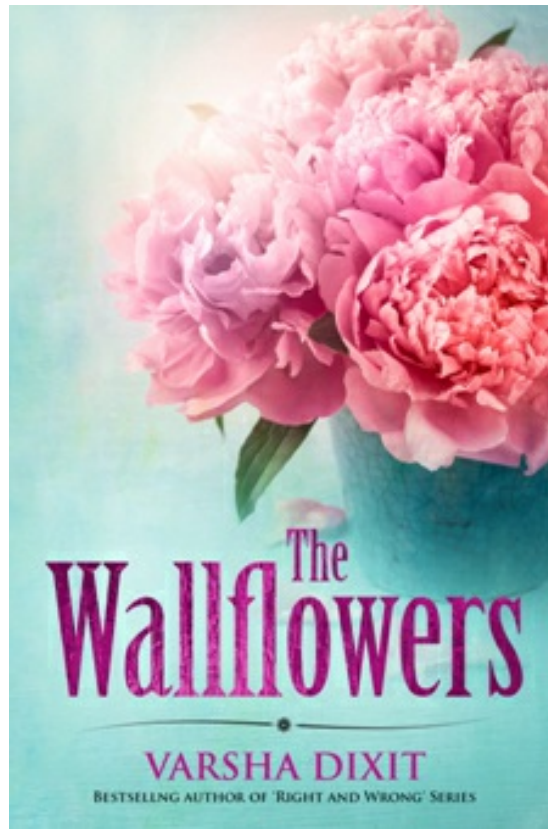
Kyra too became quiet.

Doyal shifted closer to Gina. ‘Gina, why are you crying?’

To be continued in Wallflower Book 2 . . .

Gina, Ojas and the other Wallflower’s stories will continue in ‘Miss Matched’ due to release in June 2018.

Pretty please, don’t forget to leave a star rating review (of any length) for ‘A Hasty Hookup’ on Amazon and Good Reads. They mean the world to the Author Author and are a constant source of encouragement. Thank you for reading, ‘A Hasty Hookup’.



New beginnings...

Gina Bansal is happy on the outside but lonely within.

Doyal Barua is ambitious to the core and driven by the need to never let her family starve again.

Meher Chaudhary is a dreamer, running from her own father and a life of captivity.

Kyra Saigal is a fighter and a survivor of a horrible crime and train wreck.

What binds these four girls, who are so different from each other, together?
Maybe romance novels and maybe bonds only best friends can understand!

“The Wallflowers” by the bestselling author of romance, Varsha Dixit, is a short prequel to her upcoming contemporary romance book “A Hasty Hookup.” This short story reveals who the Wallflowers are and how they met. Click on the Cover image to visit the Amazon site.

GLOSSARY

Page 6:

Hindi: Junta

English: Crowd

Page 6

Hindi - Begani shaadi mein Abdullah deewana!

English – Having fun at other's expense

Page 6

Hindi - pahunchte hi phone zaroor karna'

English – Call us once you get there

Page 6

Hindi – *dhokha*

English – Betrayal

Page 8

Hindi - *Jhansi ki Rani*

Jhansi ki Rani was the queen of the princely state of Jhansi in North India. She was one of the leading figures of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and became a symbol of resistance to the British Raj for Indian nationalists. ~ Wikipedia

Page 10

Hindi – *Chaat*

Chaat is a savory snack originating from the Indian subcontinent, typically served as a hors d'oeuvre at road-side tracks from stalls or food carts. ~ Wikipedia

Page 10

Hindi – *Thela*

English – Street cart

Pg 29

Hindi - saara shehar mujhe Lion ke naam se nahi janta hai

English – the town does not call me a lion/braveheart for a reason

Pg 40

Hindi – *gaddi*

English – car

Page 42

Hindi – Dilli

English – colloquial terms for Delhi

Page 44

Hindi - *Gina ko bumboo lagne wala tha!*

English – Poker stuck up the backside

Page 51

Hindi - Tum khelo apni chudi se

English – Keep playing with you bangle/bracelet

Page 52:

Hindi – Maali

English – Gardener

Page 54:

Deepika Padukone - is an Indian film actress. As of 2017, she is the highest-paid actress in India. Deepika publicly condemned a leading national newspaper for publishing an article about her "cleavage show" at a film premiere rather than her performance in the film.

Page 56:

Sooraj Barjatya is an Indian film director, producer, screenwriter and distributor, who makes films on family values.

Page 58

Hindi ‘*Pyar hi andha hota hai!*’

English – Only love is blind

Page 71

Hindi – *chunni*

English – *Stole*

Page 72:

Hindi – sati savitri

English – colloquially is used to describe someone honest, meek and innocent

Page 73:

Hindi - Zabardasti ki shaadi ya ghar se nikaal

English – Forced marriage or leave the house

Page 74

Hindi – Bua

Page 74:

Hindi - *Shabab and sharab*

English – *Alcohol and women*

Page 77

Hindi - *Jaal tu jalaal tu aayi . . .*

An ages old chant to ward off evil and bad luck

Page 77

Hindi – *Nani*

English – *Maternal Grandmother*

Page 78

Hindi - *Pagal hai kya*

English – *Are you mad?*

Page 78

Hindi - *Aap mujhe kitne ache se jante hain, bhai sahab.*

English – *How well you know me, Sir.*

Page 79

Hindi – *Gadhe*

English – *Donkeys/Idiots*

Page 92

Hindi - *Bloody baigan, langda baigan.*

English – *Bloody eggplant, limping eggplant. Implied fickleness of mind and character as eggplant tends to roll easily in the direction of the plate because of their circular shape.*

Page 100

Hindi – *Paagal*

English – *Mad, Insane*

Page 114

Hindi - *Koi Mar gaya, Vinay Bhaijaan*

English – *Did someone die brother?*

Pg 114

Hindi- *Marne wala hai. Mein*

English – *Someone is about to die. Me*

Page 115

Hindi – *Chachi*

English – *Father's younger brother's wife*

[Page 119](#)

Hindi - Yeh divorce toh hoga

English – This divorce is going to happen

[Page 119](#)

Hindi - Dharti ka bojh.

English – Burden on earth

[Page 127](#)

Hindi - sanskari bahu

English – Ideal Daughter-in-law

[Page 127](#)

Hindi – tyohar

English – Festival

[Page 128](#)

Hindi- Panchangam

English – Hindu Calendar

[Page 133](#)

Hindi – chutiya

English – Cussword

[Page 136](#)

Hindi - Beta, acche din ke liye kuch to kharab jhelna padega.

English – Child for better days you have to first suffer bad ones.

[Page 142](#)

Hindi - Kahin bhi aa jaate ho.

English – You just appear anywhere

[Pg 168](#)

Hindi - lal battis

English – Red Light atop cars owned by high-ranking Government Officers.

[Page 168](#)

Hindi – Kasai Khana

English – Butcher House

[Page 169](#)

Hindi - Hanuman ji

English – Hindu Deity

[Page 173](#)

Hindi - Kala Jadoo? Tona totka?

English – Black Magic and voodoo. Some rituals use a person's photograph to cast spell and misfortune on that person

[Page 182](#)

Hindi – No cheekhna chillana, no gali galoch

English- No shouting no cuss words

[Page 193](#)

Hindi – didi

English – Older sister

[Page 193](#)

Hindi - chai pee lo

English – drink your tea

[Page 195](#)

Hindi – mareez

English – patient

[Page 195](#)

Hindi - toh manual kaun pakadta be?

English – Who will hold the water faucet next to the pot?

[Page 205](#)

Hindi - Abhi anger mein chilla, kal dard mein jab police ke dande padenge

English- Today scream in anger tomorrow in pain when the police beat you up.

[Page 208](#)

Hindi - rona dhona

English shedding tears

[Page 209](#)

Hindi - kile ka darwaaza

English - Door of a fortress

[Page 210](#)

Hindi – moti

English – Fatso

[Page 214](#)

Hindi - Aaj toh lottery lag

English – today you have won the lottery

OTHER BOOKS BY VARSHA DIXIT

~ [Right Fit Wrong Shoe](#)

~ [Wrong Means Right End](#)

~ [Rightfully Wrong Wrongfully Right](#)

~ [Only Wheat Not White](#)

~ [Xcess Baggage](#)

MEET THE AUTHOR



Varsha Dixit is the author of the bestselling novels, *Right Fit Wrong Shoe* (2009), *Xcess Baggage* (2010), *Wrong Means Right End* (2012), *Only Wheat Not White* (2014), and *Rightfully Wrong Wrongfully Right* (2016). She worked in the Indian television industry before moving to the US with her family. She feels enriched and blessed to be an author and a woman.

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