


THE STARRY EXPERIMENT

A chemistry experiment setup featuring several Erlenmeyer flasks and test tubes. In the foreground, a flask contains a vibrant red liquid, while another holds a bright yellow liquid. A glass tube is inserted into the yellow liquid. To the right, a rack holds several test tubes filled with liquids of various colors: green, yellow, blue, purple, and orange. The background is a blurred green chalkboard with faint white markings.

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Chapter One

‘Come on guys, let’s go,’ I pleaded. ‘It’s almost nine fifty, we’re so late.’

Vinod leaned back in his chair and said, ‘Relax dear, we are not late, we got in at nine sharp, didn’t we? At least let us have breakfast in peace.’

‘No, Rithika’s right, we should have been at our desks by now,’ said Arun in my support.

‘Yeah for the past few days, we have been reaching our desks, well past nine thirty. I mean The Tiger comes in at eight thirty, he might notice this, you know,’ chimed in Divya as well.

“The Tiger” was our boss, Keshav Wagh, whose last name Wagh literally meant tiger in Marathi. We had gotten used to calling him The Tiger, behind his back of course.

‘Fine,’ Vinod sighed and finished off the rest of his *poha*.

We left the cafeteria and walked through the corridor leading to our

laboratories, when I spotted Wagh walking towards us.

‘Good morning, Sir,’ I mumbled, followed by the rest.

‘Good afternoon to all of you,’ he smirked. ‘I want to see you all in my cabin at eleven sharp, if it’s not too much trouble.’

The four of us exchanged glances and nodded. We left for our respective labs. Arun and Divya turned towards the chemistry lab. Vinod and I swiped our access cards at the entrance of the microbiology lab and went in.

I put on my lab coat, sat down at my desk and switched on my laptop. My head was swimming with thoughts. I couldn’t believe we were going to be in trouble for something so trivial. We had gotten into this habit of having a relaxed breakfast where we would discuss all sorts of things. It was a time to unwind and laugh, a lot. Full time pass. But I should have noticed this long ago and put an end to it. This was all Vinod’s fault. He was the one who insisted on “making a positive beginning to each day” or whatever.

Hell, I am a goddamn Ph.D. working at The Indian Research Centre or TIRC as it was widely known, one of the premier research institutes in the country, I thought. Why am I worrying like a college student who had been caught by her professor for some mischief? This is ridiculous. I brushed away those thoughts and got down to work. Vinod was busy flirting with someone on his phone. Man, when did he get his work done, I wondered.

I hardly noticed the time as I moved about in my lab, when the phone rang. It was Divya.

‘It’s eleven. We need to be in The Tiger’s den, *now*.’

I hung up, yelling out to Vinod, and cursing under my breath, left to face the inevitable.

Wagh ushered us in with a wave of his hand. The man was used to gesticulating a lot. He began by asking us about our ongoing projects. I mentioned that I was having a tough time with the malarial parasite experiment. He brushed it aside saying, ‘Come on Rithika, I know you will figure out some way to do it.’

The man didn’t appear really interested in our efforts, it seemed to me. He suddenly started grinning like a maniac and said, ‘I’ve got a surprise for you. Let’s move into one of the conference rooms.’ We trooped out after him.

‘I’ll be right back,’ he said, still grinning and left us alone.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Vinod. ‘I thought we were going to be in trouble.’

‘Maybe it’s a nice surprise, like a raise or a bonus. After all, we are the best scientists working around here,’ suggested Arun.

I thought that was stretching the truth a little. The four of us were certainly good at our work, but we had some of the best minds working here at TIRC.

‘Maybe they are sending us on a small vacation or something, you know, a paid trip to... Italy,’ said Divya in a dreamy voice.

‘Yeah, right,’ I cut in, ‘because life is just so perfect.’

We were debating this point, when The Tiger returned, followed by two men. One was tall and thin while the other was plump and short. Divya started making ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’ noises next to me.

‘Guys, I want you to meet two very important guests,’ began The Tiger, ‘Mr Himanshu Mehra,’ pointing to the tall guy, ‘and Mr Rakesh Gupta,’ and pointed to the short one. I thought the names sounded vaguely familiar.

‘As you know,’ Wagh continued, ‘they are two of the most famous names in Bollywood today.’

Yes, that was it. These guys were from Bollywood. I had probably seen their pictures in *Bombay Times* or something. They definitely didn’t look like actors, maybe they were filmmakers. What the hell were they doing here? By the looks on everyone’s faces, I knew they were thinking the same thing.

The Tiger was waving his arms furiously now, saying, ‘They are making a film, which is based in a research centre like ours. So they want to learn more about the kind of work that we do here. They will be with us for a few days. Maybe they will even shoot a few scenes here.’

‘Well, actually we are thinking about being here with you guys for a couple of weeks or more, it will be like a workshop for our actors. To understand how you guys work, get into character. And then we will return later to shoot a few scenes here,’ said Rakesh Gupta. ‘If you guys allow us to, of course,’ he added with a smile.

‘Of course, of course, we are more than happy to have you here,’ said Wagh.

I was staring at The Tiger with my mouth open. A Bollywood film, *here*?

Was he out of his mind? I looked around. Divya and Vinod were looking ecstatic, while Arun looked stunned.

‘You guys will be mainly responsible to show them around and assist them in their research, in every way,’ The Tiger concluded, looking at the four of us.

This was crazy. This cannot be happening, I was thinking, as The Tiger rambled on about the two of them, saying what amazing filmmakers they were and how we had to put in every effort to make them comfortable here.

‘But Sir,’ I interrupted him. ‘This is a Bollywood film we are talking about, aren’t we? Since when did Bollywood films start having research centres as their locations?’

Himanshu Mehra answered me before The Tiger could say anything, ‘Have you seen Contagion or Outbreak? We are making a film on those lines. To put it in brief, there is a viral outbreak which threatens humanity itself and our main leads are scientists who save the day. So you see, we have to shoot it at a research centre. I can show you the script later if you wish. We hope we can outdo Hollywood with this one.’

My mind boggled at the very idea. Bollywood actors as scientists? Had the guy totally lost it? Who is going to watch that? I wanted to ask.

Before I could say anything else, The Tiger gave me a dirty look and said to them, ‘Of course, it’s a great idea. We are more than happy to assist you.’

He introduced the four of us to them while thoughts ran through my mind about the absurdity of it all.

As The Tiger chatted away with the Bollywood duo, I whispered to Arun, ‘Do you believe this? They have gone insane.’

‘Yeah, they don’t know how much you hate Bollywood movies. Better not mention it in The Tiger’s presence. He might fire your ass just for saying it. Just look at the way he is fawning over them,’ Arun said.

‘This is so great,’ Divya exclaimed. ‘Bollywood stars in our midst. And we can always claim we were helping them, if we don’t do our work and just hang around them,’ she laughed.

When The Tiger finally left us alone with them, they said how thankful they were about us taking time out to help us. As if we had a choice! They said they would be staying at a nearby hotel and would come down everyday to be

with us, in our campus for a few weeks just to get a feel of things. Later they would commence shooting here. Of course, only some parts would be shot here. The rest would be shot inside a set which they would create, similar to our labs.

Divya did most of the questioning, about the cast and crew. They mentioned that only few members would be with us for this “workshop”. This included Mehra, Gupta and two of the main leads. The rest of the crew would join us later for the shoot.

They left saying they would return the next day.

‘Oh my God, what a wonderful surprise,’ Divya and Vinod said to each other as Arun and I rolled our eyes.

‘Mehra and Gupta are quite the team. Their last movie was the biggest blockbuster in history,’ informed Vinod. ‘This one will be huge too.’

‘Can you believe it? Aakash Tandon is going to be here,’ Divya said to me excitedly.

‘Which one is he again?’ I enquired.

‘Come on Rithika, I know you don’t watch Bollywood movies, but even you have to know who Aakash Tandon is. He is one of the hottest young actors on the block. He routinely tops the list of the most eligible bachelors in the country today. And he is damn good at acting too.’

‘The guy with the cute dimples?’ I asked.

‘Yes, that’s the one, although I remember you saying that he had a cute butt the last time you saw his picture in the papers,’ Divya said with a wicked smile.

‘Oh shut up,’ I said crossly, going red in the face.

‘But he isn’t the only one coming, right?’ Vinod cut in. ‘We also have Vivek Naidu visiting along with him. He is the other lead in the movie.’

‘I’m sure Rithika doesn’t know him. He has just acted in a couple of films. He made his way into films after winning a reality show on TV, but he is also on his way to stardom. And he is really sexy,’ Divya said with a sigh.

‘I think you should read more scientific journals rather than Filmfare and all that crap,’ I said to Divya.

‘Ooh, hitting me where it hurts. My reading skills,’ she laughed. ‘Two handsome hunks visiting us here. And we get to hang out with them, as part of our work. Man, at times like these, I wish I didn’t have a boyfriend.’

‘Thank God, you remembered him. I was just about to call Dilip to warn him that his girlfriend was about to elope with some sidey *filmi* guy,’ Arun teased her.

‘Aren’t there any heroines in this movie?’ Vinod asked.

‘Aren’t you tired chasing after so many women?’ Arun asked him in return.

‘They didn’t mention anything about the female lead, did they?’ Vinod continued, ignoring Arun.

‘I’m sure they have one, to add to the glamour quotient. She will be seen dancing around the trees in our campus. They wouldn’t dare to show a woman as a scientist in a Hindi movie. A woman with brains, God forbid, that would be just too much to ask for,’ I said.

Everyone laughed.

‘You know how much I hate Bollywood movies, having these guys around is going to be a nightmare, what am I going to do?’ I asked.

‘It’s okay, just pretend that you don’t care and do your job. Leave the rest to us,’ Arun assured me.

I nodded and smiled at him.

Chapter Two

Divya couldn't stop chattering during breakfast the next day. She told us the news had spread in TIRC and everyone was really excited about the whole film shoot, especially the younger PhD students.

'Of course a few years ago, it wouldn't have been possible to even think of such a subject, since India didn't have many decent scientific institutes then. But TIRC is really state of the art, so swanky and hi-tech. I'm proud of working here,' Divya went on.

'Yeah, now that we have Bollywood approval,' I said, exasperated.

'We are going to be famous,' Vinod said. 'That's what a Hindi movie does to people.'

'Dude, we are not going to be *in* the movie,' I reminded him.

'So what? People will know about our workplace, isn't that cool? We can mention it to everyone now, after the movie comes out.'

I gave up and finished the rest of my breakfast in silence, listening to Divya and Vinod's grand plans.

I was halfway through my morning work, when I was summoned by The Tiger. I saw that the meeting had already started with the filmmakers today. They gave me warm smiles as I joined them. Today they also had another guy with them.

'Hi, I'm Vivek Naidu,' he got up and shook my hand.

'Hi, I'm Dr Rithika Menon,' I smiled.

He was really good looking, tall and lean. His biceps strained against his tight T-shirt. He sported a goatee which made him look cuter.

Divya giggled next to me.

'So you are the lead in the movie?' I asked him.

'Oh no, Aakash is the star of the movie. I'm just playing a supporting role.' He smiled at me. I noticed he had an endearing smile.

'He is just being modest. Aakash may be the star, but Vivek has got an equally interesting role,' said Mehra.

Vivek shrugged and smiled again.

‘So where is the star?’ I asked Vivek.

‘He is stuck in traffic, will be joining us any moment,’ Vivek said.

‘Typical,’ I muttered, low enough for him not to hear me.

As we talked more about the film and their visit here, I found that Vivek was really down to earth, no starry airs. Well, I guess he was just a beginner. But I found his attitude refreshing. I took an immediate liking to him.

Divya was chatting with Mehra. Vinod and Arun were busy discussing the arrangements with Gupta, when he was interrupted by a phone call. ‘Aakash’s here, can someone escort him to us?’

The Tiger looked around and beckoned to me, ‘Sure, Rithika will do it,’ before I could say anything else. I glared at him and left to receive the “superstar”. I was sure he would be with his team of sycophants and would be easy to spot.

As I reached the lobby, I saw no one around. A guy wearing huge sunglasses obscuring most of his face, was leaning against the reception counter and talking on his cell phone. The receptionist too was nowhere to be seen. My cell phone rang. It was Arun. He had stepped out of the meeting to talk to me.

‘Is he there?’ he asked me.

‘No, he is not here yet, maybe he is at the main gate,’ I told him.

‘Sorry I couldn’t help you, The Tiger left me with no choice.’

‘It’s fine. I know you couldn’t have done anything. What is The Tiger’s problem anyway? Are we scientists or goddamn spot boys?’ I said in a loud voice. The guy at the counter glanced at me.

I lowered my voice and continued, ‘Is this how it’s going to be? Do what these stars tell us. God, I never imagined that I would one day be running errands for them.’

‘Relax, it’s not that bad,’ said Arun.

‘Not that bad? Are you kidding me? Today I am welcoming them. Tomorrow these guys will be throwing tantrums, like “Get me a soda” or “Hold my umbrella”. And we have to run behind these brainless idiots. I mean, see what kind of shitty films they make. We know they don’t have any brains. And the

people who watch them are equally idiotic. Man, I hate Bollywood.'

'You are getting hyper for no reason. Nothing has happened so far.'

I went on ignoring his comment, 'I mean, look at this guy. It's cool for him to arrive fashionably late for everything. Keep everyone waiting. As if we have nothing better to do. I am going back to my lab. To hell with this dude.' I hung up before Arun could pacify me any further.

I turned around and almost bumped into the guy with the sunglasses. He took them off and perched them on top of his head. He seemed vaguely familiar.

He gave me a frozen smile and said, 'You must be Rithika Menon.'

I gave him a confused look before he added, 'I'm the guy you wanted to send to hell a moment ago. Aakash Tandon,' and extended his hand.

I shook his hand limply and stared at him aghast, not knowing what to say next.

'They must be waiting for us. Shall we?' he motioned with his hand.

I set off with him towards the conference room, thinking about all the stuff that I had just said. The Tiger would lose his shit, if he ever came to know that I had behaved so badly. I looked at Aakash Tandon. He just stared ahead without saying a word as we marched down the corridor. I realized that I was in big trouble.

Chapter Three

Aakash Tandon was shaking hands all around, as he was being introduced to the rest of the team. I could sense the excitement in the air. It was not every day that such a huge star sat amongst us.

I heard Arun say, 'Arun Kelkar. Pleased to meet you,' before Divya cut in with, 'Hi, I'm Divya Joshi. It's so amazing to finally meet you. I'm such a huge fan.'

'Vinod Shah, loved your performance in *Dildaara*. Outstanding,' said Vinod, shaking Aakash's hand.

Aakash was graciously smiling, as these big stars do when they meet ordinary folk. He had not so much as glanced at me after his initial words. I was worried that at any moment, he would blab to The Tiger about what a pain I had been.

I was wondering whether The Tiger would be mad enough to fire me on the spot. No, he wouldn't do that, I reasoned to myself. Probably would just take me off "the helping committee." Wouldn't that be great for everyone? I was deep in my thoughts when I found myself looking up into the eyes of Aakash Tandon himself. The Tiger was apparently re-introducing me to him. 'And of course you've met Rithika,' he said.

'Yes, I did,' Tandon said and shook hands with me. He took a step closer to me and said, 'So why do you hate Bollywood so much or is it just me?'

I was too shocked to say anything. I noticed that The Tiger hadn't heard, as he was busy chatting to Gupta.

'I don't... hate you... or Bollywood,' I mumbled.

He raised his eyebrows and walked away before I could say anything else. Divya was once again chatting to him, telling him he was such a great actor and that he was fantastic in his recent film where he played a double role. Mehra requested that we should walk around and have a look at the place now that Aakash had also joined us.

The Tiger said, 'Sure, Divya and Rithika will show you around the research centre, our main workplace. Arun and Vinod can show you the rest of the campus. I understand that you will be staying at a nearby hotel?'

‘No,’ replied Aakash.

Mehra, Gupta and Vivek looked at him in surprise.

‘We’ll stay right here. It will be better that way, to remain here, away from the outside world. It would help us to really get into it. If you do let us stay here, of course,’ said Aakash.

‘Are you sure you want to stay here on campus?’ asked Gupta.

‘Yes, I’m sure, if the good scientists allow us to,’ smiled Tandon.

‘Absolutely, we will make all the arrangements. We are delighted to have you here,’ Wagh smiled back.

‘Arun and Vinod will look after that,’ he said, nodding to them.

The Tiger left with Arun and Vinod towards the residential buildings to look after the arrangements, which left Divya and me with the film guys.

‘Let’s go,’ Divya said happily. Tandon joined her. Mehra and Gupta followed them while Vivek walked with me, making up the rear.

We showed them around the labs. Divya did most of the talking. I showed them the microbiology lab. They looked suitably impressed with all the hi-tech equipment and facilities. Mehra and Gupta asked a lot of questions. As we moved along the corridors, Divya was talking nonstop with Tandon. I kept looking at them now and then. Vivek was talking with me about how long I had been here and whether I liked my work and things like that. I tried to pay attention but couldn’t. I was annoyed at how Divya was acting like a star struck teenager. I didn’t know why it bothered me that much.

As we finished the lab rounds, Mehra said, ‘Well this is a great place. It’s obviously the right choice to shoot the subject that we have in mind. However we will need help with some technical stuff which we need to add in the script. We don’t want to come across as ignorant or tacky. And we also need to study the way you guys work. Aakash and Vivek will need to pick up the technical lingo, the body language, all that stuff. They need to look and talk like scientists. I think we should just observe how you work, to start with.’

I just nodded along with whatever he was saying. Arun came to my rescue, informing them that they were ready to show them the rest of the campus.

‘We have some of the best facilities in the apartments. Let me show you,’ Arun said.

‘Do you have a gym?’ Vivek asked.

‘Yes we do, we also have a jogging track, indoor sports facilities and a park with a sea view since our campus is practically located at the tip of Mumbai,’ Arun said.

‘Cool, can’t wait to see it,’ Vivek said. And with that Arun led them away.

‘Thanks for showing us around,’ Vivek smiled at me before he walked away with the rest.

I felt relieved. I looked at Tandon’s retreating back. He had not said a word to The Tiger about the earlier incident. Maybe he wasn’t that bad after all.

That evening as I sat reading, Arun came up to my apartment and collapsed on the couch.

‘I’m really exhausted. These guys wanted to see *everything*. Just finished with moving them into their apartments,’ Arun told me.

‘Apartments? Aren’t these guys staying in bungalows like our senior associates?’ I wondered.

‘Mehra and Gupta moved into one. But Aakash and Vivek have taken up apartments. They wanted to live like young scientists, like us,’ Arun grinned.

‘In fact, they are staying in the building right opposite ours,’ he added. ‘Hey, I think we can see them from your window.’

He rushed to my window as he said this. I didn’t really want to join him, until he yelled, ‘Oh my god, you can totally see into their apartments. Look!’

I went to the window and looked across. The windows of their apartments were open. I could see Vivek doing some push-ups in his living room. But my attention switched to Aakash who was stretched out on his couch in a black T-shirt and grey trousers, watching TV. He didn’t seem like this huge movie star, just another regular guy relaxing at home after work.

‘Divya is going to go nuts, if I tell her that. It’s really unfortunate that her apartment isn’t facing this side,’ he said.

We both guffawed at this and fell back on the couch. Arun left after chatting for a while. I controlled the urge to go and check what those two were up to,

reminding myself that I hated these *filmi* types anyway. It was hard. So I went off to sleep.

Chapter Four

The next day, I set off for my daily morning jog, with music humming in my ears as usual. I avoided the gym which had all the latest equipment and was preferred by most of the younger lot. I liked jogging in our park, where there was a jogging track, which had an entire stretch running parallel to the sea. I enjoyed the sea breeze ruffling my hair as I ran. After I completed my run, I usually sat down on one of the benches overlooking the sea. It immediately calmed me down and was a great way to begin the day. A kind of meditation, when I reflected on positive thoughts to inspire me.

I could see some of the other associates jogging or walking around the track. I smiled and waved at a couple of them. I did a few stretching exercises before I began my run. I was running along to Greenday's "Boulevard of broken dreams" which was one of my favourite jogging numbers. I didn't hear any footsteps, but suddenly realised that someone was running alongside me. I stumbled and almost fell over in surprise when I saw that it was none other than Aakash Tandon himself.

'Are you following me, Dr Menon?' he asked me.

'What?' I sputtered in disbelief. 'Do you think I am a groupie or something,

who has nothing better to do in life than stalk movie stars?’

He was shaking with suppressed laughter at my outrage.

‘Relax, I was just kidding. Where’s your sense of humour?’

He added, ‘I know you hate Bollywood’, a little seriously.

He was still jogging along with me.

‘Look, I owe you an apology for my appalling behaviour yesterday. I didn’t mean all that. I was just a little irritated with my boss, that’s all,’ I said.

‘Apology accepted,’ he smiled. ‘So you don’t hate Bollywood?’ he said, not ready to give up.

‘Let’s just say, I’m not a fan. Can we leave it now?’

‘But why don’t you like it?’ he persisted.

‘It’s not important,’ I said.

‘I would like to know, if you don’t mind telling me,’ he said.

‘Well, I don’t enjoy watching Bollywood films. I used to, at one time, when I was younger, but I don’t anymore.’

‘Why?’ This guy was relentless.

I didn’t know how much to tell him, because once I started, there was no stopping me. Well, he had asked for it.

‘Bollywood movies have no plot. They are merely based on star power. People go to watch their favourite stars, not the movie. They have huge budgets, but for what? What is the end product? There is no logic anywhere. The leads break into song for no apparent reason. Even if the hero is poor, he is seen dancing in foreign locales. The story is more or less same in all films. There is nothing new to see. Don’t even get me started with nepotism. More and more star kids come into the industry with rich backgrounds and zero talent. These films take the audience for granted and insult the intelligence of the viewers. Leave your brains at home, they say. Well, I like having my brain with me, thank you very much.’

I said all this rapidly with emotion. Aakash didn’t interrupt me.

He paused for some time and finally said, ‘Well, I agree with some of the things which you said. Some of the films are without logic. Quite a few

actually. But we also have a bunch of filmmakers who want to show new things, who want to break the rules. We do have films with plots, with logic. I agree that the star factor is high in our films. But that's the way it is. Some stars also use it to do good meaningful films. But sometimes one has to do these entertaining films with mass appeal. Not everyone wants to watch intellectual stuff, you know. And songs are a part of our culture. Which Indian festival or occasion is without songs? As for star kids, that's something unavoidable. Not all of them are without talent though. The ones without talent disappear from the public eye too soon. The viewers are not fools. And there are people who come from a non-*filmi* background who are successful too, you know. I am one of them, if I may say so myself, so is Vivek.'

'That is just a small percentage,' I argued. 'Most films are just crap. And the stars are so full of themselves, as if they are demigods or something. The craze for Bollywood stars in this country is just revolting.' I was getting agitated now.

'You know, films are the only source of entertainment for a large section of the population. You can't blame them for being obsessed with film stars.'

'Well, I think this country needs better role models.'

We were still arguing like that as we finished our run. I dropped down on one of the benches overlooking the sea. This was actually my favourite bench, it was very close to the sea and also a bit secluded, with huge trees covering the area. Aakash sat next to me.

'Wow, this is simply amazing,' he suddenly exclaimed, looking at the view.

'What? Oh, yeah, it is. One of the best things about working here,' I grinned.

We sat in silence for some time, before I said, 'I know you actors are fitness freaks. So why aren't you at the gym?'

'I'm sorry if I disturbed you,' he said.

'No, I didn't mean it that way,' I mumbled.

How did I always manage to offend the guy?

'I prefer to stroll amongst nature. I avoid the gym whenever possible. Although sometimes I have to, my trainer leaves me with no choice,' he said, flashing those famous dimples.

I noticed for the first time that he was really good looking, I mean, drop dead gorgeous. No wonder he was considered “one of the hottest young stars”, as Divya had mentioned.

I was staring at him as he got up, said bye to me and left. I sat there for awhile longer before leaving for my apartment.

Chapter Five

I didn't mention my morning encounter with Tandon to anyone during breakfast. Divya would probably not find it amusing. Vinod was narrating some story about his last date, which was a disaster as usual. I saw Tandon and Vivek strolling into the cafeteria. All heads turned to look at them. They picked up the food at the counter, gave us a wave and sat down at our table.

Divya immediately started a conversation with Tandon. I could hear stuff like

“what is your favourite colour” and “who is your favourite co-star?”

I continued eating in silence, but Vivek started talking to me about my plans for the day. I saw Tandon glance in our direction once or twice, before continuing to listen to Divya’s rambling.

Vinod interrupted us by asking Vivek about the female lead of their movie.

‘It’s Aisha Banerjee,’ Vivek said.

‘The Bengali bombshell? She is so sexy, dude,’ Vinod said and stared gushing about her physical attributes.

‘Will she be joining us?’ he asked Vivek.

‘I don’t think so,’ replied Vivek.

‘Can a Bollywood heroine be a scientist? I hope she won’t be reduced to dancing around the trees here,’ I said.

‘No, she is not a scientist,’ said Tandon, before Vivek could answer me.

‘Oh?’ I managed to ask.

‘She plays a doctor who saves the lives of all these infected people. Obviously, most of her scenes will be shot in a hospital and not here.’

I didn’t say anything further, mainly to avoid looking at the fiery look in Tandon’s eyes.

‘You know, Mehra and Gupta are responsible filmmakers. They have made four films together so far. All entertaining, but also meaningful with a message. They wouldn’t show women in a bad light. The women in their movies are pretty and smart, which is not such a rarity,’ he concluded.

‘I wish Aisha Banerjee did have some scenes here though. She could have been a scientist and someone else could have played a doctor,’ Vinod said ruefully and everyone laughed, relieving the tension.

‘So, I guess, we begin to see how you guys work, from today. Can I come to your lab?’ Vivek asked me as we finished our breakfast.

‘Sure,’ I said, giving him a big smile.

I saw Tandon going ahead with Divya. Mehra and Gupta would also be joining us, they would probably be spending the day with Arun.

As we entered my lab, Vivek was constantly chattering. He enquired about the equipment in the lab, about the uses of each, as Vinod and I showed him around. Vinod moved on to sit at his desk.

As I began my work in the bio-safety cabinet, Vivek sat down next to me and asked a bit about what exactly I was doing. I explained about my latest project on malarial parasites. I could see that he quickly got bored watching me work. We began chatting about our families and soon he was telling me tales about his struggles, auditions and reality TV show which gave him his big break. He was very charming and narrated with humour and flair. He wasn't at all bitter about the adversities he had faced, which I found remarkable. I was talking to him as if we were old friends.

Vivek helped me carry the test tubes from the work bench to the incubators once I was done. I didn't realise that it was time for lunch as we chatted away. I suggested we wait for the others before going to the cafeteria, but he said he was hungry. Vinod said he would join us in a few minutes.

Vivek kept joking and I was laughing so hard that almost everyone around was looking at us. That's when the others joined us. Tandon flashed me a look which clearly said that he wasn't very much amused, but he didn't say anything. Throughout lunch, Vivek kept saying funny stuff and I kept laughing like an insane person. Arun merely shook his head and smiled, because he was used to my loud laughs, but Tandon kept throwing the pair of us dirty looks. I don't think Vivek noticed or maybe he pretended not to.

'What's wrong with you? Why were you laughing so loudly?' Arun asked me, after we finished lunch.

'Didn't you hear the guy? He is really funny,' I replied.

'Yes, yes, he is a delight. But you know, we are used to your monster laughs, not our esteemed guests,' said Arun.

'Hey,' I said, slightly offended.

'You know what I mean.'

'Yeah, but you know that I can't control my laughter.'

Arun sighed and said nothing.

'Mr Good looking demigod will just have to bear it,' I continued.

‘Good looking?’ said Arun, his eyebrows raised.

‘I mean, to the fan girls, not to me,’ I clarified.

‘Yeah, good thing Divya didn’t hear you,’ he smirked.

‘And The Tiger too, he would have chewed my head off,’ I said.

‘Probably would think it was an insult to them,’ agreed Arun.

I didn’t see much of Tandon during the next couple of days, barring at meal times and sometimes when we ran into each other in the corridors. He didn’t take much notice of me and was busy chatting with Divya or Vinod. Even when I saw him during my morning jog, he just nodded at me, barely smiling and went his way. Of course, I managed to get glimpses of him through my window as he wandered around his apartment. I scolded myself every time I watched him, but continued to do it.

I had a great time with Vivek, the two of us just laughing most of the time. Even Mehra and Gupta visited my lab and I found them to be quite intellectual and thoughtful. They had a lot of questions for us. I hoped they would do a good job of representing the scientific community.

Chapter Six

‘We had such a great time last night. Sameera is cool, you guys, she is so much fun to be with. Not to mention the fact that she is also sizzling hot,’ Vinod was gushing about his latest lady love over lunch.

‘How can a person be both hot and cool?’ asked Divya.

‘Yeah, she is a miracle,’ replied Vinod with a dreamy look in his eyes, ignoring the sarcasm. ‘We were up partying almost all night.’

‘That is no reason to turn up late at work. Dude, it was almost noon when you sauntered in. The Tiger was looking for you,’ I said.

‘I will come up with something, family emergency or whatever,’ Vinod shrugged it off.

‘So are you going to see her again?’ asked Arun, shoving a spoonful of rice into his mouth.

‘Didn’t you hear me? The question is not if, but when,’ said Vinod.

‘Oh, so when are you going out again?’

‘Tonight.’

‘So soon?’ I asked. I had heard enough of his “playing hard to get” strategy.

‘Yeah, I can’t wait to see her. So I made plans for tonight.’

‘As if this is going to last long,’ remarked Arun. Vinod gave him a withering look.

‘Well, you are wrong. I think this time I’m going to make it work. She may be the one,’ sighed Vinod.

We returned to work after lunch. I was busy in my work bench when Vinod came up to me.

‘Hey, what are you doing?’ he asked.

‘What do you mean?’ He could clearly see what I was up to.

‘Are you busy?’

‘Not particularly. I can talk. What’s up?’

‘Who are all these new guys in the chemistry lab? I just saw some people

entering there.'

'Oh they must be the new interns, I guess.'

'Like college interns?'

'Yes.'

'How come we don't have any here?'

'I don't know. It must be their turn. Why? You think we need interns here?'

'Well, it would help us, there is a lot of work to be done. It would also help them learn. Isn't that the whole purpose of it? Maybe I should talk to The Tiger about this.'

We obviously had a lot of work to be done, but I was not sure if having interns was going to help in any way. Sometimes all they did was get in the way.

'Dude, we will get them when we get them. Don't do anything stupid. It's not a big deal.' I tried to dissuade him.

I saw Vinod having coffee near the vending machine and talking with the interns later in the evening. One of the girls was giggling too much and I heard her saying, "You are so funny Vinod Sir" as I passed by.

The next day, the same giggly girl walked into the lab with Vinod.

'Hey Rithika, this is Sanju, I mean Sanjana. She was very curious about what exactly we do, so I thought of showing her around here,' he said.

'Cool,' I smiled and got back to my work. Vinod spent at least an hour with her, showing off all the equipment. I ignored both of them till they went out of the lab.

A couple of days later, Vinod was looking glum during breakfast.

'How goes the love story?' asked Arun. 'Something troubling you buddy?'

'Yeah, the lovely miss hot and cool,' I prompted.

'That is over,' Vinod said gulping down his tea.

'What? Wasn't she supposed to be the love of your life?' I asked.

'There was a misunderstanding between us which led to a huge row. She broke it off.'

‘What led to it exactly?’ asked Arun.

‘I was texting Sanjana yesterday evening, you know the intern in the chemistry lab,’ said Vinod.

‘The one from my lab?’ asked Arun incredulously.

‘You mean Sanju, right?’ I grinned, stressing on the name.

‘How do you even have her number?’ asked Arun.

‘Didn’t you see them on coffee dates around here?’ I asked Arun.

‘Okay, enough Rithika,’ Vinod waved in my direction to stop the leg pulling. ‘Arun, that’s not entirely correct. I was merely being a good colleague when I showed her around campus a bit.’

‘I cannot believe you are hitting on our interns. These kids are in college, dude,’ said Arun.

‘Yes, Vinod Sir was a really good mentor to them,’ I continued to mock him.

‘What did you do to her?’ asked Arun.

‘I did not do anything to her. What do you think I am? Like I said, I was just texting her, harmless chat. She said this was her first time in Mumbai and she wanted to see the city life.’

‘Dude, tell me you did not take her out on a date.’

‘It was not a date. I was showing her around the city, just like I helped her here.’

Arun was running his hands through his hair now. ‘Do you know what will happen if The Tiger comes to know about this?’

‘I told you it was not a date. I swear it was all in public places. Anyway, we were having dinner at this restaurant and Sanjana was clicking selfies when Sameera walked in there with her friends.’

‘Whoa, all hell must have broken loose then,’ I remarked.

‘You could say that. I tried to explain the situation to her, but she wouldn’t listen. It didn’t help when Sanju started talking as well. We had a huge argument in the restaurant and one thing led to another and Sameera, well, she poured a glass of wine on my head.’

‘She did what?’ asked Arun, as I laughed uncontrollably.

‘She also called Sanju a whole lot of names for trying to steal another woman’s boyfriend. Sanju started crying and it was a really bad scene. Everyone was staring at us of course. Sameera hasn’t responded to my calls. I pacified Sanju all the way home. Both the girls are not talking to me now.’

‘What the hell were you thinking man?’ asked Arun.

‘Are you going to report me to The Tiger?’ Vinod was quite nervous.

‘Of course not.’

‘Well, what if Sanjana goes and tells him?’

‘I’ll talk to her and try and convince her not to discuss this with anyone.’

‘Thanks man, I know that you can convince anyone.’

‘There is no need for flattery. Just make sure that you keep away from the interns henceforth. I am not going to save your sorry ass again.’

‘I swear I will.’

Chapter Seven

‘She was really something,’ sighed Vinod.

Arun, Vinod and I were chilling out in my apartment. Vinod had been telling us about a stunning girl he met at a bus stop a day ago, when he had gone shopping. He had been unlucky in his attempt to woo her.

‘Hard luck, mate,’ Arun consoled him, grinning widely.

‘Oh, bite me,’ snapped Vinod.

‘Don’t forget the Sanjana debacle dude,’ warned Arun. Vinod went red in the face.

‘You know, if you stopped trying so hard, you could succeed,’ I said.

‘Yeah, you are not bad looking,’ agreed Arun. ‘At least you’re not hideous.’

‘Thanks a lot,’ said Vinod. ‘I know I’m good looking and intelligent. I have a decent job. I’m the full package actually.’

Arun rolled his eyes.

‘I wish I had a better body though,’ sighed Vinod.

‘Like Vivek Naidu,’ said Arun.

‘Yeah, he has a great body. So does Aakash Tandon, in fact,’ said Vinod.

‘He does, but Vivek’s is better,’ said Arun.

‘What biceps man,’ gushed Vinod.

‘Why are you both suddenly behaving like a bunch of teenage girls?’ I asked.

‘You should have seen them at the gym today evening. You would have gone mad,’ said Vinod.

‘They were at the gym?’ I asked.

‘They were cool,’ said Arun.

‘Aakash was there too?’ I asked.

‘Yeah, why is that so surprising? Actors work out all the time,’ said Vinod.

‘But Aakash hates going to the gym,’ I blurted out.

‘How do *you* know that?’ asked Arun, with a wicked smile.

‘I... I read it somewhere,’ I managed.

‘Really?’ smirked Arun.

‘Those guys are awesome. They don’t behave like stars at all. They could have stayed anywhere, but they chose to stay with us. And they act like they are our friends. Respect, dude,’ said Vinod.

‘Hmm,’ was all I managed. There was a knock on the door and Divya walked in.

‘Guys, there is a tennis match going on,’ said Divya.

‘So?’ asked Vinod.

‘Idiot, I meant on campus, it’s between the geeks and the gods. The actors with the scientists,’ said Divya.

‘Let’s go,’ jumped Vinod. All of us rushed out to the tennis court.

A small crowd had gathered to watch. Aakash and Vivek were on opposite teams. Two of our guys from the physics department were playing with them. We sat down to watch. The match was highly entertaining. Both teams were

playing well.

‘Looks like the physicists are rocking it,’ commented Arun. I didn’t know these guys could play at all. Aakash was serving for the set. Suddenly Divya got up and waved, yelling, “Come on Aakash.” The crowd cheered. Aakash looked at us and grinned. He hit the ball hard and sent it crashing. Unbelievable, it was an ace. They won the set.

We cheered for both teams in the second set. Aakash was playing really well, but Vivek and his partner were a tad better. Soon Vivek was serving for the second set. I don’t know what came over me. I stood up and yelled “Come on Vivek” and did a small jig, waving my arms and shaking my hips.

Vivek gave me a wide grin and winked. No one missed it. Vinod whistled. I sat down, mortified. I didn’t look up to see what happened. Next I heard Vinod yelling, “Vivek did it. You, the man.”

The teams sat down to rest. I couldn’t see their faces, but I could see Aakash sipping some water. As they walked back to the court, Aakash glanced at us. He gave me a sarcastic smirk. It had been so quick that I was not sure if he really did it.

The match was on after the two sets. There was some hard hitting from both the sides. But Aakash looked charged up. His team won the next two sets, winning the match. Vivek shook hands with him at the nets. As Aakash walked back, he looked at me and smirked again. This time I was sure.

People went up to them to congratulate them or just shake hands.

‘Come on,’ Arun pushed me.

And so we went up to talk to them. Divya and Vinod running ahead, Arun and me, following them.

‘Good match,’ Arun was saying.

‘Hey thanks for supporting me,’ Vivek said to me.

‘Well played,’ I beamed.

‘Congrats,’ I said, as Aakash turned to us.

‘Thanks,’ he smiled. ‘So you watch tennis?’

‘Yeah, I love it,’ I said.

‘Who do you support?’

‘Federer, big fan.’

‘Aha, I like Nadal. Great rivals, those two. We must watch one of their matches together.’

I gaped at him.

‘All of us together, some time,’ he said, turning to everyone.

‘Anytime,’ said Divya.

As Divya and Vinod chatted with Tandon and Vivek, Arun whispered to me, ‘I am confused. Did he just ask you out?’

‘Don’t be absurd,’ I said. That was the last thing he would do.

‘So,’ Aakash was addressing me again, ‘do you also play tennis or are you content to dance while watching?’

‘Umm, I...’ I mumbled.

‘She doesn’t play,’ snickered Vinod, interrupting me.

‘Thanks Vinod. I don’t play tennis,’ I managed.

‘Yes, it is quite hard to play, not to mention it requires high level of energy,’ said Vinod.

‘What *do* you play?’ asked Aakash, while I gave a murderous glare to Vinod.

‘I was never into sports much,’ I said. ‘Never played anything beyond chess,’ I laughed.

‘Chess, huh? Do you still play?’

‘Yes, occasionally.’

‘Maybe we can have a match. What do you say?’

‘You play chess?’ I was astounded.

‘Why? Actors are too dumb to play chess now?’ he asked drily.

‘I didn’t mean that...’ I breathed deeply. ‘A match, it is.’ I said finally, not wanting to offend the guy any further.

‘Tomorrow night?’

‘Sure.’

He shook hands with me and walked away. We walked over to the rest of the guys to convey our congratulations.

Chapter Eight

‘Why did Aakash ask Rithika for a chess match out of the blue? It’s baffling,’ remarked Divya. We were back in my apartment.

‘I think I know,’ said Vinod.

‘Enlighten us,’ said Arun.

‘He was pissed off when she was cheering for Vivek,’ said Vinod. ‘He planned this. Now he wants to humiliate her.’

‘What? That’s ridiculous,’ I said.

‘Is it?’ asked Vinod and got up. He shouted, “Come on Vivek,” imitating me and breaking into a jig, eerily similar to what I had done. All of them laughed.

‘I didn’t do that,’ I defended.

‘Actually he nailed it,’ said Arun.

‘What about Divya when she was supporting Tandon?’ I asked.

‘She was cool,’ said Vinod. ‘Unlike you.’

‘Oh piss off,’ I fumed. Divya giggled.

‘Anyway, I think that’s his plan,’ said Vinod.

I was worried. I hadn’t thought like that.

‘I think Rithika plays really well. She should be able to handle it,’ said Divya. ‘In any case, I don’t think many people would want to watch a game of chess. There is nothing much happening. I mean it’s like watching paint dry. So even if she loses, it’s okay.’

I was counting on that.

‘You know the real reason, don’t you?’ Arun asked me, after Vinod and Divya left. ‘He can stare at you as much as he wants during the match.’

I said, ‘What rubbish!’ I knew Arun was pulling my leg, but I still blushed. Arun roared with laughter.

The next day, I couldn’t concentrate at all on work. I kept looking up chess moves on the internet. I even got reprimanded by The Tiger for not listening to him as he droned on about some project during a meeting.

‘You are taking this too seriously,’ said Arun, during lunch. He and I were sitting at a table. I had refused to sit with the stars.

‘Am I?’

‘Yes, he is probably not even a good player.’

‘That’s your argument? We don’t even know how he plays.’

‘Don’t over think this. Eat,’ Arun pushed the plate towards me. ‘No one is going to watch it. It will be just us. Relax. It’s only a stupid match.’

I shoved the food into my mouth.

I somehow made it through the nerve-wracking day. It was evening now.

‘Come on Rithika,’ Vinod called me. ‘The guys are waiting.’

‘What guys?’

‘I just called a few of our guys. To support you, of course.’

I walked down to the ground. A table was set with the chess board. It looked like all the guys working at TIRC had gathered to watch the game. In fact, I thought I even saw a few outsiders. My mouth went dry as a loud cheer greeted me. I saw Aakash and Vivek coming from their apartment. Another cheer went up.

Aakash smiled at me as we sat at the table. Vivek flashed me a thumbs-up.

‘I think we should not crowd around the table. Just move back a little,’ I heard Arun saying. I felt really grateful towards him. People settled down.

‘All the best,’ Aakash wished me and shook my hand. I returned the wish. Everyone was quiet. And the game began.

Aakash played well. It was evident that he was no rookie. I lost a few pawns as we went along, he lost one. I was thinking hard and forced myself to concentrate. After a few moves, I captured his knight. I was back in the game.

I looked up to see him staring at me. I looked back into his deep dark eyes. He seemed to be lost in thought. At that moment, it felt like we were playing alone, just the two of us. No one was watching us. I had not noticed until then that he was wearing a white T-shirt which showed his muscular biceps. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. His lips were slightly parted. I looked back up, into his eyes.

“Come on Rithika,” someone yelled. It broke my reverie. It was Vivek. I reprimanded myself. I needed to focus on my game, not admire my opponent. I upped my game, using all the tactics I had learned. It slowly began tilting in my favour. Each time I looked up from the board, I could see Aakash looking at me. Maybe I was imagining things. I brushed away all other thoughts.

Aakash was fighting back now. He was merciless in the next few moves. Half our pieces were gone. Both of us were playing well. It had been over an hour

now. This guy was really good, I grudgingly thought.

I planned out a great strategy, my final one. It would be risky. The next moves could well end the game. We played on. I thought if he moves his bishop to the right, he will win. If he moves it to the left, I will win. It all depended on his next move.

I waited for his move. He was taking really long this time. His head was bent low, chin on hand, deep in thought. He was really good looking, I thought. No, don't lose your focus. Choose left, choose left, I repeated in my mind, looking at him. He looked up suddenly as if he had heard me. Go left, I said one last time, as he looked into my eyes.

He sat up straight and ran a hand through his hair. He moved his bishop, to the left.

'Check mate,' I said, almost immediately. There was no way out for him.

He looked at the board, then at me and said, 'You got me.'

There were cheers all around. I couldn't believe it. Aakash smiled and said, 'Congrats. Well played.'

'Thanks. You too,' I grinned.

The guys were cheering for me. I jumped and threw my hands in the air.

'Ladies and gentlemen, our new chess champion,' screamed Vinod.

Everyone was dancing and cheering around me. Divya, Arun and Vinod hugged me, saying, "You were fantastic." Vivek wished me as well. I was over the moon. Vinod and Arun were doing a kind of victory dance with the other guys, pulling me in.

As I was dancing, my eyes searched for Aakash. He smiled at me through the crowd, giving a mock salute. I smiled back.

Chapter Nine

That weekend, the film crew had gone out for some other assignments and we had the time to ourselves. We set off for Matheran, a small hill station near Mumbai, early in the morning. We had been planning this day long trip for a while now. “Let us celebrate the grand victory of our chess champion” was Vinod’s pretext.

Apart from the four of us, we had three guys from the physics department who had joined us on the trip. We had rented out a small minivan so that we could travel together. It was so much fun to be out with friends, enjoying the weather. It was drizzling, perfect for a weekend outing. Vinod did a fine imitation of The Tiger waving his arms about and spouting idiotic stuff. That made us all snort with laughter. I was laughing so hard that tears came out of my eyes.

We stopped for breakfast on the highway. The view around us was breathtaking. We were eating at a small restaurant with lush greenery around us. After clicking a few pictures, we resumed our journey. I noticed that one of the physicists, Hemant kept glancing surreptitiously at me. The moment I looked at him though, he blushed and looked away. Okay, that was definitely weird.

We reached Matheran and had to park our vehicle at the entrance. Being an eco-sensitive region, no private automobiles were allowed inside. Within Matheran the transport facilities available were horses, hand-pulled rickshaws and a toy train. We decided to walk around. Since it was still raining, we bought transparent rain coats, wide brimmed plastic hats and a map of the area before going in. I checked the map, which indicated that there were many designated look-out "points" or viewpoints that provided a 360 degree view of the surrounding area with interesting names like Louisa Point, Panorama Point, Alexander Point and so on. I was looking forward to visiting them.

‘So what do you think of Hemant?’ Vinod asked me in a low voice, as we set off wearing all the rain gear towards our first destination. We both were walking at the back of the group.

‘What do you mean?’

‘What is your impression about him?’

‘He seems nice,’ I said, not knowing where this conversation was heading.

‘Not just nice, he is a great guy. He is obviously smart and he makes really yummy pasta.’

‘Uh huh.’ I nodded distractedly.

‘I think you two could really hit it off.’

‘What?’ That was out of the blue.

‘Yeah, I mean, he is totally smitten by you. He admitted it when we were all completely drunk one night. I don’t think he would ever have the courage to even speak to you. So I invited him to come with us on this trip. So he could get to know you better and maybe get things rolling, you know.’

‘What the hell man,’ I burst out.

This caused the rest of the gang to turn back and look at us. I flashed a fake smile and lowered my voice.

‘What the hell man,’ I repeated. ‘Have you lost your mind?’

‘Oh come on, you two would make a cute pair.’

‘No way.’

‘Why? Because he is not that good looking? You girls are so shallow.’

‘As if men are so not into looks, judging us all the time. You can’t even look at our faces when you talk to us. So spare me the bullshit,’ I flared up.

‘Well, why don’t you check out his ass then? No one is stopping you,’ he smirked. ‘Looks pretty nice from over here.’

‘Shut up. I don’t judge people by their looks. At least I try not to.’

‘What’s the problem then?’

It was quite nice walking on the soft red soil of the place, with none of the typical city sounds that we were used to. It was so quiet we could actually hear the clatter of the animals and the hum of the birds around us.

‘I don’t know the guy, Vinod,’ I sighed, trying to make him understand. ‘We have barely ever spoken at work. Besides, he comes across as a typical nerd.’

He snorted derisively at this.

‘A nerd? That’s the worst insult you can come up with? Seriously?’

‘It is not an insult.’

‘You know, some people would think you are a nerd.’

‘That’s the whole point. I would want someone who balances me out.’

‘So you want to date someone who is dumb? Like a male bimbo?’

‘That is really offensive.’

‘What? You just said it.’

‘I give up,’ I sighed.

‘You know, I have just the guy for you. How about Aakash Tandon or Vivek Naidu? They are the exact opposite of nerds.’

The image of those dark deep eyes boring into mine flashed before me. I pushed it away.

‘Yeah they are and also, way out of my league. So let’s drop it.’

‘You really are hard to please,’ Vinod gave a mock frown and shook his head.

We kept walking through the day as we visited the various points. It was not raining heavily, but we kept our coats and hats on. At one particular point, we had to get down a few mud steps to get a closer view of the valley. While climbing back up, the steps had gotten so slippery due to the rain that I lost my footing and fell.

Before any of us could react, Hemant reached out and offered me his hand. He pulled me up quite comfortably and asked me if I was alright, his first words to me all day. I nodded and thanked him. I glared at Vinod who was smirking openly at this exchange.

Arun and Divya enquired if I was okay to walk further or we could rest for a bit. I agreed to sit down for a few minutes before going further. As we sat there admiring the remarkable view, it felt like we were the only ones in the entire world. We heard someone whistling loudly which startled us.

‘We should go,’ said Arun at once. ‘There could be thieves around. Maybe that was a shout out to his friends or something. I have heard of stuff like that happening.’ We immediately left the place and walked to our next point, where there were some other tourists like us.

At a little past noon, we settled down for lunch at one of the small restaurants serving local food. I was famished due to all the walking since morning. We dug into the delicious *naan* and chicken. Vinod kept on ordering more food. We were all really full and there was still a whole *biryani* remaining on the table.

‘I can’t eat even a spoon more. I’m done,’ said Divya. We all agreed.

‘We can’t waste that food. Dude, you should not have ordered so much,’ Arun scolded Vinod.

‘You guys are such pussies. You hardly ate anything. Now, watch the master at work and learn,’ said Vinod and started piling his plate high with *biryani*. While we all watched in amused wonder, he finished the entire dish on his own. We even mock clapped when he was done.

‘Can you even walk after stuffing so much?’ I asked Vinod as we left the restaurant. He appeared to have no difficulty at all. We went to Charlotte Lake after that. It was quite a beautiful sight, where we splashed around in the water a bit. There was a bridge over it, which led to a temple. We resumed walking around to the different points.

It was getting a bit dark now. We thought of getting back to the exit now. But it looked like we were lost, we couldn’t find our way out.

‘Was this thing here when we came this way?’ Arun pointed out to a structure which looked like an abandoned school. I didn’t remember seeing it there.

‘I’m not getting any signal on my cell phone guys,’ said one of the physicists.

‘This is spooky guys, like a horror movie plot,’ Vinod grinned wickedly.

‘Let’s see how much you beam when we are stuck here all night,’ Arun said to him.

‘What do we do now?’ I asked. There seemed to be no one around.

‘This place is haunted,’ said Vinod, trying to scare us. Divya looked terrified and on the verge of tears. She was easily spooked.

After walking about for a while, we seemed to be getting deeper and deeper into the place.

‘Maybe we are meant to be here forever,’ said Vinod.

‘I’m going to bash your face in, if you don’t stop spouting nonsense,’ I warned him, seeing the look on poor Divya’s face.

Just then we saw a lone figure coming down the path. Was he a ghost, we wondered for a moment. But then we called out to him. He turned out to be a mere mortal after all and he pointed out the correct way to us. We thanked him profusely and left.

But the excitement was not yet over. We could see the central market a little distance away. We walked towards it when we were surrounded by a bunch of monkeys. They bared their teeth at us. Monkeys were known to be vicious creatures and they even attacked humans sometimes. We were on the back foot here. Just as we were wondering how we would get out of this one, we saw Vinod charging at them. He was carrying a small bag which contained all of our wallets and cell phones, to protect them from the rain. He brandished the bag like a sword and screamed at the creatures. He jumped and made all sorts of offensive noises. The monkeys were so startled by this that they tucked their tails between their legs and left. After the initial shock, we laughed really hard. We teased Vinod about his “monkey dance” all the way home.

Chapter Ten

I was back at work. It was late at night. I was looking up a reference at the campus library. There was hardly anyone around. I sometimes liked to come here when everyone was asleep. It was quiet and productive to work here at this time. I was reading a scientific journal and simultaneously making notes on my laptop. I was so engrossed in my work that I didn’t realise when the place became empty. When I looked around, it was almost two and I was the

only one left. Well, I was not completely alone. Some guy was sitting in a corner far away from me and reading. I got up to leave and moved towards the exit.

I almost dropped the book in surprise when I saw it was Aakash Tandon. He looked up to see me gawking at him.

‘Hello Dr Menon,’ he called out cheerfully.

‘Hello, what are you doing here?’

‘Stalking you, of course,’ he winked. ‘I was reading, what else would you do in a library? Actors can read, you know. Well, at least some of us can,’ he corrected himself laughing.

‘What were you reading?’ I was curious to know.

‘A biography,’ he held up the cover. ‘You know, even though this place is full of scientific journals and such stuff, it also has a variety of fiction and nonfiction books.’

‘Yeah I know. So you like to read huh?’

‘I am not a big reader as such. But I do read biographies and inspirational books whenever I can.’

‘That’s nice.’

‘I couldn’t get any sleep tonight. Thought I might visit this library, of which I have heard so much about.’

‘That’s nice,’ I repeated, running out of things to say. ‘Would you like to have some coffee?’

‘Is it available?’

‘Yes, there is a vending machine right here. I can get it if you like.’

I got two cups of coffee and settled down at the table. He asked me what I was reading at the moment. I told him about the racy thriller and then went on to talk about my favourite authors. Being an avid reader, I had quite a few of them. I also liked to read several books at a time. He found that remarkable. I realised I had been talking nonstop and had been with him for at least an hour.

‘I must go now,’ I stood up.

‘I thought the conversation was just getting interesting. Well, no matter, good night,’ he said.

When I told the gang about the encounter of the previous night, Divya squealed with excitement and wished she had been there too. She had been out on a date with Dilip, which I secretly thought was far more exciting than reading in a library.

‘But the question is, what was he doing in a library?’ Arun asked me pointedly.

‘I wouldn’t know. Didn’t you hear that he likes to read?’ I finished lamely.

‘And you had a midnight coffee date,’ said Divya.

‘It was anything but a date,’ I replied.

‘Yeah, he couldn’t sleep apparently,’ said Vinod. ‘That would hardly qualify as a date.’

‘We are so spying on him tonight,’ said Divya.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

‘Tonight, at your apartment, let us watch what he is up to and by watch, I mean ogle shamelessly,’ she leered. I groaned, though I also did the same covertly.

‘Enjoy ladies, I have work to do,’ said Arun.

‘And I have better things to do than to stare at some dude, however stunning he may be,’ said Vinod.

‘Who invited you guys?’ asked Divya. ‘This is just for the two of us anyway.’

Divya arrived as promised at my apartment late in the evening. We settled down to look through my window. Aakash was lazing around the apartment, doing random stuff like watching television and texting on his phone. We still stared at him.

‘I could look at him doing nothing, all day long,’ sighed Divya.

‘Ahem, you have a boyfriend, if I might remind you for the umpteenth time.’

‘Oh, Dilip doesn’t mind. We are allowed to fantasise about celebrities. I mean, we know that nothing is ever going to happen. So it is guilt free.’

‘I guess.’

‘You are single. It should be even more so for you. Don’t tell me that those two don’t turn you on? And to have them right here, within your grasp, ah, what more could you want? We can look at these gorgeous hunks whenever we want at least for a few days more. We should make full use of it.’

I laughed and agreed somewhat with her reasoning.

Aakash was drinking some sort of juice now. He began doing warm up exercises in his room. He stretched and did push-ups, then he picked up a duffel bag and left his apartment.

‘I think he is going to the gym. Come on, let’s go,’ said Divya.

‘I don’t go to the gym.’

‘You are now. Get your work out gear, quickly.’

‘Should we call Arun and Vinod too?’

‘They were already there earlier, remember? Let’s go, come on.’

I changed into my track suit and shoes. Divya also changed and came to my apartment. We left for the gym.

Chapter Eleven

‘This takes me back to my college days, when we used to chase guys,’ said Divya.

‘What the hell? You used to do that?’

‘Yeah, this one time, my friend and I were walking on either side of this cute guy we used to like and we kind of teased him. He was quite embarrassed and didn’t know what to do. Poor chap.’

‘Damn, isn’t that like eve teasing?’

‘More like Adam teasing,’ she laughed.

‘You are a badass, Divya.’

‘Yeah, it was quite harmless.’

As we neared the gym, I saw Tandon standing outside, talking on his phone. I pulled back Divya to wait, just a few meters away from him. Tandon seemed quite agitated, whoever he was talking to, was getting an earful.

‘I cannot keep repeating this. How many times do I have to tell you? Stop calling me and stop bothering my staff,’ he was almost shouting. He listened for a moment and then began yelling again. ‘No, you listen to me. This is not going to work. If you keep calling me, I will have to inform the police.’ He continued in this vein and finally hung up. He stood there, exhaling heavily and running his hand through his hair, clearly agitated. He went in after about five minutes.

‘What was all that about?’ I wondered.

‘I guess it was some crazy fan or stalker, these guys have quite a few of these deranged followers. Some of them turn up at their houses, some may even try to kill them. Lunatics, I tell you.’

‘Yeah, sounded like it. Quite dangerous, huh?’

‘Or maybe it was an ex girlfriend. You never know how these things turn out.’

‘It sure was an awful breakup in that case.’

We went in. There were quite a few guys around and some girls too. Wow, everyone suddenly seemed to be health conscious these days.

‘So what do we do now?’ I asked.

‘We work out, like the rest.’

I started off on the treadmill, while Divya walked around talking with some of the guys. Aakash was really working up a sweat in a corner. Most people were just staring openly at him. I glanced occasionally to see what he was up to. Man, he had some really nice biceps.

Divya was now talking to him as he exercised. Was she flirting with him? I could see her twirling her hair. Some of the other girls were surrounding him as well and fake laughing. Dear god, what is wrong with these people, I wondered. Why did it bother me? I am obviously not jealous. Hell, I wasn’t even paying that much attention to Tandon. Even the guys were envying his body apparently.

‘Hey Divya, when do we get out of here?’ I whispered, as she came closer. She looked fresh as a daisy while I was sweating like a pig. I was exhausted as I had already exercised during my morning run and now quite a bit on the treadmill.

‘We leave when he leaves,’ she muttered, glancing in Tandon’s direction.

‘But that could take hours.’

She simply shrugged and walked away. I sat down and wiped the sweat from my eyes. Aakash waved at me. Oh perfect, just the right time to notice my existence. I smiled back through gritted teeth.

I was wondering what exercise should I do next or perhaps it would be wise to just call it a day. Suddenly I heard Aakash say, ‘Why don’t you all join me at my apartment after your workout? Nothing beats an impromptu party. Call your friends too. I’ll make the arrangements. After all, we have earned it.’

A loud cheer went up. As soon as Aakash left, most of the gawkers also left.

‘Okay, now we tell Arun and Vinod,’ said Divya. We went to dress up for the party. I didn’t want to look as if I had put in too much effort, so I stuck to wearing jeans and a nice blue top.

When we reached the party scene, a few people had already arrived. Pizza and non-alcoholic drinks were on the table. Some were dancing to the music. The party was very much on. Aakash and Vivek were mingling with the crowd. Those two seemed quite modest and nice, without the starry airs.

When they joined the others to dance, the crowd whistled and cheered. Someone started playing a peppy Bollywood number. Aakash started grooving to the beats, he was an awesome dancer. He did some step which looked to be the signature move from the song, a kind of moon walk and made it look so damn easy. The crowd went berserk. People had random requests after that. Aakash and Vivek obliged some of them. They danced with some of the girls, Divya was of course one of them. I maintained a distance even though I was a fair dancer, but I knew I was nowhere close to those guys.

After some time, some of us went to another room and were chatting, away from the noise and the dancers. The actors joined us as well. Aakash asked one of the guys to dim the light.

‘Are we going to watch a movie?’ someone asked.

‘Even better. How about we narrate some ghost stories? But only those that have happened for real,’ said Aakash.

I liked reading terrifying tales and even watched scary movies, this should be fun, I thought. Everyone settled down comfortably. It was dark, just the right setting for a horror story. People began sharing their adventures or haunted tales.

Vivek shared his experience when he was travelling down a lonely road in Bhopal.

‘We were shooting in a remote location for my reality show. After the shoot, we were supposed to go back to our hotel which was quite far away. There were four of us in a car, including the driver. The rest of the crew were going to reach there in a bus,’ said Vivek. ‘We were driving down this road. There was no one for miles around. It was so dark that except for our car’s headlights, we could not see too far on either side of the road.’ He stopped for a moment to look around before continuing.

‘We didn’t know where the bus was, but it was like we were all alone in the world. Just the four of us in a car, going down this narrow, almost never ending road. All of a sudden, this tiny creature appears out of nowhere, a little distance away from the car.’ Divya squeezed my hand as he said this.

‘We didn’t know what it was. It didn’t seem like any animal that we had seen. It was furry with sharp fangs and a snout, a kind of miniature wolf

combined with mongoose, a chimera. It was running along with our car. We didn't know how it was keeping up with us. But every time we looked out the window, there it was. Running along with the car, its beady eyes on us. We were shit scared by now and were driving like maniacs. Still the thing was right outside our window and it appeared to be getting closer and closer to our car.'

Someone gasped aloud at this.

'Well, you can imagine our plight,' Vivek continued. 'We thought we were going to be attacked any moment. Somehow even being inside the car seemed to offer no protection at all. Just then, we saw lights ahead which seemed to be coming from a small village. When we reached it, the creature disappeared. We all breathed a sigh of relief. Till today, we have not solved the mystery of that creature.'

'Wow, that was quite a story,' someone remarked. Some people looked shaken, including Divya.

'Those who are not comfortable can please join the others,' said Aakash. I gestured to Divya, who I knew was petrified, but she remained seated beside me.

'So I was in a village in Rajasthan, shooting for one of my films,' began Aakash in a low voice. 'Weird things kept happening at the hotel we were staying at, right from the first day. We heard noises at night, some of our costumes and accessories were misplaced. In typical horror movie style, I heard the sound of a woman's anklets outside my door one night. So we asked the hotel staff about it, who told us that the village itself was haunted.'

Everyone was listening spellbound to the tale.

'The manager told us that many years ago, there was a prince who was passing through that village. He fell in love with a local girl when he stopped to ask for water. He kept coming back to see her and eventually won her heart. The girl belonged to a low caste. When the old king got wind of this, he confronted his son about it, who said that he could not live without the girl. If his father was not ready to accept her, he was ready to give up his right to the throne to be with her. The king initially threatened him. When that failed, he cajoled and pleaded with the prince, begging him to see reason. But the prince couldn't be persuaded.

‘The king decided to get rid of the girl. His men went to her house one night and abducted her. When her father tried to intervene, they slit his throat in front of her eyes. Forcibly, they took her away to the desert. No one heard her muffled screams. They whipped and tortured her, after tying her to a tree and left her body for the vultures.

‘The prince was mad with grief when he came to know about his beloved’s death. A few days later, he threw himself off the highest tower of his palace. Some people said the girl returned to avenge her death, though no one knows the truth. The king was found dead in his chambers under mysterious circumstances. One by one, so were the rest of his men who had killed her. The king’s entire family was wiped out in a few years. The kingdom was ruined. The village and especially the desert became haunted after that, some claimed.’

Aakash took a pause before continuing. No one uttered a word.

‘When the manager finished telling us the story, we were all quite frightened. But we had to finish our shoot as well. There was no choice but to ignore and carry on our work. Our director and his assistants were out one day on location in the desert. The rest of us were supposed to join them later. One of the ADs got separated from the group. He got lost and seemed to be going around in circles for hours. There was no signal on his cell phone. The team couldn’t reach him.

‘He was really tired, after walking for miles. So when he spotted a tree, he sat down underneath it. He didn’t realise when he fell asleep. A prickling sensation woke him up. He heard the tinkling of bangles and looked up to see a woman standing nearby. He jumped up to his feet and almost fell over. She didn’t move. He looked around. There wasn’t a thing in sight for miles. He tried talking to her, but she didn’t say a word. He got really scared and moved away from her. When he looked back, he couldn’t see her anywhere. He just screamed and ran fast, as far as he could. When the team found him, he was screaming like a mad man. We had to take him to hospital. We didn’t venture out alone after that. We just finished the shoot and got the hell out of that goddamned place.’

Aakash’s story seemed to have terrified almost everyone. He had a natural flair for storytelling. His voice and gestures added to the overall effect. I gave him a tiny smile. Divya was ashen faced and had squeezed my hand so hard

throughout that it had gone numb. I knew she would not be sleeping tonight at all. I could probably listen to a few more stories like that, but the crowd had had enough. It was time to leave.

Chapter Twelve

It was Friday evening and I was still undecided on what to do during the weekend. Vinod had yet another date. It was remarkable how he managed to get a new one almost every weekend. One had to admire his spirit. Divya was going out with her boyfriend Dilip. I, of course didn't fail to remind her many times that she had a boyfriend, when she was going gaga over the stars. Arun was planning to visit his parents in Pune, which left me all by myself.

I had some work in the lab and decided not to go home. I thought I would catch up on some reading, but two whole days of reading would probably be too much. I thought of going someplace by myself the next day. It had been a long time since I had visited the museum, so I decided to go there first and then see where it went after that. It could be fun being alone.

After finishing my work, I set out for the museum on Saturday afternoon. I decided to walk there. There was a group of film reporters stationed outside, waiting for the actors to appear, since they were not allowed on the premises. I moved on, not looking back. On my way, I went into a bookshop to pick up the latest work of fiction. I lost track of the time as I always did when I was surrounded by books. I spent about an hour there and came out loaded with books. I walked towards the museum which was just a short distance away. I thought about the events of the past few days and they still seemed unreal to me.

My thoughts were interrupted when a black Mercedes stopped right next to me and a guy jumped out. I screamed in surprise and dropped one of my bags. The guy bent down, picked them up and handed it to me.

'Sorry Dr Menon, I didn't mean to scare you,' said Aakash Tandon, taking off his sunglasses.

'What are you doing here?' I asked.

'I was passing by and saw you walking along,' he said.

I had recovered from my initial shock by now and said, 'Are you following me?' with a wicked smile.

'What? No way...' he began and realised that I was kidding. 'I see, you used my trick on me. Very funny.'

I secretly wished for a moment that he was following me, but discarded that line of thought immediately.

'So where are you headed? Maybe I could give you a lift,' he said.

'I was going to the museum. It's not too far. I can walk. Thanks anyway.'

'Oh, fine. I better be on my way then,' he said.

'Unless...'

'Unless what?'

'Unless you would care to join me?' I couldn't believe I had just said that.

'What?' He seemed equally surprised.

'Umm, it's okay, you probably have to be someplace important,' I said, horrified.

He looked at me with a bemused expression. It felt like an eternity before he said anything. I looked everywhere except at him.

'I could probably cancel. Are you sure it would be fine if I came with you?' he enquired.

I had never been less sure about anything. But I acted all nonchalant as I said, 'Sure, no problem.'

'Fine, hop in, we can reach faster.'

I got in, thinking this was ridiculous. What the hell had I gotten myself into?

A guy in a black suit was sitting ahead with the driver. On seeing the look on my face, Tandon said, 'Don't mind him. He's my bodyguard.'

'Oh yeah, I forgot that you stars have your entourage with you all the time. Hey, how come we don't see these guys with you at TIRC?'

'Well, Gupta asked us to keep them away, thinking it would make everyone uncomfortable. Anyway, you guys have top security within the premises. So we can afford to keep these guys out.'

Tandon excused himself and called his secretary asking him to cancel all his appointments. As he was busy talking on the phone, I glanced at his lovely, expressive eyes and appealing bee stung lips. When he smiled, it was a sight to behold. And those dimples. Man, how could anyone be so stunning?

As the car hit a bump, I was shaken out of my trance. Man, had I lost it? Sure, he was good looking, but he was a film star. Someone who dated beautiful models and actresses, who probably treated people with disdain most of the time because of his status. Sure, he had been nice to us, but that was probably because he wanted to get tips from us. I had to get a grip on myself before he thought I was a big time idiot.

We reached the museum. I reached for my bags.

‘Why don’t you leave them here?’ he said. I did so when something struck me.

‘How are you going to come in there?’ I asked.

‘Why? Do I require something special?’

‘No, I mean, people are going to recognise you and be all, you know, star struck.’

‘Oh, don’t worry. I have this,’ he said and pulled out a hoodie from the back of the car. He put it on along with his oversized sunglasses. I guess someone would have to look very closely to recognise him now.

We went in. There were very few people around. We started looking around. I tried to show off a little by rambling about the artefacts which we saw. I could remember a few details, but of course, I had forgotten quite a lot. I stopped midway through a sentence about the antique weapons on display when I remembered that it was all wrong. I should have just said nothing.

‘You know, you are really smart, but that doesn’t mean you have to know *everything*,’ he said with a mischievous smile.

I laughed and we moved on. We reached the room where the paintings were displayed and sat down on the bench opposite them. They were so beautiful that we just stared at them, not saying a word.

After a long time, he said, ‘So do you like living alone?’

I was surprised and could just say, ‘What?’

‘You know, you live alone in a city like this. Don’t you feel lonely?’

‘No, my family is in Mumbai. I just stay on campus because it’s so much easier, as I usually work late. But I visit my family often. Besides, I have my friends here. I am deeply involved in my work. And I do a lot of other stuff like reading and travelling.’

He listened attentively as I spoke about my family, my career, my life so far, commenting now and then, asking a few questions.

‘I think I’ve talked enough about myself, why don’t you tell me something about you,’ I said.

‘I think we should leave. We’ve spent a lot of time here, they might be closing now,’ he said.

‘Hey, that’s not fair,’ I protested, but he was already walking away, grinning.

Chapter Thirteen

As we came out of the museum, he said, ‘So where to next?’

‘We could go to one of my favourite places. Come on,’ I said.

I instructed the driver to turn this way and that, asking him to stop when we reached Marine Drive. I got off and started walking. Aakash followed me and we sat down, admiring the view. It was dark now and “the Queen’s necklace” as it was called, was sparkling.

‘Isn’t this place beautiful? I love to come and just sit here, looking at the sea,’ I said. ‘What’s the matter?’ I continued, when I noticed that he had gone all quiet.

‘You know, it’s been a long time since I’ve been here. This place brings back a lot of memories. When I was a struggler in the industry, you can’t imagine the number of times that I faced rejection. At those times, I used to come and

sit here. Just sit here, like you said. The sea calmed me down on every occasion and I resolved to try again one more time.'

There was so much tenderness in his voice that I felt like I was intruding on a very personal moment. It felt like he was talking more to himself than me. I guess he realised that too and immediately stopped talking.

'It must have been hard, for you. To know that you have what it takes and still get rejected,' I said slowly, unsure whether he would even respond.

'Oh yes, I went to so many auditions, before I got my first break. All because I didn't have the right connections, I guess. But I believe that if you have talent and a little bit of luck, opportunity will knock at your door,' he said.

'What about your family? Did you have their support?' I was curious to know.

I instantly felt him stiffen. I sensed I had asked the wrong question, but there was no way I could take it back. Of course, since I didn't keep up with the lives of stars like Divya, I knew nothing about his background. He didn't say anything for a while.

'My parents got divorced when I was six. I stayed back with my mother in Delhi and my father moved to Bangalore. Both my parents remarried and I was quite a loner in my childhood days. I only opened up when I started taking drama lessons in college. After that, I moved to Mumbai to try my luck in movies. I stayed alone in this city, working part-time at a hotel. My parents were financially well off, my mother used to even send me money when I was here. But other than that, they were busy with their lives and I was searching for my destiny in a strange, ruthless city,' he said.

I could imagine him in his early days, living alone, going for auditions, working and coming home late at night to his apartment, having faced yet another rejection and having no one to talk to. It must have been so hard.

'How did you get your first break?' I asked.

'Well, for two years, I went through the whole cycle of failure. I was miserable. To take my mind off it, I enrolled for dance lessons. I had always been a good dancer, but the classes moulded me into a great one. Along with some other guys from my troupe, I appeared in one of the songs in a major film, in the background, of course. But it was what I needed; I could use it as a reference. One of the producers decided to call me for an audition after he

saw me dancing. It was a dance based movie which required a new face and immense dancing skills. I nailed the part.'

I almost applauded here, but controlled myself.

'And the rest is history. Wow, you could make a movie based on your life story,' I told him.

'I think it sounds more dramatic than it actually was,' he grinned.

We talked a bit more about him now, before he suggested we should grab a bite. I was very hungry, so I agreed instantly.

'But I hope we can go someplace nice and small, not one of your fancy restaurants,' I said. I was not dressed up at all to go to such a place.

'Oh, I know an interesting place, it's right around the corner. We can go there,' he said.

We reached a restaurant near Girgaum Chowpatty, which was really "nice and small" like I wanted.

We sat down at a cosy table and the waiters wished Aakash like he was a regular customer. He grinned back at them. I was confused. Did he visit this restaurant even now, when he could afford to go the best ones in town?

We placed our order and went back to normal conversation. Aakash narrated anecdotes about Mehra and Gupta which had me in splits. But it was clear that he had great admiration for both of them. I was laughing so hard that some people nearby looked at us and frowned, but my laughter was something which I could never control. I didn't know how to suppress it or cover my mouth while laughing.

'Are you seeing anyone right now?' he asked. I stopped laughing abruptly.

'No, I'm not,' I replied. 'It's been a while,' I added unnecessarily. 'What about you?'

'Me neither, despite what you may read in the papers every day,' he smiled.

'Is that so?'

'My love life is vastly exaggerated,' he guffawed.

'Cons of being a celebrity, I guess.'

'Would you ever consider dating an actor?'

Was he implying something here? Did he want to date me? Maybe it was just an innocent question, to know my view about actors in general.

‘Well, would you?’ he repeated, when I said nothing.

‘You mean, like a movie actor?’

‘Yeah, let’s say, a movie actor.’

‘I think the important question is, would an actor consider dating me?’ I replied carefully, sidestepping his question.

‘Why not?’ he asked.

‘Well, I’m not an attractive model or actress, that’s why,’ I reasoned simply.

‘You don’t have to be a model or actress to be attractive,’ he remarked, flashing those damn dimples.

Did he think I was attractive? My heart missed a beat. No, that was not possible. I mean, I was not *bad* looking. I was tall, almost as tall as him actually. I was slim and fit, thanks to my morning runs. I had long curly hair and my friends told me I had a charming smile. Earlier in the day, he said I was smart. Now he thought I was attractive. No, he’s just messing with me. I reminded myself that his last girlfriend was an ex-Miss India, as Divya had mentioned to us the other day. Get a grip. Don’t behave like a loser. He’s just asking you these things casually, as a part of normal conversation.

He was still smiling, waiting to hear my answer.

‘Well, I don’t know. It wouldn’t last. Even if some actor considered me attractive enough to date, I wouldn’t be able to keep up with his expectations. He would be surrounded by these beautiful women all the time. I mean, look at them, all perfect bodies and smooth skin. I, on the other hand, am not too bothered about my looks. I hardly even use makeup. Besides...’ I paused.

He was listening intently now, ‘Go on, besides, what?’

‘Well, actors have issues. Most of them are vain and self obsessed. I mean, they work in an industry where looks are so damn important. He would probably not even notice me, after some time. And all that fame, there would hardly be a moment of privacy. I wouldn’t want to be the focus of all that attention, reading about my personal life in the papers and gossip magazines. No, I think I would prefer a regular guy, someone like me, intelligent, funny,

someone who prefers the simple things in life.’ I was being honest, whether he liked it or not.

He just nodded and smiled, but didn’t say anything. Dinner was almost over.

‘I think we should leave. It’s late. I’ll drop you home,’ he said, signalling for the cheque.

We didn’t talk much on the ride back home. I was thinking back on the events of the day. As he dropped me at my building, he thanked me for a wonderful evening. I returned the compliment before he went his way, leaving me with a plethora of thoughts running inside my head.

Chapter Fourteen

As I sat up in bed with my laptop for company that night, I couldn’t concentrate much on anything. My fingers automatically went to Google and typed up “Aakash Tandon”. I felt annoyed with myself, but I checked it out anyway. There were thousands of links about him. I clicked on one of his biographies.

He was thirty years old, two years older than I was. He was five feet eleven inches tall, three inches taller than me. Man, I had to stop comparing! I scolded myself.

He was born and brought up in Delhi and came from a broken family. His rise to fame was all there, more or less like he had narrated to me. He had been working in films for about six years now. Quite a few of his films were major hits, which made him a huge star. Of course, I hadn’t watched any of his films. So I didn’t know if he was a good actor or not. He had received critical acclaim for some of his performances, but hadn’t received any film awards so far. Well, I guess he was a fine actor and not a sycophant then, if he kept out of that shit.

I clicked on one of the numerous videos which showed him dancing to a peppy number. It was from a movie in which he had featured last year and featured some chubby actress along with him. I had to admit that Aakash was an amazing dancer, although some of the moves were downright silly. Typical Bollywood stuff, I muttered. Grown men and women prancing like monkeys.

I probably should have stopped then, but I went on to read a few more

articles. His personal life was revealed in some of them. He had been in a relationship with a leading actress for two years. But after that didn't work out, he had been dating a string of beautiful models and actresses in the last couple of years. There were quite a few names thrown in there, including his last girlfriend, the ex-Miss India. He was apparently single now. I didn't know if it was all true, but it was revolting. How could a person just move on from one relationship to the next? I shut my laptop in disgust. Cursing Tandon, I drifted off to sleep.

I concentrated on reading and doing chores on Sunday. Well, I tried to. But inwardly I was seething at Tandon. He had behaved like such a gentleman with me yesterday. I even thought we could be friends. I had been so naïve to think like that. Apparently, he was even vainer than the rest of the *filmi* brigade. He thought he could get any woman he wanted. And when he grew tired of her, he just got himself a new one. The thrill of the chase, that was all that mattered to him. You shouldn't believe everything that's written, maybe it's not true, reasoned a tiny voice inside my head. But I smothered that voice quickly, showing no mercy.

I hated Monday mornings and usually ended up cursing it. But this time, I hated it with a vengeance. The thought of seeing Tandon along with The Tiger's smug face was enough to make me see red. I didn't say anything about my Saturday "date" to Vinod and Divya, not even to Arun. I sat mum through breakfast and when Tandon and Vivek joined us, I got up excusing myself, saying I had some urgent work to attend to. I didn't return Tandon's warm smile and focused on getting far away from him.

As I got down to work in my lab, the phone rang. It was The Tiger. He informed me that Aakash Tandon wanted to visit my lab, so Vinod and I were to do our best to indulge him. Fuck! I cursed under my breath and slammed the phone down.

Moments later, Tandon turned up at my doorstep, grinning. I forced myself to smile at him. I guess the effort showed, his smile faltered a bit. Vinod and I showed him around the lab, talking in detail about the work we did. I focused on getting the information across, rather than looking at his face. He asked us a few questions. He seemed genuinely curious.

I sat down to work at my laminar flow bench, hoping Vinod would take care of Tandon. Both were chatting away. But moments later, Tandon sat down

next to me. I explained what I was doing to him, as I continued with my work. He just watched me.

I could not concentrate with him staring like that. He kept talking, mentioning again how much he enjoyed the evening we had spent together. I nodded and said “Hmm” in some places, but didn’t say much. After a while, he became quiet too and kept watching me work silently.

Suddenly he said, ‘Is something wrong?’

‘What?’ I asked, puzzled that he could make out that I was doing it all wrong.

‘Not this, is something wrong with you? I mean, have I done something? You seem upset.’

He sure was direct. I didn’t know what to say.

He went on, ‘Did something happen the other day? You haven’t said much after that.’

‘No, it’s nothing.’

‘Come on, tell me.’

‘It’s just personal stuff. Nothing to do with you,’ I lied.

‘Oh, I thought...’

‘Well, I’ll be okay. Nothing to worry about,’ I said, flashing him a fake smile.

‘In that case, it’s fine. Maybe we could do it again some time.’

On seeing the puzzled look on my face, he said, ‘You know, just go out, like we did. Obviously not like a date. As friends.’

‘Oh, umm, I think, we shouldn’t.’

‘Why not? I thought we connected well. I really enjoyed myself. Didn’t you?’

‘It’s not that. I think we should not get into all that. It’s better to maintain a professional relationship.’

‘Professional relationship?’ he asked me incredulously.

‘Yeah, I mean, you guys are here to learn, after all. I think it would be better that way, for all concerned.’

He looked at me, as if seeing me clearly for the first time. We didn’t speak much after that, keeping whatever little conversation we had, strictly

“professional”.

Chapter Fifteen

I avoided speaking much to Vivek as well. I didn't want to give Tandon the impression that I was friendly with him. I stuck to my work. During lunch time, I tried to be late whenever I could and ate by myself. Even if I sat with them, I was silent most of the time. I secretly hoped this whole thing would end soon and we could get back to our normal life.

I noticed that the guys were bonding well. Vinod and Arun chatted away with Aakash and Vivek, but Divya had become quieter. She didn't flirt with Tandon or Vivek anymore. But unlike me, she didn't seem to be quiet on purpose. She appeared lost in her thoughts and picked at her food.

‘What’s up with Divya?’ I asked Vinod and Arun. The three of us were having tea near the vending machine.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Vinod.

‘Haven’t you guys noticed? She is quieter these days,’ I said.

‘Really?’ asked Vinod.

‘Yes, she is,’ I asserted.

‘So are you,’ said Arun.

‘I’m just stressed with my work,’ I said quickly. ‘But something is wrong with Divya.’

‘I don’t know. She may be PMS-ing or something,’ Vinod shrugged it off.

‘You jerk,’ I gasped. ‘Don’t you have any concern for her?’

‘She’s okay, relax,’ said Vinod.

‘I think she will be fine,’ Arun bafflingly agreed with Vinod. ‘People get moody at times.’

‘Fine, thanks for your help guys. I’ll talk to her myself,’ I frowned.

I went to Divya’s room after having dinner. She looked listless. I tried to make small talk. We chatted for a while about work and other stuff.

‘Is something wrong? You seem disturbed,’ I said.

She looked at me for some time. Her lip trembled. I thought she was going to cry.

‘It’s okay. Whatever it is, you can tell me,’ I assured her.

‘It’s Dilip. He has been avoiding me. We had some ugly fights these past few days. He isn’t taking my calls now. He refuses to see me,’ said Divya.

‘But what happened? Why are you guys fighting?’

‘Initially, it was just small things. Then the arguments grew. Now he hates everything about me. He just picks fights with me all the time. I think he has found someone else.’ Divya started weeping.

‘Are you sure? Maybe he is just stressed with his work,’ I tried to soothe her.

‘No, it’s not that. During our last call, he said he wanted to break up with

me.'

'Just give it some time, Divya. Maybe he said it in the heat of the moment.'

'He won't even speak to me. I don't know what I've done.'

She seemed really miserable.

'Do you want me to talk to him?' I asked. I had met Dilip a few times, we all had gone out together. I could at least ask him what was going on.

'Would you do that?'

'Of course, if you want me to.'

'Here,' she handed her phone to me.

'You mean, right now?'

'Why not?'

'Fine,' I said and dialled Dilip's number. He didn't pick up. I took out my cell phone and punched in his number. He picked up on the third ring. I spoke to Dilip for about twenty minutes. Divya kept throwing me anxious looks as I talked, pacing about the room.

'Well?' she asked me as soon as I hung up.

'He seems pissed off at you,' I agreed.

'I told you.'

'But I've managed to convince him to meet you.'

'What? When?'

'He said he'll come by tomorrow night. He'll text you the time and place.'

'Are you serious?' She couldn't believe it.

'Do you think I would joke about this?'

'How did you convince him?'

'A master never reveals her secrets,' I grinned.

'You are the best,' said Divya and hugged me. 'Thanks a lot Rithika.'

'Anytime,' I smiled.

'What should I wear for tomorrow's date?'

‘Oh hell, I think I should leave now,’ I said, getting up immediately.

‘Yeah, I know you hate helping me pick my outfit. Fine, go. Thanks again,’ she said.

I said goodnight and left.

Chapter Sixteen

The next day, Divya was her usual chirpy self. It felt good to see her happy. I even listened to her going on about the awesome new red dress she had chosen to wear for her date.

‘Dilip is going to pick me up at eight,’ said Divya, showing me his text.

‘Have fun. Don’t fight,’ I said.

Divya waved to me as she went out that evening. She did look stunning. I

went back to reading my book.

My phone rang in about half an hour. It was Dilip.

‘Rithika, come down,’ he said. His voice sounded urgent.

‘What happened?’

‘Near the gym. Now. Please.’ He hung up.

What the hell was that all about, I thought, as I put on my jacket and ran downstairs. The gym was a little away from my apartment. It would probably be deserted at this hour, I thought. As I neared it, I saw Divya and Dilip. It looked like they were fighting. Oh boy, what was the matter now?

‘What’s going on?’ I asked.

‘Your friend is crazy. I told her I don’t want to see her anymore. She just won’t understand,’ said Dilip.

I looked at Divya.

‘You bastard!’ Divya lunged at Dilip and grabbed his throat.

‘What are you doing?’ I yelled at Divya, as I pulled her away from him.

‘Have you gone completely insane?’

‘See, what I have to put up with,’ said Dilip.

‘You son of a bitch! How dare you,’ screamed Divya.

‘Divya, calm down. People will hear you,’ I said, looking around.

‘I don’t care, Rithika. Because that’s what he is,’ said Divya.

‘Talk some sense into her,’ Dilip told me.

‘He is engaged,’ screamed Divya and started wailing loudly.

‘What?’ I was taken aback.

Divya sank down onto a bench and cried, holding me for support.

‘The bastard cheated me,’ she repeated again and again. ‘I was such a fool. I loved him with all my heart and he cheated me.’ She really looked like a mad woman.

‘Is this true?’ I asked Dilip.

‘I told her I didn’t want to see her anymore. Where is the question of

cheating?’

‘Liar!’ yelled Divya. ‘He went to Hyderabad last month. He told me he was going to meet his family. But he had gone for his engagement. He told me he wanted to break up with me only a few days back.’

I looked at Dilip, who looked shifty. It was clear that Divya was telling the truth.

‘But I never told her I would marry her,’ he said finally. ‘She just assumed things.’

‘So what then? You just wanted to sleep with me? And now you have no use for me?’ cried Divya.

‘Shh Divya,’ I said and held her close to me. Divya and Dilip continued to argue. I was getting worried someone would see or hear us here. It could cause problems for Divya. This was after all her workplace.

Divya was quiet now. I guessed she was exhausted. I took Dilip a few feet away and said, ‘You did the wrong thing.’

‘She won’t listen to me,’ he said, exasperated. ‘I never made any promises to her, I swear.’ He ran his fingers through his hair. I noticed the gold engagement ring on his left hand.

‘You should have clarified matters. You both have been together for so long. Clearly she would have expected some commitment from you,’ I tried to reason with him. He didn’t say anything. I could see him thinking hard, clearly ruffled. It looked like he just wanted to leave.

‘I think I’ll go now,’ he said. I was right.

‘You think you are rid of me forever, aren’t you? Well, you are wrong. You are going to pay,’ said Divya in a low voice. We both turned towards her. She took out a plastic pouch from her pocket. It contained some grey powder. Before both of us could react, she put the powder from the pouch into her mouth.

‘What the hell?’ I yelled and ran towards Divya. Dilip followed me.

‘What was that?’ we asked in unison, picking up the pouch. It still had some powder inside.

‘Rat poison,’ Divya grinned like a maniac. ‘You are the witness to my death,

Rithika. Make the bastard pay,' she pointed at Dilip.

'Oh my god. Have you lost it completely?' I screamed. 'We have to get her to a hospital. Now,' I said to Dilip.

Divya sat down on the bench and said, 'I'm not going anywhere.' Dilip tried to pull her off it. She resisted with all her strength.

I knew Arun and Vinod had gone out for a movie. I didn't know what else to do, so I ran to the gym. I saw two guys working out in two opposite corners of the gym. One of them was a guy from the engineering department. I didn't remember ever speaking to the guy. The other one was Vivek Naidu. I made my decision in an instant.

'Vivek, please, I need your help,' I said.

'What is it Rithika?' asked Vivek, alarmed at my state.

'It's my friend Divya. She has swallowed something poisonous. We have to get her to a hospital now.'

'Of course.'

Vivek immediately rushed out with me. Divya and Dilip were still grappling on the bench.

'I'll explain everything later,' I said to an astonished Vivek. 'We may have to use force.'

Vivek looked at Divya and then at me. I nodded. He called his driver and asked to get his car there. He then just picked up Divya off the bench as if she was some piece of paper. This guy was strong. Divya started screaming.

'Don't create a scene,' I pleaded. She sobbed and went limp in Vivek's arms. We all got in Vivek's car. We reached the nearest hospital and got Divya admitted in the ICU. Vivek and I did all the talking. I handed over the pouch containing the rat poison to the doctor. Dilip had gone numb. I called Divya's parents and told them what had happened. I called up Arun as well.

The hospital staff started Divya's treatment immediately. She would be alright, the doctor assured us. We had brought her in, well in time. Relief flooded my veins as I sank on to the chair outside the ICU. I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked up to see Vivek smiling at me. I thanked him for his help.

‘Don’t be silly. Would you like a cup of coffee?’ he asked and went to get it.

‘My life is ruined. I didn’t want it to end this way,’ Dilip said to me.

‘You are still thinking only about yourself. What about Divya? What did she do wrong?’ I asked.

‘Don’t you see she is a psycho? I was right all along.’

‘I just saw a desperate girl deeply in love with a guy who doesn’t deserve it.’

‘Don’t you get it? It’s a suicide attempt. The police will be here. What will they do to me? This is a nightmare.’ The guy actually had tears in his eyes.

‘Just go if you want to.’ I was so furious I wanted to slap his stupid face. He didn’t move. Vivek was back with coffee and biscuits. I felt really grateful as I gulped it down. I didn’t realise until then that I was famished, having missed dinner.

Arun and Vinod rushed in. I told them and Vivek everything that had happened, right from the beginning. Just as I finished, Divya’s parents walked in. I repeated the story in brief. They were visibly shaken.

Divya’s parents took charge. They spoke to the doctor. The police had arrived by then. I could see Dilip trembling. Vivek said, ‘Leave it to me’ and took the police officer aside for a long chat.

‘He is not filing any charges at the moment, but he will be back tomorrow to talk to Divya. If she says it was an accident, it should be alright,’ Vivek told us.

Dilip let out a deep breath. Divya’s parents thanked Vivek profusely.

‘I think you better go now,’ I said to Dilip. Divya’s parents hadn’t said anything to Dilip so far. They had been too concerned about their daughter’s wellbeing to create a scene. Dilip nodded and left immediately.

We stayed for some more time. Divya’s parents asked us to go home. They assured us that she would be alright. It was quite late. Divya’s father asked us to not mention it to Wagh or anyone else at TIRC. We left after checking up on Divya one last time. I thanked Vivek again for all his help. He just beamed and dropped us home.

‘I still can’t believe she did this,’ said Arun, as we climbed up the stairs to our apartments.

‘Yeah, I mean, is it worth giving up your life for some guy?’ asked Vinod.

‘She was not thinking right. She was too emotional. People do crazy things in love,’ I reasoned. ‘I’m not justifying what she did. It was definitely wrong. But, it was just a spur of the moment thing.’

‘Why was she carrying that powder in her pocket then?’ asked Arun.

‘Come on, we all do stupid things. She was feeling low for the past few days. She may have bought it, you know, just in case. I don’t think she planned on using it.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Arun.

‘I’m glad that she will be okay, though,’ said Vinod.

‘Hmm,’ both Arun and I nodded.

We said goodnight and headed off to our apartments.

Chapter Seventeen

I woke up late and missed my morning jog. I rushed to get ready and reach the cafeteria for breakfast. Vinod, Arun and I chatted about Divya. We decided to not tell The Tiger about what really happened. Vivek walked in and sat next to me.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked me.

I smiled and nodded. Vinod was smirking at me for some reason. I turned my attention back to Vivek as he talked and I wolfed down the delicious *upma*. I was ravenous.

He was telling us some story about Mehra which had us in splits, when Aakash walked in.

‘What’s so funny?’ he asked.

‘I was telling them about the time Mehra got me to rehearse a scene in my underwear, remember?’ said Vivek.

‘Oh yeah, that was funny,’ Tandon gave a tight smile. I didn’t say much after that.

‘Where’s Divya?’ asked Aakash.

‘She went home,’ said Arun. ‘Family emergency.’

We had decided to tell Wagh the same excuse.

As we finished, Vivek said to me, ‘I hope I can be with you today. Would that be alright?’

‘Of course,’ I said brightly.

‘Hey, you are mentioned in today’s paper,’ said Vinod, pointing at Aakash’s face in the morning paper. Man, he was handsome.

‘Aakash Tandon spotted on a date yesterday night, it says. Tandon was seen with a girl coming out of a pub. No picture of the girl though. You dog!’ guffawed Vinod.

‘Vinod, behave yourself,’ admonished Arun, not wanting to offend Tandon. Aakash reached for the paper. I felt hot around the collar. This was nauseating. I got up and walked away.

‘Wait for me,’ said Vivek and joined me. I was seething as we entered the lab, cursing Tandon and his damn good looks.

‘It must be so cool for you guys. Girls falling all over you,’ I remarked.

‘Doesn’t happen a lot with me,’ Vivek admitted candidly.

‘I seriously doubt that,’ I said.

‘No, really, I’m not that famous. But yeah, I get it. For guys like Aakash, they do fall over him. It’s crazy.’

‘Good for him.’ I rolled my eyes.

‘Well, it’s not all that good. The love and attention feels great. But fans can get insane sometimes. Some may even stalk their favourite stars, make their life miserable.’

‘Yeah, I keep hearing that.’

‘And of course, it’s not at all easy to find someone to date.’

‘Are you serious?’ I asked. That was hard to believe.

‘Well, if someone likes you, you always wonder if they like you for who you are or your screen persona or maybe your money. If you go out on a date, the whole world reads about it in the papers the next day. Even if you are

friendly with someone, it's made out to be more than that. As if actors just go on a dating spree. It makes it so much harder to be in a relationship. Don't even get me started on breakups. If you get your heart broken, people enjoy reading about it even more. It's all *masala* entertainment for them. There are entire episodes dedicated on dumb TV shows about your broken relationship and even analysis about where it all went wrong.' Vivek paused his rant.

'Wow, I never thought...'

'Well, now you know,' he said.

I didn't know what else to say. 'Let's get to work,' I said. We enjoyed each other's company. The day went by real quick.

I came back to my apartment. I went to the window and saw Aakash sitting in his apartment, talking on the phone. I thought about what Vivek had said. Had I been too quick to judge Aakash? Did I generalise about actors or had I been right this time? I was not sure at all, as I watched Aakash. He stretched back on the couch, laughing and running one hand through his hair. No wonder the girls were swooning over him, I could watch him all day.

'He really is something,' someone whispered right next to me. I jumped. I was so lost in watching Tandon that I didn't see Arun come up right next to me.

'We did knock, but I guess you didn't hear us,' said Arun, on seeing the look on my face.

'It's okay, it happens,' said Vinod, who was sitting on the couch. 'You tend to get lost in your thoughts when you are in love.'

'What?' I asked. Arun raised his eyebrows at Vinod.

'Well, maybe not love, yet...' said Vinod.

I was stunned.

'What are you talking about?' I managed.

'Come on, are you that clueless?' asked Vinod, all mysterious.

'I really don't know what you are talking about.'

'He has a crush on you, babe. The way he looks at you. I mean, he really likes you,' grinned Vinod.

I looked at Vinod, my mouth open, then at Arun. Arun smirked at me and then looked away.

‘Do you like him too?’ asked Vinod. ‘I think you do.’

‘Umm...’ I said, words failing me.

‘He is great, out of your league, of course. But nice job, Rithika. He cares about you too. Asking “are you okay” all the time. Sweet.’

‘What?’ Arun and I asked together.

‘What?’ asked Vinod.

‘Who are you talking about exactly?’ asked Arun.

‘Her future boyfriend,’ teased Vinod. ‘Vivek Naidu.’

‘Are you mad?’ I enquired, enraged.

Arun was howling with laughter. ‘Talk about being clueless,’ he said finally.

‘Who did you think it was?’ Vinod asked me.

‘I thought...’ I mumbled. ‘Nothing.’ I stopped myself.

‘Well, I think Vivek likes you. And I know quite a bit about this dating stuff, as you know.’

‘Oh boy,’ said Arun, rolling his eyes.

Arun kept smirking at me and I threw him dirty looks, as Vinod rambled on about the perks of dating a famous actor.

‘Do you know how Divya is?’ I asked, interrupting him..

‘Yes, I called her father. She is doing okay and will be discharged from the hospital soon,’ said Vinod. That changed the topic. We discussed about Divya. Arun and Vinod left after some time, leaving me to my thoughts.

Chapter Eighteen

‘Rithika, Hemant is waiting for you,’ Vinod grinned widely.

‘What? Where?’ I looked up from the microscope.

Vinod and I were the only ones in the lab. The lab attendants had left for the day. Even the interns were gone.

‘He is here. I think I’ll step out for a bit. Give you guys some privacy.’ Vinod started walking towards the exit.

‘Why? What does he want?’

‘I think he just longs to see you,’ he teased, turning back.

‘Get out.’

Vinod went out, nodding slightly to Hemant, who looked a tad nervous.

‘Hi, Hemant. How are you doing,’ I asked.

He replied that he was alright and had been busy working on his projects. The Tiger had been harassing him as well.

‘So what’s up?’ I asked, curious about his purpose of visit here. He looked distinctly uncomfortable.

‘I wanted to talk to you,’ he mumbled.

‘About what?’ I took off my gloves.

‘I... umm... wanted to tell you that I... damn it,’ he stopped, unable to talk coherently. His hands were trembling.

‘What is it? Is everything okay?’

‘I assumed, correctly it seems now, that I wouldn’t be able to talk to you. So I wrote down what I wanted to say. Here,’ he handed me a few sheets of paper.

‘My dearest,’ it began. It looked like a really long letter. I looked up at Hemant. He nodded for me to go ahead and read it.

He had written about his feelings for me, how he pined and waited for my love. It was like a badly written love poem. Being a fast reader, it didn’t take me long to skim through the contents. It was more or less of the same tripe, written in multiple ways. Towards the end, I was alarmed to read a few lines written, in what looked like blood.

It was my turn to be tongue tied. I was embarrassed by this show of emotions

and didn't know how to handle it. Hemant looked at me with anticipation.

'This is really sweet. I don't know what to say,' I said truthfully.

'I do mean all of it, especially the part at the end,' he smiled.

'You didn't have to do that. Is that your blood?'

He held up his left hand, which had a bandaged finger.

'Oh dear god,' I exclaimed.

'I am glad that I wrote it down. Vinod agreed too.'

'Did Vinod put you up to this?'

'No, it was my idea. He just told me to go ahead with it.'

It was a good thing that Vinod had gone out of the lab. I would probably have strangled him. I had to tell Hemant the truth. I was not interested in dating him. But I couldn't be cruel to him, I knew that much. I had to let him down gently.

'I appreciate what you did here for me, I really do. Any girl would be grateful. But I'm sorry, I can't reciprocate your feelings.'

He looked like he had been slapped.

'It's not your fault. I am not into dating right now,' I added hastily.

'It's okay,' he said, crestfallen. 'I somehow knew that you would not feel the same. I mean, I know I am not that good looking. And just look at you. You are way out of my league.'

'Okay, stop it. There is nothing wrong with you and I am not too good for you. I am not in that phase right now, that's all.'

'Is there someone else?' he asked.

I thought it would be good for his self esteem if I lied outright. So I hesitated for a moment and then nodded.

'But Vinod told me that you are not seeing anyone right now. I mean, I checked with him before approaching you.'

'He doesn't know yet. It is fairly new, so I haven't told anyone about it.'

'So if it doesn't work out, I still have a chance huh?' he joked.

‘Absolutely,’ I smiled.

‘I guess I should leave now.’

‘Thank you. I know it takes a lot of courage to do this. Besides, it’s always nice to know that someone loves you.’

He took the letter from my hand and left. Vinod walked in after a while.

‘What is wrong with you?’ I turned on him immediately.

‘What? Did he say something?’

‘You knew he was going to write me a letter, in blood, no less and you didn’t try to stop him?’

‘He is hopelessly in love with you. Nothing that I said would have mattered to him.’

‘So you decided to sit back and enjoy the show.’

‘Hey, why the hell is it my fault?’

‘Don’t you see what happens when you meddle in other people’s affairs?’

‘I did not meddle. He asked me stuff about you and I provided some information, that’s all. I’m sure you would have done the same if some girl asked you about me.’

I was agitated about the whole thing.

‘I had to break his heart,’ I said. I hadn’t enjoyed that part at all.

‘Oh, boo hoo. He is a grown up and will deal with it.’

‘Can you promise me something? Never try to set me up with anyone.’

‘Yeah, sure. This is what you get for trying to help your friend.’

‘Well, don’t.’

‘I heard you, loud and clear.’

We got back to work.

Chapter Nineteen

The next day, Aakash and Vivek walked in while we were having breakfast.. Gupta and Mehra were with them. Vivek plonked himself next to me. I stole glances at Aakash as he chatted with Mehra and Gupta. I caught him looking at us a few times.

‘I chatted with Aisha last night,’ said Gupta, looking at all of us. ‘I told her about all the fun we are having here. She said she was really jealous. She wanted to visit too.’

‘Who is Aisha?’ I asked.

‘Aisha Banerjee, the heroine, dumbass,’ Vinod admonished me.

‘Oh,’ I said, losing interest.

‘Why don’t you ask her to come?’ asked Tandon.

‘What?’ asked Gupta.

‘You know, ask Aisha to come here. She could see it for herself,’ replied Tandon.

‘Well, she is free today. Let me see,’ said Gupta, whipping out his phone.

‘Oh, I hope she comes. She is so gorgeous,’ said Vinod, with a dreamy look in his eyes.

‘Not to mention sexy,’ sneered Tandon. Vinod nodded vigorously.

‘She will be here in an hour,’ said Gupta, ending the call.

‘Oh my god,’ screamed Vinod, startling me and causing me to almost drop my spoon.

‘Please introduce us,’ Vinod turned to Tandon.

‘Of course,’ smiled Tandon.

Vinod didn’t touch his food after that, going into a trance.

Aisha came after an hour. I was busy with work. Vinod went down to the reception along with the film crew to receive her. He didn’t return to the lab.

‘Have you seen Vinod?’ I asked Arun as we walked down to the cafeteria for lunch.

‘Still with the actors, I guess,’ replied Arun.

‘Great, the lab was very quiet, I got a lot of work done,’ I chuckled.

‘Hey guys,’ yelled Vivek, stopping us in the corridor. The rest of the film crew was behind him, including the new arrival, Aisha. Vinod was with them too. He was walking next to Aisha, talking excitedly. Wow, she is really beautiful, I thought, as I looked at Aisha. I saw some of our guys passing by staring at her, their mouths open. No one so good looking had stepped on to our campus for a long time. I tried to act cool as they neared us.

‘These are the guys I told you about,’ said Mehra and introduced us to Aisha. She gave us a warm smile as she shook our hands. Vinod didn’t even glance at us. He only had eyes for her and missed the look of contempt I gave him.

‘You guys have a really nice place here,’ said Aisha. ‘Not to mention very nice people,’ she added, smiling at Vinod.

‘Thank you,’ said Arun and proceeded for small talk.

I was having trouble talking. Everyone else was chatting. I was looking at Aakash and Aisha.

‘I wish I could have stayed here too,’ I could hear Aisha saying.

‘It’s entirely our loss,’ replied Vinod.

I didn’t hear anything after that. Things were happening in slow motion. I could see everyone laughing and talking. Aakash and Vinod were next to Aisha, clearly fawning over her. Aisha laughed at something Aakash said and touched his arm. He touched her waist slightly. I just snapped out of my daze.

‘Excuse me,’ I said, to no one in particular and started to walk away.

‘I thought we were going for lunch,’ said Arun.

‘You guys go on ahead. I might take a while,’ I said and hurried back to my lab, before Arun could say anything further. I did not want to witness this idiocy any more. I waited in my lab and went for lunch after some time. I did not leave my lab all day.

I was so lost in my work, muttering abuses against a certain actor intermittently, that I didn’t even notice The Tiger come in to my lab. He waved at me as I looked up. Was I in trouble, I wondered, as I stopped what I was doing and walked towards him.

‘What are you doing?’ he began.

‘Working,’ I replied matter of factly.

‘Well, I can see that. If you remember, I had put you in charge of showing our guests around and assist them in every way,’ he said.

‘I did as you asked me,’ I said.

‘It was not for a day, Rithika. It is for the entire duration of their stay,’ he pointed out.

‘Well, Arun and Vinod are with them, aren’t they?’ I countered.

‘I had asked all four of you.’

‘I had more important things to do than escort a group of actors around campus,’ I said hotly.

‘Oh really? And you think the rest of us are working on unimportant stuff. Your research is the only thing worth doing?’

When did this become about him against me?

‘I did not mean...’ I began to explain.

‘I don’t want to hear another word. This is important for TIRC. You will do exactly as I instructed.’

His voice had gone all low and dangerous. This was The Tiger at his intimidating best.

‘Do you understand?’ he asked.

I gave him the dirtiest look I could muster and then I reluctantly nodded.

‘Now I want you to join us, if it’s not too much trouble,’ he said and marched out. I was fuming by now and took a few moments to compose myself before I followed him. They were gathered in one of the larger conference rooms. It was like a party. Quite a few of our staff were there along with the film crew. Vinod and Aakash were sitting next to Aisha. Everyone was eating and talking.

‘I thought you were busy,’ said Arun.

‘No, The Tiger thinks otherwise,’ I said. ‘This stupid party is more important than my research. Hooray for science.’

‘Here, have a *samosa*,’ said Arun, handing me one. ‘Why don’t you sit down?’

‘Has he left her side for one second?’ I asked.

‘Who?’ asked Arun.

‘Vinod, of course,’ I said.

‘Oh, him. Yeah, this is his moment of glory. The rest of us are dead to him.’

‘How can someone be so annoying? Just following a girl around like that. Like some kind of slave. Laughing, flirting, touching. It’s so pathetic.’

‘Okay, calm down. Why are you getting so worked up? You’ve known him for years. This is typical behaviour.’

‘Well, I just think...’

The Tiger screamed my name at that moment and I was forced to join him and the others. He was saying something good about me, for a change. Aisha smiled at me. I smiled back and mumbled something. I stood there for a few minutes while the others rambled on. I glanced at Tandon, but he was talking to The Tiger and Mehra. When I thought it was safe to move away, I excused myself and went to get a drink.

I needed something strong, but I could see only coffee and juice. I poured out some coffee, still fuming. I couldn’t understand why. I was really confused at my own behaviour.

‘Are you alright?’ Aakash had materialised by my side. It was the first time in the day that he had even acknowledged my presence.

‘Oh yeah, yeah,’ I said, pretending to be cheerful.

‘You seem awfully quiet today.’

‘Oh, a few problems with my project. Just thinking about it.’

‘I hope they get resolved soon.’

‘Thanks. So, Aisha’s really cool, huh?’ I tried to ask as normally as possible.

‘Yeah, she is. She is great fun to work with.’

‘I bet.’

‘She loved this place and you guys.’

‘Great.’

‘She wants to stay back with us.’

‘That’s really... umm, great.’ I was running out of words apparently.

‘But she can’t. She has a busy schedule.’

‘Of course. That’s too bad though.’

‘Are you sure you’re alright?’

‘Yes, I am. The coffee’s good, huh?’

‘Yeah. Well, excuse me,’ said Aakash and returned to the group.

‘Are you alright?’ asked Arun, as he joined me.

‘Why is everyone asking me that? There is nothing wrong with me, okay?’ I said.

‘Fine, relax,’ said Arun.

‘I want to wring his bloody neck.’

‘Will you leave Vinod alone?’

‘Not him. I mean, The Tiger. He had no business forcing me to come here.’

Arun nodded. ‘Yes, but you know how he is.’

The party went on. Aisha left after saying goodbye to everyone, leaving Vinod heartbroken.

Chapter Twenty

‘Why couldn’t she stay for some more time?’ Vinod asked gloomily. He had been rambling on about how much he missed Aisha, how her beauty was divine and such crap for the past hour, as we sat in my apartment. Even Arun was beginning to get annoyed.

‘Divya is home guys,’ I said. ‘Look.’ I showed them her message. That changed the topic. I felt happy at this bit of good news, particularly after a day filled with angst. Somehow I couldn’t sit still anymore.

‘I’m going for a walk,’ I said and went out. It was quiet as I walked around the campus. I tried to make sense about all that I had felt during the day. What was going on with me? I was supposed to be smart, but I couldn’t

figure it out the plethora of emotions that I was feeling at the moment.

I moved towards one of the sea facing benches, my favourite one. But there was someone sitting there already. He saw me before I could turn around.

‘I was hoping I’d run into you here,’ said Aakash.

‘I was hoping I wouldn’t,’ I muttered in a low voice, almost to myself.

‘Lovely night for a walk, isn’t it? I couldn’t sleep.’

‘Oh?’

‘How about you? What are you doing here at this hour?’

‘Couldn’t sleep,’ I grimaced.

‘What a day, huh?’

‘Yeah, I can imagine what it’s like on the sets.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, the camaraderie between the two of you was delightful.’ I couldn’t keep out the sarcasm from my voice.

‘Do you mean, Aisha and me?’

‘Of course, who else would have such... chemistry?’

‘Oh, I don’t know, some might say, Vivek and you.’

I was speechless, but not for long. I couldn’t believe he had said that.

‘Well, that’s completely different,’ I said. ‘We don’t flirt, we’re friendly.’

‘So are we.’

I snorted. This guy was unbelievable.

‘Fine, enjoy the rest of your evening. Good night,’ I said and turned to walk away. I didn’t want to argue with him.

‘Why did you tell me that we should have a professional relation and then get all flirty with Vivek?’ asked Tandon. I turned to face him, furious. This guy could be direct as hell.

‘I did not get flirty with him. There’s a reason why I’m so nice to him. Not that it’s any of your business.’

Aakash had a sceptical look on his face.

I continued, 'He helped me, when I needed it. No questions asked.' I told him about what had happened with Divya and the part Vivek played in getting her medical attention.

'He didn't say anything about it,' said Aakash.

'It's not something that he could. Divya's father asked us not to tell anyone.'

'I understand.' He asked about Divya's health and I told him that Divya was fine now.

'So we really are just friends. Vivek and me,' I said. I wasn't sure why I was explaining this again to Tandon.

'So are Aisha and me. I called her here today, hoping that...'

He looked at me, in a strange way. Actually, he stared at me for a bit too long.

'Hoping what?' I asked. I didn't get why he was being so mysterious.

'Nothing.'

'What? Tell me.'

'Hoping that Vinod gets to finally meet her,' said Aakash, smiling.

Damn, those dimples. I felt weak in my knees.

'He had a great time,' I agreed. 'Although I'm sure he is disappointed that she didn't want to marry him.'

We both burst out laughing.

'Are you sure about that professional relation thing?' asked Aakash.

I didn't know what to say.

'We had fun that day,' he said softly. I nodded. That was true.

'We could be friends,' I agreed and looked into his eyes.

'So, how about going out for a movie tomorrow night?' he asked.

'A movie?'

'Yeah, you know, the thing which pays my bills.'

I grinned.

‘Okay, but it’s not a date,’ I clarified.

‘Of course not,’ he said. ‘Two friends, hanging out.’

‘Cool.’

‘Cool.’

I said goodnight to him and went up to my apartment, thinking about all that had happened that day.

Chapter Twenty-One

I didn't know if I was doing the right thing, but it was just a movie after all. It would be disastrous to be anything more than friends with Tandon. I was so not cut out to date a movie star. Nothing good would come of it. It is not a date, I reminded myself. I decided not to think about it too much.

Vinod was quiet during breakfast, being the forlorn lover. It was funny and

cute. Of course, Arun and I didn't miss the opportunity to give him a hard time. Aakash and Vivek joined us as we were shaking with laughter.

‘What's so funny?’ asked Aakash.

‘Nothing,’ said Vinod, looking pointedly at us. This caused us to laugh even more.

‘He's pining for Aisha,’ smirked Arun.

‘Really?’ asked Aakash.

‘Interesting,’ smiled Vivek, as he buttered his toast.

‘I don't think I will ever be able to date a normal girl again,’ Vinod blurted out suddenly.

‘That is deep, dude,’ mocked Arun, placing a hand over his heart.

‘Dude, you didn’t date her, okay? Get over it,’ I said.

‘Well, I know I didn’t date her, but I can’t just forget her,’ said Vinod.

‘Oh, for god’s sake,’ I said, rolling my eyes.

‘Don’t worry about him. It’s Friday. He will have a date by the end of the day,’ said Arun.

Vinod gave him a scathing look.

‘Speaking of which, what are you doing tonight?’ Arun asked me.

‘Why?’ I asked, involuntarily glancing at Aakash.

‘I’m not going home this weekend. My parents are on a camping trip. So I thought we might do something. Maybe watch a movie or a play?’

‘Umm, sorry, I can’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’ve got other plans.’

I could see Aakash smiling into his tea cup.

‘Oh?’ said Arun. ‘Like what?’

‘Yeah, I’m going out with some of my school friends. Maybe we can go out tomorrow night?’ I offered.

‘It’s alright. We’ll see about tomorrow. Have a good time.’

I didn’t know why I didn’t want to say that I was going out with Tandon. It was not a date, after all. But somehow, I didn’t feel right mentioning it to the others.

“*Pick you up at 7?*” Aakash’s message beeped on my phone as I was working in my lab. My heart skipped a beat.

“OK,” I replied, after thinking a lot and not coming up with any witty retort. I lost my focus for some time, but pushed myself to concentrate on work. Aakash and Vivek were in the physics lab. Vinod was deep in thought about Aisha. So no one bugged me about my lack of attention.

I ran out of the lab at five. As I walked back to my apartment, I thought about what to wear. Man, I’m turning into Divya. Stop it, I scolded myself. I decided to wear a simple wine coloured dress, which fell just below my knees.

It was seven, no sign of Aakash. He was mocking you, a voice inside me said. What’s the point, he has nothing to gain, I countered. Five minutes passed. Each minute felt like an hour. I went to the window. His apartment was dark. My phone rang. It was Aakash.

‘I’m waiting at the gate,’ he said. ‘Should I come up to your apartment?’

‘No, don’t,’ I said immediately, mortified at the sight of anyone seeing him at my apartment. ‘I’ll be right down.’

Calm down, I said to myself, and took a deep breath, as I walked down to the gate. He was waiting near his car. He wore a checked gray shirt and jeans.

‘You look nice,’ he said, as I reached him.

‘Thanks. So do you,’ I replied. He held the car door open for me.

‘So which movie are we watching?’ I asked, as we drove off.

‘Well, it’s a Ukrainian film about war refugees, with subtitles of course,’ he said.

‘Oh, wonderful,’ I grimaced at the thought of spending the next couple of hours trying to stay awake while being bored out of my wits.

Aakash laughed. 'That's not what we are watching,' he continued laughing. 'Sorry.'

'You are mean,' I said. 'So what *are* we watching?'

'It's a Hindi film, directed by Manish Jain.'

'Oh. I've read about him. He makes these arty, indie films, right?'

'Well, yeah. But his films are never boring.'

'I've never seen any of his films. Actually, I must confess, I haven't watched a Hindi film in years. I've caught bits and pieces on TV. Haven't really managed to sit through an entire film though.'

'We'll have to see about that then.'

'What's this one about?'

'It's a dark love story.'

'Aren't they all?'

Aakash guffawed. 'We've almost reached.'

As we got out of the car, he put on a cap and said, 'The movie's already started.'

'What?'

'Well, it's a drawback of being a celebrity. I can't enter a movie hall with everyone looking at me. So I have to creep in after the movie has started.'

'That's crazy.'

'No, I have to do it. Every single time. And I have to leave before everyone else too.'

'So that's why you're wearing a cap,' I noted.

'What did you think? Lack of fashion sense?' Aakash shook his head.

We got inside the hall and settled in.

I tried to focus on what was happening on the big screen, but somehow I was very conscious of my surroundings, especially the handsome movie star right next to me.

What are we doing here? I wondered. More specifically, what is *he* doing

here? He could be anywhere at the moment, but he chose to be with me. What does it mean? Nothing, you idiot, another voice said. He just likes your company. As a friend, nothing more.

I jumped as Aakash's hand lightly brushed mine on the armrest. That was deliberate, the voice in my head said. Maybe he wants to hold your hand. Don't behave like a loser, be cool.

I didn't catch most of the first half of the film, what with the voices bickering in my head and Aakash's hand touching mine.

'Popcorn?' he asked me, during the interval. I politely declined.

The dark love story continued. There was an intense lovemaking scene a few minutes after the interval. Great, just what I needed. I saw Aakash watching the scene calmly. I moved my hand to my lap. The scene was really hot. For a moment, I imagined it was Aakash and me up there, on the screen. He was kissing me and was all over me.

Whoa, where did that come from? I thought as the next scene began. I was really messed up. I tried to focus on the movie and not on what had just flashed through my dirty mind. It was hopeless really. I had to admit, to myself at least, that I was attracted to Aakash.

The movie was coming to an end. Aakash gestured towards the exit. I guessed we had to leave before the crowd realised there was a star seated amongst them. I felt Aakash's hand at the small of my back guiding me through the dark, sending little waves of pleasure through my body.

Chapter Twenty-Two

‘So did you enjoy the movie?’ Aakash asked me, as we sat in his car.

Well, to be honest, I hadn’t paid much attention to most of it.

‘It was nice,’ I said. That was vague enough.

‘Nice? You actually enjoyed a Bollywood movie?’

‘It wasn’t a typical Bollywood *masala* film,’ I laughed.

‘I agree. I thought you would like it.’

I was glad that Aakash didn’t ask me to review the film further. It was almost ten.

‘Where are we going?’ I asked.

‘For dinner.’

‘Where?’

‘You’ll see.’

We came to a hotel near the beach. We rode the elevator right to the top. The roof top restaurant had a breathtaking view of the beach. I rushed to the table nearest the edge.

‘This is fantastic,’ I said. I didn’t believe such a place existed in Mumbai.

I looked around at the beach and the stars in the sky. I almost forgot that I was here with someone. I turned around to see Aakash looking at me. There was no one else around except the restaurant staff. We had the place to ourselves.

‘Please sit,’ he waved.

I sat on the red cushioned couch facing the beach. Aakash slid in beside me. It was cosy.

‘What a beautiful view,’ I remarked.

‘Hmm.’

‘I could just look up at the stars all night. It’s so quiet too.’

We could hear the splashing of the waves. The waiter brought our food and poured out some champagne.

‘I took the liberty of ordering beforehand. I hope you don’t mind,’ said Aakash.

‘Of course not. I take a long time to order anyway.’

I took a sip of the champagne.

‘And was it your idea to have no one else around?’ I continued.

‘I hope you don’t mind that too. I thought it would be better if no one stared at us all the time.’

‘Or wrote about your escapades for the morning paper.’

‘Yeah, that too,’ he laughed.

‘Do people bother you for autographs and selfies while you are out?’

‘They do come up to me a lot. In fact, I try to indulge my fans whenever I can, but it can get a bit too much. Sometimes all you want is a peaceful meal and some privacy.’

‘But if you refuse, they will assume you are arrogant.’

‘Exactly, that does happen. Some guys don’t get that we are humans too. It gets difficult for family or friends who are with us.’

That wasn’t fair, I thought. We ate in silence for some time.

‘So do you come here often?’ I asked.

‘Hmm. I love this place.’

I imagined him coming here with his various girlfriends, sitting right where we were at the moment. I stiffened at the thought and mentally kicked myself for asking.

‘I come here with friends,’ said Aakash, as if reading my mind. ‘Sometimes, also by myself. Just for the view.’

He placed his arm on the couch around me. I sat up straight. His fingers brushed my shoulder. Not knowing what to do, I looked up at the stars.

‘It’s so clear. We can see them shining brightly. I like this,’ I remarked.

‘I like... spending time with you,’ said Aakash softly. His arm had slipped onto my shoulder now.

I looked down, into his deep dark eyes. He was so close I could smell his

perfume. I didn't move. Oh, those lips, I so wanted him to kiss me. I forgot all about being only friends at that moment.

He looked at me and moved his head closer. I closed my eyes. I felt his hand gently touch my cheek.

'Rithika,' he whispered.

'Yes,' I croaked and opened my eyes.

'It's getting late.'

He looked so strikingly handsome.

'We should probably go,' I said, coming to my senses and got to my feet.

I sat in silence on the way home, as soft music played in the car. I couldn't believe all that had happened that night. I glanced at Aakash, who seemed to be lost in his thoughts as well.

'I had a good time,' I said. 'Thank you.'

'So did I. Goodnight, Dr Menon,' he smiled, as he dropped me off to my apartment.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I slept in late the next day.

‘So how did it go last night?’ Arun asked me, as we relaxed watching TV in my apartment. Vinod had gone home that weekend.

‘Huh?’

‘Weren’t you meeting up with your school friends?’

‘Oh that. It went well. We saw a movie and then headed out for dinner.’

‘You didn’t tell me your school friend was such a big star.’

‘What?’

‘Oh come on, I saw you two.’

‘Who?’ I didn’t want to admit it.

‘Aakash and you,’ Arun was not letting it go easily.

I gasped.

‘Why are you hiding this from me?’ asked Arun.

‘There’s nothing to hide.’ I didn’t meet his eyes.

‘Really?’

I gave up. I told Arun everything.

‘Nice,’ he whistled as I ended.

‘It has to be between just the two of us,’ I said even though I knew he would not blab to anyone. It was not his style. Arun nodded.

‘So the superstar has a thing for nerds. Who knew?’ he teased me.

‘Oh, shut up.’

‘But why didn’t he kiss you?’

‘Perhaps, because we had agreed it was not going to be a date.’ I could not think of any other reason.

‘Or maybe he didn’t want to come across as being desperate.’

‘Maybe.’

‘There are so many fan girls lusting after him. I doubt he could be labelled as desperate.’

‘No, he is such a gentleman.’

‘Look who’s gushing now.’

I just smiled and shook my head.

The weekend passed by in a blur. I didn’t see Aakash around. I guessed he was busy with his other commitments.

Divya was back in her apartment on Sunday. She seemed normal, she didn’t mention anything about the unfortunate incident. We all had decided to not mention it either. I was glad that she was okay. I updated her on the work front.

‘It’s probably our last week here,’ announced Vivek as we had our Monday morning breakfast.

‘Oh?’ I asked. That was disappointing.

‘Yeah, I heard Mehra and Gupta discussing it.’

I didn’t want them to go, didn’t want *him* to go, but I couldn’t say anything.

‘I want to work with you today,’ Aakash said to me.

‘I want to spend all my remaining time here with you,’ he said, as we entered my lab. I didn’t look at him.

We talked for hours as I worked. It was like we knew each other for ages. He could really make me laugh as well. I tried not to think about the fact that he was leaving in a few days.

I came back to my apartment and watched Aakash through my window, doing push-ups in his apartment.

‘How about a tennis match tonight?’ Vivek asked us the next day, amidst the morning chatter.

‘Yeah, I’m in,’ Aakash chimed in.

‘Sorry guys, I can’t,’ I said. ‘It’s my parents’ wedding anniversary tonight. I have to go home. And these guys can’t join either. You promised to come, remember?’

Arun, Vinod and Divya groaned collectively.

‘Rithika, your father will eat our brains,’ complained Vinod.

‘I know. But you guys promised. There’s free food,’ I patted his arm.

‘Maybe we can play tomorrow night,’ said Vivek.

‘Sure. Hey guys, why don’t you join us tonight?’ Vinod blurted out.

‘What?’ asked Vivek.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘You know, they can join at your house,’ Vinod said to me, ignoring my murderous looks.

I didn’t want to come off as rude, so I said, ‘Yeah sure, you guys can come. If you wish. I’m sure you have better things to do.’

‘Actually, I’m free tonight,’ said Vivek. ‘Are you sure you want us to come?’

‘Of course,’ I said, putting on a fake smile.

‘Your folks won’t mind?’

‘Not at all.’

‘Fine, I’ll come too,’ said Aakash.

Oh great, I groaned, cursing Vinod mentally.

Chapter Twenty-Four

We set off for my house in Aakash's and Vivek's cars. Arun and I were with Aakash, Vinod and Divya with Vivek.

'So I know that you have a brother who is an engineer, your parents stay here, but you stay at TIRC campus, what else do I need to know?' asked Aakash.

'Her parents are doctors,' Arun informed him. 'Her father is a cardiologist and her mother is a paediatrician. They are among the top doctors in Mumbai.'

'She didn't mention that,' said Aakash, turning to me with an accusing look.

'And her brother is not an ordinary engineer, he is a gold medallist from IIT-Bombay,' finished Arun.

'Wow, a family of geniuses,' remarked Aakash. 'Is that all?'

'Wait till you meet them,' smirked Arun.

Aakash raised his eyebrows questioningly at me. I chose to ignore him. He would know soon enough.

'How come you didn't ride with your boyfriend?' Vinod teased me, as soon as we got off from our cars.

'Oh, she did,' Arun mouthed wordlessly.

My parents owned a quaint little cottage, in the suburbs. They wanted to be away from the hustle and bustle of the city.

'Nice place,' said Vivek, as we knocked on the door.

My mother opened the door and welcomed us. The rest of the guests were still to arrive. My brother Rohit came and hugged me as we entered the living room.

'I know these guys, of course, but I don't think I've met these two,' said Rohit, pointing at Aakash and Vivek.

Vinod and Divya guffawed, as I introduced Aakash and Vivek to my brother.

'You look familiar,' said Rohit.

'They are actors,' I said.

‘Who?’ asked my father who had joined us now. I introduced them to my father as well.

‘So you guys are actors?’ asked my dad.

Aakash and Vivek nodded gravely.

‘Why?’ asked Dad.

‘Because we were really bad at studies,’ joked Vivek.

‘I assumed as much,’ said Dad.

Oh hell, I cursed inward.

‘So, you guys do theatre or TV or what?’ asked Rohit. He was not helping.

‘Well, movies mainly,’ said Aakash, pokerfaced.

‘Oh nice, anything I might have seen?’ Rohit went on.

‘Well, we are still struggling, you know,’ said Vivek.

‘Oh, I’m sure it will work out eventually,’ Rohit assured him.

‘We’re counting on it,’ nodded Vivek.

Dad excused himself to join my mother.

‘Why are they laughing?’ asked Rohit, pointing at Divya and Vinod.

‘Is IIT on another planet?’ asked Divya.

On seeing Rohit’s confused look, Vinod fished out his phone and googled “Aakash Tandon” and shoved it under Rohit’s nose.

‘You seem to be famous,’ remarked Rohit.

‘Dude, he is one of the hottest stars in Bollywood today,’ said Divya. ‘How can you not know?’

‘Check Vivek as well,’ Vinod told Rohit.

‘No, I get it. Both are famous actors. I did say they look familiar. Sorry guys, I’m not into Bollywood,’ said Rohit.

‘Runs in the family, I guess,’ said Aakash, smiling at me.

‘Yeah, my dad is not a big fan either,’ said Rohit, completely clueless.

My parents joined us as we sat down for dinner. A few of their friends had

come in.

‘Oh my god, is that who I think it is?’ said Mrs Patil, one of my Mom’s friends as soon as she spotted Aakash. She rushed towards him and gushed saying, ‘I’m such a big fan’ and such things. She shook hands with both Aakash and Vivek.

‘I didn’t know you knew them. Gosh, you should have told us they were going to be here. Anyway, it turned out to be such a nice surprise,’ she continued, addressing my parents now.

My parents looked all confused as the other guests too started chatting with the stars.

‘I thought they were struggling actors,’ said Dad.

‘Apparently not,’ said Rohit.

As we all settled down, people started asking them about their life, current movies and such fan stuff. They answered the questions patiently.

‘So what did you study?’ asked Dad.

‘Arts and drama,’ replied Aakash.

‘I studied engineering, but I wasn’t any good,’ said Vivek.

I could see Dad wince. I couldn’t wait for dinner to be over. I gave an apologetic look to Aakash, who merely smiled back.

‘You know, I was always a big fan of Aakash’s movies,’ said Mrs Patil. ‘But I became an even bigger fan of his, when I learnt of all the charity work he does.’

She looked like she would like nothing better than to fall into Aakash’s arms. For once, Aakash looked really embarrassed.

‘It’s nothing,’ he shrugged it off.

‘No, he does so much,’ she persisted. ‘For the education of underprivileged girl children. I also read about his support for farmers in drought hit areas.’

‘It’s true,’ added Vivek. ‘Aakash doesn’t like to talk about it. But he really donates his time and money for noble causes like these. I have personally witnessed it.’

My respect for him grew as I learnt this fact about him. His affairs were

splashed all over for the general public to consume, but this aspect of his was lesser known.

‘Is it okay if I want to see your room?’ Aakash asked me, as the guests talked with each other after dinner. I was taken aback at this.

‘It’s fine if you don’t want to,’ he said.

‘No, come on, but we will have to be quick,’ I said, taking him upstairs.

‘It’s just like I imagined,’ he said, as we entered my room. There were several books and pictures all around. He sat down on the bed.

Oh my god, Aakash Tandon was in my room, on my bed. The thought made me giggle.

‘What’s so funny?’ he asked.

‘Nothing. It’s just weird, you being here, that’s all.’ I sat down next to him.

‘Is it?’

‘Who would have thought this would happen, even a few days back?’

‘Yes, it is funny how things work out.’ He tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. My skin burned at his touch. We heard footsteps outside. He quickly removed his hand from my face and got up. I asked him to go ahead, as I needed a moment alone to slow down my heartbeat. I sat there for about five minutes and was about to leave when Dad walked in.

‘Are you dating him?’ he asked me directly.

‘Who?’ I asked.

‘Either of them, the actors,’ he said.

‘No, of course not.’

‘Then what are they doing here?’

‘They are my friends, like the rest.’

Dad looked at me for a moment, before saying ‘Alright’.

Rohit came into the room as Dad left.

‘What were you two whispering about?’

‘Nothing.’

‘He’s nice.’

‘Who?’

‘Aakash Tandon.’

‘So?’

‘I like him.’

‘Whatever.’

‘You two would make a good pair.’

‘What is wrong with everyone?’ I was exasperated.

‘Why? Did I say something wrong?’

‘First Dad and now you. I’m not dating Aakash or Vivek, okay?’

‘I know that. I’m not talking about Vivek. But I think I saw something between Aakash and you.’

‘There’s nothing between us,’ I said sharply.

‘Alright, I must be mistaken then. Don’t bite my head off.’

He patted my head and left.

Chapter Twenty-Five

‘I had a great time,’ said Aakash, as Arun, he and I returned home in his car. ‘Your family is really nice.’

Arun was riding shotgun. Aakash and I were in the backseat.

‘I’m sorry they are not like other people. They don’t know much about Hindi movies,’ I said.

‘Thank God they are not like everyone else. It’s refreshing actually. I enjoyed myself. But you didn’t tell me everyone in your family is a genius.’

‘They are not. They... we, are just normal middle class people,’ I said, embarrassed.

‘Yeah, normal, highly intelligent and successful.’

We continued chatting as he asked more about my family. As we reached TIRC, Arun said goodnight and left us alone.

Aakash turned to look at me. I felt nervous all of a sudden.

‘Did I tell you I like your family?’

‘Yes, several times,’ I laughed.

‘Did I tell you how much I like *you*?’

That stopped my laughter. I was shell shocked.

‘I really like you,’ he said softly. ‘Right from the first day when you were dishing my profession actually,’ he laughed now.

I just looked into his eyes. Was this really happening?

‘Say something,’ he said.

‘Thank you. I never thought that someone like you could like, you know, someone like me.’

‘Is that all?’ he whispered.

‘I... like you too,’ I mumbled.

‘Do you?’

You have no idea, I thought. I nodded.

‘Well, that’s good enough, for now,’ he said and leaned in. I was too shocked to move. He gave me a light peck on my cheek and said ‘good night’. I could feel my cheek burning as I got out of the car. I walked to my apartment in a daze. What just happened here, my heart was beating rapidly again.

I sat down on the couch and tried to think clearly. But I couldn’t. My head was a mess. My skin was prickling all over. I couldn’t sit still. I rushed to the window. Aakash’s apartment was dark, where was he? I sat back disappointed. I so wanted to look at him. I was jolted from my reverie by a knock on the door. Damn, it must be Arun, I thought, come over to tease me.

I opened the door to find Aakash standing there.

‘Hi,’ I managed.

‘Can I come in?’

I shut the door after he came in. I wondered what he was doing here.

‘I didn’t go up to my place. I couldn’t.’

When I didn't comment, he continued, 'I didn't wish you a proper goodnight.'

'Oh?' I asked.

He came towards me and pushed me up against the door. He held me in this way and looked deep in my eyes. He smelled so good. Oh god, I thought my heart would burst with all the exhilaration. I wanted to kiss him. Do it, I told myself.

I kissed him on the right cheek. I looked back in his eyes, they were blazing. Before I could do anything else, he bent down and kissed me, right on my lips. The kiss lasted for a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity.

He let me go. I couldn't meet his eyes this time.

'Goodnight,' he whispered. I whispered it back. He left, leaving me a quivering mess. I slumped on to the couch.

The remaining days passed by in a blur. Neither of us mentioned the kiss. But we spent all our time together, in the lab, playing tennis or chess in the evenings. All of us wanted to make the most of it.

'Today is the last day,' said Vivek on Friday morning. 'We should have a party.'

'We will be coming back to shoot, of course,' added Aakash.

'But it will probably not be the same,' said Vinod. 'What with the huge crew and all. You guys may not have time for us.'

'It won't be like that,' Vivek reassured him.

'But the party sounds like a fun idea,' said Divya. 'Let me check with The Tiger.'

Divya arranged everything with our help of course. The TIRC auditorium was packed to capacity in the evening. Mehra and Gupta made formal speeches thanking all of us. Aakash and Vivek brought the house down with their casual ones. The Tiger handed them mementoes. Then there was music, food and celebrations.

I danced with Aakash. I was a fair dancer, but I was very nervous. Aakash was really good, of course. But he made me feel comfortable.

As a peppy number started, I screamed, 'Hey, I know that song. Awesome!'

‘You do?’ asked Aakash, surprised.

‘I’ve heard it somewhere.’

‘It’s from one of my films,’ he beamed.

‘Oh, show me your moves then. I’ll follow you.’

He twirled me around rapidly, caught my waist and pulled me closer. Has he lost it, I wondered. But before I could react, he twirled me again. We danced this way for the entire duration. Far and near, far and near again. It was wonderful.

‘May I have the pleasure of this dance?’ asked Vivek, as the next song began. Vivek was a good dancer too, but nowhere in Aakash’s league, I noticed. Vinod winked at me and gave a thumbs-up as he passed us. Oh perfect, I groaned.

The evening ended. Soon it was time for them to leave.

‘Call me,’ Aakash whispered to me, as we said our goodbyes.

I lay awake that night, thinking of all that happened in these past days. It seemed like a dream. I already missed Aakash.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It was our third date after he had left our campus. We were in his car, parked near the beach. He had sent his driver away.

‘So,’ Aakash, said, in between kissing me, ‘what are you doing this Saturday?’

I couldn't say anything. I was barely conscious of what was going on. He was holding me tight and kissing me, that's all I knew. "Sucking face" was what Vinod would say, if he could see us now.

'Dr Menon?' he prodded.

I stopped kissing him and tried to move away, but he held me firmly in place.

'I don't know,' I said. 'No plans yet. Why?'

'Well,' he looked sheepish.

'What is it?'

'It's my birthday. And I want to spend it with you,' he said.

'What? Why didn't you tell me before?'

'I am telling you now. So, what do you think?'

'Sure. It's your day. We'll do anything you want.'

'Anything?' he smirked.

I turned red in the face and mumbled, 'Not *anything*,' as he laughed hard.

'So it's a date,' he said.

I didn't know what to get Aakash for his birthday. He had pretty much everything. I consulted Arun, who told me about a "greatest dancers in the world" video collection, which had come out recently. I thought that would be appropriate.

Aakash had to shoot for an ad during the day, so he picked me up in the evening. We had dinner at a fancy restaurant. I handed over the gift, which he loved and called it thoughtful. Post dinner, we headed to a night club, where we met up with some of his friends. A couple of them worked in the film industry, but they were not actors. The rest of them were regular people, like me. I liked that. And soon enough, we were all hanging out like a bunch of old friends.

'She's really smart, dude,' said Sahil, one of Aakash's friends, as I cracked some wise joke, making everyone laugh.

'Do not let this one go,' he said to Aakash, who raised his glass and winked at me. As my face turned red, despite knowing it was meant as a joke, Aakash pulled me to the dance floor.

This time, I was not worried about matching his dance steps. It was a slow number and we were just swaying to the rhythm. He held me close, as we danced, his hand on my back. His scent was so intoxicating, I felt like I was losing control of my senses. I thought I would just kiss him right there. But I didn't.

'Are you okay?' he asked, almost on cue. I nodded.

'Want to go some place private?' he whispered in my ear. I gulped. 'Come on,' he said, taking my hand, making the decision for me. We said goodbye to his friends and headed out.

'Where are we going?' I asked him in the car.

'To my house,' he smiled and kissed my cheek lightly.

What, I shivered. It was past midnight. What was I getting into, I wondered. Did I really want to go this far so soon?

'Relax. I know it's late. But I can drop you home whenever you want,' he assured me.

We reached his building and took the elevator to the top floor. His apartment was a sea facing penthouse, the view was absolutely fabulous.

'What is with you and the sea, huh?' I asked.

He laughed. 'Yeah, some kind of weird connection, I guess.'

We sat on the plush couch with the drinks that Aakash poured out. We chatted and before I knew it, he was kissing me. This time, it was very passionate. I was scared and excited about where it could lead to. He gently caressed my back, making me moan. His hand grazed my thigh. I jumped as if burnt.

'What is it?' he asked.

'I thought I heard a noise,' I said, more to cover my embarrassment than anything else. Actually, I had heard a faint noise. But at this stage, I wasn't sure if I was imagining things.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes,' I said and got up, to catch my breath.

'But no one else is here. It's just the two of us.'

‘Let me check.’

His apartment had many rooms. I opened the doors one by one. There was nothing but the wind. As I opened the door to one of the bedrooms, I almost passed out.

On the king sized bed was strewn a great quantity of rose petals. And among them, lay a beautiful woman, clad only in her lingerie. I recognised her from the pictures I had seen on the internet. She was none other than Aditi Sinha, his rumoured last girlfriend, the ex-Miss India.

I cried out in shock. She seemed indifferent as she stared at me and then beyond.

‘What are you doing here?’ I could hear Aakash beside me, yelling at her. I didn’t know what the hell was going on anymore. I had been a fool not to see it after all. As tears started pouring down my face, I grabbed my purse and ran.

‘No wait, Rithika please,’ I could hear Aakash plead. Aditi and he were shouting at each other now. I didn’t say a word to him, I couldn’t. I made a dash for the door and the elevator, to take me far away from this wretched nightmare.

I flagged down a cab, climbed in and finally let go of my tears. I was stupid, so stupid, I thought over and over again.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I woke up all groggy. I was still wearing my silver grey dress from the previous night. I had fallen into bed after reaching home and cried myself to sleep. I didn't feel like getting up. It was a Sunday, so I didn't have to work.

How had I let this happen, I wondered. I thought I was so damn smart. I knew this guy was deep trouble right from the beginning. He was an actor, for god's sake, he pretended to be someone else for a living. I had known about his numerous "conquests." Yet, I failed to read all the warning signs. I wasn't thinking straight at all. But he had proved he was a liar, a god damn cheat.

I had to be away from him, there was no denying that. I was not in love with him, after all, was I? It was just a little crush. But why did it hurt so much then? I just lay there, staring at the ceiling, thinking these thoughts over and over again.

I could hear my phone beeping and ringing. I switched it off. Arun knocked on my door at lunch time. I yelled through the door saying I wasn't hungry and lay back down in bed. It was dark soon. Where had the day gone? I couldn't ignore the growling in my stomach any longer. Why am I punishing myself, I wondered. I got up and made my way to the cafeteria. It was deserted. I sat down and shovelled food into my mouth. I switched on my phone as I ate. There were some missed calls, most of them from Aakash. There were many messages from him too. I deleted all of them without reading.

'I thought I would find you here,' said Arun, appearing out of nowhere.

I remained silent and continued eating as he enquired if everything was alright. I stubbornly refused to answer any questions. He knew something was wrong but didn't push it. He began talking about his day and I muttered a few responses.

'Leave me alone,' I finally said, unable to take it any longer.

He looked at me for a while and finally got up.

'I'm here whenever you need to talk,' he said, turning at the door and left.

But I didn't talk to Arun or anyone else for the next few days. I just went to work and shut myself in my room after that. I felt ashamed of myself, bitter about being so foolish. I didn't want to admit it to anyone. It would have been

bad if it had been any guy, but it being Aakash made it worse. I felt like a gigantic ass.

A week passed before Arun broached the topic again. He caught up with me in my lab, since I was avoiding him.

‘Rithika, what is wrong with you? What happened between you and Aakash?’ he said, coming directly to the point.

‘Nothing,’ I said, not meeting his eyes.

‘Come on.’

‘Who said anything happened between us?’

‘Why are you lying? You know you can tell me anything.’

‘I’m not lying.’

‘Rithika please, you stay in this lab all day or in your apartment. You avoid us. You don’t even have your lunch.’

‘I have it, just a little late.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes,’ I said, looking down. ‘I’ve been busy, that’s all.’

Arun continued in this vein for some time, but gave up when I didn’t say anything further. I felt bad about not talking to him, but was too upset to do anything about it.

Whatever I did, the pain would not go away. I didn’t realise I had such strong feelings for Aakash. I felt helpless.

A couple of days later, I was watching some random television channel while eating ice-cream. I wasn’t even aware of what was playing. I vaguely heard a Hindi song. Was that Aakash’s face that loomed on screen? Yes, I saw it was him, as my eyes focussed. He was crooning some romantic number with that horrendous woman in his arms, the one who was in his apartment. Images flashed through my mind from that night. I switched off the TV and rushed into Arun’s apartment.

‘I can’t take it anymore,’ I said, as I collapsed on his couch.

Arun didn’t say much, just offered me beer, as I talked about all that had happened. I cried as I finished talking.

‘Is that all?’ he asked.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, I thought, you know, something more must have happened.’

‘Like what?’

‘Well...’

I gasped as I grasped his meaning.

‘I hardly know the guy. We’ve been on, like three dates.’

‘I know, I just thought...’

‘Well, nothing happened.’

‘But Rithika, I don’t get why you are so upset. I mean I can understand you being angry with him. He was totally out of line. But it wasn’t like he was your boyfriend. He hadn’t made any promises, right?’

‘Are you taking his side?’ I asked in disbelief.

‘No, I’m not taking his side. I’m just giving you some perspective.’

‘He had no right to treat me like that.’

‘Of course, Rithika, I agree. But, it was just the beginning. It wasn’t like you guys were in love or in a committed relationship.’

I didn’t say anything. Why was I feeling so upset then? Was I in love with Aakash? No, that was insane, I thought. My mind was boggled by all the confusing thoughts.

‘Are you alright?’ asked Arun.

‘Yeah, I... I’m fine,’ I muttered. I got up to leave.

‘Don’t lock yourself up again. Why don’t you talk to me?’ said Arun gently.

I sat back down and began to cry. I didn’t know what was wrong with me.

‘I don’t know how I feel about him. It just hurts so much.’ I cried as Arun hugged me and I let myself go in his arms.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

‘This is a high profile visit. We cannot afford for anything to go wrong,’ said The Tiger.

‘Who is it this time?’ I muttered drily.

‘Our grants depend on it,’ continued The Tiger, ignoring me.

We had gathered around in Wagh’s office, for an urgent briefing. I rolled my eyes at Divya, who gave a low chuckle. It looked like our lives, not just grants, depended on it.

‘My regional counterpart from Switzerland will be visiting along with a team of eminent scientists, from different parts of Europe. We must put up a good show,’ he continued to speak self importantly.

‘What exactly are we supposed to do?’ I asked.

The Tiger glared at me, as if I was an imbecile interrupting his monologue.

‘I mean I know that the lab and equipment have to be spic and span,’ I added hastily. ‘But in addition to that, is there anything specific that we should be preparing for?’

‘Yes Rithika,’ nodded The Tiger, waving his arms furiously, reminding me of a windmill. ‘I was coming to that. We need to make presentations about our site and key projects to start off the visit. I will be personally checking these to ensure that only the best is presented to them. We can have a lunch here on site. Of course, like you said, the lab has to be in order, including any documents. We also need to have a grand team dinner in the evening at a nice hotel. So yes, we have tons of stuff to do.’

‘When is the meeting?’ asked Arun.

‘Next Friday.’

‘There is hardly any time left,’ I remarked.

‘Yes, I am aware of that. That is the reason we have to get cracking. I have already prepared the task list along with responsibilities,’ The Tiger put up a slide on the screen in his office. ‘I will need daily updates on this.’

I could see my name as a part of the opening presentations as well as during the lab rounds. I was expected to explain about the microbiology lab

operations, along with Vinod. My mind boggled at the amount of effort that had to be put in, along with our daily work.

The Tiger blabbered on for another half an hour on how important the visit was and that he would have our heads off, if there was even the slightest hint of a mistake. We trooped out in silence.

‘What are we going to do?’ I asked Vinod, once we were out of earshot.

‘We have to slog it out, there is nothing else to do,’ he said. I was anyway slogging these days, so it would not make much of a difference.

‘We can start with having a look around our lab and check if any corrections are to be made.’

Vinod agreed and then we would discuss about our data. Arun and Divya were deep in conversation too. I saw others from various departments too, all discussing the impending visit preparations.

The next few days were a blur. I went to my apartment only to sleep. I was at work all day. I had tests to run, reports to make and decks to prepare. I welcomed the effort as it kept my mind off other matters. Vinod kept making jokes at the expense of The Tiger, even in the midst of all the mayhem.

The day of the visit was finally here. We were all hoping things would go smoothly. More than anything, I was hoping for a good night’s rest. I was sick of hearing The Tiger’s constant “Is that the best you can do?” remarks, the reworking of data, checking of lab areas. I had enough of this lunacy. As for the man himself, our great leader, The Tiger jumped at the slightest noise and yelled at anyone who had the misfortune of being around him at that particular moment. I for sure would be glad when it was over.

We started the day welcoming the European team and accompanied them to the main conference hall. The presentations began and they seemed interested, asking a lot of questions. When it was my turn, I did my best to make an impact on them. I was a naturally confident speaker in front of a crowd and had always done well in debates and elocutions in school and college. I answered the questions readily as well, with inputs from Vinod on some of them. I thought they were suitably impressed. Even Wagh gave the tiniest of smiles when I was finished.

Once the lab round began, we were ready to welcome them with our respective teams. The lead scientist was a guy with light green eyes called

Tim. I escorted them into the lab while Vinod walked at the back along with Wagh. I introduced them to the rest of the staff and showed them the various equipment we had. Vinod and I had gone over the monologue so many times, that I was practically running through it nonstop without even thinking. Tim and the others had a few questions about the projects we were working on. I was so well versed with it that I could answer all of them clearly. They seemed to be genuinely pleased. After spending a considerable amount of time, they decided to leave. I could see no sign of either Vinod or The Tiger. That was quite odd. I escorted the group to their next destination and returned to my lab.

After some time, Vinod walked in with a huge grin plastered on his face.

‘Hey, where did you disappear?’ I asked him.

‘You are not going to believe it. The Tiger was about to faint when you were talking to those scientists. I think the poor guy was so nervous about this whole thing that he had not eaten all day. I took him outside the lab before he actually fell. I made him lay down in the medical centre. His blood pressure was a bit low. They gave him some medicines. He should be alright once he has eaten. I handed him some fruits as well.’

‘This happened right here?’ I couldn’t believe it.

‘Yeah, unbelievable.’

We both looked at each other and burst out laughing together.

‘He warned us so many times that nothing should go wrong. Oh my god, how embarrassing,’ I said.

‘We shouldn’t be laughing at a man who is sick,’ said Vinod and continued to laugh.

‘This is really insane,’ I said.

The Tiger was back with us by lunch time. I asked him how he was doing. He brushed it away saying it was nothing and resumed the activities for the rest of the day. I was sure that he wouldn’t be giving any of us a hard time about the visit now.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I debated for a long time on what to wear for the dinner with our guests and finally chose a black dress which fell just above my knees. I kept the makeup and accessories simple, wearing a shiny silver bracelet to complement the outfit.

We were laughing recalling The Tiger's swoon earlier in the day, with Vinod acting out the whole thing. Arun asked him to be more discreet and not attract attention to our table. But it didn't matter as everyone was in high spirits. Most of them were grooving on the dance floor. I was munching on the yummy appetisers.

'That Tim guy is quite handsome,' noted Divya.

'Yeah, he has dreamy green eyes,' I said.

'Were you looking deep into his eyes as you gave him the tour?' teased Vinod.

'Where else am I supposed to look?' I laughed.

'Lucky you,' sighed Divya. 'I hardly talked with him. Arun here was blabbering all day.'

Arun rolled his eyes at this. Our guests seemed to be having a gala time, partying with our team.

'How come you are not drinking?' Divya asked me.

'I just don't feel like it. But maybe I should get a mocktail,' I said, getting up to move towards the bar.

As I ordered my virgin mojito, Hemant and his friend Sharad also came to the counter and ordered vodka. After our past awkward encounter, I hadn't spoken much to Hemant. He smiled at me and I did the same. We made small talk as the bartender made our drinks.

'You are looking nice,' said Hemant, giving me an appraising look.

I smiled again. I didn't want to appear uncomfortable, though I was and couldn't wait to get away.

'Yeah you do,' Sharad winked at me, making me raise my eyebrows.

'Shut up,' Hemant told him.

‘You don’t drink?’ Hemant pointed at my glass.

‘I *am* drinking,’ I answered, knowing fully well what he meant.

‘No, I meant alcohol,’ he said.

‘Well, no...’ I began to explain.

Before I could say anything further, his friend Sharad interrupted me saying, ‘That’s very good. You should not. Good girls don’t drink. Leave the drinking part to us men.’

He looked quite drunk, this was obviously not his first drink. Nevertheless, I was appalled at his statement.

‘He doesn’t mean it. He does not know what he is saying,’ Hemant said, at the look on my face. ‘Let’s go buddy,’ he pulled Sharad away.

I walked away seething. I plonked my glass on the table, cursing under my breath.

‘What happened? Did Hemant say something to you?’ Vinod asked me. ‘I saw you both at the bar.’ I repeated the entire conversation to them.

‘That son of a bitch,’ said Divya.

‘I know. I wanted to slap him,’ I replied.

‘Calm down, you two,’ said Arun, always the composed one in the group. ‘The guy was clearly not in his senses. Just ignore him.’

‘You should complain to the HR manager. The drinks here are not for men, but for all the employees. How dare he say that,’ Divya egged me on. She clearly wanted me to take brutal action.

‘What? Rithika, you should do nothing and forget the whole thing,’ Arun tried to pacify me.

I sat there, fuming for a while. We talked about the events of the day, but I could not focus on the chitchat. I spotted Sharad drinking and laughing away among his little coterie and got riled up again.

‘I know what I am going to do,’ I said, standing up all of a sudden. ‘I am going to show him how good girls can be, in drinking too.’

‘What kind of twisted feminism is that?’ asked Arun, trying to reason with me.

‘Are you guys with me or not?’ I asked, walking away. They joined me as I made my way to the bar.

I ordered a tequila shot and called out to Sharad, who was standing a few feet away. He came over, looking puzzled. Hemant and some of the others also came towards us.

‘I am going to show you a cool trick. Watch and learn,’ I said. ‘This is for what you said earlier.’ I poured a pinch of salt on my hand and licked it off. I downed the tequila shot, then bit down and sucked on the lemon wedge like a pro. Sharad’s eyes went wide. I should have probably stopped then, but my fury was beyond bounds at that moment. I continued having shots one after the other, with Arun asking me to stop and Divya egging me on. Vinod was just staring at me like I had lost it completely.

‘I think now you should go to HR or The Tiger probably,’ said Divya. The colour drained from Sharad’s face when he heard it.

‘What?’ he squeaked.

‘You do know about our work policy, Rithika,’ she said, ignoring him. ‘Discrimination is not tolerated. I will support you. Hemant is a witness to what the dimwit said to you.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Sharad said at once, agitated. I glared at him.

‘We can do whatever we want, got that?’ I snapped my fingers at him.

The guy was so scared that he fell down to his knees and kept saying repeatedly that he was sorry, as his buddies watched in shock. He was clearly worried about losing his job. I let him plead for a bit and then asked him to get up, ending the show. I walked away almost in slow motion, to incessant applause coming from inside my head.

The only negative aspect to that encounter was the raging hangover I had the next morning, but it was totally worth it.

Chapter Thirty

It had been more than a month since I had seen Aakash. I was back to having breakfast with the gang again.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ Divya asked me.

‘Why?’

‘You look a bit worn out.’

‘Just a lot of work, nothing else,’ I replied.

‘Well, if you ask me, you are working a bit too much. Don’t stress, okay?’ she said.

‘I think she’s pining for her “almost boyfriend.” Poor sod,’ smirked Vinod.

‘Haven’t you noticed she has been like this since Vivek left?’

Arun glanced at me. I just shrugged.

‘Dude, let it be,’ he said to Vinod.

‘Come on Rithika, forget about him. There are many fish in the sea,’ Vinod said, trying to console me.

‘Not everyone wants a new partner every week. Some people want meaningful relationships,’ Arun said, looking pointedly at Vinod.

‘Yeah sure, believe that if it helps you,’ laughed Vinod.

I tuned out as both of them debated about the state of relationships today. I was thinking about what I wanted.

‘What the fuck is “friends with benefits” anyway? Friends are there for you always, no matter what, they are not to be used for any physical benefits,’ I could hear Arun saying, through my stupor.

‘Do you think you could find a date for me?’ I heard someone say. I was shocked to find that it was me. I had said it, aloud.

‘What?’ Arun was equally shocked.

‘Are you over Mr Big shot actor then?’ asked Vinod, with a sly smile.

‘I want to be,’ I replied. ‘So can you find someone?’

‘I thought you didn’t want me to set you up ever.’

‘Well, that was in the past. Things have changed now. So can you do it or not?’

‘Of course. You are not bad looking.’

‘Thanks,’ I said, dripping sarcasm.

‘You know what I mean. Some guys may even find you attractive. Plus, you are smart, funny and successful. Hell yeah, I can get you a date.’

‘Okay then.’

‘How about Hemant?’

‘Is that the best you can come up with?’ I asked.

‘Oh, so you are challenging my abilities. Fear not, I will find the right guy for you.’

‘What are you doing?’ Arun asked me, as soon as we were alone.

‘Nothing. I think it will be a change for me. Don’t argue,’ I said, as I could see Arun would try to convince me otherwise. He reluctantly let it go.

‘So I have a few guys who want to go out with you,’ said Vinod, as we ate our lunch a few days later.

‘Really?’ I almost choked on my glass of water. Even though I had acted all cool when I said I wanted to date, I wasn’t sure about this. But Arun was watching me keenly, so I didn’t protest.

‘Yes, I have about four right now. Maybe a few more by next week.’

‘And who exactly are these guys?’ asked Divya.

‘Well, they are friends of some of my friends,’ replied Vinod.

‘So you don’t know them directly?’ continued Divya.

‘No. But they are great guys,’ defended Vinod.

‘They must be alright if they are not friends of his,’ smirked Arun.

‘So who are they?’ asked Divya.

Vinod pulled out his cell phone and showed us a picture of a guy posing with his dog.

‘Presenting Bachelor number one, engineer by profession, plays basketball,

animal lover, loves hanging out with his friends,' began Vinod.

'You have pictures of these guys?' I asked.

'Yes, they were more than happy to send them to me,' said Vinod.

'Guys are really unbelievable. Sending pics to random strangers,' said Divya.

'Be happy they didn't send dick pics,' grinned Vinod.

I actually choked, spraying water on the table this time.

'Dude, you are gross,' said Divya. Arun just glared at him.

'I don't want to see any pictures,' I said firmly.

'But I was just getting started. I have quite a line-up. Let me introduce all the eligible bachelors,' Vinod went on.

'No, I can't judge them on their looks. Just tell me, are any of them weirdos?' I asked.

'Would I do that to you?'

'Are they?' I persisted.

'Of course not.'

'Fine, just fix up a date with any of them.'

'But which one? They are all cool.'

'I don't know. Whoever you like best.'

'Okay. How about this Friday night?'

'Yes, that should be fine.'

And that was the end of the conversation. Divya and Arun looked at me, as if I had gone completely nuts. Maybe I had.

Chapter Thirty-One

My first date turned out to be a bespectacled, scrawny, balding nerd who introduced himself by his last name, Reddy. He seemed to be nervous throughout our date and kept gulping gallons of water. His aim was to go to the US after some time and he kept talking about that. He randomly asked my opinion about various scientific theories about which I had no clue. It made me wonder what Vinod had told him about me. I was bored within minutes.

‘No more geeks for me,’ I admonished Vinod the next morning.

‘What? You don’t like smart men?’ he asked, staggered.

‘No geeks,’ I repeated. ‘Got it?’

‘Alright, alright. I thought you two would get along.’

‘I could have just gone out with Hemant, dude. What was the whole point?’

‘Yeah, I guess they are the same type. I have just the guy for you then.’

My next date turned out to be a muscular, very good looking guy called Sunil. His T-shirt was stretched tight across his chest and biceps. His jeans were precariously balanced on his hips. I noticed that most women at the restaurant turned to look at him as he sauntered to our table.

‘Do you like going to the gym?’ were the first words he said after introducing himself.

‘Umm,’ I struggled to answer.

‘You know, working out?’ he continued.

‘Well, I love to jog,’ I managed to say.

He kept asking me questions about the number of hours and days I jogged, talked about the exercises he did, how he trained. It was repetitive and quite tedious. When we finally placed our order, he ordered all “healthy” stuff and tsk-tsk-ed when I didn’t, explaining the vices of junk food, as I ate. I couldn’t wait to get out of there.

‘I don’t want to be judged when I eat, okay?’ I yelled at Vinod the next morning. ‘I will eat whatever I want.’

‘You really should have known better,’ Arun sneered at Vinod. ‘Don’t you know she gets wild when someone even looks at what she eats.’

‘Dude, how would I know he was some health freak? I was told he was beefy and handsome. Seemed like her type,’ Vinod winked at me.

‘Oh shut up,’ I said crossly.

‘So no more good looking guys then,’ said Vinod.

‘I didn’t say that,’ I muttered, making him roar with laughter.

Bachelor number three turned out to be a Hindi movie buff. Well, that was that.

‘Don’t you know me at all?’ I asked Vinod.

‘Yeah dude, what’s wrong with you?’ said Arun. ‘She hates Bollywood. *And,*’ he raised his eyebrows at me before continuing, ‘She is trying to get over an actor.’

‘What has that got to do with anything?’ grumbled Vinod. ‘God, talk about being choosy.’

I glared at him.

Bachelor number four turned out to be a pervert, who wouldn’t stop staring at my chest.

At one point, he said, ‘36C, no? I’m quite good at guessing.’

Revolted, I made a quick getaway and pummelled Vinod the next day.

‘My friend vouched for him,’ defended Vinod. ‘I will kick his ass.’

‘No more dates for me. I’ve had enough,’ I concluded.

‘No, don’t say that,’ said Vinod.

‘Hey, let her be,’ said Divya.

‘But I have just the right guy for her,’ said Vinod.

‘Why are *you* so desperate to pair her up?’ asked Divya.

‘He is taking it as a personal failure, if he doesn’t match her up. He would no longer be the dating king or love guru or whatever,’ said Arun.

‘Don’t listen to these guys. Come on, this guy is perfect. You know what they say, five times a charm,’ grinned Vinod.

‘I know I’m going to regret this,’ I sighed and agreed to go out on one last

date.

Jatin was the guy I was meeting. He was stylishly dressed, was above six feet tall, I estimated as I saw him walk towards my table. I noticed his hands and nails were very clean, I smiled to myself.

As we chatted, he revealed that he had completed his MBA and was working in a corporate office nearby. He was polite, not too muscular, definitely not a pervert. I found that I could talk easily to him. He was very nice, I thought.

‘So do you watch Bollywood movies?’ I cautiously asked him a while later.

‘Occasionally. I’m not a fan. I prefer to watch Hollywood or European movies.’

Bingo.

‘You’re not saying anything negative today,’ noted Divya the next day.

‘That’s because her date was perfect. I’ve done it, haven’t I?’ Vinod asked me.

‘Well, the guy was decent,’ I said.

‘And?’ he prodded.

‘I had a nice time,’ I relented.

‘And?’ he continued.

‘What?’ I snapped.

‘Are you going to see him again?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know. I haven’t thought that far,’ I mumbled.

‘Come on, he is a great guy. Why won’t you meet him again?’

‘I didn’t say I won’t meet him.’

‘Well then, you will meet him, right?’

‘I...’ I fumbled for words.

‘Why are you questioning her like the police?’ Arun butted in. ‘Let her take her time. It was just one date.’

‘God, I’m just asking. This is the thanks I get for hooking her up with a great guy? Who knows, they may end up getting married. Then what are you going

to say?’ Vinod grumbled.

I rolled my eyes at this.

‘Thanks Vinod,’ I said sweetly.

Chapter Thirty-Two

‘Rithika, how are you getting along on your project?’ Wagh asked me in our team meeting.

I updated him on the progress of the project.

‘That’s quite decent in the given amount of time,’ he said, as I wrapped up.

My jaw dropped. It was rare for The Tiger to praise anyone. Everyone in the room turned and grinned at me.

‘I think you can relax a bit now,’ said Divya as we came out of the meeting room.

‘I guess so,’ I was pleased with myself.

‘This calls for a celebration. Should we do something tonight?’

‘Maybe some other day. I already have plans for tonight.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, I’m going out with Jatin again.’

‘The nice one, right?’

I nodded.

‘Vinod will be glad,’ she teased.

I chose to wear a long, off shoulder pink dress for dinner with Jatin that night.

We met at an upscale restaurant. The food was good and the drinks flowed freely, like the conversation. I was having a nice time. After a long time, I reminded myself.

‘Anyway, my boss insisted that I finish the damn deck,’ I was telling Jatin about my day at work.

‘Oh you said deck, I misheard at first,’ he chuckled. I snorted into my glass. That’s when I saw Aakash Tandon walking in with a couple of his friends. He was wearing his stupid hoodie and oversized glares. But I would recognise him anywhere.

‘Everything okay?’ asked Jatin, as I had stopped talking.

I assured him that I was fine and excused myself to go to the washroom. Damn, it had been a while since I had seen Aakash. I had not expected to bump into him like this. Should I just leave the place before he spotted me? I debated for a while and finally decided to stay put. I took deep breaths to calm down and reapplied my makeup just for the heck of it. I returned to my seat.

Aakash and his friends were sitting at some distance away from us. With any luck, he wouldn’t see me at all. Maybe I could ask Jatin to switch places with me. No, that would seem weird as we were in the middle of our dinner.

‘What is the wildest thing you have ever done?’ Jatin asked me.

‘Rappelling during one of my treks last year,’ I replied absently. ‘What about you?’

Jatin began narrating about his drunken escapade in Goa with his friends. I was distracted as I kept glancing occasionally at Aakash. He didn’t seem to have noticed me. I couldn’t tell for sure because of his glares. Their gang was having fun.

‘And then my friend just stood on the beach and peed into the wind,’ Jatin was saying.

I laughed hard though I heard only the last part.

‘There is a new play in town. It has nice reviews. Maybe we could see it,’ said Jatin as we finished dinner.

‘I don’t know. Work is crazy these days,’ I replied.

‘Oh okay. No worries.’

Why was I being mean to him? There was nothing wrong with the guy.

‘Maybe we could go on the weekend. I will try and finish my work by then,’ I rectified.

‘Great. I will check the show timings, in that case.’

I was eager to leave and declined dessert. Jatin told me I looked a bit jittery. I made up an excuse of having a headache and we left the restaurant.

I didn’t listen to what Jatin said throughout our drive back to my campus. I kept saying “okay” in some places during the conversation. Seeing Aakash had clearly rattled me. Jatin dropped me off at the gate and left.

As I was entering the campus, I heard someone call out my name. I turned and was shocked to see Aakash standing in front of me.

‘Are you following me?’ I flared up.

‘What? Well, yes, this time.’

I glared at him.

‘Who was that?’ he asked.

‘Who?’ I pretended not to understand.

‘That guy you were with, Rithika.’

‘It’s none of your business.’

‘Is he your... boyfriend?’

I couldn’t believe his audacity. I wanted to say yes, but I had never been good at lying.

‘Like I mentioned, none of your business,’ I said instead.

I turned to go inside. He came ahead of me and blocked my way.

‘Why are you following me?’ I asked.

‘You wouldn’t pick up my calls or respond to any of my messages.’

‘I think that’s a clear indication that I don’t want to talk to you.’

‘At least hear me out.’

‘You are such a big star. Then why are you behaving like a stalker? I said I don’t want to hear anything.’

I walked quickly into the campus before he could say anything further.

Chapter Thirty-Three

‘Hey Rithika, I need your help,’ Arun said to me the next morning.

‘Sure, what for?’

‘I need to go shopping actually. I need some new clothes.’

‘What’s wrong with these?’ I pointed at his clothes.

‘I might be meeting some girls. So I need to be make an impression.’

‘Dude, tell me you are going on a date. And not to some weird arranged marriage meeting.’

‘Come on Rithika, what’s wrong with an arranged marriage?’

‘Oh no, not again. We have gone over this multiple times.’

‘Yeah I know. I don’t prefer to have my heart broken, that’s all.’

On seeing the look on my face, he hastily added, ‘I mean, it’s not my cup of tea. This way, the headache of finding me a wife falls on my parents.’

‘I hope you know what you are doing.’

‘I do.’

‘Well in that case, I wish you all the best. I’m available for all the shopping you want to do. I’ll make sure you look classy.’

‘So we’ll go this weekend.’

‘Sure, it’s a date,’ I grinned.

We set off to the mall that weekend and bought all the clothes Arun wanted. We were exhausted by the end of it.

‘Let’s go in there,’ Arun pointed to a big department store.

I groaned.

‘You promised. Come on,’ he said and pulled me.

After looking for a bit, we headed for the section upstairs. It was totally empty. Not even the staff members were present.

That’s odd, I thought. We started looking at the clothes on the racks.

‘Hi,’ I heard a voice behind me.

I turned around and almost dropped everything. It was Aakash.

‘Oh my god, what are you doing here?’ I screamed.

‘Relax Rithika,’ Arun said. ‘Aakash wanted to speak to you. So I brought you here.’

‘What? How dare you?’ I glowered at him.

‘Please. Just hear him out,’ Arun said.

‘You are supposed to be my friend,’ I said in an accusing tone.

‘I am. Aakash called me that night after you guys met. After hearing what he had to say, it only seemed fair to me.’

I continued glowering at Arun, but held my tongue. I would deal with him later.

‘I will be right over there,’ Arun said and moved to the far end of the room. I folded my arms across my chest as I looked defiantly at Aakash.

‘Rithika, I’ve wanted to talk to you for a long time. It’s not just about what happened between the two of us. I really don’t want someone to think something about me which is far from the truth, especially someone who is a friend.’

I didn’t say anything.

He continued, ‘That day, when we went back to my house, I didn’t know Aditi was there. It’s true that I was dating her but we broke up last year. I moved on, she didn’t. She kept trying to revive the relationship. I met her a few days before our date and told her on clear terms that we couldn’t be together. But she just didn’t understand. She turned up at my house that day and my staff of course knew her, so they let her in. She wanted to surprise me on my birthday. It was her way of trying to get me back. I kept trying to reach you to explain, but you wouldn’t give me a chance. So I decided to let it go. But when I saw you in that restaurant, it all came back. I just had to clear things up. That is the whole truth. You may choose to believe me or not. But I wanted to tell you this. I feel much better now.’

I was speechless. Several thoughts were running in my head.

‘Well? Say something,’ he said.

‘I don’t know what to believe. What I saw that night or what you are telling me now.’

‘I know what you must have thought. Anyone would think that. I mean, to see Aditi on my bed, wearing...’ he stopped at the look of repulsion on my face. ‘Anyway,’ he continued hastily, ‘I told you what actually happened.’

‘Come on Rithika,’ Arun had appeared at my side, ‘he is telling the truth. I believe him.’

Both were staring at me. I gave in.

‘Alright,’ I smiled.

‘So we are okay?’ asked Aakash.

‘We are okay,’ I said.

‘Thank god. And thank you Arun for your help,’ Aakash shook hands with

Arun and hugged him. We began chatting as if nothing had happened.

‘Who was that guy with you at the restaurant?’ Aakash asked me.

‘Just some guy Vinod set me up with,’ I mumbled. Arun smirked at my discomfort.

‘Are you dating him?’

‘No.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Are you dating Aditi?’ I snapped back.

That shut him up.

‘Okay, both of you are single and not dating anyone else,’ Arun cut in. ‘Let’s take it from there.’

We laughed and left the store.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Aakash left for England the next day for a movie shoot. So we couldn’t spend time together. But the texts and calls resumed between us. It was a blissful feeling.

“Missing you already.” I was grinning stupidly at the last message that Aakash had sent me.

‘Someone seems cheerful today,’ Divya remarked looking at me at breakfast. I just smiled, as I shoved scrambled eggs into my mouth.

‘It’s that dude I fixed you up with, isn’t it?’ asked Vinod.

‘Er, yes partly,’ I said.

‘I knew it. He’s the perfect guy for you. So what are you two up to?’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

‘You know, have you guys kissed yet or maybe more?’ sniggered Vinod.

‘Shut up,’ I said.

‘What? He’s a very kissable guy.’

‘You are a pig.’

‘Hey, don’t forget who set you up. This is what I get in return.’

‘Leave it Vinod,’ said Divya.

‘Why don’t you talk about yourself? Who are you seeing these days?’ asked Arun.

‘He hasn’t gotten over Aisha Banerjee yet,’ I laughed.

‘I am definitely over her. For your information, I’m seeing a nice girl,’ said Vinod.

‘A nice girl?’ I repeated.

‘Where did you meet her?’ asked Arun.

‘I met her online. What does it matter? She is lovely,’ said Vinod.

‘And this girl is willingly going out with you?’ grinned Arun.

‘I hope she is not imaginary,’ I joined in.

‘Hey, watch it,’ said Vinod.

All of us laughed.

‘Let’s all go out this Saturday night. Vinod can bring her to meet us,’ I suggested.

‘I can’t bring her,’ said Vinod.

‘Why not?’ I asked.

‘We have just started going out. She is very shy.’

‘I can’t come on Saturday either. I’m going to Pune. My parents have set up a meeting with a girl,’ said Arun.

‘Great. So Divya and I will go out then. Is that okay?’ I said. She nodded.

‘I will join you guys,’ said Vinod. ‘Even if I don’t bring my date.’ We made plans to go to a nightclub.

Vinod, Divya and I were having a great time at *The Walrus* on Saturday night. Suddenly a thought struck me.

‘Hey Vinod, how come you are not ogling at the girls out here?’ I asked.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘Oh come on. You haven’t said anything about all these pretty girls. You haven’t stared at them or anything.’

‘Yeah, why is that?’ Divya chimed in.

‘They’re not my type,’ said Vinod.

‘What? These women are not sexy enough for you?’ I asked incredulously.

‘It’s not that. I haven’t liked anyone that much.’

‘That is ridiculous. They are all hot.’

‘Well...’

‘I know what it is. It’s this new girl you are seeing. You are serious about her, aren’t you?’ I asked.

‘No. I’m not,’ replied Vinod.

‘Yes, you are.’

‘He is blushing,’ Divya laughed.

‘Will you both stop it?’ said Vinod, mock irritated. We giggled and drank more beer.

‘Hey look, it’s your ex,’ pointed Vinod.

‘What? Who?’ I was confused.

‘Oh,’ I said as I turned around to see Vivek Naidu sitting with a group of friends. He saw us at the same time. He waved and walked over to us.

Vivek was friendly as usual. He told us that the team would be returning soon to shoot on our campus.

‘That’s wonderful,’ said Divya.

Vivek asked me for a dance. I could see Vinod and Divya glancing at the two of us and whispering. We danced for a bit and Vivek went back to his friends.

‘That must have been awkward,’ said Vinod the moment I sat down.

‘No, not really,’ I replied and didn’t explain further.

We met Vivek again outside the club just as we were leaving. He hugged and gave me a peck on the cheek as we said goodbye.

‘Awkward again,’ commented Vinod.

‘Not really,’ I laughed.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The next morning, Divya ran into my room yelling incoherently.

‘It’s Sunday morning. I haven’t woken up yet. Can you be quieter?’ I admonished her.

‘Have you seen this?’ she shoved the newspaper under my nose.

There were two pictures of me and Vivek splashed across the page. One of them was inside the club, the picture taken from a weird angle in the dim lights made it look like we were kissing and the other was outside the club, quite clear, him actually kissing me on the cheek.

‘What the hell,’ I screamed.

I read the article, my eyes getting wider with each word. It was a typical gossip item which focussed on Vivek mainly and talked about him kissing a “mystery girl” at the club.

I jumped when my phone rang. It was my brother.

‘Dude, tell me that is not you in the pictures,’ said Rohit, coming to the point directly.

‘It is me,’ I muttered.

‘What the hell were you kissing Naidu for? I thought you liked Aakash.’

‘I wasn’t kissing him. Well, not in that way. We are just friends.’

‘Sure doesn’t look like that.’

‘I know how it looks like, but it’s not true.’

‘Were you drunk or stoned out of your mind?’

‘Of course not.’ That was only partly true, as I was a bit drunk.

‘You are in big trouble. I hope you know that.’

‘Did Dad see it?’

‘Yes, he has blown his fuse. Didn’t he call you?’

I checked my phone, there were many missed calls from my father, among other people. I had been deep asleep.

‘Shit,’ I said.

‘Exactly. You better think of some good story and call him.’ Rohit hung up.

The moment I called my father, he almost bit my head off.

‘No, Dad, I am not dating him. Those pictures are morphed. No, it was just a friendly kiss, I swear. You can ask Divya and Vinod, they were with me,’ I tried explaining things to my father as he continued to give me an earful. I had to say sorry and promise to “behave” myself in future, before he let it go.

‘Don’t worry, people will forget it in a day or two,’ Divya tried consoling me.

I literally had my head in my hands, when Vivek called me to apologise. I assured him it was not his fault. He cursed the paparazzi and hung up.

Now the big question was what I would tell Aakash. I took a deep breath and dialled his number. It was unreachable. Damn. He did tell me that he was shooting in remote locations and may have network problems. I typed a message and then deleted it. I thought it would be best to talk to him and explain in person.

Since it was a Sunday, I didn’t have to go to work. I stayed in my room talking with Vinod, Divya and Arun. Mercifully, Vinod didn’t tease me about Vivek. I was restless throughout the day, worrying and pacing about. Almost as the day was about to end, I received a text from Aakash.

‘Shocked!’ That was all it said.

That one word did it for me. I couldn’t come to terms with the fact that he just believed all that rubbish about me. He, of all people, should have known that it was not true. But maybe he believed it because Vivek was involved. He had been jealous of Vivek earlier too. I didn’t want to justify his behaviour. I was so angry at him. He didn’t deserve a response from me. I switched off my phone and went to sleep.

‘Rithika. A moment,’ The Tiger beckoned me into his office the next day. I was prepared for this. I knew what I had to say.

The Tiger said, ‘Rithika, What you do in your free time is not my or the institute’s prerogative. But the institute won’t take kindly to any harm on its reputation. I have spoken to the directors and prevented any action on you, citing your exemplary performance so far. But you better be more careful next time. Meanwhile I would advise you to keep a low profile for the next few days.’

That was it. He didn’t expect any response from me. So I thanked him and

left.

I did what the Tiger asked me to. I stuck to working in my lab all the time and didn't speak much to anyone else. I could see people whispering as they saw me in the cafeteria or the library. I had no choice but to ignore them. I even avoided going home, as I knew what was in store for me. Rohit called me to inform that matters had cooled down.

'How come they didn't print your name later though?' Vinod wondered. 'You know once they found out you were the mystery girl.' This was a few days after the incident.

'Maybe they didn't found out,' said Divya.

'I'm sure they must have. Vivek was here for a long time. It's easy to make the connection.'

'Probably someone prevented it, someone with authority,' said Arun.

'Maybe or the story just lost steam,' said Vinod.

'Yes, the guys here have stopped talking about it,' informed Arun.

'Yes, earlier people were asking me for details, until I asked them to keep their noses out,' said Vinod.

'Yeah me too,' said Arun.

'Thank you guys for sticking up for me,' I said.

'Like I said, people will move on to the next sensational story soon,' said Divya and we went back to watching the movie.

Chapter Thirty-Six

‘Guys, I have four tickets,’ Vinod told us, holding them together.

‘How many times do we have to tell you? Rithika won’t come to watch a Bollywood movie,’ Divya sighed.

‘But it was a great offer. I literally got them for free,’ exclaimed Vinod.

‘Fine, I’ll ask one of the physicists.’

‘Hell, no. I’m not going with that lot,’ said Divya. ‘Rithika, you have to come. Besides, it’s not a typical Hindi movie. It is a sort of arty movie. I heard it’s an adaptation of some play written by Shakespeare.’

‘I guess I could make an exception this time,’ I agreed.

‘Great, I’m sure you will like it,’ said Divya.

‘Yeah, Aakash does a good mix of commercial as well as these kind of meaningful roles,’ said Vinod.

‘Aakash is in the movie?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Guys, I don’t think we should...’ began Arun.

‘It’s alright,’ I said. ‘We can go. I have never watched any of his movies.’

‘Are you sure?’ Arun asked me.

I nodded.

‘Who is the director?’ I asked, more to prevent any further questions, than interest in knowing.

‘Some new guy,’ said Vinod, as we headed off.

As we were going into the movie theatre, a bunch of girls were walking ahead of us.

‘Hey Vinod, which one do you like?’ I whispered.

‘What?’ Vinod had barely noticed them.

‘He must really like this new girl he is seeing,’ I told Divya. ‘We must find out more.’

The movie began. I took a deep breath. Even though I knew I was going to

see Aakash, I was still not prepared when his face came up on the big screen in front of me. His smile, his voice just reminded me of how much I missed him. I soon got engrossed in the story. I had to admit that Aakash was a good actor indeed. Just when I thought I could get through this, a kissing scene ensued between Aakash and his co-star, a petite young thing. I wanted to smack them both hard. The intermission sign came up as I was having this rather violent thought.

‘You look like you have seen a ghost,’ remarked Vinod.

‘It’s all the violence,’ I replied.

I went to the rest room and washed my face. I needed to get a hold of myself. Post the break, it got worse. There was an intense lovemaking scene between the leads. It was like watching a scary scene from a horror movie, the stuff of nightmares. I watched the scene through my fingers, holding up my hands in front of my face, grimacing throughout. There were a couple of kissing scenes towards the end as well.

‘I thought you were going to be alright,’ said Arun as soon as we got out.

‘The bastard seemed to be enjoying himself with that bloody woman,’ I muttered.

‘Come on Rithika, the guy was just doing his job.’

‘Yeah, in her mouth.’

Arun snickered, but stopped immediately at the look on my face.

‘He is an actor, it’s just a role, okay?’ Arun tried to console me.

‘What a great movie, right?’ Vinod was asking all of us. ‘I doubt even you Rithika can find much fault with it.’

‘It was good,’ I agreed.

‘And what about Aakash, huh? I think he deserves all the awards this year. He was phenomenal.’

I nodded and gave a fake smile. I didn’t want to get in any discussion about Tandon.

A week later, we were hanging out at Divya’s place.

‘Let’s watch the Miss India contest guys,’ she said, switching channels.

‘What? No, I’m not watching that dumb shit,’ I protested.

‘What is wrong with it? Beautiful girls, good performances, win win all around,’ said Vinod.

‘Dude, women being paraded around and judged for their looks, is fun?’ I asked.

‘It’s a *beauty* pageant, for fuck’s sake. What are they supposed to be judged on? Their intelligence and wit?’ he countered.

‘Yes, they should be. But I forgot that women are supposed to be pretty things, aren’t they?’

‘Guys, really can we not do this? Why ruin our time together?’ Arun intervened and stopped us arguing further.

I muttered under my breath and settled down to watching the beauty contest, sipping angrily on my diet Coke.

It was as idiotic as I expected. Various rounds of displaying slick bodies were done and the judges asked them all kinds of questions which were supposed to give us a glimpse into their beautiful souls or whatever. The whole thing was a farce.

‘Our next performer is someone who is not only a brilliant actor, but also one of the best dancers in the country,’ announced the host. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the heartthrob of the nation, Aakash Tandon.’

‘No fucking way in hell,’ I almost yelled. There was no getting past this guy.

The music began and a group of dancers entered the stage. Then Tandon came down from above them, hanging from a kind of revolving disc, dressed in black, hair flying all over the place. Man, he was breathtaking. And when he started grooving to the music, damn he was killing it. I could feel my heart beat pulsing fast just looking at him. But of course, I kept a calm demeanour and pretended like I was watching some dull documentary on the Discovery channel.

Divya and Vinod were hooting and cheering him on, as if India were playing in the finals of the World Cup.

‘Some of his moves are like MJ,’ remarked Vinod.

‘He is incredible,’ agreed Divya.

Aakash danced to a medley of hit songs and then it was over. The contestants walked on to the stage when he finished. He did a couple of steps with them and then began the friendly banter between them which soon turned flirtatious. Tandon got down on his knees in front of one of the contestants and kissed her hand.

‘He is not acting now, is he?’ I asked Arun.

‘Come on, he is just being charming. He has an image to keep up.’

‘Yeah that of the ladies’ man. I get it.’

‘Well, he does have a huge female fan following. It is just good strategy.’

‘Why are you being his PR person?’

‘Just pointing out the obvious.’

‘He is so cute,’ said Divya, breaking up our conversation. ‘Let me tweet how amazing his performance was.’ She immediately began typing on her phone.

‘Yeah me too,’ echoed Vinod.

I rolled my eyes at this and watched as Tandon was singing some stupid song with another one of the girls. It was a really off key performance, and now they were rapping, just perfect.

Tandon waved and blew kisses to the crowd and left. Everyone seemed mesmerised by his performance, except me.

A couple of days later, we were having breakfast as usual in the cafeteria.

‘Did you see this?’ Vinod held up the newspaper.

There was a picture of Aakash Tandon and his ex-girlfriend Aditi Sinha, taken through the window of what looked like a café. They seemed to be deep in conversation. My blood boiled looking at the two of them, how much had he lied to me, was any of it ever true? The headline blared, ‘Back together?’ as I wondered pretty much the same thing.

‘I guess it was just a matter of time,’ remarked Vinod.

‘Yeah they have a history. It’s the longest that he has been with anyone. They do look good together,’ added Divya.

‘That woman is a psycho,’ I blurted out, without thinking.

‘But she is smoking hot,’ smirked Vinod.

I was furious at Aakash for getting back in the dating scene so soon as if what happened between us didn’t matter at all. Maybe it didn’t to him, they were used to such things, these stars. It was all just a game for them. Here I was hoping that maybe things could be better between us, but he had run back into the arms of his ex for comfort, at the first sign of distress. I cursed him, but most of all, I cursed myself for having such strong feelings for him and harbouring false hopes. I was living in a fool’s paradise.

Just as I was about to enter my lab, Arun called out to me saying that The Tiger wanted to meet all of us. What else was this day going to turn up for me, I wondered and entered the conference room.

Wagh was clearly in his element and waved his hands around, as if he was addressing the nation from Red Fort on Independence Day.

‘Don’t look so despondent, my dear colleagues. This time you haven’t done much wrong,’ he grinned. ‘I have some great news for all of you. We are expanding our operations, we will be building a new TIRC centre and it is going to be state of the art. We will have better infrastructure, better equipment, everything miles ahead than what we have here.’

Everyone got excited and started talking among themselves.

‘There is more. Some of you will be involved in the design and set up of this new centre and of course, those of you interested will be given a chance to work there. You would have an advantage over those who join later from other places. This could work wonders for your career. We are aware that quite a few of you would be interested in this venture. So there will be a thorough screening and selection process. All details shall be provided to you via email at the earliest.’

‘What’s the catch?’ someone asked amid laughter.

‘None. Well actually, there is a little something I must add. The centre will be coming up in Shanghai, China.’

‘Ah there it is,’ said Arun.

‘Well it is not a setback by any standards. It is one of the most developed cities in the world. I’m sure most of you would love to work there, given a chance.’

‘I wouldn’t,’ Arun said to me in a low voice.

‘Neither would I,’ I agreed. ‘I have visited the city. It is definitely a great place. But I don’t know if I could leave all this, all of you guys and go to some place at the other end of the world.’

‘That’s my girl,’ Arun smiled. ‘India may not be the best country to live in, it does have a lot of problems, but it sure is the only place for us.’

‘Good luck to whoever plans to go,’ I said.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

‘Should you be eating that?’ Vinod pointed at the *samosa* that Arun was stuffing into his mouth. ‘I mean, now that you may be having a fellow human cohabiting with you soon.’

‘What?’

‘I’m just saying that’s your third *samosa*. Girls don’t want to marry guys with paunches.’

‘He may have a point there Arun, though he could have been more subtle,’ I said. Arun had gained quite a lot of weight recently.

‘You are worried about his feelings? Yeah, he doesn’t have any,’ said Vinod.

‘Let the poor guy eat,’ said Divya.

Arun finished eating it and asked, ‘So what do you propose?’

‘Why don’t you join me on my morning jog? It will be fun,’ I offered.

‘That is actually a great starting point,’ he agreed and we discussed how we were going to go about it. Arun decided to buy all the running gear and gadgets that he needed by the end of the day.

When I knocked on his door the next morning, he was all set to run in his new track suit.

‘What do you think of my new shoes, pretty nice, huh?’ he pointed out as we did our warm up exercises.

I began my usual jog around the track, with Arun trying hard to keep up with me. It was clear that he was having a tough time. I had started off slow to allow him time to cope, but he was panting hard after a couple of rounds.

‘You can stop if you want to. It is your first day after all,’ I told him. But he refused and insisted on completing all the rounds with me. He complained of muscle pain throughout the day. I told him to rest the next day, but he was up and ready for the morning jog.

After a couple of days, it was quite clear that he was having pain almost all over the body. He kept rubbing his neck and back, having particular difficulty in climbing steps due to stiffness in his knees.

‘You know what, maybe I should quit running after all,’ he gave in after the fourth day. Before I could protest, he continued, ‘When we attempt to lose weight we try to change everything at once. That includes buying all sorts of gadgets, exercising seven times a week, swearing to sleep more, taking supplements, and sticking to a diet. Now this is all wrong. I’ll tell you why. I read about the 80-20 rule, also known as the Pareto Principle, which states that just 20% of the changes are responsible for 80% of the results. The key to losing weight is like the Pareto Principle. If you want to lose weight, stick to making one change. That will be responsible for 80% of your success or failure. So I have decided to focus on the food that I eat.’

‘I don’t think only controlling your diet is going to help Arun,’ I tried to reason. But he went on to extol the virtues of the Pareto principle, making me

stop.

Over the next few days, Arun bought a weighing scale and downloaded an app that allowed him to record his daily weight, with graphs and charts. He read articles on Atkins, Paleo, Mediterranean, South Beach and other latest fad diets. He went shopping and bought broccoli, quinoa, flax seeds, walnuts, tofu, avocado etc. He informed us that he was now strictly on this diet and threw out all junk food from his apartment.

We heard various remarks like, “I had honey in warm water first thing in the morning” to “how can you guys eat that junk”. He brought *masala* oats for breakfast while the rest of us had our humble cafeteria food. He was also eating small portions, multiple times in a day. He created a Whatsapp group and doled out weight loss tips to all of us.

‘I have lost two kilos,’ he announced to general applause around the table.

‘And we have lost our minds,’ mumbled Vinod.

But this phase didn’t last long as usual. Arun was soon back to his ways, it started with having *samosas* and cake during a colleague’s birthday celebration. When we ate butter popcorn during a movie, he made a grab for it, saying, ‘popcorn is light, doesn’t even count as food, right? Besides, who watches a movie without popcorn?’

Finally during a party, he indulged in red wine having read that it had antioxidants, followed by more red wine, dinner and dessert. He regained all the weight he had lost. When we asked him about the weight loss agenda, he told us that he had deleted the app and given away his weighing scale. Paraphrasing Mark Twain, he informed us, ‘Weight is an issue of mind over matter. If you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter.’

A few days later, as we came down for lunch, we found him with a couple of guys, muttering in low voices.

‘Doling out weight loss advice?’ I asked.

‘I thought that phase was over,’ remarked Vinod.

‘Nope, I was just looking at the guy’s horoscope. When I told him a few things that have happened in his past, you know, really personal things, it blew his mind. Then he wanted to know about his future, when he would get a promotion, his marriage and all. The other guys were also interested after

that and gave me their details. So I'm going to look into their horoscopes as well.' Astrology was another of Arun's interest.

'Yeah, you know what you should do next? Buy a parrot and ask it to pick out cards for you,' Vinod said scathingly.

Arun glared at him. This had always been a bone of contention between them.

'Dude, you are a scientist, for god's sake. What is this abracadabra nonsense?' Vinod continued to pour scorn on him.

'For your information, astrology is a science. It studies the movements and positions of celestial bodies,' Arun defended himself.

'Oh, don't give me that bullshit.'

'Just because you don't understand it doesn't make it any less accurate.'

'Guys really, can we talk about something else?' I interjected, sensing the tension.

'Why don't you predict the result of tonight's match? Let us check the accuracy of your science. Who is going to win?' asked Vinod.

I glowered at him, signalling him to stop. But I need not have worried. Arun was his usual serene self and did not get riled up. He chose to ignore the barb, shook his head and got back to his lunch.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Wagh called all of us to his office the next day.

‘The filmmakers will be back here this weekend. They will begin shooting this time. I will be personally looking into matters to ensure we provide full support. You will of course, help like you did last time.’

‘Will they be staying here?’ asked Divya.

‘No, I don’t think so. It is a big crew.’

He made a gesture to indicate that we were dismissed.

‘I don’t want to be involved,’ I said, as soon as we came out of The Tiger’s office.

‘I understand,’ said Arun. ‘You stay out of it, we will handle everything.’

‘Thanks.’

‘What about The Tiger?’ asked Divya.

‘He won’t know a thing,’ said Arun.

I decided to spend the weekend at home. That way I could avoid all the frenzy here. I called my folks to let them know.

‘Hey, good to see you,’ Rohit welcomed me. I had not been home for a while.

‘It’s good to be back. How’s Dad?’

‘He was pissed with the whole, you kissing an actor and getting splashed on the front page, thing.’

‘Well, I hope that has passed.’

‘I guess. You will know soon enough.’

My parents came home late from work, my brother and I had already had dinner. My father didn’t say much and I was thankful for that.

The next morning, I was lounging on the couch reading the papers. My parents worked on Saturdays too, most of the time.

‘Do you have any plans for tonight?’ my father asked.

I realised that the question was directed at me. I shook my head, wondering why on earth was he suddenly interested.

‘We are having guests for dinner,’ he went on.

‘Who?’ asked my brother.

‘The Panickers.’

‘Oh that’s nice,’ said Rohit.

‘Yes, we have been friends since a long time,’ added my mother quite needlessly.

Rohit and I glanced at each other.

‘Well, their son Naveen will also be coming. He has completed his MBA from IIM-A, you remember? He is now working as a VP in one of the leading banks,’ said Dad.

‘Good for him,’ said Rohit. I had yet to speak a word.

‘Well, he is a really good boy,’ said Mom. ‘He is humble and polite. So well mannered.’

‘It will be good for you to meet him,’ Dad told me pointedly.

‘What? Is this some kind of matchmaking?’ I finally spoke up, understanding their intentions. ‘I am not doing this. Arranged marriage? No way.’ I was horrified at the very thought.

‘It’s not like a typical arranged marriage, Rithika. We have known the family for years. We also know Naveen well enough. You can meet him and decide for yourself if you want to marry him or not,’ Dad tried to explain.

‘Oh great, thanks for giving me that choice, Dad,’ I was seething.

‘So what do you want? Date random actors and kiss them in public? Make a fool out of us in front of everyone else?’

‘I was wondering when that would come up.’ The bickering between Dad and me continued.

‘Of course it will come up, you did something highly irresponsible, Rithika. Do not behave like we are blaming you for something you didn’t do.’

‘What is so wrong in dating an actor?’

‘You are talking like this? You are a scientist.’

‘But that is my profession. This is my personal life.’

‘I cannot believe this. Are you dating that actor?’

I was speechless for a moment.

‘No,’ I said slowly.

‘Then why are you protesting?’

I didn’t have an answer to that.

‘We are not asking you to get married today. We are not forcing anything. Do not behave like this. You don’t have to do anything. Just meet them like you would meet any other friends of ours. That’s all.’

When I didn’t say anything, they took my silence for acquiescence.

‘They will be here at seven,’ said Dad and my parents left for work.

‘Thank you for sticking up for me,’ I turned on Rohit.

‘What could I have said?’ he protested. ‘You know how these guys are.’

I was furious.

‘Look, as he said, you don’t have to do anything. We will just pretend that this is a routine dinner thing. I will also be there, don’t worry. Maybe this Naveen guy will turn out to be so hideous that our parents will only reject him.’

Chapter Thirty-Nine

My parents came home early to check on the dinner preparations. I had put on a plain cotton dress, which my mother took one look at and asked me to change.

‘Should I drape a *kanjeevaram* saree?’ I asked her mockingly.

‘At least put on a nice dress and some makeup.’

‘I’m not dressing up. Isn’t this a casual dinner?’

‘Don’t be difficult. You know what I mean.’

So I did what she told me.

‘You look nice,’ Rohit smirked when he saw me.

‘Shut up.’

Naveen did not turn out to be hideous at all, as we had hoped. In fact, he was quite pleasant to look at. He did have impeccable manners, as my mother had pointed out.

All of us were seated in the living room of our house. Rohit was sitting between Naveen and me on the couch.

‘So what do you do exactly?’ Rohit was asking him.

He went on to tell us and I stopped listening after the first couple of minutes. It was dreadfully dull, whatever he did, something related to finance was all I grasped.

‘I know it’s quite boring,’ he smiled, looking at me.

I hastily tried to rearrange my expression.

‘Tell me more,’ Rohit interfered.

He spoke for another ten minutes, with Rohit asking him more questions.

‘What about you Rithika?’ Naveen addressed me directly now.

So I told him about TIRC, my colleagues and Wagh.

‘They seem interesting,’ he remarked.

‘Well not as interesting as my colleagues,’ Rohit intervened and started a monologue about his office and work mates. I was thankful to Rohit for

doing this.

Just then, Mom said, 'Rithika, why don't you show Naveen your room?'

'Umm, I don't know if Naveen would be interested, Mom,' I gave a fake laugh.

'Sure, let's do that,' he said.

Oh great.

I started moving upstairs along with Naveen. Rohit was about to join us, when Mom called him away. He shrugged, gave me a look saying, "you are on your own kid."

'Nice room, cheerful,' Naveen commented. We sat down on my bed, it felt strangely intimate and reminded of the time Aakash was up here.

'So what do you do apart from work?' Naveen asked me, breaking my train of thought.

We talked about our hobbies and interests for a while. It didn't feel awkward like I thought it would. Naveen was easy to talk to, mainly he listened when I talked. That itself was rare.

'That's a nice picture,' he pointed at a photograph of Rohit and me, when we were children.

'Yes, it was taken at our native place. I had just fallen off a tree and bruised my nose. You can see me trying to shield my face,' I laughed. 'Rohit is being cool like always. He was the one who actually pushed me off the tree.'

Naveen chuckled.

'Rithika, you do know why we are here, right?' he asked, suddenly serious.

'Yes.'

'Look, I don't believe in all this arranged marriage stuff. But it doesn't have to be like this. There is no pressure. We can just pretend that we are meeting up for a date, a blind date set up by our parents. Let's take it from there.'

'I don't want to be married.' I said slowly, not looking at him.

'To me?'

'No, it's not about you. I just don't want to be married.'

‘Ever?’

‘Right now, it does look like that. I am just not in that space. I’m not even thinking about marriage or dating. I’m sorry if my parents gave you the wrong impression.’

‘It’s alright. It’s not like we were getting married right away or something. Like I said, no pressure.’

I smiled. ‘Thanks for understanding.’

‘Hey, it’s all cool. We can still be friends, right?’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, I find you really interesting. Unless you find this awkward?’

‘No, we can be friends. Our parents already are.’

‘That need not be the only reason.’

‘I didn’t mean it that way.’

‘I was kidding.’

We both laughed and talked about his stay in London and then Delhi, before he returned to Mumbai. We came down after a while for dinner.

‘Why don’t you come to our place sometime Rithika?’ said Mrs Panicker to me. ‘I’ll make you some *biryani* or we can order something, whatever you like. Maybe Naveen and you can go out for dinner.’

‘Sure, Aunty,’ I smiled.

When the Panickers left, my mother was beaming at the success of the “meeting.”

‘Rithika, Mrs Panicker likes you so much. She was raving about you. Naveen couldn’t take his eyes off you. This could work out. What do you think?’

‘Mom, I already told you. I don’t want to get married.’

‘But he is such a nice guy. He is the right match for you.’

‘Are you behaving like this just because we found you the guy?’ Dad began.

‘Is there some compulsive need for your generation to do everything yourself? He is good looking, smart, earns well. Tell me one bad thing about him.’

‘Why don’t you understand? This is not about him.’

‘Then what is it about, Rithika?’

I couldn’t explain it to them. I didn’t understand it myself. I went up to my room.

We had the same conversation again the next day.

‘If you don’t like him, we can find someone else,’ said Mom.

‘No. I don’t want you to find anyone.’

‘You have always done what you felt like. We never stopped you. Do this one thing for us.’

‘That doesn’t make any sense. This is an important decision. How can I do it for someone else? It’s my life after all.’

‘I will not have my daughter kissing some dumbass actor and get mocked by the world,’ barked my father.

‘Enough, Dad. That was one time and we weren’t even kissing.’ I had lost all patience by this time.

‘Didn’t you hear about the actor who is in jail now for molesting a colleague? I mean sure, he didn’t do it himself, he sent some goons to do it, all for revenge. Like a common criminal. That is how these guys think.’

‘Dad, that could have been anyone, not just an actor,’ Rohit spoke up. ‘It can happen in any industry, not just the movies.’

I was seething and didn’t want to offer any further explanation. It was beyond any logic.

I grew really tired of the argument which continued for the rest of the day. I had to do something soon.

Chapter Forty

I left home early that Monday as I was eager to get away from home. As a result, I found myself seated at the breakfast table all alone. I saw the sets were up all around the campus, but could not see any film guys around. I guessed they would be starting later. With any luck, I would be back safely in my lab by then.

As I was finishing my second *dosa*, the rest of the gang joined me. The usual chitchat about the weekend began.

‘Someone looks like they came out of a war zone,’ Vinod remarked, looking right at me.

‘Well you would too, if you had your parents forcing some arranged match down your throat,’ I responded.

‘Ooh, tell me more,’ said Divya.

So I proceeded to tell them all about my disastrous weekend. I got a text from Rohit saying, ‘Just heard from the grapevine that Naveen likes you apparently, though I can’t figure out why. You are officially screwed.’

I cursed loudly, causing the engineers at the nearby table to turn and stare at me.

‘What is the matter with you?’ Vinod asked me, telling me to pipe down.

I showed them the message.

‘What am I going to do guys?’ I was in a jam alright.

Arun had not spoken a word so far, he was usually the one to offer advice first. I found it a bit strange and told him so.

‘Well...’ he looked sheepish. ‘I can’t exactly offer any poor opinion on arranged marriage, when I am going to do it myself.’

‘What?’ I sputtered, spilling coffee on the table.

‘I did tell you about it, that I was meeting a few girls. Rithika, you even helped me pick out my clothes.’

‘Yeah, but I thought it was all a joke, just to keep your parents happy.’

‘Initially it was, but I think I may have found the one.’

‘How nice,’ remarked Divya. ‘Tell us about her.’

‘Her name is Shambhavi. She is an engineer and stays in Pune. We hit it off right from the moment we met. We have been on a few dates now and I know that I want to spend the rest of my life with her.’

‘How romantic,’ gushed Divya.

‘What utter rubbish,’ I said, ‘You met this woman a couple of times and you are already thinking of marrying her.’

‘I just know, Rithika. You have to trust your instincts,’ said Arun. ‘I knew what I was getting into, when I agreed to do this.’

‘I’m with Arun on this one. I’m so happy for you,’ said Divya.

‘Dude, of course, we are happy for him,’ I relented. ‘I just don’t want him to make a hasty decision.’

‘Thanks guys. I know it’s soon, but I am convinced I am doing the right thing. That’s what matters, right? She is really nice. I can’t wait for you guys to meet her. On top of all that, even our horoscopes match,’ added Arun.

‘I was wondering when that would come up. You are a scientist,’ reminded Vinod.

‘So? I didn’t base my liking for her on that. I checked it after I decided that I want to marry her. It’s nice to know that even the heavens approve.’

Vinod rolled his eyes, not making any further protest.

‘Rithika, you should tell your parents that you don’t like this Naveen guy,’ Divya told me. ‘They won’t force you in that case. In fact, you should meet all the guys that they ask you to and just reject all of them.’

‘For how long?’

‘For however long it takes for them to stop pestering you.’

‘I don’t think it’s going to work. My father is obsessed with getting me hitched. And one thing I can tell you about that man is that he won’t stop till he gets what he wants.’

‘Sounds like someone we know,’ grinned Vinod.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘Nothing. Just marry the guy,’

‘What the hell?’ I flared up.

‘You anyway don’t like any of the guys I set you up with. You even ditched poor Jatin after going out on a few dates. This guy seems like a nice catch.’

‘A nice catch?’ I couldn’t believe my ears. ‘Didn’t you hear anything I said? I don’t want to get married like this.’

‘Okay, don’t bite my head off. It was just a suggestion,’ mumbled Vinod.

We concentrated on our breakfast for a while.

‘They are here,’ said Vinod, when he noticed me staring at the film sets. ‘All the guys. Just like old times.’

‘Yeah, we met them yesterday. I forgot how good looking they were,’ giggled Divya. ‘The Tiger was here too, said he wanted to welcome them himself. They are not staying here this time though. They have their vanity vans and stuff. So they will be here only during the day mostly.’

‘I thought we could play tennis and chess like last time,’ sighed Vinod.

‘Maybe we still can.’ Divya looked at the watch. ‘They should be here any moment now. They are shooting in our lab today. Mehra and Gupta want to meet me before the actors join.’

Arun offered to help Divya.

‘Oh, we should go then,’ I said. I wanted to get away before any of them arrived, especially a certain Mr Tandon.

Chapter Forty-One

The next couple of days passed quickly. I saw bits and pieces of the action taking place around campus. I managed to steer clear of the actors and Wagh as well. One evening as I was leaving after work, I saw a scene being shot in the lawn outside. Aakash and Vivek were mouthing dialogues in the scene looking sombre and a lot of our guys had gathered around to watch. I considered walking away, but somehow seeing Aakash in person after so long made me stay.

The actors were engrossed in the scene, they were both really good. I realised this was the first time I was watching Aakash in action on a set. The scene got over and they went over to replay it on the monitor. They got back into position for the next one. Aakash laughed as Vivek said something to him. His expression changed abruptly as he spotted me in the crowd. He stared at me for a few seconds before looking away.

The scene started to roll. Aakash fumbled with the opening dialogue. They did a couple of takes more, I could see Aakash struggling. He was clearly irritated with himself. Was it because of me, I couldn't help wondering. He finally got it right and moved away to sit down. He was sipping on some drink now. I left the spot and went to my apartment.

I tried to read, but couldn't get beyond a single paragraph. The way Aakash had looked at me, as if he was furious with me or perhaps I didn't matter to him at all. I gave up on reading and opened my laptop. That didn't last long either. Damn, one glance of the man after days and I was behaving like a love sick teenager. I needed to clear my head. I headed out for a walk. I did a few rounds of the track and sat down on my favourite bench overlooking the sea, as usual.

I was sweating profusely and closed my eyes to relax. When I opened my eyes after a while, I was surprised to find Aakash standing there, looking fetching as ever.

'May I, Dr Menon?' he pointed to the seat next to me.

When I didn't say anything, he sat down anyway.

'How have you been?' he asked.

'I'm fine, how about you?' I replied.

‘Never better.’

There was an awkward silence.

‘Good scene, back there,’ I said.

He nodded and asked about my project. We made small talk for a bit.

‘Rithika, about that day, that kiss...’

I flinched.

‘I mean, I know that it was nothing,’ he continued quickly.

I got up.

‘There is nothing to say. I have to go now.’

‘Rithika please, let us talk.’

‘I know you are back with your ex girlfriend. The world knows about it. I kissed Vivek apparently. So that’s that. We are done talking.’

‘I know you are angry with me.’

‘Why should I be angry?’

‘I should have spoken with you, cleared matters.’

‘Why? It doesn’t matter,’ I was furious.

‘Calm down please.’

If there was anything which could be more infuriating when one was angry, was being asked to calm down. I wanted to slap him.

‘I really have to go. Goodbye.’ I said and left. He called after me, but I didn’t look back. I came back to my apartment and wanted to just throw things around. I grabbed the pillow on my couch and punched it hard.

I went to Arun’s place, but he was not yet home. I remembered that he would be working late tonight. I did not want to be alone at the moment. I went over to Divya’s place and barged in without knocking. I stopped in my tracks. Divya was on the couch, kissing Vinod. They were oblivious to my presence. I had been so livid that it didn’t register for a moment.

‘What the hell?’ I yelled.

They jumped up on seeing me.

‘Rithika, what are you doing here?’ Divya fumbled, clearly shaken.

‘What the hell is going on?’ I couldn’t believe my eyes. ‘You two were kissing,’ I pointed out the obvious, still not believing it.

‘Let me explain,’ Divya began.

‘We are dating,’ Vinod cut in.

‘Yes, this is not a hook-up or something like that,’ said Divya. ‘We love each other.’

This was too much to take in.

‘What? When? How?’ It was mind boggling.

‘It just happened, we have been dating for a while now,’ said Vinod.

‘Vinod helped me get over my breakup with Dilip. He was a good friend and as we spent more time together, we realised that we really like each other.’

I suddenly felt guilty for not being there for Divya. As if reading my thoughts, she said, ‘You did whatever you could for me, Rithika. I can never forget that.’

That made me feel a tad better.

I looked at Vinod. ‘Is that why you have suddenly stopped staring at other women and being a jerk in general? I didn’t realise Divya is the new girl you are serious about,’ I grinned at him.

‘Yes, it is. I don’t need to look at anyone else. I have the most beautiful woman with me now,’ said Vinod.

‘That is so sweet,’ Divya hugged him.

‘Does Arun know?’ I asked.

‘No one knows and you can’t tell anyone.’

‘What? We have to tell Arun. It would be weird otherwise.’

‘Fine, you can tell him, but no one else. We don’t even know what the TIRC policy is, on dating one’s work mate.’

‘Yeah sure, you can count on me to keep a secret. This is so great guys. I am so happy for you.’

Divya and Vinod hugged and started kissing again.

‘Ugh, gross,’ I rolled my eyes.

‘Divya, you could have done so much better though,’ I teased.

‘I know,’ she laughed while Vinod made a face.

‘You better hang on to this one,’ I told him.

Chapter Forty-Two

I returned to my apartment after hanging out for a while with Divya and Vinod. I was happy for them. Now all my friends had found their significant other, including Arun. It also reminded me how far I was from finding anyone. Maybe I should give Naveen a shot after all. No, I immediately rejected that idea. I was just getting desperate. And what about Aakash? It was just getting more and more complicated. I was not meant to date superstars, I always knew that. I was far removed from their world and I was so incapable of handling all the drama. It was just being proved time and again. It would not do for me to be depressed or jealous of my friends. I had to get a grip on myself. I thought I would just have to focus more on my work, maybe publish a few papers. I could take on more, I was certainly capable of it.

It was getting late, but I just couldn’t sleep. I kept replaying the encounter with Aakash in my mind. That didn’t help at all. There was a soft knock on the door. I opened it, to find Aakash standing there, looking sheepish.

‘What are you doing here?’ I asked. ‘At this hour?’

‘Can I come in?’

I reluctantly agreed.

‘Could I get some water?’ he asked, settling down on the couch. I got it for him.

I stood with my arms folded in front of him, as he finished drinking.

‘What are you doing here Aakash?’ I repeated my question.

‘I was in the neighbourhood.’

‘So you decided to stop by and meet your old friend, huh?’

He glowered at me.

‘Why don’t you come clean for once?’ I asked.

He didn’t say a word for a while.

‘I was at a pub nearby, with some of my friends. We were just having fun. When I came out, the paparazzi started bothering me as usual. They tried taking pictures of my friends as well. I asked them nicely at first to just go away, but they wouldn’t. Some of them got real close. I lost my cool and hit one of them.’

I gasped.

‘I know it wasn’t the right thing to do,’ he continued. ‘It will probably be seen as a drunken star hitting out at a poor journalist. But that was not the case at all. You had to be there to know how much I was provoked.’

No matter what he said, I couldn’t believe he had actually hit someone.

‘I can understand Aakash, but violence is not the answer. We read about this stuff all the time, nobody sympathises with an arrogant, entitled celebrity.’

‘Oh it sounds so much worse, when you say it like that,’ he groaned.

‘It’s true, not only does it affect your image, you could go to prison for assault.’

‘Fuck, I’ll have to call my lawyer and my PR team.’

He called up some guy on his phone and talked, while I went to my bedroom.

‘Everything taken care of?’ I asked.

‘I guess. I hope this thing won’t blow right up.’

‘Wow, wish I had a team who could handle my shit.’

‘Well, you don’t get into so much trouble.’

‘Yeah right, but it still doesn’t explain what you are doing here.’

‘I was followed by the paparazzi after the incident, so I asked my driver to

turn into this place, rather than drive all the way back to my house. I think I lost them, they must be camping outside my building right now. Once I got in here, I thought I should not bother Wagh or anyone else. I decided to come to you.'

'I guess you did the right thing.'

'So can I stay here tonight?'

That could turn out to be awkward. I hesitated for a moment. Then I nodded, knowing I was going to regret this. I brewed some coffee and settled down on the chair.

'I can sleep here,' he pointed at the couch.

'Are you sleepy? I can get some blankets.'

'Not yet, do you mind talking for a bit?' he sipped on the coffee. 'This is really good.'

We talked a bit about the movie shoot at our campus.

'Rithika, I know that you didn't kiss Vivek, okay?' he said quietly. 'He told me a couple of days back, when we talked about the incident. I have been trying to talk to you, I did earlier too. I'm sorry I didn't believe you.'

'It's alright,' I said, though it wasn't.

'And about Aditi. We are not back together. She wanted to meet me, just as friends. So I did. The whole thing was blown out of proportion. I'm not seeing her,' he finished.

'It doesn't matter.'

'It does. I mean, I don't care if the world thinks we are dating. But I don't want you to think that.'

'Aakash, don't do this.'

'I haven't been able to get you off my mind. I don't know what it is about you.'

I just looked at him, a million thoughts running in my mind.

'How much have you had to drink tonight?' I asked.

'A little, but I know what I'm saying. Rithika, I think... I'm in love with

you.'

'What?' I blurted out. That was the last thing I expected him to say.

He didn't say anything further and just stared into his coffee mug. He looked wretched.

I got up and went to him. I grabbed his face and gently kissed him. He pulled me down to the couch and kissed me back, gently at first and then, deeply and passionately. He kissed my neck and moved to my shoulder. I threw my head back and closed my eyes. His hands were moving over my body and it was pure ecstasy. I pulled him towards me and kissed him hard. I kissed his cheek and bit his ear. He gave a little groan. I loved the fact that he was getting turned on, because of me. We were both lost in each other's arms. I had not realised how much I wanted him, how much I wanted to be with him.

'Aakash,' I said huskily. He didn't reply, his lips moved down my neck to the wildly beating pulse at the base of my throat. He kissed it, feeling my pounding heart under him.

I bit down on his shoulder, my nails digging deep into his taut back. His hands were on my waist now. He pulled up my top a bit and caressed my skin, making my body writhe with a burning ardour.

'Aakash,' I moaned this time. In response, he just picked me up and carried me to the bedroom.

Chapter Forty-Three

I woke up and turned in bed to see that Aakash was gone. Oh man, he didn't even say goodbye, I groaned. Had I been a fool again? Maybe he didn't want to disturb me while I slept. Then he could have waited for me. Maybe he had to be somewhere. As I debated with these thoughts internally, Aakash walked

into my bedroom.

‘Hey, good morning gorgeous,’ he smiled at me.

I sat up. My clothes were strewn across the floor. My cheeks went red, thinking about the previous night. I pulled up the sheets even higher to cover myself. That made him grin broadly.

‘Shut up,’ I admonished him, not quite meeting his eyes.

‘I didn’t know you were such a wild cat,’ he smirked.

‘What? No way. I don’t know what you are talking about.’

‘Do you want me to show you the bite marks on my body?’ he asked, pulling down his shirt from his shoulder.

‘No,’ I protested, hiding my face, mortified.

He laughed, having great fun at my expense. He sat next to me and held my hand.

‘If I could, I would never leave your side. But I have to go now.’

It was still quite early in the morning. I agreed that no one would notice if he left now. He gave a peck on my forehead and left, promising to call later. I couldn’t wipe the stupid grin off my face as I lay in bed, thinking of him.

I was humming as I got ready for work. If this was love, I didn’t want it to end. Should I tell my friends, I wondered. Well, Arun already knew. Maybe I should tell Divya and Vinod as well.

‘Hey guys,’ I waved at them at the breakfast table. ‘What are you talking about?’ They looked like they were in the middle of a discussion.

‘This,’ Vinod threw the newspaper at me. ‘It’s all over the news too.’

It was a series of snaps along with an article on the front page. Aakash holding Aditi Sinha, and him hitting some guy. The headline screamed, ‘Actor hits journalist in drunken brawl.’

So the story did break, as Aakash had expected. But what was Aditi Sinha doing there? Was she involved in some way? Aakash had not said a word about her.

‘Bollywood star Aakash Tandon, along with girlfriend Aditi Sinha were seen exiting a pub,’ the article began.

Girlfriend, his girlfriend... my mind was losing focus.

I read the article, which mentioned how Aakash had got agitated with the press on being questioned about his personal life.

‘None of your fucking business. Back off,’ he had roared repeatedly and then hit that journalist guy.

The article was full of blame for Aakash, he had a hit a member of the media after all. I obviously knew about this, but I didn’t know about Aditi.

I hadn’t looked at my phone. I saw that I had received a text from Aakash some time back. *“Don’t believe anything. Will call as soon as I can.”*

I re-read the article, mainly to understand Aditi’s role in this, but couldn’t decipher much. It worried me that Aakash failed to mention that the woman was with him at all. I didn’t eat much and kept thinking about it throughout the morning.

Aakash finally called me as I was about to go for lunch. He apologised for not calling earlier, as he was busy dealing with a lot of PR stuff or fire fighting as he called it. He had also called in his lawyers.

‘It’s going to be a nightmare,’ he admitted.

‘You lied to me,’ I had decided to be direct.

‘Rithika, I didn’t want you to be upset, knowing that Aditi was with me.’

‘I *am* upset, Aakash, about the fact that you lied to me.’

‘Rithika, I was actually at the pub with my friends. She came there, I think she was following me, I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I had tried earlier too, so many times, to make her understand that things were over between us. I got worked up that she just wouldn’t get it and so I left. She followed me outside and she was the one holding onto me, trying to prevent me from leaving. I was really angry at her and I saw these guys trying to photograph us. I lost my cool and you know the rest.’

‘Oh, so that was the real reason for the brawl.’

‘Yes, that is the whole truth.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me last night?’

‘I knew that if I even took her name, you would get upset and any chance that

I had to be with you would be lost. You had just barely started talking to me then.'

I really didn't know whether to believe him or not. What if he was playing me along, like the rest of his "conquests." All that stuff about him being a Casanova came to my mind.

'Please believe me. I am telling you the truth.'

'You thought you would be able to stop this thing from coming out.'

'I broke the guy's camera during the scuffle. I foolishly thought that the picture he took of us would never be published. So I didn't tell you. But of course, there were other guys there.'

'So if this hadn't been published, you would have never told me.'

He grew quiet.

'I don't know. Maybe I would have, after some time, after things were better.'

'Then why didn't you tell me this morning?'

'It was too soon.'

'You are just making excuses,' I flared up. I had a terrible headache and felt like weeping. I couldn't believe how Aakash had blatantly lied to me.

'I'm sorry, okay? Look, I'll do anything to make this right. But you have to trust me first. Otherwise this won't work. Can you do that? Can you trust me?'

There was a long silence. I could almost feel my heart growing heavy.

'No,' I said finally.

Chapter Forty-Four

A week later, my friends were sitting around at my apartment watching the cricket match between India and Australia. Divya and Vinod were cuddling together, while Arun was texting his fiancée. There was a break after the first innings.

‘Man, what a game huh?’ remarked Vinod.

‘Looks like we are going to win,’ agreed Divya.

‘Guys, I need to tell you something,’ I began, before the match discussion got any further.

They all looked at me expectantly. I hesitated, took a deep breath and told them the whole sordid saga. Divya and Vinod looked scandalized, Arun knew most of it already.

‘You and Aakash, I just can’t believe it,’ said Divya.

‘Well, it’s all the same because it’s over now,’ I replied.

‘Maybe you were too quick to judge him,’ said Arun.

‘Let’s not go there,’ I warned. I did not want to hear about what I should or should not have done. The whole thing was twisted and it would just confuse me, besides I had already decided the future course of action.

‘There is one more thing I wanted to tell you,’ I continued. ‘I talked to The Tiger a couple of days back about working for the new TIRC centre. He was reluctant at first and even tried to talk me out of it. I mean that was sweet of him, saying that I was a valuable asset for this place. I didn’t know that he didn’t want to lose me. But I persisted and told him to forward my application. The good news is that I got selected and will be starting work soon on the setup. I heard about it today.’

‘But the centre is in China,’ said Divya.

‘Yeah, that’s the attraction,’ I gave a wry laugh.

‘Rithika, are you serious? Don’t do this. You want to run away because of what exactly, a guy?’ Arun was indignant.

‘It’s a wonderful opportunity. You heard The Tiger. Future career prospects, blah blah.’

‘Don’t give me that bullshit. You told me that you never wanted to leave the country. What about your family? I’m sure your parents had a lot to say.’

‘They were furious. My dad thinks I’ve gone completely crazy. But if I stay here, they will just get me married to some random guy. I need some peace in my life right now.’

‘Oh come on, they are not going to force you, and you are not one who gets subdued. Don’t you talk like some medieval damsel in distress,’ Arun was not letting it go.

‘Fine, I just don’t want them pestering me.’

‘What is the real reason, Rithika?’ asked Vinod.

I did not want to admit that I was in fact doing it to get away from Aakash. It would appear to be childish, a smart, grown woman changing cities to mend a broken heart. But I was sure I wasn’t the first person in history to do it. So I told them that this place, even my apartment reminded me of him and I wanted to go away.

‘Is this going to be a permanent move or till things cool down?’ asked Vinod.

‘I don’t know. I thought I would do it first and then depending on how it goes, I will decide.’

All three of them looked upset about my decision, but I had made up my mind. Arun, who normally never lost his cool, looked really mad. I hoped they would accept it eventually.

I had to leave in the next fortnight, considering that the setup phase of the new centre was to begin soon. I worked on getting my visa and the rest of my travel plans. I also handed over all my current projects, mostly to Vinod. He cursed about all the additional work he had to do. I knew he was more upset about me leaving, of course.

I spent time shopping and hanging out with my friends. We had little time left together and I was sure going to miss being around these guys. Though they hadn’t forgiven me for “abandoning” them as Arun liked to call it, they did not make me suffer, considering that I was going away soon. All this kept me busy and it also helped keep my mind off Aakash and our breakup. I still thought of him when I was alone, especially at nights. I knew I was being a big time loser when I hugged my pillow and cried at times, but I had never

felt lonelier in my life.

While the shoot was still on at TIRC, I didn't see Aakash at all. I was certainly avoiding the areas where all the action was happening and it did look like Aakash was trying to avoid me as well. I met Vivek once though as he was coming out of his vanity van and told him about my move to Shanghai. He wished me luck and promised to be in touch.

The guys organised a farewell party for me where all of us got emotional. I mean, even The Tiger got all "senti" and stuff. Hemant came up to me and awkwardly wished me all the best for my move. There was nothing I could say to him. Later, we all hogged on the lovely food and got drunk.

I spent little time at home, as matters had not cooled down yet. Rohit was the only one who supported me, though he was doubtful at first. I stayed there for a couple of days. My parents didn't say much, except for the occasional muttering and glaring. I would be glad to get away.

Finally it was time to leave. I had never stayed away from this city for a long time. Now I didn't know how long I was going to be away. But I had made my choice and it was time to act on it. I hugged my family and friends goodbye and boarded the flight to Shanghai, hoping that the city would be kinder to me than this one had been.

Chapter Forty-Five

Before I knew it, a year had passed since I came to Shanghai. I had completely immersed myself in setting up the new centre. There was a lot of work to do and I didn't mind it one bit. I had adapted well to the city, though it took me a while to get used to the local food and language. I didn't have much time to roam around, but I did enjoy visiting a place known as "The Bund" sometimes, which reminded me of Marine Drive back home.

I was video chatting with Divya at the moment. She was still dating Vinod. To be honest, I had not expected it to last that long, but they were apparently quite serious about the relationship. She was giving me the latest updates about our TIRC colleagues.

'Hope you have received the wedding invitation from Arun by now,' she said.

‘Yes, we had a long chat about it.’

‘When are you coming down then?’

‘I don’t know Divya, if I can.’

‘What?’ she asked, appalled. ‘You are not coming? Arun will kill you.’

‘I know, but things are a bit crazy down here. I will have to take a few days off.’

‘This is Arun we are talking about,’ she reminded me. ‘You have got to be kidding me.’

We talked for a while and I hung up, promising that I would try my best to work things out. I had carefully avoided saying anything to Arun. I knew he would not take it well.

After my call with Divya, I just started scrolling through my phone mindlessly. There were some pictures of our time together at Matheran and so many other trips. We did have such a wonderful time together. My mind wandered back to the memories and I lost track of time. When I finally came back to the present, I knew that I must go back to India, even if I didn’t really have the time or the inclination. I would have to work it out somehow, for Arun’s sake. He had done so much for me too.

I managed to get about a fortnight’s leave and returned home. Rohit had come to pick me up at the airport.

‘How are Mom and Dad?’ I asked him as we drove home.

‘You know, the usual.’

‘I hope they are not still mad at me.’

‘At you? Their precious princess? Yeah right,’ he chuckled. ‘They were cross for a while as you know, but I think right now, they are just looking forward to seeing you again.’

I was relieved to hear that. I didn’t want any unpleasantness at home. I asked Rohit about his work and life in general. My parents were not home when we reached. It gave me the chance to chat with my friends and tell them I was here. I made plans to meet them. My parents were cool and not at all hostile, like Rohit had mentioned, when they came home after work. My father asked about the progress of my project. They seemed to have forgiven me after all.

I met Divya and Vinod for lunch the next day. Arun had already left for Pune, the wedding was only a couple of days away.

‘I must say, I expected you to be with some other chick by now,’ I teased Vinod.

‘Thanks a lot,’ he said with heavy sarcasm. ‘But I have no intention of letting this one go.’

He held Divya’s hand as he said it. It was really sweet.

‘You better not. You won’t find anyone more awesome,’ I said.

We talked about getting Arun a great gift. When Divya excused herself to go to the restroom leaving Vinod and me alone, he said, ‘Can you keep a secret?’

‘I’m offended that you even had to ask me that.’ I acted mock shocked.

‘Okay, so I’m going to ask Divya to marry me,’ he grinned widely.

I couldn’t believe it.

‘Oh my god,’ I shrieked, causing people around to stare at us. ‘For real?’

He nodded.

‘That is so great. I’m so happy for you,’ I hugged him.

‘You are the only one to know. But you cannot tell anyone right now, okay?’

‘Of course. So when are you planning to do it?’

‘At Arun’s wedding.’

‘Dude, you can’t do that. You can’t steal his thunder.’

‘No, of course not. I meant after the rituals and stuff. People get all emotional at weddings, especially girls, right? So I plan to take advantage of that.’

‘You mean, she will be at her most vulnerable then and likely to not refuse,’ I laughed.

‘Exactly,’ he agreed.

‘Well played.’

‘Who?’ Divya was back.

‘Umm, we were talking about the match last night,’ I said.

We turned the discussion to more mundane topics. Though I was happy for them, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy. There it was again, rearing its ugly head. Why did it have to be back? No, I should be happy. What kind of friend was I, I immediately rebuked myself and smiled forcibly.

The next couple of days went by in a blur. The three of us left for Arun's wedding, which was to happen the next day. It was like a road trip driving from Mumbai to Pune, albeit a short one. We reached Arun's home where we found him running around, attending to everything at once.

'Guys, you made it,' he hugged us. 'Rithika, you are here,' he yelled with a huge grin. I was glad I did the right thing by being here. Arun was like a brother to me. How could I not come?

'So what do you need us to do?' I asked.

'Nothing, just rest for now. We will have fun in the evening with all the dancing and stuff,' he said.

'Of course not. We are happy to help around here. What about your bachelor party?' I asked.

Arun and Vinod exchanged awkward looks.

'We kind of already had it in Mumbai last weekend. It was awesome,' said Vinod with a dreamy look. We all laughed and got down to work. We had a great time at the *haldi* ceremony in the evening. We literally applied tons of turmeric paste on Arun. It was like playing Holi all over again. We danced the night away while the DJ played the latest Bollywood tracks.

'Rithika, could I talk to you for a moment?' Arun pulled me away from the crowd. He looked really nervous.

'What is it?'

'I probably won't get a chance to tell you tomorrow morning.'

'Okay.' I waited.

'I invited the Bollywood guys for the wedding. We had kept in touch after the shoot. Mehra and Gupta are shooting abroad and sent their good wishes. Aakash and Vivek have accepted the invite and they will probably be here tomorrow.'

I just stared at him. This was the last thing I expected.

‘I know I probably shouldn’t have asked them, knowing you would be here,’ he carried on. ‘But you know, after the movie came out, the one which was shot at TIRC, have you seen it? Anyway, it was a blockbuster. Everyone in my family wanted to meet them, especially after they realised that I knew them personally. Shambhavi is a big fan of Aakash. So I had to, sort of do it. I’m sorry.’

I crossed my arms across my chest and let him suffer for a bit before saying, ‘You don’t have to apologise. I can understand the glory of inviting a movie star to your wedding.’

Arun looked nervous. So I reassured him, ‘Really it’s fine.’

‘Will you be able to deal with it tomorrow?’

‘I’ll try my best to ignore him. I’m sure these big stars won’t be spending more than ten minutes of their precious time here. It should be easy enough.’ I gave a fake smile. Arun smiled and hugged me. We rejoined the crazy dancers.

Chapter Forty-Six

I woke up quite early the next morning. My head hurt and I felt dehydrated and disoriented. I hadn't had much to drink. Maybe it was due to the fact that I hardly slept at all. Damn you Arun, I cursed aloud. Why did he have to invite Tandon to his wedding? I pretended to be okay with it, while I was clearly not. The very thought of coming face to face with him had kept me awake.

I dragged myself to the washroom and washed my face. I came back to the bed and dozed off. After about another half an hour, I heard a knock on the door. It was Divya.

'I thought I would check if you were up,' she said. 'Are you okay?'

I nodded and lay down on the bed again.

'Are you sure you are alright?' she continued. 'You look worn out.'

'Just a little headache. I'll be fine.'

'I guess you drank a little too much,' said Divya. 'Do you want something, maybe juice?'

I didn't try and disagree with her. I didn't want to discuss the real reason with her. We didn't talk for a while. I wanted to sleep but the moment I closed my eyes, my mind behaved like a drunken monkey and went out of control.

'Maybe we should start getting ready. Let me know if you need any help.'

She went away.

I stood beneath the shower for quite some time, trying to wash away the hangover like feeling away. Get over it, I chided myself. I wore a bright yellow saree, I still didn't know how to drape one properly. I would ask Divya to help correct out the folds later. I put on some makeup and accessories, including gold *jhumkas* which were actually my grandmother's. I also stuck a small *bindi* on my forehead, which I rarely did. But it was a wedding after all. So I decided to go the whole traditional way.

I went to Divya's room. She was wearing a green saree with a silver border.

'Oh my god, you look stunning,' she almost screamed, looking at me.

'So do you,' I smiled. She really looked beautiful. 'I'm so happy for you.' I almost cried, remembering the imminent proposal.

‘Umm, it’s Arun who is getting married today, not me.’

‘I know,’ I laughed. ‘It’s a happy occasion.’

Once we both were ready, we went down to the lobby where we met Vinod, who was already waiting for us.

‘You ladies look absolutely gorgeous,’ he said, giving a low whistle.

‘We know,’ winked Divya. ‘You look quite dashing yourself.’

Vinod was wearing a maroon and cream *sherwani*.

‘Thank you. I’m always amazed at how you girls do it.’

‘Do what?’ I asked.

‘Just transform yourself like that. One minute, you are lounging around in your sweatpants and the next, you are an angel who has come down from heaven.’

‘Well, if I tell you, I would have to kill you,’ said Divya.

We all laughed and left for the venue. The festivities were in full flow. The band had already arrived. We got involved in the proceedings as well. Arun looked handsome in his traditional Maharashtrian wedding attire.

‘Are you nervous?’ I asked him.

‘A bit. But I’ve never been this happy,’ he replied. I could make out it was true.

Soon it was time for the rituals, the auspicious time was near. Everyone gathered around the stage, where the bride and groom were standing, separated from each other by a sheet, mantras being chanted.

There was a commotion outside and we could hear people screaming. But it was not something to be alarmed about. Apparently those were screams of pleasure. I braced myself for I knew what was coming. I saw Aakash and Vivek walking in, smiling and waving at the guests. People were clapping and cheering. They came and stood near the stage now. Arun smiled at them and the rituals began.

I tried to concentrate on what was happening up there on stage. My best friend was getting married... Aakash had grown a beard, he looked so much hotter now, if that was even possible... the priest was chanting hymns,

Shambhavi looked radiant, Arun so content, they were perfect for each other... Aakash was wearing a suit, he looked dapper, he was smiling, damn those dimples. I stopped glancing covertly at him and focussed entirely on the stage. Divya and Vinod were holding hands, standing next to me. I threw the rice in my hand at the stage along with the others, showering the couple with blessings.

Aakash and Vivek settled down after the rituals when the bride and groom went to change into their attire for the reception. I didn't expect them to stay for so long. I could see people approaching them to talk or click pictures with them. I stayed as far away as possible. The couple returned on stage and people started congratulating them. Divya, Vinod and I stood in a corner talking.

'They look so happy,' commented Divya.

'Shambhavi is really nice,' I agreed.

'I can't believe someone from our group is married,' said Divya.

'Yeah, we are grownups now,' I chuckled.

'Hey, who are you calling a grownup?' asked Vinod. We all laughed.

We gazed at the stage, each one lost in their thoughts.

'Divya, I need to talk to you about something,' began Vinod, which was my cue to leave and give them their time alone. I excused myself and went out to the small garden adjoining the hall. Apart from a few children who were playing in a corner, there was no one around. There was a small fountain in the garden, with lights flashing on it, covering the water in multiple hues. I went and sat on the edge of the fountain and began humming to myself.

Chapter Forty-Seven

I glanced around and found Aakash standing a few feet away, watching me quietly. I gave an involuntary gasp. He walked towards me slowly, his hands in his pockets.

‘Hi,’ he said and sat down next to me. After we exchanged hellos and asked each other how we were doing, we grew quiet. Maybe I should just make some excuse and leave, I thought. But I didn’t and inexplicably sat there next to him.

‘You look really beautiful today,’ he said. I looked up into his eyes and felt like I was drowning deep in them.

‘Thanks,’ I mumbled, looking away. I had forgotten the effect he had on me. ‘You look great too.’

‘Nice wedding, huh? Arun’s a lucky guy.’

I agreed. He asked about Divya and Vinod, so I told him that they would probably be getting married soon too.

‘Wow, that’s nice,’ he said.

The talk shifted to our families. I couldn’t believe it was so easy talking to this guy, who I hadn’t seen in more than a year. I was chatting away about my parents and Rohit, who had just completed his Ph.D.

‘So now all of you are Dr Menons,’ he shook his head, smiling.

‘Yeah, I used to give Rohit a hard time as he was the only non doctor in our family. But my parents are medical doctors, highly acclaimed too, so they are the only “real” doctors according to them. The sad part is now I can’t tease him anymore. ’

He laughed.

‘Please pass along my congratulations to him.’

‘I will.’

I asked about his family and he told me that he had travelled to Europe recently along with his mother, his step father and step brother.

‘Oh, wasn’t that weird for you?’ I asked.

‘No, I am friendly with them. My step father has been more of a parent to me than my actual father.’

He proceeded to tell me about the trip in detail.

‘I’m sure the media must have covered the trip,’ I teased him.

‘Well, they tried to, but I kept it all a secret. I did not want the paparazzi all over me while I’m swimming around wearing nothing but my trunks.’

That conjured up a very sexy image of him coming out of the water in my head and I immediately pushed it away.

‘So I heard you were in China?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, it is quite an experience.’

‘Really?’

‘I found it difficult initially, due to the vast difference in food habits and the language barrier. I guess it became easier eventually. I even understand a bit of Mandarin now.’

‘That’s impressive. What about the food? Have you started eating snakes and worms now?’

‘Of course not,’ I chuckled. ‘I just cook at home a lot more than I used to.’

‘Always a better option.’ He nodded sagely. He talked about all the healthy food he was eating these days, courtesy his dietician. I forgot that these guys had their personal trainers and stuff, to take care of their health. They really did live in another world.

‘What about guys?’ he asked all of a sudden.

‘What?’

‘I mean, how do the Chinese men measure up?’

‘Oh, they are pretty nice,’ I said, not knowing what else to say.

‘They are?’ He seemed interested.

‘Well, I wouldn’t know much. I didn’t get any time to socialise. I was buried too deep in my work.’ I felt like a loser the moment the words were out of my mouth. I probably should have lied and told him that I had dated tons of guys and was clearly not pining away after him. He obviously had the nation’s

young beauties falling all over him.

‘Are you seeing anyone?’ I asked directly, feeling bold. He did start this thread of conversation after all. Also, I really wanted to know.

‘No. I’ve been single for a while now,’ he said, making my heart do a little jig. ‘Even the gossip magazines have had nothing to write about me.’

‘That’s great.’

‘So when do you go back?’

‘In another few days. I will be attending a symposium later this week at TIRC. I’m actually the key note speaker. It will be great to go back there, even if for a short time. After that, I will go for a trip with my family, before I return to China. It was really hard to get leave even for a few days. The project is in full swing right now.’

‘We have to put in tremendous efforts for our career sometimes. Even I tend to get completely immersed in my work.’

‘Yes, I have heard.’ I smiled.

‘So you have been keeping track of me, huh?’ he gave a wicked smile.

‘No, I mean...’ I stuttered.

‘Relax, I was just kidding. I know Dr Menon does not have time to follow the life and work of mere Bollywood actors.’ He said it in jest, but it felt like he was taunting me.

‘Aakash, it’s not like that.’

‘It’s okay.’ He looked deep into my eyes. I could not look away. It felt too intimate.

‘You really do look amazing, especially with this *bindi* and *jhumkas*,’ he said, still staring into my eyes. He gently flicked my earring with his finger. ‘You should try this look more often.’

I blushed at his compliment and finally looked away.

‘Have you seen our movie?’ he asked, changing the topic.

‘What? Oh no, I haven’t. Congratulations though, I heard it is a massive hit.’

‘Thank you. It’s hard to believe that you haven’t seen the movie shot at your

own campus?’ he asked, looking incredulous.

‘I just haven’t found the time,’ I lied.

‘Is it because I’m in it?’ he guessed correctly.

‘Of course not. What does that have to do with anything?’ I gave a nervous laugh.

‘Okay, maybe you should watch it then.’

‘Maybe I will.’

‘We should watch it together. I could arrange a private screening.’

‘Oh no, please don’t bother,’ I said hastily. ‘Anyway, I don’t think I will get the time to watch it here. I have a packed schedule, like I told you. But I will watch it very soon and will surely give you feedback.’

‘I look forward to it, Dr Menon.’

‘Maybe we should go inside,’ I said. It had been a long time since we had been sitting here. He looked as if he wanted to say something else, but he didn’t. He stood up, said goodbye and left.

Chapter Forty-Eight

I came back in feeling completely jittery. The man still did this to me.

‘Hey,’ Vivek Naidu called out to me. ‘I was wondering where you were.’ I spoke to him for a while, both of us updating each other on our work. The guy was always nice to talk to. He still didn’t have any airs of a superstar. I congratulated him on the movie’s success.

‘I think it’s time for us to go,’ Aakash interrupted our conversation. They had travelled together in Aakash’s car.

‘Keep in touch, Rithika,’ said Vivek. Both the actors said goodbye to the crowd and left. They didn’t stay for lunch as they had work commitments. It was a wonder that they stayed for so long.

Almost all the people were done congratulating the couple by now. I found Divya and Vinod sitting together and pulled them up on the stage.

‘Guys, we are engaged,’ shrieked Divya, the minute we finished wishing

Arun and Shambhavi.

‘What?’ asked Arun.

‘Vinod asked me to marry him and I said yes,’ she showed us the ring on her finger.

‘Dude, you got a ring and everything, damn,’ I teased Vinod.

‘Oh my god, you guys are insane. It’s wonderful. Congratulations,’ said Arun. We did a group hug.

We enjoyed the delicious lunch, a vast spread of Indian, Italian and Chinese cuisines. I was so full I couldn’t move. My mind was replaying the earlier conversation with Aakash. What should I make of the whole thing?

‘Did you guys hear?’ one of the guests was saying to Arun nearby, while I was lost in my thoughts. ‘Their car met with an accident while going back. There is no confirmation on survivors.’

It slowly sunk in, who he was referring to.

‘What happened to them?’ I asked. ‘It’s Aakash and Vivek, isn’t it? Are they alright?’

We rushed to the television inside. The news channels only mentioned that Aakash and Vivek met with an accident on the Mumbai-Pune expressway when a truck coming from the opposite direction jumped the dividers and slammed into their car. Other details were unknown so far.

I felt like everything was happening in slow motion. I couldn’t hear or see anything. I couldn’t even breathe. If anything had happened to... no, I couldn’t even think that. It was unbearable. I felt like I was about to faint.

‘Rithika, sit down, here,’ Arun caught hold of my hand and made me sit down on the chair nearby.

‘Is he... are they okay... what has happened?’ I couldn’t even put words together.

‘I’ll find out, it’s going to be alright,’ he said.

There was no update yet on the internet too. We tried calling their numbers as well, but couldn’t reach them. We sat there for agonizing moments watching the screen for any news.

‘I can’t just sit here, doing nothing. I’m going out there,’ I said finally. It was killing me, not knowing.

‘Rithika, no, you can’t do that,’ Arun tried to stop me. I think he was scared of what I would find out once I did get there. I could see the concern in his eyes.

‘Please, just wait for a while. Let us get some confirmation first,’ he tried to reason with me.

‘Confirmation of what exactly? Whether he is alive or not?’ I broke down, as I said the words out aloud. Divya held me while I wept.

‘Guys, look at this,’ Vinod pointed at the screen. The latest news was that Aakash, Vivek and the driver were all injured and had been taken to hospital. No one had been killed.

I heaved a sigh of relief. At least he was alive. But I still didn’t know how bad his condition was. Was he critical, struggling for his life? Horrible images came to my mind. Why does this happen? Why do our worst fears attack our minds at times like these?

‘Can we go now? I can’t, I just can’t sit here, please,’ I said.

‘I’ll drive you,’ offered Arun.

‘No, it’s your wedding. You should stay,’ I said.

‘Come on Rithika, they are my friends too. Besides, I want to be with you. I can’t let you go alone.’

I hugged him and wept some more while he patted my head.

‘We will go too,’ said Divya. So all four of us left for the hospital. I couldn’t stop my tears all along the way. Arun was driving and saying words of encouragement. All of us were hoping that the guys would be alright. I was concerned about Vivek, he had always been a good friend. But when I thought about Aakash, my heart broke. I couldn’t bear to lose him.

I did believe in God, but I was never someone who prayed a lot. I hardly ever visited temples or performed religious rituals. At the moment though, I prayed hard. It helped to keep my mind off what I was about to witness once we reached the hospital.

There were quite a few media persons around the hospital, with their vans

and cameras, though the full battalion was still to reach. We rushed inside. The hospital staff refused to let us meet them, saying there were already too many people waiting to see them. We pleaded with them that we just wanted a few minutes, but to no avail.

‘Can you at least tell us what is their condition?’ I asked, feeling frustrated.

‘We cannot divulge any information at the moment,’ was the maddening response.

Well, I refused to leave till I met Aakash and settled down to wait at the lobby. We were probably in luck as barely a half an hour later, we saw Vivek walking out of the elevator.

‘Hey, what are you guys doing here?’ he asked as soon as he saw us.

‘Are you alright? We came to see you guys of course. What happened out there?’ I asked.

He told us about the accident, how they were hit by a truck which came out of nowhere, crushing the divider and almost crushing their car. Their driver had been quick to respond and managed to swerve their car, avoiding a lot of the impact.

‘We would probably be dead if it wasn’t for the quick reflex of the driver. Poor guy though, he is in a critical condition.’

‘And what about Aakash?’ asked Divya.

‘He is fine, has a few injuries, nothing major of course. I escaped with just a few scratches,’ he pointed to his arm. ‘Really lucky.’

‘Can we see Aakash?’ asked Arun. ‘These guys won’t let us meet him.’

Vivek escorted the four of us upstairs to Aakash’s room. He was lying on the bed with bandages on his forearm and head.

‘Oh my god,’ I exclaimed, as soon as I saw him like that.

‘It’s not as bad as it looks,’ said Aakash. ‘This is just a precaution. I’m fine.’

Vivek left us with Aakash, while we enquired about his health.

‘My driver, poor chap,’ sighed Aakash. ‘He is battling for his life. The impact of the collision almost killed him, almost killed us all. It is really a stroke of luck, to be alive. Hey, I really am fine,’ he said the last part, looking straight

at me.

‘She wouldn’t stop crying,’ said Divya.

‘Divya...’ I interrupted her before she could say anything more embarrassing.

Divya, Vinod and Arun stepped out discreetly, leaving me alone with Aakash.

‘We couldn’t reach you on the phone when we heard,’ I said.

‘Yes, my phone was damaged. I’m sure most people must have assumed the worst.’

‘I thought you were gone forever,’ I was on the verge of tears again.

‘Rithika, it’s alright. I’m right here,’ he smiled. I sat next to him on the chair. I took his uninjured hand in mine, to reassure myself that he was indeed here and unharmed. He gave it a squeeze.

‘They will let me go tomorrow morning. I asked the doctor. They are only keeping me here for monitoring purposes,’ he said.

‘I guess they want to confirm there is no internal bleeding or damage. Sometimes that’s not immediately apparent.’

‘Yes doctor,’ he teased.

I hit him playfully on the arm. He pretended to be hurt and we laughed. I decided to stay there for the night. I sent the others back, even though they wanted to stay. I didn’t want Arun to be away from his wife on his wedding day. Aakash asked me to go home, but I refused. There was a couch in his room. I would be quite comfortable sleeping there, I insisted. Aakash made a couple of calls, including to his parents, before he slept.

Chapter Forty-Nine

I woke up a couple of times in the night to check on Aakash. He appeared to be alright. I couldn't resist the temptation of looking at him, as he slept peacefully. I kissed his forehead lightly, but he didn't wake up. I knew it was because of the sedatives he had been given to help ease the pain.

The next morning, he seemed fit and ready to leave. He was discharged after a quick check-up by the doctor.

'Rithika, I want to thank you for staying with me last night,' said Aakash.

'It was nothing,' I was embarrassed.

'Well, it meant a lot to me. So where are you headed?'

'Back to Mumbai today. I told you I have a packed schedule.'

'So why don't I give you a lift back home?'

'Oh no, that's alright. I will go with Divya and Vinod.'

'Why? Are you afraid of getting in a car with me? All the damage has been done already,' he joked.

'No, it's not that. My things are still at the hotel. I have to change,' I mumbled. 'You go ahead.'

'Why don't you do all that? I will wait for you to come back. I'll send my driver with you.'

I tried to argue, but he just didn't listen. I met Divya and Vinod at the hotel and informed them that I would be driving back with Aakash. They were quite surprised, but went along with it.

Aakash was waiting for me at a side entrance of the hospital. We had to leave in secret as the place was mobbed by media as well as his fans. Vivek had already left the previous night after checking with Aakash. So it was just the two of us in Aakash's car. The rest of his staff had arrived and were following us in separate cars.

'Quite a scene here, huh?' I remarked, looking at the crowd as we left the area.

'Yes, I just made an appearance and gave a statement to the media to show that I was alright and not yet dead,' said Aakash. 'Some of them must be

disappointed,' he grinned.

'Phew, all in a day's work.'

He laughed out loud. He told me that they would drop me off home first and then proceed. I gave my address to the driver. We continued to catch up over our lives in the past year. He told me about the projects he was currently working on.

'That is some interesting stuff,' I agreed.

'Yes, trying to stay relevant in an ever changing environment.'

'Good for you. Hey, continue to do this and I may even start watching your movies,' I teased.

He made a face and we both laughed. We stopped for breakfast on the way. We didn't get out of the car but his staff got us tea and sandwiches. The time passed quickly with music playing softly and both of us chattering away. I didn't even realise that we had reached my house and it was time to say goodbye. I really didn't want to get down, but I thanked Aakash and left. Neither of us made any promises to keep in touch.

I knew my parents would be at work, but Rohit was home.

'Who was that?' he asked me. 'Quite a few cars there.'

'Aakash Tandon,' I replied, feeling listless all of a sudden.

'Oh, I didn't know you were friends with him again.' Rohit knew bits and pieces of what had happened between Aakash and me. We used to discuss it sometimes over chat, while I was in Shanghai.

I plonked down on the couch while Rohit got me some water to drink.

'Want to talk about it?' he asked. I closed my eyes, my mind wandering over what had happened these past two days. I told him the whole story.

'Is he alright?' asked Rohit. 'That crash sounds deadly.'

'Yes, he is fine now. Like I told you, minor injuries, that's all.'

'You do know that you still care for him,' said Rohit, after we were quiet for a while.

I didn't disagree with him, as I was thinking the same thing the whole time.

‘I think he also feels the same way,’ he continued.

‘I don’t know that.’

‘Come on Rithika. Isn’t it obvious?’

‘I think I made a mistake by not trusting him when he asked me to.’

‘Well, it was a choice you made, based on the prevailing circumstances at the time. No point in beating yourself up over it.’

‘Things have changed, Rohit. We both made certain choices and have moved on. Life doesn’t wait for us to make up our minds. I mean, sure, he may like me, but is it the same? Does he think of me in the same way as before?’

‘Why don’t you ask him?’

‘What?’

‘Yeah, why don’t you ask him?’

‘You mean, I should just pick up the phone and ask him if he still loves me? Are you crazy?’

‘What is the worst that could happen?’

‘He could hear me,’ I said, exasperated.

‘But what if he still loves you? Shouldn’t you at least know that?’

I didn’t say anything to this statement as I wondered if Rohit was indeed right.

‘I think he is the one,’ I said finally.

‘So what is your next move?’ he asked me.

‘Nothing, okay? I don’t want to push my way back into his life. He said “take care” when he left. He didn’t say that he would call me or text me or anything of the sort.’

‘Are you a teenager? Quit behaving like one. Welcome to the adult world, Rithika. I suggest that you let him know what you feel. If he rejects you, don’t be a baby and move on.’

I told him that I would think about it, more to get him off my back than actually doing it.

Chapter Fifty

I spent the next couple of days working on my speech for the symposium. There was no word from Aakash. Divya had called me to know about the drive back home and I told her what I was going through. She, like my brother, thought I should just tell Aakash. I promised her I would do something after this thing was over. Arun was on his honeymoon of course, so I didn't bother him. I was quite nervous about my speech. I went over it multiple times with Rohit, who kept correcting and giving me tips. He also reminded me that I was a fabulous public speaker, so I need not worry too much.

Divya and Vinod were in the audience when the conference began and wished me luck. There were quite a few people gathered there, at least with respect to a science convention. I took a deep breath and stepped up to deliver one of the best speeches of my life. There was thunderous applause as I sat down at the end. Rohit was right, it couldn't have gone better. Vinod gave me a thumbs-up. After a few more talks by the scientists, there was a brief Q&A session. We turned to face the audience. I answered a couple of questions and looked on politely while the rest answered. It was almost over now.

'I have a question for Dr Menon,' a very familiar voice said.

I searched the crowd, located the person in question and my jaw dropped. It was Aakash. What the hell was he doing here and why was he asking me a question, I wondered. I gathered my composure and gestured for him to go ahead with his question.

'Isn't it true that India has already lost many scientists to institutions abroad, to what we know as the "brain drain" right? Shouldn't we focus on measures to keep good Indian scientists over here, in that case?' he asked.

'I don't see how that is relevant to this discussion,' said one of my fellow panellists.

'It's okay, I'll answer it,' I said. 'It depends on the opportunities that are available here. If someone feels that it is no longer significant for their career to be here, no measure will be enough to retain them. I do agree that there is still work to be done here though, with respect to providing more prospects.'

'What if there were... opportunities here? Would that convince them to

stay?’ he continued.

Everyone was looking at the handsome young man now, some of them apparently recognising him, muttering excitedly. He waited for my response, not looking at anyone else.

‘Well yes, in that case, they could consider it,’ I replied, smiling. He smiled right back at me.

As the session ended, Aakash left the conference hall before people could get close to him. Divya and Vinod rushed up to me. I was too stunned to speak.

‘That was a great speech by the way,’ said Vinod.

‘Go, Rithika,’ said Divya. ‘He is waiting for you.’

‘What? How do you know?’

‘I told him,’ she said, not meeting my eyes.

‘Told him what exactly?’ I narrowed my eyes.

‘I called him and told him that you still liked him.’ She looked distinctly uncomfortable now.

‘You did what?’ I couldn’t believe her.

‘Yeah, I told him he had to get his act together before you went back to China.’

‘Why did you meddle in this? He is going to think I’m such a loser.’

‘He knows you are not aware of this. I did it of my own accord. I could not see you suffer, Rithika, when you both obviously feel the same about each other. Don’t you see that you guys are meant to be together? Since you were too thick headed or maybe too chicken to tell him, I had to meddle. I am not sorry about it. Now go, he is waiting for you and you can thank me later.’

Though I wanted to murder her right there, I chose to ignore her and ran outside, pushing past the crowd. I knew where he would be. I reached the jogging track and reached my favourite sea facing bench, but there was no one there. I looked around the place, but couldn’t see anyone. I sat down panting as I had run all the way here.

‘Waiting for someone?’ I heard his drawl and looked up to see him standing there, grinning like a maniac. He walked towards me and sat down.

‘That was quite *filmi*, what you did back there,’ I said.

‘Did you expect anything less from a Bollywood actor?’

‘Thank god, you didn’t break into a song and dance.’

‘I could do that now, if you wish,’ he offered.

‘So you don’t want me to go back, huh?’

‘Did I say that?’ he laughed. I hit his arm.

‘I want you to go, finish up your project and come back,’ he said. ‘I can wait for you.’

‘What if I prefer to stay there? It would be good for my career.’

‘Then we will have to work it out long distance, I guess. I could fly in and out. You could come here at times. We will come up with something.’

‘I was kidding. I want to come back, of course. I wasn’t keen on leaving in the first place.’

‘Oh thank god.’

‘This bearded look suits you by the way,’ I remarked.

‘Really? It’s for my new movie. I play an alcoholic,’ he laughed.

‘Maybe you can keep the beard.’

‘Is that right?’

‘So what happens next?’ I teased.

‘How about I show you a teaser?’ he asked, pulling me close. He hugged me tight and kissed my neck. He slowly kissed my jaw line and moved to my lips. After kissing passionately for a bit, we broke apart for some air. He caressed my face and tucked a lock of loose hair behind my ear.

‘I love you,’ I said to him, for the first time ever.

‘I love you more,’ he said, looking deep in my eyes. I knew it was absolutely true. I wished we could stay like this forever. It was perfect.

‘Oh no,’ I said, hitting my head.

‘What happened?’ he asked concerned.

‘My parents, I mean, my dad in particular. He is going to throw a fit. An

actor, I mean, how am I going to explain things?’

‘Oh that, we will do it together. Don’t worry sweetheart.’

‘And if he doesn’t agree?’

‘Well, he will just have to live with it.’

Epilogue

I completed the project in Shanghai and came back to my old job at TIRC. The Tiger made a big show of being saddled with me again, but I knew that he was really happy to have me back. My friends of course couldn’t contain their joy. Our gang was complete again.

Arun and Shambhavi are happily married, though they live in separate cities. Arun visits her in Pune on weekends. They are trying to work out their living situation.

Divya and Vinod are getting married next month. They couldn’t be happier.

Mehra and Gupta are working on their next movie, which is about an alien landing on Earth and adjusting to life here. I continued to be in touch with Vivek, who is a dear friend now. His career is going great guns as well.

As for Aakash and me, after dating secretly for a few months (both of us didn’t want the publicity), we had a very public engagement. He actually asked my father first for permission, before asking me to marry him. I had to admit that was a master stroke. Dad is completely his fan now. Once we were engaged, we couldn’t keep it quiet though. It was all over. Of course, my dad

flipped when the gossip magazines referred to me as “Aakash Tandon’s fiancé.” He felt it was rather inconsiderate of them, as I had my own identity as an eminent scientist. I had to explain to him that actors were far richer and much more famous than scientists in our country, so it would be best to accept that and just ignore these guys. I am still coming to terms with seeing my face plastered across the news every few days. I know the frenzy has just started and will get worse once the wedding is near, which may be a few months from now. We haven’t set the date yet.

Rohit and Aakash are quite fond of each other and get along well. Aakash and I still argue about Bollywood movies, though I watch a lot more of them now. I am especially catching up on Aakash’s work. I must admit he gets better as an actor with each film.

About the author

Rashmi Pillai is a pharma professional and lives in Mumbai. She loves to express herself through writing, which is her passion. She is the author of the children’s book “Rani and the Flying Elephant” available on Amazon. Her numerous short stories and articles have been published online as well. She is an avid reader and her other interests include travelling and watching movies. She blogs at rashmipillai.wordpress.com