



# Destiny's Girl

Can Maya reconcile her love with  
her need for revenge?

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ADITE BANERJIE



# DESTINY'S GIRL

*BY ADITE BANERJIE*

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This book was previously published by Harlequin/Mills&Boon as The Indian Tycoon's Marriage Deal in 2013.

Cover Design: OliviaProDesign  
Cover Photo: V Sanandhakrishna

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## Chapter One

“You’re sure she will be here tonight?”

Krish Dev strode into the glittering Ballroom of New Delhi’s spanking new seven-star hotel, The Dev Residency, speaking softly into his phone. He wasn’t surprised at the confirmation, but he had to be one hundred per cent certain.

“And does she know who sent her the invite?”

The response confirmed that everything had gone exactly as planned.

“Well done. I knew you could do it.” Krish snapped his phone shut.

He felt a thrill of anticipation. Having dealt with hundreds of negotiations and a myriad client-types, this one should be a breeze. But it was different from anything that he had done before. His phone pinged again as a new message hit his inbox. “Just in case you have difficulty recognizing her.” He scrolled down and found an image file that his leave-nothing-to-chance assistant, Rohan Shetty, had attached. He needn’t have. Krish would recognise her anywhere. Even though he had seen her only once. And that too through a thick, tinted plate glass window. As he glanced at the digitised image of the girl, he felt the same hot rush of blood when he had seen her yesterday. Even if his eyes betrayed him, his libido wouldn’t!

This was not about sex, Krish admonished himself, but a business deal. He had learnt one thing in his five years as a top-ranking strategic management consultant: the higher the risk, the more delicate the deal-making; the greater the chance of failure. This one was up there, in terms of risk factor. Too many unknown variables, as they said in management-speak.

Only two days ago, he had the perfect plan in place. He even had a shortlist of five eligible, ambitious candidates. Their backgrounds had been thoroughly researched and they all fit the bill – that of the ‘ideal bride’ that he could present to his dear, dictatorial Dad. Of course, she would have to first sign a water tight contract. The most critical clause of the contract was that the chosen candidate would have to keep the marriage a secret, even from her own family. And, most significantly, from the media hounds. The price for her silence would be a luxurious lifestyle, way beyond anything she could dream of.

As he’d waited in the air-conditioned lobby of the British High Commission for his meeting with the High Commissioner, Krish had been contemplating his dilemma. He did not have the luxury of time to make a decision. And yet, he found no valid reason not to pick one of the candidates

and run with his plan. Dammit, none of the chosen women had the ‘right vibe’! The gut-feel reaction that rarely failed him in his professional decision-making was missing. Krish trusted his instincts as much as his skills that he had honed since his Harvard education. They had enabled him to mount many a successful business campaign for his clients.

It was then that she had come into his field of vision. Almost like something that the hot summer winds had blown onto the manicured lawns of the British High Commission. Beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, he’d seen her standing in knee-deep muddy waters, fixing a leaky pipe, shouting orders at a bunch of clueless gardeners. Krish had watched, totally mesmerised. Task accomplished, she’d lifted her hair away from the nape of her neck, as she’d plodded towards the entrance of the building in her soaking wet, hip-hugging, cut-off jeans. The sight of her perfect curves and makeup-less face glowing with sweat and the satisfaction of a job done kept his eyes glued to her. Her firm breasts pushing against her cotton tee-shirt made Krish feel suddenly hot under the collar. Had the air-conditioning in the lobby developed a snag? Or was it the girl he was looking at through the window?

A few discreet inquiries and Krish had soon had her complete dossier on his desk by late last evening. And his gut had finally kicked in! She was the perfect candidate. His detectives – working extra hard for a fat bonus to unearth every little detail about her – had informed him that she had no family to speak of, in Delhi or anywhere else for that matter. That her father, a poor government school teacher, had died four years ago in her hometown of Howrah in West Bengal. She had moved to the capital to pursue a college degree and a career. Her ambition, however, more than made up for her humble background. She had financed her own college education through a scholarship at Miranda House, the la-di-dah college where daughters of the rich and famous studied.

Six months ago she had joined Evergreen Consultants, reputed landscape designer Kavita Dayal’s firm, as a lowly intern. But within weeks, she had been assigned one of Evergreen’s prestigious clients – the British High Commission – and she was already looking for suitable opportunities to further her career. She had even applied for the position of Nursery Manager at one of the most well-known private horticultural gardens in the country – the one owned by the host of this party. And that gave Krish the perfect bait. Everything was right about her... All he needed to do was pitch his



proposition, in a way that she could never refuse. Easy as pie!

He felt the same prickling sensation he'd had last time he'd seen her – his body was on high alert. She had to be here. He scanned the room and his eyes zeroed in on Maya Shome, stunning in sleek stilettos and a black halter dress that dipped dangerously low, revealing acres of silky smooth skin. Time to make his move.

Maya sipped a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon and surveyed the Ballroom. The crème de la crème of New Delhi was out in full force. The women, dripping diamonds, and showing off their freshly acquired Botox pouts. The men in their Armanis, sipping eighteen-year old Single Malts, talking shop as their eyes did the inevitable chick checkout. She smirked – men would be men. Predictable down to the tips of their Gucci-clad toes.

Entrepreneurs and politicians, corporate honchos and models, fashionistas and aspiring social climbers mingled with ease as champagne flowed and a live band played. Kamalkant Dev, the Chairman of Dev Group of Enterprises, darling of the media as much for his high-stakes corporate takeovers as for his celebrity lifestyle and affairs with nubile Bollywood nymphets, was celebrating his fifty-fifth birthday. KD, as he was known among friends and foes alike, was never known to do anything in half measures and this party wasn't any different. But to her, he was Enemy Number One.

For thirteen out of her twenty-three years, KD's very name had evoked just one emotion – pure, unadulterated hatred. She felt a shiver of dread run down her spine. What would it be like to finally come face to face with the man whose very existence filled her with such malevolence? She hoped and prayed she wouldn't freeze. She had prepared, planned and plotted for this day ever since her Papa died four years ago.

Yet, when she finally got a chance to break into the inner circle that this filthy rich incarnation of the Devil thrived in, it felt almost anticlimactic. In fact, there was something uncannily chancy about the whole thing. The phone on her office desk had rung just as she was about to leave for home. She had a good mind to ignore it but she picked it up. It was her client at the British High Commission. After making a few inquiries about the ongoing landscaping assignment, Jane Hill got to the point. "If you're free tomorrow night, you may want to be at a party that the Dev's are throwing at their new hotel. Apparently, your work at our lawns has impressed Mr. Dev. And he is keen to meet you in person."

“Really? You mean the Kamalkant Dev of Dev Group of Enterprises?”

“Well, someone from his office called up and wanted to know if we had your home address. But I thought I would check with you first. If you ask my personal opinion, this could be a big turn in your career.”

“Oh, thanks so much for the heads-up, Jane. I really appreciate it.”

A gold embossed invite arrived promptly at her address. And Maya marvelled at the lucky break she had got. But as some wise soul had said, “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.” She had to grab every opportunity that came her way to achieve her only objective – to bring the man, who had tormented her father’s every living moment and made his life an eternal hell, down.

The Dev Residency was the newest uber-opulent hangout of the rich and famous. Surrounded by acres of greenery in the heart of Delhi, its grand architecture and décor harked back to the colonial times but its amenities belonged very much to the twenty first century. Heck, some would even say twenty second century. For Maya, the Residency’s appeal lay in its sprawling gardens, which boasted some of the most exotic flora. She would give an arm and a leg to be able to just walk through the marvellous grounds.

But now that she’d got the invite, she was in panic mode. Conjuring up appropriate evening wear for the occasion from her pathetic wardrobe would defeat even a master magician like Houdini. Visions of her walking into the Ballroom dressed like Cinderella in rags gave her the heebie-jeebies. After an extremely stressful shopping session, Maya had found just the outfit that would pass muster. But boy, the hole that it had left in her meagre bank balance... well, that was something she would panic about some other day. For now, it was “party time”.

She scanned the Ballroom looking for her quarry and couldn’t help notice that the choice of floral decoration was the exquisite lavender rose. A sharp pang twisted through her, reminding her of Papa, who had perfected the art of growing these beautiful, exotic flowers. She reached out to touch a delicate petal. The presence of Papa’s special flower was like a good omen; as if he was watching over her. She felt lucky tonight.

“Beautiful!” drawled a deep, gravelly voice.

Maya’s eyes darted towards the man standing a couple of feet away from her. Awareness zinged through her as her eyes clashed with a pair of dark, dancing eyes set in a face that was all sharp angles, framed by thick cropped hair. It should have made for an all too severe effect but for the deep

cleft that dented his chin. His lopsided sexy smile had her pulse doing a crazy dance. He left her in no doubt that she was the object of his appraisal.

Flustered, she dragged her eyes away from his sexy cleft chin and tried to gather her scattered wits. “It’s a shame to present such beauty with so little imagination.”

“You would have done it differently?”

She stole a quick look at him. The light stubble only accentuated his chiselled jaw while his cream-coloured silk shirt parted ever so slightly to reveal a superbly toned body.

“Maybe,” she replied, annoyed at herself for being so easily waylaid by his sex appeal which he no doubt regularly used with deadly precision on women at parties like these.

“You’re right.” He turned his mesmerising dark eyes on her again. “Exotic beauties need to be treated with more delicacy and...” He gave her a slow look-over, “imagination.” Her body thrummed with awareness.

He smiled knowingly, almost as if he’d felt her instinctive jolt of reaction, and held out his hand, “I am Krish.”

“Maya.”

“Illusions. Imagination...It will be a pleasure to get to know you,” he murmured almost to himself, as he turned the handshake into something less formal, more intimate, touching his lips to her fingers. Maya felt the tremor of awareness go up a notch higher on her internal Richter scale.

Maya disengaged her hand and pretended a nonchalance that she did not feel. “The décor is all wrong for a splendid specimen such as the lavender rose.”

“So what would be your perfect setting for it?”

“Regal, definitely. A backdrop of rich, white silk or even satin.”

“And a hint of gold?”

“Precisely. You don’t need a profusion of these roses. Just a few can make for a stunning effect.”

His eyes skimmed over her perfect heart-shaped face with the large, limpid kohl-lined eyes – brown with a hint of hazel. The dangling golden strands in her ears and the thin gold chain around her slender neck indeed created a stunning impact. “There’s a lot to be said for the minimalist appeal.”

Maya felt her toes curl in the face of his appraisal. He was smooth. Very smooth. “Besides, these roses would be quite difficult to find.”

“For KD, money is of no consequence.”

“It’s not just the money. To grow them in hothouses, you need skilled professionals.”

“No doubt you are in the horticulture business.”

She shrugged. “It’s obvious, isn’t it? And you... work for KD?” she enquired.

“I’m a boring management consultant. Unlike your work, mine is totally devoid of any charm.”

Maya laughed. “I’d once tried to get a job at KD’s gardens but was rejected.”

“Not enough experience?” he enquired.

“Sadly, you can’t show a diploma certificate for home-grown skills.”

“Ah, a daughter of the soil! Who would have guessed?”

“You mean you actually thought I’m one of the lotus-eating women whose passion is to stalk rich men at Page 3 do’s like this one?”

His eyes danced with amusement. “Nope, you’re nothing like them. You’re more like that lavender rose – exotic and rare.”

Her heart flipped in slo-mo at his easy charm and her hands were getting clammier by the minute. “I may not be the Page 3 type, but you definitely need to brush up on your pickup lines.”

His heartbreakingly sheepish smile almost did her in. “Worth a shot, anyway.”

His glance took in her now empty glass and he was all chivalry. “Let me get you some more...Cabernet Sauvignon, if I’m not wrong?”

She smiled, “Quite the connoisseur, aren’t you, about wine and women?”

He shrugged those invitingly broad shoulders, “Comes with the territory. Hey, don’t disappear. I will be back in just a sec.”

This would give her an excuse to get away from him. Or, wait. Maybe he could introduce her to KD? He definitely seemed to know a lot about KD’s operations. He intrigued her. His supreme confidence indicated that he couldn’t be just another employee. His demeanour was that of one who was used to parlaying sexy banter with sassy women. Not her type at all.

But did she even know what her “type” was? All through her college years, she’d found it difficult to mix with her classmates, most of whom came from rich families. She was the odd one out – the orphan with no influence or money. Not that her classmates weren’t friendly. Just that she never felt



quite comfortable with them. Or, they with her. Her world was so different from theirs. She now realised that her self-preservation emanated an aloof vibe. So, she never got invited to the weekend visits to the mall or the movies. She never was welcomed to their homes for their birthdays and they never gossiped to her about their dates and boyfriend woes.

As for going out on dates – there was no time for the fun things that girls her age did. The scholarship she had won was only enough for fifty per cent of the tuition fees. To keep body and soul together she worked two part-time jobs: as a waitress at a local pub and as a dance teacher in a posh Delhi neighbourhood.

Quite often, a guy at the pub would make a pass at her. Most of them of course were sloshed and pretty offensive. Once in a while though some cute guy would try and buy her a drink. But her self-preservation instinct made sure she stayed cool and aloof. Her touch-me-not demeanour was a douche of cold water on any amorous feelings that a man may have harboured. I would put myself off with that attitude, she thought wryly.

“So, what’s with the Mona Lisa smile?” Krish was back. And her heart did yet another somersault at his sexy drawl. Now where did that come from? It seemed like her self-preservation instinct had taken the day off.

“Just thinking that you have really mastered the art of charming small talk.” Her thick eyelashes fluttered down to hide her emotions.

“Good! That means you were thinking of me and find me charming.”

She couldn’t take her eyes off his cleft chin. She wanted to run her fingers over it – an urge she barely managed to control.

“Nah, wrong conclusion. You’re just not my type.”

“And what type would that be?”

“You know -- the oh-I-am-so-gorgeous-that-women-can’t-help-but-fall-over-me type.”

His sexy, throaty laugh made her want to do just what she said she wouldn’t – fall all over him! She couldn’t believe she was flirting with this charming devil. It took all her willpower to drag her eyes away from his superstar handsome face and scan the room. She needed to track down KD fast, if only to put some distance between herself and Krish’s mesmeric eyes.

“You know what they say about not judging a book by its cover? The same goes for people too!” he drawled as he grabbed her hand to get her wandering attention. The live band had struck up a Latino beat. “How about a tango, Mona Lisa?”

He didn't miss the look of surprise on her face as she countered, "Tango, huh? Trust me, you don't want to make that move!"

"There are no wrong moves in tango. Only new ones."

The arrogant challenge and the supercilious look in his eyes were Maya's undoing. "You sure you are up to it?" she countered with relish.

Her wild side kicked in. She headed for the dance floor. Krish, a step behind her. She could feel his warm breath on her back; his masculine scent enveloped her making her nerve-ends tingle.

Starting off like a couple of combatants on the dance floor, Krish and Maya moved to the beat of the music, intuitively anticipating and syncing their movements with each other. Maya was soon absorbed in the passionate ritual of doing the tango. Swirling and twirling. Perfectly in tune with each other. Sexy and intimate, they danced in perfect unison as the guests watched enthralled. As Maya's voluptuous curves fitted into his lean, muscular frame, they looked like they had been practising the tango for years. Not missing a beat. Enjoying every pulsating moment as their bodies twirled as one.

KD stood at the top of the stairs, surveying the scene before him. On his 55th birthday, he could look back with pride on a career studded with milestones: youngest rising entrepreneur at twenty, most ambitious successful takeover bid at age thirty two, and chairman of a Fortune 500 group by the time he had hit fifty years. The Dev Group of Enterprises stocks had continued their reign on the top of the bourses even as competitors struggled to ride the tsunami-like waves that had hit the economy. DGE's brand equity was at its pinnacle and his own personal worth put him among the richest men in the country. And they were all here to raise a toast to him – the doyens of Corporate India, the glitzy Bollywood stars, the movers and shakers of the political world.

He had vowed to anoint his son as heir to his business empire on his 55th birthday. He still had a few hours to achieve his target – of overcoming opposition to his well-laid out plan from his recalcitrant, rebellious son and reluctant heir to DGE.

A lot hinged on this one move for KD. The next phase of expansion for DGE needed not just an infusion of financial investment but also fresh young blood to harness new opportunities. Who better than a Dev to helm the group and help it scale greater heights? Part of the plan involved the takeover of the Mittal group. The Mittal's hospitality business had been in trouble for some time. KD was well aware of the fact that a couple of his rivals had made

lucrative offers to Surya Mittal, whom he had known for well over twenty five years. But Surya Mittal was an astute businessman who would not be content with top-dollar alone for a company that had been nurtured by his family for three generations. Selling out would make him look like a loser and KD knew Surya well enough to realise that he would do anything to save his personal reputation and family prestige.

Not one to let an opportunity go by, KD had made Mittal an offer he couldn't refuse – he'd asked for his daughter's hand for his only son. The matrimonial alliance would pave the way for a friendly takeover of Mittal's company. Mittal had jumped at the chance to salvage his incredibly fragile business situation without losing face. From KD's point of view, the marriage-cum-business merger would bolster DGE's prime position as the market leader in the hospitality sector and would provide him with the perfect opportunity to rope in his recalcitrant son as heir to his empire.

KD spotted Viren Saxena, his college mate turned trusted flunky, escorting Surya, his wife Amrita and daughter Amisha towards him. Viren had stuck with him through thick and thin, and had virtually become a part of the Dev family. He couldn't imagine DGE without Viren. Or for that matter, even taking a personal decision without first discussing it with his confidant. And for now, only Viren was privy to the deal he'd struck with Surya.

KD approached the Mittals, arms stretched in welcome. "Surya, Amrita...it's so good to see you!" As Amisha bent to touch his feet in the traditional mark of respect, KD hugged her, "*Jug jug jeeyo, beta!* God bless you, my child."

After exchanging pleasantries, Amrita and Amisha turned away to greet other acquaintances. Surya looked anxiously at KD, "I hope the plan still stands."

"Of course, it does," KD reassured him. "Tonight is the perfect occasion to announce the coming together of the Mittal and Dev families. We're going to be not just business partners but in-laws!"

KD hailed a drinks server and picked up two glasses of Scotch, offering one to Mittal, who raised it in salute. "I'm honoured to be your in-law."

As they discussed the details of the imminent announcement, Surya's attention was drawn to the dance floor where a couple tangoed with passionate abandon. "Seems like the party is off to a great start...KD, *woh ladki kaun hai?* Is she one of the supermodels who featured on your calendar

last year?”

KD's indulgent smile froze on his face as he whipped out, "*Pehle kabhi dekha nahin*, never seen her before."

Maya felt a twinge of regret when the sizzling hot dance ended with its customary flourish. The tango was a dance that required synchronised moves. And she was amazed at how this perfect stranger had guided her effortlessly. So much so that she had lost herself in the passion of the dance. Now he was raising her arched back gently. Their lips were a heartbeat away from each other. Maya closed her eyes, savouring the moment. Unable to resist her inviting lips, and the sweet sensation of having this gorgeous woman in his arms, Krish threw caution to the winds and brought his mouth down on hers, teasing her lips and drawing a passionate response even as he heard her gasp of surprise.

Thunderous applause broke around them. Her face flushed a delicate pink as she pulled away from Krish's embrace. But he wouldn't let her go. Giving her an intimate wink, he bowed theatrically to the applause. "Still think I am not your type?"

Before she could retort, Maya found herself staring into the face of a stranger. Krish turned around to see who had caught Maya's attention. It was Rohan.

"What's it, Rohan?" Krish barked.

Rohan mumbled, "I'm sorry but I have to speak to you in private."

Krish excused himself to Maya and glared at Rohan, "Make it quick."

Rohan whispered into Krish's ear. "I just overheard a conversation between KD and Mittal..."

Maya gazed around the banquet hall. She thought she spotted a Bollywood star holding forth as the people around him hung on to his every word. There were celebrities sprinkled like confetti all around, she mused, and wondered if she'd even get a chance to speak to KD. Krish seemed too preoccupied and she'd lost the chance to ask him for an introduction to KD. That's when she saw him, marching down the hall straight towards her. Maya froze. She'd seen his pictures in the newspapers and on television, but the shock of coming face-to-face with the man, whom she had vowed revenge against, still hit her like a body blow. She felt the bile rising as her emotions churned with every step that he took towards her. He stopped just a few feet away from her as Krish spoke up. "Hullo, Dad!"



KD acknowledged the greeting with an imperceptible nod as he bit out sharply. “How like my son to steal his father’s thunder! But it’s good to see you having a great time.”

Dad? Son? It took Maya a couple of seconds before realisation swept through her befuddled mind. The surge of hot emotion was tamped by the rush of cold fact—Krish was the son of the man she hated most in the whole wide world! Oh my God! How could she have missed such an important detail? She’d researched the tycoon’s family history but nowhere had she found any mention of a son. Yes, she’d seen the rare article about KD’s reclusive wife, Suvarna, a descendant of the royal family of Dungargarh. But... son? And how on earth had she winded up dancing with the enemy, not to forget locking lips with him!

KD was sizing up Maya. His hostility was perceptible but he had too much savvy to let it affect his demeanour. “Won’t you introduce me to your lovely friend, Krish?”

Taking a deep breath and calming her jumpy nerves, Maya flashed a weak smile. “Many happy returns of the day, Mr. Dev. I’m Maya.” Try as she might she couldn’t bring herself to say that it was a pleasure to meet him.

Krish cut in smoothly. “Dad, remember Kavita Dayal’s landscaping marvel for the British High Commission? That was based on Maya’s design.”

Maya looked as if the rug had been pulled from under her. How did he know that she worked for Kavita Dayal? And why hadn’t he said anything to her? What was his game? Her brain was buzzing with questions to which she had no answers.

KD barely acknowledged Maya’s presence. “Krish, come with me. I have an important announcement to make.”

Krish mentally thanked Rohan for tipping him off about his Dad’s imminent announcement. He’d known for some time now that Surya Mittal was in financial trouble. Heck, the whole industry knew it. But KD had not only grabbed the opportunity but he’d played a master stroke—one that would ensure he’d keep a firm grasp over Mittal’s business interests under the guise of a family wedding. The only problem with this cosy little arrangement was that it was his fate being decided upon and he had no intention of becoming a pawn in his father’s chess game. It also meant that his plan of pitching his proposal to Maya was about to go down the tube. KD’s two-birds-with-one-stone strategy would mean the death of his own dreams. Of his plan to get away from his father’s clutches and establish his

own enterprise. Unless...

Could he salvage his plan? Maya was his only hope. Ignoring the fury in her eyes, he caught her hand and weaved his fingers through hers. This was going to be risky, but heck, he wasn't going to be yet another victim of his dad's endless manipulation. He took in a deep breath and said, "I know it's your big day, Dad. But I have a small announcement of my own to make."

KD's eyebrows shot sky high as he growled, "Really? I'm all ears."

"There's something you need to know about Maya," Krish said, scanning Maya's wide-eyed expression.

Maya's heart stopped thundering for a nano-fraction of a second.

"Maya is my fiancée."

Krish's words sent shockwaves all around. KD's face turned stony as he glared at Krish. Disbelief and confusion swept through Maya, spilling through her eyes as she glared at him.

"Are you out of your mind, Krish? You are going to marry a girl like her?" KD bellowed.

KD's angry words barely registered as Maya's mind struggled to make sense of Krish's declaration. The blood was pounding in her ears as Krish's next words to KD slammed through her consciousness.

"You should be happy, Dad. I have finally found the girl I want to spend my life with. We are getting married next week."

## Chapter Two

Maya dashed out of the Ballroom and on to the street – her heart still racing, her mind still trying to make sense of Krish’s wild proposition. She’d had just one glass of wine – so she definitely wasn’t drunk! Maybe that’s what rich bored playboys like Krish did for entertainment – play silly pranks on unsuspecting girls! But even that didn’t make sense – he knew about her work at the British High Commission. Of course! It was Krish who’d sent her the invite and she’d stupidly jumped to the conclusion that it was KD! Was it just a ruse to get her to the party to proposition her? But why? Who, in his right mind, would propose marriage to a girl he’d just met? That too, when as heir to the Dev business empire, he could have his pick of the hottest girls in the country? And she didn’t even want to think about that scorcher of a kiss! What was his game?

As she grappled with Krish’s mind-boggling proposal, an auto-rickshaw honked loudly and screeched to a halt beside her. “Madam, *yahan sawaari milna mushkil hai. Aapko kahan jaana hai?* You’re unlikely to find a cab or an auto here at this hour. Where do you want to go?”

Right! And she’d no desire to trek to the taxi stand which was more than a mile away in her five-inch stilettos and her backless party wear! With a terse nod, she got into the auto and instructed the driver, “Hauz Khas *chalo.*”

It had all gone wrong. Krish contemplated how the evening had turned into such a disaster. Except of course for that soul-stirring, passion-filled dance. Where had that come from? He really needed to get a grip on himself. How long had it been since he’d slept with a woman? Granted, Maya was an extremely attractive woman, but there was no need for him to trip over her. For God’s sake, he had behaved like an adolescent with raging hormones, not a man of the world who was used to dating some of the most ravishing women in India. He smiled as he recalled how she had so easily labelled him as a playboy.

But it wasn’t all bad. If nothing else, he had stymied KD’s plans for a big, splashy announcement of an engagement between himself and Amisha. The media would have gone nuts over it. Their rivals would have marvelled at the business chutzpah of such a match, finally leading up to The Great Indian Wedding in a blitz of opulence and media hype. That was not going to happen. Never. He had bought himself some time by proposing to Maya. So the evening hadn’t been such a disaster after all. He only hoped he had not

completely screwed his chances with her. She was an integral part of his overall game plan. And he could not fail!

KD had been furious at his announcement—and Krish had expected nothing else. But even as he'd tried to calm his father down, Maya had disappeared. It took Krish a while to realise that she was not in the Ballroom, and by the time he had sprinted out of the hotel in search of her, she had disappeared into the night. His phone buzzed urgently with a text.

"I'm at the Penthouse suite on the twenty-first floor. Don't keep me waiting."

Krish scowled. KD had issued his imperial order. Just like he had on his graduation day from Pennsylvania University, eight years ago. He had been in the midst of a wild celebration party at his pad in Philadelphia with his friends for making it into Harvard. The music wasn't loud enough to drown out the insistent phone. It was his Dad—summoning him back to India. Krish's protests had died on his lips as soon as he heard that his mother was very ill. He'd taken the first flight out and arrived in Delhi only to find out that his father had lied to him. Krish had seethed at the subterfuge but his father was unrepentant. KD wanted him to join the family business and put his foreign education to some use. It was payback time. Krish's protests that he had earned a scholarship to study at one of the most prestigious business schools were brushed aside as so much nonsense. 'No business school can teach you what the school of hard knocks can,' KD had declared. At first, Krish had railed against his father's diktat. Then, pleaded. But to no avail. Finally it was his mother who had made his father see reason.

Krish entered the elevator and stabbed the "Penthouse" button angrily. He'd never figured out how she'd managed to convince him. As the elevator swished open directly into the penthouse's plush gold-and-blue living room, Krish pushed away his thoughts. The bitterness he felt towards his father had a complicated history and it was pointless to dwell on it. A sense of déjà vu filled Krish as he geared up to face off with KD yet again.

KD was waiting for him, a tumbler of Scotch in his hand, on the terrace lawn of the penthouse that afforded a spectacular view of the Delhi skyline. In the distance, Krish could see the distinctive dome of the pink-stone Humayun's Tomb, a regal backdrop to the modern expressway that arched in front of it. Row upon row of lights sparkled on the expressway as cars streaked away to the farthest corners of the city.

KD swilled his drink and faced him. "Care to tell me what that was all



about?”

“How about offering me a drink first? After all, I will soon be marrying one of the most gorgeous women in town.”

“You want me to celebrate the fact that I have a fool for a son? Or should I rejoice at the thought that I will soon be shelling out a huge amount of money to get rid of your ‘gorgeous’ troublemaker?”

Krish knew his father would go for the jugular. Subtlety had never been one of his virtues. “I don’t expect your blessing but would it be too much to show my fiancée some respect?”

“You want me to show respect to a two-bit gold digger with whom you spent a few nights?”

“Let’s not trade insults,” Krish shot back sharply.

“Fine, you had fun with her. Good for you. Take her to Thailand, the Swiss Alps, Timbuktoo, for all I care. Work her out of your system, or if you can’t, she can be your mistress. But for god’s sake, Krish, do you have to marry her?”

Krish’s determination to stay cool was being sorely tested. “I’m not asking you for suggestions on how to live my life. I’m marrying Maya and that’s final.”

KD exhaled slowly, trying to keep his temper on a leash. There was a lot at stake here and he needed Krish on his side. This girl was a complication that needed to be dealt with, swiftly. He put his arm around his son. “Listen to me, Krish. Marriage is an important milestone. You can’t tie the knot with the first girl you think you are in love with.”

Krish repressed a snort at that. Love didn’t come into KD’s scheme at all. For that matter, it didn’t in his either. But one thing was for sure – he and his father had totally divergent reasons for that. “There’s nothing to discuss. As I said, my decision is final and there is nothing you can say or do to change my mind.”

KD controlled himself. Barely. “I have given my word to the Mittals that you and Amisha will have the grandest wedding ever seen in India this Diwali. You want me to call it off and lose face?”

Anger flashed in Krish’s eyes. “You didn’t think it necessary to ask my opinion before you took a decision about my life?”

“It’s not just your life, son. It’s about the Dev family!”

“A wedding in Diwali and a takeover of the Mittal group in the New Year? Was that your plan?” Krish smiled coolly at the look of surprise on his

father's face. "So, it's just another business deal that you have struck with the Mittals. Well, I want no part of it."

KD was a hair's breadth away from losing his composure. "Krish! It's more than a business deal. It's the coming together of two families... besides, you will never find a better girl than Amisha to be your wife."

Krish's eyes narrowed as he knew what his father was leading up to. The same old arguments about filial obligations, family prestige, blah-blah... He'd heard it all his life. Who better than him to know just how little his father truly cared about family values? It was just another tactic KD used in his game of endless manipulation. But he wouldn't be intimidated. Not anymore. Not after he'd seen how his sweet, serene, spiritual mother had paid the price for her selfless devotion to her family. His voice hardened as he raised his hand, "Dad, let's not do this. I am your son but you don't own me."

The air was so thick with tension that a knife could have sliced through it. The phone rang. KD picked it up and barked into it: "Yes?" After listening for barely a moment, he said, "Viren, *tumhe pata hai kya karna hai*. You know what to do. I'll be there in a bit."

Krish walked away towards the elevator, "Your guests are waiting for you and I don't think they would be happy with Viren as a substitute. And oh, by the way, happy birthday!"

The elevator stopped at the fifth floor. Maya pushed her way out of the cramped carriage and walked down the corridor towards the frosted glass door with Evergreen Consultants splashed on it in big, bright green letters. As she passed by the reception desk, a pretty girl called out, "Good morning, Maya! Will you just hold on for a sec, please?"

Maya stopped at the desk, "Good morning!"

As the receptionist handed her an envelope, Maya laughed, "What's this? An early pay-day?"

But she looked away, fidgeting with the phone cord. "Your things are in that box. Kavita Madam's orders."

Maya looked at the cardboard box that sat on the counter. "My stuff?"

Maya tore open the envelope. It contained a note that simply said, 'You are fired.' Kavita's scrawl beneath those three words confirmed this was no mistake. There was a cheque for sixty thousand rupees—which included a severance pay and her salary to date. She was numb with shock as she hesitated for a bit before she grabbed the box and left the office.

Six months and twelve days—that’s how long her job had lasted before it had gone kaput! It didn’t take a genius to figure out why she had been fired without being given any reason. All it had taken was a call from KD and Kavita would have bent over backwards to follow his orders. After all, she was just a lowly employee while he was an all-powerful client who could generate new business for Evergreen in a snap. Maya had a good mind to storm into Kavita’s office and demand an explanation. But how would that make a difference? The writing on the wall was as clear as a big, bright neon sign. She could forget about her dreams of becoming a landscape designer, about making a life in this city. Her diploma was now reduced to a mere scrap of paper that she may as well dump in the trash can. All her hard work counted for nothing. The close-knit community of landscaping professionals and employers would not touch her with a twenty-foot barge pole—KD would have made damn sure of that.

Rage. She felt that old familiar emotion rip through her. She’d known rage for a very long time. Rage at her own inability to help her father whose agony she could only fathom when he thrashed about in his alcohol-induced sleep. Rage at her father for being powerless to take on his tormentor, KD. Rage at the injustice of it all. Over the years, the flames of her rage had died down to become a steady glowing ember, but it had been enough to fuel her desire to bring KD down, to snatch away the power that gave him the right to treat others like dirt; take away their dignity by exercising his money and influence. And once again, KD had left her feeling undermined and powerless.

As she stepped out into the street, a dust storm raged. Leaves and litter whirled around her, as pedestrians ran for cover. The tall Ashoka trees swayed and bent over, as if trying to keep out of the devastating path of the angry storm. Maya’s angst had projected itself into the universe. The storm raged as did her emotions. Taking refuge under a bus shelter, she recalled that dreadful night four years ago.

She had just stepped into the overcrowded public hospital in Howrah where her father was being treated for cirrhosis of liver. She had prepared and packed his favourite fish curry and rice. The elderly nurse – whom everyone called Mashi – had reassured her that Papa was on the road to recovery. As she entered the cramped general ward, which he shared with twenty other patients, she saw Mashi hovering over his bed.

“How’s Papa, Mashi?” she asked. “Can I take him home tonight?”

Mashi turned towards her, her kind eyes full of an unspoken sadness. “My child, your father has gone...”

Maya stared uncomprehendingly at Mashi. “Gone?”

She took her in her arms, squashing her to her ample breast. “He’s gone to his maker. May his soul rest in peace.”

The tiffin box with the fish curry clattered to the ground.

“Papa...No, that’s not possible. You said he was going to be fine. You...you said ...”

There was a lump that squeezed her throat so tight, it wouldn’t let the words come out. She ran towards the iron cot. She whipped away the white sheet that covered his body. He lay there. Lifeless. Beaten by life. Beaten by his hatred for the man who had ruined his life.

With the help of the hospital ward boy – whom Mashi had deputed – she had taken her father’s body to the crematorium. She didn’t have the money to pay for a priest to do the last rites. What little cash she had was spent on firewood, essential ingredients for the cremation and a tip for the ward boy. She watched Papa’s body burn on the pyre through the night. There were no tears. Only rage in her heart. It seeped through her bones as the flames leapt towards the night sky, fuelling her need for revenge.

Rage and revenge. They had the acrid smell of burning flesh and the searing heat of embers.

KD’s actions had stoked the embers of Maya’s rage once more. She felt the heat singe her skin and the smell of ashes invade her nostrils once again. She would not be defeated by him. Never. That was a vow she had made to herself and to Papa that night, as she cremated him with only one mantra in her heart: “I’ll get justice for you, Papa!”

After that night, there was nothing left for her in Howrah. She boarded up the tiny cottage where she and Papa had lived, sold the few gold ornaments that her mother had saved up for her wedding and took the train to Delhi. All she took with her was Papa’s diary, the very same that Mashi had found tucked under his pillow at the hospital, and a studio-posed family photograph taken on her ninth birthday. The money from the sale of the jewelry was enough to put down a deposit and a few months’ rent for a kerchief-sized one-room-kitchenette terrace apartment, known as *barsaati*. She applied to the best colleges in town and finally got admission to the prestigious Miranda House College on a scholarship. She studied by day, gave dance lessons by evening and worked as a waitress at a local pub by

night. Those had been four gruelling years – but one thing had kept her going. Her rage.

The dust storm worked itself out as suddenly as it had appeared. The unbearable heat had been replaced by a light, cool breeze. It lifted Maya's spirits. As pedestrians emerged from their shelters and the traffic once again resumed, she started walking down towards the Metro station. She didn't know how, but she was certain that revenge would be hers. That was her destiny. And KD's.

Lost in thought, she was completely oblivious to the snazzy Toyota Prius that almost ran her over. She stopped in the middle of the street, as the driver screeched to a halt barely inches from her. Shaken out of her reverie, she jumped out of the way, crashing into a cart laden with fruit.

As oranges and apples rolled all around her, the fruit seller yelled angrily, "Madam, *aapko dikhta nahin hai?* Can't you see where you're going?"

The Prius's chauffeur, dressed in a spotless white uniform, apologised profusely. "Sorry, sorry, Madam."

"It's not your fault," Maya replied.

"Madam, *aapka naam Maya hai?*"

"How do you know my name?" she shot back.

"Krish Dev *saab ne bheja hai*. He's waiting for you at the Taj Mansingh coffee shop."

"Krish Dev?"

"Madam, please. *Ek baar baat karlo*. At least talk to him." He held out his cell phone to her.

"Go tell your boss I'm not his slave."

"Madam..."

The traffic started to pile up and a honking orchestra had begun.

A driver yelled, "Oye...move it, will you! We don't have all day while you sort out your issues!"

"Madam, please!" the chauffeur pleaded again.

Confronted by annoyed drivers all around her, Maya had no choice but to get in. She was amazed at the sheer arrogance of the man. After his utterly obnoxious behaviour yesterday, he had the gall to order her around. She couldn't wait to give that arrogant, self-obsessed guy a piece of her mind! But even as a part of her seethed at his behaviour, a strange excitement bubbled within her at the thought of setting eyes on him again. She closed her

eyes in horror. What's wrong with you Maya? she wondered desolately.

Krish watched from a secluded alcove as one very angry Maya stormed into the coffee shop. Even in her casual, no-nonsense sky blue salwar-kameez, she looked utterly delectable. No, he wouldn't let himself be distracted by her doe eyes and luscious lips. This time around, he would be all business. But as she approached him, he felt every cell in his body come alive. So much for being cool, calm and business-like, he thought wryly.

"Hullo, Maya. Thank you for coming," he said.

Maya's skin prickled at the sound of his sexy voice. "Much against my will!" she spat out, her golden brown eyes flashing fire, "And I demand an apology."

He remained unfazed by her annoyance. "Perhaps you would like to listen to my business proposition before you shout at me. You will only embarrass yourself further."

Maya couldn't believe his arrogance. "Embarrass myself? Last night, you embarrassed me in front of everybody by..."

She turned her gaze away as she felt her cheeks heat up at the thought of the kiss.

"Kissing you?" He inserted helpfully. "I got the impression that you enjoyed it as much as I did."

Maya's face flushed a hot pink. "What I meant was your proposal."

"Oh, so you enjoyed the kiss but it was the proposal that offended you?"

Maya tried to calm herself as this infuriating guy had her all tied up in knots. "What's offensive is that you should play a stupid prank like that in the first place!"

"It wasn't a prank. I was deadly serious. Why don't you sit down and let's talk about it like rational adults?"

She remained rooted to the spot. "It wasn't some kind of sick joke? You are serious? You want to marry me?"

Maya's shock made her totally oblivious to the fact that they had begun to attract amused looks from the tables around them.

Krish gave her a lopsided grin. "If you like, I'd be happy to go down on one knee and propose. Seems like everyone here is expecting me to do just that."

Maya glanced around and much to her embarrassment found people smiling at them. "Look Mister," she hissed at him. "I've had a lousy day so



far. So, if you are done with your fun and games, perhaps you could tell me why I've been summoned. Maybe then I could get on with my life... of course with your permission?" she added with withering sarcasm.

Krish raised his hands, as if in surrender. "Okay, Maya. Let's start over again, shall we?" He gave her a sincere smile. "And I apologise if I have embarrassed you. I promise you, that wasn't my intention at all."

She felt her heart thaw slightly as he added persuasively, "How about calling a truce with some cold coffee and chocolate muffins?"

How did he do it? She felt her anger fade away under the onslaught of his charm. Maybe he had an internal switch that he flipped – Arrogant Hot Shot one minute, Prince Charming the next...?

It felt churlish to refuse his peace offering and she grudgingly nodded. "Just cold coffee, please."

He snapped his fingers and within seconds a waiter put before her a tall glass of deliciously chilled coffee with a topping of choco-chips. Krish leaned towards her. "Now, would you like to hear my business proposal?"

She wished he wouldn't lean so close. Not only was her heart thundering away like a runaway train, but with his breath fanning the hair on her forehead, her mind was in danger of completely shutting down any rational thought. Shoot! Finally, her befuddled mind kicked in. "Business proposal? I thought you said marriage proposal!"

### Chapter Three

Krish was finally comfortable. Doing what he did best – deal making. Maya listened to him with increasing incredulity as he rattled off his proposal like he would a corporate presentation, complete with bullet points. All he needed was a projector and one of those laser pointers. But then, with those piercing dark eyes, he'd already hypnotised her. Problem was that as she focused on those oh-so-kissable lips and his sexy cleft chin, his words were being drowned by the sound of her own rapid-fire heartbeat. Forcing herself to concentrate, her jaw nearly dropped open as her brain kicked into gear. A job that masqueraded as a marriage! Sure, it was a job to die for. But marriage? Surely he didn't need to go that far?

"What you need is a landscape designer not a wife!" she exclaimed.

Krish looked at her intently. "There are two reasons for the marriage condition. One, what I am about to set up would be the most ambitious project of its kind in the country. I cannot and will not take the risk of details being leaked out to the media. You and I will work on this together as a two-member team. That way, if anything leaks out, I know who the culprit is." He paused, letting the words sink in. Then added with a serious look, "And I have a whole other presentation on what happens if you breach the contract."

Maya breathed in sharply. "And reason number two?"

"Amisha."

"Who?"

"Surya Mittal's daughter. My father is hell bent on marrying me off to her."

"I don't get it. You're not averse to a marriage of convenience with me. So, why not with Amisha?"

"There is one big difference," he glowered. "Expectations. Between us, it would be nothing but a business deal, with clear terms and conditions. But with Amisha, she would expect that our arranged marriage would at some stage lead to love. To a real marriage. To babies, commitment, the whole nine yards. That's not for me."

The full weight of Krish's offer hit Maya. What he wanted was an employee with benefits. One who could double up as a wife and allow him to play the field. How utterly convenient! "Oh, so you want your cake and be able to eat it too!"

His eyebrows shot up curiously. "What do you mean?"

"Isn't it obvious? No commitment to a wife leaves you free to play the

field with other women.”

A hard look came into his eyes even as he laughed out loud. “Already jealous? Don’t worry, Mona Lisa, I’m strictly a one-woman guy.”

Now, that raised a whole lot of very pertinent but troubling questions. As her imagination took flight with X-rated images of Krish’s naked torso on a king-sized bed, she reined in her thoughts.

Krish’s eyes strayed to her mouth as she bit the soft inside of her lower lip. His look was nothing short of a caress and she shivered as he said huskily, “Trust me, I intend to keep that promise.”

“But why me?” Her voice sounded breathless even to her ears.

“Why not?” he asked, as he gave her his lopsided grin, fully aware of the effect he was having on her. “You’re ambitious, you want the good life and you want it here and now. And as far as I can tell, falling in love and having babies are not in your scheme of things. But if they are, you’d better tell me right now.”

Maya couldn’t agree more with him. Love was a luxury she couldn’t afford. But he had no clue what was at the heart of her burning ambition! It was definitely best if he stayed clueless. “You hardly know me. Aren’t you worried that I might expose your grand plans to the press, in spite of any contract I’d signed? I’m sure the media would pounce at every little piece of gossip about the super-reclusive heir of the Dev empire and pay an extortionate amount for the privilege?”

Krish dramatically slapped his palm to his forehead. “Ah yes! Blackmail. Why didn’t I think of that? Okay, let’s say you go ahead and do it. Who do you think they’ll believe? The down-and-out woman, who has just been fired from her job and is looking for her fifteen minutes of fame by maligning—”

Eyes flashing, she cut him short. “That was you, wasn’t it? Did you think getting me fired would make me more amenable to your offer?”

Krish’s eyes narrowed shrewdly. “No, it wasn’t me. It was KD, and I’m truly sorry about that. But, to be utterly frank with you, it did work out to my advantage and I’m not one to let an opportunity like that slip by me.”

Before she could lash out again, he reached out and caught her hand. “Listen to me. You don’t know how ruthless KD can be. He won’t stop till he has either ruined your reputation, or run you out of this city, or both. Trust me, only I can protect you from him.”

Maya fumed at his arrogance. But he was right. KD was ruthless

alright. Who better than her to know that? Krish drove in his point forcefully. “You can’t change the past, Maya. But you have an opportunity to change your future. And if you’re smart, you’ll grab it.”

His words gave her a jolt. He could have been quoting verbatim from Papa’s diary. The jottings that she’d read and re-read for the last four years till every word was etched in her heart and mind. She had no choice but to grab every chance that she got. Whatever Krish’s motives might be for going through with this marriage of convenience, one thing was for sure—she would never again get such a golden opportunity to infiltrate the enemy’s lair.

She could still feel the shards of contempt that had pierced her heart when KD had thundered last evening—“You’re going to marry a girl like her?” How could his precious son marry a nobody! A riff-raff! A social pariah not worthy to grace his party! Fury filled every molecule of her being. Oh, how she would love to see his face when she walked into the Dev family home as his daughter-in-law. That would be the first step in her goal of getting justice for Papa. That was the only way his soul would rest in peace. And she would do anything for that... even if it meant tying the knot with the enemy’s son. Krish was right – you can’t change the past but she would damn well make sure that the Devs atoned for it.

Krish watched as emotions flitted across her expressive face. She had listened to him intently and he knew he had been right about her. She was ambitious. He had chosen his bait carefully and yet he wasn’t fully certain that she would bite. He couldn’t help but marvel at the way her golden brown eyes changed colour with her emotions. One minute they were soft and glowing, the next flashing with flecks of amber. He wondered if they would be chocolate-fudge brown when she was in the throes of passionate love-making. He felt himself going hard and immediately backed off mentally. It wasn’t a good idea to take that thought any further. He needed to keep this relationship businesslike.

Maya knew he’d glossed over his motives for going through with such a cold marital arrangement. But she wouldn’t press for details. As long as she was in control, there was nothing to worry about. She would never put her personal interests in the hands of a man – definitely not this arrogant devil! She looked at him defiantly and declared, “I have a couple of conditions of my own.”

“Let’s hear them,” he instructed.

“This marriage would be strictly in name only. Or, the deal is off.”

Krish laughed. The soundwaves reverberated inside her making her feel all warm and fuzzy.

“You mean, leave sex out of it?” Krish’s dark eyes seemed to pick out her body vibrations even before she could. “Are you absolutely sure about that?”

Maya seethed. She wished she could wipe that all-knowing look off his face. If only she didn’t feel this strong surge of attraction for him—but that was her secret to keep. “I’m sure you can find a discreet way of taking care of that side of things for yourself.” He clicked his tongue in mock disapproval. “You haven’t been paying attention, sweetheart.”

Maya was back to worrying her lower lip and Krish leaned across the table to run a finger across her mouth. “I’ve told you before that I’m a one-woman guy. And I don’t share what’s mine.”

Her lips tingled at his touch, even as his words held out a deep, velvety promise that made her breath catch. Breathe, Maya, breathe! She pulled away and stuttered: “I...I mean it... no sex, or the deal is off.”

The twinkle in Krish’s eyes belied his serious tone. “Look, I’m a reasonable guy. Let’s compromise. We can go with your condition for the first couple of weeks and then we will put it up for review. Fair enough?”

“I’m not going to change my mind,” she warned.

“We’ll see about that. Now, what’s the other condition?”

Maya grasped at the change of topic like a drowning person to a life jacket. “After your project is set up, there is no reason for us to stay married. Say, a year from now, we should file for a divorce.”

His response came hard and fast. “No way! This marriage is for keeps. Once we do the *saat pheras*, we stay married. Forever. No exit options. Is that clear?”

Maya stared at him in disbelief. His whole demeanour had undergone a transformation. Gone was the laid-back, sexy charm, and in its place was raw, emotion-filled intensity. His eyes burnt with a fiery determination that frankly scared her. If she didn’t know better, she would have mistaken his attitude for possessiveness.

She couldn’t help but wonder at the irony of it all—here was a guy who was offering her a sham marriage that came with a till-death-do-us-part clause. No exit options. If that was the price she had to pay to gain entry into KD’s world—so be it. She was certain that once she was inside the security barriers on enemy turf, she would find the evidence to bring her father’s

destroyer down. That would be her moment of triumph and it would also pave the way for her exit from this sham marriage. There was no way Krish would want to stay married to her once she ruined his father, and there was no other option open to her ...she'd made her choice and she would have to live with it. As for the rest, she would leave that to her destiny.

She picked up the pen that he'd placed on the table along with the legal contract. Grasping it tightly so as not to betray the slight tremor in her fingers, she signed on the dotted line. "There, it's done."

Signed. Sealed. Delivered. He relaxed and a wave of accomplishment washed over Krish as he put his signature on the document alongside hers. He had to give it to her. Few women would have had the guts to do what she had done, but then she had nothing to lose. She was on the threshold of a new life – one that was full of promise and opportunities. Honestly speaking, the scales were tipped in her favour. But he could afford to be generous. This deal was his only ticket to freedom. Freedom to lead his life the way he wanted to, without his father breathing down his neck and dictating his every move. As heir to the Dev empire, he would be condemned to live like a puppet on a string.

Like his mother had. But she had chosen to be a 'puppet', out of her love and devotion for a man who had no use for them. Like a forgotten old rag doll she would be dusted from time to time and brought out to play the role of beloved wife only to be thrust back to lead an isolated, lonely existence. Despite KD's repeated rejection of her, she'd never wavered from her chosen path. She had put her faith in the power of her love to transform KD. Sadly for her, that had never happened. And it had taught Krish an important life lesson – love was an overrated emotion that only brought tears and pain in its wake. He'd make sure that it never played any role in any of his relationships with women.

Sex of course was a different matter. And he could feel it in his bones that Maya, despite her desire for a platonic marriage, was attracted to him. He could feel the vibes; the crackle of electricity between them. She could deny it all she liked, but he could read her body language. The way her eyes changed colour – turning soft and liquid – when he touched her. Just the thought of her all soft, warm and chocolatey-eyed in his arms was enough to make him hard with lust for her. It wasn't going to be easy to keep his libido on a leash, but he'd do it until she was ready to concede that a platonic marriage was not what she truly wanted.

It was a done deal. He leaned back and caught the eye of the waiter who rushed forward with a bucket of champagne. As the waiter popped the bottle and poured the champagne for them, Krish clinked his glass against hers and murmured softly, “Congratulations to us.”

The next couple of days were a whirlwind of activity. Krish had arranged a session for her with celebrity fashion designer Ritu Kumar. Maya felt like a Bollywood superstar with a whole team of girls waiting on her, taking her measurements, fussing over her, asking her opinion on fabric, colour, jewelry, lingerie, makeup, accessories. They modelled a mind-boggling array of ensembles, for every imaginable occasion that a new bride may find herself in, while she sipped on a cooling mango drink in luxurious comfort. She was mesmerised by the elegant Tussar silks, the rich Banarasi brocades, the gorgeous organzas and the splendid chiffons.

And then came the most stunning piece: the wedding ensemble. The rich red-and-gold *lehenga* in gorgeous silk with delicate *zardozi* embroidery on the blouse was a handcrafted masterpiece. The elegant gold jewelry and the gauzy chiffon *dupatta* with just a touch of shimmering gold on it added the glitter that could turn an ordinary girl into a princess at her own fairytale wedding. Maya gasped at the exquisite ensemble. It was perfect for an ecstatic bride starting a new life on a rock-solid foundation of love...not for some faux bride in a made-for-revenge marriage!

Wardrobe makeovers were no walk in the park. After hours of mixing and matching, endless trials and alterations, a tuck here, a stitch there, Maya finally had a wardrobe full of stunning clothes, accessories and shoes that would put Bollywood diva Kareena Kapoor’s trousseau to shame. Next was an appointment at a five-star spa-salon. All the stress melted away as the masseuse massaged her tense muscles with fragrant oils. The aromatherapy worked its magic even as professional hands styled her hair, gave her a facial, manicure and pedicure.

Her palms and feet were covered with intricate henna tattoos. She smiled enigmatically as the henna artist sighed that the rich, deep colours of the tattoos on her smooth, soft skin were proof that her groom loved her deeply. As if! She stifled the laugh that bubbled up at the thought of her impatient, supposedly besotted groom cooling his heels while she was undergoing the bridal treatment!

As she emerged from the spa, all aglow and picture perfect, Krish took

in his breath sharply. He wanted to whisk her off and make long, languorous, passionate love to this goddess standing in front of him. He fought back his desire to snatch her up right there and then and give her a hard, desire-filled kiss. He didn't want to feel like this.

"How do I look?" she twirled, her silky shoulder length hair falling perfectly around her heart-shaped face, her eyes all sparkly bright. She was surprised to see his shuttered look as he curtly said, "You look fine. We're getting late. Come on."

Maya took another quick look at Krish's face as he drove through the traffic. She wondered if he had already begun to regret this whole charade.

She looked out of the window as they passed by the India Gate grounds, where a few urchins were diving into the pond to beat the heat. She envied their gay abandon and their in-the-moment happiness. It reminded her of the brief periods of joy she had shared with her father. Those rare days when her father's gentle and fun-loving nature would surface from under the haze of his alcohol-induced gloom. Those were idyllic days—Papa had taken up a job at a local school where he taught eighth graders. When he would return home in the afternoons, they would set off to the riverside. She would swim in the gentle waters while he caught fish for dinner. Later, he would make the most scrumptious meal: rice, fish curry and *paayesh*, the wonderful rice pudding that she so loved.

They pulled into the driveway of the five-star hotel where Krish had arranged to meet the Brahmin priest who would conduct the wedding rituals. Krish had already reserved the hotel lawns, which would serve as the venue for the marriage. Maya was surprised to see that the lawns had already been decorated with red-and-gold silk and papier maché banners and curtains. The tastefully done decorations contributed to the feel of a traditional wedding *mandap* even as they provided privacy from prying eyes. As Krish instructed the hotel manager on the arrangements, a portly, shaven-headed Brahmin priest in spotless white *dhoti-kurta* arrived. The Brahmin handed over a list of items that were needed for the wedding ceremony to Krish before bustling away. Maya sighed with relief. Finally, she could go back to her *barsaati* and spend a few quiet hours by herself. But she was surprised when Krish led her into the hotel lobby.

"Where to now?" she asked him in bewilderment as he walked towards the bank of elevators.

He punched the button and said coolly, "Suite No. 103." As the



elevator doors swished open, he offered politely, “After you, Maya,”

Once they were settled in a plush suite and Krish had ordered some coffee and snacks, she turned to him, “Do you mind telling me what we’re doing here?”

Krish sank back into the soft leather-bound sofa, an enigmatic expression on his face. Unable to contain her irritation she said, “I still have to go back to my apartment, pack my stuff and take care of some urgent chores. So if we’re all done, here...” She got up to leave but Krish caught her arm and pulled her towards him. She landed on the sofa right next to him, as he said, “One question at a time, my beautiful bride. As to why we’re here... we need to discuss logistics.”

There was a knock on the door and a bell boy walked in bearing all their shopping bags.

Krish continued, as he tipped the bell boy, “It’s just more convenient for us to change into our wedding finery here.”

Maya nodded, wondering why she hadn’t thought of that herself, “So, are we done now?”

He turned towards her and she felt a frisson of energy zap through her as his thigh touched hers. “No, not yet. We still have to work on our story.”

“Story?”

Krish gave her a sardonic smile. “Yes, the story of our whirlwind romance. We don’t want anyone to think our wedding is just a cold and calculating business transaction, do we?”

The buzz of warmth evaporated in a flash. “You mean we need to come up with something that will convince your father?”

“And every member of the Dev family. The minute they hear about our marriage, they will descend on us... and you’d better be prepared. They have interrogation skills that would put hardened cops to shame.”

Oh God! She hadn’t thought about that. She had been so focused on KD that she had clean forgotten that the Devs would have an army of snotty rich relatives. Feigning sympathy for KD’s misfortune at getting an unsuitable daughter-in-law, they would fawn or fret. The very thought threw up a vision of vultures swooping down on a carcass. And she was the carcass!

Krish didn’t miss her look of apprehension but he knew she could handle herself. “So, any ideas about where we met?”

Shaking off the vision, which felt like a bad omen, she said: “Since you are the ideas guy, why don’t you come up with something? I’ll just go along

like the docile little bride I'm supposed to be."

Krish rolled his eyes. "Docile? You'll never manage to keep that facade up, so don't bother."

For the rest of the evening they traded plausible situations for their oh-so-romantic meeting and falling-madly-in-love storyline and came up with something that would hold up under the scrutiny of his suspicious relatives. Maya squirmed at the fact that her new life was starting on a foundation of lies and deceit. But then, this was not about her. It was about Papa whom the Devs had ruined in their lust for power and money. And to get to the truth, she would lie till she went blue in the face!

After brainstorming several alternatives, Krish was finally satisfied with the story they had put together. His phone buzzed. Krish listened for a moment, before he instructed: "Come up to Suite #103." Within a couple of minutes, Rohan was at the door. "Maya, meet Rohan Shetty who works for me. Rohan, this is my fiancée."

Rohan's handshake was polite and his smile genuine. "Pleased to meet you, Ma'am and congratulations." Maya smiled stiffly at the other man.

Krish turned to Rohan, "Have you brought the stuff that I asked you to?"

"Yes, Sir." He placed a leather case on the coffee table. "It's in there..."

Krish instructed Rohan to pick up Maya from her house the next morning before dismissing him. And then, as Maya looked on curiously, he took out a little jewel box from the case. An exquisite diamond ring sat inside – a delicate cluster of sparkling diamonds encased in a platinum band.

Krish slipped it on her ring finger. A little fazed, a little overwhelmed, Maya looked into Krish's face and caught something soft, something warm in his deep, dark eyes.

"This belonged to my mother." His voice was husky with emotion, and he looked at Maya, with warm, fuzzy eyes. But within seconds the warmth disappeared, replaced by a determined look. "I expect you to honour this ring and the lady who wore this before you."

The ring felt strange on her finger. For the last two days, the preparations for her new life had an unreal, almost dreamy quality, about them. It was almost as if it were happening to somebody else and she was just a bystander who was swept away in the craziness of wedding preparations. After the awe came the shock – there was nothing fairytale like about her

situation. The cold clasp of the ring quickly brought her back to reality.

As he took his hand away from hers, she felt the loss of his warm, strong hands. He was again his usual self. "Time to go home, " he suggested. "Tomorrow is a big day. You'd better get your beauty sleep." Maya rose from the sofa, suddenly feeling tired. The day's events had wrung out her emotions and she longed to lie down in her own bed, disconnect from the world and fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Krish suddenly pulled her towards him, close. Too close for comfort. "I hope you're not having second thoughts about going through with this, Maya."

She could feel the blood coursing through her veins, pumping energy into every tired cell in her body. She pulled away and her voice was cold as she waved her ringed-finger at him insolently, "The deal is done, and I have this as a reminder, do I not?"

"Make sure you don't forget it. Let's go then, my lady of illusions."

On the ride back home, Maya pondered over the irony of Krish's words. Lady of Illusions, he'd called her. She definitely had none. The time for second thoughts too had passed. During the last four years she'd dreamt up different scenarios about how she would avenge her father but never had she imagined that her life would take such a strange turn. In less than eight hours, she would enter the home of her enemy as his daughter-in-law! She'd made her choices and there was no looking back. There were bound to be consequences for the path that she'd chosen but now was not the time to think about them.

Krish cut the engine outside her house and turned to her. "Rohan will pick you up at 8.45 AM. Sharp. I'm not one of those who subscribes to Indian Standard Time. So make sure you are ready to go when Rohan arrives, please."

She ground her teeth at his bossiness, got out of the car, and banged the door shut. "Goodnight."

Krish responded with a sardonic "sweet dreams" before turning the car around and whizzing past, leaving a trail of dust and leaves in his wake.

Maya trudged up three floors to the *barsaati* that had been home to her for the last four years. No sooner had she keyed open the door than a hot blast greeted her. Even with the cooler working at full speed, the walls of her room were as hot as the insides of a furnace. There would be no sleep for her tonight. She might as well pack her stuff and keep everything ready so that

she could just hand it over to the landlord before Rohan came to pick her up. “Sweet dreams?” As if! Life had never been dreamy or sweet for her. And it seemed as if it was going to get a whole lot more nightmarish given the challenge that she had set herself up for.

She removed the old yellowing plastic photo-frame that was hanging on the wall. It was taken on the morning of her tenth birthday. She wore a lovely rani-pink, frilly dress that her mother had stitched for her. She remembered how excited she had been... Her mother had organized a little birthday party for all her friends from school and the neighbourhood. She had even ordered a strawberry cake. She had looked at it a million times during the day, wanting to taste a bit of the icing. And her mother would shoo her away, “Not now, Baby! You will cut the cake later in the evening after Papa comes back from office.”

She had pouted. “But Ma, how can I wait for so long?”

Her mother laughed. “Have patience, sweetheart.”

She had been patient. Very patient. Her friends had arrived for the party by 7 PM. But there was no sign of Papa. And he had promised her he would come home early. She would anxiously run to the balcony every few minutes to check. Ma too was getting impatient, even though she maintained a calm exterior, chatting with her friends’ mothers who had all come to attend the party. She checked the clock again and again – but it seemed to be teasing her, the arms moving ever so slowly. Finally, the doorbell rang.

She rushed to the door. There was Papa. Frazzled. His forehead covered in sweat. His spectacles askew and his hair ruffled. Gone was his usual smile and “Where’s my beautiful Princess?” greeting. She rushed to him, “Papa, you are late for my party!” But he pushed her aside, and spoke urgently to Ma. “We’ve got to talk.”

They rushed into the bedroom. A few minutes later, the door opened and an anxious Ma ushered out the guests. Apologising profusely. “I’m sorry, my husband is not well. You will have to leave. I’m really sorry.”

Maya was in tears. “Ma, what about my cake?”

Ma shushed her. “Sweetie, listen to me...we will cut the cake later....”

Suddenly with a loud banging, the door burst open. Three burly policemen stormed in. “We have an arrest warrant for Subodh Shome. Where is he?”

An audible gasp went around as friends, relatives and neighbours gawked. Horrified, Maya watched as they cuffed Papa and dragged him

away. Ma wept as she ran down the stairs to the police van. She rushed behind Ma. The policemen shoved him in the van, and Papa gave her a shame-faced look before turning away. As the neighbours looked on, whispering among themselves, she clung to Ma's sari. Ma wept inconsolably and she wanted to cry too.

As the police van pulled away, she tore herself from her mother and ran down the streets, Ma's screams fading into the background. She kept running till the van disappeared from her sight. She was faint, desperate, lonely. A bell chimed in the distance. She cried aloud, "Papa!" A sudden burst of white light appeared as she saw Papa walking towards her in a white robe spotted with blood stains. His face was smiling but wrinkled. She rushed to him: "Papa!" But he kept walking past her. And then she saw ten, twelve, no many more, vultures swoop down towards her, wings flapping. Her heart pounded loudly. She covered her face in fright and screamed, "Papa!" But he was gone...all that remained was a path strewn with bright, vivid, lavender roses.

## Chapter Four

Heart pounding, Maya woke up. Totally disoriented. Soaked in sweat. The sunlight was streaming in through the curtain-less windows. The pounding though had not stopped. With a start she realised someone was banging on the door and calling out her name. Oh no! The wedding! She checked her mobile. 8.50 AM. And three missed calls. She rushed to the door, opened it a crack.

An anxious Rohan heaved a sigh of relief. “Madam, we are going to be late....”

Smiling apologetically, she said, “So sorry, Rohan. I will be with you in five minutes.”

Before he could respond, she shut the door and sped to the bathroom. Tepid water shot out of the creaky showerhead. The water brought her back to life, washing away the last vestiges of her troubled dream. She had been up for most of the night, had packed her stuff into the small suitcase. It had been too hot to sleep, especially after the power blackout sometime after midnight. She must have dozed off during the wee hours of the morning. And the bizarre dream about her father... she still couldn’t get over it.

She pulled on a pair of jeans and T-shirt. There would be just about enough time to get into her bridal finery at the hotel suite. She grabbed her suitcase and her handbag and took one last look around the bare room. She would miss this place – it had been her home and she had felt at peace coming back here in the evenings. In the early days, though, she had often been depressed and lonely in a strange city with no friends or family. That’s when she had taken up dancing. She would put on some music and let herself go—immerse herself in the beat and physical energy till every dark thought had been erased from her mind.

A car honked impatiently. Maya, you’re running late! She shut the door quietly and ran down the flight of stairs. Pulling out an envelope containing the cheque for the rent, she slipped in the key to the *barsaati* and pushed it under the door of the landlord’s ground floor apartment. She dashed across the street and got into the passenger seat of Rohan’s car.

The wedding *mandap* at the hotel lawns was bedecked with flowers. Strands of marigold garlands were strung out on the canopy atop a small raised platform where the wedding rituals would be conducted. The shaven-headed Brahmin priest was not to be messed with: he was taking his own

sweet time arranging the flowers, herbs and essential ingredients like rice, turmeric, the auspicious vermilion, and the myriad other objects that went into solemnising a Hindu wedding.

Krish's patience was at breaking point. At this rate, the wedding rituals would go on for hours and there was still no sign of the bride. Finally, the arrangements were completed and the pundit declared, "You may call the bride now."

"About time!" Krish said under his breath, pulling out his phone from his pocket. Had she decided to renege on their agreement? He went cold. But then he stopped in his tracks. There she was – walking towards him, the picture perfect Indian bride. Her head covered by the gauzy chiffon dupatta; the shimmering red and gold *lehenga* swaying as her hips moved gracefully. The silver anklets tinkling softly, the *jhumkas* on her ear lobes caressing her cheeks, the red and gold bangles on her henna-tattooed arms, the white flowers in her plaited hair and the jewel-encrusted *tikli* nestled on her forehead... She looked like an ethereal 16th century Rajput princess on the day of her *swayamvar*. Shaking away the unfamiliar tug that squeezed his chest, Krish approached Maya.

She looked up to find herself staring at Krish, impeccably dressed in a cream-coloured raw silk *kurta-churidar*. The red shawl and the turban on his head made him look like a dashing prince, ready to wed his princess. She was suddenly overcome with shyness. She almost felt like a real bride on the threshold of a new life with her chosen groom.

"The beautiful bride is here finally! Now, can we get on with it? Or do you intend to take the rest of the day to walk to the *mandap*?"

His impatient words shattered her momentary illusion. What was she thinking? As a child, she had been fascinated by the tale of the dashing Rajput prince Prithviraj Chauhan who defied his family, rode his golden steed into an enemy kingdom to carry away his beloved Princess Samyukta away to happily-ever-after land. She was no Samyukta, nor was Krish her Prithviraj! Casting away the thought from her mind, she resolutely made her way to the *mandap* to sit in front of the *havan* – the holy fire that would solemnise their marriage according to the Hindu Arya Samaj rites.

The flames leapt up as Krish and she poured offerings of rice, ghee and assorted condiments into the holy fire at regular intervals, to the chants of the pundit's mantras. After the pundit tied the ends of her dupatta and Krish's shawl together, they took the *saat pheras* – the seven steps. As they walked

around the fire, the pundit invoked the gods to bless them with the seven most precious needs – nourishment, strength, wealth, health, progeny, luck and a loving relationship. Rohan and the pundit's assistant showered them with grains of rice and rose petals, symbolic of blessings.

Maya's heart swelled with longing for her parents. How her mother would have fawned with pride to see her darling daughter as a bride. How her father would have shed tears to see his precious princess being wed. As her eyes welled with unshed tears, she sneaked a peek at Krish – her husband. Was he thinking about his mother? It was obvious that he had been very close to her. And no matter how much Krish rebelled against his father, surely he must have wanted him and the rest of his family to be there at his wedding? Even if theirs was a faux marriage. On the other hand, could there be anything more real than this? Taking vows before the holy fire, streaking her hair with *sindoor*, and claiming her as his wife for the next seven lives?

A thought that surprisingly enough did not fill her with dread. She looked into Krish's eyes and could see the reflection of the flame glowing there. He looked down at her and fed her a sweetmeat, "So, Mrs Maya Krish Dev, here's to a long and happy marriage." His voice was sincere and his eyes had a warm glow in them, which ignited a spark in her heart. She was lost for words but her stomach issued a rumble of protest.

Krish laughed. "Seems like the bride is hungry. And as a husband, it's my duty to provide nourishment, isn't that right?"

A beaming Rohan announced, "Sir, Ma'am, lunch is ready to be served in the Banquet Room."

A sumptuous meal, comprising of several courses, was served to the newly married couple – ranging from the most deliciously cooked vegetarian dishes, melt in the mouth meat and chicken curries, a delicately spiced chicken biryani, flavourful mutton vindaloo and the most amazing array of syrupy sweetmeats. As Maya tucked in heartily, Krish watched her with indulgent amusement. "I have never seen such a ravenous bride."

Her mouth full, she glanced at him, as if to say something but thought better of it and continued demolishing the food on her plate. As she polished off the last crumb of the sweet and creamy *kheer*, she noticed Krish take a second helping of the syrupy *gulab jamun*. "Aha, so you have a sweet tooth!"

Krish smiled sheepishly, "Never could resist GJs."

Sighing contentedly she said, "That was truly the most amazing meal I have had in a long time."



Krish looked at her, wonder-struck. “And you had a pretty decent appetite to do justice to it. Wonder of wonders, you aren’t worried about losing your figure!”

She shrugged nonchalantly. “If I need to shed pounds, I will jog. But wasting such delicious food would be downright criminal!”

Krish’s throaty laugh made her nerve ends tingle. “You know, you’re an amazing woman, full of surprises.” And added in a husky whisper, “I can’t wait to unwrap the others that you have in store for me.”

The fire in his eyes belied his teasing voice. It held a promise of passion that found an echo deep within her. She looked away, trying to steel her mind against the temptation. But her body rebelled, as it responded with sparks of fire of its own, spreading heat and warmth that crept its way right up to her cheeks in a fiery blush.

Tearing her eyes away from his gaze, she murmured, “I need to change first before we leave.”

As Maya made good her escape to the washroom, she pondered over the way she was reacting to Krish. There was something in his eyes that had the heat of fire – at times they were all aglow like embers, at times alight with the flame of mischief, and always there was a hint of controlled, fiery passion. She wondered how they would blaze when he finally let go of that control. The traitorous thought sent a hot wave of sensation down to her innermost core, as she doused her face with cold water.

As Krish deftly manoeuvred the Prius through the city traffic towards the green verge beyond the cityscape of malls, multiplexes and multi-storeyed apartment blocks, Maya marvelled at the sight of the flame of forests. Blood red flowers on trees that were stark and bald. The hotter the Delhi summers, the brighter the gulmohur blossoms. The sprawling farmhouses were spaced out between huge acres of farmland. The houses themselves, nestled deep in greenery behind formidable walls topped by barbed wire were private and secure. These were the farmhouses of the rich and famous – and some even went the extra mile by posting gunmen to protect their property and privacy. Turning into a narrow track off the main road, the Prius passed by acres of fenced-off sheds topped with the distinctive green covering sported by hothouses. The air was different – it had the feeling of space and greenery but also of seclusion and secrecy. For all the serene beauty, there was an edge of menace that chilled Maya’s heart. She

felt a bit like Alice crashing into an alien wonderland. A knob of tension gnawed away at her insides.

To shake off the ominous feeling, she asked, “These are the Dev Group hothouses?”

“Yes. In total, the DGE hothouses are spread over more than 100 acres. And these supply cut flowers to destinations abroad as well as to the rest of India. After you have settled in, I will show you around. Most of these hothouses, though not all, are completely climate controlled. I’m sure you would find it interesting to check out some of the exotic floral species that are grown. Though honestly speaking, this is one of the least profitable of the DGE businesses and its potential hasn’t been harnessed the way it could have been.”

“Spoken like a true management consultant,” she muttered.

Krish simply shrugged. “Yes, but I don’t do consultancy for the DGE.”

Maya was taken aback. “Why not?”

“KD believes in hands-on management and he has no faith in management consultants.”

“Not even you, the heir to his empire?” Maya was incredulous.

Krish’s eyes were focused on the road ahead. “Technically, I would be his heir. Realistically, I would be little more than a puppet on a string.”

“So if you’re not interested in taking on the DGE empire, wouldn’t it be best for all if you simply walked away?”

A nerve throbbed in his jaw. “Let’s just say, it’s complicated. And leave it at that.”

The adamant set of his jaw, the dark look in his eyes, telegraphed a stay-away-from-this-subject message. She was more than happy not to interfere into father-son issues. The less involved she got, the better for her. She was not here to stay despite signing his marriage contract – and maintaining her distance would be the wisest thing to do.

They passed a curving driveway with perfectly manicured lawns on both sides. Up ahead was an opulent stone-façade farmhouse—no, scratch that—a palatial mansion. Right adjacent to it stood a smaller bungalow built in the British Raj style. Krish waved at the mansion as he drove past. “That’s the main house – my father lives there, and that’s where all the entertaining is done. The bungalow is his office.”

“But I thought the DGE headquarters were located in Connaught Place,” she said, bemused.

“Yes, this is more of a home-office. For the times when KD doesn’t want to make the trip into Delhi. Besides, the horticulture business is handled out of this office.”

Krish kept driving further away from the mansion and turned into a narrow tree-lined path. “When I came back to India after finishing my studies, I had no intentions of living anywhere close to my father. After squabbling over it for months, we finally came to a compromise. I would have my own private quarters within the complex and we would meet each other only when we needed to.” What Krish didn’t tell Maya was that KD was wont to forget his promises. Recently, he had become more demanding and had begun to seek his son’s direct involvement in the DGE group. Then came the pressures to tie the knot and the endless arguments about duties and responsibilities of the “heir to the Dev empire”. But at the heart of these tussles was just one issue. His father would do anything to ensure that he stayed in control but Krish was damned if he would give up his independence. And now, he had finally outmanoeuvred his father—and reclaimed his life. He couldn’t wait to see his reaction when he walked into his mansion this evening with Maya by his side.

Krish took a turn and as the car crunched the gravel underneath, Maya saw nestled among the greenery a compact little cottage. The stone exterior was covered in green ivy. It was something straight out of a Homes and Gardens magazine. Elegant and yet homey with none of the ostentatious architecture of the main mansion. Its striking simplicity made it look more like a cosy holiday hideaway. She couldn’t help but gasp in admiration at the perfectly serene surroundings. She stepped out of the car and took in the fragrance of the bougainvillea – climbing in a profusion of pink-and-white flowers over the awning on the front porch.

An enigmatic smile played on his handsome face. “I would love to say ‘welcome home’. But I guess it’s too early for you to consider it home.”

“It’s.... beautiful,” she whispered as she looked around.

Suddenly there was a rustle of leaves as something came hurtling through the greenery at them.

“Uh-oh. I should have warned you...” But before he could finish his sentence, a huge ball of slobbering red fur, flapping ears, and sparkling eyes hurled itself at Krish. For a split second, Maya was taken aback at the sudden assault but soon recovered when she realised that the huge dog was trying to bark, dance, slobber and pant all at the same time.

“Baloo! Come here, boy!” Krish called out, laughing, as he wrestled playfully with the ecstatic dog. “Oh, I have missed you too!”

Krish struggled to bring the hysterically happy dog under control. “Enough now. Calm down. Okay, good dog! Stay, Baloo! Stay!” A few more commands and the dog quietened down, before turning its attention to Maya. If it weren’t for Krish’s restraining hand on the dog’s collar, she was certain he would have launched himself on her and given her an equally enthusiastic licking.

“Maya, this is Baloo...he is an excitable goof. Has a habit of knocking people down....but is the gentlest soul ever born on the face of this earth.”

And then he suddenly looked at Maya as if the thought just crossed his mind. “I hope you’re not scared of dogs.”

Maya shook her head, “No...I am not. What breed is he?” She sat down on her haunches. “Hey Baloo!” That was all the encouragement he needed. Pulling away from Krish, the dog was soon slobbering all over her. And she was laughing and wrestling to keep him away from licking every inch of her face.

“Irish Setter,” grinned Krish. “That does it... you have got yourself one slobbering devotee for life.”

“I think I can live with that,” she laughed.

Krish felt his heart twang yet again. She was definitely one hell of a surprise package. What would she surprise him with next, he wondered uneasily.

A young girl in her early twenties came rushing out and rescued them both from Baloo’s crazy antics.

Krish led the way to the cottage. Just as they were about to cross the threshold, the same girl came forward with a traditional thali – a brass plate holding an earthen lamp and assorted colourful condiments—and a pot full of rice grains. “Bhaiyaa, Bhabhi, one minute.”

She placed the shiny brass pot bearing the auspicious sign of ‘Om’ in vermilion on the threshold. It was filled to the brim with rice grains. “Bhabhi, this is your first time in your new home.” Maya knew what she had to do. She had to topple over the pot of rice with her right foot, an act signifying that the new bride would never want for anything in her marital home. As she crossed the threshold, the girl put a tiny mark of vermilion paste on her forehead and on Krish’s before stepping aside. Krish smiled and pushed some money into the girl’s hands.

“Maya, this is Rani and if you need anything, just ask her.”

Rani bobbed her head enthusiastically. “Yes, Bhabhi,” she said in broken English. “I help. You ask only.”

Krish winked at Maya and said, “Rani only talks in English.”

Rani beamed at Maya. “I bringing mango *lassi*. You eating?”

Maya smiled. “Thank you, Rani. I would love to drink some mango *lassi*.”

Rani slapped her forehead with her hand. “Ah, yes, drinking *lassi*, eating *roti*, no?” And before Maya could reply she whizzed off towards the kitchen.

Maya looked around the large, bright, airy living room. Even without air-conditioning, the room was cool and comfortable. There were indoor plants everywhere and a stark simplicity about the teakwood décor. Krish gave her a quick tour of the two-storeyed house – which included apart from several en suite bedrooms, a modern gym, a library stacked with books, a workstation, a TV room leading to a sit-out area on the veranda overlooking the gardens and a kitchen stashed with every mod-con imaginable. Every creature comfort that she could dream of was available. Finally, he led her to her suite of rooms, overlooking the gardens. Looking at the comfortable double bed, she wondered where his rooms were. And in a flash, he had read her thoughts.

“I am just across the corridor.” And then with a hint of mischief, “You’re most welcome to share my rooms, if you like.”

A hot blush crept up her face. “No, thanks, I will be perfectly fine here.”

“It’s an open offer. Feel free to change your mind...anytime.”

Maya’s heart had started an erratic rat-a-tat at his husky, sexy offer and she desperately tried to change the topic. “Who looks after the gardens? Rani?”

Krish gave her a knowing look. “Rani’s father, Hari. Okay, I will leave you to your own devices. If you need anything, just let Rani know. And oh, I almost forgot. Tonight you get to meet your pa-in-law at dinner.”

Touching his lips to her hand in a feather-soft kiss, he said, “Stick close to me, and from time to time make sure to give me long loving glances...and you will do fine.”

She pulled her hand away with a jolt. “Right... the just-married lovey-dovey couple act. How could I forget?”

“8 PM. Be ready.” Blowing her a kiss, he turned on his heel and left.

It was almost as if with Krish’s departure, the colours had suddenly gotten muted. The sunny warmth was replaced by a creepy chill that made Maya shiver. She dreaded the thought of facing up to KD in a house full of hostile people. Krish, it seemed, was her only ally. As if! He had made it quite clear that he expected her to play the role of an adoring bride. And she had better, or else KD would kick her off his turf in double quick time.

A sudden wave of nausea came over her. What if she lost her nerve? What if KD saw through her? Taking a deep breath, she shook her head vehemently. She grabbed her purse and pulled out Papa’s diary, which she always carried with her. Opening it to a random page, she read the words that her father had jotted down. The pages were frayed but the words were still as evocative as when Maya had first read them:

*How do I rid myself of the shadow of KD? I have tried and I have failed. How I wish God would just take me away. But then what would happen to my sweet little Maya?*

Even in his darkest days, his thoughts had been about her. She closed the diary and held it to her heart. *You have to do it for Papa!*

A knock on the door heralded Rani’s arrival with a glass of delicious mango *lassi* and a plate of savouries. She welcomed the girl’s intrusion but not even Rani’s exuberant Hinglish chatter could divert her mind from the impending evening. Maya tried to focus on the job of selecting her evening wear and decided on a pair of silk turquoise blue harem pants with a cream-coloured halter blouse with delicate Kashmiri embroidery work on it. Rani greeted her choice with a delighted squeal. “Bhabhi, this will look *ekdum* beautiful on you. You will make Monica Madam go green....”

Before Maya could ask who Monica Madam was, Rani realized that she had crossed a line. She stuck out her tongue and excused herself. “In that dress, you looking like *pari* – no, no – fairy! I going now. Bye-bye!”

Rani’s enthusiasm had put brought a smile to her lips. But would fairy-wear be adequate armour for the hostile gunfire that she was about to face?

## Chapter Five

At night, the mansion looked even more grand and imposing than it had during the day. The stamp of ostentation was all around. From the heavy brocade furnishings, the antique Louis XIV furniture to the thick Persian carpets and the chandeliers on the ceiling. All eyes turned towards them as soon as they stepped into the hall of the mansion. Maya couldn't suppress a shiver of apprehension. Krish felt the fleeting reaction and caught her hand in his, weaving his fingers through hers. "Relax!" he murmured into her ear.

"Oh, I didn't know it was going to be a party," she said.

"No, this is the way it is every night. It's nothing special. I guess my father can't stand his own company." Krish's voice was tinged with sarcasm. Lifting her chin with his finger to look deep into her kohl-lined eyes, he said, "You look like a million bucks. Let's go get them." Her heart fluttered wildly as she gave him a brief smile.

Krish's hand on her back felt steady and firm as he guided her towards a group of people. These were some of KD's closest friends, associates and relatives. She could see the curiosity in their eyes as Krish introduced her to them. His charming manner soon put everybody at ease and their hostility remained sheathed as he put on a flawless performance of the besotted bridegroom.

For a moment even she was dazzled. But she recovered soon enough when he whispered, "Put some heart into your smile, sweetheart!"

A shrill female voice broke through. "Krrrrrrish!!!"

Maya looked on curiously as Krish's face hardened and a nerve in his jaw throbbed. Coming straight at them was a huge mass of shiny, shimmering stuff with a voice shrill enough to give a banshee an inferiority complex. Monica Madan, one-time Bollywood wannabe superstar whose claim to fame were some sizzling hot numbers for B-grade movies, had clearly lost her battles with age and bulge. Her huge bulk covered with blinding bling, she thundered past Maya and yanked Krish in a bear hug that would have knocked the breath out of anyone who was not as tall or muscular as he was.

"My naughty, naughty Krish! You got married and didn't even tell your Monica Aunty! I'm so hurt."

Batting her heavily mascaraed eyes, she miraculously squeezed out a couple of tears, without smudging any of her heavy eye makeup. Dabbing a tissue to her eye ever so delicately she sniffled, "Never mind, Krish beta. All is forgiven. How can I stay angry with my one and only Krish, no?"

Krish cringed away from the mountainous woman shedding crocodile tears. “Maya and I wanted a quiet wedding. There’s no reason why you or anyone else should feel hurt. Maya, meet Monica Madan, a one-time Bollywood star and VVIP in the Dev household.”

Unscathed by Krish’s sarcasm, Monica turned her full attention and girth towards Maya.

“Trust the Dev men to pick only the most beautiful women,” she declared after she had given Maya a top-to-toe appraisal. With the flair of a practised drama queen, she tossed her blonde hair that had probably cost her several hours and a bucketful of cash at some super-exclusive salon, she complained, “But they are also notorious for their short attention span.”

“You have no cause for complaint on that score,” Krish shot back. “Your reign has outlasted that of every other woman in KD’s life.”

Krish’s eyes held an accusation that would have sent anyone with less tenacity than Monica running for cover. “That’s because no one else has loved your father as much as I.”

Krish’s face hardened into a mask as his eyes glowed with rage. “If only you knew the meaning of love.”

The air crackled with tension. Maya could tell that the hostilities between Monica and Krish had a long, tortuous history. Krish’s shuttered down face betrayed his angst and for some strange reason Maya’s heart reached out to him. She didn’t want him to lose face in front of this woman who reeked of guile and cunning from every pore of her being. Nor did she want him to become the victim of salacious gossip among KD’s cronies, as they hung on to every word. Edging closer to him so that her body was touching his, she linked her arm possessively in his. “When I fell in love with Krish, it was I who did the ‘picking’.” She pouted coquettishly at him, “As for attention span, you’re not worried that I’m going to lose interest in you any time soon, are you, darling?”

A murmur of appreciative laughter defused the tension as Krish’s rage-filled eyes turned soft with amusement. He nuzzled her neck lovingly making her toes curl. “I am at your mercy, my lovely Maya!”

A young woman who was standing closest to them beamed at Maya and put her hand out for a high-five. “Good on you, Maya. And you Krish, you better watch out. It looks like you have met your match.”

Maya did a high-five with her new unnamed ally as Monica shot her a nasty look and harrumphed away to find solace among her friends.



“Nats, I didn’t stand a chance,” said Krish. “By the way, this is my cousin Nats, sometimes also called Wild Natasha.”

Natasha hugged Maya and said, “Krish, you have finally done me proud. Welcome to the Dev *parivar*, Maya!” Adding sotto voce to Maya, “We’re one family that can put all those soap opera ones on TV to shame.”

“And here comes the patriarch,” added Krish cynically. KD had stepped into the hall and was being greeted by Monica, with a display of affection that would have done any self-respecting Bollywood diva proud. “We’d better go and pay our respects. Nats, don’t disappear. We need to catch up.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not about to disappear anytime soon. I just can’t miss out on how KD Uncle is going to react to his sassy *bahu*,” said Nats, giving Maya a supportive wink.

Krish guided Maya towards KD across the room. Maya’s hands felt clammy and a strange sensation gripped her. Anticipation battled with dread as she gulped down the bile that rose to her throat. Never for a moment had she thought that she would come face to face with KD as his daughter-in-law. There was something to be said about destiny. It worked in ways that truly boggled the mind. For now, she had the upper hand. And she had to make sure it stayed that way. She watched as Monica whispered into his ears, and KD turned his attention towards her and Krish. Maya mentally shook herself. Don’t panic. Don’t forget, this is for Papa. Now, breathe!

Krish had been preparing for this face-off with KD for some time now. And yet, he had allowed himself to get blindsided by Madam M, the name he had given her when he had first set sight on her as a gawky twelve year old. Those days she at least had a figure and the sheen of a starlet. KD had treated her like the sun shone out of her and every time she visited – which was for weeks on end – his mother would retreat into her own private world, refusing to even talk to her beloved son. It didn’t take long for Krish to figure out that Madam M was his father’s on-off mistress. The very thought filled his heart with rage against his father. The more he saw his mother cut herself away from the public, the more he suffered too. Over the years, as Madam M’s fortunes in Bollywood had declined, KD’s ardour for her also wilted. But even though there were younger, sexier women whose company KD sought out, Madam M continued to have some kind of hold over him – like the bloodsucking leech that clings on to its prey.

Krish hadn't seen her in almost a decade. And it was pathetic how she clung on to her Bollywood notoriety and behaved like the Queen Bee, never mind that her days of glory were long gone. His contempt for her knew no bounds and yet he'd let her get under his skin, almost as if he was reacting to her as he had as an adolescent. Tonight too, he'd nearly succumbed to his desire to tick her off in the presence of KD's friends. That would have been disastrous – he would have ended up playing into her hands. If it hadn't been for Maya's intervention, he would have come across as a callow youth who couldn't keep his emotions under control. But it was amazing how Maya had intuitively sussed out Madam M so quickly and defused the situation. The more he was getting to know his wife – it felt strange to think of her as his wife! – the more he was fascinated by her.

But now, it was time to face KD. He smiled at Maya and said, "Ready?"

She inhaled deeply, "Let's do it."

As they approached KD, Maya switched on her smile and hoped that her face didn't betray the intense emotions that were churning within her. She took refuge in the Indian custom of the *bahu* showing respect to her pa-in-law by keeping her gaze lowered. Folding her hands in a *namaste* she said in a low voice, "I hope you will give us your blessings." Try as she might, she just couldn't make herself call him "Papa" or "Dad".

KD turned his cold eyes on her and said, "Blessings are to be earned, young lady. You have done nothing so far except marry my son, and that too against my wishes."

"You're right, Dad. Now that we are done with the formalities, perhaps we should leave," Krish said promptly.

"Not so fast, Krish. Whether I like it or not, what's done is done. And I'm sure our friends would like to meet your wife."

Looking across the hall, he caught Natasha's eyes, who came across instantly.

Natasha's chirpy "Hello Uncle!" brought a reluctant smile to KD's grim face. "Natasha will you please introduce your sister-in-law to our guests. Krish will join you in a moment."

Natasha took Maya's hand in hers, "With pleasure, Uncle. See you later, Krish."

KD turned to his son, his voice a mixture of anger and exasperation. "Why do you insist on going against my word every time, Krish?"

Krish smiled. "I believe in keeping my promises, Dad."

"Hah, promises! Trust me, sooner or later, that girl you have married will break her promise and give you hell."

"That won't be the first time that someone would have broken their promise to me," Krish shot back.

"Oh, come on. Nothing is all black and white! Life is about compromises. I guess you will learn that your own way. But don't say I didn't warn you."

"Warning noted," Krish said curtly. "I believe you have something to tell me."

"Hmm...you're right. And strangely enough, this is also about a promise. One that your mother made to me – many years ago."

Krish's face hardened imperceptibly. "Really? And I'm guessing it has something to do with me?"

"Of course. Let's go to my den. I have something to show you."

Maya was still getting used to the shock of being introduced as the new Mrs. Dev. Losing count of who was related to whom, Maya went into auto-pilot mode, making the right noises, laughing at anecdotes about Krish's childhood, and answering curious questions about her family without revealing much. She felt more than grateful for the hours she had spent with Krish working out the nitty-gritty details of their 'love story'. Not that she would admit it to Mr. Know-it-All Krish! Strangely enough, now that he wasn't by her side, keeping a watchful eye on her, she felt a little bereft. Almost like a boat that had gone too far out into the river from its moorings.

The thought came as a bolt from the blue. What was wrong with her? Till yesterday, she'd found his presence overbearing, even stifling, her nerves constantly on edge. And today, she actually wanted him to be around, and be introduced to family and friends as a real Dev bride would be? It didn't make sense at all. She needed to keep her focus, and getting all cosy and friendly with her husband was definitely not on the agenda. She had made it this far only because she had a promise to keep. To herself. And to Papa.

Krish's mind was in turmoil. A few moments ago, he could have sworn that KD had been totally taken aback that he had actually followed through on his promise of bringing Maya home as his bride. KD was just not used to anyone defying his orders. While his marriage to Maya would be a definite blow to KD's grand plans, Krish also knew that KD would hit back hard. Just

how hard would be revealed soon enough. The thought that it had something to do with his mother filled his heart with even more bitterness. She was long gone, but even now, KD insisted on tormenting her departed soul. Bracing himself for KD's assault, he entered the rich teak-and-leather lined den. KD pulled out an envelope from his desk and handed it to Krish.

A stab of memory hit Krish as he felt the coarse handmade envelope. The type that his mother loved to use. He raised it to his nostrils, almost expecting to inhale the warm scent of jasmine that she always wore in her hair. But all he got was the smell of musty old paper. He opened it almost reverentially and began to read. The letter was dated on that fateful day when he had returned from the US, on his father's summons, and his plans of going to Harvard had been nearly nixed. But his mother had come to his rescue, somehow she had made KD see reason. He had asked his mother many times how she had done it, but she always laughed at him, and said enigmatically, "You enjoy the fruit, don't worry about the seed!" He had a feeling that all would be revealed tonight.

As he read the words his mother had written more than ten years ago, he could feel her presence. Her loving hands riffling through his hair, her eyes soft with love and pride, her heart, filled with an unspoken sorrow. And she had spilled out that sorrow in this letter. She begged him to forgive her for promising to KD that when their son turned 30, he would do as KD wished – become an heir to his business empire. Only on that condition had KD agreed to let him go to Harvard and build his career as a management consultant. How heartbreaking it must have been for her to make such a promise. And that too, when she had known how much he had wanted to build his own career independent of his father's control, seeking his own space in the sun, creating his own career path. But what choice did she have? KD had given her none. It was an either/or option and she had tried to make the best of the situation – for him.

He struggled to cope with his emotions – anger at KD's insensitivity, hurt for his mother's pain. As he folded the letter carefully back into the envelope, he knew that unlike his mother he did have a choice. He could walk out of KD's house and renege on the promise that she had made to KD. He could throw his father's money in his face, walk out and never look back. With that one act, he could be free from the stifling shadow of KD. Forever. He could choose to be a son who didn't do the honourable thing – of being the dutiful son. The irony was that his father, who so revelled in tradition and

patriarchal values, felt no remorse at his own shameful manipulation of his family for his own materialistic ends. Never mind that. He was his mother's son.

He looked into his father's eyes and said, "It all comes down to keeping promises, doesn't it?"

His eyes burnt with an anger so intense that KD, for a moment, was forced to look away to hide the momentary reflection of guilt.

Maya was restless. With every passing moment that Krish was ensconced in KD's den, she couldn't help but worry what was going on inside. Maybe, KD had seen through their marriage. Maybe, right now he was telling Krish to get rid of her! As the thoughts swirled round her head, her hands felt cold and clammy and beads of perspiration dotted her forehead.

"Are you okay, Maya?" Natasha asked, looking at her with concern.

"Just a bit tired. It's been a long day."

Natasha offered to get her some food from the buffet tables that were overloaded with an array of appetising dishes. But the thought of food made her feel queasy. "No, thanks. I'm not very hungry."

Nonetheless, Natasha fetched her a glass of pineapple juice. As Maya gratefully took a long sip, she said, "Thanks. I needed this."

"Nah," she winked mischievously. "I'm just looking out for myself. Don't want the new bride to be fainting all over me!"

Maya laughed. "That wouldn't do at all. So what's with the 'wild Nats' nickname?"

"Uh-huh. Not so fast!" she grinned back. "First you tell me about your real identity."

Seeing Maya's stunned expression Natasha said, "You did have an identity before you became Mrs. Krish Dev, right?"

Maya laughed, partly at herself, for reading too much into Natasha's innocent question. But before she could say anything, Natasha stopped her, "Wait...wait. Let me guess. Um, I'd say you're a creative type. An artist perhaps? Or maybe you're into fashion? No... you're a dancer."

Maya nodded, impressed. "Not bad. You're quite good, you know. Well, I'm a landscape designer by profession but my passion is dancing."

Natasha did a victorious fist-pump. "Yes!!"

Soon Maya and Natasha were chatting away like old friends. Maya told her about her passion for the Latin dances and how she was a self-taught

dancer, while Natasha regaled her with stories about her childhood escapades with Krish. “Normally I would be the brain behind these sorties. But on the rare occasion that we were caught out, Krish would be prompt to take the blame and be the all-protective brother,” she sighed. “Krish is like that. And that’s what makes him so special. But why am I telling you all this? You already know it!”

Maya laughed, “Trust me, he’s never told me about this part of his life.”

“I can believe that. And I’m sure if he knows I told you, he will scowl and say, ‘Nats, you talk too much!’.”

And suddenly Krish was behind them, “Nats, you do talk too much!”

Throwing a mock punch at Krish, Natasha countered, “See, didn’t I tell you?”

But the amusement was gone from Krish’s eyes. Instead, it had a distant, faraway look in them. “Maya, we should go now. Nats, we’ll catch up soon.”

Maya hugged her new friend. “Thanks, Wild Nats. We must get together.”

“You bet.” Natasha shot back and kissed her on both cheeks, “Have a happy life, you two.”

The short walk back to Krish’s bungalow was far from ‘happy’. Krish’s mood was as dark as the night outside. The glow of the stars too had dimmed as if the heat had sapped the energy out of them. The heat wave conditions had lasted much longer than usual for this time of the year and even the large acreage of greenery couldn’t absorb the sting of the heat. To make matters worse, she had to deal with her own body temperature that shot up a couple of notches every time Krish was anywhere near her. Applying the brakes to her crazed thoughts, she sought refuge in words.

“That didn’t go so badly, after all, did it? Seems like our dress rehearsal was well worth it.”

“Yeah, it went well,” Krish replied tersely.

“For a moment though, with Monica, it was kind of touch and go.”

Krish’s brooding silence was getting to her. Maybe, she was wrong to assume that they had pulled off their fake marriage convincingly. After all, he hadn’t said a word about what happened between him and KD. Just thinking about it made her insides knot up painfully. “So, how did it go with your father? You think he’s bought into our story?”

“Your little act out there may have convinced Monica. But don’t ever underestimate KD,” he warned in a savage voice.

Fear gripped her heart as his tension radiated towards her in waves. She gulped hard, her throat dry as sand. “You think he...”

Krish’s eyes were dark and unfathomable. “He’s willing to go along with our story as long as I meet his demands.”

The way he was doling out the information in dribs and drabs made Maya even more tense. “What kind of demands?”

“Nothing that you ought to worry your pretty head about,” he drawled, his fingers tugging a loose strand of her hair and tucking it behind her ears.

The action left a blazing trail of fire as her ears burned to his touch. She bristled at his glib words and jerked away. “Yeah, right. At least I know when to keep my head and not lose it over Monica’s insinuations!”

Krish raised an eyebrow, “What would I do without you, my sweet Maya?” Giving her a cynical salute, he strolled into the cottage.

He was the most infuriating person she had ever set eyes on. Maya fumed at his supercilious attitude. Doling out information on a need to know basis. And why not, a little voice asked. Surely, she didn’t expect him to applaud her for her performance? It was best not to worry about KD’s demands. Krish could take care of them, and if he couldn’t, it wasn’t really her problem, was it? She had enough of her own to worry about – the primary one being, finding a way to get into KD’s office.

Was that her imagination or was that a distant clap of thunder? How she longed for the monsoon showers of her hometown that turned the river into a burbling, bubbling water body. How she yearned for the cleansing, invigorating feel of swimming in the fast-moving river. She had spotted a swimming pool and she decided to do a few laps – if only to get rid of the knot of tension at the back of her neck.

As soon as she reached her room, Maya got into her one-piece swimsuit, threw on a wrap-around skirt, collected a towel and headed off for the pool. Lights resembling Diwali lamps in earthen pots, threw the gardens surrounding the pool into soft focus. To one corner of the pool, Maya discovered a beautiful arbour, with multi-coloured flowers and creepers. She stepped inside to find a small stone idol of Krishna. It hadn’t been tended to in a while, but she realised that at some point, someone must have found a lot of solace in this quiet little green hideout. She sat down for a while; the serenity of the place calmed her down instantly. She planned to come over in

the morning to check out the shrubbery. But for now, the pool looked too inviting with its clear, blue water and greenery all around. Dropping her skirt, she walked towards the pool, the smooth stone tiles still warm from being baked in the sun.

Krish wrestled with his emotions even as he tried to push away the whole episode of the letter from his mind. He longed to throw it all in KD's face and walk out. But he knew he couldn't do it. He couldn't betray his mother's memory. It would mean putting his own dreams on hold. He was sure KD had something big up his sleeve. Probably a mega deal which he didn't trust his own guys to handle. And that was the reason for this great rush to rope him in as heir to the business. Krish's credentials as a top-notch management consultant would definitely work to KD's advantage, especially if he was beating other rivals to get a lucrative contract or finalising a multi-billion dollar deal. From Krish's point of view, it would mean reworking his own schedule. Damn it! Just when he had reached the point where he was looking forward to gearing up on his own project.

He needed to work the frustration out of his system. He changed into a pair of swimming trunks, picked up a towel and strode out of the house towards the pool, whistling for Baloo... The Red Setter was at his heels in no time, jumping with joy at the prospect of diving into the pool. Baloo's antics brought a reluctant smile to his lips as he saw him loping away towards the pool.

Suddenly, he heard a shriek. Was that Maya? His heart thumped. Krish raced down the track towards the pool and reached in time to see Baloo greet Maya with an enthusiastic jump. "Baloo, no!" he shouted. But Maya missed her footing while trying to save herself from the impact of the jumping dog and fell awkwardly into the pool. Splash! Krish sprinted the last few metres and dived in; hoping fervently she hadn't hit her head against the side of the pool. But as he scanned underwater, she was nowhere ... he could only see Baloo swimming away. Then he heard her behind him and he swung around. He swam towards her and caught her by her waist, pulling her towards him and surfacing for air. He turned her around; she tried to pull away from him. But Krish's arms were firmly around her. He was standing on firm ground, while her feet were some distance from the floor of the pool.

"Are you okay?" His eyes scanned her face – worry made his eyes turn a shade darker.



She just nodded. "I'm fine.... Baloo just came out of nowhere and I lost my footing."

He knew he should let her go. But there was no way he could ignore the heat from her body, hitting him in waves, making it impossible to let go of her. His eyes were alight with passion, drawn to a droplet of water that ran down her face only to hang tantalisingly from her luscious lips. His tongue caught it; tasted the saltiness of her before flicking ever so softly on her lips. He heard her breath catch. He pulled her closer to him, making her aware of his hard, taut body. Her eyes closed of their own volition, an invitation in the way her soft curves moulded against his lean body in the cool water, her fingers clinging to his shoulders as if she couldn't let go. He traced his tongue over her beautiful features, licking the water off her eyes, ear lobes and cheeks, leaving a trail of fire in its wake, before finding her lips again. This time his lips crushed hers and his tongue found the deep recesses of her mouth.

Maya felt heat rise up from the core of her being as his tongue evoked sensations that made her insides go all warm and wet. She kissed him back, her tongue locking with his, driving her into a zone where nothing mattered except the tingling sensations that were imploding inside her.

His hand brushed against her voluptuous breasts. Moving the strap of her swimsuit over her shoulder, he dipped his head below the water, cupping her breast in his hand, feeling its soft rounded fullness. His tongue tasted the hollow of her neck, licked the smooth curve of her breast before curling around its hard peak.

Maya was totally lost – the sensation of fire and water sending her nerves tingling with pleasure that she hadn't thought possible. Her spine arched back as his lips delicately pulled the hard nub into his mouth, teasing, kissing and nipping it, leaving her all hot and breathless. She moaned as his lips found hers, and he kissed her with a ferocity that threatened to make her come undone. As she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed him back, she heard him growl into her ears: "Oh God, Maya! You're driving me insane!" For a moment, she opened her eyes.

He looked into her glazed, melting chocolate, passion-filled eyes, when they both heard it. Baloo was barking his head off at them. With a jolt, Maya pushed herself away from Krish, swimming away to the far end of the pool. "Maya!" Krish called out.

But without a word, she got out of the pool and raced down the track

towards the cottage.

“Damn you, Baloo!” Krish cursed as Baloo dropped a ball into the water. “Really, you’ve got the worst timing ever.” He threw the ball at the far end of the pool with all his pent-up emotions. Baloo – unrepentant and grinning, wide-eyed and eager – dived in to fetch it, as Krish swam several laps flat out, trying to work off the effects of the sizzling hot encounter with his bride.

## Chapter Six

Maya reached her room and slammed the door shut. As an extra precaution, she locked it. Not that she needed to. Krish wasn't about to chase her and break the door down to get to her. It was she who had opened the door wide open between them. Made him an invitation so tempting that no man could refuse. He was all fire and his passion had found an echoing spark deep within her. She couldn't believe how close she had come to giving in to her desire.

She threw the windows wide open. The first raindrops of the season were finally coming down, accompanied in a glorious blaze of lightning and rolls of thunder. As the cooling raindrops descended, the hot, parched earth sizzled. But there was no respite for the emotions raging inside her. She spied Krish walking towards the house, Baloo at his heels. She quickly switched off the lights, closed the windows and turned on the air-conditioning full blast.

She had barely seen his silhouette but her mind filled in the contours of his toned body in graphic detail. The rise of his chest as she had revelled in its hardness, the searing intensity of his passion-filled eyes, his sensuous lips that scorched a trail of fiery kisses all over her body, his muscular thighs that had supported her with such ease. Her cheeks flushed hot as she recalled how hard he'd been against her. "You're driving me insane!" he had whispered. Truth be told, she herself had been beyond the point of sanity. She'd wanted him to go all the way, there and then. How could she have been so brazen, so out-of-control? And, Oh God!, how was she going to face him tomorrow, when she had come so close to breaching her own no-sex clause in their contract?

As she stood under the shower, the scalding hot water filling up the stall with steam, she could feel Krish on every pore of her body. Unlike her, he was no novice when it came to sex. For him, it was just a game that would inevitably lead to its logical conclusion – sexual pleasure. For her, intimacy was something to be shared with only the person she would first fall in love with. Sex, without love, was a complete turn-off. The only time she'd even come close to giving it a shot was when her defences had been worn down by Vicky, a cute guy who'd been a regular at the pub that she worked in. Every other evening Vicky would ask her out for a date and one day she'd agreed. More out of a sense of guilt for refusing him so often. It had been a pleasant enough date – Vicky had a great sense of humour and had kept her in splits

with his jokes about his friends and their dating disasters. After a couple of dates, he'd kissed her. But it had left her cold. Worse, it had made her feel like a fraud, for trying to pretend to a sexual interest that simply wasn't there.

Wiping the mirror with her towel, she looked at herself with new eyes. Krish had made her feel something that was totally out of her range of experience. The passions that fired her up were that of a woman in lust. Just thinking of him made her skin tingle and her insides thrum with exciting new sensations. Rubbing her head vigorously, she stormed out of the bathroom. This would simply not do – her situation was complicated enough and adding sex to the mix was trouble that she did not need. If she wasn't careful, she would soon be falling head over heels in love with the Charming Devil!

Krish had never felt so out of control. Sure, it wasn't as if this were the first time that lust raged through his loins. But he hadn't ever felt so overwhelmed by it. It was as if an unseen storm had emerged out of nowhere and ripped through his insides. Just the thought of Maya in the pool, her soft curves clinging to his body and her eyes drowning in pools of passion made him burn up with desire. It took all of his tattered control to stop himself from bursting into her room and making crazy, passionate love to the woman who had stirred in him a ravaging need. Thunder claps reverberated through the house mocking his raging emotions.

There was only one way to deal with it. He stormed into the gym, and put himself through an excruciating cycle of hard, physical exercise that had his muscles quivering with exhaustion and dripping sweat on the hardwood floor. He was intent on punishing his body for its unruly behaviour and he wouldn't let go till his muscles packed up or his mind stopped conjuring up the image of Maya in the pool. And yet, the vision of her rising from the water like a golden goddess just wouldn't go. He felt his body hum with energy, and he forced his mind to focus on a course of action. One in which, he would not let lust get the better of him.

At the first light of dawn, it stopped raining. The trees and plants outside were shimmering with life – the dust had been washed away leaving them clean and sparkling green, the raindrops clinging like pearls on a beautiful necklace. Maya got into a pair of track pants and a T-shirt and headed towards the arbour that she had found near the pool. Before long, she was immersed in the work that she loved best. She discovered a multitude of plants and creepers that had revived from last night's rain.

Working in the garden was the only way she knew how to de-stress. Even as a kid, she would douse her angst at Papa's drunken stints by toiling in the hanky-sized kitchen garden that they had back home. Of course, Papa would be full of remorse after he had recovered from his hangover and would try to win over her by promising to give up alcohol. But booze proved to be a hard task master. For every dry spell that brought hope, there would be an even more traumatic period when she would be overwhelmed by Papa's incessant drinking. Looking back, she now recognized that they were the signs of a man who was well on the way to self-destruction – but as an adolescent she never could figure out how her easy-going kind father could morph into an angry, raving drunk for days on end. On such days she would shed tears in the garden and gain strength from the moist soil that felt like a soothing balm.

“Let me help you with that.” Krish's voice nearly caused her to drop the heavy pot that she'd been moving. But Krish was quicker than her and caught it just before it crashed to the ground.

“Are you trying to break your bones? Or am I the target?” Krish asked irritably.

She had been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn't heard him come down the track. Her mind swivelled back to the present. “You shouldn't be creeping around. It would be your own fault if I'd dropped it on your foot!”

“You should do your gardening thing when Hari is around to help you.”

Maya tried not to stare at the breathtaking sight of his muscle-bound torso rippling beneath the stretchy jersey he wore. Jeez! It should be declared illegal to look so disgustingly sexy in an old T-shirt and running shorts! So much for all her efforts to de-stress and take her mind off last night's episode. Using her hair to shield her heightened colour, she turned her attention to the smaller pots. “Don't worry, I can do my thing without causing you or your staff any problems.”

Krish shrugged. “Sure, as you please.”

She waited for him to leave, but he just kept watching her with those dark eyes that made her even more jumpy than ever.

“Are you always this cranky in the morning?” he asked.

The nerve of the guy. “Excuse me! You're the one who gave me the fright of my life by creeping up on me...and you call me cranky?”

He remained unmoved by her outburst, but one eyebrow shot up. “Just

wondering if I had something to do with your grouchiness.”

Of course, he had everything to do with it! She breathed deeply. “No worries. You can rest easy. If you don’t mind, I just want to get on clearing this up before it gets too hot.”

And of course, he wouldn’t take the hint – maybe she should have dropped the pot on his feet after all. Would serve his gigantic ego right!

“I never thought you were the type to run away from the truth.”

“I don’t know what the heck you’re talking about!” Refusing to look at him, she cleared up some of the mud stuck to the sides of a pot with a little more force than was necessary.

“Really? So why won’t you look at me?”

She faced him. “The truth is that your super-fragile ego is hurt that any woman wouldn’t want to fall in bed with you the moment you set eyes on her.”

“And how exactly did you arrive at this great insight? When you were in the pool... clinging to me with all your might?”

“I was not! You’re the most disgusting guy I have met,” she exclaimed angrily.

“Got you!” he said, his eyes burning with equal amounts of desire and anger. He shot out his hand and pulled her close against his chest. “Don’t try to fool yourself that what you felt for me last night was anything even close to disgust.”

She was treading on water and hopelessly in danger of going into the deep end. Trying desperately not to look at his seductive lips, inches away from her own, she pushed hard at his chest with her muddy hands.

“Look, we have an agreement,” she said, trying to put some distance between them. She charged on, before she lost her nerve. “Let’s just say that what happened yesterday shouldn’t have. We were both to blame.” She rushed in before he could object to anything, “I guess we were both emotionally overwrought, what with the wedding and then the meeting with your father .... So let’s just agree to forget about it, shall we?”

Krish burst out laughing. “Emotionally overwrought! I love that! Tell me something, are you scared of making love with me?”

Maya bristled, even as his rich, sexy laugh made her nerves tingle. His eyes skimmed over her T-shirt that clung lovingly to her curves, and he ran one long finger gently down the side of her face, catching a loose tendril of hair. Anger or lust – she didn’t have a clue what was making her pulse race

faster than a Ferrari.

“I’m not going to apologize for what happened,” he said huskily. “And, if ‘overwrought’ translates into the kind of passionate kisses we shared in the pool... I’ll do overwrought any day!”

She pulled away from his searing touch and gritted her teeth. “If you think that because of what happened last night, you have an open invitation to my bed, you’d better kill that thought right away.”

Krish narrowed his eyes. “I’d love to prove you wrong, beautiful. But right now, I’m on a schedule and so are you. And we need to get on the road asap.”

“Are we going somewhere?”

“Yup... make sure you pack yourself some clothes for a four or five day trip in the hills. See you in thirty minutes.”

She seethed at his arrogance. Born with a silver spoon – no, make that a golden one with the Kohinoor diamond encrusted on it! – he, no doubt, felt that everyone ought to bow and scrape to his every command! But what was worse, he knew just how to heat up her blood with just a look or the slightest touch. And God, why did her body hunger for his touch even when she knew that was the very last thing she needed? Spending the next couple of hours in close proximity to him in the car would be sheer torture. She marched back to the cottage, trying to ignore the spark of excitement that flickered through her.

As they drove down the Highway an hour later, Maya figured it would be best to maintain a studied silence. In any case, every time they talked, he seemed to steer the conversation into dangerous territory. As she fished in her bag for her book, Krish glanced at her. “Still sulking, are you?”

“I don’t sulk,” she shot back and her gaze caught his cleft chin, which seemed to have dimpled a little more since the last time she had checked.

“Hmm... so let’s see... you don’t Sulk, and you don’t want to make love with me.”

She gritted her teeth and pursed her lips tightly, refusing to take the bait. His eyes danced with mischief. “Tell me something... is there a history to your reluctance? Like a boyfriend who ditched you? Something that put you off being intimate with a man?”

Smiling sweetly at him, she bit out, “I’m happy you find me so entertaining. As for my personal history, it can be summed up in four words. None. Of. Your. Business.”

“Touché!” He laughed as he steered the car expertly to avoid grazing against a motorcyclist that suddenly shot into their lane out of nowhere.

“Seriously, I think we should stick to business. After all, that’s what our relationship is based on, isn’t it?”

“Sure, so how would you describe us... do you have a term for this relationship that we are in?”

“I think you have had enough fun at my expense. If you don’t mind, I would like to read my book.” She waved the paperback at him.

“Oh come on, don’t be a spoilsport! Really, I didn’t notice how many interesting words begin with S. Sexy. Sassy. Spoilsport...”

“Ha ha...” she responded and pointedly thrust her book into her face.

“No, I’m serious... do you realise we could be the pioneers of a new kind of relationship? Married but sex is off-limits. Business partners but not quite. How about friends with benefits, do you prefer that?”

“Clearly, originality is not one of your strong points. Besides, I don’t think, friendship even comes into the picture,” she said waspishly.

“Hmm...maybe you’re right. *Dosti* is one word that doesn’t describe us.”

“I’m glad we at least agree on something! Maybe we can extend that a wee bit and listen to some music,” she said with a measure of finality.

“So, there’s hope for us, yet, huh? Okay, so let’s do *Sangeet*! Golden oldies *chalega*?”

“You actually need my permission?” she shot back.

“I’m trying my best not to offend you!” he protested.

She faked a sweet smile. “How kind of you!”

Krish pressed a few keys on the console and the lovely strains of the evergreen Hindi song – *Jaane kahan gaye woh din* – warbled out, filling her heart up with an old ache.

Krish didn’t miss the faraway look in her eyes. “Don’t like the song?”

She looked away trying to hide the emotion that she felt. “No, it’s fine. It used to be Papa’s favourite song.” She laughed as she remembered. “It was the only Hindi song that he liked and he would sing it all the time which would make Ma see red. She would be like, ‘why don’t you learn a new song, please!’ And he would go, ‘This is the best song ever!’.”

Krish smiled. “Must be tough not having them around.”

“I lost my mother when I was eleven years old,” she said, softly, recalling her bewilderment when she had come back from school to find her



mother gone and Ma's cousin, Meena Mashi waiting for her. She had already packed all her clothes in a suitcase. "It was a Wednesday evening—the day that farmers would bring their produce to the local *haat*. She always wanted the freshest veggies. And no one, or nothing, could stop her from going to the weekly *haat*. Nobody knows what exactly happened. She had been weak after a bout of 'flu and probably had a dizzy spell just when a speeding van—"

Her voice wobbled with emotion. "She was rushed to the hospital and for a while we hoped and prayed that she would be fine – but the next day...it was all over."

Maya stared out of the window, trying to keep her tears in check. Krish glanced at her, his eyes brimming with compassion. "Your father wasn't with you when it happened?"

'I could not be with her when she needed me most. I'll never forgive myself for that.' The words in Papa's diary were burned in her memory forever. But it wasn't Papa's fault that he had not been there by Ma's side. The person who was to blame for that was KD. He had woven an intricate web of lies to trap her unsuspecting father. And by the time Papa reached the hospital it had been too late for his wife.

"No." She gulped hard, trying to dislodge the lump in her throat. "He was away and couldn't get to the hospital in time."

She would never forget the deep loss that she had felt in the weeks after Ma's death. Papa had been wrapped in his own grief and was in no state to comfort her. Meena Mashi had come over to look after her for a few days but she had her own family to care for. Then, it was just her and Papa – bonded in their grief and loss. And just how much worse it would have been for him! Torn by guilt, and grief, his life had started unravelling before her. And she could do nothing but watch – bemused, lost, scared.

Krish reached out for her hand. "You've had a difficult life, Maya. Your parents would be proud of the woman that you've become."

She glanced at him and saw the compassion in his eyes even as the warmth of his touch was like a soothing balm on her heart. But she steeled herself and pulled away. No matter what her relationship with Krish, he would always be the one whose father had destroyed her family. He will always be the Enemy. Don't ever forget that, Maya!

"Wake up, Sleeping Beauty!" Krish's teasing voice jerked Maya awake.

She shot up straight in her seat and came up close against Krish's face. Too close for comfort.

"Have we arrived?" she asked, moving her head away, so that her hair fell over her cheeks, like a silk screen.

He moved away from her, taking care not to touch her. He seemed remote. Something had changed during the car ride. Initially he'd tried to bait her with his sexual banter and then for some strange reason she'd felt an overwhelming need to share a part of her past that she had always kept locked within her. She could feel a subtle but definite shift in his attitude. He was almost aloof, like he was trying to keep a distance, raise a wall around himself. It suited her fine. She should never have gone blabbing to him about her parents – what was she thinking?

"You should have woken me up earlier," she grumbled as she got out of the car.

"Seems like you didn't get much sleep last night," he said with a sideways glance at her. "Anyway, I thought you might want to see this."

Maya looked around her and found that there were on the top of a hillside, overlooking a valley. In the distance, the majestic snow-capped peaks of the Himalayan ranges glittered in the sunlight. The clear, crisp air and the rolling hills in the near vicinity made for an enchanting sight. As she took in the breathtakingly beautiful green valley, she was amazed to see terrace gardens dotting the hillside. "Are we near Dehradun?"

"Thirty five kilometres beyond... It's called, Deovan. Forest of the Gods. This is part of the initial experiment that I started five years ago when I set up the Suvarna Hill Valley Project. The idea was to involve the hillside communities that are scattered in villages in this area. Along with a couple of NGO partners, we have been pretty successful in teaching organic farming techniques to the villagers."

She quickly forgot her irritation as she gazed at the terrace gardens that spread out in the distance. "Wow, that's amazing."

Krish said, "Currently, all the hard work is done by the two NGOs that the SHVP funds. We wanted to demonstrate to the village community that this wasn't just another business enterprise where people from the city would come in and profit without giving anything back to the locals. We wanted to gain their trust before proceeding with our own business plan."

He turned around and strode to the car. Maya paused for a moment longer, breathing in the cool, clean air before joining him. "And what would

that be?”

“To set up super-luxury resorts across several remote hill stations. These would cater to tourists who are looking for spiritual rejuvenation. The resorts would be income generators for the local hillside communities. So, everything that is consumed by the resort guests would be produced locally. The staff for these resorts would be hired locally, except for a few administrative positions.”

As they took another sharp turn, he pointed out a solar power station that had been set up by the villagers with seed money from SHVP. “These villages had no electricity. But today the solar power station has completely changed the lives of the villagers.”

“Unbelievable!” she whispered to herself.

“What’s so unbelievable?” he shot back.

“Well...That the heir to the Dev gazillions would actually put together a project like this.”

“You really have an annoying habit of pigeonholing people,” he said sharply.

Her tone was sarcastic. “Are you denying that the Dev name doesn’t have its privileges?”

His eyes had darkened dangerously. “Are you implying that my father is financing this project?”

He veered off the road on to a green patch and killed the engine. “Here’s a bit of advice for you – it’s best to keep your opinion to yourself on things that you know nothing about.”

Maya knew she had perhaps gone a bit too far with her insinuations. She desperately needed to get out of the pressure cooker like atmosphere inside the car. Yanking the door open she stormed out, and instantly felt the cool breeze wrap around her. As she looked out at the pine-covered valley, the mist moved softly over the hills, exposing the green verge beyond like a veil being pulled away. Just like she was seeing a side to Krish that she didn’t know existed. His dedication to his project had taken her by surprise, more so because he seemed determined to make it a success without KD’s help. Who was the real Krish – the playboy whose easy charm would give Casanova a complex or the do-it-yourself entrepreneur whose business philosophy had a humane touch to it?

It was surreal – one side of the hills misted over with rain while the sun shone on the other side. Fascinated by the play of sun and rain, Maya was

totally oblivious of the light drizzle that had started. She was overcome with a feeling of oneness with nature, she felt alive, free, and yet, connected to the world.

Krish and she belonged to two different worlds, but somehow, in these serene surroundings, their differences seemed to fade away into nothingness.

She wanted to reach out to him as he stood some distance away. Make amends. She knew she'd been unfair, been too quick to judge. She glanced across at him – his back was towards her. Every muscle, every sinew of his body screamed 'stay away'. She took a deep breath and approached him.

Oblivious to her, he picked up a stone and hurled it into the valley.

Before she could touch him, he turned around to face her. Feeling awkward, she pulled her hand away. "Krish." Her voice quivered and the words on her lips dried up at the hard look in his eyes.

He muttered, almost to himself. "Such innocent eyes and yet...they hide something." His whispered words floated between them as the raindrops started to fall harder and faster. His mesmerising eyes could discover all her secrets in a moment, she thought, as she licked the raindrops from her lips.

Just as suddenly he strode away from her to the car and opened the door. "We should be heading back. In the hills, you never know when a drizzle can turn into a downpour. Besides, this is landslide country. You don't want to get caught in one."

## Chapter Seven

They reached the secluded cottage, nestled amidst towering pine trees, just as the magic hour set in. Romantic. That was the word that popped into her head as she got out of the car and walked towards the porch of the compact cottage painted a bright yellow with red brick tiles. Multi-coloured petunias were in bloom all around. A large peach tree was brimming over with fruit and the chirping of birds as they settled down for the approaching night was like music to her city-traffic-deadened ears. The Himalayan ranges in the distance were like a majestic backdrop that made Maya feel as if she had stepped into an ethereal world. And the rain-swept weather enhanced its romantic quotient by several degrees.

Inside, the living room with its wooden beams and slatted windows was stark in its cosy simplicity – a dining table, a well-worn couch, a couple of comfortable armchairs placed in front of a fireplace and a mantelpiece with some lovely antique knick-knacks. The main highlight of the room was a comfy window seat that overlooked the small garden in front and a spectacular view of the mountain ranges. Next to the living room was a bedroom with a four-poster bed, complete with a pull-down mosquito net, a teakwood closet and an antique writing desk.

For Krish, it was a bitter-sweet homecoming. After his mother had passed on, he had only been here a couple of times. Those were short visits on the way to the resort sites, to check in with the caretaker and to make sure that the house was being maintained as per his instructions. For a moment as he had stepped into the living room, he had felt a wave of nostalgia wash over him. He was glad that he had been able to preserve it the way his mother had wanted. But he had no intention of turning it into a mausoleum. And that was one of the reasons he had chosen to stay here for this trip. It would also give Maya a feel for the lay of the land and its local flora, which would come in useful when she started work on the resort landscaping designs. She'd already had a chat with the caretaker, about some of the trees she had spotted on the way, when he served them a simple but delicious meal of hot off-the-stove *chappatis*, a vegetable curry and a sweet carrot *halwa*.

"Not quite on the same grand scale as the other Dev properties," Maya mused as she gazed at the framed water colours that his mother had painted and hung on the walls.

Krish raised an eyebrow. "You obviously don't approve."

"No, I'm surprised, that's all... It just doesn't seem to fit in with the

Dev grandeur.”

“It was never meant to. This place belonged to my mother. She’d come here to get away from it all. And she loved it just this way. She wouldn’t let anyone make any changes to it.”

A couple of framed photographs of a teenaged Krish with his arm around his mother graced the mantelpiece. Even though the pictures had faded, the close relationship that mother and son shared was more than apparent. “You came here quite often?”

“Only during the summer holidays.” His succinct reply made it clear that the subject was closed.

Krish looked out the window at the few lights twinkling in the distance. It was almost as if he and Maya were the only two people in the universe. And the crickets had begun a raucous orchestra to celebrate their isolation.

The space between them crackled with energy, making him edgy.

She caught his look and felt tension coil deep within her in an immediate response. Spying a bunch of old long playing records, she asked, “Mind if I take a look?”

He reached for his laptop case, pulled it out and powered it swiftly. “Let’s go through the resort plans instead. It will prepare you for tomorrow’s site visit and give you some landscaping ideas. Come, sit here.”

He patted the comfortable couch on which he sat, the computer on the coffee table, as his shoulders hunched over it. Maya’s muscles tensed at the thought of making thigh-to-thigh contact with him on the cosy couch. The romantic charm of the cottage was getting to her, sending her body into high-alert mode. She tried to sound casual, “Wouldn’t it have been better if we’d stayed in a hotel?”

Krish tapped the keys of the laptop and opened a few files. “The resort site is another twenty kilometres uphill. It didn’t make sense to drive all the way from Dehradun, especially in this weather. You’ll just have to rough it out here for a day or two.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she shot back.

He looked at her, the brooding intensity in his eyes, making her skin tingle in warning. “So what’s the problem?”

“Nothing!” The real problem was this cottage – it had begun to feel like a romantic hideout than the convenient business-stop-over that he had in mind. The real problem was that her mind would seize up the moment she

shared couch-space with him.

She didn't realize that she was staring intently at the couch till Krish's amused tone washed over her. "Are you practising voodoo on that couch? Not planning to burn it to cinders or make it disappear, are you?"

Her voice wobbled a wee bit. "Oh, that would be inconvenient. Where would you sleep then? On the floor?"

He eased himself against the couch and gave her a look that made her shuffle her feet in nervous agitation.

"And what gave you the idea that I'd want to sleep on that couch and not in the bed?"

"Clearly, you don't have a chivalrous bone in you. Or you would have offered to sleep on the couch!"

"What does chivalry have to do with sleeping arrangements?" His eyes danced merrily. "And what's so wrong about sharing a bed when we can both be comfortable?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" she exploded. "We have an agreement, remember? Besides, I don't want ..." Her voice trailed off as she shied away from finishing the thought.

He stretched out his hand and pulled her hard. She landed on his lap and squirmed to get away but he held her tight. She could feel the heat from his body radiating towards her. His delicious male scent mingled with his aftershave started a fresh assault on her senses.

"Am I being ridiculous?" He caught her hand and thrust it under his shirt. She could feel his heart beat strong and heavy against his hard chest and his warm skin made her own turn soft and tingly. "Tell me you don't want to touch me." His rich, gruff voice sent shockwaves of sensation rocketing through her.

She felt as if she'd been jolted by a high-voltage current. She thrust at him with all her strength and leaped out of his arms. She could barely trust her legs to carry her to the far end of the room, but somehow she did and flopped down on the soft mattress covering the window seat. He was right, she wanted to touch him, all over. She yearned to wrap herself around him, feel his hands on her skin, the taste of his mouth on hers. It's just a game for him.

"You don't know me well enough to know what I want," she said through gritted teeth. "I am not the kind of woman you're used to."

Krish didn't move a muscle, but she was aware of everything about

him – every breath he took, the passion-drenched look in his eyes, the male scent of him and the husky edge to his voice as his tone sharpened, “What kind of woman would that be?”

Maya took a deep breath. “The kind you bring here to enjoy your dirty little weekends.”

His reaction came hard and fast. “Bloody hell!” Krish cursed angrily. “You think that’s why I have brought you here?”

But before she could retort, he strode towards her and pulled her up to him, squashing her to his chest and leaving her breathless. She couldn’t pull her gaze away from his dark eyes.

“Let’s get two things very clear. One, I don’t believe in forcing a woman into providing sexual favours. Two, I haven’t ever brought any one – man, woman or child – here. This was my mother’s private retreat and it has stayed that way. You’re the only person – apart from my mother and me – who’s been here.”

“I....It’s just that you are so secretive about it.”

His eyes were like blazing, hot coals. “Not secretive, just protective – especially when it involves my mother’s memory. Much as I would like to, I can’t forget the fact that certain people caused her so much distress and turned her into a figure of ridicule in the media. She could have had her say – demolished all of them publicly – but she chose not to. She was too dignified and detested public displays of emotion. But eventually the speculation, ridicule, gossip ... destroyed her.”

Maya was aghast. “And you thought I would go to the media with some scandalous story?”

He gave her a hard look, dragging his fingers through his hair. “It’s been done before.”

“You really are paranoid!”

“You would be too...if you found your schoolmates poring over salacious titbits in the papers about your father and his latest squeeze.”

“Oh!” Anything she said would be grossly inadequate.

“It was worse for my mother. Especially after Monica came into the picture. She flaunted every little detail about her affair with KD in the media. She’d hoped that it would resurrect her Bollywood career. But after a while even the press lost interest in her.”

The KD-Monica affair had devastated his mother. There had been many other women in KD’s life but with Monica, it was different. With her,



he seemed to lose all discretion, revelled in the salacious gossip, and he took blatant pleasure in taunting his wife, almost compelling her to lose her dignity and hit back with angry tears instead of stoic silence. But his mother hadn't exploded in tears and recrimination. Instead hers had been an implosion – her rage had been icy cold and directed not at KD but at herself. She had tortured herself, instead of KD.

The only person who knew about her self-inflicted torture was her mother's trusted maid. One night, she had been desperate enough to call him at his boarding school, despite his mother's strict instructions not to ever bother Krish. He was appalled to hear that his mother had stopped eating, refusing to come out of her room and meet with anyone. KD, of course, was off on his European jaunts, uncaring of his wife's condition. He had rushed home from Doon School to be with her. He'd made her promise that she'd never ever do this to herself again.

A month after that incident, they had come to the Deovan cottage for the first time during Krish's summer holidays. They had spent a month trekking all over the hills.

"When we came here for the first time, I saw a new carefree, spontaneous side to my mother... it was the first time that I'd seen her truly happy," Krish recalled.

Maya wondered how a fifteen year old boy would have coped with tittering school mates and his parents' complicated relationship. He would have shut out the outside world – mother and son would have bonded together and sought strength from each other.

Just like she and her father had. They shunned everyone – neighbours, relatives, acquaintances. Even Meena Mashri had stopped visiting them after a while. They only had each other for support – but for Papa that wasn't enough.

As his alcohol addiction grew, he began to withdraw from her too, cutting her out. Those were the times when she'd felt like she was a huge burden on Papa. Maybe he'd felt it too...Did he think of her in those last moments in the hospital?

Krish's words jolted Maya back to the present. "It was she who inspired me to start this project and when I started putting it together, I decided to name it after her."

Krish was amazed at how cathartic it felt to actually talk about his growing up years. It was almost as if they had crossed some kind of invisible

threshold in their relationship. So far he had been happy to share information with Maya on a need-to-know basis. And all of a sudden he had thrown the door wide open, letting her into a private space that had been locked up for years. What was it about her that made him go into a confessional mode? Never once, in any of his admittedly brief relationships with women, had he felt the need to go beyond the physical.

Krish walked back to the couch and settled down in front of the computer. “Right. I think we’ve had enough soul-baring confessions for one night, don’t you agree? Let’s get some work done, shall we?”

She couldn’t have agreed more. Her thoughts were still in a whirl. Frankly, she had never imagined that Krish’s guilt-edged life could have been anything but glittering and the glimpse that he had given her into the darker side of it, made her want to reach out to him. But that wouldn’t do. She had never felt so conflicted. She should be happy that he was beginning to trust her. And at the same time, she didn’t want his trust, she didn’t want this camaraderie, she didn’t want any of this warm, soul-sharing, fuzzy feeling!

“These are the conceptual drawings of the first resort that the architects have come up with.” Krish’s words cut through her inner turmoil and she turned her attention to the computer screen. The drawings were an artist’s impression of a typical luxury resort with a swimming pool and other activity centres located in and around a main building.

Maya scrolled through the drawings. “Have you thought of creating a complex of small buildings instead of having one main resort building?”

“Can you tell me what you have in mind?” he asked, interested in her idea.

“Every building could have its own reception area but would be dedicated to a similar group of activities. So the décor of each building would be different, though there would be some broad synergy.”

“That’s a thought,” he murmured.

Maya forged ahead. “One could think of the resort as an interconnected network of spaces. I’m just thinking aloud. What if there were themed spaces within the overall resort theme of rejuvenation. For instance there could be a ‘nature lover’s space’. So those who want to come to the resort to do bird-watching treks, and other ‘nature’ oriented activities, the look of the building and the flora around it would be distinct from the other parts of the resort.”

“Rejuvenation of the body, mind...”

Maya finished his thought, “...and spirit.... Is there any lake or body of

water around near the site?”

“Yes, there is an old dried up lake. But right now, it’s in a pretty sad state.”

“A lake is a great way to jazz up a place.” She shared an incident about a client for whom they had created an artificial pond. “It was amazing. Over the next few months, the place turned into a sanctuary for birds. The whole ambience of the place was transformed.”

“So from just a bunch of bricks and mortar, it becomes a living, growing thing,” Krish mused.

“Exactly,” she said forcefully. “And for a resort like this one, we should landscape it in such a way that it blends seamlessly into the environment.”

Krish loved the way her eyes sparkled and danced with excitement, her mouth soft and upturned as she tried to keep pace with her mind that was churning with ideas. “Let me show you something.”

He stretched across to get to his laptop case and his arm brushed against her skin making her blood sizzle. She tucked her hair behind her ears, trying to regain her composure as Krish pulled out a bunch of photographs. “I had commissioned a photographer to take pictures of the local wildlife and he came up with these.”

“Wow!” She looked at a photograph of a Crimson Sunbird. “Look at these colours. We could have creepers climbing up the outer façade with blooms in shades of pink, crimson, intertwined with the bright blues and purples of the morning glory.”

She grabbed her handbag and took out a notebook and a pen and started to sketch furiously. Krish watched with wonder as her fingers flew over the paper.

“Is there a local nursery where I can check out some of the local varieties of plants?” Maya was too absorbed in putting her idea down on paper to notice Krish’s look of admiration.

“Oh yes. We can stop on the way to the site.”

She finished the sketch and thrust it at him. He was impressed at how quickly and instinctively she had created a concept and a design for it. As he looked at the sketch, she chewed at the end of her pen. “You don’t like it?”

“I love it. I’m amazed that you came up with this idea so quickly.”

The uncertain look in her eyes disappeared and her enthusiasm sparkled through. “This is just one possibility. Once I have seen the location,

I will be able to give you a lot more choices. Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I’m fascinated. You have given me more ideas in ten minutes than our architects have been able to come up with in three months. You’re not an architect by any chance, are you?”

“Nope.” She laughed. “I picked up the basics of gardening from Papa. Later of course, at Evergreen, I read up on whatever books I could find on the subject. And a lot of them were on architecture. What I love to do is put things together... you know, like mix and match....”

“You really do have a talent for this. I can’t wait to see what you come up with next.”

Maya’s cheeks flushed at the praise. “Oh, it’s always easy to come up with ideas for new projects where you start right from scratch.”

“You are being too modest. Hey, why don’t you go through those pictures while I make us some coffee. Sound good?”

She nodded. “I’d love some coffee. Do you need help?”

He gave her a self-deprecating smile. “At least let me impress you with my coffee-making skills.”

She felt herself go all warm and fuzzy. She couldn’t believe how comfortable she felt brainstorming with him. Normally, she liked to work alone. At Evergreen, she’d been diffident about sharing her ideas with her colleagues, especially the ones that she hadn’t thought through. And realizing this, Kavita had given her the space to do it her way.

But with Krish she had no such reservations; she knew instinctively that he would hear her out and even if he didn’t like her idea he would not just dismiss it but would give her a reason. She cringed when she recalled her own behaviour – how she had been so quick to stand on judgement and accuse him of using his father’s connections to get ahead. How her casual comment must have hurt him when he was intent on doing just the opposite. SHVP was a tribute to his mother and he wouldn’t wish KD to influence it in any way.

Krish emerged from the kitchen with two mugs of steaming coffee and placed one before her. “I think we’ll make a great team. To us.” He clinked his mug with hers. “When we get back to Delhi, I will set up a meeting with the architect. He can integrate your ideas into the overall plans.”

“Krish...I’d like to say something.”

He settled down comfortably in the couch, barely inches away from

her. "Sure, go ahead."

She glanced at him briefly before looking intently into her coffee mug. "I owe you an apology for what I said earlier... in the car. That was totally uncalled for. It was wrong on my part to make such a sweeping judgement about you and I'm really sorry."

"Maya, Maya, Maya." His husky incantation of her name sent a thrill through her.

He leaned forward and held her chin with his fingers. "Don't think about it, love."

The soft look in his eyes made her want to wrap her arms around his neck and the mug nearly slipped from her hands, splashing coffee on her skirt. As she brushed off the scalding hot liquid from her skirt, trying not to wince at the pain, Krish grabbed the mug from her hand and placed it on the table. His voice was full of concern. "That must hurt. Let me take a look."

She was burning up from embarrassment at her monumental clumsiness. "I'm alright."

He knelt on the floor and lifted her skirt to expose her thigh. The skin where the hot liquid had dropped was already turning a dark shade of pink. His fingers skimmed the flesh gently, making her break out in goosebumps.

"Stay here," he commanded. "I'll get some ice."

She hastily pulled down her skirt and tried to get a grip on her madly racing heart. Gosh, Maya, you're such an idiot! He was back in a flash. As he bent down to gently apply the ice cubes wrapped in a hanky, on her hot skin, she clenched her palms, trying desperately to quell the urge to run her fingers through his thick hair. "Does that feel better?"

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. He blew on her tender skin as he applied the ice pack, then placed a soft kiss there. Her hands unclenched and she clutched at his shoulders trying not to sink into the couch and give into the pleasure that was coursing through her.

He looked up and saw her eyes cloud over with passion that she couldn't hide any more. Raising himself on to the couch, he pulled her on to his lap as his lips found the side of her neck. She felt herself almost swoon as he finally covered her mouth with his and his fingers found their way to the soft swell of her breasts.

Her eyes closed involuntarily and she felt her mind go numb with the sweet longing that she felt deep within her. His kisses were gentle, soft, almost as if she'd imagined them. She opened her eyes and the look in his

passion-shot eyes took her breath away. Her tongue flicked over her lower lip, and she heard him groan against her as she responded by moving closer to him.

Lifting her off the couch in one sweeping action, he cradled her in his arms. In a few strides, he had carried her into the bedroom as his lips continued to roam her face and neck, his tongue flicking over an earlobe, nipping at it before dipping into the valley between her breasts. An involuntary moan of pleasure escaped her as his lips found hers in a crushing, intense kiss. She felt the world tilt, she wound her arms around his neck, as if she would never let go.

He laid her gently on the bed, ripping his shirt off in one fluid motion. She couldn't take her eyes away from his muscled torso, as she longed to run her hands over its hard planes. But before she could put her thoughts into action, he had claimed her lips again, sending her thoughts careening away into the cosmos. Sensations took over and adrenaline pumped. Her back arched and she craved to wrap herself around him. His hands pushed away her blouse as his eyes feasted on the twin peaks of her breasts in their lacy lingerie. Suppressing a groan, his mouth found one of the hard nubs and pulled gently. Pleasure ripped through her like streaked lightning and she heard him take a deep, sharp breath as he continued to kiss her all over. Waves of pleasure roiled through her making her clutch at him, seeking what she had never sought before from any man – to be possessed, body and soul.

“God, Maya,” he mumbled against her breast. “You’re the most exquisitely responsive woman.” Her body trembled with a deliciously sweet ache as he continued to caress her all over. “My sweet, sexy Maya.” His voice was thick and rasping. “I want you so much.” Her body quivered with a deep, violent need as he breathed her name. He knew instinctively what she needed, touching her at pulse points in ways that messed with her sanity, driving her deeper, harder, faster into a vortex of shimmering sensations. Her body craved for release and she moaned, “Krish, please...” He entered her, at first gentle with her, and then as her body responded to his thrusts, his pace and rhythm increased, taking her to heights of ecstasy that was beyond anything that she could have dreamt of. As they went spinning into an orbit of sensation and pleasure, she felt every cell of her body fuse into nothingness and then explode in a starburst of colour, leaving her breathless, spent, satiated.

## Chapter Eight

Even before she opened her eyes, Maya felt a whisper-soft kiss on her brow. She revelled in the strange new feelings that wrapped her insides in a cosy, downy quilt. She was enervated by the languorous warmth that seeped right through into her bones. What was this wispy, undefinable emotion that fluttered like a butterfly that had just emerged from its cocoon? Her mind spooled back to last night and to the sheer depth of her feelings as she'd scaled the heights of pleasure in Krish's arms. Krish! He'd rocked her world and she would never be the same again.

Was that his breath she felt on her brow? Her eyes flew open as the full impact of what happened last night hit home. She clutched at the quilt that covered her body and found herself staring into warm, delicious, dark eyes.

"Hello there." Her heart convulsed as he whispered fervently, "You are even more beautiful in the morning. And you're making me lose my sanity all over again." Colour rushed to her face at the thought of how she had let go of all her inhibitions and danced to the tune of her own desire and his artful love making. He groaned and propped himself up on one elbow, while reaching out to play with a silky strand of her hair. "If you blush like that, I won't be responsible for my actions." She looked away trying to keep her heart from running away – and failed. Miserably.

As she struggled up, trying not to lose the quilt and her fast-scrambling dignity, her head bumped up against his chin. His arm shot out from under him and pulled her on top of him. His lips captured hers in a fiery kiss, lighting the spark of passion deep within her. She came up for breath, resisting the urge to be consumed by the heat that was spreading through her. She pressed hard against his chest, scrambled off the bed, and held on to the quilt for dear life. Her voice sounded hopelessly breathless to her own ears. "I'd better get ready. You did say we should head off to the site early."

Maya forced herself to look at his face even as she found her eyes straying to his washboard abs. Krish's eyes gave her an all-knowing look as he replied, "There's no rush, *jaaneman*. What say, we skip the site visit for today and just spend the day here?"

She shook her head vigorously, not wanting to give into that irresistible invitation in his eyes. She waddled away, with as much dignity as she could, to the bathroom. "You promised and you're not getting out of it so easily. I'll be ready in ten minutes."

Krish flopped back against the pillow and his disappointment was more

than evident in his reply. “If that’s what you wish!”.

She closed the door and looked at herself in the mirror. She was amazed at the happy face that stared back at her. Sparkling eyes, flushed cheeks, and lips pink and swollen, fresh from that heart-stopping kiss. Krish made her feel special – like some beautiful, fragile flower that needed careful handling. She could never have imagined that her first time with a man could be so...she was lost for words to describe what had been simply phenomenal. But even more amazing was the connection that she felt with Krish. It was so right, so inevitable, so karmic! She felt as if she had been swept away on a tidal wave of emotions.

Within minutes she had showered and dressed. As she applied kohl to her eyes and touched her lips with gloss, she gazed at her image in the mirror. Look at you. You’re prettying yourself for him! Before she could get into an argument with herself, her stomach rumbled as the rich aroma of *alu parathas* wafted through. She followed her nose into the living room. Krish winked at her as she approached the dining table as the caretaker served piping hot *parathas*. “These are delicious. Come on, or there won’t be any left for you!”

This, as he attacked the *parathas* on his plate with gusto. She reached out for the chilli pickle as the caretaker put a plate of *parathas* in front of her. Krish gave her an anxious look, “Those are pretty deadly. Eat at your own risk!”

She laughed self-consciously and bit into a pickled green chilli with great relish. Krish grinned wickedly, “You really do like it hot!”

She nearly choked at that and gave him a mock-threatening look as she continued to devour her paratha. Trying to hide her awkwardness she mumbled, “So, when do we leave for the site? I would like to check out the kitchen garden first, if that’s okay?”

Krish signalled Ramu for another paratha, “Of course, no problem. Ramu is the expert here. Feel free to look around and ask him any questions you have. I have to make a call to Rohan. We can leave after that.”

That should give her some time to compose her thoughts, to analyse this surge of new emotions that bubbled up within her at the sight of Krish. And yet, that was the last thing she wanted to do. What if she just gave in to the irresistible urge ‘to go with the flow’, discover what lay ahead, take it in her stride? She quickly finished her breakfast and sought refuge outdoors, away from the hypnotic thrall that Krish had her in.



Krish couldn't take his eyes off her. She looked both incredibly sexy and uber-feminine in her hip-hugging jeans and jacket ensemble, the purple T-shirt beneath adding a splash of vibrant colour. Since last night's cosmic sex, all he wanted to do was to drag her back into bed, rip off her clothes and make slow, sensuous, sensational love to her. He felt an unfamiliar emotion squeeze his chest as he thought of how beautiful she had looked this morning – her hair spread across the pillow in a dark halo around her angelic face, her petal-soft lips partly open as she slept and her eyelashes forming thick veils on her smooth skin. She aroused in him a tenderness that he had never felt before. It bowled him over. It had always been about his desires, about instant gratification. No complications. Zero stress. And his dates were smart sophisticated women, out for a good time, with whom he continued to be good friends after the affair had ended. That was the only kind of happy-ever-after he liked. Never before had he felt the desire to break his own rules. Until now. What was it about this woman that made him want to possess her and protect her, all at the same time?

His phone buzzed. "Hey, Rohan, I was just about to call you."

It was only when Rohan wished him a happy birthday that he remembered he had turned thirty today. "Thanks, buddy. Have you heard from Singhal about the changes that we proposed to the JV contract?"

"Mr. Singhal has approved them and I have emailed the new draft to Mr. Rushmore's office in Sydney."

"Great. You can take care of the clients for another couple of days. We should be back tomorrow or latest the day after. Okay?"

"Krish, it's KD... he wants you to come back to Delhi asap."

"No can do. Tell him you can't reach me."

"There is a delegation of executives coming in from London tonight and he has already informed them that you will be representing the Dev Group."

Krish sprang up from the chair. "What!? Who are these guys? Why wasn't I told about this earlier?"

"Krish... I... KD said I should call you only after we reach Doon."

"You are in Dehradun? And who's with you?"

"Yeah.... the pilot and I."

Krish was incredulous. "The pilot? KD has sent his precious G6?"

"I'm sorry, Chief. KD threatened to fire me on the spot, unless I told him where you were."

Rohan's apology did little to pacify him. He was being bamboozled by KD and he hated it. But he also knew he had no choice in the matter if he was to stay true to his mother's memory. He barked into the phone. "Okay, we will be there soon."

Krish snapped the Phone shut. He should have known that KD would want his pound of flesh. After all, his mother had promised that Krish would meet his demands once he turned thirty. Trust KD not to waste a minute! He'd better get used to being at his father's beck and call like a dog on a leash. The only difference was that this dog had the luxury of travelling in KD's newest private jet – the Gulfstream G650. He picked up his laptop from the table and cased it as he called out to Ramu.

Maya breathed in the cool air and wrapped her arms around herself. Last night had been magical. She had been blown away by the chemistry that they shared. And it wasn't just about the amazing sex. It was about being on the same wavelength at every level -- intellectual, emotional, sensual. The kind of connection that she had always dreamt of sharing with someone special. The kind of bond her parents had shared with each other – and even as a child, she knew that such rapport was rare. And wonder of wonders, last night she had felt that connection with Krish. She knew that if there was one person, she could fall completely and irrevocably in love with, it would be Krish.

Oh my God! How was that possible? Not when he knew nothing about the real reason she'd married him. Not when she'd hidden the truth from him, let him believe that all she wanted from him was an easy life. A hot pang of guilt squeezed her heart at the thought. She braced herself as her happy thoughts scattered like leaves blowing in the wind. If she really believed that they shared a karmic connection, shouldn't she just walk up to him and tell him the truth? Was she actually contemplating sharing her deepest secrets and sorrows with Krish? Did she really think that opening her heart to him could end in anything but disaster?

Yet, she couldn't help but feel a sense of loss at what could have been. Last night, she had found something magical only to realise that it was as ephemeral as the mist wrapping itself around the hills. A sudden chill settled in her heart and she turned back to the cottage and spotted Ramu rushing towards her. "Sahib is ready to leave."

As she approached the driveway, she noticed Krish piling his suitcase

into the boot of the car.

“Aren’t we coming back here tonight?”

“Change of plans,” he said curtly. “Go get your bags. We’ll be late.”

He seemed preoccupied and remote. The sunny start to the day had already begun to fade away, as the overhanging clouds threatened to dampen the mood even more. She quickly packed her bag and rolled it out to the porch. Maybe, they would stay over at a hotel tonight – Krish would tell her soon enough.

She felt another pang of loss at leaving the cottage that would forever hold some of the most wondrous memories for her. Was it only yesterday that she had come to Deovan? But within the span of a few hours, she knew that her life had somehow shifted gears. Something had changed forever – things could never be the same again.

As they drove past the rain-washed landscape she spotted some of the landmarks they had crossed the previous day and was surprised. She turned to Krish. “Aren’t we going to visit the resort sites?”

His eyes were hidden behind the designer shades he wore and his voice had an edge to it. “We are going back to Delhi.”

She swallowed back the disappointment that choked her throat. “Oh, really? And you didn’t think I needed to know?”

“Some urgent work has come up.... You now have a pretty good idea of the terrain and the local flora. That should be more than enough for you to work on.”

The hot words that rose to her lips dried up when a chilling thought flashed through her mind. What if this was what he’d had in mind all along? What if he’d never intended to visit the resort sites after he’d got what he wanted from her? Her mind tracked back to the conversation that they had in bed this morning. Of course! He had even suggested that they skip their visit altogether. Clearly, it wasn’t work that was on his mind, but what else – sex! And she, like the first class idiot that she was, had attached all kinds of meaning to it – fantasising about some kind of magical, karmic connection between them! The only connection that he wanted with her was of the sexual kind. Her hands clenched around her handbag, as a sick feeling made her stomach churn.

Krish glanced at her, quizzically. “Is everything okay?”

She bit back the bile that rose to her throat. “I’m fine. I was just thinking about the working arrangements in Delhi.”

“You can use Sheetal’s office. She is the manager of the horticulture division.”

“And where would that be, in the DGE office in Connaught Place?”

“No, KD’s office within the farmhouse complex. Sheetal can also show you around the greenhouses if you would like that.”

The implications of the working arrangements hit home. She would have access to KD’s office. The horticulture division was where she would find whatever she was looking for.

She tried to collect her thoughts as she replied, “Great... but won’t KD mind if I... you know... just land up in his office?”

Krish’s patience ran out, already stretched very thin by KD’s machinations. “Stop behaving like some over-anxious intern on her first day at work. It will be fine.”

Maya bristled. “I don’t want to step on any more toes than I have to. I would rather keep out of his way.”

“You needn’t worry about that... he will be busy with a business delegation from overseas.”

“That’s settled then.” She pursed her lips and looked away.

As the car ate up the miles, the distance between them grew steadily. Maya knew that she should be elated by the opportunity that had just been handed to her. And yet, the thought of following through on her plans filled her with dread. Once she took that road, there would be no looking back.

It was with relief that she saw the Doon airport come into view, if only to get away from the conflicting emotions that threatened to drive her crazy.

Rohan escorted them to the tarmac where a private jet was ready for take-off. Krish handed over the car keys to him. “Who’s driving my car back to Delhi?”

“KD has deputed his personal chauffeur for the job.”

A smiling air hostess took over from Rohan and showed them to their seats inside the plush private jet. It could have been a lavish conference room, complete with a large flat screen TV, wide comfortable seats covered in cream-coloured leather upholstery and pull-out desks for notebooks and computer gadgetry. As soon as the aircraft took off, the hostess was back with refreshments.

Krish was at his politest best with Maya, though his body language made it clear that he would be happier if he didn’t have to breathe the same air that she did. After the plates were cleared away, the hostess reappeared

with a chocolate truffle cake.

Maya stared in shock at the frosting on the cake: Happy Birthday Krish! She sucked in her breath sharply. Cold fingers clamped around her heart like a steel vice. If she needed any proof of just how unimportant she was in Krish's life, this was it. Her eyes stung with unshed tears.

Krish looked irritated at the fuss that was being made but went along with the cake-cutting ritual in as business-like fashion as possible.

Rohan turned to her, all bright-eyed and eager. "Maya, you must feed him a piece of cake."

Hurt ricocheted through her and her mind protested at this mockery of a celebration. She moved closer to him and whispered in his ear. "Happy Birthday! It would be best if you give me a list of important dates like this one in future. Or else, people might get the wrong idea about us."

If looks could kill, she would definitely be dead!

"Rohan and I have some business matters to discuss," he said in an icy-cold voice. "You might like to rest in the adjoining cabin. If you need anything, the hostess will help you."

Summarily dismissed! His rejection slammed through her like a body blow. Forcing her stiff limbs to carry her towards the cabin, unshed tears shimmered in her eyes. She dropped into the creamy soft cushions resisting the urge to let the tears flow, to let her pain out. How had she got it so wrong? The thought of his tenderness last night felt like a knife stab deep within her. She'd been so desperate to believe that what they shared would be just as important to him – that theirs was a meeting of the mind, body and soul. How pathetic was that! Brushing away her tears, she wrapped her arms around herself, sinking into the velvet soft seat. That's when the realisation hit her and she reeled from the pain as if someone had punched her in the gut. She had fallen completely and irrevocably in love with her enemy!

Krish pushed away the laptop and leaned back in his seat. This wasn't what he had planned for his thirtieth birthday and it sure wasn't how he had expected things to turn out. He'd been looking forward to spending time with Maya, showing her the sites and taking her to Sunrise Point. This morning, she'd seemed like the perfect birthday present that had happened to him. And he had meant to tell her that. But the best laid plans often went completely and utterly wrong – especially when KD had his fingers stuck in the pie.

He was also concerned about his plans for SHVP. He may as well

forget about them for a while. This was the big deal that KD had been preparing for – if he could pull off this proposed joint venture deal with the UK based Cosmo International, it would give wings to his global ambitions. No wonder he was keen to get Krish on board. Despite his irritation at KD's imperial summons, the upcoming negotiations would have at least one positive side-effect. It would bring back some much needed balance to his relationship with Maya. He was thinking far too much about her for his peace of mind.

Determined to act on his resolve, he stabbed the keys on his computer and focused all his attention on the presentation.

On their return from Deovan, Maya went out of her way to avoid Krish. She'd occasionally catch a glimpse of him at the poolside, playing with Baloo, or zipping off to work in his Prius. And that was enough to cause her aching heart to yearn with longing. Krish made sure he never once crossed her path. It was for the best, she reminded herself sternly.

But try as she might, in the privacy of her room, she could not hide the fact that she was miserable. That she craved for him with a ferocity that made her feel sick to her very bones. But she was determined not to wallow in self-pity. No matter how much it hurt, she knew that there would never be any future for her and Krish. They were never destined to be a couple – and even their marriage was always meant to be in name only. Her unrequited love wasn't going to change anything between them. She needed to get out of Krish's life and fast – the sooner the better. Preferably before Krish had any inkling of what she was going through. Unrequited love she could deal with, his pity would absolutely kill her.

But for now, she wished she could just blank off all emotion, empty her mind. And there was only way to get relief, even if it was for just a short while. She strapped on her dance shoes, put a CD into the music system, and closed her eyes. As the music flowed over and into her, her mind began to relax and her body moved to the pulsating beat. Soon, she was immersed in her dancing and as she let herself go, she revelled in the stillness of her soul that only dance could bring.

When Maya swept into KD's office the next day, she was greeted by the affable and efficient Sheetal Malhotra who ushered her into a bright, spacious room overlooking the lawns. Her temporary work station had everything that she needed—laptop, photocopier and printer and a freshly

brewed steaming cup of coffee. Her first priority would be to finish the SHVP designs for Krish. After the first few minutes when she struggled for concentration, she was soon immersed in her work. As the concepts that she'd shared with Krish began to morph into designs, she created page after page of drawings. Each stroke of the pen felt like a soothing balm on her aching heart. She soon lost track of time until Sheetal knocked on her door to inform her that Natasha was waiting for her in the lobby. Krish's bubbly cousin had decided to pay her a surprise visit – to see how the new bride was doing.

Sitting across her, she gave Maya a long, incisive look. "Dark circles under the eyes don't suit a 'glowing' bride!" And then added with a wink, "Or should I say, it's obvious that you two love birds haven't found any time for shut-eye?"

Maya laughed. "Don't you know about the JV deal that Krish is working on? I haven't seen him at all since we got back."

Natasha rolled her expressive kohl-lined eyes. "Oh, you poor girl! It's amazing how stupid my brilliant cousin can be! Let me call him right now."

As Natasha frantically dug into her purse for her phone, Maya caught her hand, "Hey, Nats, I was planning to head out to the greenhouses. Want to join me?"

Natasha perked up instantly. "That sounds fun. I haven't been to the greenhouses in years."

Over the next couple of hours, Maya was given a guided tour of the climate-controlled greenhouses with Sheetal rattling off facts and figures about cut-flower exports, sales growth and the fierce competition, while Natasha filled her in on family anecdotes.

On Maya's request, they stopped at the rose greenhouses. The sight was breath-taking as lines of pots bearing roses, with an astonishing range of colours, extended as far as the eye could see.

"Our roses are the most sought after." The pride in Sheetal's remark was unmistakable. "We grow some of the most exotic hybrids."

"Do you also grow lavender roses?" Maya asked, trying not to let her voice betray her anxiety.

"The ones that we grow are 'purple roses'. Lavender roses, technically, should have both the scent of the lavender and rose. We haven't quite mastered that yet."

"Oh, but I do remember Suvarna Auntie would have fresh cut lavender

roses in her room every single day,” Natasha piped up. “I can never forget the scent, though it has been so many years since I actually held one of those roses.”

Maya felt a jolt of shock hit her as Natasha elaborated. “Now that you mention it, there used to be this botanist who worked here in those days. And after he left, the lavender roses also disappeared.”

“Do you remember his name?” Maya asked, as she fisted up her suddenly clammy palms and stuck them in her trouser pockets.

Natasha frowned in concentration as she tried to remember. “He was a Bengali man, wore these big round glasses....Sinha...maybe Shome, or something like that. I vaguely remember there was some kind of scandal.”

Maya felt her blood turn cold. She waited with bated breath for Natasha to continue.

“We were so young then. All I remember is that he was a very gentle, kind person. He’d call me Naughty Baby. You see, I’d be the one who’d get Krish into all kinds of trouble.” Natasha laughed at the memory. “Anyway, it was all so long ago.”

Maya smiled even as her eyes threatened to water. “A pity, you don’t grow lavender roses anymore. They are the most majestic.”

Natasha nodded. “Suvarna Auntie would say there is nothing more mysterious or enchanting than a lavender rose.”

“She was right. Sheetal, if you have any documentation on the lavender roses, could you please send them to me?”

“I remember coming across some documents about a Lavender Rose project when we were computerising our records last year,” Sheetal said, as they drove back to the office. “If I find anything on it, I will definitely send them across to you. Of course, if they are more than ten or fifteen years old, they would be in the store room. But let me warn you, most of the stuff there is in pretty bad shape.”

The greenhouse visit had completely unsettled Maya. She recalled the lines from Papa’s diary:

*The most ill-fated moment of my life was the one when I met KD and agreed to work on the lavender rose project.”*

Would she find the documents that she was looking for? Would she finally be able to hold them up to KD and demand answers from him? Nervous tension coiled inside her as she realised that she couldn’t waste any more time fretting over her stalled relationship with her so-called husband.



Her cell phone pinged as a message hit the Inbox. It was Krish.

“Party tonight @ KD’s. 8 PM.”

Maya’s fingers flew on the keypad as she couldn’t resist returning a jibe. “Yes, Master!”

Later in her bedroom, Maya threw open the wardrobe eyeing the row upon row of designer evening dresses. Well, she didn’t need a fairy godmother. Krish had already paid for a closet full of designer wear that could make Cinderella go green with envy... and he was now demanding his money’s worth. Why quibble when she’d been fully aware of the terms of the contract? But instead of sticking to them, she had gone and messed it all up for herself – by losing her heart to him.

She picked an ensemble that would make her look like the diva of the party. Tonight she would fulfil all her promises to Krish. She would be the glamorous wife that she’d signed up to be. And perhaps, for the only time in their marriage she would not be playing the role of a much-in-love woman but actually living it. Her heart fluttered painfully at the thought that never again would she be so close to Krish. Never again would he look at her with something akin to tenderness – even if it was only for display – and that was all she could have. Tonight, she would also keep her promise to herself. It was the aftermath that would haunt all of them – the Devs as well as her. There would be time for regrets and she would get there soon enough. Now, it was time to deliver on her promises.

## Chapter Nine

After almost round-the-clock negotiations, Krish had pulled off one of the biggest joint venture deals in the country. Steering the DGE group and one of the top brands in the hospitality industry worldwide – Cosmo International – into a win-win partnership was no mean feat. It definitely was one of the toughest assignments of his career and he had closed the deal in record time.

And yet, the thrill of success eluded him. He usually was not averse to celebrating his hard-fought-for success, but this time round, his heart was not in it. Frankly, if it was left to him, he'd give tonight's party a miss. But he knew KD would not stand for it – and this was one celebration that would definitely be over-the-top even by his father's hard-partying standards.

Then there was... Maya. Since their return from Deovan, he'd willed himself not to think of her, or about that night when she'd come to him like the proverbial moth to a flame. He'd driven himself to the point of exhaustion, scrupulously avoiding her during the day and only returning from his gruelling meetings late into the night. But no matter what he did, how hard he tried, he couldn't stop her from invading his dreams. And now, as he approached her, the intensity of his need for her came roaring back – burning bright and insistent.

She looked like a vision that his fevered brain had thrown up. So much for mind control!

Maya – stunning as ever – faced him with a dazzling smile that was as fake and bright as the candles in the crystal chandelier in KD's mansion. "Congratulations. You have landed quite a coup with this deal!"

He inclined his head. "Thanks. But a deal is just a deal... sometimes you close it, sometimes you don't."

"You don't sound too thrilled."

He just shrugged. "I've just closed a mega-deal, the DGE brand name is all set to become a global powerhouse and I've got a sexy wife to flaunt at the celebratory party. So, what's not to love?"

"Right, at least I know where I stand in your list of priorities." Her flippant words were in stark contrast to the deep anguish that she felt at his words.

Krish's Phone buzzed. As he turned away to take the call, Maya exhaled the breath that she didn't even know she'd been holding. From the minute Krish had stepped into touching distance, a mess of contradictory

emotions roiled inside her. Hurt at his insensitivity, anger at his arrogance, and longing that burnt a hole in the pit of her stomach. Anger is good, Maya. Adrenaline and anger – as long as they didn't desert her tonight, she would be fine.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the ornate mirror across the room. She had picked her ensemble with care – a sequinned lavender choli blouse that exposed her back with only a dainty knotted gold string holding it in place. The matching Asian-style pants in a darker shade of purple with gold highlights alternately shimmered away from and clung to her curves. And the makeup – it had to be perfect. She'd never spent so much time in front of a mirror, masking the dark rings under the eyes. The touch of glitter around her kohl-lined eyes gave them a mysterious, smoky look that added to the effect that she wanted to achieve – that of a trophy wife to Krish's upcoming business tycoon persona. She knew she looked stunning and it had given her self-confidence a huge boost, never mind the fear and doubt that gnawed away her insides at the thought of following through on her plan.

She turned her attention to the party and surveyed the glittering hall – the very same one where she had been introduced to the Dev family and friends. Today, it looked different – the décor was Indian with *rangoli* decorations in bright festive colours on the floor and tiny earthen lamps placed strategically all over the room. Red gold silk drapes separated the buffet tables that were yet to be laid out with the array of Indian delicacies. To one side, there was a raised platform where musicians were playing classical Indian music.

It could have been a scene straight out of a nawab's *mehfil* and Krish looked like an imperious prince in his impeccable charcoal grey silk Nehru suit. The guests were sipping the best of wines, cocktails and whiskeys and nibbling on cocktail snacks served by a small army of servants.

A crisp British-accented voice hailed Krish who snapped his phone shut and turned to welcome Mike Andrews, CEO of Cosmo International.

"Pleasure to meet you, Maya.... You're one lucky guy, Krish!" Mike's voice had a hint of envy as he raised Maya's hand to his lips before releasing it.

Krish wrapped his arm possessively around Maya's waist, pulling her close. "You can say that again. I count my blessings every day."

She felt an almost physical pain in her chest at his words – if only he meant it!

“Really?” she pouted. “Difficult to believe after you have ignored me for the last five days.”

Mike laughed. “Ah! I think I may be partly to blame for that. I had no clue that my new partner is still on his honeymoon!”

“I guess I will never hear the end of this,” Krish smiled, but Maya knew he was far from amused. “Mike, you will have to excuse me for a bit. I need to talk to Frank before he leaves for London. Maya, would you please give Mike a tour of our lawns. He is quite the gardening buff.”

Maya bristled at what sounded far too close to an order for her liking. “Of course, it would be my pleasure.”

Krish’s brows furrowed as he couldn’t help but notice that Mike wasn’t at all immune to her charms. Mike winked at Krish, “Take your time while I enjoy your lovely wife’s company.”

“See you soon.” Krish bit out through clenched teeth as Maya glared at him, then shot Mike a sweet smile and took his arm and led him to the gardens. A sharp stab of possessiveness twisted his gut. He looked away and resolutely made his way towards Frank.

Mike had gone to the bar for a Scotch refill and to fetch her a Margarita. She hadn’t missed the look in Krish’s eyes when she had taken Mike’s arm and had instantly felt a thrill run through her at the possessiveness he’d unwittingly displayed. Big deal! As if that made an iota of difference to their situation. She was still the one who was hankering to be in the circle of his arms, feel the warmth of his body next to hers. And he was still the one keeping her at arm’s length.

A tingling sensation at the nape of her neck alerted her to Krish’s presence. Think of the devil. Seconds later, his warm hand touched her back and she had to resist the temptation to lean into him. His husky voice whispered in her ear. “Missed me, sweetheart?”

“Why should I when Mike has been more than an attentive companion?” she answered ultra-casually.

His eyes glittered. “So where is this most chivalrous man?”

“Fetching me a drink.” Her mind went numb as his fingers gently caressed the bare skin of her back just under her choli.

“Go easy with your flirting, *jaanu*. Don’t forget you’re a married woman.”

“As if I can forget that,” she breathed as the rat-tat-tat of her heart

drowned out all other background sounds. “How sexist of you to think that I have to flirt to hold a man’s attention.”

“Not at all. The sexy outfit you’re wearing...that helps too.” His appreciative gaze made her skin flame up. “I can guarantee you, none of the men here are looking for a conversation.”

She jerked away from his touch wanting to put some distance between them. But she wasn’t quick enough. For a moment her vulnerability had revealed itself.

And Krish hadn’t missed the flash of pain in her eyes. It made him feel like a complete louse. “Sorry, I take that back.” He raised his hands in apology. “I’m just being a grouchy bastard.”

He touched her face delicately and rubbed her cheek in a gesture that was part tender, part awkward apology and she felt her heart melt. Oh my! She gulped back the lump in her throat and breathed deeply. She despaired for herself – if she didn’t get out of his mesmeric presence, she might as well forget about her plans to find justice for her father. He had positioned himself between her and her path of escape. But he needn’t have – she felt powerless to move. As she tore her eyes away from him, she spotted Mike coming towards them. “Here comes Mike with my drink.”

Krish swivelled around to face Mike even as his hand reached around her waist to hold her close against him. The gesture was so spontaneous, it made her all fuzzy and warm inside. She smiled at Mike who handed her the drink with a flourish, “At your service, my lady!” Glancing at Krish he added, “All sorted out with Frank?”

Krish nodded. “Pretty much. Rohan will be in touch with him for anything else that he might need.”

Maya sipped her drink, her mind in a whirl. There was something different about Krish tonight. He seemed restless, almost uneasy. As if he didn’t want to leave her side. As if he needed her next to him – and not just in a physical sort of way. His warm fingers slid across her waist before intertwining with hers. Was she reading too much into his behaviour? Or, was it all for the sake of public appearance? Whatever. The truth was she wanted this moment to be real. And she found her fingers clinging to his. He gently squeezed them without so much as looking at her. A sunshiny warmth spread inside her. It was a moment that she knew was being branded into her memory cells... for those cold and lonely days ahead. And close on the heels of that thought came an intense sense of loss. Loss for what, she wondered.

Loss for what she'd never had nor could ever hope to have – his love.

Her thoughts were wrenched away as Krish disentangled his fingers from hers. "Public announcement time. Got to go."

Watching him cross the room to the little podium where KD had begun addressing the audience, Maya knew that the moment had come. It was now or never. The next few minutes, they would all be wrapped up in their celebratory announcements and toasts. No one – least of all Krish and KD – would notice her absence. Yet, she found herself rooted to the spot. Her heart beat had become heavy. She shook her head, trying to cast away the lethargy that gripped her in its vice-like hold. She forced herself to leave the hall, keeping her eyes away from the podium. She dared not look at Krish or else she would never be able to go through with it. A voice inside her screamed. You don't have a choice, Maya. This is your destiny.

Once she was outside the mansion, she kept in the shadows and headed straight for KD's office. Sheetal had given her a set of keys to the office so that she could come and go at will. Focusing her mind on the job, she disarmed the alarm just as Sheetal had shown her.

As she stepped inside, the darkness enveloped her. Her heart beat hard and fast as she waited for her eyes to adjust to the dark. She felt her way to the store room, keyed it open. Closing the door shut, she switched on the light. She'd have to find something in the next ten to fifteen minutes and get back to the party. Taking a deep, calming breath, she got down to the job at hand.

Krish nursed the crystal tumbler of Scotch as he struggled to keep his attention on KD who droned on about the virtues of collaborating with Cosmo International. He frowned as he watched his father hold forth about the DGE Group and its future prospects. This was just a dress rehearsal before the official launch and the press conferences where KD would strut and preen like a peacock. A wave of exhaustion swept over him. The deal may be done but the media hoopla was only just about to begin. And he was so not looking forward to it. He had agreed to go through it only on the condition that KD would announce the name of the candidate he had selected as CEO of the new joint venture. Once the reins were handed over he would be free. He had kept his mother's promise and he would then be free to pursue his own path.

And free to pursue his desire for Maya? What was he getting into? His

resolve to stay emotionally detached from her was seriously under threat. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt so possessive about any woman – he wanted to shield her from every roving male gaze in the room. He didn't know what to make of this intense emotional turmoil that bubbled deep within him. But whatever it was, he knew that he could no longer go through with his earlier resolve of staying aloof from her. Was he willing to risk a closer, more intimate relationship with her? Was he even ready to take the risks that came wrapped with trust, intimacy and sharing?

A sudden burst of applause broke through his musings and he realised everyone was cheering him. Gosh, what had he missed now! He walked up to KD, who embraced him in a bear hug and announced proudly, “And now, a few words from the new Managing Director of DGE-Cosmo India Pvt. Ltd.”

Krish's synapses clicked sharply into place as he heard KD's gloating words. In the few moments that he had been distracted, KD had put him in a bind by publically announcing that Krish was the new CEO of the joint venture! He should have seen this coming from miles away. The only other person who seemed to be dazed at the announcement was Viren.

Krish shot a furious glare at KD, before turning to the applauding crowd. “Thank you all for coming here today. Welcome aboard, Mike. It's great to have you and your team here with us. I look forward to working with Mike Andrews and his team as the Acting Managing Director.” He cocked an eyebrow at KD. “Dad, you forgot to mention this role was only temporary. You seem to be tripping up!” A ripple of laughter erupted as KD masked his agitation behind a glazed smile. “For the DGE Group, this collaboration signifies a major thrust into the global arena. And for that reason alone, DGE-Cosmo deserves the most competent Managing Director who will steer it in the right direction within the highly competitive hospitality industry. Till such time as we find the right candidate for the job, it will be my pleasure to fulfil the role of Acting Managing Director. Here's to the success of DGE-Cosmo. Over to you, Mike.”

After the round of toasts and speeches had been completed, Krish firmly moved KD away from his group of admirers and gave him a piece of his mind. But his father was unrepentant and more than a little sloshed after the several glasses of Single Malts he had downed. “I strike when I see an opportunity and I make no excuses for that. But I must give it to you – you sidestepped my move very smartly. You're a tough little cookie, you know, and I'm glad we are on the same side.”

Krish seethed. “Not for much longer if you keep trying to manipulate me.” He stopped for a moment, making sure that KD got the message loud and clear. “The next time you spring a nasty surprise on me like that, I’m out for good. Do you hear me?”

Krish made for the porch, overlooking the lawns, without waiting for KD’s response. He inhaled the soothing fragrance of the jasmine trees that were in full bloom and tried to calm his frayed nerves. For as long as he could remember, it was always about what KD wanted. Manipulation was something he had perfected to a fine art. He wondered how his mother had put up with it for years. He realised just how debilitating it had been for his mother – it had worn away her self-esteem and dignity and yet she had not let her frustration seep through into her relations with others. With her son and those who were close to her. Frustration snapped at him, making him feel like a caged animal wanting to get out. KD would do everything in his power to keep him chained to DGE. How naïve he had been to think that he could do a balancing act – keep his word to his mother and be a dutiful son to her memory while being free of KD’s hold. That was unlikely to happen. Not now. Not ever. And today, he had a taste of just how manipulative KD could be to reach his own ends.

What a night it was turning out to be. And the celebrations had only just begun. He only hoped that KD had for once restrained his impulse to go in for loud, kitschy entertainment.

He saw it then – a light in KD’s office. Had someone forgot to switch it off? No! Someone was in there. At this time of the night? He could see a figure moving. A flash of something bright glinted in the dim light. Something sparkling – it was a woman’s outfit. He stormed into the hall and spotted Rani serving snacks to the guests.

He pulled her aside. “Where’s your Bhabhi?”

Rani looked around the hall, bemused. “*Yahan nahin hai?* She’s not here?”

Maya’s heart banged away as she looked through the filing cabinets. She’d been here for fifteen – maybe twenty – minutes. KD would definitely be in a celebratory mood and there would be a lot of toast-raising, mutual back slapping and congratulatory speeches. But she knew she couldn’t risk being away from the party for much longer. Krish was bound to notice. In her haste, she fumbled, dropped a few files and wasted a few precious seconds in



retrieving the papers from the floor.

There seemed to be tons of files and projects, but nothing on the Lavender Rose Project. Sheetal was right – it was a mess. They had probably thrown away the old files. And even if they were somewhere in here, it would take hours to sort through it all.

It had all been in vain. There was no evidence of anything that linked KD with her father's failed project. Tears of frustration pooled in her eyes as she desperately scanned the files. She fumed inwardly at the sheer injustice of it all. It had taken all her resolve and grit to sneak in here only to find out that it had all been for nothing.

Venting her frustration, she banged the drawer shut. On the verge of giving up, she nevertheless decided to check the last drawer before calling it quits. Please God! Let there be something! But it was stuck. She pulled hard, it opened a few inches but was still jammed. She reached inside—her fingers closed around a dusty, dog-eared file that had wedged itself between two drawers. As she pulled it out, the file ripped. Her heart almost stopped. It was labelled – “Lavender Rose Project”.

She choked the cry that rose from her gut. Could this be it? There were only a few pages inside and as she flipped through them, one name leapt at her – Subodh Shome. She'd found it. Her prayers had been answered. She could have wept with joy but she needed to get out. Now. She collected the papers that had fallen out of the torn file and thrust them into her pocket.

As she stepped out and locked the main door behind her, her mind raced. Would the documents help her nail KD's fraud? What if they were just details of some obscure project? The thought almost made her stop in her tracks. She'd never once considered what would happen if she didn't find the evidence that she needed to nail KD. Would she find it in her heart to forget the past? Or would she become as embittered as Papa who had wasted away in his hatred and misery. She shuddered at the thought as she rushed down the pathway to the mansion.

The party was on in full swing and she could hear the music blaring out. She hoped, prayed that Krish hadn't noticed her absence.

She slammed into a hard, muscular chest... that could belong to only one man. Krish!

## Chapter Ten

Maya's breath caught in her throat – her worst fear had come true. Just my blasted luck! She clutched at Krish to save herself from falling headlong into the flower bed. Fear and adrenaline made her blood pump faster. He scooped her in his arms. "Easy! You are in one hell of a hurry. Everything all right?" Krish's steely voice was making her even more edgy.

Calm down, Maya! She pulled away from him. "Yeah, fine. I didn't see you coming."

"What were you doing in KD's office?" Krish's eyes were dark and impenetrable.

Her brain buzzed, trying to find an answer. "Oh... I had gone to pick up my mobile... I'd left it behind this afternoon."

Krish's eyes narrowed. "Really? You couldn't wait till tomorrow morning to retrieve it?"

Maya took a deep breath, desperately trying to quieten her racing heart. "I guess I could. But I needed to text my number to Mike. I just can't seem to remember my new number."

His voice was sharp and cold. "Mike? So, you have started exchanging phone numbers with him as well."

Maya inwardly squirmed. How she wished there was some way in which she could insulate Krish from the consequences of her actions. "I didn't realise that would be a problem."

His eyes narrowed. "Mike is not just a friend or an acquaintance. He is a business partner. There is a certain level of formality involved and I don't want you to give him the wrong impression."

For a moment she was completely taken aback. And almost instantly indignation flared. "Wrong impression about what?"

"There is no need to lose your cool. There is a certain business protocol that needs to be observed and you should be aware of it."

She felt distracted as confusion tore through her. Part of her wanted to run away, shut herself up and go through the documents that were burning a hole inside her pocket. Another part of her wanted to trust her instincts and blurt out the whole sordid story to him. She exhaled, reeling with her wayward thoughts. "You don't have to worry. Mike and I were talking about landscaping and he happened to mention some friend of his who has come up with a new rooftop garden innovation. I thought it could be useful for the resort. So I asked him to text me the number of this innovator. That's when I

realised I had left my mobile behind in Sheetal's office. So, no need to get paranoid!"

He inclined his head and stared at her. She felt as if he could see through her lies, deep into her soul. Her face flushed in agitation. "So, if you are done with your interrogation, maybe I can skip the rest of this party?"

There was a glint in his eyes that she couldn't quite fathom. "Actually, the party has only just begun and you need to stay through to the very end."

He jerked her into his arms, taking her breath away. "Looks like you need a little refresher course on the terms of our contract."

Desire rippled through her. Why don't you stop talking and just kiss me! His eyes held hers in its hypnotic dark gaze, his breath warm on her face, as his stubble-dusted chin grazed over her cheek. Before he could press his lips down on hers, she heard someone clear his throat.

"Sir... excuse me..."

Embarrassment flooded over her as she pulled away. Krish dragged his hand through his hair, giving her a tortured look, before turning to face Rohan. "What is it?"

Maya turned on her heels and dashed inside. Rushing to the washroom, she looked at herself in the mirror. Her cheeks felt hot against her cold palms. She bit down on her lower lip, trying to quell the desire that still throbbed within her. One minute she was afraid that Krish would see through her lies and the next she wanted to lay bare her heart's true desire.

She opened the tap, snatched a hand towel off the rack, and wet it with cold water. Squeezing it dry, she wiped the back of her neck with the cool towel and felt the tension ease somewhat. She couldn't believe how she had managed to improvise on the spot. True, Mike had told her about his friend's landscaping innovation and he had promised to share more information with her. But that was it...he had not asked her for her mobile number nor had she volunteered to give it to him.

She was amazed at how easily she had lied. What an irony it would be if in her quest for revenge she became more and more like KD – deceitful and manipulative! She rubbed her temples, trying to erase her self-doubts. Deep down she knew that no matter how she justified it to herself, she was about to betray Krish's trust. She was on the verge of throwing away any chance that she had of making a life with the only man she had come to love so completely. But what choice did she have? Could she really tell him the truth? And expose herself to his contempt? The truth of the matter was – she

was damned if she did and damned if she didn't!

Krish barged into KD's den to deal with the new crisis on hand. But Rohan's warning had come a little too late. He watched as a fuming Viren stormed off. KD was far from perturbed. He steered Krish towards the buffet tables. "Oh, *jaane do ussey*. Let him go," he said dismissively. "Viren needs to cool off. Come now, as hosts of the party we can't keep our guests waiting."

Frankly, Krish had enough to worry about and had no wish to play mediator between KD and Viren. Watching Maya barrelling out of KD's office had come as a nasty shock. The thoughts that had whizzed through his mind had been uncharitable to say the least. And he had been tempted to judge her without giving her a chance to explain. Maya was right, he was really becoming paranoid. If he didn't watch out, he would end up like KD – wrecking every relationship, alienating every single person he came into contact with. Ever since his adolescent years, he had instinctively avoided his father, almost as if he'd known that his father's negativity would pull him down, cast him in his mould. It wasn't just about proximity – after all, you can never tell when your genes will kick in.

"You Devs really know how to throw a party." Mike marvelled as he tucked into his food. "These are the most succulent kebabs I have ever had in my life."

"I will pass on your compliments to the chef." Krish grabbed a plate and piled some kebabs on it.

"By the way, Maya gave me some invaluable tips on gardening. Your wife is quite a talented young lady."

As soon as Mike mentioned her name, Krish's hackles rose. His jaw tightened ever so slightly. He sneered. "Now that you have her cell number you can call her any time for more landscaping advice."

"Man, I have no idea what you're talking about." And then, as if it dawned on him, Mike gave him a nudge and a wink. "She's got you all wrapped around her little finger. Watch out, mate!"

Mike's joke slashed through him like a knife slicing open his gut. If he wasn't so furious at himself he could have laughed out loud. Here he was, only minutes ago, agonising over doubting Maya but it seemed like he should have paid more attention to his gut feeling. His desire for her was clouding his judgement and that was unacceptable.

Turning away from Mike with a muttered excuse, he snapped open his phone and speed-dialled Maya's mobile number as his eyes scanned the hall for her. She was nowhere to be seen. And she wasn't picking up the phone either. He felt a tightness in his chest as questions burned through his consciousness. What was she hiding? How deep did her lies go?

For a while Maya circulated in the party, smiling and air-kissing acquaintances, being the perfect hostess. But she was on pins and needles; dying to get back to the bungalow and read the documents. The longer she stayed, the more she fretted.

Finally, she seized the moment and slipped away. The scents of the night wafted in the breeze that cooled her overheated skin as she hurried down the pathway. In the dark, she stumbled on the porch step and winced in pain. Rani had forgotten to switch on the light.

A sudden childhood memory flashed. Ma had entrusted her with her with the task of switching on a light in the verandah of their home every evening. A dark home is an invitation to evil spirits, Ma would admonish her, whenever she forgot her task. Over the years, it had become such a habit that even on that fateful evening when she was leaving for the hospital – full of hope about Papa's recovery – she had instinctively reached for the light switch as she stepped out. Only to see the bulb fizz and explode. It had seemed like a bad omen but she had chided herself for reading too much into a fused bulb. In hindsight, it did seem as if some force out there was trying to warn her, prepare her for what lay ahead.

The memory wafted away as she flicked on the porch light, pushed open the door and stepped across the threshold. Normally, Baloo was the first to greet her. But today, Rani must have left him with Hari at their quarters. She felt a strange sense of foreboding returning to a dark, empty home. Home. Since when had she started associating this place as home she wondered.

She rushed to her room, switched on the table lamp and spread the documents on the desk. She speed-read the pages, glancing over random details about various projects that Papa had been assigned to in his role of Consultant Botanist to Dev Horticulture Pvt. Ltd. There was a technical paper – handwritten in his distinctive scrawl – which listed in some detail the process of growing a new hybrid variety of lavender roses. Attached to it was a typed copy of the same document and a letter from the Patents Office. Her

heart skipped a beat as she read the official notice granting ownership of the patent to one Manish Agarwal, PH.D., at Mansarovar Agricultural College. The residence address listed was the same as the Dev mailing address.

She stopped reading as things began to fall in place. So this was KD's scam! Papa's technical paper, containing drawings and process details, had been merely copied, given a new title and patented in Agarwal's name who was probably some junior flunky in KD's office. Papa had probably trusted KD enough to share with him his original designs and technical processes. The handwritten paper was proof of that. And in return for his trust, KD had cheated Papa of his rightful claim, lodged a false complaint against him and had him thrown in jail. She paced the room as her mind processed the probable scenario. Another piece of paper fluttered to the floor – an affidavit on a judicial stamp-paper signed by her father. It read:

*“I hereby withdraw all claims to the hybrid lavender rose innovation and regret that I had falsely claimed the ownership of the same which is Manish Agarwal's work and is currently patented in his name. I forfeit any future claims to the innovation .*

The legal document was dated 20 March, 1999. She froze with shock – that was the horrible day when her mother had been struck by a speeding van. Meena Mashhi had spent the night at the hospital with Ma while she had been deposited at Meena Mashhi's place. She remembered how scared she was. Nobody would tell her anything. All they would say is “Pray to God, Maya. Pray for your Ma.”

The document dropped from her hand as she remembered how hard she had prayed that night. The next day when Meena Mashhi came home from the hospital, she was crying. She had run to her, “Mashhi, why are you crying? Ma is going to be okay, no?” But she had hugged her and sobbed her heart out. She had never felt so scared, so lost, so alone. Later that day Papa arrived but one look at his distraught face and she knew it. Her Ma would never come back.

The hurt, the pain, the loss... it all came crashing back. The document was the final piece of the puzzle. And it all fitted in perfectly helping Maya to create a timeline of what had happened. On 20th March, a frantic Meena Mashhi had called up KD's office and informed them about Ma's accident. KD had used this tragic turn of events to his own advantage. He struck a bargain with Papa—his release from jail if he agreed to sign away the rights to his innovation. Distraught by the news of the accident, Papa had only one

thought: to rush back to Ma. But by the time everything was put in place for Papa's release, precious time had been lost. And when he finally reached the hospital, it was all over. The tears coursed down her cheeks as pain ripped through her in waves.

Maya nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard the sharp knock at the door. "Maya! Open the door!"

Krish? What did he want with her at this hour! She glanced at the watch. 2.35 A.M. A second knock, more urgent this time, followed. He was not going away. She swiped the streaks of tears from her face. "Give me a moment," she called out. Hurriedly, she swept all the documents under the pillow and pulled the bed spread on top.

"Come on, Maya. If you don't open the door..."

She pulled the door open and faced him defiantly. "Or else, what?"

For a moment, he just glared at her. Tension simmered. She said softly, "Look, I'm really tired and I'd just like to go to sleep. Can't we do this tomorrow?"

"This shouldn't take long." He pushed the door open and entered the room, closing the door shut behind him. He was inches away from her and her skin prickled to life; she edged back towards the bed. "You can't just come barging in like this!"

He leaned against the door and gave her a hard look. "Hiding something, Maya?"

The revelations had left her feeling raw. Wounded. And Krish's arrogant behaviour was like salt being poured on an open wound. She gritted her teeth. "What do you want from me?"

"Just answer my question. What were you doing in KD's office tonight?"

"I already told you. I had left my mobile behind."

His voice lowered a couple of shades as he warned. "I've had enough of your lies."

Her heart thudded against her chest. How did he know? He must have mentioned it to Mike. He inched closer, reading her thoughts. "Mike did not ask for your phone number. So, why did you lie to me?"

How dared he be so self-righteous! Not when his father, the great Kamalkant Dev, had built an empire on a foundation of lies, deceit and manipulation. Yes, she had lied – because that was the only way to get to the truth of how his family had destroyed hers!

“I lied because I needed to find out something... something that’s of value to me.”

“I see.” He had turned stone cold. “Something so precious, that you had to steal it.” Behind his sharp accusation was a hint of dismay.

“If that’s how you want to look at it – yes, I went in there to steal something.”

He shook his head slowly, as if trying to deny something that he already knew was undeniable. Corporate theft. She’d planned this all along. Was everything she had said a lie? Was that the reason why she had married him – to get access to the Dev household? Why did he not suspect anything when he had gone through her dossier? The questions piled up till he thought his head would explode.

He strode to the desk in the corner, switched on the table lamp and pulled open the drawer.

“What do you think you are doing?” Maya rushed forward to stop him.

His voice was cold as ice. “Do you realise that corporate theft is a serious crime and you could spend several years in jail?”

She stopped dead in her tracks at the look of contempt on his face. His tone was low but to her ears, every word was a screaming accusation. “So what is this valuable thing that you were looking for? Documents? Something that you could sell for a price to some gossip rag? Or maybe to one of our rivals?”

She had anticipated this all along and yet she hadn’t been prepared for the hurt that rumbled through her. Her voice was dead. “Go ahead... why am I not surprised that the heir to the Dev empire is nothing but a bully just like his father?”

Krish turned to her menacingly and she found herself pinned to the wall, trapped between his arms on either side of her. “And who are you, Maya Shome? A sneaky scumbag of a reporter writing for some business gossip rag? Or an ambitious scandal seeker looking for your fifteen minutes of fame?”

She refused to be intimidated by his scathing words. Or the fire in his eyes. But she inwardly cringed at the contempt she saw in them. As if she was indeed the very scum of the earth. She wanted to tell him everything. Show him her stolen goods. Reveal KD’s fraudulent ways and how he had played havoc with their lives. Do it! Tell him the truth!

Krish was breathing hard as he muttered almost to himself. “For god’s



sake, Maya why?”

For a moment she saw a flash of pain in his eyes. And her eyes brimmed with tears that she would not let drop. The time to tell the truth had long gone. From his point of view, she had already crossed a boundary. The boundary between trust and mistrust. Between truth and lies. Between loyalty and betrayal. The truth would not be enough to bridge that chasm.

Her voice choked on a bitter sob. “Let me go.”

His nostrils flared. “Tell me. Why did you do it?”

She stared into his unforgiving face and pushed hard against his chest, trying to free herself from his grip. “Let. Me. Go.”

He slammed her against the wall, and his lips came down hard on hers, in a scorching, brutal kiss that left her gasping for breath. Her mind rebelled against the humiliation even as she felt her body go soft against him. She felt hot, angry tears prickle her eyes and she bit down hard on his lip. She heard him curse against her mouth and realized she had drawn blood. She tore herself away from him, rushed to the door. He was close behind her and as he whirled her around, she spat out her anger, “Get away from me, Krish.”

His phone buzzed. “Goddammit!” he cursed as he pulled it out and barked into the phone, “Not now, Rohan.”

He snapped the phone shut. “Here’s the deal, sweetheart.” She cringed as he spat out the sarcastic endearment and his fingers dug into the soft flesh of her arms. “You have till tomorrow morning. To give it all back... whatever you have stolen from KD’s office. Give it to me and then get out of my life forever.”

He thrust her away from him. As if repelled by her touch. As if every moment he spent in her presence nauseated him. Within moments, he had opened the door and was striding down the hallway.

“Wait,” she called out. But her voice was barely audible; her throat strangled by unshed tears. She ran to the bed, threw away the bedspread and fumbled for the documents under the pillow. Grasping them she raced down the hallway. But Krish had gone and she heard the roar of the Prius as it screeched away from the driveway. Finally the tears poured out and as they fell on the papers in her hand, she felt her heart wrench as if it was being pulled out of her body. She had seen the stricken look in his eyes moments before he’d thrust her away. And she knew that she would always carry that memory in her heart. She flopped down on the bed and with a cry of anguish she tore the documents to shreds.

## Chapter Eleven

The meeting with the angel investor should have been a cakewalk. Krish had expected to close the deal with Harshad Kumar for SHVP. Everything had been worked out – every financial I had been dotted and every T crossed. Besides, Kumar had been his mentor from his Harvard days and knew about his pet project since the time it was incubated. A couple of months ago, when Krish had sent him the architect's plans of the resort, Kumar had been very impressed. And when Krish had tentatively asked if he would like to be one of the angel investors on the project, Kumar had been more than happy to jump aboard. "Signing on the dotted line is a mere formality," Kumar had assured him.

And yet, today's meeting was a no-go. Kumar's turnabout came as a shock. Worse, he had been most evasive – fobbing him off with excuses. But when Krish had pinned him down he had come clean. "The market is buzzing with all kinds of rumours about the DGE group. It's just a case of bad timing."

Krish could barely contain his disappointment. "Mr. Kumar, you know full well that my father has nothing to do with this project. He has no stakes in it nor does DGE."

"I have complete faith in you, Krish, and I know that your project is independent of DGE. But the fact is that you can't detach yourself from your father or his group. Right now, things are not looking good for DGE. Once word gets around that I'm investing in KD's son's project, it's bound to impact my business reputation. I can't take the risk. Let's reassess the situation in a couple of months. And I'm sure by then, DGE would be in a much stronger position." Putting an arm across Krish's shoulders in a paternal gesture, he said, "Krish, I know you're disappointed. But trust me, this is not the right time for this deal. Don't lose heart."

Don't lose heart. In the five years that he'd been working on SHVP, for the first time his heart was no longer in it. It had got hopelessly entangled with his memories of Maya. He couldn't even think of it without evoking memories of that night in his mother's cottage in Deovan. The whiff of her floral perfume, her silky hair brushing against his skin, her chocolate eyes aflame with passion as she melted in his arms. Damn her! She had forever tainted the one thing in his life that he'd so cherished. He should be glad he'd returned the morning after their final argument to find her gone.

His Phone buzzed. He drew in his breath sharply as he found himself

standing at the hotel car-park, keys in his hand, staring into space. Cursing himself he pulled out his phone. “I’m on my way, Rohan. Should be there in ten minutes.” He got into the Prius and strapped himself in.

Eighteen-hour workdays had become the norm ever since things had spun crazily out of control only days after he had discarded Maya from his life. The ink on the DGE-Cosmo JV deal had barely dried when a series of issues between the partners had flared up. Before long, the Delhi and London teams were at each other’s throats. Frayed tempers, angry phone calls and emails went back and forth and KD made it worse with his high-handedness.

The deal was off. And then came the inevitable aftermath. News spread like wild fire through the business community fuelled by scandal-mongering and speculative media reports. The share market reacted with shock – DGE stocks went into free-fall causing panic all around. Investors threatened to pull the plug on several crucial DGE projects. Pulling back the group from the brink of a public relations disaster proved to be near impossible as damaging stories about KD’s opulent lifestyle and his penchant for Bollywood starlets erupted in magazines and television talk shows like forest fires. Suddenly, KD, the darling of the media had turned into its most lampooned celebrity. Krish had no option but to abandon his own project and take charge.

The more he delved into DGE affairs, the more he was appalled at the sheer scale of mismanagement – this was a disaster waiting to happen. Overhauling the group would require months of relentless hard work. Perhaps Kumar’s rejection had come as a blessing in disguise – he needed more hours in a day to bring back DGE from the brink and there was no way he could have added to his Sisyphean workload. He may as well forget about SHVP for now. Even if his father didn’t deserve his help, all the thousands of innocent employees DGE employed did and he couldn’t turn his back on them.

And what wouldn’t he do to forget Maya. Her betrayal haunted him like a bad dream that darkened his every waking moment. No matter how hectic his day or how preoccupied he was with handling the corporate crisis, she was never far away from her thoughts. The more he tried to erase her memory, the more he yearned to feel her, touch her, smell her. She had invaded his soul and the harder he tried to free himself of her hold, the more trapped he felt. Despite her betrayal, he still needed her in his life, even though he repeatedly told himself it was crazy to feel like that.

As he stormed into his office, he found Rohan at his heels. “Got a minute, Chief?”

“I can spare a couple of minutes before my meeting with the HR team,” said Krish as he swept into his tenth floor office overlooking the Connaught Place greens.

Rohan thrust a printout of an article that he had got off the Internet at him. It showed a cartoon of Krish in a firefighter’s suit trying to put out a blaze that engulfed a huge skyscraper with the DGE Group logo emblazoned on it. To one side, was a caricature of KD serenading buxom women on a luxury yacht. Krish’s face turned grim and he threw the printout back on the table towards Rohan.

“I have no taste for dark humour these days.”

Rohan shook his head. “Ignore the cartoon, Chief. Read the article. It’s the most positive piece that has come out since the problems began. The reporter has also agreed to do an exclusive interview with you focusing on the corporate restructuring of DGE.”

“It’s too early for such an article, Rohan.” Krish powered up his laptop and opened his presentation file. “Right now, I would be happy if I can pacify the employees’ union and make them call off their strike.”

Rohan would not be deterred. “The reporter also gave me some confidential information. She says that the string of DGE exposés in the media have all come from one source.”

Krish’s head jerked up at that. “And did she tell you who it was?”

Rohan nodded. Krish’s face grew grim as he murmured almost to himself. “I knew it! Maya!”

Rohan was flummoxed. “No.”

No? It had to be her! “Then, who?”

“Viren Saxena. He planned this media campaign to sabotage DGE and KD’s credibility.”

“Viren? I know he has been having some major issues with KD recently.” Krish stroked his chin as he thought aloud. “But it doesn’t make sense. Unless KD knows that Viren is the one who has brought him down, the revenge theory doesn’t work.”

Rohan was all excited now. “Exactly, and he’s been building towards it. He was definitely the one who sabotaged the DGE-Cosmo deal. Cosmo is all set to enter the Indian market with its own hundred per cent-owned subsidiary and guess who will be heading it?”

Finally, it all fell in place for Krish. “Viren Saxena.”  
“Bingo!”

Maya sat on the bank of the river under the shade of the large banyan tree where she’d spent some of the loveliest moments of her childhood. Swimming in the river as Papa fried fish that he’d caught. Eating lunch off leaf-plates. Papa’s voice soft and mellow as he talked about his favourite trees. As the cool breeze soothed her tortured mind, the banyan tree was like a long-lost friend, under whose protective shelter she felt at peace.

She read for the umpteenth time the last entry in the diary that Papa had addressed to her.

*Maya, my darling daughter, I tried to be strong for your sake. But I failed. Perhaps that is my karma. I hope you will forgive me. I fervently pray that you will leave behind my failures, my dashed dreams, my unfulfilled life. You are a strong girl, and you have a long and happy life ahead of you. Go after your dreams, Maya. I am asking you to do what I never could – leave the past behind. Don’t make my karma into your destiny.*

She now understood fully what her father had meant. He had asked her to forget and forgive – something that he had himself struggled with. His blessing for her was a forgiving heart, something that had eluded him all through his life. She clutched the diary to her and let the tears flow. If there was one thing she could give anything for – it was Krish’s forgiveness.

It had been six weeks since she had returned home. For the nth time she replayed that last night and agonised over how she could have done things differently. She would forever be haunted by the despair, the hurt in his eyes as he had rasped, “For God’s sake, Maya, why?” Through tear-washed eyes she had seen him turn his back to her – his shoulders clenched, his body radiating his rejection of her. She felt as if something within her had been ripped out. By the time she’d made up her mind to show him what she’d stolen, it had been too late. The man she loved had walked away from her life. Forever.

She’d finally faced her moment of truth. That nothing would ever be the same again. The documents in her hands mocked at her and in anguish she had shredded them and finally let go of her revenge. She had eventually pulled herself together and called for a taxi. As she walked down the driveway, she stopped in her tracks as she saw KD waving goodbye to the

last of the guests. The man who had turned her world topsy-turvy stood there. And she stared at him, blankly. She wasn't even aware that she had called out to him until he turned around to look at her. "You have something to say to me?"

She stepped out of the dark pathway and on to the lawns. She didn't know what force carried her forward or compelled her to say the words that she did. "Mr. Dev, does the name Subodh Shome ring a bell?"

KD looked at her, uncomprehending. "Who?"

Maya was amazed at how calm she felt. Almost as if every emotion she had ever felt had been wrung out of her. She didn't recognise the cold, level voice that felt as if it belonged to a stranger. "The man you sent to jail on the false charge of patent infringement."

Something flared in KD's eyes momentarily. "Oh yes. Subodh Shome. It's late and I don't intend to waste my time talking about him. Good night."

"Sure, why should you ruin your sleep when you felt nothing about ruining his life?"

His face suffused with colour as he angrily shot back. "He was a thief and he got what he deserved."

"Is that how you justify your actions? Fortunately, documents don't lie. And according to them, you are the thief."

At Maya's words, KD stumbled, reached out to grab the lawn chair that was nearest to him and plopped down. Maya watched him with cold eyes. "And when he threatened to expose you, you had him thrown into jail. Was it just an ego trip, Mr. Dev? All that power and influence... to be able to bring a man to his knees, to ruin his family, just to play God!"

"Lies... all a bunch of lies." Instead of his customary deep growl, KD's words came out slurred and shaky. He brushed a trembling hand over his eyes and the fear in them was palpable. His breathing was laboured and he struggled to speak. "I want those documents. Name your price."

Maya felt something stir within her. And she was surprised that it wasn't red-hot fury. It was pity. Pity for a man who measured everything in terms of hard cash. Pity for a man who was so enslaved to his ego and pride, that he had lost all sense of right and wrong. Pity for a man who'd lost the love of his only son and wasn't even conscious of the fact.

The lump in her throat was hard as rock. "You destroyed us. Me. My father. My mother... and you think you can put a price on that?"

As it finally dawned on KD, he looked at her with fear and trepidation,

“You’re Subodh’s daughter.”

“Do you think you have it in you to admit the truth, even if it is to yourself?” And when he didn’t answer her Maya shook her head. “I thought not.”

She heard KD stutter, “Please don’t....”

She exhaled. “Don’t what? Don’t expose how the great Indian tycoon scammed and destroyed a trusting, honest man?”

He practically withered in front of her. The terror that she saw in his eyes should have been a balm on her tortured heart. But it wasn’t. All she felt was overwhelming pity for a man who was blinded by his lust for power and pathetic enough to plead with her for the sake of his non-existent honour.

“One exposé in the media is all it would take for the great Kamalkant Dev to lose his status, honour, prestige.” But she didn’t feel any thrill or excitement at the sight of KD practically hanging on to her every word. Instead of the sweet taste of success, she could only savour the bitter taste of loss. “Don’t worry, Mr. Dev, I won’t do it. Not because I want to spare you the embarrassment. But because Krish doesn’t deserve to pay the price for your sins.”

Maya saw KD’s face go white as a sheet but his plight left her unmoved. For whatever it was worth, she had purged her life of Kamalkant Dev.

Krish steered the car into the driveway and pulled up outside his bungalow. As soon as he stepped out of his car, an ecstatic Baloo greeted his arrival home with an indecent amount of joyous hi-jinks. The warm welcome put a smile on Krish’s face and for a few minutes he forgot all about the relentless queries he’d had to put up with all day ever since Viren’s master stroke was played out in a blaze of media glory.

As news of Viren being appointed CEO of Cosmo International’s fully-owned Indian subsidiary hit the headlines, the media took special delight in highlighting the fallout between the college buddies turned corporate rivals, KD and Viren, and the dramatic change of fortunes in their careers. The media hounds scrapped over the meaty details but finally they began tiring of it. Through it all, Krish and Rohan worked relentlessly on putting DGE back on track – working out agreements with the employees’ union, re-negotiating with investors and financiers, rebuilding broken bridges with suppliers and customers. Krish knew that confidence building required transparency and

honesty – and it was only a matter of time before the tides would turn.

Amazingly enough, KD had gone along meekly with all their plans. Clearly, Viren's betrayal had come as a big blow. KD's blustering arrogance and power-fuelled megalomania had taken a huge dent. It was almost as if he had withdrawn from the battle, laid down his arms and retreated. Whatever the reason, KD's cooperation had made life easier for everybody all around.

But through all the media frenzy and the hectic damage control sessions, one question kept gnawing at him like a vulture pecking at a carcass. If Maya had no intention of betraying KD, what did she steal that night? Why did she not tell him what she was after? As Krish strode up the stairs and towards his room, he glanced across the corridor at Maya's room. He hesitated for a moment—as he dreaded the thought of being assaulted by the memories of that last argument with her—but he needed to know, dammit!

He marched down the hallway and threw the door open. He could still feel the echo of his angry words resonate in the silence. The bunch of fresh flowers that she always had in a vase next to the window had wilted. And yet, everything else was neatly arranged. On the desk, her sketch pens and pencils were stashed in a pen stand. Her landscaping books were still on the shelves in the book case. The wind chimes that she had hung at the window sill tinkled gently in the evening breeze. He looked around, stunned. He pulled open the closet. It didn't make sense. He'd accused her of being a thief. But she'd not taken anything with her... in fact, everything that he'd ever bought for her was neatly arranged inside. His hand lingered over the silks and the soft cottons as if that alone would make her materialise. He pulled open a drawer and found all the jewelry safely stacked away.

His eyes fell upon a small ring box and he opened it. It was his mother's ring – the same ring he'd slipped on her finger the day before the wedding. A twinge of remorse squeezed his heart as he took it out. He remembered the day of their marriage and the vows they had made to each other as they stepped around the holy fire. It had seemed like the most natural thing to do – to bring her home as his wife. Somewhere deep within him, he'd known that she completed him. And yet, at the first sign of trouble, he had broken his vows and opted for the easy way out – banished her from his life. He'd made the one mistake that he never ever did in a business relationship – take a hasty decision in the heat of an argument. But what about Maya? Why hadn't she defended herself?



As he placed the ring box back in the drawer, he noticed her large sketch pad. He pulled it out. On the cover, in big black bold letters were the words – SHVP, Deovan. He felt his breath catch as he flipped it open and stared at page after page of colourful landscaping designs. Each of them had been meticulously sketched out with intricate details – she'd recreated on paper every minute detail that they had discussed that night at the cottage in Deovan. She had taken his ideas and given form, shape, texture to them. She had kept her side of the bargain – to prepare the designs for the resort. Confusion rammed through him. Why would she do that if her sole intention had been to steal documents to sell? What was the information that she was looking for and why did she not use it?

He banged the closet shut but it flew open. A piece of paper had wedged itself at the bottom. He pulled it out. It was a torn scrap of a legal document. All he could decipher was a couple of signatures – KD's and Subodh Shome's – and a few random words. Was this the document that Maya had stolen from KD's office? It seemed like some kind of a contract. Who was Subodh Shome? What was Maya's connection to him? He needed some answers – and there was only one man who would have them.

Minutes later, he stormed into KD's den and it didn't take long for Krish to get the whole sordid story out of his father. Shock rampaged through him as he felt the full weight of the damage that his father had caused. Could Maya ever forget the hurt and pain that his father had inflicted on her family? Or why blame his father alone? He had behaved no better. He had been totally wrapped up in his own insecurities and paranoia, ready to believe the worst of her.

KD watched as Krish grappled to come to terms with what he had just told him. "Krish, there is one more thing I need to tell you."

Krish looked at him, dreading the thought of what he was about to reveal. KD tore his eyes away from him, as guilt and remorse overcame him. "She assured me that she wouldn't expose me in the media."

Krish raked his hand through his hair as he clenched his jaw against the pain that clawed at his gut. "Why? What did she say? Tell me her exact words."

"Because she knew..." KD searched for the right words as he evaded his son's eyes. "She said she didn't want you to pay the price for my sins. Krish, I'm sorry....for everything—"

## Chapter Twelve

Rohan stretched lazily as he woke up feeling refreshed. For the first time in weeks he'd had a full night's rest – not even an earthquake could have shaken him awake. He checked his mobile phone. It was 7.30 A.M. and his phone had already logged five missed calls from the boss. Three of them at 2.30 A.M.! Oh no, not another crisis! He shot out of the bed as he speed-dialled Krish. As the phone connected, he pulled the handset away from his ear as Krish's voice barked down the line. "Get to the office. Now, please."

Half an hour later he found Krish deep in a meeting with two men in sharp suits taking copious notes.

Krish glanced at Rohan. "Good morning. I'm glad you slept well; we've a lot to do."

Rohan looked sheepish. "Morning, Chief. I'm sorry, my mobile was..."

Krish waved away his apology. "Rohan, meet Akshay Verma and Shyam Mehra from MDS. They are private detectives."

"The same MDS that rescued kidnapped industrialist, Ram Sharan Goenka?"

Akshay, the older among the two, whose ramrod straight posture, hinted at a military background, nodded as he shook hands with Rohan. "Yes, Sir, the very same. We have an impeccable record in tracking down missing persons. The police had been on the Goenka case for months, but when his family approached us, we located the criminals and rescued him in five days."

Krish wrote out a cheque as he shook his head. "Uh-huh... Not good enough. Five days is too long. I want Maya located ASAP. You already have several leads that I have provided."

Akshay nodded gravely. "We'll get on the job right away. Do you have any addresses that we could check out in her hometown?"

Krish gave them an annoyed look. "You're not looking for a criminal. Finding someone in a small town like Howrah with the leads that I have given you shouldn't be tough. The sooner you find her, the bigger the bonus you get. And your clock has already started ticking."

As soon as the detectives had left with an advance of five hundred thousand rupees, Krish instructed Rohan, "I need you to follow up with them and give me reports on their progress."

Krish looked out of the large plateglass window at the Connaught Place

greens.

A worried Rohan looked at Krish. “Chief, are you okay?”

Krish turned around and Rohan saw the haunted look in his eyes.

“Rohan, I need to find Maya urgently. I messed up. Big time.”

Maya struggled to put her life together piece by little piece. After being locked up for more than four years, the house had demanded her immediate attention. But that was the easy part. The difficult part was dealing with the unholy mess of her feelings. How do you discipline your runaway heart, box up your love for a man who hates you and stash it away?

Her home had always been her refuge and yet she could find no comfort. Even after she had swept all the cobwebs away, scrubbed the floors, spent her meagre resources on getting a paint job done in bright colours, she didn’t feel a shred of satisfaction. And the thought of spending a life without Krish made her tear up all over again.

Startled at the loud knock on the door, she dashed away the tears that were streaming down her face. Just in time too. As Mashi, the nurse who’d been such a godsend during Papa’s last days, stormed in and folded her in a warm embrace.

. “O Ma, *tomaye dekhi!* Look at you, all grown up!” And then clicking her tongue disapprovingly, “What’s with you young people, why do you all want to look like dried sticks?” That had brought a smile to Maya’s face, amazed that her facial muscles hadn’t forgotten how to!

Hands on her ample hips, Mashi gave her a mock-fierce look. “Did you think you could sneak back into town and I wouldn’t know?”

Maya’s excuses that she was planning to look her up were instantly waved off as Mashi busily started opening up a tiffin box full of delicious food. “You sit down while I fetch a plate for you.”

“You don’t expect me to eat all this, do you?” Maya protested.

“You need fattening up. That stick-thin look might be fashionable in Delhi, but not here. So, come on now, get on with it.”

In a way Maya welcomed Mashi’s bossiness. At least it took her mind away from Krish. But if she’d thought she could deceive the doughty old nurse, she was sadly mistaken. “I know something happened in Delhi that you don’t wish to talk about. But know one thing – if you ever want to talk, I’m here.”

Maya looked away – she didn’t want to go there. Someday she would tell her about Krish, but not now. Not when the memory of his accusations

and the contempt in his eyes still had the power to lacerate her heart to shreds. Not when the thought of spending the rest of her life without him filled her with a heart-aching loneliness that she had no idea how to deal with.

She changed the topic before Mashi bulldozed her any more on the issue. “I have got a job at St. Joseph’s Convent as a dance teacher.”

Mashi beamed. “Dance and kids – that should stop your waterworks.”

Sure, she hadn’t missed her red, blotchy eyes. But before she could shuffle away, Mashi wagged a finger at her sternly. “And if that doesn’t cure you, I’ll send you packing to the hospital. A few doses of bitter medicine should do the trick.”

With a hug and a peck on her cheek, Maya dashed off. As Mashi had predicted, the kids kept her on her toes. She was plunged into the energetic business of training a bunch of ten-year olds for an upcoming inter-school dance competition. Her days were filled with the boundless energy and chatter of children while the nights were spent in a fruitless pursuit of exorcising Krish’s memory.

The meeting had gone just as Krish had planned. Rohan had more than impressed the investors with his presentation on the DGE restructuring. As the investors applauded, Krish winked at Rohan and gave him a thumbs-up sign. Rohan beamed back at him briefly before turning to address a question that an investor had raised. Krish had begun to delegate more of DGE’s work to Rohan who had lived up to the challenge. Soon he would be ready to take on more responsibility. With a whole new management team in place, the DGE restructuring strategy was already begin to impress clients and customers alike.

And yet, despite the relief, Krish felt restless, almost adrift. He checked his phone yet again to see if there was any message from the investigators. He stopped himself from dialing Akshay and checking on their progress. He knew he had to give them time. But he was fast running out of patience. He felt torn between hope and despair. Hope that there would be some news of Maya. Despair that he would never ever be able to find her. It was almost as if she’d disappeared from the face of the earth. As he threw open the door to his office, the receptionist approached him with a thick envelope marked “Urgent”.

“Sir, this packet just came for you,” she said before hurrying away.

The packet had the MDS logo on one side. As he tore it open, a thick dossier slipped out. Finally! He collapsed into his chair and avidly began to read the report.

The investigations had led the detectives to the Howrah Government Hospital where Maya's father Subodh Shome had been treated for cirrhosis of liver four years ago. He'd been under the care of a nurse called, Laxmi Sarkar, who still worked in the hospital. She had refused to divulge any information about Maya and her whereabouts, claiming that as far as she knew Maya had left town after her father had passed away. But the detectives had managed to glean from one of the ward boys the real story about Subodh Shome's death. On the day he was to be discharged, Shome had asked the ward boy to fetch him a razor as he wanted to shave before he left the hospital. The boy did as instructed and Shome went to the bathroom to shave. Half an hour later, the boy returned to find a commotion outside the bathroom. People were beating on the door and yelling to the occupant to get out. Finally, they broke the door down only to find Shome lying dead on the floor: he had cut his wrist open with the razor.

Krish's jaws clenched tightly as he looked away from the document briefly. The investigators had stated the stark facts without any embellishment but they had the effect of a knockout punch. His heart went out to the 19 year old Maya... not only did she have to face the loss of her father but also cope with the trauma of his suicide. What would she have done? Who would she have turned to? Was there anybody to help her through the police investigations that would have followed on the heels of the discovery of her father's body? Taking a deep breath, he continued to read.

The nurse had been the only person who supported her through it all, accompanying her to the police station and bearing upon the officials to close the case without further delay as her father had left behind a suicide note in which he'd clearly stated that he alone was responsible for taking his own life.

Krish flipped some more pages, anxious to know if the detectives had managed to find Maya's whereabouts. And, there it was in black and white. Her address. He clutched at the page and tore it out of the file. Thrusting it in his pocket, he picked up the phone on his desk and barked into it. "Get the G6 ready."

He texted Rohan: "We have a lead. On my way to Howrah. Talk soon."  
By late afternoon, Krish had arrived in Kolkata. Rohan had made sure

that there was a cab waiting to drive him to Howrah. He thrust the piece of paper at the driver. “Get me to this address as fast as you can.”

As the cabbie deftly steered them through the Kolkata traffic before speeding down the road towards Howrah, Krish wished they could go faster. Every minute that they spent on the road seemed like an eternity. He pulled out his Phone and scrolled to the images folder. The image that flashed on the screen was of Maya at KD’s birthday bash. The day he’d met her. Her lips were turned up in that heartbreaking Mona Lisa smile. He cursed himself for the millionth time for all the things he’d done wrong. He longed to wrap his arms around her, hold him close to his heart and never let go. But his hopes were fast fading away, and the fears closing in. Fear that the past would forever stand like a barrier between them. Fear that she would reject him because he was his father’s son. Fear that she would never feel anything but hatred for him. Fear that he was doomed to live a life without Maya – empty, lonely and meaningless.

Maya’s home was filled with rambunctious ten-year-olds. They had made it to the quarter-finals of the dance competition and their incessant chatter was testimony to their high state of excitement. Keeping them focused on the practice for the next round of the contest was driving Maya crazy. She finally clapped her hands loudly and called for their attention in her sternest voice. “Listen up, if you don’t practise now, you may as well forget about beating the St. Mary’s team in the next round.”

One pretty little girl whimpered, “O Maya-di, please don’t say that.”

Maya gave her a stern look. “If you want to win, stop chatting and start practising.”

The kids quickly took their places as Maya turned on the music system. The music blared and the kids were soon absorbed in the ballet that told the heart-rending love story of Shakuntala, the queen who was cursed by an angry sage, and lost the love of her husband, King Dushyant.

From time to time, Maya would correct their posture but she was delighted that there wasn’t one false step. In fact, as the leads danced to the climactic scene of the star-crossed lovers reuniting when the king recognises his queen after he finds the ring that he had given her she felt her throat choke up with emotion. It reminded her of her own lost love – but unfortunately for her there would never be a happy ever after!

So absorbed was she that she didn’t see the shadow that darkened the

door. The hairs at the back of her neck prickled. Just the way they did when Krish was near her. Why couldn't she get over him? Why did she yearn for him so much that she could actually feel his presence in the room? You're so pathetic, Maya! She turned to the girl closest to her, who'd stopped dancing and was looking beyond her. "What are you looking at?" she scolded the girl before glancing at the door.

The tall, muscular physique, the whiff of a familiar male scent, his tousled hair falling over his forehead, the stubble on his jaw line which seemed even more angular and sculpted than she last remembered. Krish!! Was she hallucinating? She was rooted to the spot as she watched him approach her. And then that gravelly, sexy voice she had believed she would only hear again in her dreams... "Maya." It sounded too real to be just a dream. Her spell was broken when one of the girls interjected, "Maya-di, we're done."

She strained to put a smile on her face, "Well done. That was a good rehearsal. I will see you all at the hall at 10 AM tomorrow."

As the children filed out of the house, excitedly chatting among themselves, they darted looks at the tall, handsome man who had eyes only for their teacher.

Maya turned to Krish, her heart dancing to a crazy beat. "What are you doing here? If I remember right, you'd told me to get out of your life."

That's when it hit her and her heart sank. Of course, they still had unfinished business between them. There was only one reason for him to seek her out. For a relationship that had begun with the signing of a contract, there could only be one way to end it – the signing of another one to end it. He needed her signature to file for divorce.

"Maya, just hear me out. Please."

She couldn't bear to look at him. The desperation in his voice was enough to freeze up the warm feelings that had bubbled within her. It was a desperation born out of his need for freedom. She was a burden around his neck and he needed to break free. Tears squeezed her throat. "You couldn't wait to get rid of me and now you have actually tracked me down. So, what could be so important?"

For a moment, Krish seemed lost for words, before he said simply. "You. You are the most important thing in the world to me."

Anger flashed in her eyes. "Really? Somehow it's very hard for me to believe that."

Something stirred in his eyes. Was it pain? But before she could decipher it, he said, “I know ... I know you’re hurting...and frankly saying sorry is not enough. Apologising for all the hurt, the pain, the trauma that you and your family have suffered thanks to mine seems so inadequate. It’s too little, too late. But believe me, if there’s anything I could do to change the past I would. If there’s any way that I could repent for my father’s sins, I would.”

Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears at the sincerity in his eyes. She turned away from him, walked towards the window, where the curtains were ruffling in the light evening breeze and the sky had turned a soft violet-pink. The magic hour. But right now, there was nothing magical about it as darkness fast descended into her life. Guilt. He obviously needed to unburden himself of his guilt.

She took a trembling breath. “What’s done is done. You don’t have to apologise for what KD did. Nor do you have to feel guilty for his actions. We can put that whole sorry episode behind us.” She clenched her fists tightly, waited for him to take the cue and raise the issue about ending their sham marriage. But his words didn’t come. Instead she felt his warm breath on her back, as he gripped her shoulders and turned her around to face him.

He put his fingers under her chin and looked deep into her eyes. “Yes, we can put that behind us. But before that there’s one thing I need to ask you.”

There was something unspeakably soft and compassionate in his eyes. She couldn’t take his pity. It was best to get it over and done with – or else, she’d shame herself even more by collapsing in a heap of tears in front of him. “Yes, I know what you want to ask. And of course, I will sign the divorce papers.”

Krish went still and his voice betrayed his devastation. “You want a divorce? Do you really hate me so much that you want to break all ties with me?”

Maya gulped hard, “Isn’t that what you want? You never wanted to be tied down. And now that you know the truth about me... the deceit, the lies, the—” Her voice broke and the tears that she had held back gushed forth.

He folded her into his arms with a soft moan, “Oh Maya, please don’t cry. I can’t bear to see you cry.”

His frantic words and his warm embrace only made her sob her heart out. “I don’t hate you. I love you so much it hurts. If you divorce me, I don’t



know how I'll spend the rest of my life—" She couldn't bear to go on.

He cupped her face in his palms and looked deep into her tear-washed eyes. "Did you say you love me?"

She nodded, her heart breaking in to a thousand pieces. "I wanted to tell you but you would never have believed me."

He groaned, "Oh, sweetie. How did we get ourselves into such a mess? It's my fault – I was too wrapped up in myself, my priorities, my paranoia, and even when I knew I was falling in love with you, I resisted it with everything I had. I thought I could just turn you out and carry on with my life. But I was so wrong. So horribly wrong."

He saw her shell-shocked look and bent to gently kiss her face. "I love you, my sweet Maya. I never knew it was possible to love anyone so much. And there's only one way to make you believe me."

His lips touched hers softly in a kiss that was as sweet as it was poignant. As fierce as it was gentle. As hungry as it was satisfying. She kissed him back and felt the ice in her heart thaw and melt at his magical touch. She felt alive once again.

After a long while, resting her head against his broad shoulders, she murmured, "Are you sure what you feel for me is love...not pity, or guilt or whatever?"

His eyes twinkled. "I know I must come across as a blathering idiot, but..."

She put her finger on his lips. "No....it's just that when we were in Deovan... One minute, you were so warm and wonderful and then the next it was almost as if... as if you even regretted the fact that we'd made love."

Maya revelled at the love that she saw in his eyes as he spoke. "You'd spun my world off its axis, Maya. Made me feel something so new, so deep, so amazingly wonderful, I didn't know what had hit me. And, frankly, I was running scared. So when Rohan called up to tell me that KD wanted me back in Delhi to do the deal, I grabbed the opportunity...and ran. And you know what, it didn't work. I couldn't think of life without you. You're my life force, Maya. Without you, I may as well be dead."

She caught his look that was a combination of fierce, passionate and loving and his lips crushed hers in a scorching kiss that vaporised every thought in her mind.

He dragged his mouth away from hers even though every cell of his body rebelled against it. "When I was coming here, I thought of something

that never quite made sense to me. It was something that my mother would say – when you love someone deeply, you take a leap of faith. The person you love may or may not love you back. But that’s the risk you take. For the first time in my life I understood what she’d meant. Because I felt that way about you. And when I knocked on your door – it was with the knowledge that no matter what, I’d always love you. Even if you hated me. Even if you turned me away. Even if you told me that there could never be anything between us. Even if I never saw you again for the rest of my life. I’d love you. Eternally.”

All her doubts blew away like the remnants of mist chased by bright relentless sunshine. “Forever mine.”

He pulled out a small velvet box from his pocket as she watched him take out the ring that he’d given her so many moons ago. “Will you be my wife, Maya?”

“But I already am.”

His warm, loving gaze took her breath away as he husked. “Yes, indulge me, my precious love. This is about starting again on a clean slate. No rituals. No contracts. No terms and conditions. Only love.”

She felt as if her heart would burst with love and happiness. “Yes, Krish, I will be your wife. To love and cherish you. For eternity.”

He slipped the ring on her finger and sealed the vow with a kiss. “For eternity.”

She threw her arms around him as her heart soared – she had finally come home to her soul mate.

## Epilogue

Two years later....

Krish surveyed the Suvarna Hill Valley Resort grounds from the window of their personal suite. The resort was finally ready to open its portals to guests. And going by reviews in the media and critiques by some of the most celebrated experts in the hospitality industry, there was no doubt that it was an achievement to be proud of. It was so fitting that his dream should come true just as his and Maya's wedding anniversary was coming up. He longed to savour this moment with his wife, his partner, his soul mate.

And there she was – in the garden with Baloo at her heels, enjoying the morning dew fresh ambience. The lavender roses were in full bloom and in all their brilliant glory gave the resort its unique and stylistic signature. A landscaping marvel like none other. And, a creation as beautiful as its creator... His very own Maya.

As if sensing his gaze on her, Maya looked up at the window and blew him a kiss. His heart still tripped at the sight of his lovely wife, wondering in amazement if it was possible to love anyone so much and have that love grow ever more intense with each passing day.

The last two years had been hectic as he had sorted out the DGE corporate mess, had brought it back from the brink of disaster and restored its credibility with the help of Rohan and an incredibly talented team of youngsters. As a board member of the group, he still had to keep a watchful eye on DGE, but he knew that it was in safe hands. With Maya by his side, he had gone about setting up the SHVP project. Kumar had come on board as one of the angel investors and so had a host of others. Everything had gone through without a hitch. It was almost as if the cosmos had conspired to make his – no, their – dream come true.

But most of all, he had been amazed by the change in his father. Neither KD, nor he, had ever anticipated that it would be Maya who would make the first step towards reconciliation. He would never forget how she'd gone up to him and said, "I have come to your house as your son's bride. But I hope you will love me like a daughter." KD had hugged her and Krish hadn't missed the sheen of tears in his father's eyes.

That was the moment when everything had changed. When KD had decided to let go. Let go of his control and his drive to rule over everybody. He was at peace with himself now. And with everyone else around him.

The whiff of jasmine alerted him to Maya's presence even as her arms sneaked around his waist and she hugged him to her. "A paisa for your thoughts, my dear husband?"

He turned around and wrapped his arms around her. "I can't tell you... it's a surprise gift for our wedding anniversary."

Her eyes twinkled mischievously, "I bet it can't be better than the surprise gift I have for you. Can you guess?"

He was totally lost and looked at her enquiringly. She tousled his hair lovingly and laughed. "Oh my brilliant, stupid husband! How did you miss all the signs? We're going to have a baby!"

The shock of love and joy that seared through him found an echo in his whoop of joy as he lifted her in his arms and twirled her around the room.

The End

## Acknowledgement

In 2013 I made my debut as a traditionally published author with this book. It was then called The Indian Tycoon's Marriage Deal. It's only fitting that I should choose to go indie with the same book but in a new avatar.

My journey as an indie author has been inspired by some of my friends who are among the most dedicated and hardworking authors I know. I am blessed to have such supportive friends who have shared their knowledge of indie-authorship unstintingly Take a bow Preethi Venugopala, Sudesna Ghosh, Sai Swaroopa Iyer, Ruchi Singh, Paromita Goswami and Devika Fernando. Esha Pandey, Reet Singh and Rubina Ramesh have been there for me whenever I approached them with my doubts and queries Thank you all for being you; for the words of encouragement and support. Much love.

## About the Author

Adite Banerjee is a journalist turned screenwriter and author based in New Delhi, India. She has been published by Harlequin/Harper Collins. When she is not grappling with her current work-in-progress, she loves watching back-to-back movies and spending time with her writer-and-woodworking-enthusiast husband.

## Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed this book as much as I loved writing about Krish and Maya and their happily ever after. If you liked it, I hope you will leave a review on Amazon.com, Amazon.in and Goodreads.com.

I hope to bring Rohan and Natasha's story out soon.

To find out more about my books, please do visit my website [www.aditebanerjie.com](http://www.aditebanerjie.com) and sign up for my monthly newsletters. I would love to hear from you. You can connect with me on facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/AditeBanerjieWriter> and on twitter: @adite.

Thank you for reading.

Best wishes,

Adite Banerjie