



when unlikely  
souls meet

*Destined*

# *Destined*



## **CONTRACT**

The Parties intend for this Agreement to become effective upon the date of the signing of this Agreement, and shall be governed by the laws of the states of India, including any Uniform Laws, and any other applicable laws, adopted by any state of India.

The Parties wish to enter into this Agreement to provide for the status, rights and liabilities of the relationship and division of property between them, including future property acquired by either of them.

The Parties wish to affix their respective signatures to this Agreement, in the presence of witnesses, and in the possibility of unhappy difference.

# Rubina Ramesh

Rubina Ramesh



Destined  
By  
Rubina Ramesh

**To Ron**  
**My Inspiration**

Esha Mehra could have taken care of her father, only if she had some support from her fiancé. But he had his priorities set and her sick father was nothing but a burden. Esha didn't have any other choice but to apply for a loan from her office. But she had not banked on the fact that the Head of Geno Technologies needed her for other reasons.

When Rohan Sharma saw Esha for the first time, he felt she was the one. He had no intention of falling in love with her, for the pain of the past was still too much to bear. But he did need Esha as a decoy to his plan. Esha, however, was not a damsel-in-distress who would bend to his will easily. While he was sure that he would marry her only for six months, he still couldn't understand why he felt a searing jealousy every time her ex-fiancé Ayush's name was mentioned.

While these two souls have other plans in their lives, Destiny conspires to bring them together. But will the stench of Death let them live their lives?

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Edited by: Dola Basu Singh

Proofread by: Sundari Venkatraman

Beta Readers: PG Van and Inderpreet Kaur Uppal

Cover Illustration: Floryie

## Acknowledgment

To all those women out there who had to make a choice between their family and their marital bliss. Your cries cannot be muted.

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**To TBCM – You know what you are to me.**

And to someone who became my Destiny on my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday,

**Ramesh Kannan.** You didn't ever ask me to choose. Thank you.

## **Note from the Author**

Dear Friends,

Destined is not just a love story, though as a romance writer, I have kept it light. This is for all those women out there who have to choose between their own family and that of their husband's. It's never easy. However much you feel alienated from your own family after marriage, in times of need, your blood calls out to each other. I have experienced the battle between being a wife, a mother and a sister—may no one ever experience this. But if you ever do, remember one thing, life is still beautiful. Never lose hope.

With Love,

Rubina Ramesh



## **Other works by rubina ramesh**

### *Knitted Tales Series*

*Knitted Tales Vol. 1: A collection of emotions*

*Knitted Tales Vol. 2: Where the Gods Dwell (Coming Soon)*

### *Romance*

*Finding The Angel*

*Destined*

## CHAPTER ONE

"The chemo has to start by Monday, Ms. Mehra." Dr. Pant tried to keep his expression neutral when he saw the shocked face of the lovely woman sitting across him. "The bills have to be cleared before that."

"But that's only four days away," Esha Mehra whispered, fear etched on her face. This was certainly not the news she was expecting to hear when she had rushed her father to the hospital after he collapsed while watching television. She had thought it was from exhaustion or, at the most, an indication of high blood pressure. Definitely not cancer.

*Not again!*

Her mind started calculating the assets they had. Even if they sold off their house and arranged for another place to live in, it would take at least a month for her to organize the funds. This felt like a bloody nightmare. As it was, hospitals gave her goosebumps since childhood. From the delicate age of eight, she had stayed with her mother in hospitals since her father had had to go to work. Night after night, the silent whispers in the ward had kept her awake. It was she, a mere child then, who had woken up to her mother coughing blood or screaming in pain. She hadn't ever understood why her life was so different from that of her friends and cousins. All she knew was that the four walls of the hospital room had started feeling oppressive, like a hand holding her against her will.

*Claustrophobic.*

"Can you not start the treatment and I'll pay you in installments?" Esha knew from experience what the doctor's answer was going to be but she had to try.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Mehra." Dr. Pant was stoic. "These are the hospital's policies and nothing is in my hands." He shrugged his shoulders in a helpless manner.

"But there must be something you can do to help your patients?" Esha almost begged.

"Regretfully, there isn't," Dr. Pant said firmly, though not looking into her eyes. While he was humane enough to be revolted by this whole system, there was nothing he could do about it. He opened the file in front of him, not knowing what else to do, and hoped he looked dismissive enough. Going against the hospital policy was not an option. "You can bring him back on Monday and pay the hospital bills at the same time." He took out a pen and

wrote 'Patient coming back on Monday' in the file and handed it to her. "Give it to the registrar downstairs and he will guide you further."

Esha glared at him; her sherry-colored eyes having a delectable way of lighting up when infused with anger.

*As if this is my fault*, the tired doctor thought, his patience drained out from standing in the OT since morning. Every time a chronic patient was announced to a family member, they seemed to blame the doctor, at least eighty percent of the time. But as a doctor in a popular Medicare Hospital, he was used to these 'it's your fault' looks.

"How can you people call yourselves doctors?" Esha shouted, not bothering to control her volume even when the doctor started shushing her up. "Are you not in this profession to save lives?" she thundered.

"We are," said Dr. Pant. "But as I have said before, rules are rules. I would have gladly changed the rules for every patient but as you must be aware, I don't have the right to do so. Kindly look into the details and bring your father back on Monday."

Esha let out a deep breath to steady the raging fear that was coursing through her veins. She felt lost, alone. And the worse thing was that she couldn't give in to her fears. Right now, she was the strong one in the family, even though she sucked at being strong. "Okay. Okay. I don't think you're going to give me any different advice if I keep on asking you the same question repeatedly. I get that. I really do. But... but I am wondering what happened to the Hippocratic Oath that you guys had once taken?" She sighed dramatically, seeing his vacant look. "I suppose you can only give me that look since you don't have any answers to my questions." Esha glared at him and Dr. Pant started feeling very uncomfortable under her accusing glares, but she wouldn't let go. "So, I will make myself scarce and hopefully gather the money before my Dad decides to walk up to heaven."

Her sarcasm hit the mark.

Dr. Pant went a deep shade of red, murmured a hasty 'take care' and went away, leaving behind an angry, yet scared Esha. She didn't know where to go from there or which relative to call. All her life she had depended on her father for every small thing. Now with him on the sick bed she didn't know where to start. The long corridor of the radiology ward seemed to be stretching in front of her representing the lone journey ahead. Suddenly, she felt like a small dot in the sea of life, floating about aimlessly. She only had two choices. One, she could just pretend as if nothing had happened and live

her life like an ostrich that buries its head in the sand or two, she could take up the responsibilities life was shoving on her without an inkling of how she was going to fulfill them.

She sat down on the bench in the empty corridor and concentrated on her breathing. This was so not what she had signed up for. She needed to marry the guy she loved. The man who had been with her since childhood, with whom she had dreamt of her picket-fenced house with small chubby kids playing in the courtyard while she made life comfortable for them all. With Ayush, her Ayush, who was her best friend since primary school days. She wanted to see the world and grow old as she completed her long bucket list of desires. She wanted to live too. Tears of self-pity welled in her eyes. She felt selfish and that scared her. She wanted to be good—the Florence Nightingale kind—but suddenly, she had an inane desire to live a life without any scare of diseases around her. She had had enough.

Maybe she could just ignore it and it would go away. Life would just go on and one day her father would slip away and she could carry on with her life, pretending that she was the best human being in the world who had tried her best to save him. It would be a freaking lie but then what was the great deal about it? Everyone lived a lie at some level.

And then her father's face crept up in her mind; his salt and pepper, curly hair, which always seemed to need a good wash, even if he had just come out from the shower, those laughter lines around his eyes that had weathered down slowly as he watched his wife give in to cancer. A man who was always there for his daughter, no matter how tough his own day had been. He had shouldered all the sadness, so that she could have a happy childhood.

She closed her eyes for a moment, gathered all her strength and when she opened them again, she knew just what she had to do.

Esha saw her father, Prateek Mehra, waiting for the lab results of his blood test near the reception area. He didn't know that she had already collected them from the doctor and was wondering how to break the news to him. 'Hey dad, we have to hurry and sell off the house since you have stomach cancer' was definitely not going to work. She sat down on the chair next to him and gently laced her fingers through his unsteady ones. She squeezed them slightly and turned to look at him. Even at the age of sixty-one he was a handsome man. Like her mom would say, tall, dark and handsome—just the kind the old Mills and Boons made them. She loved him. And in

this kind of love, self-pity could not make a home in her heart.

"So *baccha*, what did the doc say?"

"I'm not a child so don't you call me 'baccha' in public," she said in mock anger. "And oh, he was proposing to me," she added with a naughty twinkle in her eyes.

"Nah, he is too old for you and I bet he has a brood of children tucked away somewhere."

"You are probably right," she laughed, still holding on to his hand.

"How bad is it?" he asked, still smiling down at her.

"Second stage." Her voice wobbled for a moment and this time she felt the gentle squeeze he gave her hand. "We can still beat it."

"We don't have that kind of money, *baccha*."

"Let's go home, dad," her voice was much steadier now. "We can discuss this along with a cup of my famous *masala chai*."

"Can we seal the deal with a few potato fritters?"

"Nope. Marie biscuits."

"You are cruel!" he said dramatically, but got up and followed her towards the exit.



By 8pm, her father called out a 'goodnight' and went off to his room. Now that the house was silent, Esha's thoughts started churning. It was time to take action. She would need to have a financial plan in place for the treatment. All their property and most of her mother's jewelry had been sold when her mom was being treated. Her salary would not be enough for even one week. She took out the small black diary where all the important phone numbers were noted and started dialing.

Her father's sister was closest to the family, often dropping in with her brood during the holidays. She was always ready for fun and frolic and her mom used to say that when she came, she brought a piece of sunshine with her.

"Hello *Bua*. How are you?"

"Fine Esh, fine. How are things with your dad? Have the test results come in?"

"Yes, *Bua*. But they are not good."

"*Rab di sau!* I will pray for him sweetie. Don't you worry."

"Bua...actually..."

"I understood darling, I understood. Don't you worry. I will get you all the *prasad* from *Shirdi*. See you soon." And with that, the line went dead. Esha sighed. So much for the ray of sunshine! One down and a few more to go.

Next on the list was her *Mama*, her mother's brother.

"Oh my god! I can't believe *Jijaji* has the same disease!" he exclaimed loudly. The response to that were the loud whispers that began at his end. No doubt his wife was telling him how to handle the situation. Esha grimaced.

"Uncle, can you help us financially till my salary starts rolling in? I will give you every penny back in about six months."

"I know you will, dear. And we are so proud that you have got such a good job in a prestigious IT company. I was telling Sheetal to be like you, but my idiot daughter is only interested in Bollywood movies. Not like you at all."

"I love Bollywood movies too," Esha said lamely, not knowing what else to say. "Uncle, about..."

"I wish I could help you out, sweetheart, but last time your father had taken three thousand rupees from us and never returned it. You know it does not look good, right? Now your aunty is very particular about money. So, till that is not returned..."

Esha had no idea when her father had taken any money from her uncle. She made a mental note to ask her father about it. "I will ask dad about it, Uncle."

"You don't believe me," her uncle was quick to take offense. "This is what happens after my beloved sister goes away," her uncle continued to lament, "that man is turning your head against our family. He blames us for her sickness."

Esha kept down the phone without even saying goodbye.

As she proceeded with the list, one by one, all the names started getting crossed. Some had a son in college for whom they had to pay fees, while someone was planning a trip to Canada. She didn't blame them even if it did feel bad. But right now, her feelings were secondary as she had to find a solution rather than curse her good-for-nothing relatives. These were the same relatives who had always approached her dad when they needed any help.

Just then her phone rang.

Her eyes sparkled upon seeing the caller ID. She should have called him first!

"Hey beautiful." The caller's voice had a rich baritone that sent a tingling feeling down her spine. Ayush. Her *fiancé* and best friend since her second grade in St. Mary's Convent. He had been with her in all her ups and downs and there was nothing he didn't know about her. Suddenly, she felt safe again.

"Hey Ayush, am I glad to hear your voice or what!" she said breathlessly.

"I've been trying to reach you since six in the evening. Where have you been?" he sounded concerned and continued after a pregnant pause, "Everything well on your side?"

"Took dad to the hospital for some tests. He had suddenly fainted while watching television."

"I'm so sorry to hear that, Esh. You poor, poor baby!"

Esha felt the tears roll down her eyes for the first time since Dr. Pant had diagnosed her father's illness. Someone finally showed her some sympathy. She had pretended to be strong due to the fact that she was standing alone, facing all the problems. But now a bit of support was crumbling her resolve to stay strong.

"Esh? What is it? You are scaring me."

"Ayush. The news is not good."

"What happened?"

"He has been diagnosed with stomach cancer."

"Oh my freaking God! *Kaka*? Our *Kaka*? I cannot believe this."

"Neither can I, Ayush. But then the doctors explained everything and we have to start the chemo from Monday."

Esha waited for him to ask how she would manage financially since he knew all about how her mother's illness had drained them of their finances.

"My poor babes," he cooed. "I wish I was with you right now to give you a tight hug. But you know we were winding down our project in Denver and I just flew back to Bangalore from Denver a few hours back. Feeling jet lagged or I would have come to meet you right now."

"Sure, I know that," she whispered. Despite her closeness with Ayush, she could not ask for his help. "You don't have to come. It's just that I am finding it a bit difficult to manage alone."

"Of course you are, my darling. But you are not alone. When you go to office, you can keep an *ayah* right? Shall I ask my mom to recommend one? It will save you some time in searching for one."

*And how the fuck am I supposed to pay for that?* Esha thought angrily, furious at his lack of understanding. But as always, she kept quiet. Ayush continued as if her silence was nothing new. "Whatever happens Esha, you must keep your job. You do know how tough it is in the USA to survive on one person's income. And your company has promised that your next project will be here. So please take my mom's help and get an *ayah*. You can even train her while you are in India."

"Ayush, right now I cannot think that far." She took deep breaths to control her voice, which would have broken otherwise. "I'll catch up with you later. I need to work this out."

"Sure darling, I'll call you again same time tomorrow. I have some very interesting news to share with you. But today you take rest. Love you."

Esha held on to the phone for a long time wondering about what had just happened. Should she have been more specific? But should she not expect more sympathy from her life partner? Was it wrong to expect financial help from him? She would have returned every penny but she had just started her job a month back with Geno IT Solutions. Right now, she didn't have that kind of cash. Maybe tonight she just needed to sleep and tomorrow would be another day.

But sleep was the last thing that came to visit her that night. She sat with her laptop searching the internet for information about stomach cancer. She noted down the names of NGOs that offered help but she doubted if they could help her out. The middle class of India are the worst hit people. They are not poor enough to get any help nor are they rich enough to afford expensive treatments. But her search was not in vain. She found that her company's name flashed across many websites as one of the best companies that did philanthropic work. She leaned against the backrest of her chair and nibbled on her lips thoughtfully. Was she looking in the wrong direction? Was it possible to meet the chairman of the company and present her case?

Having found a direction to walk in, Esha closed her eyes and finally found peace as she dozed away.



The chirping of the birds woke her up. Esha had fallen asleep on her



desk with her head resting on the laptop. Her head was buzzing and a severe headache promised to accompany her that day. She wanted to curl up under the blanket and not face the day but that was escapism and she was anything but an escapist. If this is what she had to face in life, so be it. She quickly showered and got ready for office. Her father had already made breakfast and the guilt of that made her short-tempered.

"Dad, why did you get up? I could have managed on my own."

"How?" he asked her quietly, placing the omelet in front of her.

"What do you mean how?" she scowled. "You don't need to get up early in the morning for me. How are you feeling now?"

"I'm perfectly fine. You have to stop worrying about me."

"Dad, we need to talk." She knew she could not keep it from her father for long.

"Not now. Your car will be coming soon. We will talk after you return from office."

Esha looked at the man who was her life. His face was clear, devoid of any tension. No one could even guess that the cancerous cells in the lining of his stomach were growing right now, consuming his life as well as of those around him. Esha felt a lump in her throat. *Why me, dear God, why me?* Why were both her parents cursed with the same disease? She grabbed her purse and ran out of the house mumbling a 'bye'. Her father would not be able to bear her tears. She was sure of that.

Mornings in the office were always quiet and peaceful. This gave Esha the time to organize herself, check out her mails and catch up with a few early birds over a cup of coffee. She was a quiet and private person. Years of tending to her mom's illness had made her an introvert. Friends would listen to her sad story for a day or two and then awkwardness would set in. After a few such incidents occurred, she had learned to keep her thoughts to herself. But the thoughts from last night refused to abandon her. Would her company sponsor her dad's treatment? If that happened, it would solve all her problems.

Without thinking too much about it, she made her way towards the HR department where the company secretary, Mr. Chakraborty's, office was situated. He was a healthy man with a bald head. Everyone called him 'Mr. Flutesnoot' from Archie's world of characters. He looked like a forgetful professor but that was just a belying exterior. This morning, he was dressed in a bright yellow flowery shirt with lapels that had been in vogue during the

Raj Kapoor era, his brown trousers held together with black suspenders. His bald head was shining, reflecting the lights high up on the ceiling. Only a few threads of hair could be seen in the middle of his head.

Nothing ever happened in this company that Mr. Chakraborty didn't know about, and hence reported to the big boss above. He was busy in his office as usual, eating donuts, which he generously offered to her as she went in. She declined with a smile and promised to get him pastries from the Iyengar Bakery near her house.

"They are the best. You must try them once at least."

He wiped his mouth with a tissue and peered at her through his spectacles. "*Ki byapar, bondhu?* You are trying to put '*maska*' on me. What is it that you want?"

Red faced, Esha sat down and smiled apologetically. "Was I that obvious?" she asked, the pink tip of her tongue caught between her pearly whites.

"Yes. You never even speak to anyone in the office and now you are suddenly promising me pastries from *Iyengar Bakery*. Tell me what the matter is."

Mr. Chakraborty looked curious and not at all maleficent. That gave Esha the courage to go on with her resolution to seek help. "I've heard that our company does a lot of charity work. Can I ask for help for the same?"

"Are you sick?" he asked sharply, mentally calculating if she was fit to stay in the company or not.

"No no. I am perfectly fine," she reassured him. "But my dad is sick and I really need some financial help for his treatment."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Cancer," she whispered. She hadn't been able to grasp the implications of her father's illness till now. It was difficult to even say the word—a word that was going to take something precious from her life again.

"*Orrey baba*. That is tough," Mr. Chakraborty said sympathetically. "Let me have a word with the boss. Maybe something can be done. But I am not promising you anything, mind you." His big and round eyes looked serious, losing the twinkle they generally had. "I can only speak to him and the rest depends on his...err... mood."

"True, sir. We poor people are dependent on everyone's mood." Esha tried to control the sarcasm in her voice but couldn't. But beggars couldn't be choosers and so, to dilute the bitchiness in her tone, she broadened the smile

on her face.

"Arrey, don't get perturbed now. Boss is a busy man. Only I have access to him so I know how busy he is. I will tell him about you for I feel for you." When Esha raised her eyebrow, he hastened to reply, "You are the same age as my daughter and I feel proud that you are doing this for your father."

Esha's face lit up with a genuine smile that made Mr. Chakraborty even more determined to help her out.

## CHAPTER TWO

Rohan Sharma was having a bad day. It was one of those days when everything went wrong. He knew he had to take a decision or fall for the blackmail his stepmother was putting him through.

Bitch. She was nothing but a money grabbing loser who lived off rich men and her father had fallen for those big eyes—just like he had once.

But how dare his father put him through *this*? What was the man thinking? Was this some kind of revenge from the grave? He couldn't believe the clause his father had put in his Will. And now his stepmother had an upper hand. He had to stall the situation for some time till he didn't find a solution. He just had to.

Rohan banged the glass top of his oak wood table, rattling the paperweights into making a jingling sound. But that didn't cool his temper. He could imagine the mocking green eyes of that woman, waiting for him to make one mistake. He was getting tired of her threats to go public with their relationship. Not that he cared because he had nothing to lose, but he didn't want to sully his father's reputation. He was gone now and deserved to rest in peace. How dare she put him in this kind of a situation?

To top it all, he had a conference with his Japanese clients in thirty minutes and he was not prepared for the meeting at all since he was busy discussing with his lawyers how to make Zaira leave him alone without creating a scandal. She had refused all his offers and insisted on only one thing, which he refused to even consider. Rohan closed his eyes and concentrated on his breathing.

Breathe in. Breathe out. 'The calming way of life' course he had taken a few weeks back said that he would surely see some difference in his life once he did that regularly. He did it but till now he had not noticed even an iota of change.

Probably his Karma.

Yes, that was what it was all about. His Karma had always made sure he was paying for some sin from his previous life. *What an unscientific attitude for a scientific scholar like him!* But then the ways of a woman were such that even God could not predict. And with that thought, Rohan Sharma banged his table again.

A tentative knock on his door made him sit up straight and adjust the tie, which was totally askew. Taking a deep breath, he answered in his rich

baritone, "Come in, Chakraborty."

He couldn't suppress his grin despite the anger bubbling inside him when Mr. Chakraborty came in. Chakraborty had once told him that girls in his college used to call him Shammi Kapoor. And judging by the way he chose his shirts, it was apparent he still believed in that myth. Clearly, he had not outgrown that stage of trying to look debonair in flowery and bright colored shirts.

"You're glowing, Chakraborty," Rohan said, an amused smile playing on his lips.

"What glowing? Do you know how strained I am because of your *boudi*?"

"Why do we men get married at all, Chakraborty? See even you complain about *boudi* every day."

"Not complain, this happens in life, Boss. But if she is not there, I miss her too."

"You are making marriage sound so... err... so romantic. I am going to gag next!" Rohan grinned, enjoying the stunned expression on Chakraborty's face. He indicated that he take the seat across him. "So, what's the most important task for the day?"

"Are you ready for Mr. Adachi? He will be here in around..." he glanced at the clock on the wall behind Rohan, "in about twenty minutes."

"No, I'm not," Rohan grumbled. "Can you not postpone this meeting?"

"Boss! Do you know how important these people are? I gave you all the details about the requirements of this client at least one week ago."

"Stop behaving like a teacher, Chakraborty," Rohan said, flicking his hand in irritation. "I had a few issues on the family front. So..."

Chakraborty smiled sympathetically. "Your step mother again?"

"Hmm," Rohan said curtly, but did not expand on the conversation. After all, it was his family matter. And moreover, it would be very awkward if the reality came out. "So can you give me a solution for this, Chakraborty, or do we lose a client?"

Chakraborty stared at his boss for some time, as if a solution would magically appear. Then his face brightened up, as an idea hit him. He clicked his fingers and stared happily at his boss, "Boss, I have an idea."

"Uh oh!" Rohan looked at him skeptically. "Last time you had an idea I had to pay one crore to an NGO!"

"But they still remember you with love, don't they? No, Sir?"

Rohan sighed. He might as well hear him out for the clock was ticking. They had been doing business with Mr. Adachi for a long time and he didn't want to lose such an important client. "Ok, shoot!"

"There is a new recruit on the second floor. She is really good with project deductions and documentation. She has already gathered all the data for this project and I am sure she can come up with something."

"Then get hold of her pronto and tell her to start. Tell her we will pay her overtime if she can pull it off."

"She might not want overtime but something else."

"Are you kidding me?" he asked angrily. "Don't tell me, she is a social parasite."

"Trust me, Sir. She isn't," said Chakraborty.

"Then get on with it. You have only fifteen minutes before they turn up."

"On it, boss." With that Chakraborty ambled towards the elevator. Just as the door was closing, Rohan called out to him.

"And what's her name?"

"Esha. Esha Mehra."

And with that the elevator door closed on Chakraborty's face.



Rohan stared at the closed elevator door for a minute or two, his mind churning. That was some belief in a new employee. Knowing Chakraborty's character, he must genuinely like her to refer her to him.

Esha Mehra. The name had a nice ring to it. Switching on his computer, Rohan searched for Esha Mehra in the company database.

Name: Esha Mehra

Date of Birth: 21st June, 1993

Place of Residence: Bangalore

Joining Date: 3rd February, 2017

Esha was a fairly new recruit. There was not much about her family background except that she lived with her father. Her employee picture showed a young girl with clear skin and big eyes. Her hair was tied back, and she looked serious, like a nerd. Rohan smiled. Perfect, like the ice maiden

kind. Even if he was stereotyping, there was nothing in that picture to show any remarkable quality in the girl.

No. That was not true. Those eyes. They were hypnotic. One would like to keep staring at them. He picked up the phone and dialed a number.

"Sir."

"Patel, I want you to investigate one of our employees. Her name is Esha Mehra."

"Anything serious, sir?" Rohan's Chief of Security, Avinash Patel, was not at all surprised by this request, even though it was the first time Rohan had asked him to investigate a woman. But he was a man of duty and never questioned his superiors.

"No. I just want you to dig into all the details you can find. Her family. If there is a boyfriend or a husband. Where she goes, what she does. That kind of thing."

There was silence on the other end, which made Rohan frown and ask, "What? Are you not able to hear me?"

"I am, sir," Patel said quietly, though he was surprised at the nature of the request. "It will be done. By the end of the day, you will get all the details."

"Good." And with that Rohan disconnected the phone and leaned back to wait for Esha to send him the details for his impending meeting.

Soon he heard the beep that signaled the arrival of a new mail. Rohan opened his inbox to see a mail from Esha Mehra with the presentation file attached. Curious at what she could have achieved at such a short notice, he opened it and was pleasantly surprised at the way she had created the slides so quickly and with an accuracy that only comes with knowledge and experience. He also found several Excel sheets attached. Everything was marked step by step and all he had to do was show it to Mr. Adachi. This was the first time he was going to a meeting without being prepared and it was all due to that bitch who called herself his step mother.

But right now, he could not think of anything but the work ahead. His secretary, Amisha Singh, had just now messaged him that Mr. Adachi was waiting for him in the conference room. Rohan picked up his laptop and made his way toward the conference room.

The meeting went in a whirlwind. Lots of questions were asked and many satisfying answers were imparted. The PPT and the Excel sheets gave Rohan an understanding of any doubts the clients had and by the end of it,

even if it was a very grueling session, he came out feeling enthusiastic and with a sense of achievement.

When he returned to his office, he found a file awaiting him on his desk. He knew where it had come from and without wasting a moment, he opened it. By the time he summoned Chakraborty, he already knew everything he wanted to about Esha.

According to Patel's findings, Esha lived with her father after her mother had died of cancer. There was nothing in the file that indicated that she needed money. Hers was a simple middle class family, living in the heart of Bangalore. In fact, she had stayed there all her life. Her school and college life were without any major adventures. Her father was the retired principal of a private college. So he must have earned well. She was getting a competitive salary in his company and she didn't seem like a social butterfly. So why did she need so much money?

Interesting. An idea was slowly forming in his mind, one that would solve all his problems. There didn't seem to be any man involved in her life right now—at least according to the file. He stared at the file and started thinking.

"Ah Chakraborty! Come, come," he said, as Chakraborty came in.

"How did the meeting go, boss?"

"Excellent. I must thank you and your protégé for that."

"She is not my protégé, boss," Chakraborty was quick to state. He hated it when he was accused of partiality. He gave chances only to those who deserved them. "Did her work help you or not?"

"Stop being so stiff about everything, Chakraborty," Rohan laughed. He got up and walked towards the bar set up in one corner of the office. Though he was not much of a drinker, today he needed a stiff one after all the crap he had had to go through last night with his step mother and the tension he had faced today due to the lack of preparation for the meeting.

"What would you like to drink, Chakraborty?"

"Essh! What, boss? Is this the time to drink?"

"Do you have to do everything by the clock?"

"Oh yes! But you are the boss, so if you give me a drink during office hours, you cannot fire me for drinking on duty, right?"

Rohan laughed heartily. "Will scotch do?"

"Sure."

Silence ruled, intermittently broken by the clinking of ice in the



glasses. Rohan handed Chakraborty a glass and then raising his own in a toast, gulped his drink down in one go. Chakraborty looked at him in awe as he sipped from his glass, drop by drop, unable to believe that this was really happening. He was drinking Scotch with his boss during office hours. Now he had seen it all.

"Tell me more about Esha Mehra, Chakraborty."

"Nothing much to say, boss. Quiet girl. Keeps to herself. Not much into office politics etc."

"Good. Just the way I like it."

"What do you mean?" Chakraborty looked at him suspiciously.

"Keep your high horses to yourself, Chakraborty. You know me since at least ten years. Have you ever seen me behaving indecently with a woman employee? Or even men?" Rohan added for good measure.

"No, boss. Never. Sorry about it," Chakraborty said, a bit red-faced.

"I think she is a very good candidate for a position I have in mind. Send her to me when she is free. I would also like to thank her personally."

"Before you meet her, there is something you should know."

Rohan's eyes narrowed down into slits, like a hawk that had zeroed in on his prey and was now swooping for the capture. He knew something important was coming up and maybe this was all that he needed to seal the deal he had thought of with her.

Chakraborty cleared his throat before continuing. "Yesterday, Esha came to me asking for a loan. She knows our office does a lot of philanthropic work and she wondered if she could apply for a loan."

Money. It was always about the money, Rohan smirked. When would he realize that that's all women ever wanted? If you have a girlfriend, she wants to see if you can spend on her whims and fancies. If you have a wife, she will keep comparing your status to that of your peers. If you have a daughter, she will think of ways and means to clear off the family account. Money was like an acid for any relationship.

"Tell me something that is new," he sneered.

"No, boss. Her reasons are different. She does not want the money for herself but—"

"They never do. I just cannot understand that if a person does not have money, why do they think of things that they need money for."

"She needs money for her dad, boss," Chakraborty felt compelled to put the record straight.

And for the next ten minutes, Chakraborty spoke and his boss listened. And now Rohan knew all he had to know about Esha Mehra.



Esha felt a bout of jitters. She was surprised when Mr. Chakraborty had given her an emergency assignment and an ominous note that said, 'Do this to the best of your ability and your problems might be solved.' She just hoped it was not one of those office jokes that made life terrible. You had to laugh at the joke and seethe within. But upon reading the requirements of the project, she felt a sense of achievement. She already knew all there was to know about the Adachi Corporation project. She quickly opened her Excel sheets and extracted all the data she needed.

For the next five minutes, she concentrated only on her computer screen. Only after she was satisfied with the data she had collected did she send the files to the email address that Mr. Chakraborty had sent across. She wondered what the Big Boss above would think of her. Well, that was not her concern right now. She just hoped that he would get the deal.

She had no clue whether her work was up to the mark or not. There was no acknowledgment mail and that disappointed her a bit. Didn't the big boss say a thank you? Or was it against their office policy? Well, she had done her job to the best of her ability and now all she could do was to wait for some comment to come from the top floor.

But she didn't get much time to mull over the events. A call from Ayush's mom changed her life forever.

### CHAPTER THREE

Not that she ever had any good feelings about Ayush's mom but there had never been any open animosity. They were two women who were forced to like each other due to their love for a common man. But the barbs that came out of Mrs. Singh's mouth, every time she spoke to Esha, had always found a target in Esha's heart. Ayush had told her often not to bother too much with what his mom said. 'She has a heart of gold and a mouth of a truck driver,' he would often joke. Well, the truck driver part Esha had often witnessed but the gold seemed to be safely hidden somewhere deep, very deep, inside her body.

"How are you, *beta*?" The shrill voice of Mrs. Singh demanded that Esha leave everything she was doing and pay attention to this conversation.

"I am fine, Aunty," Esha said tentatively, not sure why she was blessed with this call today. Maybe Ayush had told her about her dad's health.

"I heard about your dad!" She confirmed Esha's suspicion. "So shocking for all of us." There was a dramatic pause and then the axe fell. "But then you guys must be used to all this rii...ight?" Ouch! Esha hated the way Ayush's mom dragged the word 'right' in a nasal tone.

"Yes, but it is tough, Aunty."

"I'm sure. I'm sure." Again that pause. "What do the doctors say? Will he live?"

For a moment, Esha closed her eyes. Of all the insensitiveness she had encountered in her life, this was the cherry on the icing. She wanted to lash out and tell the lady that what was gossip to her was actually Esha's life. Esha wanted to remind her that she was talking about her father, whom she not only loved a lot, but who was the only surviving member of her family.

But for Ayush's sake, she kept quiet. "He will be fine. I am sure of that." She said it with more confidence than she felt. "Did you want to ask me something, Aunty?" she ventured out tentatively. This was, after all, her office time and it looked odd to be sitting in her cubicle and chatting with her future mom-in-law.

"Yes. I needed to ask you something." Mrs. Singh's voice had hardened. "Ayush was saying that you plan to look after your father even after you both get married."

"Yes, I do. Why?" Esha really could not understand where this conversation was leading.

"But *beta*, how is that possible? Ayush is planning a career in the USA and he already got an offer. We thought you both will marry and settle down there."

Esha gritted her teeth. No doubt Ayush had discussed this with his mom but right now she really didn't need this. "We will discuss this when the time comes, Auntie. Right now, I am too tensed about *Baba's* situation."

"That's why I called. Why don't you arrange for a nurse for your father? That way you will be free to do anything you want."

"He needs personal care also, Auntie, or he will die."

"What rubbish! There is nothing you can do that the nurse can't do better."

"Medically, yes. But as a daughter..."

"As a daughter you will send him money to pay for the nurse. Other things, I am sure Prateek *bhaisaab* can manage."

"Auntie! How can you ask me to leave my dad and walk away as if nothing has happened?"

"See some reasoning here, Esha!" she said sharply. "You will be going to the USA where you will not have a work permit immediately if your current office does not sponsor you. All the burden will land on Ayush's shoulders. He doesn't deserve this and you are putting too much pressure before he has even started his own career. That's not fair."

"Has Ayush asked you to speak to me regarding this?" Esha asked bluntly.

"No. But that doesn't mean I don't understand the turmoil going through his mind. Moreover, your mom had cancer and now your dad. Are you sure it's not hereditary?"

Esha was stunned at the crassness of this lady. "I have no clue about this, Auntie. Why don't you ask your family doctor? In the meantime, I will do my job, while I still have one in this country. Okay?"

Her sarcasm was lost on Ayush's mom and she disconnected the line without even goodbye. Esha was sure that Ayush would come complaining later. But right now, she was beyond caring. Her only priority was her father.

Just then her desk phone blinked and, controlling all her emotions, she picked it up.

"You have done wonders, my girl. Wonders!" Mr. Chakraborty's voice boomed over the telephone. It acted like an antidote for the hurt in her heart. She smiled and politely thanked him for this opportunity.

"I've not done anything. It was all your hard work. Now leave everything you are doing and go up to the top floor."

"Top floor?"

"To meet The Boss." Mr. Chakraborty said it with the same reverence one has while saying 'God'.

"But sir, I have loads of work to do. The Summit Enterprise file is not complete and I have to check the records once more to look for loopholes."

"All that can wait. You must go now. I have already spoken to him about your loan. So don't be foolish and lose this opportunity."

Feeling chastened, Esha rose up and smoothened her cream A-line skirt. As she walked towards the elevator, some of her colleagues gave a wolf whistle. She laughed good-naturedly. She knew it was not done in bad taste but since hardly anyone got the opportunity to go up the elevator, it was always fun to tease those who made it. It was kind of an office joke.

Esha stepped out of the elevator into the sleek top floor office. Amisha, Rohan Sharma's secretary, greeted her with a warm smile. "Welcome to my reclusive zone," she laughed. "Am I glad to see another woman's face or what?!"

Esha laughed, her tension ebbing away slightly. "It must be awfully lonely for you out here."

"It has its perks," Amisha winked at her. "Now you go right down the corridor, to the door at the extreme left. You can't keep the boss waiting."

Esha almost envied the boss for a moment. It must be a great feeling to wield so much power. She walked briskly down the hall and knocked on the door. A buzz indicated that the door was opened from inside and she stepped into the luxurious world of Rohan Sharma.

"Ms. Mehra," his deep voice, with a hint of an American accent, fell on her like a soft caress. She had heard from her colleagues that he had done his schooling in Pittsburg. She shivered slightly, puzzled at her own nervousness. Was it her dependency on this man's money that was making her feel like that? Esha was not sure.

"Ms. Mehra, I've been waiting to meet the face behind the brain of some of the fastest analytics I've seen in the recent years." His smile was charming as he politely got up to stand when she entered the room. That surprised her for he didn't need to. He came around the desk, his long legs covering the distance between them in a jiffy. She gazed at his charcoal eyes, gleaming with an intensity that intrigued her. There was intelligence and a

certain friendliness in them. She was surprised to find herself smiling at him. Generally, her reserved self never allowed her to do that.

"You wanted to discuss the Adachi Project, Sir?" she asked politely, happy that her voice was steady and showed none of the turmoil she felt.

"Not exactly. You were quite thorough in your analysis and I wanted to thank you for helping me pull it off. Without you, I couldn't have done it." He politely gestured her to take a seat.

"Why?" she asked, sitting down as her eyes followed him returning to his seat.

He looked momentarily taken aback at her bluntness.

"Why what?"

"Why were you not prepared? You don't seem to be a man who walks into a board meeting without being prepared."

His eyes narrowed before he gave a small laugh. "You're pretty blunt, Ms. Mehra."

Esha cringed. There, she had done it again—opened her mouth at the wrong time. Their eyes locked for a moment as they both assessed each other. "I am sorry if you think so, Mr. Sharma. But I was very surprised when Mr. Chakraborty called me with the request. I have heard too many good things about you to believe otherwise."

"And here I thought that you were not interested in the gossip mill of our office."

Esha studied his clean shaven face intently, looking for a trace of sarcasm. She could find none. His mouth had a softness that indicated a slight smile around the corners of his lips like someone who was always amused at the workings of the world. His strong nose and the deep cleft in his chin suggested his determined nature and his dark eyes promised passion in everything he did.

*Hold your thoughts here Esha, don't even go there.* With that she met his gaze steadily, refusing to be intimidated by him.

"I am not into gossiping but that does not mean I am deaf." She smiled, to take away the sting from her retort, pausing before continuing, "Everyone praises your work so I found this... this... slip a bit out of character. But please don't let my opinion be of any relevance to you. It's just me being nervous in your presence."

"You look anything but nervous to me, Ms. Mehra." He leaned back, his two forefingers tapping each other at the base of his chin as he continued

gazing at her thoughtfully.

"Sorry if I sound rude."

"Tch tch." He clicked his tongue. "I do expect a certain amount of honesty from my employees."

Esha calmed herself, blaming her rising hormones in front of this handsome hunk. Even Ayush was a handsome guy but he never invoked this kind of feeling in her. She chided herself at her wayward thoughts and for forgetting why she was really here. Ayush's mom had really put her in a totally defensive mood today but she knew she couldn't blame everything on her.

"So what did you want to talk to me about?" she asked quietly.

"That's very straightforward of you."

*Straightforward? Foot in the mouth disease more likely.* One could call it anything one wanted to, but right now she needed to know if he would give her the loan or not. Her father's treatment depended on that and she was done with all the small talk she could for today.

"I like that in a woman."

*As if I care.* The indolent thought entered her mind. Hormones or no hormones, his small talk was grating on her nerves. She needed an answer and she needed it now. "Mr.Sharma—"

"Call me Rohan. My friends do."

"We are not friends," she said more sharply than she had intended to.

"I mean...office etiquette and all."

In answer, he flipped a switch on the intercom.

"Yes, Rohan?" Amisha's voice floated through.

"Can you ring downstairs for two coffees? I have a massive headache coming up."

They could hear Amisha chuckling as the line got disconnected.

"That was very rude of you," Esha said. "I will take your leave if I am giving you a massive headache." She got up to leave.

"Sit down, please," Rohan commanded her. "Not only are you straightforward but also presumptuous."

He was watching her with an amused smile. Esha couldn't make out what he was thinking for his long and dark eyelashes hooded his expressive eyes very well. So well that she almost felt naked in her need to gain approval from this man.

"I have an urgent need to know if you are accepting my loan request

or not." She decided that coming straight to the topic was the best course. She refused to be intimidated by him.

He smiled in response to her impatience. "I've got a deal for you, Ms. Mehra," he said softly. "One that will solve both our problems."

"A deal?" Esha looked at him in shock. "With me? Now what do I have that you could possibly want?"



Rohan took in her proud stance and sighed. It was not going to be as easy as he had thought. He had really thought that since she needed the money, she would be putty in his hands. Shows how little he understood women. But there was one thing he could not deny. The proposal he had for her did not seem such a bad deal at all. She was beautiful. And more than that, she was fiery. Something about her patrician nose told him that she was not going to please him just because he wanted her to and that excited him. The fire in her eyes excited him. The way she bit her lower lip and glared at him excited him. And this had never happened to him before.

He studied her quietly, fascinated by how her eyes darted towards the elevator every now and then. Like a deer waiting for its escape. He had never thought of himself as an ogre and he felt amused that she thought him to be one. He was entranced by her vibrancy even when life was pulling her down. There was pride in the way she lifted her chin slightly upward. The cream skirt and coffee-colored formal shirt should have made her look severe, especially with the way she had tied her hair back, but her sensuality couldn't be camouflaged even with her formal clothes. And the best part was that any other girl in her position would have loved to lick his boots right off his feet but she was different. Reserved and yet brave. And he admired her for that.

"First of all, I am sorry to hear about your father's illness, so soon after your mother's death due to the same disease."

"How do you know about my mother?" She asked, puzzled, for she was sure she had told Mr. Chakraborty only about her father.

Involuntarily, Rohan's eyes fell on the file before him. Her eyes followed his gaze and widened when she saw her name written in bold across a file with a sticker marking it as 'confidential'.

Shocked, Esha got up. "You had me investigated? Why?"

He looked at her blazing eyes and felt a tug at his heart. Such a young



girl and yet facing so many issues. He did his best not to show his sympathy openly, for his instinct told him that it would not be appreciated.

"Why?" Esha repeated, more forcefully.

"As I have already said that I have a proposal for you. And—"

"And what? What kind of a proposal demands an unauthorized background check on an employee?"

"Marry me."



Shock ripped through her body as she heard him utter those words. If any girl has ever faced a ridiculous proposal, this was it. A stranger whom she had met only a few minutes ago, who had conducted an investigation on her life based on some ridiculous idea, was proposing marriage to her.

"And why should I get married to you?" she asked incredulously, her eyes round like two saucers.

He hesitated, but only for a brief moment.

"And why not?"

"Because we don't even know each other. We don't love each other."

"Love? Don't tell me Ms. Mehra—"

"Esha," she interrupted. "It sounds funny now when you call me Ms. Mehra after just proposing to me."

His lips curled upward but he didn't say anything. "Esha. Now coming back to the quaint ideology of love, surely you don't believe in that kind of 'Bollywood syndrome'?"

"Of course I do. Also, I think you should fire those idiots you call investigators."

"Excuse me?" He looked perplexed at the sudden change of topic.

"Your investigators forgot to mention one major fact about my life."

He waited.

"I am engaged to be married next month. You are, of course, invited."

## CHAPTER FOUR

Esha was seething as she hurried towards the parking lot. It was only when she was securely locked inside her car did she allow herself to breathe normally. This could not be happening. The only man who was in the position to help her out was now the reason for her anxiety while her father was lying in the hospital, waiting for his daughter to make the arrangements. She had taken him to the hospital on Monday, two days ago, as suggested by Dr. Pant and got him admitted. Her father was scared. She knew it for she had seen the fear in his eyes. He had been with his wife at every step of her illness so he knew how the journey was going to be. He knew the pain that awaited him. And even though he was putting up a brave face, Esha knew it was only a matter of time before cancer dominated their lives again.

*Can we meet now?*

Ayush's text flashed on her mobile. She perked up. Maybe this was God's signal for the answer she was seeking. She was sure Ayush would have the solution to her problems.

*Yeah. Sure. Where?*

*The usual coffee shop. Near your office*

*I can be there in 5 mins*

*I will be there in 10. Order a Latte for me please*

*Sure. See ya!*

She drove to the small hub of shops where the coffee shop was located. She had told Ayush that she would order the coffee but for her every hundred rupees mattered. But how could she say this to the man who had paid for their every date? It was just a freaking coffee which everyone took for granted, yet the cost of it in these cafes was so high that it made a huge dent in the pockets of people like her. She ordered a Latte for Ayush, a glass of water for herself and took the corner seat by the window and waited for him.

Ayush came on time, as was his habit. She often teased him that the clocks were so afraid of him and his mom that even they would stop in their tracks for them to catch up with their tasks. He came over and placed an obligatory kiss on her cheek.

"Hi, Sweetheart. God! I needed this coffee so bad." He took a huge sip from his latte and raised his eyebrows in surprise, "Where is yours?"

She waved her hands in the air nonchalantly. "My stomach is

drowned in coffee from the coffee machine in our office. I couldn't bear to have any more. I'm detoxifying myself with a glass of water now."

Ayush laughed at this and for the first time Esha noticed the strain around the corners of his mouth. "Hey," she said, taking his hands in her soft ones, "is everything fine? You look pretty tense. What's up?"

Ayush patted her hands and said, "Yes, sort of. I seem to be caught between you and my mom. And frankly, I don't know how to handle this."

Esha felt puzzled by this whole thing. What was he talking about? It was then that she remembered the call from his mom the other day. She was sure that his mother had spoken to him about it. She glanced at her watch to see when she had to meet her dad. She still had an hour left.

"Yes, your mom did call me up. She was worried that your life might be ruined if I look after my dad."

"And?"

"And?" she repeated, puzzled. "And what, Ayush? I told her that if you have any issues I am sure you have a voice to tell that to me directly."

Ayush did not say anything but was looking at the menu card lying in front of him. Suddenly it seemed to be the most important thing in the world to him.

"Ayush? Are we on the same page here or—"

Now her heart was beating faster. Something told her that everything was going to change from now on.

And she was right.

"Mom is worried that we are just starting our lives and this kind of financial burden would ruin our lives."

Strange. His mom had said that it was he who was worried. But she let that pass.

"My dad's life is not a burden to me."

"He has never saved anything, Esha. I really don't understand how that is possible. He was the principal of a private college. And a very famous college at that. How could he not save a penny?"

Esha sat up straight. Her chin took a proud stance. "He is an honest man, Ayush. He took care of my mother's illness without ever accepting a bribe. He never took a loan since he was not sure who would pay them back. Do you know how much of a toll it takes on a family if one member has a terminal illness? We all look at the patient and feel sorry. But behind every patient is a family, who are never prepared for this kind of a disease. So

please, before you say anything, understand one thing clearly—such terminal diseases can even turn kings into paupers."

"And you want the same thing for us?" he asked quietly.

Her indrawn breath came out with a hiss, like a viper ready to strike, to protect her young.

"Would you leave your mom if she had the same issues?"

"Of course not!" Ayush was quick to answer. "I am her son. I have responsibilities."

Esha leaned back and smiled sadly, "I am my father's daughter. I have the same responsibilities."

"But legally, after marriage, you don't have any responsibility towards your family."

Esha closed her eyes for a second. She didn't want to spit venom on his face. She, in fact, felt sorry for his mindset. "I don't know about the legalities, Ayush," she said softly. Too softly. "I only know that he is my Dad and I love him very much. He has taught me my first word—Ma. He has taught me to walk and to ride my first bicycle. And today he needs me. What has law got to do with that?"

"But we have a future together in the USA. We will have kids and we will need money for all these things. We will need every penny we can save. You will not be able to work in the USA if you don't come with a project from your current office and I cannot maintain three families."

"You never asked me if I gave you the permission to look after your parents."

He opened his mouth but no sound came out.

"And here I am expected to leave everything—my job, my ailing dad...everything! And just follow you to the land of dreams, forgetting my reality?"

"You've always been emotionally hyper," he whined.

"Well, one of us had to be. Since you don't know the meaning of the word emotion," she said, getting up. She turned to leave and stopped, "by the way, you owe me three hundred bucks. Please return it to me when you can. I need every penny to take care of my father."

Ayush's shoulders slumped back and he looked totally dejected. "So does this mean we are breaking up?"

"As life partners? Yes, definitely. But not as friends. We have known each other for far too long. I can tolerate your lack of character as a friend,

even laugh at it. But as your partner, I cannot live with a small and selfish mind like yours."

And with that she walked straight out of the cafe without looking back once. Even when he called out her name, she didn't turn back to wave goodbye.



Esha couldn't believe what she had just done. In one go, all her future plans had been wiped clean. She drove mechanically to the hospital, her mind churning as she envisaged her life as a single woman. One thing her practical mind could not deny though: she didn't need the Ayushs of the world.

Her father was sitting on the hospital bed, gingerly eating the jelly provided with the hospital meal. He beamed when he saw her. "I could never understand how to eat these wobbly squares." he complained, even as he grinned broadly.

Esha kept her purse on the table and took the towel to wipe his mouth gently, "You're so enjoying this pampering, aren't you?" she teased him.

"You bet!" He laughed. "And the duty nurses are a bit too sweet to me. They say I don't look a day older than forty-two!"

"They are compulsive liars!" Esha laughed, glad her dad was in such a good mood. Now she was going to take away the smile by telling him that they had to go home tonight and only return when she could arrange the money. Her heart broke but there was nothing she could do. Right now, her father had stayed in the hospital for two days and the bill had come to thirty thousand. After paying the utility bills, this extra cost would wipe out all their savings and she would hardly have any money left to buy his medicines.

"*Baccha*, there are some receipts on the table."

"You mean bills?" she asked, going towards it.

"I mean receipts. I know the difference between receipts and bills, thank you." He said petulantly.

Surprised, Esha picked them up and glanced at them. Sure enough, they were all paid hospital bills and a note was attached to them that she had to meet the doctor immediately.

"But who paid these?" she asked in surprise.

"How will I know? I assumed it was you." He looked worried. "Do you think someone paid for the wrong patient?"

"*Kuch bhi!*" she said and glanced at the receipts once again. Her father's name and room number were mentioned clearly. "I'll ask the doctor. Maybe he knows something. Till then, you be a good boy."

Her father's laughter followed her as she made her way to the doctor's office. Dr. Prashant, a senior to Dr. Pant, was a busy doctor in the Oncology department. But he always made a personal connection with all his patients. And sharing a bond with Mr. Mehra was an easy thing to do. He was so full of laughter. The doctor called her in as soon as the nurse informed him of her arrival.

"Come Esha, come. Glad you could make it before I left. We need to plan out his treatment, now that the financial aspect has been taken care of."

"That's the thing I wanted to ask you, doctor. I have not made the payment. And I don't know who made them for me."

Dr. Prashant laughed, thinking she was joking, but seeing her serious face his smile vanished.

"This is strange! He didn't inform you, I suppose."

"Who didn't inform me?"

"Rohan Sharma. He had called us up earlier and said that he was taking care of your father's bills. He was very insistent that we start the treatment immediately. So I thought that you knew about it."

"I can't believe this." She whispered to herself.

"Excuse me?" Dr. Prashant asked, curious.

"Nothing, doctor. You carry on with the plan but I need to talk to my company before I say yes to anything."

"We will start the treatment, Esha. Delaying further is not an option."

"Sure, doctor."

After signing the necessary documents, she left the doctor with a murmured 'goodbye'. She knew that the nurses would take care of her father for now. She had something very important to do. She had to go and meet her boss.



She didn't remember driving almost at break-neck speed. It was a miracle that she didn't get stopped by the police. Not waiting for Chakraborty's permission, she straightaway made a beeline for the elevators leading to the top floor. Amisha was not in her chair. That made Esha pause. She had rushed back without thinking if Rohan would still be in the office or

not. She wondered if she should just go back and come tomorrow. But the anger burning in her would not allow her to do so. She felt conspicuous as she stood at the threshold of the doorway to his office.

Before she could make up her mind, the door was yanked opened and the man ruling her thoughts stepped out. Immaculately dressed in a black suit and a white shirt, his tanned complexion was striking, adding to his reckless look. He looked commanding and not at all surprised to see her.

"Good. You are right on time."

"On time? On time for what?"

"Dinner."

"I'm going to have dinner with you?" She asked incredulously.

Rohan smiled at her warmly and she almost melted at the expression in those dark eyes.

"I am hungry. You have issues to discuss and I'm sure you have not eaten. Correct me if I am wrong."

"But—" Esha started and then stopped. Her growling stomach reminded her that she had indeed not eaten for a long time and if she needed to discuss anything with this man, she needed to have her head properly installed on her shoulders.

"I need to inform my father or he would wait up for me."

For a moment a doubt flickered on his face. "Do you want to go to the hospital and eat there?"

"In the hospital?"

"In the canteen, after meeting your father."

She was surprised to hear this from him, especially after what Ayush had said. But then a man of Rohan Sharma's stature could afford to be benevolent. *Don't get sucked into his charm Esha*, she reminded herself. He is attractively distracting and right now you need to focus. FOCUS.

"No, that won't be needed," she said, injecting a firmness in her voice. She remembered that it was not a social visit and, however much she tried, she couldn't deny the fact that this man had taken a decision of her life without even consulting her. "I will give him a call on my way to the..."

"Oh, somewhere close to the office then, if that is fine by you?"

*And now he asks*, she thought in amusement. Nodding, she let him usher her down the lift to his waiting, chauffeur-driven BMW. She called her father first and told him that she would be late. And then, it was time to deal with the problem sitting next to her.

"Why did you pay for my dad's treatment even when I refused to marry you?" She asked, looking at the profile of the man staring out the window as if he was seeing the city of Bangalore for the first time in his life. Anything to avoid looking at her directly, she supposed.

"Let's eat first," he said, almost sounding relieved when the car stopped in front of a Chinese restaurant. "You like Chinese, right?"

"Did your investigators tell you that?" she asked sarcastically.

"Umm. Yes. You're loved by the small shop catering Indo-Chinese cuisine at the beginning of your lane."

Indo-Chinese cuisine sounded so sophisticated for the small, charred shop that made dishes like Hakka noodles, fried rice and chilly chicken, Esha thought wryly.

Too surprised even to retaliate, she let him lead her inside the restaurant. The opulence of the restaurant made her want to turn around and walk away. She couldn't even afford a green tea in this kind of place. The maître d'hôtel seemed to know Rohan very well and, without even asking for their reservations, he led them to a quiet corner at the back of the restaurant.

*No doubt his popular love-haunt*, she thought.

"Any drinks for the lovely lady?" the man asked.

"Just water, thanks," she smiled stiffly. Rohan nodded and added, "Maybe your famous egg drop soup to start with while my friend here decides what she wants?"

"Certainly, Sir. I'll be right back." With that the maître d'hôtel left them alone.

Esha waited for the soup to arrive, all the while watching him as he looked everywhere except at her. "You love studying people around you, don't you?"

Taken aback at her candidness, Rohan rested those dark eyes on her. "You are very blunt, Esha."

"So I have been accused. Can we please now discuss the topic we both are skirting around?"

"Do you want to know why I paid for your dad's treatment?"

"Yes."

"We would do that for every employee who faces a similar situation like yours. You are a good employee and we like making life easier for our good workers."

"Then what was the marriage proposal all about?"



He fell silent as the soup arrived and waited for her to taste hers first.

She loved the hot liquid snaking down her throat and falling like a gentle reminder in her stomach—the reminder that she had stayed hungry since morning. Silence ruled as Rohan watched her sipping the soup, momentarily forgetting that she had loads of questions for the man sitting across her.

Her short, brown hair curled around her cheeks. She had a childlike quality in her that made him want to protect her. But he knew that was a totally false projection. Something about the way she handled herself told him that she was like a lioness guarding her fortress, and her fortress was her dad now.

"How is your dad doing now?" he asked politely. He had never met the man but already felt jealous of him. Would someone ever love him and fight for his life if he fell sick?

"They are going to start the chemo tomorrow. Thanks to you."

"Good. I am happy we could help." He shifted uneasily in his chair. "Listen Esha, there is one thing I wanted to discuss with you."

She stiffened, put her spoon down and glared at him, waiting for the axe to fall.

"Please don't look at me like that," he said softly. "I wanted to apologize."

"For?"

"For proposing to you like that. I must have shocked you."

"You are a man who can get any girl. Why did you ask me to marry you?"

He smiled, once again amused by her directness. At least with her, he didn't have to think what was going on in her mind. Her eyes spoke volumes and reflected her every mood.

"I need a wife. But not for the reasons a man generally marries. More like—shall we say—'an official deal'? And only for six months."

"You are asking for a contractual marriage?"

There! All the words he was trying to gather were simply told by her in two words, though accompanied by a horrific expression that made the word 'contractual' sound like a sin.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Rohan studied her blazing eyes and felt a tug at his heart. He shouldn't go through this; he knew this was a very bad decision. Maybe he could just say that this was a prank and drop her at the hospital. But just then his phone beeped and the message that flashed on his screen broke his resolution to be good.

*When are you coming home to mamma, baby?*

His eyes turned into burning coals of blazing anger as they turned towards a puzzled Esha. "You wanted the money and I had it," he said, his voice dripping icicles. "I am not asking you to marry me and live happily ever after. Just for six months. How hard could that be?"

Esha gaped at him. Just now the man was smiling at her and had the same flirtatious look that he had displayed in his office. Did he suffer from short term memory loss? How else did one explain this blow-hot-blow-cold nature?

"You want me to marry you for six months? But why?"

"I have my reasons. But then you told me that you are already engaged. So I don't see the point in discussing this."

She debated whether to tell him or not about how Ayush had run away like a man chased by a skunk upon hearing her financial condition. Not that it was any business of his, but he had paid her father's hospital bills.

"I—"

"Hey," he interrupted, raising his hand to call the waiter hovering nearby. "Let's order some food first. What would you like to have? Noodles or fried rice?"

After ordering an egg fried rice and a plate of Manchurian, he turned his full attention to her. "Now don't go on worrying about the money. It's the least we could do. Of course if you are so much against taking help, I am sure your *fiancé* can pay us back in time."

She blanched at the very thought. "Why should he pay you back? It's my dad who is sick. Not his."

"Interesting," he murmured.

"And before you go any further on this topic, let me tell you that I am no more engaged. The reasons are personal and I don't want to discuss them."

"So, there is no *fiancé* in the scene now?" Rohan grinned.

"No," Esha said, irritated by the smile. She wanted to throw the

napkin on his face but refrained herself with great difficulty. "But that does not change the fact that I have no wish to marry you."

"Ouch," he said good-naturedly. "And here I was thinking that it was my handsome personality that made you ditch that moron."

She gasped in surprise but the slight twinkle in his eyes made her laugh out loud. He didn't seem that bad.

"Are you going to tell me why you are so desperate for a contractual marriage?"

"If I tell you the truth, will you marry me?" he countered, tongue in cheek.

She could not help but notice the naughty look in his face. She laughed. "Only if you give me a valid reason to think about it."

"Fair enough." But now his face had lost all its happiness. A slight twitch at his temple indicated his tension.

They waited for some time as the waiter served their portions. Esha wondered if she should hear his story first or eat. Her stomach was growling and frankly, no other problem seemed to matter right now. Thankfully, he must have felt the same for he indicated that she should start eating and joined her in satisfying their hunger first. Well, she was hungry and things made more sense on a full stomach than an empty one. He didn't seem to mind, though she did catch an amused glint in his eyes.

"Should I order more?" he asked politely.

She blushed. Was she hogging? She deliberately picked up the napkin and wiped her mouth and glared at him. His amusement deepened but he thought better than to comment.

"You were going to tell me why you wanted this... strange arrangement?"

"I was in Delhi University when I met Zaira. Zaira Wadia."

Ah, a love story. Why she was not surprised? She was wondering why there was no one in his life. And now it seemed that she would be privy to his most personal secrets, whether she wanted to or not.

She nodded and waited for him to continue. He looked very agitated but she could not understand why. Everyone had a past, but such intensity scared her.

"You loved her a lot, didn't you, Rohan?"

"As much as a young ambitious guy can, I suppose. I had thought of marrying her and settling down before I went to Harvard. But she said that

that would not be fair on either one of us, what with life being unpredictable and other such blah blahs."

"So she didn't want to marry you before you left for the USA?" she asked, puzzled. "I don't see anything wrong in that. Actually, I feel that it was the right decision every girl should take."

A scowl darkened his brow and she wondered if she had offended him. But then why was he telling her the story of his life if he didn't want her honest opinion?

"Please hear me out before you draw your conclusions about my life," he said, a tad bitterly.

Esha felt a strange flutter in her stomach on seeing the sadness in his hooded expression. She felt sure only a rare few had ever witnessed this man's vulnerability. She didn't like Zaira already—the girl who had the power to bring so much sadness in his eyes. *Don't go there Esha*, she warned herself. This was not a situation she wanted to get caught in. No emotional entanglement, not right after her engagement had been called off. She drew in a ragged breath and tried her best to alienate herself from this man's emotions.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I have this habit of jumping to conclusions."

He smiled bitterly and didn't speak for a moment. "And that is the problem in every person's life: jumping to conclusions. It is only time that tells us whether they are right or wrong."

Okay. That was pretty philosophical of him. But she just smiled politely and let him continue.

His fingers traced small circles on the frosted glass, as if his thoughts were far away from the woman sitting right in front of him.

"To say we were in love and truly believed in a future together would not be wrong," he continued. "At least that's what I thought, and made lots of plans. But I respected her wish when she said that she would marry me only after I returned from the US."

"And did she?" Esha prompted.

Rohan blinked and brought back all his thoughts to the present, the pain from the past clearly etched on his face. Esha felt a twinge of jealousy. That felt strange for she had never felt like this about anyone, definitely not for a stranger. But she brushed aside the feeling and continued listening to his fascinating tale.

"It was a lot of hard work at Harvard and, even though we kept in

touch through mails and occasional calls, the closeness we had here in India could not be maintained while I was out there. I kept thinking that we would marry and settle down when I returned to India. But..."

"But what, Rohan? Did she not wait for you?"

"Oh yeah," he said bitterly, "she did wait for me but not as my *fiancée*, but as my dad's wife!"

Esha blinked. Of all the conclusions, she had not thought of this. She almost giggled but her good sense prevailed and she kept a serious face on. How many people faced this situation, this kind of ingenious jilting when one's girlfriend turned into their stepmom? But she did not voice her thoughts knowing fully well that it would not be appreciated.

"Do you find this funny?" He asked her suspiciously, his eyes narrowing to gauge her reaction.

Rohan watched Esha, trying to understand what she was thinking. When he had first thought of marrying her, he had never anticipated his own feelings would be involved in this situation. It had all started with a ripple of interest in a corner of his heart and then his basic instincts took over as he felt the need to touch the small tendrils of hair escaping around her neck. He wanted to feel that vein ticking rhythmically at the base of her throat with his lips as she moaned her submission. He felt a need for her, a primitive desire that scared the hell out of him.

She had a proud and defiant look about her that made people admire her. Even though she needed money badly, she didn't beg for it. The jeans and the black T-shirt that she wore right now did nothing to enhance her femininity yet no one could deny that she was one of the most beautiful women present in the restaurant. Her face was devoid of any makeup, and he was sure that not many would be able to carry this look and yet look regal.

"But I still don't understand what all that has got to do with your marriage proposal." She had the curiosity of a two-year-old that had to know why the morning dew disappeared as soon as the sun came up. "And I don't find it funny at all. It's just that a man of your stature lamenting over a girl who reduced every relationship to ashes, does not make sense to me."

"I am not, and I repeat myself, I'm not lamenting over a girl who ditched me for my father. There are other, more serious, issues involved here."

"I'm listening."

"One year back, my father had a stroke and he died. I made peace

with my father's memories and returned home. I was informed that my dad had left everything to me and thus I was forced to join the family business. After a few months, Zaira—"

Esha leaned forward wondering where this story was leading. Not that it wasn't interesting, but right now her own life demanded more attention.

"Zaira," he continued, "has started making her interest in me very public. It's becoming embarrassing in my business circle and the rumor mill is already churning. I have to put a stop to that."

"And you think marrying me for six months will solve this problem?"

"Zaira is a freaking nymphomaniac. She makes a move on all men. I came to know this only after she married my father."

"So you've had a lucky escape," Esha laughed.

Rohan shot her an irritated look and accused, "You are finding all this very funny?"

"Yes, I am." Then she sobered up a bit and glanced at him. He didn't look heartbroken so it was definitely not a love story. Else she would not even consider this. Being entangled emotionally was not her forte. "But I can see that this has become a complicated situation for you."

"This plan will work." He leaned forward and looked deep into her eyes as if he wanted to understand what was going on inside her mind.

For a moment, they both stared at each other and the world around them ceased to exist. The open laughter that was present in Esha's eyes earlier was now replaced by confusion: a confusion that she was trying to cover up with false bravado.

Rohan could see the uncertainty in her eyes and he felt a strange urge to touch her cheek and assure her that everything would be fine. He had never felt like this about anyone before, not even Zaira. He couldn't understand what it was about Esha that stopped him from thinking rationally. How could he think about a contractual marriage with her, especially if his feelings were getting involved? After the fiasco he had experienced with Zaira, he had become guarded in the matters of the heart.

"Though this marriage would be only in name, you have to convince Zaira that you love me and that you will not leave me under any circumstance."

Esha looked away from him and took a sip of water from her glass. Her throat suddenly felt parched and she willed herself to not let any emotion invade her mind. He was asking for a contractual marriage, for God's sake,

and there was no romance involved in this. So getting all hyped up for nothing would bring unnecessary complications in her life, something she did not need at this point of time. Her sole focus should be on her father, she reminded herself.

Rohan loved the myriad of emotions flickering across her face. He wondered what she was thinking so deeply about. In a second, he saw a veil come down over her eyes. He knew there can never be an emotional bond between them. They were two different people connected via their circumstances and that can never be the basis for any relationship.

"Wouldn't people be surprised if we suddenly got married?" She asked.

"Chakraborty will tell everyone that he had introduced us and the rest is up to how well we convince people that we are in love."

"But why marriage? We can just pretend to be engaged or live-in together. Why is this farce of a marriage needed?"

"You make marriage with me sound like a prison sentence!" His smile was bitter.

For a moment she wondered if she sounded insulting but this was so unusual and she had to enter this situation with her eyes open.

"What exactly will this marriage entitle?"

Esha was getting nervous now. Now that the payment for his treatment was made, her father must have relaxed a bit, thinking she had arranged for the money. She did not want to disappoint him by telling him that all this was a sham. "Rohan, I need to know exactly what this is all about."

How could he have forgotten that even Esha had many things to lose if this deal did not go through? He hadn't for once considered that she was probably thinking he might refuse to help her. It had never occurred to him but now that she was making such a big deal about it—well, he was a good man but not a saint.

Suddenly feeling great, he leaned back and smiled. "It's pretty simple. All you have to do is marry me and pretend to love me and convince the whole world that you are my wife in the true sense and in return you don't have to ever worry about your father. Does this sound like a very bad deal?"

"Very," she murmured to herself.

"Excuse me?" His eyes were studying every emotion flitting across her features.

She thought for a moment and asked him bluntly, "Would we sign a contract before we get married where it is stated clearly that you will take care of my father's treatment?"

"Do you doubt me?" He had no clue as to why he felt so offended by her words. She was, after all, a stranger who did not know anything about him. So why did he have so many expectations from her? "I think we should get this straight before we get married. My lawyers will send you the contract and you can get it checked before signing it. You can rest assured that Rohan Sharma does not cheat anyone."

"And yet we are cheating the whole world," she said softly. "Ok, this is a deal then. I will take your leave now; I have loads of things to do before my dad's treatment starts. And thanks for the lovely dinner." Without waiting for him to answer, Esha got up to leave and started moving towards the exit.

"Esha." His voice stopped her in her tracks. Thinking she had left something behind, she turned to look back. He was right behind her. She slightly bumped against him and he steadied her by gripping her shoulders. "I think we are forgetting something."

"What?"

"This is a contract marriage. We need to seal this deal with a kiss."

And with that his lips descended upon hers, softly and yet hard enough to declare to the whole world that she was his.

Esha wanted to protest, wanted to push him away but a part of her bruised soul felt parched. Her slight push was resisted and he drew her closer. Her eyes scanned his face, looking for the answers that her heart asked. Was this feeling for real? That slight pull in her belly—was it a whirlpool that was about to wash her away with the sheer intensity of her desire?

He lifted his lips from hers and looked into her eyes, and Esha saw a whirlpool of conflicts in them as if even he had been caught unawares.

Rohan traced his thumb over her lips, trying to make sure they were really the ones he had tasted a few minutes back. He wanted more and he wanted her to want him with the same intensity.

"I want you to kiss me," he whispered with a touch of anguish that seared her soul.

She didn't need his invitation, just like he hadn't needed hers. Her hands snaked around his neck and she welcomed him back, savoring the sweet sensation in every cell of her body. She felt loved, cherished, and quite antithetical to her experience with Ayush, where she had been left bruised



and rejected.

He suddenly stopped kissing and gently pulled her arms from around his neck. "Not like this. Not like a replacement for your rejected love."

She opened her lips to protest but he laid his fingers gently over them, shushing her. "I'll drop you to the hospital." And gently, he guided her to his waiting car.

## CHAPTER SIX

The next thirty days did nothing to diminish the memory of that kiss. Even the whirlwind of marriage preparations could not take away that liquid warmth of desire that had spread over every inch of her body. It had been so fleeting that had her own desires not kindled up, she would have thought it had all been an illusion.

It was terrifying to know that a stranger had the ability to stir such primitive emotions within her. Esha promised herself there and then that she would always be on guard against this. And it was actually a blessing in disguise that the wedding preparations started in earnest. Not that she had anything to do. Rohan had visited her father in the hospital to ask for his permission for her hand in marriage. Her father couldn't contain his astonishment.

"You mean to say you are not marrying that mamma's boy?" Her father asked Esha.

"Dad!" She was horrified at the way her father had started bonding with Rohan. Rohan was laughing openly at this; his eyes had the same old twinkle that she had now come to associate with him. "You both are conspiring against me and you have just met." Her complaint was genuine, even though it sent both the men into paroxysms of laughter. She supposed she should be glad that they both had bonded but that did not solve her own situation with Rohan. He had not touched her since that one kiss and the worse thing was that she wanted him to. So she avoided being in the same room with him as much as possible. By now the whole office had come to know of their impending marriage and the lighted hearted banter that took place in front of her earlier had now stopped altogether. But she braved it out.

Esha wanted a court marriage with a reception for the office colleagues later on.

"Are you sure you don't have any relatives to invite?" Rohan asked her before ordering the wedding cards.

"Nope," she said stubbornly. When she had needed them, they hadn't been present anyway.

But when her father heard this he threw a fit. "How can a marriage be solemnized in front of a court registrar?" he had wailed dramatically. "Your poor mother's soul will not forgive me if you do this."

"Dad, why will she not forgive you if I marry in court? You married

her in front of the society, right?" She lovingly hugged her father. "Ma said you barely managed to hold on to the horse."

Her father groaned, "She always teased me because that horse had one leg short and I looked a bit err... unbalanced on it."

"What a fib!" Esha mockingly slapped his chest lightly. As it is, she was feeling lightheaded with Rohan watching her from across the room. He was silent, but his dark eyes pierced through her soul and try as she might, she couldn't ignore them.

"Why are you so silent, Rohan?" she asked, deciding that attack was the best line of defense.

"We should marry in a temple, if not in full grandeur," he said quietly.

"What the—" she spluttered.

But before she could say anything her father gave a huge whoop of joy and hugged his future son-in-law. "Now here is the person who really understands how much I need to please my wife even if she is in heaven. I'm answerable to my wife there too."

Esha shrugged, knowing when she was defeated and glared at Rohan, whose mischievous smile was back as he shared jokes with her father.

Just one day before the wedding, Amisha brought her a lovely red *Banarsi* sari and a few boxes of jewelry.

"Rohan asked me to give these to you," Amisha said proudly. She was obviously happy for her boss. "Where do you want me to keep them?"

Esha felt a lump in her throat as her eyes scanned the intricate *zari* work on the red sari with the rich green border.

"I can't keep them. Please take them back."

"But why?" Amisha asked, genuinely puzzled. She knew Rohan had chosen the gifts himself and there had been excitement in his eyes when he had handed them to her to give to Esha.

*Because I have taken enough from him and for a six-month marriage, such extravagance is not needed.* But Esha kept her thoughts to herself.

"My mom would have wanted me to wear the sari she wore at her own wedding and moreover, I... I think dad would be happy to see me in my mom's sari. It was her last wish."

After that, Rohan left her alone and did not interfere at all with her arrangements. The only difference was that she always found a white orchid on her desk every morning. On the third day, she clicked the picture of the orchid and texted him.

'Why?'

He replied immediately.

'Because we need everyone to believe we are in love.'

She almost felt disappointed.

'Do you like it?' He texted again. 'Or do you like roses? My investigators did not cover that. :P'

She couldn't help grinning and texted back, 'I like orchids. Pink.'

The next day, she found a pink orchid on her desk.

Even if she didn't expect it to, life started changing slowly. Her father was shifted to a private ward. There were fruits and flowers in his room at all times. He even got a PlayStation installed in his room, which he took to just like a moth to a flame. Who would have thought a man in his sixties had a hidden gamer inside him waiting to come out!

On the 15th day of what was supposed to be their courtship period, Esha did not receive any orchid. More than her, it was her colleagues who got curious. She could almost hear them whispering. She smiled at the small group of gossip mongers and asked them directly, "Do you want me to ping him and ask why he has not sent it yet?" She teased them though even she was wondering about it herself. Was she getting used to his attention? That would not do. Just would not do.

A series of "no ma'am, we were just wondering" responses made her laugh, as everyone, herself included, got back to work. At 4pm, there was quite a stir in the office when the big boss himself walked in. Esha could feel the change in the atmosphere when the hair at the back of her neck stood up as she became aware of Rohan's presence. She turned and saw him speaking animatedly to all the people present there. Mr. Chakraborty had come out too and was introducing him to a few of the new recruits. He was acknowledging everyone but his eyes kept darting towards her. She knew that the heart leaping inside her was not normal anymore.

*Was this how one felt when one was in love?* This random thought stunned her momentarily and she quickly banished it from her mind. She schooled her features to a delighted smile, as must be expected from the *fiancée* of Rohan Sharma. On the inside, though, she was furious as to why he had come down there.

He managed to get out of the clutches of some clingy office girls and walked towards her. "I thought I will deliver the orchid personally today," he

said and took one from inside his jacket and presented it to her. There was a note attached to it. Esha looked around her and went a dark shade of red at the attention they were drawing. More than her, everyone else seemed eager to know what was written in that note.

She opened it, her fingers shaking, since he was leaning against her desk, his long legs crossing over each other, as he too waited for her to read it.

She quietly read the note, folded it and curled her fingers around it, not knowing what else to do in front of all her colleagues.

"What is this *bondhu*?" Mr. Chakraborty's voice boomed. "We need to know what poetry sir has written for you." He looked around for support and, from all the catcalls that could be heard, he got his full support. "Come on, read it to us. We have never seen this side of our boss."

Esha would have firmly refused but a mocking look from Rohan challenged her. *So he thought she didn't have the guts to read it out aloud. That showed that he didn't know her well.*

Taking the note out, she started to read in a voice that rang clear but husky, reverberating in the silent expectations of those around her.

*Shall I stop these moments for you?*

*Or should I merge myself in these moments?*

*What should I do? What should we do?*

*I don't know how to stop these moments –*

*The moment when our eyes first met,*

*And our love story began.*

As her voice trembled to a stop, the room echoed with wolf whistles and claps. She smiled brightly even as her eyes threw darts at him.

"Please tell me darling," she gritted, "that Amisha wrote this and not Mr. Chakraborty?"

He burst out laughing and said, "No, that's me. I was listening to the latest singing sensation, Arijit Singh's, songs in the car, when these lines flashed in my mind. Not bad, right?"

"Plagiarized."

"Translated," he was good to retort back. "I have another surprise for you. Will you come with me now?"

"Now? But I have a few files to go through for the meeting tomorrow. It was your order, remember?"

"Mr. Chakraborty!" Rohan called out loudly, making Mr. Chakraborty

scurry towards him. "Will you be terribly offended if I steal Ms. Mehra for the rest of the day?"

"No no! Not at all, Sir." Mr. Chakraborty felt proud that his boss had asked his permission in front of the whole office. That showed everyone how much weight he carried in this office.

Esha sighed. She felt she would disappoint everyone if she refused him. She shut down her laptop and gathered her purse. "Shall we?" she asked sweetly. Too sweetly.

"After you," he said, his eyes definitely amused.

The situation hit her for the first time when she was in the lift, alone with him. The confined space suddenly seemed too small for them. He was silent, his eyes never leaving her face.

"You are staring at me," she said, almost feeling shy. Almost.

"Am I?" he asked. "Could be. I've never had a *fiancée* before."

Her eyes widened. She searched his face to see if he was making a reference to Ayush. But his face was not mocking at all. "Well, I cannot even say that."

"I am sorry," he said, his voice a harsh whisper. "Did my words hurt you?" He crossed the distance between them and hooked his fingers under her chin and made her look up. She took a step backward. She needed to douse this fire that was now burning in her heart and reflecting in his eyes. She kept on reminding herself that this was temporary and she needed to protect her heart.

"N-no," she murmured. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Do you miss him?"

She thought for a moment before answering him. "Not that much. I miss him as a friend since I knew him from the second grade. But as a *fiancé*, I don't think we were suitable." She had never ever felt this fluttering with Ayush. This constant tension that she felt when she was near Rohan was totally alien to her.

"I'm glad." He said that ever so softly that she almost missed hearing it.

She couldn't say anything since the lift door opened and they reached the foyer where the valet had parked his car. Cushioned against luxury, she hoped she wouldn't get too used to this.

"Why did you say that?" she asked, as the car pulled out of the office building and merged into the Bangalore traffic.

"Say what?"

"That you are glad that I... I don't love him anymore."

"I didn't say that. I said I'm glad that you don't miss him anymore. You said the rest." He smiled broadly, turning towards her. Esha refused to look at him and stared unseeingly at the racing traffic. He tuned into the local radio and his favorite artist Arijit's soothing voice filled the car. A very romantic song.

After around twenty minutes, she saw that they were parking in the car park of St. John's hospital. "Why are we here?" she asked, suddenly feeling scared. "Is dad fine?"

"Of course. I would have told you if something was wrong."

He didn't explain anymore. She followed him to her dad's ward where he had just finished his first session of Chemo. She felt very bad that she couldn't accompany him but someone had to bring the bread home. He was looking very weak and spent out but upon seeing the two of them, his face brightened into a smile.

"What a wonderful surprise, my dears." Her father raised his arms and beckoned to both of them. After the nurse nodded her approval, they both rushed towards him and hugged him. It felt so right. Her dad and her *fiancé*. How could this feeling not be for real? She didn't want to ponder too much right now and drew back to look at her dad.

"How are you feeling, handsome?"

"Top of the world," he answered but Esha could see he was very tired. "So what are you two love birds doing here?"

Esha glanced quickly at Rohan to see his reaction but he was busy speaking to the nurse, instructing her about something. He always seemed to be in command of the situation, even in this scene that was not even his forte.

"Esha, the nurse is packing up your dad's things and we will be taking him home tonight."

"Home?" she croaked. She had gone pale upon hearing the word home.

"Esha darling, did you hear what Rohan said?" her father whooped in joy. "We are going home tonight."

Rohan kept his eyes steadfast on Esha's as he walked towards her father. "Dad," he said, raising his eyebrows when he saw the scowl on Esha's face but decided not to ask anything directly. Pretending to ignore Esha's dark looks he continued, "Dad, let's go and sit in the car, while Esha goes

with the nurse and collects your things. Would that be fine with you, Esha?"

"Yes." That would give her a few seconds to collect her nerves and plan her next move at least.

But ten minutes later when she came down with her Dad's meager belongings, she had no plan. She had to tell both of them the truth but she just could not bear the hurt in her father's eyes. She had failed him so miserably.

Her father was sitting in the back seat, his head resting on a pillow. Rohan had made sure that her father was comfortable. She felt a lump in her throat. Who was Rohan to them? She had always thought that Ayush, who knew her father from such a young age, would do all these things. But life had now taken yet another turn.



Searching for the right moment is never right. It just does not ever happen. Esha had to tell them the truth but she wondered how. Will her father be able to take it? Will Rohan think she had sold her soul to the devil when she made her announcement? Lost in her thoughts, she never realized that they were not at all near her house but rather in a very posh locality, where the houses were nothing like the one she had lived in all her life.

"Where are we, Rohan?" she asked, surprised as they stopped in front of a two-storied modern bungalow.

"Home."

"Home?" her father asked weakly, stepping out of the car. Rohan rushed forward to help him out, at the same time shouting, "Lakhan, come and give us a hand here."

A man, in his forties, rushed out to take the suitcases from Rohan's hand. "*Saab*, you are home early."

"Lakhan, this is Esha madam. We are going to be married soon." He told Lakhan as the man's eyes popped out in wonderment.

"This is such a wonderful news, *saab*," said Lakhan with pleasure, greeting Esha with a *namaste*.

Esha smiled and returned the gesture politely. She saw an appreciative glint in Rohan's eyes. She raised her eyebrows in silent query but he just shook his head and smiled at her warmly.

"Lakhan's father has been with our family from generations, Esha. Lakhan joined us right after finishing school. This bugger here had no interest in studies. But his kids are all in school now and doing rather well."



"All thanks to Rohan *saab*, madam."

"You must tell me all about your children soon, Lakhan *bhaiya*," she said laughing. "And your wife? Where is she?"

"She is the cook here, Esha," Rohan intervened. "You will meet everyone soon. Let's go inside now and get you all settled in."

Esha was dying to ask Rohan what they were doing here. But she couldn't in front of her dad. Moreover, it gave her time to think where she would take her dad next.

Her dad's room was downstairs so that he didn't have to climb up the stairs. "This was my dad's room and no one has used it after he—"

"I'm so sorry, Rohan," she said, softly laying her hands on his without thinking. He interlinked his fingers through hers and walked her inside the room. The decor of the room was extremely jazzy; the room was done in several shades of purple and gold. Esha blinked, sure that her father would hate the room. But right now, they had no option but to accept Rohan's hospitality.

"Lakhan will be in the next room and every time your father needs anyone, he just has to buzz the intercom."

"But I can take care of him!" Esha protested.

"Yes, you can. But you will be working in the office the whole day," he said firmly, "being tired all the time is not going to help your father, right?"

She could not deny this simple fact. She accepted his offer of help with all the grace she could muster and followed him to the bedroom she would be staying in. It felt good that someone was taking care of her for a change.

"This is our guest bedroom," he opened the door to an airy room with a huge double bed in the center. It was a beautiful room, enhanced with the dominance of satin all over. Maroon and gold curtains added to the glamour of the room. She could see a lot of frills on the bed covers and pillow covers. No doubt this belonged to a lady, for it was bold yet very feminine.

"This is—" she searched for the right words to say.

"Overdone?" he laughed. "I agree. My mom's. She had a fascination for satin."

"This is a lovely room," she stated. She glanced at him and was startled to see that he was watching her intently. Feeling self-conscious, she combed her fingers through her now disheveled hair. But his hands shot out

and stopped her midway.

"Don't," he said softly.

She laughed, feeling awkward at his close proximity, "I am a mess."

"You are a very beautiful woman."

She felt a thrill coursing through her nerves. This was exactly how it was *not* supposed to be. She was supposed to be angry and making her stance clear to him. Instead she was going all dewy-eyed on him.

"Please stop acting now," she said it, more brittle than she intended it to be. "There is no audience in this room; we both don't need to act like a loving couple right now."

A bland expression replaced the tenderness on his face and he took a step away from her.

"And here I had just gotten into the role."

"There are a few things I would like to discuss with you before the wedding, Rohan."

"Can I at least sit down on that sofa while you dictate your terms?"

She scowled at him, feeling kind of intimidated by his teasing. He was a charming devil, there was no doubt about that. She nodded and climbed into the huge bed and made herself comfortable.

"If you are ready, my queen, your subject is still waiting."

Esha threw him a look of annoyance. "Before we get married, I want to make it clear that my father is my first priority so if I cancel some parties or meetings, you will have to bear with it." She injected indifference into her attitude for that was the only protection she had against him.

It seemed that he was going to say something but thought the better of it and kept quiet. For that she was thankful and continued, "Every time my father needs me I'm going to be there for him. I'm not here to entertain your friends and I'm not a socializing person."

"And I am?" Rohan asked, raising his eyebrows slightly. "You seem to have many preconceived notions about me."

For a moment, she got worried. Had she been too judgmental? After all, she should not forget that he was their benefactor and, at the least, deserved to be respected.

"Cat got your tongue?" Rohan asked sarcastically. "You have already mentioned we are alone. So there is no need to keep up the pretense any longer. But I have to say something. To pull off this charade, we need to at least have mutual respect for each other or this is definitely not going to work

out." His voice was rough, as if he was getting tired of the constant battle he was having with her. "We should both remember that we are both gaining something out of this."

True. She could not deny that. She was so concerned about herself and her father that she had forgotten to even ask him how he expected her to behave in front of his stepmother.

He had enacted his part beautifully in front of their office colleagues and her father. Her father would never expect her to marry to pay for his treatment. So she had to make double the effort of convincing him that she was marrying Rohan for all the right reasons. Thankfully, Rohan supported her more than she had expected.

"I am sorry," she whispered, feeling contrite.

There was something on her face that was so innocent and vulnerable that he could not help getting up and rushing towards her. Taking her soft hands in his, he patted them. "This is new to both of us and we have to take every step together. Why are you putting down so many conditions even before starting this journey?"

How could she answer his question? How could she say that she had not been very truthful with him? How could she tell him that she needed him more than he needed her?

"There is something you should know."

"Go ahead." His voice was deep as he held her hand tightly against his chest.

She was beginning to feel disoriented by his close proximity. She wanted to get out of the bed but he pushed her back gently. "Relax. Tell me what's going on. I saw that look on your face when I told you that the doctor had given the green signal for you to take your father home."

She had to give him full marks for being so perceptive.

"I don't have a home to take him to."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

"And why was that necessary?" Rohan asked, understanding immediately what might have happened. She had sold her father's house!

"Had bills to pay and dad needed some injections that cost around two lakhs every time," Esha said softly, her voice slightly wobbly. "So I sold the house to one of my relatives and was mostly staying at the hospital with my dad. All our belongings are locked in one room in that house, which my uncle has been kind enough to let me do."

Dropping his pretense of not caring enough, Rohan hugged her.

At first, Esha was surprised at his warmth that suddenly engulfed her. She felt so protected in his arms. Her head rested on the bare skin of his chest that was exposed through his shirt, which had two buttons undone at the top. Her breath was uneven against the fine hair on his chest. She wanted to be held like this for eternity; it felt like her safe haven.

The very thought galvanized her into action. He was a caring person. Period. Why was she acting like a love struck teenager? He was one of the most eligible bachelors and she was a mere employee.

"I should be honored that you are paying so much attention to an employee in your company," she said flippantly, trying her best to cover up her embarrassment.

"Well, you already know that I have an ulterior motive."

"Ah yes," she said, moving away from him. "Your passionate desire to marry me."

He threw back his head and laughed. "You wish!"

The dimples dancing on his cheeks fascinated her. It would have been inhuman to stay unaffected by them. Her hands shot out and touched them as if to make sure they were real. His sudden indrawn breath indicated his surprise. He caught her hands as she quickly tried to withdraw them, embarrassed by her own boldness.

Rohan held her hands against his chest and pulled her slightly towards him, his lips hovering over her forehead.

Esha closed her eyes, not really knowing where to look, for the fire burning in his eyes was scorching her. She couldn't control what was happening nor could she move an inch away from him. A feeling of intense desire was whirling inside her and she was on the verge of submitting to it. She couldn't even deny that she wanted Rohan to kiss her at that moment.

And kiss her he did. Honeyed warmth spread through her limbs as they were pressed against his tall frame. His mouth was warm and wet against her lips as his tongue slightly parted them and demanded an entrance inside her mouth. She started shivering as his tongue sensually glided inside her mouth. Hot molten desire erupted like lava somewhere deep within her and stabbed at every point in her heart. She moaned her desire and he latched on to it.

"You're a siren," Rohan whispered in her ear, his voice roughened with emotion. "I knew you were trouble from the moment you walked into my office."

Esha was not sure how to react to that statement. Was that an insult or a compliment? Did she really have the power to turn his world upside down? She found it so easy to fit against the frame of his body, as if she had known him for years and that frightened the hell out of her. She had never ever felt her body tightening like this, this erratic beating of her heart, and a pull in the pit of her stomach. It was only her brain that was sending her a warning signal, but his mouth was stopping her from thinking logically. It was only when he lifted his mouth from hers that sanity rushed in and she pushed him away, albeit half-heartedly.

"Now that you have tested the waters you would be sailing in, can I go?"

Rohan could not remember the last time he had been so infuriated due to a woman. "Is that what you think I was doing? Testing your sexual ability?" He shot her a contemptuous look. "So I was testing waters? What about you? You seemed to be enjoying yourself too."

Though Esha blushed at his words, her temper was not very far away. Better to have anger than a desire that would never be fulfilled, she told herself. "Well then, like you, I too was checking you out. You really think a woman can't do that? We are sexual beings too but unlike men we keep our animal instincts separate from our desires."

In a flash, Rohan was in front of her, gripping her shoulders tightly. "Don't you dare show me attitude Miss. Or—"

"Or what?" Esha pushed him back with disgust. "Or what? You will throw me out of the house? Stop paying the hospital bills?" In her anger, her volume had notched up an octave to hide the hurt inside. How could a beautiful kiss like the one they had just shared cause this ugly scene?

"You have me all measured out Ms. Mehra," Rohan said bitterly.

"And you threaten me with every action of yours, sir."

Silence ruled in the room for some time as they both gauged each other. Suddenly Esha found the whole situation extremely funny. "Here we are, not even married yet and already fighting like an old married couple. No wonder, I am not married yet."

Thankfully, Rohan caught up with the humor in the situation and grinned. "Oh, this was scary. We started fighting like an old married couple. Whoa!"

They both went and sat on the bed, making sure to keep a distance of two feet between them. Rohan cleared his throat. "Okay, I will go first. Where do we go from here? Pretend this never happened between us?"

"Pretending would be tough. No?" Esha asked softly.

"And you are really bad at pretending, right? Like you are pretending that you have not sold your house and thus haven't told your father about it."

If Esha felt affronted, she kept her mask on. It was one of the worst things she had done in her life and yet she didn't feel guilty about it. Survival. The need to survive made you do many things that you would not even think of otherwise.

"While standing on your pedestal of wealth, judging others is so easy, right?" she asked. "I needed to pay the bills and I needed to do it with dignity. Which part of this is so difficult to understand? No, don't answer me." She said tightly and jumped off the bed. Walking toward the door she flung back a 'goodnight' before firmly closing the door behind her.

Rohan swore to himself and almost followed her to pacify her anger but just then his phone rang. In his anger, he didn't check the caller ID before answering the call.

"Ya," he barked.

"You are getting rude day by day, darling." Zaira's sing-song voice floated through.

A look of irritation crossed over Rohan's face. "What do you want?" he asked coldly.

"I have news to share and thought of meeting you tonight."

"I'm busy."

"This can't wait, darling. Surely you understand that I would have waited if I could," she purred.

"We will meet tomorrow morning," he said firmly and disconnected the call, without waiting for a response from her.

Zaira called him back a few more times and the rings jarred his nerves but Rohan ignored them. Right now, Esha's sad face was haunting him and he didn't want to go to bed with that look of hers imprinted on his heart.

He went downstairs in search of her and sure enough, she was with her father, playing a game on the PlayStation.

"May I join in or is this 'family exclusive'?"

"Its 'family exclusive' so you must join," her father said warmly, making room for him to sit.

Rohan felt his heart warming up to this man who would soon become his father-in-law. He picked up a controller and joined the game of kick boxing and soon they were pitting against each other and laughing like three kids out to have fun, all their problems momentarily forgotten.

"This scene is so cute," a sugary voice cut through the happy scene as a beautiful woman in a red halter neck dress walked in. "And here I was wondering if you were lonely and that's why you were so rude on the phone, Rohan."

Rohan pressed the pause button and got up, his face a mask of indifference. Esha didn't need any introduction to find out who this woman was.

Esha stood up politely though it was really difficult to picture this lady standing in front of her as her future mother-in-law.

"Hi," she smiled brightly and walked towards the lady with her hands outstretched. "I'm Esha. Rohan is my –"

"*Fiancé*," Rohan interjected, for he was sure Esha was going to say 'boss', and came over to place an arm around her waist, praying Esha would take the hint and not push him away.

"*Fiancé*?" Zaira spluttered. "Are you out of your mind? You are going to marry this... this...?"

"Mind what you say, Zaira," Rohan said softly, and yet it was enough to shut the lady up.

"Rohan, how can you get married?"

"I guess like everyone usually does," he said mockingly.

"But you don't love her!" Zaira shouted.

By now Esha's father had joined them, forgetting his new PlayStation game. He looked at them quizzically. "What's going on? And she is–?"

"You are freaking standing in my house and asking me this question?!" Zaira fumed.

"Zaira!" Rohan's voice cut in, cold as ice as he stood between Esha and Zaira. "You are standing in my house. And you're speaking rudely to my father-in-law."

"You're picking up someone from the road and making her your wife just to spite me?"

"I'm not my father, Zaira." Rohan strode towards her but never reached her. His hand caught Esha's as he moved towards Zaira and stopped just a few inches before Zaira, hugging Esha by his side.

Esha felt cocooned by his support. Not that she needed his support to face the likes of Zaira, but once in a while it felt good not to be so strong, not to shoulder all the responsibilities.

Zaira visibly paled at Rohan's direct attack. Esha could see that the scene was going to get pretty ugly and she didn't want her father to be a part of it. "Dad, why don't you lie down for some time? I'm sure these two have things to work out."

Mr. Mehra was only too happy to escape. Throwing a worried look at Rohan, he went to his bed as the other three walked out of his room.

"You've given your Dad's room to this stranger?" Zaira asked, glaring at Rohan.

By now, Esha too had lost her cool. Being protected was one thing but to stay silent while someone continuously abused her was not her thing. She smiled at Rohan, one of those flashes that would stop Rohan's heart for a second every time he witnessed it. If he was surprised, he covered it well.

"Darling," Esha purred, "what is this ruckus all about? She is your stepmom right? Does she object to our marriage? You never told me that!"

"That's because I don't care and I don't need her freaking permission to marry anyone," Rohan retorted, his insults finding home, if Zaira's expression was to be believed. "Zaira, now that you've come here and made a scene, can you please leave? Don't disturb the peace of my house."

Zaira paled at this open insult. With her green eyes pouring venom at Esha, she spat out, "You're insulting me in front of this nobody. If you think you can just marry her and live happily ever after, then you're living in a fool's paradise. She is after your money. Just your money." She raised her palms to stop him from saying anything, "Oh yes, I would know for I did it too."

With that she turned and left, leaving nothing but disgust in her wake. Esha sat down, feeling drained after the onslaught. "Is she for real?"



"Unfortunately, yes. Are you ok?"

Rohan knew Esha must hate this whole situation with Zaira. God only knew how much he himself did. The way Zaira had come and shattered the happiness in his house troubled him. That woman would only mean more trouble in the future if he didn't do something about it. Especially in defaming Esha. Far from being a gold digger, Esha was one of the most compassionate persons he had ever met, though he couldn't deny that she was going to marry him for his ability to take care of her father. She had rejected Ayush for he had refused to do so. Soon the word would be out and people would make all kinds of denunciations. Not that he cared. But her father was a different story.

"I know what you're thinking," Esha said dryly. "Zaira is not far from the truth now, is she?"

"We both are going to marry each other for reasons other than love," Rohan said slowly. He was standing directly in front of her and she couldn't help noticing his taut, chiseled jaw, a nerve ticking at the base. He was furious, and she had never seen him so angry. Zaira must wield some power over him to make him lose his cool like this.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

In the space of a few minutes, Zaira had destroyed their newly found comfort zone in each other's life. Awkwardness had set in and Esha didn't know how to set things right. The dinner that followed was a silent one since her father had begged tiredness and retired early. When Rohan didn't venture to make any conversation as Lakhan and his wife served them dinner, even Esha didn't take the initiative. They were two souls lost in their own thoughts, both unsure what the future would bring. With a terse 'goodnight', Esha went to her bedroom as soon as Lakhan cleared the table. Rohan did nothing to stop her, though his face held a deeply thoughtful expression.

The night stretched ahead to an unknown horizon. It was sheer bravado that didn't allow Esha to run across the corridor, bang at his door, and declare this charade as madness.

It was also sheer survival instinct that made her not do it for she was doing this only for her father. She had to pay Rohan back for the financial support he had given her. It was a night of restlessness and a night of turbulent thoughts and whatever the next day would bring, she knew that her life as it had been in her childhood was over forever.

She didn't have much time to mull over last night and after a quick shower she got ready for office. As she stepped out of their room to go towards the kitchen, Lakhan came and said politely, "Madam, sir is waiting for you in the living room. He said that I must ask you to meet him there."

She nodded with a smile, wondering what it was all about. But nevertheless, curiosity made her walk towards the living room where Rohan was waiting along with two other men in black suits.

*Like a bad movie cast*, she thought with a smile, *when the advent of any danger came in the form of men in black suits—The Godfather style*. But giggling now wouldn't render well with all the serious faces around her. So she politely nodded at everyone and asked Rohan, "You wanted to meet me?"

Rohan cleared his throat and got up to say politely, "Good morning, Esha. Hope you slept well?"

"Considering the upcoming events in my life, pretty much, yes."

After a polite laugh, Rohan handed her a few papers.

"Esha, I need you to sign these papers. This is Mr. Gupta and Mr. Solanki, my company's lawyers."

"What has that got to do with me?" She asked bluntly, unable to

understand what those papers were for.

"Allow me, Rohan," Mr. Solanki interrupted. And then he turned towards Esha, like a lawyer making an opening sentence in front of a judge.

"Ma'am, this is a prenuptial agreement where you are agreeing that if, God forbid, you are separated or divorced from Mr. Rohan, you would not have any claim over his property except for the two crores he has promised to give you."

"Two crores?" Esha gasped.

"Do you want to challenge the amount?" Rohan asked, his face bland.

Esha looked at him, wondering if all the kinship she had felt towards him last night was a one-way street. Did he really think that she was after his money? But come to think of it, how well did he really know her?

In her defense, wasn't she too riding along with him without any guarantee?

But that was not all. Mr. Solanki continued, "If you have any child from this marriage, Mr. Sharma will be the sole custodian of the child and you will be given visitation rights."

Esha gasped. Even if their marriage was a pretense in every way, this rule was atrocious and an insult to any mother.

"Not that I see this happening in the near future," she said, acid dripping from her tone, "but if it does, why should I give my child away?"

Mr. Solanki cleared his throat, clearly embarrassed, but he had to go on. "Well, Mr. Sharma feels that this child's life will be in danger once people come to know about the Will."

"Will? What Will?"

"Solanki!" Rohan said sharply, "who told you to put that clause in the contract?"

"But, sir..."

"Just remove it and let's get this thing settled. You can use the computer in my study and get a fresh printout."

"But that clause is very important or this –"

Rohan raised his hand and that silenced Solanki, who nodded abruptly and went to take a fresh set of printouts.

"Rohan, what is that man talking about?" Esha felt that she had just witnessed something that might affect their whole lives but Rohan was making it sound inconsequential.

"I've had it removed from the contract, so how does it matter?"

"But it does. If your lawyer thought it was so important, it must mean something."

"Are we going to have a child?" Rohan asked, his eyes suddenly very dark. He was watching her like a hawk and the air between them sizzled with tension. Esha's mouth dried up as her brain conjured up images of them making a baby together. She flushed. He was either trapping her into a confession or sidelining the discussion. And he had succeeded too, for this was a conversation she didn't want to get into.

Solanki chose that moment to return and the bond between them was broken. Esha felt free of his hold, but continued to feel awkward. Very awkward. But hell would freeze over before she would let him know that.

"Gosh! I never thought of this," Esha said, smacking her forehead with her palm, startling the men in the room. "This is a perfect pre-nuptial agreement."

"You are fine with the prenuptial agreement?" Solanki asked.

"Of course I am. But I have one request. Let me know how much your services cost."

"Why?" Gupta spoke up at last, startled by the turn of events.

"Because I need lawyers to draw a prenuptial agreement for me too."

"You?" Rohan asked surprised, "I don't want anything from you."

"That's what you say today. But I do have a list of demands that need to be fulfilled before, during, and after the marriage." Esha was actually enjoying herself immensely. Now that the thought had taken birth in her mind, it had started to build up too.

"What are your demands?" Rohan gritted out.

"You're not my lawyer. So why should I tell you?"

Rohan strode up to her and growled, "What game are you playing?"

"Rohan," Esha said calmly. "Like you, I too have er... issues."

"I don't have issues!" Rohan almost shouted. Both the lawyers stood up hastily, not sure of what was going on. Esha stole a look at Rohan and his blazing eyes almost made her give up what she was aiming at. For a moment, all sounds around her receded to silence. It was only him and her.

Rohan was not sure when the quotient between them shifted. This was no trick of fate where his love was being tested. It felt so natural.

But their marriage was not for real. Esha had made it very clear that she wouldn't stay for more than six months with him.

She snapped her fingers before his eyes and he realized that he had

been staring at her.

Bloody hell!

This was all he needed, swooning over a lady just before signing a prenuptial agreement. For a moment, a violent desire to take her in his arms and make her his rose deep within him. But he thought of his lawyers and moved back.

He had come this close to making a fool of himself.

"Do you want us to leave Rohan?" Solanki asked in a sly manner, which raised Rohan's hackles up.

"No," he snapped, and then turning towards Esha he said, "I'm sure you will find my company lawyers very fair."

"But, sir, we can't represent both the parties," Gupta protested.

"Solanki can represent me and you can take up Esha's case."

Though they didn't look very happy about it, they conceded.

"So, ma'am," said Gupta, "what're your demands?"

Before Esha could answer, Rohan interjected, "Do you want us to leave the room?"

"No," Esha said sweetly, "now that the parties have been divided, I am sure I can trust Mr. Gupta."

Gupta blushed and sat down with an open notebook.

"Mr. Gupta, I don't have too many conditions but the ones that I do have are not demands but conditions."

"Synonym bullshit." Rohan grunted.

"Please don't interrupt me when I'm speaking to my lawyer."

Rohan cussed under his breath and sat down, opening a file kept on the coffee table.

"So Mr. Gupta, please take a note of my conditions," Esha said majestically, enjoying every minute of this. "This marriage will be on paper only. Under no circumstances can I be expected to fulfill my conjugal duty."

All three men turned a deep shade of red. Ignoring their discomfort, Esha continued, "I also want it stated that my father will get his treatment till required."

"I have already promised you that," growled Rohan.

"Then you shouldn't have any objection if I have your thoughts written on the legal papers."

"This is so freaking unnecessary."

"Your fears are real and mine are insipid?"

Rohan didn't reply but continued staring at the file in his hand. She ignored him and continued, "And my last er... what was the word?"

"Condition, ma'am," whimpered Gupta.

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Gupta. My third condition is that my job in the company should not be taken away. At least, not without a valid reason."

"You really have a very high opinion of me," Rohan spat out.

"As you have of me," Esha managed to retort. "And the last condition is that after the divorce there won't be any interference in my life from you."

"Okay, done. And Mr. Solanki add that point, the one that Esha just said, in my contract too." Rohan got up abruptly. "That will be all. I will take your leave."

Silence resided in the room after he left. Suddenly Esha felt all her anger zap out. Her shoulders slumped and without a word she signed the papers in front of her and walked out of the room, leaving both the lawyers wishing they were in any other profession but this.

## CHAPTER NINE

*One week later.*

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the..." whispered Mr. Mehra, a tinge of tears waiting to escape the corners of his eyes, "who is the fairest of all brides?"

"Dad," Esha laughed. "We both will be living under the same roof even after my marriage. So why are you being so melodramatic?"

"Don't spoil it! This is a very emotional moment for me," Mr. Mehra said in mock anger. "This moment shows every father that his girl has now grown up."

Esha felt a pang of guilt but not for long. All she wanted was for her father to live. Already, the chemo was eating away his smile and the weakness on his face was heart-wrenching. He was keeping up a tough exterior and his happiness for this wedding was really helping. Right now, his eyes were alive with pride at the vision of beauty his daughter made.

The simple orange *Banarsi* sari didn't have much of *zari* work, but she felt as if her mom was wrapping her arms around her. Moreover, it enhanced her sherry colored eyes. The fleet of beauticians whom Rohan had hired had worked their magic on her from head to toe. Her hair was in a bun and was studded with twinkling diamonds while her face had been sculpted to perfection. Though her eyes were enhanced with eye shadow and glitter, the makeup couldn't hide her inner turmoil. Esha felt anything but herself. But it was worth every torture just to see her father's face light up with joy.

She remembered the conversation she had had with Rohan two days ago, during one of their after dinner talks. He had insisted that she wear his mom's jewelry along with her mom's. She had, of course, refused but Rohan had emotionally blackmailed her.

"All this belonged to my mom. And she always wished that her daughter-in-law would wear them on her wedding day."

"But we are marrying only for six months so why do we need this charade?"

"Only we know it's a charade but my relatives don't. Especially Zaira. I don't want her to be suspicious."

Esha had forced her gaze to remain steady on his face, hoping none of her inner turmoil was visible to him. Her only salvation from her worry regarding her father was her own fantasies that she had for this man.

"And suddenly why do your relatives' wishes matter?" she asked, taking a sip of the ice cold water as they sat opposite each other in the dining room. It was a Friday evening and there was no office work to keep them from discussing their issues.

"I am not saying that you should buy new jewelry. These belong to my mom. You – you can return them when you leave."

Esha scowled, all thoughts of remaining cool and dignified fading. "I thought you were scared that I will run away with your property and that's why you made me sign the contract. Suddenly, why this trust on me?" she asked, her brows bunched together in mock anger.

Rohan suppressed a sigh at her defiance. She hadn't yet changed out of the clothes she had worn to work—a pair of straight-legged trousers and a printed, pleated top—and it made her look very severe. He had a strong feeling that the contract would be a topic thrown at his face at every opportunity she got in the coming six months. Her expressive eyes were narrowed and fixated on him, making it clear that that was exactly what she was going to do.

Smiling, he remembered the papers that were served to him that morning. Her ridiculous 'conditions' worded legally looked even more ridiculous on paper. Gupta was almost apologetic when he had put the papers in front of him. Rohan had signed them, of course, for he had no intention of backing out, ever. But he had never once considered the fact that he would have any emotional involvement with her. He had barely survived his first tryst with love and had sworn to keep away from anything to do with that emotion.

"Oh, you have a point. Will follow up with Solanki and ask him to add that point in the agreement. I hope you won't mind signing it again."

Esha had almost choked on the pasta that Nandini, Lakhan's wife, had served today. "I – I can't imagine that you really think so less of me!" She said bitterly, losing her cool against his mocking attitude. Pushing her food away she got up, "Send me the jewelry and I'll wear them like the witches of Salem would wear their noose."

And with that dramatic statement, she strode out of the room, leaving Rohan with a suppressed smile and a twinge of regret.





"That was Rohan on the phone. He says he wants me to take Lakhan and his wife with me in the car on my way to the temple." The pride in her father's voice brought her back to the present.

Esha smiled, a tad sadly. The 'Salem jewelry' did not mix with her mom's simple pieces. Something about both the sets made her feel as if hands of love were clutching around her heart. Esha felt loved. Welcomed. She knew Rohan had loved his mother a lot and losing her at a young age must have been tough on him as losing her mother had been tough on her. *Was Ma watching her from the clouds above? Maybe she was with Rohan's mom, both of them skirting around the clouds to see their children getting married. Were they disappointed?* She felt a lump rising in her throat, which she quickly suppressed. It would not do to be howling on the day of her marriage. Especially if the punishment involved more hours with the makeup artists.

Esha looked in the mirror again and the face that stared back at her was beautiful. She had never looked this radiant. And it was then that a tiny voice whispered inside her – maybe it was her feelings for Rohan that were adding to her beauty, a guilty little secret she was afraid to admit, even to herself.

She blushed at her own thoughts and turned to her father with a bright smile, "You two are really gushing over each other," Esha pouted at her father. She loved the way her father and her husband-to-be had bonded.

"But why are you not coming with me? Don't be late now."

"Oh yes, or your debonair son-in-law would run away, right?" She laughed.

"No!" Her father said with a confidence that she was far from feeling. "I have seen the love in his eyes and eyes never lie."

Her father got another call from Rohan and he hurried out, leaving a stunned Esha wondering what that was all about.

*Eyes never lie.* Her practical father saying that to her made her wonder if any of it could possibly be true. But Rohan didn't even trust her and without trust, there was no love. Moreover, how could she forget what Solanki had said and Rohan had blithely ignored? What was it about his father's will that would endanger the child they could have in the future? The very idea of a child with Rohan was so presumptuous that she quickly shook it off. As if falling in love with a man who didn't love her wasn't bad enough!

Esha closed her eyes shut to stop the tears from coming out.

A slight pressure on her shoulders made her turn around. Ayush stood

before her, looking anguished. Esha's heart went out to her best friend, "Ayush!" She exclaimed and threw her arms around him.

Mistaking her gesture for something else that was more than just concern or friendship, his face lit up and he gathered her in his arms. "Oh Esha, I missed you so much!"

"You missed me? That's why you came looking for me after three months?" She asked, good-naturedly.

"Three months of pure torture," he said and kissed her on the forehead, just like he would do whenever she was sad when they were kids. It was more like a brotherly peck, for now she knew exactly how passionate a kiss could be.

Esha withdrew from him, realizing her mistake. She was just happy to see her childhood friend and had not thought that it could be misconstrued. But apparently it had been, since his eyes lit up with desire.

"Ayush, how have you been doing?" She asked self-consciously, wondering who else was at home. Suddenly she didn't want him to be in the same room as her.

"Could have been better," he murmured. "So, you are marrying your boss, I heard."

"Yes," she replied, not elaborating.

"Did he knock you up?" Ayush sneered. It was only then did she hear the slight slur in his words.

"Are you drunk?"

"You are asking if I am drunk?" He laughed bitterly. "My heart is broken, my love is marrying someone else and all you can ask me is if I am drunk?"

Esha smiled gently. "We had too many issues and it wouldn't have been good for us in the long run." When Ayush did not answer but continued to stare at her, she said, "I'm getting late, Ayush."

But Ayush had an agenda of his own. Grabbing her by the shoulders, he captured her mouth with his own.

The first thought that came to Esha's mind was, *oh shucks, I have to call those beauticians again*. She tried pushing him away but he was busy plundering her lips.

"Ayush!" Her muffled protest fell unheeded. She tried to push him away but he ignored her protests.

Then Esha did what she didn't want to do to any man. Her right knee

bent up and she slammed it between his legs. Was that crunching sound from —? Well, she didn't care for men like him who didn't understand a simple 'no'. She stood watching as he bent down in pain, cupping his palms over his crotch.

"How... could... you do this, bitch?"

"And to think we were friends once!" Esha exclaimed, disgusted with herself for even knowing this man.

"I came here because I love you and want you back in my life," he whined.

"Today's my wedding day, Ayush," she said, "and you can't just walk back into my life without my permission."

"Why the fuck are you marrying that man? Is he offering you more than I did?"

"And what were you offering Ayush?" Her tone had become dangerously quiet.

"Oh home, kids, love..."

"In that order?" she mocked. "No, thank you."

"So you caught a rich guy because you had a bit of a misunderstanding with me?"

Esha looked disgusted. "You really have the audacity to question me after what you have done?"

"All I did was ask you to focus on our relationship. Helping your dad once in a while is fine. But—"

"But?" Esha was livid now. Her dark eyes threw darts at him. "You do realize that my dad has a chronic disease, right?"

"Yes, exactly. But you're asking us to give up our dreams, our future, all of it. And then when he dies you'll have nothing in your hands. Nothing."

With great deliberation, Esha stepped further away from him and shook her head. "Even if I tear my hair and try to explain the situation to you, you will not be able to understand it." Esha felt for the first time that a part of her childhood had died.

"I don't blame you for not being able to take care of my father. At least you told me that before we got together; you were honest about it and that saved both of us years of anguish."

A new look of hope came into his eyes. "Then what is the problem? I'm sure your dad also wants your happiness. I can bet on that!"

"And you will probably win," she smiled gently at him. "It's not what

my dad wants but what I do."

"Your duty after marriage is only towards me, forget my mom as well. We will live in the USA peacefully – a land of dreams."

Even though Esha didn't like his mom much, at this moment she felt sorry for her. No one deserved a selfish son like Ayush.

"What would you do if I developed a chronic disease after marriage, Ayush? To you your career and money is very important but believe me, they are nothing but cards on which we humans build our houses."

"And Rohan is letting you care for your father and that's why you are marrying him?" he asked shrewdly.

"Goodbye, Ayush. I don't want to discuss my family or my marriage with outsiders."

Ayush took a sharp intake of breath at this blatant insult and rubbed his nose as he said with cruelty, "Hope Rohan can tolerate the smell of death that always hovers around you."

With that he strode off. But as luck would have it, he ran straight into a scowling Rohan.

"What are you doing in my house?" Rohan demanded, his eyes blazing fire. A worry was nagging him. What if this demented looking man had harmed Esha? He stepped up closer, taller than Ayush by an inch or two, and glared down at him. "And you'd better tell me the truth."

Ayush overcame his momentary embarrassment. With the anger that was bubbling inside him, he forgot that he was standing in this man's house and that too on his wedding day.

"The great Rohan Sharma," slurred Ayush. "The man who can have everything. But no. What does this man want? A piece of my *ex-fiancée*." He clapped and started going around Rohan who stood still like a samurai warrior just before an attack. "You had to pump—pump money into her, use her weakness to have her in your bed."

"Get out of my house or I'll have you arrested."

"Of course, you will," Ayush mocked. "Because you know very well why she is marrying you. If you had any sense, you would see that it is only to save her already dead father. You," he stabbed a finger in Rohan's chest, "you are nothing but an ATM machine for her. You know ATM? Automatic Transfer of Funds." And then he added to his insult by pretending to swipe a card in an ATM machine. "Whoosh!" he slurred.

By now, Rohan had lost all his composure. He grabbed Ayush by his

collar and dragged him down the hallway.

"Stay away from my home and my wife." His voice was cold and promised retribution if not obeyed.

Ayush shrugged his hands away. "I'm leaving. Don't worry. I can smell death in your house already. I hope you enjoy the everyday dance that death will play with you and your precious Esha. Your marriage will be second in Esha's quest to save her father."

"Get out." Rohan pushed Ayush out of the door. After closing the door on his face, Rohan ran upstairs to check on Esha. Just next to her bedroom door was a huge window through which he could see her.

She was sitting on her bed, her fingers touching her swollen lips with lipstick smudged around it. She was weeping like a woman who had just lost the love of her life.

Rohan felt a stab of pain at the very idea of Esha pining for another man. She was not even ready for the marriage rituals. Did this marriage hold no meaning for her? God! How could he even think there was anything going on in her heart for him? This was a contract marriage, for God's sake.

Was he really using her father's illness to get her to marry him? It was only for six months goddammit, and not even a real marriage. But he did need these six months of marital bliss to make sure Zaira understood that he was off limits.

Well, the time to think about it was over. Her father was waiting eagerly in the temple along with everyone else. She could very well go back to her precious lover along with her two crores of alimony after six months but till then; they had a contract marriage to live by.

## CHAPTER TEN

Twenty years of friendship had just gone down the drain. How did one forget the past twenty years and move on? It was true that Ayush was not her true love for she never even felt a flicker of passion towards him. He was more of a habit that she had clung to. He was her anchor to the past when both her parents had been with her and she was leading a loving and happy childhood. Flashes from the past mocked at her, from the time when she would run towards Ayush even with the smallest of her problems. Right now, it felt as if one part of her life was over and she had every right to mourn the loss of a friendship.

"I'll give you ten minutes to freshen up and come downstairs, unless you have other plans." Rohan's words were dipped in sarcasm and on any other day, she might have made a good repartee. But not today. Today she felt drained out.

"I'll be downstairs in a few minutes."

"As per tradition, I can't take you to the temple. We are not supposed to meet before the ceremony either, but given our circumstances, that can't be helped."

"Oh yes, bad luck and all!"

"Well," he smiled tightly, "we needn't worry about that now, do we? We've already had that."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's not go into that, Esha," he said. "Chakraborty will be waiting for you downstairs. Come to the temple with him."

He had hundreds of questions in his mind as he watched her demure features. Something he had never seen on her face before. She looked beautiful in her bridal accessories. His mom's jewelry could not have looked better on anyone else. Her cheekbones were highlighted and looked proud as her dark lashes touched them. With her eyes downcast, he could see the different hues playing around her eyes. Gold earrings dangled from her ears, peeping through the red veil that covered her hair, which was cleverly woven in a bun resting just at the base of her nape. A gold *mangteeka* fell on her wide forehead, like a painter's pride highlighted in an art gallery.

His heart told him that the bastard had touched her. And that bothered him. Bothered him in a way that was almost animalistic in nature. A pain seared in his gut, a need to thrash the living daylights out of that man who

had brought those tears in her eyes. Whatever had brought those tears in her eyes, it bothered him.

It should not.

For this was more of a job than a marriage. But when his eyes fell on her trembling lips and those huge downcast eyes rose to meet his, he groaned and went towards her and engulfed her in an embrace.

Esha couldn't help but sigh and welcome the support. Except her father who had been with her in all her turbulent years during her mom's chronic illness, there had never been another friendly hand on her shoulder.

Rohan cupped her chin and gazed down at her. "Will you be fine?" he asked her gently.

She could not help noticing how handsome he looked in his *sherwani*. The white and gold suited him, accentuating his broad shoulders. His stubborn jaw was clean shaven and she could not stop herself from touching it lightly. Just to make sure he was real.

His indrawn breath indicated that he was being affected and he reached out and grasped her palms, his warmth spreading over to her.

"Don't," he said, his heart telling him otherwise. "Don't do anything we will regret later."

She turned towards him fully and raised her lips to touch his. "I just wanted to start our journey with a kiss," she whispered against his lips.

The past few weeks had been a torture. It had been pure hell to watch her smile, talk, and eat without him being able to watch her to his heart's content. She felt so right against him and suddenly it became too much for him to bear.

His lips swooped down on hers to brush them ever so lightly, like a promise of heaven upon acceptance.

Esha gasped as her need for him increased. She felt cheated by the feathery kisses. For once, she didn't argue with him or even question his actions. Neither did she push him away. Taking that as acceptance, he plunged deeper.

She could feel his warm lips exploring hers and she welcomed them. He was a caring man whom she had come to know in the past weeks. She couldn't even deny that now her nights were tormented by images of him.

A slow and sultry ache started at the pit of her stomach as his cologne engulfed her senses and, before she knew it, her hands went around his neck and she drew him closer.

He made a low sound and deepened his kiss, his mouth wet and warm on hers. She forgot all about Ayush as he slowly ebbed away into a distant memory. Rohan was her present, the man who stood beside her and for whatever motive he was marrying her, she knew in her heart that he would never break his promise. At this glorious moment he was becoming her strength, a wall around her to protect her from every adversity.

He was a kisser! No doubt about that. She shivered as his mouth caressed her, invoking such feelings that she had no clue existed.

Her fingers found a way to his dark hair and she grabbed them slightly as she wanted more and more of him. Her senses were on overdrive and she felt as if she was floating in the air. She couldn't help but return his kiss with equal ardor.

But just like it had started, the kiss ended suddenly. She wanted to protest but he withdrew, his eyes not readable. Reality seeped in and she was horrified at what had just happened. What the hell was she was thinking? Hers was not a real marriage but a business deal, for God's sake.

Esha took a hasty step backwards and nearly stumbled over the coffee table. His hands shot out to steady her but then he let go of her immediately, almost as if he was afraid to touch her again.

"What happened just now?" She asked, more to herself than to him.

"I think you were trying to forget your precious Ayush and I was making sure you didn't come to my house as a bride with the imprints of another man on her."

So he had seen Ayush leaving the house. That made sense but what didn't make any sense was the blazing anger smoldering in his eyes. Why would he even pretend to care that her relationship with Ayush mattered?

"Was that necessary?" She asked him quietly. "So we kissed. Big deal." She shrugged nonchalantly.

"Ah? How could I forget? You are so used to being kissed. Didn't Ayush do a thorough job?" Even before he could complete the sentence, though, Esha landed a resounding slap on his face.

The only effect that slap had was that Rohan's face moved slightly to one side and a nerve started ticking at the base of his throat, indicating his anger. Silence ruled as they both tried to rein in their galloping emotions.

Rohan knew he deserved it. He had hurt her pride and he would have slapped himself for saying what he had, if she hadn't. What did it matter what they were doing? They were both consenting adults about to get married. And



like any normal adult they came with a past. So why did her past affect him so much?

Dammit! He was falling for her big time.

He turned away abruptly, saying, "Come downstairs soon. Chakraborty will be waiting."



Esha needed to gather herself as he strode off. One moment he had been kissing her passionately and the next, he had acted like an arrogant pig.

She stood in front of the mirror hoping to salvage her makeup to some extent. The lipstick was smudged of course but there was something different about her eyes. After Ayush had misbehaved and left, she had cried her eyes out but now there was a sparkle in them, like a flower blossoming after being kissed by the morning dew.

She quickly reapplied her mascara and lipstick but didn't touch any other part of her face. She was not good with makeup and didn't want to ruin whatever the beauticians had painstakingly created, like fairy godmothers transforming a goose into a swan.

Chakraborty was waiting near the exit like a proud uncle. He had a bouquet in his hand and was standing with a cute and homely lady draped in a silk sari and wearing gold jewelry. She was talking animatedly with Chakraborty and he was nodding from time to time, though Esha could tell he was only half listening. Both seemed to be arguing about something but there was no venom on their faces. It almost looked like two friends were sparring with each other. They both looked up as she descended the stairs, their argument forgotten.

"*Opshara eedom, opshara!* Oh my dear, you're looking like a celestial goddess," Mr. Chakraborty exclaimed like a doting uncle. "See Beena, did I not tell you that sir and Esha are very well suited for each other?"

Mrs. Chakraborty only smiled indulgently, obviously not understanding her husband's enthusiasm. But she went to the kitchen and came back with a lemon and three green chilies. Mr. Chakraborty was suppressing his laughter as Beena rotated the ingredients three times around Esha to ward off evil.

"All due to those serials she watches day and night," laughed Mr. Chakraborty.

"*Eesh, chup koro*," commanded Beena. "Just keep quiet. This is the way north Indians ward off the evil eye. You don't know anything so I would appreciate it if you quietly let me do my work."

"Oh, so you want to ward off only North Indian evil eye? What about our *ghoti bangla* evil eye? Surely it should not be spared too?"

Beena's face went a deep shade of red and she smiled apologetically at Esha. "He does not know anything. He is the only Bengali evil here."

Esha burst out laughing and forgetting that Beena was a stranger, she gave her a quick hug.

"Now let's go or we will miss the auspicious hour," Beena said, and they hurried out to a red Skoda that was beautifully embellished with white roses and green pine leaves. The white roses dotted across the car promised a pure and beautiful life ahead. Esha smiled sadly and wished it were true.

The temple was only a few blocks away. Both Mr. and Mrs. Chakraborty helped her climb the stairs. The number of guests sitting inside the temple made her nervous enough to want to turn back and run. *Shehnai* music was playing in muted tones. Keeping her eyes downcast, Esha started walking through the sea of smiling faces towards the small fire that was burning in front of the deity. She still could not understand why the heck Rohan had decided to marry in the traditional way. A quick court marriage would have been so much simpler. As usual he had cited her father as the reason. How could she say no to that? And the way her father was looking at them, it all seemed worth it.

Near the fire, the pundit was chanting the *mantras* and she felt the heat of the fire reflected in her heart as her eyes met Rohan's. His eyes reflected the dancing flames and she drew in a deep breath as the memory of their kiss flooded back. He winked at her and she almost stumbled, but Beena's firm hands saved her. She sat down next to her would-be husband and whispered furiously, "Moron, why couldn't we marry in the court? I feel like I just performed a catwalk with all eyes scanning every inch of my body."

She could hear Rohan laughing softly as he replied, "Don't worry, they did the same to me. We are the lead players of the day, so it's natural. Relax."

Somehow his words made her feel guilty for landing that slap on his face. However much he deserved it, violence was never an answer. "Rohan," she whispered leaning closer to him.

"Hmm..?" he whispered back.

"I'm sorry," her voice broke slightly. "I shouldn't have slapped you—even if you deserved it." Esha had to add the last bit.

She could feel him shaking beside her. "You're right. I shouldn't have said what I did. But I'm glad you are sorry about it. Getting a slap from your wife just before the wedding is not what a man dreams of. Unless—"

"Unless?" She glanced at him suspiciously. "Unless what?"

"Unless, it is followed by some hot kisses and—"

"Shush!" Esha glanced around them nervously wondering if someone had heard them. But the music from the background and the excited chattering around them must have muted them off from others.

"Don't worry sweetheart. I won't extract any punishment for that slap. As you said, it was well deserved. But let's not make a habit out of it, shall we?" he grinned, his voice caressing her troubled heart.

The tension flew away as Rohan's soothing words calmed her down. Somehow, the awkwardness also seemed like a thing of the past. She could see her father's beaming face as he sat to do the *kanyadaan*, the bride giving away ceremony that was a proud moment in every father's life, and her heart lurched at his proud face. Watching her father following the instructions of the pundit with such devotion, Esha felt tears welling up in her eyes. But for a change, these were happy tears.

Esha was glad that she had the opportunity to fulfill some of her father's dreams.

And she knew she had a lot to thank Rohan for. When the pundit asked her father to place her hand in Rohan's palm, she could feel a jolt pass through her. Rohan squeezed her hand as if to reassure her that everything would be fine and at that moment, the three individuals bonded for life and for that Esha sent a silent prayer to Lord Ganesha, who sat smiling at them benevolently.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Of all the things Esha had imagined her 'first night' to be, it certainly did not include the over-the-board decor her colleagues had done for the room. The whole room was strewn with flowers and balloons. Even on the bed, for God's sake! Esha laughed. Thank God they didn't have any intention of using the bed tonight or it would have been very awkward amongst the balloons. Though the flowers did evoke erotic images in her mind, she quickly banished them. Keeping her mind free of such thoughts was the key to survival. She wondered if Rohan would feel the same awkwardness she was feeling.

Esha saw the glass of milk on the side table and grimaced. She had not eaten anything since morning and it did look tempting with the saffron strands floating on the surface. But first she needed a shower before her dear husband made an appearance. Someone had already moved her clothes here. She sighed. Everything seemed out of her hands now.

She took out her pajamas and went for a quick shower to wash away the weariness. She couldn't deny a certain shyness that was slowly creeping inside her. The *mehendi* on her hands, the vermilion on her forehead, the *mangalsutra* around her neck, all symbolized the fact that her life had changed, at least for the coming six months. And this new relationship with Rohan would have a name but no meaning. There was no booklet that told a woman how to behave on her first night if she was married under contract. Now this was proving to be a bit awkward.

Quickly drying herself, Esha donned her blue Chambray striped shirt and pant pajama set and went outside. Rohan was sprawled lazily on the bed, reading something on his phone. The first few buttons of his *sherwani* were open and his tousled hair fell on his forehead, adding to his rakish look.

On seeing her, he grinned. "There goes my dream of my bride sitting on the bed with a long veil over her face that I could slowly lift up."

Esha laughed. "Do it in your real wedding."

Rohan felt a jolt at her words though his feelings had stopped making any sense at all. He found her pajama-clad wet avatar very sensual. Her hair was wet from the shower and a few droplets fell on her collarbone, like dew drops on a rose petal. Now that he was finally alone with Esha, he wanted to further muss up her hair and kiss those wet pearls away. But never had he imagined that he would be alone in a room with her amidst roses and that her

intoxicating perfume would drive him crazy. Theirs wasn't a marriage in the true sense and yet her lips were calling out to him to feel them with his own.

But he was sure that she wouldn't appreciate it. He forced himself to lean back on the pillow and give her an easy smile to fight his raging hormones. "So, which side of the bed is yours?"

She looked at him sharply to check if he was laughing at her predicament. She then went to her purse and took out a tape—a big, brown one.

"Naughty, naughty," he said sitting up, suddenly feeling the air crackling between them with an invisible electric thread that was slowly pulling them towards each other. "What's your intention darling?"

Esha gave him an evil grin and sashayed towards him, all the while opening the tape. "You didn't think I would be prepared?" she asked, her voice husky. Any hot-blooded man would find this a big turn-on but Rohan sat up straight, wondering if she was drunk.

"Esha, I think we should go to sleep now." He gave her a sheepish smile. "It's getting very late."

She threw back her head and laughed, "The night is still young, darling." She opened the tape further and climbed on the bed, inching slowly towards him as she rolled it out. Rohan could feel his heart skipping a few beats. He wanted her no doubt, but he was not expecting this and her strange behavior made him uncomfortable.

"Do you want something to eat?" He sounded lame even to himself. She threw her head back and looked at him, her sherry colored eyes darkening into molten chocolate, and the light breeze from the window caught her silk tresses and made them dance to a tune of their own. She bit her lower lip and leaned in front of him, staring deep into his eyes. "Are you nervous?"

"Why are you behaving like this?" he asked, trying to get out of the bed. He felt an invisible hand clutching his stomach but he kept his tone breezy. "Are we taking this night to mean what it is meant to be? I'm ready if you are."

If she took another step forward, her breasts would touch him. What the devil was she playing at? He couldn't even lean back further since the head rest was stopping any further movement.

She leaned forward but instead of coming towards him, she went beyond him and stuck the edge of the tape to the middle of the bed post. She

then pulled the tape down – further and further and a line was drawn along the middle of the bed. She stopped near him and said, "Now choose your side of the bed because after this you can't cross over to the other side. Capish?"

Rohan heard everything but nothing registered in his mind. All he could see was her soft pink lips moving. His friends must have spiked his drink, for a couple of scotches were not enough to make him so delirious.

"Hey, what's wrong with you?" She snapped. "How long will I sit like this? Can you please choose your side of the bed?"

He grinned, got up and went over to the side she was sitting on and whispered, "Always by your side."

Esha frowned at him for she was really hoping to get that side of the bed for the washroom would be nearer. But technically it was his room and she had to take what was given to her.

"Oh, okay," she said and crossed over to the other side and continued putting the tape in a straight line. He just sat there watching her. Soon she had divided the whole room with the brown tape, "there, now we both have our territories marked."

Rohan looked over the bed and saw the brown tape. Oh yes! They were now clearly divided.

"So, now you can sleep on your side of the bed," she said magnanimously. "I'll just finish up in the washroom," she started walking towards the washroom.

"Stop!" His commanding voice halted her. "You can't go to the loo."

"Why not?" she asked, mystified.

"Because it is on my side of the room."

"Don't be stupid," she said frowning, "washroom does not count."

"Who made that rule?" he demanded. Rohan walked over to the edge of his territory and glared at her, "Every time you come over to my side, you will have to make a payment."

"How childish!"

"And this?" he asked, sweeping his hand around, pointing to the brown tape. "This is not childish?"

"What kind of payment do you have in mind?" she asked, frowning at him.

"Today I am giving you the permission since it's our wedding night but every time you use this washroom you will have to give me something—anything. It can be a cup of coffee or—"

"Or?" she asked suspiciously.

"Or a kiss."

Esha stared back at his bold challenge. "Deal," she said and crossed over to his side and rushed towards the washroom.

Rohan watched her retreating back and grinned. This was going to be fun. She had a fire in her, a thirst to experience life to the fullest and he liked adventure. He would make a list of the ways he could trouble her.

Just then there was a knock on the door. *It must be Esha's dad.* As Rohan got up to open the door, Esha rushed out.

"Stop, you can't open the door."

"Why?" he asked puzzled. "It's not that we are... er... that we are doing anything married couples are supposed to do on their first night."

Esha blushed but didn't avert her eyes from him. "If the washroom is on your side, the door is on mine."

"Don't be silly," he protested, though he was suppressing his laughter. "It must be your father or Lakhan."

"I'll open the door for now but from the next time you will have to make a payment if someone knocks for you—coffee or kiss, whatever my heart desires."

Rohan was still laughing when Esha opened the door. On seeing the person standing there, though, her smile vanished.

Zaira stood glaring at her in all her drunken glory.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

"You bitch!" Zaira snarled. "You bloody bitch, you stole my... my boyfriend."

Esha was not at all prepared for this attack. She took a step back and fell in Rohan's arms. He gathered her near his chest and her hands slid down till his fingers intertwined with hers and she felt confident in his warmth.

"Rohan," she asked softly, "why is your stepmom walking into our bedroom and lives any time she wants?"

Rohan looked at Zaira and for the first time wondered what he had ever seen in her. She might be beautiful from the outside but the snarl on her lips and the anger in her eyes mirrored her vile soul.

"Zaira," his voice, though low, sounded dangerous even to Esha. He stepped up between Esha and Zaira and said firmly, "stop creating a scene in my house every time. We will talk when you are sober."

"I don't want to be sober! I want to know why you married this nobody."

That was all she needed, the tag of a 'nobody'. Esha felt an anger igniting somewhere deep within her. How dare this woman walk into her bedroom and throw profanities at her?!

But Zaira was oblivious to the anger brewing inside Esha and continued spitting venom, not even taking a pause.

"Oh please don't even say that this is a love marriage. I know all about your tidy little arrangement."

"What tidy little arrangement?" Esha asked, her anger masked in cold fury. "What – tidy – little – arrangement?"

Zaira lost some of her confidence but continued defiantly, "th... the one that says that he will pay you a few crores when he divorces you after a few months."

Both Rohan and Esha were stunned. Who the hell had told her that? Both Gupta and Solanki were supposed to be trustworthy.

Zaira knew she had their attention now. Even in her drunken state, her mind was working sober enough to know when to throw in her punches. "And your father's Will. Oh my freaking God, Rohan! Do you hate me so much that you would rather marry a nobody than see me living in this house?"

Esha gasped. Again the mention of that mysterious Will. Why the



heck was Rohan's father's will always cropping up?

But before she could say anything, Rohan stepped up, "I'm not in the mood for negotiations now but we will discuss this in the morning."

"Sure," Zaira purred, raising Esha's hackles. "I've plenty of time, and oh, one small information. I need my old room back. So, please see to it that the old man is shifted to another room."

"What the—," Esha started, her face red with anger.

"Shh... let's do this amicably or your father will know exactly why you married your boss. And you do know what they call a woman who sells herself for money, right?" Zaira threatened.

Esha paled, her anger draining away as she saw herself through Zaira's eyes. Is that what the world would see her as?

Rohan was quick to react. In a swift movement he grabbed Zaira's arms and dragged her out of the room, his cold eyes glaring at the woman who had betrayed him for money.

"Like you sold your soul for money, Zaira?" Rohan asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Though Zaira blanched, she retorted in a flash, "But that's not my father sleeping downstairs now, is it?"

"Get out of my room!" Rohan said, "We will talk in the morning." And with that he pulled Esha inside and firmly closed the door.

They heard a few drunken slurs and banging on their door but chose to ignore it. It stopped after a few minutes and they could hear Zaira stomping downstairs. Esha thanked the stars that her father was a sound sleeper, especially now that he was under the influence of strong medication; he would not wake up even if there was an earthquake.

Both of them didn't know what to say to each other as silence descended once again.

"Well, it's not that we didn't expect her to retaliate," ventured Rohan. "It would take me five seconds to throw her out of our house if that is what you want."

*Our?*

That one word spread warmth in her heart. It made her feel complete. Our house. Her family.

*Reality check needed here Esha.* "So, what do we do about the 'stepmom'?"

"Will you stop throwing that in my face every time?" asked Rohan,

feeling irritated.

"I mean, it's kind of funny," she grinned at him mischievously. "One night to go to sleep dreaming about your lady love and next day she rushes toward you, calling you 'my darling son'." The very image brought a new wave of laughter. "It's funny with a capital F!"

"I hope you find this funny too!" Rohan said growling, and suddenly his hand shot out and gripped her long and slender nape and brought her face close to his lips. All the laughter vanished from her eyes. All she could see was the fire blazing in his eyes, which was slowly igniting the same in the pit of her stomach.

"What are you doing?" she managed to croak.

"Showing you what's not funny. My yearning for you is not funny. My waiting for you while you solve issues with Ayush is not funny." His breath was blowing softly just over her lips, increasing her yearning to capture his hovering lips. But she dared not. They stood staring at each other, as all sense of time stopped around them. No sound penetrated through the drumroll their beating hearts made. Both unsteady, but in tandem with each other.

Rohan had never wanted a woman so much as he wanted Esha. From the moment she had walked into his office, his nights had been filled with a strange sense of incompleteness. Like a traveler who had, at last, found his destination after searching for a long time and yet was not allowed to stay there.

His thumb traced her lips. Soft under his touch, they quivered, underlining her innocence.

Esha closed her eyes, savoring every sensation passing through her. She wanted more and raised her face, inviting him to make his claim. He didn't hesitate but only gently kissed the corner of her lips, a soft gentle touch like a floating feather touching one's cheeks, lingering long enough to heighten her desire. She sighed and moved closer to him but he was now pulling away from her. She opened her eyes in surprise.

"I'm not a replacement for your Ayush," he said a tad sadly. She wanted to protest, but he placed a finger on her lips. "No, don't say anything. For now, let's live within our boundaries." He bent and picked up his pillow and went to his side of the bed. Patting his pillow a few times he grinned at her, "Good night, wifey. Dream about me."

How did he blow hot and then blow cold, all in one go? She hated

how he had curled up on the bed as if the past few minutes didn't count at all. And here she was, still shivering in anticipation of what might have been. Esha slowly moved to her side and crawled under the blanket. Sleep was far from coming; every time she closed her eyes she dreamt of his kiss. She kept tossing and turning, almost hoping Rohan would wake up and finish the job he had started. But he didn't. Somehow she felt that he was awake too but he kept his face away from hers. Well, if he wanted to dream about his stupid Zaira, he was most welcome to do so.



But Rohan was fighting his own demons and it had nothing to do with his ex-girlfriend. He couldn't remember when a woman had affected him to this extent. Did Esha not understand that this arrangement was temporary? While a small voice inside him mocked him at his own delusional conclusions, he still felt that she was the one who was letting her guard down. A rare temper was dancing like a hot flame inside him and he just couldn't let go of Ayush's image, bitter enough to create a barbaric rage within him. He lay still, hoping she would quieten down soon. Finally, after what seemed like hours but was actually only thirty minutes, she had quieted down.

But suddenly he couldn't. He wanted to trouble her, to shake her complacent sleep. He tossed and turned, unable to let sleep overcome him. After a few times, the lights in the room went on and Esha glared at him.

"Why are you shaking the bed so much?" she demanded.

"Sorry," he murmured and tossed to the other side.

But Esha refused to let go. She touched his shoulders lightly, sending a heat wave coursing to his loins. He got up, almost jumping away from her.

"Hey, calm down. I am sorry if you hate my touch so much. I am just trying to understand why you are so jumpy."

"And my every movement is now your business to solve, right?" Rohan asked, his tone sarcastic.

Esha looked at him in silence, studying the deeply etched grooves on his face. Something was bothering him. It must be Zaira's sudden appearance. Everything seemed to have changed after her visit. He suddenly became moodier and now he couldn't sleep. She didn't like it. Not one bit. In fact, right now she wanted to march downstairs, tell her father the circumstances of their marriage and throw Zaira out of their house. To hell with the

consequences.

But consequences were the one thing she couldn't afford to take chances with. She decided to tell him bluntly, "You must have loved her a lot."

Rohan flinched at her wrong deduction but didn't deny it. It would be good if she continued to think that or else keeping a distance between them was going to be difficult. "Let's not go into each other's emotions at this phase. We both are in this for a reason and let's stick to that. Ok?"

She nodded, keeping her face away from him so that he couldn't see the hurt she was feeling.

Well, if he thought about their relationship like that then she had nothing more to say. She turned around and started smoothening the sheets, not knowing how else to face this situation.

Rohan coughed slightly and got up, saying, "What the hell are you doing?"

"Making myself more comfortable, if that is fine by you."

Rohan ignored her snarky tone, knowing well where it was stemming from. He had to remain cool and detached but the memory of their kiss kept igniting a fire inside him.

Again and again.

He was in his thirties, for God's sake, and he had never felt this sexual pull towards a woman, until now. True, Zaira was his first love, but he was more like a teenager going after the most glamorous girl in high school. But this, this was almost sinful. Exciting and pulsating. Like a life form coiling in every cell of his body till he didn't give in. He almost did, but even in his most passionate moments he couldn't forget that she loved another man.

They had nothing in common except a deal. "When I promised to help you with your father, I meant it. I hope you did too, regarding my situation with Zaira."

*Of all the hell bound virgins, did he really think she would not keep her side of the bargain?* She scowled at him, her eyes blazing in anger. "I never, I repeat, I never go back on my promises."

Rohan felt ashamed of accusing her to cover up his own sexual desires.

"I owe you an apology."

She nodded, not bothering to deny it. She felt insulted and she had the right to let him know that.

He grinned suddenly. "You really are very upfront, aren't you?"

She scowled at him and his grin widened, making her heart ache for him.

"After being through so much, you still doubt my integrity. I really don't like that."

Rohan had the grace to look ashamed. "Sorry," he whispered.

She kept quiet. Sighing, he turned her face towards him, repeating, "Sorry."

She grinned. "Not bad. Quite an achievement on my part, I would say. The great Rohan Sharma apologized to a mere employee of his."

He laughed. "This is the great Rohan Sharma who always seems to make mistakes in front of his wife."

"Temporary," she reminded him.

"Temporary wife," he said

And with that, the awkwardness was back.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Zaira came to stay at the house and she left no stone unturned to make her presence known. From the kitchen staff to the gardener, everyone was instructed on what to cook and what flowers should fill up every vase in the house. By the time Esha and Rohan came downstairs, the breakfast was on the table, and the staff was running here and there to do her bidding.

Rohan was having a tough time keeping his temper in check and it was only the presence of a very puzzled father-in-law that made him keep quiet.

"Why is she always hovering around us, son-in-law?" asked Mr. Mehra in a conspiratorial whisper.

"My stepmom has a way of doing that, I know," Rohan answered back the same way, winking at him and then he gave a dramatic sigh, "but what can a poor son do when his own father was besotted?"

"I must say your father had good taste."

"Dad!" Esha admonished, stunned. But she couldn't help seeing the happiness on her father's face, like he had found peace at last. She did have to thank Rohan for that.

"What? I might be your father but where does it say that a father can't admire beautiful women? Rohan, will you stop admiring beautiful women now that you are married?"

Rohan laughed and said, "I will definitely keep a look out for you, father-in-law."

"I give up," said Esha in mock anger and sat down for breakfast where a plate of *upma* appeared in front of her.

"I hope you like *upma*," Zaira asked, breezing inside the room.

"Do we have a choice?" Mr. Mehra asked, laughing good naturedly.

"As a guest, of course you do," Zaira said sweetly. "You can always go back to where you came from and make your breakfast there."

Mr. Mehra spluttered out his food, quite shocked at this blatant insult. Not knowing what to say he looked down at his plate, a bit embarrassed. Esha was livid. But Rohan stopped her with a slight pressure on her arm.

"Since we have all planned to live as one happy family, whether we like it or not, I think time has come to set some rules here," Rohan said.

"Rules?" Zaira asked, pouting sweetly, though her eyes flashed warnings.

"Yes, rules which the guests in our house have to follow."

"Oh goody! Since your guests are here for a long time, do lay down a few rules, Rohan," Zaira said, feeling pleased with the outcome.

"Sure. One, they will not decide the meals of the day. That is for the cook to decide."

"Excuse me," Zaira said, her face a deep shade of red.

"Hold on Zaira, I am not done yet. Second rule: If anyone insults my wife in any way, they know where the door is."

Zaira got up and flung down her napkin. "Are you asking me to get out of my own house, Rohan?"

"This is not your house yet." Rohan's tone was deceptively soft.

"But darling, it's only a matter of time. Once this old man is dead, you both don't need to stay together. Moreover, with the chemistry we share, I will be able to fulfill your father's Will earlier than this... this..."

In a flash, Rohan was out of his chair steering Zaira out of the room. Esha didn't even dare to look at her father. She knew he had got the gist of the whole conversation and was replaying it in his mind to get a clearer picture.

When she dared to look at him, he was staring blankly at his plate. Her heart felt like a stone weighing upon her soul.

"Dad," she ventured out tentatively. "Please say something."

"You sold yourself for me?" he asked, a light tremor in his voice indicating how deeply he was hurt. Esha had never hated anyone in her life before but right now she could have gladly strangled Zaira and enjoyed every second of it.

"No!" she said emphatically and going over to her father, she knelt before him. "No Dad. I can never do that. You should know that by now. But yes, money was tight and I had to sell our home. For your medications and the initial hospital bills we needed the cash urgently."

"And when were you going to tell me all these things?" he asked bitterly. "You did all this without my knowledge. I gave you the power of attorney since you were the only one I trusted. Never did it occur to me that you might need to sell the house. Actually, I should apologize to you. In my own selfishness to stay alive, I never bothered to ask you where the money was coming from."

"Dad!" Esha felt a wave of emotion coursing through her. "How can you even think like this? If I ever faced any problem, I would have come

running to you—like I always do, dad."

"But then you married Rohan for his money. Not the reason I wanted my little girl to marry for. You left the love of your life so that I got proper treatment."

"No. Never. You have got to believe me. I might have married Rohan for a different reason other than love. But it's never been about the money. I would have taken care of you one way or the other. Somehow, I would have found a way. Yes, Rohan made it easy for me, I can't deny that. But I will pay back every cent that I have taken from him. I just needed the time to gather that kind of cash. And time was running out and when Rohan made the offer to me, I had to take it up. But Ayush, well, he was definitely not the man I thought he was."

"And Rohan, is he the right man for you?"

"Only time will tell that, Dad. I will not lie to you. I should have told you earlier. But Rohan makes me feel alive. I feel I can joke, laugh and be angry without worrying about what he will think of me. I don't care if he knows even the darkest of my secrets. I don't know about love dad, for the love I had for Ayush was proven not to be love at all. I am discovering the meaning of that word again. I don't know if I love Rohan but I do know that I enjoy every moment I spend with him."

*And he makes my heart stop every time he looks at me.* She didn't add that though.

"And I feel the same way about your daughter, dad." Rohan's voice made her jump right out of her skin. Embarrassed at being caught at her rawest moment, she glared at him but he ignored her and walked up to her father. "I sincerely apologize for Zaira's behavior, sir. But rest assured that your daughter never even thought of marrying me for my money. That I'm sure of."

Her father looked at both of them thoughtfully as if searching for answers and whatever he found seemed to satisfy him.

"What you need is to go on your honeymoon," he said, his eyes sparkling in excitement.

Both Rohan and Esha didn't know what to say. This was one topic they had not even discussed as it seemed unnecessary under the circumstances. But saying that to her father was not possible. Thankfully, Rohan stepped forward to answer this, for Esha didn't know how to handle it.



"Dad, if we do go on a honeymoon and, God forbid, something happens to you, we both will live under that guilt all our lives. I don't want Esha to face this. Do you?"

Her father's eyes became bleak and he stared sadly at his daughter. "That means whenever you have something to be happy about in your life, you will have to sacrifice it for me?"

"No dad!" Esha quickly went and sat in front her father, holding his hands in her own. "My honeymoon is here. In this house. I am getting to know Rohan as a man. Isn't that what honeymoon is all about—understanding the person you are going to spend your life with?"

"But—" Her father tried to protest.

"Shhh." She shushed him by placing her index finger on his lips. "No buts, both of us want this. If we change our minds, we will come and surely tell you. But right now, dad, I'm happy."

Her dad looked at Rohan who nodded in assurance.

"Can you help me to my room?" he asked softly. "All the excitement seems to have drained the energy out of me."

He beckoned Rohan to come with him. Leaning gently against his son-in-law's shoulder, her father walked away slowly along with Rohan, leaving her feeling thankful that nothing more than a few cross words had passed between them. More than anything it had cleared the air, leaving no space for an outsider to make any more mischief.



Rohan found Esha in his study, buried deep in files, when he went in search of her. He didn't want to disturb her. She looked so engrossed in the files, her pearly whites biting her luscious lips. Her face was devoid of any makeup, except maybe just a dash of pink on those lips. He was not sure but he wanted to find out badly. He suddenly felt her eyes on him, clashing with his for a minute. Both had a lot of things to say but everything between them remained unsaid.

"He's fine."

"Thank you." She said softly, getting up and going towards him. "You have saved him again and I seem to only cause agitation in your life."

"Just the thing you are meant to do," he said.

She looked puzzled but he never explained what he meant. But his

words found a residence in her heart. Did he mean that he had brought her to his house to make Zaira jealous? If that was the case, she was doing a damn good job of it.

"So my job is to make your ex-girlfriend jealous?" When he didn't deny it, she was surprised. And hurt. She felt that she was going deeper into murky waters. While he was caring and forgiving on one side, his unforgiving and ruthless side was not hidden from her. Moreover, she couldn't understand her growing attraction for this man.

Her focus was no more only on her father but had slightly shifted to this man too. What he wore, how he spoke, when he smiled, what made him frown, her days passed examining all these trivial things. She should be working or googling about any breakthroughs in the world of medicine for cancer, yet all she thought of was how she would continue with her life after the six months were over.

"I'm afraid I have to work harder in convincing Zaira that we are in love."

Rohan smiled, though those lines around his eyes didn't crinkle as they usually did when he smiled. "Yes, it will need all your acting expertise to do that."

"Which I don't have," she murmured to herself.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing. I have skipped breakfast in all this drama. Do you want me to grab a sandwich or something for you also from the kitchen?"

"Anything but *upma*," he grinned mischievously. She grinned back, suddenly feeling happy that they were on the same page. "I'll wait for you in the car and we can go to the office together."

Esha watched his long, fluid strides taking him away from her. She couldn't yet believe that she was married to this man. He was an enigma, sometimes he was so caring and yet he seemed to be withholding something. Why should she accept anything else? She already knew that he had locked up his heart forever and nothing was going to make him fall in love again. But if he ever kissed her again, she knew she would be unable to stop. She had been with Ayush from the time she understood what love meant, yet it was the past few months with Rohan that had taught her what love was all about. And that made life a bitch!

Rohan was waiting for her in the car ten minutes later when she took their lunches down. To her surprise, he was driving and the chauffeur was

nowhere to be seen. Surprised at the sudden turn of events, she suddenly felt very shy to spend the upcoming few minutes in the confined space of the car, alone in his company. "I can take the cab if you want, since you—"

There seemed no point in showcasing her newly changed status in front of her office colleagues.

But Rohan just kept quiet and the car running, pressing the accelerator a bit more each time, till she had no choice but to get inside. She was twenty-five years old, for God's sake, and was behaving like a love struck teenager. But years of looking after her mother and then accepting the fact that her life would start and finish with Ayush, she never had to have small talk with boys or men. And now suddenly she was with a stranger who was not only her boss but also her husband. Even if they were married temporarily, he was her husband for now. What did one do under such circumstances?

The Bangalore traffic was getting from bad to worse. Ever since work for the metro had started, most of the roads were dug up, turning the whole landscape into an avalanche of dust. She caught Rohan looking at her sideways and smiling.

"What?" she asked, irritated that he was finding the situation amusing.

"I like seeing you tongue-tied," he remarked.

"I am not tongue tied." She relaxed further into the soft leather just to show him how relaxed she was. A soft romantic song from the radio filled the air and Rohan hummed softly to the music. Esha was surprised to hear the rich baritone of his voice.

"You can sing?"

"Why does that surprise you?"

"Nothing about you surprises me anymore."

She was subjected to his charming grin again.

"So are we sounding like an old couple, wifey?"

"Hmm... and we are just two days old. Thank God we are not to be married for more than six months or life would have been so boring, right?"

The sudden thought of them being married and having a family took Rohan into another dimension of want. Desire exploded inside him and he somehow managed to pull the car into the underground parking area of his office without smashing it on the way.

Esha could feel the change in the atmosphere with the way he drove. His face was suddenly tense and he gripped the steering wheel as if his life depended on it. She felt an excitement building in her too, the naughty

anticipation a girl has when she is crazy about a guy who has no clue about it. She laughed at her own fantasy.

"What the heck is so funny?" Rohan asked her softly.

"Nothing," Esha said in a breathless whisper. "One of my unladylike fantasies."

"Unladylike? Now that is something I must know, Esh."

Esh? Did he just call her Esh? The name that only conjured up memories of childhood innocence suddenly had a different angle to it. Fire and passion danced in tandem in that one word. She felt the heat consuming her and she refused to look at him. But his hands snaked through her hair and pulled her closer, his lips hovering just above hers. "Vixen. Do you have any idea what you are doing to me?"

He brought her face to his and captured her delectable lips with his own, his hungry plundering mouth causing a wave of devastating desire to start churning within her.

Esha couldn't believe what was happening. It was not about him kissing her; it was about her enjoying every moment of it. It was like she was in a trance, held captive by some magic spell. He pulled her against him, his hands now freely traveling down to cup her breasts.

"We are playing with fire, wifey,"

"We are married for six months only," she reminded him, or rather herself, for her hands had found their way to interlock behind his neck.

He heard her but he ignored her words, for her passion was all-consuming. It felt so right, his dark head against her lighter one.

"We have to stop this madness," she said in a trembling voice. "This is neither the place nor the situation. I need to go."

Without waiting for him to reply, she opened the car door and hurried towards her office. If she had looked back, she might have seen the cold, desolate look on his face.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

There was a buzz in the office as Esha entered. She tried her best to ignore it at first but when the stares and the smiles became too much to bear she stood up on her desk. For a moment, silence reigned in the room before everyone else stood up too, their attention diverted towards her.

"Good," she declared with a smile. "Now that I have everyone's attention, let me tell you frankly that you will see me coming here every day. My boss didn't allow me any extra leave for my wedding," she said, smiling at everyone. There were a few appreciative laughs amongst the bolder ones, though most of them remained silent. She sighed. "Come on guys, I have always worked with you all. Don't make my life difficult just because I am married to the guy upstairs. I will come on time like I always did, do the work assigned to me, make mistakes and get an earful from Mr. Chakraborty. You all will snicker behind my back and a few will lend me their sympathetic ear when I complain of how shitty the management is. Can we continue as before or do you want me to pull my desk out in the corridor and sit there?"

That brought out laughter and the atmosphere in the office lightened. One of her colleagues even came up to her and welcomed her back. Things mostly settled down to normalcy except for one thing. Whenever anyone went to make coffee, they got her a cup too. After all she was the boss's wife. Well, she didn't mind that.



Unlike her, Rohan was having a horrendous day. A pair of sherry eyes kept haunting him. He didn't want to acknowledge that Esha had gotten under his skin, for that would mean that he was vulnerable to her. And he hated that. He kept watching the hands of the clock and just as the long hand reached six and the small hand remained at twelve, he grabbed his coat and took the elevator to the 2nd floor where his so-called wifey was supposed to be.

Everyone got excited to see Rohan down on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, though they were not surprised. Only one person seemed irritated but he ignored her. "I've come to collect my wife for lunch and then maybe a long drive. Anyone here who objects can keep their objections to themselves."

After a few rounds of laughter, he ushered Esha—a very angry Esha

—out to the lift. She still had the plastic smile on as the door closed on the sweet smiles of her indulgent colleagues.

As soon as the door closed, Esha let her anger out. "How dare you embarrass me in public?"

"A man wanting to take his wife out for lunch is insulting to you?"

"We are not husband and wife in the true sense," she thundered.

"And you want the whole office to know that?"

Well, that shut her up for he was right. Now with this small act they had established to everyone how much in love they were. That would keep the rumor mills alive for a few days and let them live in peace. But Esha couldn't deny that something strong was brewing between them. She could even feel the hair on her nape rise every time he was near. And this had never happened to her before. But the constant battle she was fighting between logic and her heart was wearing her down. She was getting tired of this game and today was only the second day of this charade.

"Where are we going?" she asked, curious.

And it was the very same moment that he chose to look at her. Her heart flip flopped in this enclosed territory.

"You are beautiful," he told her, and promptly looked surprised as if the words had come out of his mouth on their own.

"Why are you complimenting me suddenly? I mean, till last night everything was normal. Have you suddenly developed a sexual attraction towards me? Need I remind you that we have a contract?"

Rohan flinched as if a bee had stung him. Her sarcasm had hit the mark and he stepped back immediately.

"You are right to remind me of the true nature of our relationship. I need you to keep Zaira at bay and you need my money. Right, from now on, we have to maintain that."

For a moment, Esha froze at his words. "You deserve women like Zaira in your life," she snapped with such ferocity that he was momentarily taken aback too.

"That is not a very nice thing to say to your boss," he drawled in an even tone, managing to hide his surprise. "Being a woman yourself, you must admit I don't deserve someone who cheats me and marries my father for his money. Even you, yes you, laughed at me for that."

And again for the same reason, Esha's mouth started trembling as her anger ebbed away, leaving her defenseless against his humor.

"I swear if you laugh once more I will spank you."

"Oooh. Are we going to get naughty here? This lift will have some tale to tell our kids."

"That does it," he said, joining in her laughter. "Now you are going to binge watch the movies I love tonight."

"50 Shades of Gray?" she asked, curious.

"Nope. You will see. And I really hope you hate the movies. Will serve you right for laughing at me every time Zaira is mentioned."

After that, he didn't make any sexual overtures as they went to a Mediterranean grill to eat pita sandwiches and salad. Esha was surprised at how easy it was to talk to Rohan. When he was not being a snooty boss, he was a man who could talk about anything under the sun. They hopped over topics, covering the distance from politics to movies, from sexual scandals to spiritualism and for once in her lifetime, Esha didn't feel the need to curb her views. He didn't like the way the Biharis were treated in Mumbai but he heard her patiently when she discussed where the anger stemmed from. He listened, engrossed, to her concept of wiccans and paganism and agreed with her that when life threatening diseases were ruling the roost, one tried to find answers from every source. It was not a matter of religion but searching for the path that could save your loved one. Esha felt much lighter after their meal was over, like tides of emotion had been released and she had come out richer.

As he paid the bill, she said softly, "Thank you."

"You are my wife, however temporarily, and it's ok if I pay your bill. You can take me out for dinner next time."

"No, not for that. I mean, of course I will take you out for dinner. But I am thanking you for everything else. I never did thank you."

He studied her quietly for some time before saying softly, "Friends?"

"Uh?"

"I never asked you this before. We jumped into marriage and the need we have for each other made us good partners for the institution of marriage. But I like you a lot as a buddy. You are easy to talk to. I don't have many friends. So, will you be my friend?"

"Yes Esha, why don't you answer you husband? You are a veteran in friendship."

The squeaky voice could only belong to one person and even without turning around Esha gritted out, "Hello aunty, how are you?"

Rohan looked at her curiously but nevertheless stood up politely. Ayush's mom came and preened as if trying to compare him with her darling boy. Clearly, she didn't like the answer she got for she turned her blazing eyes on Esha.

"All our years of friendship forgotten when you heard the clicking coins, uh *beta*?" she asked nastily.

Esha blanched at this direct attack. Moreover, she was getting fed up of everyone suggesting that. First her father had asked, and then Rohan had joked about it and now Ayush's mom. She stood up tall and looked squarely into the malevolent eyes of Ayush's mom, "What makes you so bitter, aunty? The fact that I am looking after my father even though I'm a girl or the fact that Ayush is ready to leave you at the drop of a hat despite being a boy?"

By now many of the office goers who had come to eat at the restaurant understood that something interesting was going to happen and all attention was towards them. But Esha was beyond caring. "Why can't you, being a woman yourself, understand that as the only daughter of my family I too have responsibilities? Why does a girl have to divide herself into choosing between her husband's family and her own? You were to become my mother, yet I could never become your daughter? Who made these freaking laws, aunty? Society? Women? Or men and mothers-in-law like you who control other women who come to their household leaving everything behind?"

"How dare you insult me and my son in public? As a daughter, you have no legal obligations to look after your ailing father. If my son wanted a peaceful life after marriage, then why is he being judged as the villain? If he says he didn't want a baggage, he is a villain in your eyes and you, Miss Morality, can marry a rich man just to look after your father. If you were such a goody-two-shoes, why didn't you do it on your own like a man would do? But no! You had to use your womanly vile and pretend to be at the mercy of a rich man."

Esha felt every word hitting her heart like darts. Strong hands held on to her or else she would have fallen down. "Keep your cool," Rohan whispered in her ear and held on to her firmly.

"Enough, Mrs. Singh," he said coldly, silencing the older woman once and for all. Esha witnessed why Rohan was known to get away with cut throat deals. He stood tall and quiet, yet his eyes were like blazing beacons. He held on to Esha, protecting her from the likes of Mrs. Singh, like a lion



protecting his lioness during a hunt. "Don't you dare compare Ayush's situation with Esha's. She was eight, only eight years old when her mother was diagnosed with cancer. Do you have any idea what it does to a family if a member has a chronic disease?"

"Yes, I do, Mr. Sharma. That's why I wanted Esha to get away from all this," Mrs. Singh said jubilantly, knowing for sure now the win was hers to take. "It drains a family out of their funds. It cripples a family and when the patient is gone, there is nothing but an empty nest left."

"Wrong!" Rohan said it so emphatically that even Esha was surprised.

"I have lost my own family too, in a different way though. And when you start losing your loved ones, no amount of money matters anymore. You just want to save the ones you have left. Esha is doing only that."

Esha felt a bolt of lightning hitting her. Rohan really understood where she was coming from. She was a survivor. She had seen both her parents wasting away bit by bit but it was never, ever about their pain that was making her hold on to them. It was a purely selfish reason, which only a lone survivor understands. You just wanted to hold on to your past. You were so afraid to let go. She was scared, even with everything good going around her, she was so scared to let go of her father. For it would mean that she would be left all alone.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Esha gaped at him as Rohan steered her away from all gawking eyes, his face set in firm lines. He had always been her support from the time they had met, and yet she had ridiculed his need for her in his life. Was it not painful for him to see his love living like a wife with his own father? It must have shattered him too. Suddenly the situation didn't seem funny to her at all. Something made her feel angry, angry with him for harboring a love that was never his; for not looking at her and finding a love far more intense than Zaira's ever could be.

She removed her hands from his in anger and walked at a faster pace towards the car.

"Hey! Easy! I was just trying to help you out," he remarked casually.

"Did I ask you to?" she asked angrily. "Why do you feel I need your protection every time? I can handle Ayush's mom."

"Okay, I will remember it the next time she calls you a slut."

He stood in front of her, standing in between her and the car. "So what's making you angry? I think you held up pretty good in there."

"I don't want to talk about it," Esha told him, her breath feeling painful against her chest as she took a deep breath. Nowadays, everything seemed to be hurting. His dark gaze flashed down to her and she almost groaned at the unwanted sliver of desire that shot through her body. Her tongue shot out to run over her dry lips and the movement caught his eye. He was mesmerized to see the pink tip racing across her evocative lips.

"You are very stubborn. You desire me yet you deny it," Rohan said in a husky voice, reaching out to touch her cheekbone, his forefinger delicately trailing the fine lines of her stubborn jaw.

Esha froze, his tantalizing touch causing a dull ache between her thighs. She had only two options left to deal with this. Either she could give in and let her hormones rule her life or fight against it.

Sadly, she had to choose the latter.

Sidestepping him, she went towards the car, leaving him taut and burning with desire. He couldn't understand why she was resisting him. She was an adult and so was he. Why could they not give their relationship a try? And then it dawned on him. Of course! Why did he not see it before? She only married him because Ayush was not ready to support her father. But that didn't mean that she didn't love Ayush. What a big idiot he was!

"It must feel good to have two men pining after you," he said bitterly.

She stopped and turned around, her eyes blazing in anger, "What is the day today? EAD?"

"EAD?" He looked puzzled.

"Esha Accusation Day!"

"Wonder why everyone gets you wrong? Maybe instead of walking away, communicating might help?"

"What is there to communicate?" Esha asked him. "We are both married to each other now. You were in love with another woman but you were forced to marry me to take 'revenge'. I was engaged to my childhood friend who never even bothered to understand me. And to keep my father alive, I had to marry you. Where does miscommunication come into the picture here?"

Not waiting for him to reply, she stepped inside the car and waited for him to join her. After what seemed like a long delay, he did join her but the silence that followed was like death. He kept his eyes on the road and if the journey hadn't ended soon, she would have had trouble breathing; she felt so afraid to breathe lest it started another argument between them.

She almost dashed out of the car and ran inside as soon as they reached home. Her father was sitting in the living room watching television. She had to calm herself down and smile.

"Hey, you are back early?" he asked, smiling at her. "Where is your better half?"

"Dad! Stop changing parties. You are stuck with me for life." *And with him only for six months.* But of course she didn't add that. "He is coming."

"You both went on a date?" Zaira walked in, wearing a sequined, shimmering gown. "How archaic?! I thought new honeymooners would be twenty-four by seven in their bed rather than eating food."

Esha gave her a cold stare and then suddenly lowered her eyelashes, "Dad is at home Zaira! So we thought, you know, Rohan always has a suite booked in the Marriott, so -"

Zaira went red in the face. "How cheap?! You went to a hotel?"

"Who went to a hotel?" her dad asked out loudly, half hearing what they were saying. "Why didn't you take me?" He saw the shocked look on Esha's face and laughed. "Sorry, was teasing you."

Just then Rohan walked in, his expression stormy. Unfortunately,

Zaira pounced on that.

"My my my, this guy who has just spent an entire evening on a romantic date does not seem very happy."

Rohan looked at them and catching Esha's look he smiled, "I will wait for you upstairs. Goodnight, everyone."

Had her father not insisted that she go and join her husband, she would have lingered on. Facing Rohan now was making her shy. But she made the right amount of protests and tried to look the right amount of shy in front of Zaira and went to the bedroom. Rohan was nowhere to be seen though. Puzzled, she went to the bathroom and checked but again he was not there.

Lakhan was passing by and she stopped him, "Lakhan *bhaiya*, do you have any idea where Rohan is?"

"Sir is not in his room? Then he must be on the terrace. Do you want me to call him?"

"No Lakhan *bhaiya*, I will go and check. Thanks."

It was getting colder and the Bangalore weather was not something one could just ignore when it got chilly. She opened her cupboard and took out a stole for good measure. The terrace was studded with plants. Jasmine and roses were planted in clay pots everywhere and the fragrance from the flowers filled the night air. Esha knew she had crossed her limits earlier. Her words had been harsher than she had intended. As she climbed the stairs, her heart became heavier. Something told her that she had hurt him bad. What she couldn't understand was why her heart was aching like this.

The very idea of caring for a man terrified her. As it is, she had a lot of problems in her life. Heartbreak, she could do without. The terrace was empty and dark and she would have turned around and left if not for the sound of a mobile ringing that alerted her to Rohan's presence in the far corner. He was sitting on the steps that came down from the water tank above. It looked like a place he was comfortable in.

"Is this your favorite haunt?" she asked softly.

He didn't say anything but took a swig from his beer can. She smiled, unable to believe that the great Rohan Sharma was sulking on the terrace.

"Are you sulking?"

"Are you mad?"

"Then why are you sitting here gazing at the moon and drinking beer? Be careful or people might think that you are becoming *Devdas*."

"Do I look like a loser Romeo to you?" he growled softly.

"Right now? Yes," she said softly and went down to sit on the step beside him. "We are friends, right? So why don't you tell me if it's Zaira who is the cause of your heartbreak." Just saying those words made her want to puke but she kept a brave face on. She could clearly see that he was hurting and she wanted to take away his pain, like he had always done for her.

Rohan leaned on the stairs, threw his head back and laughed. Startled, she looked at him in the moonlight and the magic started spinning.

"You really think I am pining for Zaira?" he asked, turning to look deep into her eyes. "In the past few days, have you not felt anything for me? I have seen the desire in your eyes too."

Esha wanted to protest but no sound came out. The moonlight cast a glow on them, transcending them to a world of their own. Neither spoke, for words could never express the web that was spinning around them, binding the two souls into one heartbeat. Who made the first movement, they would never know but their lips found each other as they plunged into the sea of desire.

Rohan let go of her momentarily, only to get up and offer her his hand. She understood what he wanted and her own wants were not far behind. Willingly, she took his hand and they went downstairs to their room. Thankfully, no one was to be seen and the magic was not interrupted. He shut the door behind them and turned to face her.

In that moment, she didn't care if he was in love with Zaira. At this point of time, he was her husband. She didn't care if they had many misunderstandings between them for, in that moment, he was hers, at least for the next six months. And the desire burning in his eyes was for her alone.

He didn't say a word but walked towards her, confident of the desire he saw in her eyes. She was beautiful, sensuous like a predatory cat. Like a wildfire ready to be tamed. But then he was the willing slave, ready to be consumed in that heat.

He couldn't take his eyes off her face. Those expressions consumed him. Confusion, desire and longing, all played across those dark eyes.

"I've never felt like this with anyone. Not even Ayush."

"Don't." He hissed, placing a finger on her lips. "Don't bring him between us. Let not our past overshadow our present and let our present shape our future. Let's not bring any other person between us."

"Sorry," she murmured against his fingers, finding them slightly

rough and erotic against her soft lips.

He pulled her closer, his face and his hard muscular body just a few inches away, her throbbing heart letting him know of her excitement.

Esha was finding it difficult to breathe in his close proximity.

Rohan lifted her chin and looked deep into her eyes, "Are you sure? There will be no going back after this."

Of course she was not sure. Who makes a rational decision when they are not thinking with their head? But she knew one thing. This was right. This felt right.

He tried to pull away but she held on to him, "This is what I want too. There will be no going back—not unless you want to." A flicker of doubt surfaced in her mind. Was she reading too much into this situation?

Her chest tightened as she waited for him to answer her. She knew she would be hurt if he backed away now. Very hurt. But it was better they were both willing partners rather than just going with the flow.

"You doubt my intentions?" he asked. "Look at me." He put his forefinger under her chin and tilted her face up. "Look at me. Do you see a heart broken Romeo here? Or do you see smoldering passion for you?"

She felt scorched under his intensity. Something akin to fire was burning in his eyes. It could be the lights playing tricks but she could not deny the heat that was coursing through her veins at just being near him.

"Kiss me?"

His husky voice laden with passion was asking her for a kiss. Asking. She stared at him in wonderment. He was a gentleman even in a passionate moment like this when she felt like tearing away every strip of clothing that was separating them. She started laughing.

"There you go! Your timing of laughter is a killer!" But he was laughing with her. The corners of his eyes had crinkled slightly and humor now accompanied the passion in his eyes. She liked that. She liked her man laughing.

*Her man.*

She chose that moment to kiss him, capturing his smile with her lips. She heard his indrawn breath as he reciprocated.

His hand went behind her neck and gripped it, bringing her closer. Her mind had blanked out by now. Closing her eyes, she enjoyed the sensations that the kiss was sending through her. He parted her lips and slowly traced her mouth with his hot tongue. A moan escaped her as his

hands found their way to her aching breasts.

He pushed her slightly towards the bed and lay down beside her. His kisses trailed down her neck, landing softly on her peaked nipples. As he captured one with his mouth, she knew she was his woman as much as he was her man.

His lips played with her nipples till they were taut with need. The slow circles of his tongue, made her arch towards him, her fingers sliding in between his thick hair. She drew in a deep breath, before pressing her lips softly on his temple. He stopped and rose slightly to capture her lips again.

"You're beautiful," he whispered against her ear, "you make me complete."

"How?" she asked in wonderment. "How can we feel like this for each other?"

"Stop analyzing darling," he said softly, nibbling her ear. "Let me love you the way you deserve to be loved."

She didn't protest when his hands slid down to recapture her breasts while his leg parted hers slightly. She felt a warm haze spreading across her body as his palms started exploring the flatness of her stomach, stopping to circle his index finger in her navel.

Esha let out a soft moan as a fire was ignited in the pit of her stomach. She clenched her toes together while her fingers curled around the pillows under her head. Her body arched longingly once more as she silently pleaded to him to douse the fire inside her.

Rohan heard her and his hands traveled down to cup her mound before his fingers slid deep into her wet crevice. She called out his name in anticipation, but didn't stop him. As he rhythmically stroked her she knew such pleasures of which she had never imagined. Involuntarily, her legs widened, urging him to stride over her.

He took his own time, while she trembled in want as he gently opened her thighs wider.

She buckled in anticipation but his firm hands held her down. "Don't rush into it," he said, looking deep into her eyes. He blew gently over her breasts sending shivers down her spine. "We have all the time in the world. I am not going anywhere, neither are you."

"But—" she tried to remind him that they had only six months and in these six months she wanted to live her life with him. Loving him, making love to him and letting him make love to her. But she said nothing, for words

were not enough anymore. Instead she let her hands travel down to open his shirt. He returned the favor with an equal ardor and for the first time she felt the bare and warm skin of a man next to hers.

This time, every stroke of his fingers sent a tingling sensation in her body. His hands became bolder, fiercer and with every touch they became more attuned to each other's needs.

She wanted an exploration of her own too as she explored the tight muscles of his bare back, her hands running further down. He tilted his head back, letting passion wash over him. Esha held her breath, marveling at Rohan's perfect features. He slowly opened his eyes again and she couldn't deny the pleasure she felt at the passion that was burning in his eyes.

He grabbed her thighs and urged her to wrap them around his waist as he kissed her, making her groan in response. She loved the feel of his smooth and hard body against her soft one. He kissed her once more before slowing sliding inside her.

A ripple of pleasure made her gasp but it was soon accompanied by waves of desire that assaulted every nerve in her body. He kissed her passionately this time as his thrusts grew bolder and deeper and as they alternated between greedy and gentle, she submitted to her first orgasm of the night. He stopped and hugged her against his bare chest as she shuddered in pleasure only to be ridden again till his body didn't tense in pleasure.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Did she feel any different the next morning? Yes, she did. Esha woke up for the first time in her life in the arms of a man. With Ayush, she had always missed the tender moments of the aftermath. But Rohan was different. He couldn't stop kissing her throughout the night. He held her close to his chest, as if he too was afraid the night would end sooner than they wanted. He was a giver. He gave equally in the lovemaking and for that she felt that she was lucky.

"Hi, good morning, love." She didn't notice when he woke up for she had been lost in her own musings. He was looking at her bemused and she felt a lump in her throat. This! This was so right. But so fleetingly momentary.

"What gray thoughts trouble you, milady?" Rohan laughed, tracing his fingers across her jawline. She captured his hands in her own and smiled.

"Good morning to you too! Pray tell me, what my lord wants for breakfast?"

"Hmmm... Now that sounds interesting!" he laughed. "How about a few more kisses and another round of your delicious body?!"

"Scandalous, my lord." Esha laughed and attempted to get up but he stopped her.

"Where are you going in such a hurry?"

"We have an office to go to and my boss is a bit stickler with regards to time."

"We can't go to the office today!"

"Why not?"

"Because your boss is on leave today. You can take a leave too." He grinned impishly.

"Rohan!" Esha looked at him, shocked. "We have a client coming in about two hours. You have to be in the office today."

"Oh shucks! Yes, sadly you're right," he said regretfully and then added softly, "but then the wife is always right."

She blushed deeply and quickly got off the bed, running towards the bathroom. Then she stopped suddenly and turned towards him mischievously. "But I can have a shower with my boss, right?"

Rohan jumped out of the bed at her offer and raced her to the shower. Still panting, they both brushed eyeing each other in the steam layered

mirror. While Rohan shaved, she took the shower. His intense gaze was making it difficult for her to not rush back into his arms. He joined her and she felt his smooth jaw against her shoulder as he hugged her from behind.

"I've got to go," she whispered.

He planted a slight kiss on her shoulder, like a promise to continue where they had left off, later in the day. She quickly dressed up and went to meet her father. She found him sitting in the patio with Lakhan massaging his shoulders. He looked sick.

Worried, she rushed towards him, "What's wrong, dad?"

He opened his eyes tiredly and smiled, "Don't know, sweetheart. I was just having trouble breathing."

"Why did you both not call me?" she asked, aghast.

"We did," Lakhan said, looking guilty. "I even went and knocked on your door, but there was no answer."

Esha blushed. She must have been in the bathroom at that time and the running water must have blocked all sound. She had never felt so guilty in her life. Just then, Rohan came in for his breakfast, calling out a breezy 'good morning' to everyone. His smile vanished upon seeing the serious faces in front of him.

"What happened?" he came quickly towards them and looked at her father. "You ok, dad?"

Her father beamed at him and nodded slightly.

"Apparently he has been complaining of trouble with his breathing, which is getting worse as we speak," Esha explained, feeling rather frightened.

Rohan caught her palms with his and squeezed them. "Don't worry, darling. Let's take him to the hospital now."

"Ok. I will call up the office and let them know I am not coming."

"But—"

"No, Rohan. I must accompany dad." She said it quietly but firmly. Rohan nodded and backed off. Esha quickly called up Mr. Chakraborty and told him her situation. The poor man couldn't say anything to her of course, but Esha felt that she had done the right thing. Rohan was on the phone speaking in a low voice but Esha could make out that he was canceling his meeting with his client too.

"Rohan, you don't have to. I can take care of dad. You have important clients coming today."

"Shut up," Rohan said briefly and turned to Lakhan, "*Bhai*, get his things ready in case he has to stay in the hospital tonight."

While Lakhan rushed to do his bidding, Rohan called the hospital and made the arrangements. Esha sat with her father, rubbing his chest and stopping him from cracking useless jokes.

"You are not talking till you don't see the doctor."

"You are—"

"Shhsh...dad. Please. Don't make it harder for me than it already is."

Her father heard the slight tremor in her voice and clamped down to a sulky silence. Esha was having a hard time controlling her tears. Was it her fault that she didn't hear Lakhan calling out for her, knocking at her door? So many thoughts went on playing in her mind and for once Rohan didn't interrupt them. The ambulance came and Rohan asked Esha to go with her father while he followed them in the car. The moment Esha stepped inside the ambulance, she hated it. The pipes and the dials on the panel reeked of heartbreaks. But the paramedics rushed about, fitting a mask on her dad's face to ease his breathing. But her dad being her dad, winked at her and said, "I always wanted to be a superhero. Now I have a mask."

She couldn't help grinning and he lifted his hand to tweak her nose. "That's my girl."

After that, conversation was not possible. She held on to his arm throughout the rough ride. God only knew how any patient survived this ride since the traffic would not clear even with the siren blaring. When would the people get the civic sense of clearing the path for an emergency vehicle? At last they reached the hospital. Rohan had reached before them, which seemed like a joke by itself. A doctor and a few nurses wheeled her father to the ICU and the door shut after them. What followed was a waiting game with Rohan leaving her side only to get coffee. She had missed breakfast but food was the last thing on her mind.

It was around an hour before the doctors came out. From the look on their faces, it was clear that the news wasn't good. Esha felt light in the head. Like an out of body experience where she was a mere watcher. This pain was just too much to bear. She felt Rohan gripping her arms; maybe to steady her but she was not sure. She saw the doctors smiling sympathetically at her but her mind registered nothing except the buzzing noise that seemed to play in her ears. Everybody around her was talking, even looking at her. She felt that she had to make an important decision but she was not sure what it was.

"Esha, please get a grip on yourself. Now is definitely not the time to faint. Come on, buck up and face this." Rohan's stern voice sounded cruel to her ears, enough to spark anger inside her. Did he just call her an escapist?

It took all her will power to channel her anger within her and not throw it on his face. How dare he suggest that she was being selfish and weak? The haze cleared from her eyes and she could finally focus on the doctor's words.

"The chemo is not working as we thought. He has reached stage III B where chances of survival are around thirty three percent. But with proper care he can still make it for another three to five years. But he will need a lot of care though." The doctor paused to let his words sink in. When Esha continued to stare at him blankly, he turned towards Rohan. "Can we discuss his diet and care when you come to my office later in the evening?"

"Sure, doc," Rohan said, hugging Esha tight. "We will be there."

Esha was silent throughout and Rohan didn't urge her to talk. Since her father would be in the ICU, they decided to go home and get his room sanitized. Esha wanted to do it herself. She needed something physical to do at that point of time. Over thinking the whole episode was killing her. The ride back home was a silent one where both of them didn't want to indulge in small talk, while both were lost in their own thoughts.

Rohan had some calls to make and went to his study. Somehow, he felt that Esha wanted to be alone for some time. He closed the door of his study and only then did he let out the breath he was holding. This was going to be tough. Slowly the magnanimity of the situation hit him. Ayush had meant this. The smell of death in the house. Waiting for someone to die, watching someone die slowly was not going to be easy. And more than that, the suffering Esha was going to face would tear his heart apart. Would he be man enough to hold her hand during those days?

While Rohan was lost in his own thoughts, Esha too had a few fears of her own. She went to her father's room and started cleaning up. Lakhan came to help but she politely asked him to leave. Seeing her quivering lips, he did. She first cleaned the furniture, then changed the bedsheets and pillow cases. She then vacuumed the whole room. It was then that Zaira sauntered in.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Esha's instincts told her that things would turn ugly now. She too was not in the mood to take any crap and was ready to face Zaira.

"Do we have to do this today, Zaira?" she asked, her lips tight.

"Oh yes! High time we have a woman to woman talk, dear daughter-in-law," Zaira smirked, her eyes like flints. "Lakhan told me that your father is in the hospital, again."

"So you've come to express your sorrow?" Esha quietly put away the vacuum cleaner and turned to face her, not believing at all that Zaira had come for this reason.

To her surprise, Zaira laughed. "Express my sorrow?" she asked. "You seem to get only that Esha! Gather sympathy. Using your father as bait to trap my poor Rohan."

"Poor Rohan can take care of himself, Zaira. Don't you have bigger fish to fry?"

Stormy eyes fell on her. "You are worried about me? And I am worried about Rohan. What the heck are you doing to him, woman?"

"What do you mean? I have not done anything to him. And even if I have, that is between a husband and wife, right?"

"Husband and wife? My foot. You think he married you to get rid of me?" Zaira threw back her head and laughed. "No, you stupid woman. He married you only to get his hands on his father's property."

"What rubbish are you talking about?" Esha couldn't believe that Zaira would stoop so low. But a niggling doubt started in her mind. Was this what Solanki was talking about when he spoke of Rohan's father's Will?

"Ah! Thought so," Zaira smiled like a feline, ready to pounce on its prey. "You have no idea about Rohan's father's Will."

Esha sat down on the bed. Suddenly the world she had built in her dreams was crashing around her. "I suppose you are going to enlighten me or is the pre-drama an important part of the news?"

Zaira was too happy to take offense. She grinned shamelessly, not at all concerned of the hurt her words were causing. "Rohan's father made a Will during his last days. If Rohan marries and has a child from that marriage, he will get all the property else—"

"Else?"

"Else," Zaira gave a dramatic pause. "Else everything belongs to me."

"This is not true." Esha exclaimed.

Without waiting for confirmation, Esha ran towards Rohan's study. She found him grim, staring out of the window. "Is it true?"

Rohan turned towards her, surprised. She was anger personified and he had no clue where it was stemming from. "Is what true?"

"That your father made a Will according to which you get his property only if you marry and have a child."

Rohan kept quiet, his eyes studying her. Infuriated on being proven right, Esha stepped up to him and hit her small fists on his chest, all her anger and sorrow closed in those tiny fists. Rohan didn't flinch.

"How dare you use my body as an incubator, without even telling me? You knew this all along and you behaved like a heart broken Romeo to get me into your bed. So helping my father and me, everything, everything was a ploy to get a child?"

"Esha, this is not the time to speak about all these issues," Rohan said firmly, holding her by the shoulders. He too was not in his right mind to even defend himself.

"Just tell me the goddamn truth, my darling husband," Esha shouted, "Your agenda was never Zaira. It was always to get your hands on your father's property. You wanted to make love to me that night to impregnate me and not because—" Her voice cracked and she couldn't go on. She would be damned before she broke down before this... this monster.

Rohan studied her furious face, her trembling lips and felt an emotion totally alien to him. Tenderness. He wanted to protect her from every danger and pain. It was not lust and it was not even love. It was a much deeper sense, of divine belonging. She was his to protect and cherish and he was hers. But right now, if he said any of these things he would really look like a swine or a heartbroken Romeo.

"Let's go back to the hospital." he said instead, shaking her gently. "I can't believe that you are talking to me about anything other than your father. You know where your priorities lie and let's stick to them."

And that last line broke the dam that Esha was harboring for so long in her heart.

"Priorities? You speak of priorities? I freaking know where my priorities lie. Year after year after year, I have taken care of my freaking life's priorities." Her tears had dried up and now she only spewed venom. Rohan moved back slightly and didn't stop her at all. But Esha was beyond caring.

She was beyond wondering what others would think of her. "Do you know how it feels? To watch the other kids playing badminton in the streets from your window? Wanting to go and join in the hullabaloo, yet not being able to since you can't leave your mom lying on the bed till your dad is back from office?"

Rohan felt his heart bleeding as the image of a young forlorn girl whose childhood had been caught in the web of duties and responsibilities started sketching itself in his inward eye.

Esha glared at him for being silent but Rohan kept quiet. "And those relatives! They are the first ones to vanish from the scene when you are in trouble. The first line of defense which every family think they have. Gone! Poof! Vanished into thin air as if there never was a blood tie."

Rohan wanted to hug her bad but knew it was not over yet. He was right. It wasn't.

"My dad had to balance between his work and family, alone. He would come home at six o'clock and cook food for us and on the days he couldn't I would somehow make *chapatis* and eat them with sugar and curd."

"But you were just eight at that time, right?"

"So?" she glared at him. "I shouldn't feel hungry? I knew what you call my 'responsibilities' at a very young age, Rohan. While you spent your time flying kites, I was cooking my own food so that I could feed myself. So freaking don't lecture me about responsibilities. I took my mom for chemo when I was eleven years old. I watched her wither in pain night after night, while doing my homework and getting ready for school. And do you know what happened when my mom died?"

"What?" Rohan whispered. He felt it in his bones that here lay all her pain.

"I felt relieved, Rohan. I fucking felt relieved."

Silence. Rohan just stood there, stumped. Not moving at all.

"There, you have that look of being judgmental. You can't ever guess how it feels to see your loved one dying slowly in front of you. You have no idea since the whole world thinks that as soon as one is sick, the whole family should become Florence Nightingale. It does not work that way, Mr. Rohan Sharma. We all have our wants, needs and desires, which we slowly start forgetting one by one. All that remains is a need. A strong need to survive each day. And even that starts diminishing with time."

Rohan couldn't keep away from her any longer. She felt his arms

going around her shivering body and she welcomed the feeling. Her heartbeat started slowing down. He rubbed her back gently, feeling the shudders raking through her body. Like a dam broken after the waves of pain had beaten it for centuries. She felt calmer and there was no shame in her heart for confessing how she really felt to him. She didn't feel mean nor did she feel like a daughter who wanted to run away from her responsibilities. She didn't, for her dad was not just her responsibility but rather the man she loved with all her heart.

Rohan had remained silent throughout for he felt this outburst of Esha's was long overdue. He wanted to take her in his arms, to kiss her tears away but before he could, the study door burst open and Zaira stormed in.

"I've had enough of this façade, Rohan. This woman," she fumed, pointing towards Esha, "this woman has to leave now."

Rohan didn't move at all but smiled. More than Esha, Zaira looked shocked at the brilliant smile Rohan had on his face. Esha closed her eyes momentarily. So this was the ending? Rohan was ready to accept Zaira's love. Maybe after her outburst, she must look like a monster to him. Well, they both could carry on but she didn't have to witness any more heartbreaks.

"You two carry on. I'll go to the hospital."

As she walked past Rohan, his hands shot out and caught hers. "You are not going anywhere without me."

Zaira's eyes narrowed. "Rohan, let go of the poor girl. You can't use her just to get the property. And why the heck do you need her?" she asked, her eyes blazing. "As soon as we marry, I will transfer everything in your name."

"Enough!" Rohan's voice was raised for the first time since Esha had met him. He pulled Esha towards him and faced Zaira. "The woman you're talking about is my wife. The property you are talking about is my father's. But I can't ignore the role you're playing here. So let me spell out to both of you exactly what I'm going to do here."

Esha squirmed in his arms but he tightened his grip. "You have to listen too, Esh. For, like Zaira, you are drawing your own conclusions too. Now that I've both of you together, I might as well lay my cards on the table."

"Regarding?" Esha was genuinely puzzled. She needed to rush to the hospital but somehow this moment seemed quite important as well. Rohan must have understood her anxiety for he hugged her closer.

"It won't take long, I promise." He then let her go and faced Zaira.



"By the end of this day, I want you out of my house. Yes, my house. You can keep the factories for all I care." Both the women gasped. Rohan was giving up all his factories!

"You're going to give up your business for – for this woman?" Zaira gasped.

"Yes. And I don't owe you any explanation. This house was my mother's and I really don't want you here. You will hear from Solanki in a day or two. Now just leave me alone with my wife."

Zaira stormed out but the abuses she hurled fell on the deaf ears of two souls whom destiny had brought together. Two souls that needed healing and right at that moment an ethereal emotion was weaving around them, cocooning them from all the pains of their past.

"You gave up your property for me?" Esha wondered.

"Not only you." Rohan whispered. "But for the child who would be ours one day. No child should be brought into this world with such a burden on its shoulders."

"Our child?"

"We will have one, right Esh?" Rohan was looking deep into her eyes as if the answer lay in her soul.

"I – I don't know what to say. But without your business, your office..."

"Are you scared that I can't look after you, Esha?" he asked bleakly.

Esha hugged him hard, pouring all her love in her hug. "No Rohan. We both will look after each other. We are young and we can start building our own business. We can manage... even my dad's bills I can manage. I've stashed enough to take care of the bills."

"Shhh..." he shushed her up, gently placing his fingers on her lips. "Listen to me, my love. I've only given Zaira the properties that belonged to my father. Not the ones that belong to me."

"Oh!" Esha didn't know what to say. It seemed there was much more to learn about this man who was her husband.

"When I read my dad's Will, I always knew this day would come. I will never compromise by bringing a child into this world based on the unscrupulous intentions of the adults. So I never bothered to tell you this. That, I admit, was a mistake. But I didn't even want to think of my dad's Will."

"But why did he make such a will?" Esha asked. She could

understand that it was made in a moment of emotional weakness. From what she had heard of Rohan's father, she had drawn the conclusion that he was a very strong man.

"He found out that Zaira was my girlfriend in college and that broke him up. He was hurting because I had hidden it from him."

"But why did you?"

"How could we all live with this knowledge that my father and me had fallen in love," he said, anger in every word he uttered, "no, make it 'duped', by the same woman?"

Esha tightened her hold on Rohan. It must have been a horribly traumatic experience for a father and son to go through. But still, it didn't explain the Will. Did his father want Zaira and Rohan to come together?

Rohan tipped her head upwards and smiled sadly, "I know what you're thinking. There was a moment when even I thought that. But then I came to realize that whatever happens, this isn't what I want. I don't want to spend a single moment of my life with that greedy woman. And then – "

"Then what?"

"Then on our wedding day, Solanki gave me a letter that took away the burden on my shoulders. Let me show it to you."

He went to his desk and opened a drawer. He took out a letter and handed it to Esha. "Read it, and you'll know what I mean."

Esha gingerly took the letter from him and opened it. Words in a neat, cursive hand were inked on the page.

*Dear Son,*

*If you're reading this letter it means you've not married Zaira. For which I'm very proud of you. I know you could've married her when I was gone. But that woman can't bring happiness in your life. I wanted you to choose between love and money and if you have chosen love over the property, then you've found your true love. As for Zaira, I do hope she enjoys the money for which she has sold her soul. You, my darling son, have a great life to live. Lots of blessings to the woman who is now your wife, and is standing beside you.*

*-Dad.*

Esha felt tears flowing from her eyes. So many lives troubled due to one woman's despicable greediness. Well, it ended today. No more will her loved ones be affected by Zaira and the likes of her.

"So where do we go from here?" she asked softly.

He smiled and came towards her. "I adore you." He said, his words almost like fairy dust landing on her ears. Magical.

"You adore me?"

"No, actually I don't." He raised her chin with his fingers and said a bit louder, "I love you."

Esha gasped. At last he had said that. The feeling that was thumping in her heart had now taken the shape of a reality between them. She closed her eyes momentarily, just to make sure it was really happening.

"I just told you I was sick of all the responsibilities in my life and yet you want to be tied to me."

"To be tired of your responsibilities is human but to run away from them is a different issue. If you can run away today from your father, then tomorrow you will do the same if I am sick. And to me, marriage is for 'in sickness and in health'." Rohan brought her closer to him and kissed her forehead. "We have a tough road ahead. I am not denying that it won't be easy. I have money, no doubt about that—"

Esha raised her face and kissed him, shushing him up. "We are going to break all the clauses of our contract—except one."

"Which one? Surely not the one about sleeping in the same room?"

"That we have broken already," she laughed. "No, it's about me paying you back with my salary."

"But what is mine is yours too and what is yours is mine."

"From now onwards, yes."

She slightly stepped back from him and looked deep into his eyes. "I will not deny that you have made my life easy. Many people might think that I married you you're your money."

"You care for what people like Ayush's mom think?"

"No," she denied vehemently. "But I do care for what I think. Only what I think. And I want to do this for my dad. So that he has that pride in his eyes when he sees me. I see the pride in my eyes when I look in the mirror—that I have taken care of my dad my way, of course with the help of my husband, who has never interfered in my life, at least not for the wrong reasons."

Rohan wanted to deny at first but seeing the fierce pride in Esha's eyes, he bent his will to accept the situation. He, after all, wanted only one thing—the love this woman had brought into his life and that fierce sense of family that had been missing for a long time. All the Ayushs and all the

Zairas of this world could not take that away from him. He traced his thumb on her soft lips and watched her blush, a soft glow spreading over her cheeks. She was his now as he had become hers.

"Let's go and get your dad home. We have a long road to walk before sunset."

## Epilogue

*5 years later...*

"Esha, I'm getting late for office" Rohan shouted above the din of the whirring noise of the hair dryer. "Are you coming with me now or later?"

"Later, darling." Esha smiled adoringly at her husband. "I've got to drop Garv to school first."

"Where is the little devil?" Rohan put his hands around her waist and kissed her neck.

"Where else? He's playing with Lakhan *bhaiya* who is spoiling him rotten."

Rohan nuzzled her soft tresses. "His father did the same to me. Look how well I turned out."

Esha turned to catch the laughter in his eyes and grinned back. "Now *that* I can't argue with." She kissed him on his lips, confident now that the love she felt for him was reciprocated without any room for doubt. "By the way, I've got a surprise for you."

"For me?" Rohan looked at her with excitement, the mischievous look she loved so much back in his eyes, "Is it naughty or nice?"

"Shuddup." She flicked his hands away and went to get her purse. She took out a cheque and gave it to him. "This, my darling, is the last and only clause of the contract that I would like to keep."

Rohan went stock-still. He was not prepared for this. He slowly walked towards her and took the cheque. "Why are you doing this, Esh?" he asked, his voice husky. "We are married with a child now. I loved your dad too."

"I know, my darling. I know," Esha said gently, winding her arms around his neck. "He died a happy man knowing his daughter is loved by the man of her dreams. And you," she kissed the tip of his nose, "you are the man of my dreams because you love me for who I am and what I am. You have never, ever, tried to change me."

Rohan smiled, "I wouldn't dare to, my hellcat, but it still doesn't make sense that the money is going from your account to mine."

"I know of the whispers. Many people still think that I have married you for your money. Ayush, his mom and Zaira have fanned such rumors

too."

"But we know that's not true."

"Now we do." Esha smiled with pride. "I didn't do this for you or for the society. I did it for my pride. The pride of a daughter who could take care of her father." Esha's voice broke slightly. "And you, my darling, you have given me this chance to prove myself."

Rohan felt all his love for this spitfire rising in him as he lifted her face and claimed her lips. This was the woman his father had asked him to choose and no amount of money in the world could make him trade this kind of love.

*The End*

# About the Author

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Rubina Ramesh is an avid reader, writer, blogger, book reviewer and marketer. She is the founder of The Book Club, an online book publicity group. Her first literary work was published in her school magazine. It gave her immense pride to see her own name at the bottom of the article. She was about 8 years old at that time. She then went to complete her MBA and after her marriage to her childhood friend, her travel saga started. From The Netherlands to the British Isles, she lived her life like an adventure. After a short stint in Malaysia, she finally settled down in the desert state of USA, Arizona. Living with her DH and two human kids and one doggie kid, Rubina has finally started living the life she had always dreamed about – that of a writer.

## **Her other published works include**

Finding The Angel (Romance)

Knitted Tales (Collection of Short Stories)

Marijuana Diaries (Anthology)

Long And Short Of It (Anthology)

Writings From The Heart (Anthology)

## **Her contact details:**

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/RubinaRameshWrites>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/rubinaramesh199>

Website: [www.rubinaramesh.com](http://www.rubinaramesh.com)

Email: [rubinaramesh1973@gmail.com](mailto:rubinaramesh1973@gmail.com)

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*Rubina Ramesh.*