

# Still Not Over You Book One Of Geeks of C@ltech Aarti V Raman

#### Author's Note

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much. For trusting me with your time, your money and the belief that I can take you on a journey of love, redemption, friendship, and family.

Still Not Over You first began about six years ago as Second Chance – a story of two lovers who could not get over the death of their best friend. And the sometimes unwise choices they made in finding their way back to each other.

Second Chance was written as a way for me to deal with the loss of someone I knew a long time ago, my very first friend from the school I transferred to in third grade. I was weeping copiously (I used to do that a lot) and I still remember how he held my hand and solemnly told me, 'I'll take care of you, Aarti.' We lost touch as we grew up and grew apart but I never forgot the boy who told me he would take care of me that very first day.

It saddened me beyond measure to hear of his passing away back in 2012, all the missed opportunities to never mend our friendship and reclaim it and I did the only thing I knew to cope with how I felt. I wrote.

Second Chance – draft one – was the result of that loss, that grief. And was a wholly different story, if I'm being honest.

Fast forward to today and Still Not Over You: Book One of The Geeks of C@ltech. Dev began as a man who held no grudges and ended up as a tech geek with a band of brothers who were as amazing as he is. And from then on, the series took on a life of its own. And it is not hyperbole when I say this: these men make me pull my hair out when I think about telling their stories but they hold my heart.

I hope they hold yours too.

Welcome to The Geeks of C@ltech. I hope you enjoy diving into their journeys as much as I did.

Love,

# Aarti

PS: A one-liner review is invaluable to any author. Dear reader, please be kind. Review us.

Lots more love,

Aarti

# Dedication

- This book would not have been possible without the help, support, and encouragement of the following people:
- My parents who gave me the go-ahead with three simple words. "Go do it!"
- My tribe. Bells, S, FK, Sue, PM, E, Marv, who were unstinting in their cheering and always have been. And my other tribe: my reader friends who have always been so generous.
- S, again, who is the rock upon which I stand. Be it critiquing a crucial scene or providing developmental edits or timely smacks when I doubt myself.
- Ritesh Kala who showed me the way with a Deluminator and helped me take charge of my writing destiny. Hope you're happy with the Potterhead reference, Ritesh!
- Shawn D'Souza, my master cover designer, for translating a concept with the words HOT HOT into a thing of beauty for my cover! Shawn. You rock!
- Varsha Naik, my very first editor who still gets what I want to say in the way I want to say it. And then improves on it.
  - Jonathan Fernandes. For whom I wrote the first version of this book many years ago. You are missed. Always, my dear friend.

And Max

## **Prologue**

1155 am Riverside Heights Chicago, Illinois

"Someone might come."

There was a giggle. Followed by the rasp of a zipper. Then there was silence. Punctuated by broken moans and half-whispered words. The air around them was cold. It was, after all, *this* close to Christmas and the snow was supposed to blizzard them to next week. Their breaths puffed out, hot air and vapor mixing in a heady combination.

"Shh. Not there. I'll scream."

"Good. I love to hear you scream."

There were more giggles.

"I love your hands on me."

"Me too." Another zipper rasped and, this time, there was definite moaning.

"We shouldn't be doing this."

"What? Making out?"

There was no answer to that, because they were busy kissing. The little alcove where they were standing, leaning into each other, was full of their breathing. The air heavy with the scents of winter and heat. Such heat. She felt herself burning up with the warmth he caused in her with one look. With one kiss, just one kiss, she was a goner.

"No. I mean, yes. I mean..."

She bit her lip and he looked up, from where he was busy kissing her neck and giving her a hickey which no amount of makeup could cover up. He wanted her that way. Marked. He wanted the whole world to know what they were doing. That she was his.

"If my parents found out..." she trailed off.

This was a conversation they'd never had. Because, before today, *this* had been a dream. A fantasy. Something they'd suffered through for six whole months of school and semester. Because she'd been sure he wouldn't come back home for Christmas and he was sure she would have found a high school jock.

Nineteen didn't automatically grant you wisdom, and he was the first to admit that.

"They won't." He was so arrogantly sure.

It was one of the first things she'd noticed about him. The first thing she'd hated about him when they were little kids. That devilish grin that made his hazel eyes look greener than the leaves of the trees that grew in their driveway. And when his lips curled... Till she was fourteen she'd wanted to devoutly punch him every time he'd thrown that careless, careless grin her way.

Then, she'd turned fourteen and everything had changed.

What had been intense, childish hatred turned into something else. Something else entirely.

"How are you so sure?" She asked him, even as she let him tug off the leather jacket she had borrowed from him, since they were both supposed to be out hunting for mistletoe. The jacket landed with a soft plop at the stone floor underneath their feet. They'd found the mistletoe alright, a sprig of it under the arch at the alcove, and he'd decided this was as good a place as any to start kissing her.

He'd been home for twenty minutes from Northwestern. It was a wonder he'd held out that long.

"Because."

"What kind of answer is that?" But she was smiling, so she didn't really mean it.

He smiled too, but it was a different smile. An adult smile. He had filled out some, from basketball practice, she guessed. And his cheekbones, which had always been a little girly according to him, were thinning out, turning into those things that could be carved on statues. His eyes were a mysterious hazel and his hair was all black, silky to the touch when she kissed him. He was so handsome, so sexy he took her breath away. He was nineteen, three years older than her, and several more in experience. Between him and her cousin Aadi they'd never let her get any. Not that she was complaining.

A wave of such consuming love filled her that she fought to breathe through it. He heard the slight hitch in her breath anyway.

He swallowed. Touched her still-baby soft cheek with one hand. "God, I missed you."

He leaned down, so that their foreheads touched.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you, too," he said.

Then she reached up and kissed him. Softly, sweetly, with all the promise of

youth and love that she had inside of her. He kissed her back equally softly, equally sweetly. As if they had all the time in the world. His back was to the alcove entrance, since he was partially shading her from prying eyes.

Not that anyone would come wandering here; he'd checked the area three times before pulling her in.

He urged her closer to him, while his hands, his basketball rough hands roamed restlessly through three layers of clothes to get to naked skin. She shivered, both with the sensation of cold stone against her back and because he was making her feel so helplessly, deliciously *good*. She'd never wanted to do this with any other boy. Not since the time she'd discovered boys.

That had been when she'd turned fourteen.

"When will I see you again?" She whispered near his ear. He was touching her breasts, cupping them and that felt so good too. They hadn't gone that far last summer, when the lightning bolt had hit them. But now, he couldn't seem to stop touching her. And she couldn't seem to stop letting him.

"I am here now, aren't I?"

"We have to go back." She could barely get the words out.

"We don't."

"Yes, we do. They'll come looking for us and I don't think they'll be happy to find us here."

But there was less conviction in her voice, in her eyes, than there was in her shaking hands that were wandering past his beltline. He caught them before she could do his newfound manhood some real damage and kissed the fingers.

"Not now. And you're right. We should get back." But there was regret in his voice, that sexy, yet-to-mature voice. It had a timbre, like someone was pouring tequila down her spine. It made her ache inside, especially when she was hearing him on a call deep in the middle of the night. No other guy ever stood a chance against him, and she'd known that so long ago.

"I am always right."

She grinned at him, and he tweaked her nose. In a familiar gesture leftover from their childhood.

"Yeah, you are."

"I hate it right now."

He laughed softly. An extension of the careless, devilish grin and her insides melted.

"I wish I could go with you to Northwestern," she whispered. Suddenly,

abruptly serious. Holding onto his hands like a lifeline, like a wish, a yearning so strong she was physically ill with it.

His own eyes sobered. "You have high school, cheerleading practice, you'll forget about me when I leave."

"Is that what you think of me?" Her golden eyes shimmered with tears and he instantly felt like an asshole.

"Of course not. Am messing with you." He kissed her on the cheek, twice as an apology. "I'm sorry. It's just that..." He hesitated. He never hesitated. But she could hear the beat of his heart from where she was trapped against his chest. And it was agitated, driven. He was nervous and anxious. "I wonder if maybe you're better off without me, sometimes."

She couldn't help it. One tear tracked down her cheek.

"Hey, don't cry. I am sorry!" His eyes darkened with alarm and concern.

Magically her tears stopped and she grinned at him. "Sucker. Gotcha."

He shook his head but smiled tentatively at her. And she laid her head on his shoulder. She was up to his shoulders now, all thin and gangly, like a colt not yet grown into her legs. His heart stopped when he thought about how beautiful she would be when she grew up. Five years, ten years, from now. He wanted to be there with her for every single one of them.

"You are a public menace," he informed her, while he kissed the top of her head. She rolled her eyes but did not respond to his needling.

"Do you think other people feel the way we do, right now?" She asked him solemnly.

He didn't know how to answer her. "I don't know. I'd like to think so."

"I think nobody could love anybody the way I love you." She was so confident of her feelings, of his own, that it freaked him out sometimes. But it was also part of her innate personality. He wouldn't change a thing about her, even if it meant dealing with her God-given confidence.

"I love you more, so yeah, I guess you're right," he shot back. Then winced because she tickled his ribcage. He was very sensitive to tickling, evidenced by the hundreds of childhood battles she'd won just by running her fingernails over his skin. Of course, now all that tickling was producing a very different reaction. One no less uncomfortable and far less noticeable, thank God.

He didn't think she was going to handle *that* very well. Yet.

"You don't love me more than I love you. I turned down dates with Chad

Turner for you. Chad Turner!" She leaned back a little in his arms.

His lips quirked. "And how does that prove anything?"

"Chad is hot. Like, seriously hot. Jock and debate champion. He's the ultimate prize and he asked me out and I said no. The mean girls in school don't let me forget it." She frowned, pouting.

That he found that sexy made him realize how sunk he was. "You could have said yes," he suggested dryly.

Her eyes flashed at him, and she stuck her tongue out. It was very childish and endearing at the same time. "Maybe I will, the next time he does," she said, sweetly.

"Like hell." Before he knew it, his hands bit into her arm, and he kissed the breath out of her. "You're mine," he said it with all the fierceness and passion he could feel. He loved her; he wanted her, even right now, when he had her in his arms, when it was as close to right as it could be for him, he still wanted her. Like breath, like air, like the one thing he couldn't ever get enough of.

This wasn't a young boy talking. That she knew it was evidenced when she sighed and said nothing.

"Hey," she said.

"Yes?"

"You're mine too. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"That's alright then."

"Yes, it is."

But it wasn't.

Twelve hours later, when their worlds collapsed around them. When it ended. It wasn't.

And it never would be again.

## 2pm

All the houses in Riverside Heights were huge, sprawled on acres of grounds. There were gardens, gazebos, even a lake or two thrown in for sport fishing. Only the very moneyed lived in the exclusive community just outside of the city. And they paid very well for this privilege.

Right now, since it was the holidays, snow dotted the driveways and the trees that lined the neat, numbered streets. And the showpiece front lawns had ornate Santas and his reindeer or any number of cute, Christmassy ornaments. The front doors were all decorated in wreaths, so that the brass or gold knockers underneath were barely visible. The Doric or Gothic columns were twined with ivy or holly or something sweet-smelling, giving the sense of home, of cheer to all the houses that lined 'A' street.

One such house was called Sycamore Drive.

Rather obviously named, but it was such a showpiece, had been written in *Town & Country* twice that nobody dared mention the crude naming, anymore. It was a huge white marble and stone affair. With soaring Gothic columns and gargoyles jutting at the top that scared away many an unwary visitor, when they happened upon the open-mouthed monsters.

The house itself had more than ten rooms, layered terraces, balconies and bathrooms large enough to fit football teams. The graveled driveway was a half-mile long, lined with sycamores that were kept in amazing shape the year round. The sycamores were the only trees that escaped decoration. The gates before the driveway were again black and tall, with a security system envied by many of the Heights' residents.

It was a big house and it imposed its shadow on everything.

Especially on the leather jacketed boy by the end of the driveway, safe from wandering eyes.

The boy, his black hair wavy and expertly cut, with expressive brown eyes that often held scorn and derision, was slouched in the shade of the last tree. He frowned into the middle distance. He was jonesing for a hit. He fingered the small packet of powder in his jeans pocket. It wasn't much. He'd blown all his allowance on a fancy room for his six-month anniversary with Lily, who had dumped him anyway. So coldly. So cruelly! Now he had no

money left over for the thing he needed so much. His white powder.

The boy lit up a cigarette, a poor substitute. His breath was coming out in puffs, but it was difficult to see if this was due to the smoke or the cold. Probably a mixture of both.

"Hey, you gonna share that?" A voice intruded on the boy.

He startled violently, too violently, and someone laid a hand on his shoulder, as if to calm him. The boy whipped his head around and almost smiled.

"Dude. Scared me," the boy murmured. He passed his half-smoked American Blue to the other boy.

This boy took a deep drag and then stubbed the thing out under his heavy boot heel.

The other boy frowned. "Why'd you do that for?"

"Because, it's going to rain anytime now. And I'd like you to come in."

"Dev." The boy sighed.

"Dude, it's the holidays. And we are home. Let's not mess it up, ok?"

The boy snaked a glance up at his best friend and the one person whom he'd thought he could trust above everybody. Evidently, that wasn't the case. He didn't voice the thought that was foremost in his mind.

Everything is already messed up, Dev. Can't you see?

"Sure, let's not," he said tonelessly, and then shoved his hands deep into the pockets of the jacket. He encountered a small box and wanted to fling it away from him. From the both of them.

Dev glanced causally at the other boy's bent head while they half-strode along the driveway. "Hey, Aadi, not that that jacket doesn't look good on you. But, you're planning on returning it to me, right?"

Aadi smiled back. Innocently. "Sure, brother. As soon as we go in."

They were running the moment Aadi answered because the skies opened up suddenly. And the rain came down in torrents.

Chaos reigned in the large, well-spaced, warm kitchen at Sycamore Drive. There was a continuous smell of cinnamon and gingerbread mixed with peanut butter cookies that Dev Banerjee had associated with this kitchen as long back as he could remember. It was a homey room and smelled that way, from the bay windows that opened out to the patio and back gardens. The island was a long granite counter that ran the middle of the room equipped with all sorts of things needed for cooking.

Pots, pans, ladles, and tureens hung in shining, charming disarray and most of

them were utilized at one point or another. This was a kitchen that was *used*, not just kept ready to perfection. Ma DSa, the bustling Goan-Portuguese woman who ran the kitchen and the home made sure that everything gleamed and that nothing was wasted.

As she was fond of saying: *Just because you are millionaires gives you no cause to waste. There are poor people starving back home in India.* 

Everybody, including Grandpa, was suitably chastened the moment they heard this admonishment.

Dev smiled as he pulled up a chair on the comfortably scarred, pine-length table that served as informal dining table complete with mismatched chairs. In the kitchen, at least, they didn't pretend. They all laughed and joked and ate and pretended to be semi-human people.

With the arrogance and contempt of the very young, he automatically assumed that dissent meant dissatisfaction and that arguments meant fights. Since it was true for the most part, but not always, he didn't have to change his perception.

There were about seven people seated at the dining table.

Grandpa Sundar Subramanian, head honcho at AllMart, a reigning departmental store chain that had begun as a humble bodega in the back alleys of Chicago's Southside projects, but was now a corner staple in Midwest America. He had a shock of startling white hair that looked incongruous with the even black tan of his face and shrewd beetle black eyes. His height and his acumen had been inherited by both his grandchildren, skipping a generation in between.

Seated to his right was Vaidehi Sreedharan, Aadi's mom and the woman who hostessed for Sycamore Drive and her father's business. She was austere and she rarely smiled. She'd lost her husband to a brutal heart attack and between running an enormous home, coping with a demanding boss and father, and raising a precocious child; she'd forgotten the simple joys of life.

Only Dev could make her smile, and he tried to do that as often as possible, if only to deflect attention from her son and his more outlandish antics.

Next to Aunt Vee, as he affectionately called her, was Aadi Sreedharan. Slouched in his seat seeming to want no part of it all. He wore a dark sweater that showed how exactly thin he was under it and baggy, ill-fitting jeans. Fashion had never been his best friend's strong point but, lately, it seemed like Aadi was trying to look exactly like a homeless punk. And managing quite well.

Dev continued his survey and watched the couple talking softly next to Aadi. Gopal Subramanian and his wife, Vijaya. Grandpa's son and heir apparent, if he didn't screw it up. Gopal was an affable sort of guy who liked the things money bought him but had no single clue as to how to make it. He'd gone to Chicago City College, joined the family business, married the woman suggested by his father, and was quite content to have his life be managed by his wife and his dad. And, since his dad showed no signs of slowing down, this was working out quite well for him. He had a post at AllMart, Vice President Sales, but he rarely went to work.

He and his wife took trips. To the Yucatan Peninsula, to Cairo, to see the Chichen Itza ruins. Vijaya liked to dabble in archeology since they'd both seen the Indiana Jones movie 'Temple of Doom,' when she was pregnant and, now, tried to take in as much of history as they could. He'd never seen a couple more suited to each other than Uncle Gopal and Aunty Viju.

And he'd never understood how these absent-minded, almost careless parents could produce such a brilliant offspring as Zara Subramanian. Zara was sitting next to her grandfather, completing the circle of seven, including him. His own dad was away on business, China this time, and his all-American mom had died in childbirth so he didn't really remember her.

He'd been raised by this family even if he hadn't been born to it. Even if his own granddad and Grandpa had just been business partners for the most part. AllMart was a family-owned company and was a successful immigrant business story in the United States. They catered to the all price-group demographic, and used high-end marketing strategies that worked well for them because Grandpa was astute and a visionary. He'd turned a relatively small chain of department stores into a national phenomenon in a span of forty years, along with Dev's grandfather.

Dibankar Banerjee was the financial genius that led AllMart to such unprecedented glory and success till he'd died at fifty-two of an aneurysm. Back then his son, Pradosh, had been most interested in squandering all that money away on booze and women. Then he'd met Allison Craig, a waitress at FudRuckers who was putting herself through medical school. A tumultuous courtship followed by an even more tumultuous marriage had resulted in the unlikely birth of Dev Banerjee.

His mother had died giving birth to him, his father had turned to work as panacea since the women and booze didn't appeal to him anymore. And, for all intents and purposes, Grandpa S had become his father. For the last

nineteen years, this had held true and he knew it would be true long after they were all in their graves.

Which brought him smack-dab to the middle of his dilemma and the last person on the table.

She was sitting next to her Grandpa, laughing, tucking her hair behind her ear in an unconsciously feminine gesture, her wrist slim in the kitchen lights. Her small, gamine face was animated and her lips were red from the wine she was allowed to have because of the holidays. Zara Subramanian didn't have a thing to worry about in either the looks or the brains department.

She was supposed to go to college a year early, Northwestern, thank the good lord. And she had turned down dates from high school popular boys named Chad Turner.

And, since he was quite desperately in love with her, he considered all of this a minor miracle.

"Boy, you look starved. What, do you not eat in school?" Ma DSa scolded him, bopping him on the head affectionately while she placed a steaming mug of hot chocolate sprinkled with yellow marshmallows, his favorite since age two, and a platter of cookies in the middle of the table.

"No one feeds me like you, Ma." He added a wink for effect and dodged another bop to the head.

Lunch had been an hour ago, and they were all still congregated here before they dispersed to resurface for lunch tomorrow. Grandpa had weird rules. And one of them was lunch with family. Probably because he himself liked to work during dinner, checking on stock market reports or having it with a business colleague or a potential investor. It suited the family perfectly because it meant that he and Aadi had been able to sneak away on dates and such things with nobody being the wiser.

But that had all changed when they'd all gone to college. Aadi a year before him to Yale, while Dev had gone to Northwestern in the fall.

Now, he obediently sipped his drink and continued to take in the noise around him. It would stop soon enough, he figured.

The rain drummed soothingly outside.

#### 5pm

"So, I was thinking..." Aadi began quite causally. They were in Grandpa's study right now, a deed which had gotten them walloped by both Grandpa and Ma DSa on previous occasions. But like lemmings bent on

suicide they still persisted on coming in here. The lure of the Cuban cigars was a little too much for teenage boys.

"What are you thinking?" Dev choked on his cigar and hastily passed it back to Aadi, who smoked it comfortably. His eyes were wide, like he was either surprised or scornful. Nowadays Dev found it difficult to read him.

"We should go out tonight. Party. Girls, booze, you know, the works? Christmas comes only once a year."

Dev smiled. "Dude, you do that every night at Yale where you drag the family name through every futon there is. Let's just relax at home, today, ok? Take it easy for a night."

Aadi, who till now had been slumped in one of the arm chairs that dotted the room, was suddenly up like a shot. Like someone had lit a fire under him. His cigar waved wildly in the air as he gestured with it. "Fuck Yale. Fuck the university and the precious family name."

Dev tried to pacify him. "Aadi, you're going to set off the smoke detectors. And we really don't want that, do we?" What was going *on* with Aadi?

Aadi paused in the middle of the room, his footsteps making no sound in the shag pile that was laid through almost all the rooms of the house. He looked at Dev, calculatingly. "Why? Afraid of getting caught, Dev?"

Dev nodded emphatically. "Hell, yes. And so are you. Grandpa we can handle. But if Ma DSa gets here, she's going to kill us. So, come on already, stop doing the wild thing and let's try smoking like gentlemen here."

Screwing my cousin is not very gentlemanly of you, Dev!

But Aadi said nothing as he sat down in his armchair and they smoked in silence. The air thick and fragrant with the smell of tobacco and burnt ash. Dev was given to few words on the best of days, and it looked like Aadi didn't want to be loquacious right now. Dev couldn't help wondering why his best friend was suddenly so high-strung.

Hesitantly, he asked, "Aadi. Is everything ok? Back in school?"

Aadi cocked his chin at that and regarded him through cigar smoke. "Why do you ask?"

"Because, you're acting all strange. Wanting to set off fires and smoking in the driveway. It's not you. Plus," Dev grinned here. "You still haven't told me all about the curvaceous Lily of the fine rack."

Aadi shrugged. "What's to tell? She's good. The rack's good too. But I dumped her before coming here."

"When did this happen? Last time I'd spoken to Zara she mentioned

something about you bringing home a girlfriend."

"Is that what you and Zara talk about? My girlfriends?" Aadi couldn't help the caustic question.

This time Dev was confused. "Why? Can't we?"

"That's not what I meant. Dev..." Aadi hesitated.

"What?"

"If there was something terribly, terribly wrong with your life would you try to fix it or just run away from it?"

"Why? What's wrong with your life?" Dev was nothing if not sharp. And he knew, just knew something was going on with Aadi, something secretive and dangerous. He wanted to help, he just didn't know how.

"Not my life. Just in general. It's a metaphorical question, Dev."

Dev considered it. "Well, it depends on the problem. If it's solvable then you should do that. Otherwise, sometimes, running away is a good option. My dad is a prime example, isn't he?" But he asked the rhetorical question in an academic way, with no bitterness. He'd long ago gotten over his father's abandonment because he couldn't survive otherwise.

Aadi pondered the wisdom of his words and nodded. "You're right. 'Course, you're right. And I am behaving like a moron." He smiled and he was back to normal. Dev could see it happen, like a switch that had been flipped on. He couldn't get a handle on what was going on with his friend. And it was beginning to scare him.

But right now, he nodded back and said, "I am always right, bro. Come on, let's get going. It's time to put the gifts under the tree."

"Hey. Idiot boys. Ma DSa will kill you if she finds out what you're doing," Zara said, poking her head through the study door and wrinkling her nose at the cigar smell. She was allergic to cigarette smoke which was why Dev had made it a point to quit smoking. She came in, after looking back out cautiously. And went to the wing chair where Aadi was sprawled. She took a drag from the cigar herself and started choking so badly that Aadi had to thump her back. She screwed her face up and Dev grinned raffishly.

"That stuff is foul."

"No, it's not. It just takes getting used to." Dev winked at her. Aadi laughed and nodded agreement.

She stuck her tongue out at the both of them and said, "Well, Auntie Vee is searching for the two of you. It's time to put the presents under the tree. And I knew I had to sneak in and warn you two before they came in and Ma DSa

walloped your behinds."

She grinned nastily, and Dev got horny all over again. It wasn't that she was wearing sexy, provocative clothing or, god forbid, make up. She was dressed in jeans that clung to her coltish legs and a red sweater with green ribbing that caressed her torso and comfortable sneakers. Her hair was a black wave that curled to her waist and he could feel the warm, alive length of it almost as if he were kissing her right now.

She had an oval face, with a pointed chin that gave her beauty a sharp, almost defined edge. And her lips and cheeks still held a trace of baby fat that only time would iron out. But it was her eyes that caught at his heart. They were brown, like the hot chocolate he loved so much, and they were dancing in the firelight right now. With secrets and amusement and, because he'd learned to look for it and recognize it, love.

For him.

"My behind," he drawled. "Is excellent and would love to be walloped."

Aadi groaned and Zara blushed, thanking god that with her dark skin color, blushing didn't show up so easily. Or at all. She recovered and said primly, "Aadi, are you coming or not?"

But it was Dev who answered, rising up from his own arm chair and extending a small package out to her. "Here, put this under the tree, will you? It's yours, anyway."

Their fingers brushed. She tried to not jolt, to not let it matter. *What was in the box?* 

"Alright." She linked arms with Aadi, before walking away with him. Dev followed them out slowly, smiling like he knew something that nobody else knew.

#### 11pm

Aadiraj Sreedharan had been many things in a short span of twenty years. He'd been a young boy who lost his father way too early. A responsible teenager trying to take care of his mother without her ever knowing it. A cousin brother who always looked out for his little cousin because he loved her and wanted only the best for her. A grandson who was expected to do the family duty and carry on with the fine tradition of making even more money hand over fist.

But there was only one thing he'd wanted, out of his own choice.

And that was to be friends with Dev. It had been instinctive, primal. The

knowledge that here was another kid who knew how it was to be abandoned. To have the weight of family expectation almost break you. And to not give a damn.

And because he'd understood Dev in that way, he'd wanted to be friends with him. Friends, partners in crime, comrades in war. Even though Dev was a year younger than him and still believed in the goodness of people, despite his cocky demeanor. And because of that, precisely because of the fact that he was so good, that Aadi didn't know what to think right now. Didn't know what to do. How to react.

He paced the length of his terrace while thunder boomed and lightning flashed in the near distance. The effects of the coke he'd snorted in the bathroom was finally beginning to make itself felt. The storm had been gaining speed the whole day and was now being covered live by the weather channel. It was supposed to spend itself by morning but, for now, it was here to stay. And it was here to destroy.

Aadi knew life would change. It would change drastically, if Dev and Zara ended up together. Not that they weren't good people, not that they didn't deserve the best. But if they had each other, who would need him?

The sense of betrayal, of unjustified anger swelled in him again. He'd been trying to battle it all day, since he'd seen his little sister and his best friend kissing in the alcove when they were supposed to have been hunting for mistletoe. And they'd looked...complete. Like they didn't need a single thing more to hold them together. The incredulity of what he'd seen had been left far behind in the wake of the anger and fear that coalesced in his gut. He'd wanted to hurt Zara and Dev.

He still did.

How could they have each other when he had no one?

With his mind made up, with wet streaming from him and making him sneeze violently, he loped down the stairs that led down to Zara's terrace. The good thing about their house, cold and empty as it was, was that it had entry and access points everywhere. He and Dev had played Lava Land around all of them. If she'd begged and pleaded enough they'd even let Zara play along with them. It had always been the three of them against La Familia. Against the world and its cruel reality. And now, they were excluding him from theirs.

He wasn't going to have it.

His shoes squeaked in the rain but they gripped tight enough for him to get to

her stone terrace without incident or injury. The light was switched on, he could see it filtering through the pretty blue curtains that she'd made him hang up two summers ago. When she'd decorated her room yet again.

And he had done it, because he loved her. *How could she do this to him?* 

Aadi banged on the fragile glass doors, not caring who would wake up, not caring if the whole neighborhood came down to watch. He heard her exclaim, curse and then she pulled the door open.

"Jesus, Dev, what's the hurry? You said midnight..." She trailed off. Her eyes widening with alarm when she realized that the tall, dark-haired wet boy wasn't her boyfriend but her brother.

"Aadi. What are you doing here?"

He shook his head violently and drops of water fell on her pretty pink flannel pajama set. Her hair was freshly washed and hung in a curtain at her shoulders and back. She looked fourteen again, and Aadi was so angry with her.

He pushed her into the room with unsteady hands.

"I want to talk to you about your boyfriend," he snarled, following her in with angry strides.

#### Two

"Boyfriend?" Her heart hammered in her chest, while she frantically tried to figure out what Aadi knew. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't act dumb, Zara," he snarled, rounding on her.

And Zara was perplexed, now that she could see him properly in the light. His brown eyes, so like hers, were feral now. Wild with some inner rage that she couldn't quell, because she didn't know what he was angry about. He was soaking wet and he was shaking with anger.

But he was her cousin brother. Family. So she had to try.

She moved towards him, touching his arm. "You're so wet, Aadi. Come on, let me get you a towel. You need to dry off."

He shook her hand off so violently she stumbled again. But she still wasn't scared, she was surprised.

"Don't touch me. Don't talk to me. How could you? How dare you betray me like that?"

Her mouth opened but no sound came out. What was going on with him? Confusion flickered in her eyes, but she asked calmly enough, "Aadi, what are you talking about? Why are you so mad? Did I do something? Say something? What's the matter, Anna?" *Brother*.

Aadi's vision crimsoned. Without thinking, his hand raised itself and he struck her. He could feel his hand connect with her tender, baby soft skin and she was stumbling down. Sprawling on the floor, hitting the glass vase that was kept at a side table and the vase was broken.

She started crying.

"Shut up," he whispered. "Shut up."

"I hate you," she sobbed. Putting her hands protectively over her face because he was advancing towards her.

"Zara," he said, crouching unsteadily in front of her. She crawled back from him, raising watery eyes to him. Tears streamed down her sweet face, and there was blood at the corner of her mouth where he'd hit her.

"God," he whispered.

"Why?" Now she was scared and it showed. In the way her breath hitched. In the way her pupils dilated and she shrank from him. "Why did you hit me? What did I do to you?"

"How could you be with him, Zara? How could you not know any better?" Her eyes closed as understanding finally dawned. He knew, *he knew*. Oh,

God, oh God...

"I love him. He loves me. We are going to tell my parents. Everything is going to be fine, Aadi. I promise you. We can fix everything," she said desperately. Trying to calm him. At this point, it didn't matter. Only that he get away from her.

"Zara, don't you understand? You can't fix me."

"What?" The tears were a gentle wave now. But they didn't stop. She was crying as much from hurt as from anger. "What are you talking about?"

"*I* am hurt," he said softly, so she almost couldn't hear him. "How could you do that to me?"

"Aadi." His name was a shocked whisper.

"How could you let me be all alone?"

This time she reached a hand and touched his wet cheeks. He closed his wild, agonized eyes while his heart threatened to pound out of his chest and bleed all over her marble floor.

"It's not like that, Anna. I am here for you too. Dev is here for you too," she said, crying in earnest now.

Lightning crashed across her room, making her wince. He opened his eyes and saw only the fear. Didn't, couldn't see the love, the concern that was holding her trembling hands to him. Even though she wanted to run, she wanted to pound on her parents' door and have them help her. But she couldn't...God....

"It's too late, isn't it? It's too fucking late..." He was half-crying himself.

She shook her head wildly. Her only thought was to calm Aadi down. Clearly, something more was going on with him than he was letting on. "Anna, please calm down. Let's talk about this tomorrow. In the morning."

"No!" Aadi exploded. "I am leaving right now. I can't stay here anymore. I fucking can't."

He didn't know what he was doing, only that he wanted to go away from here. He had to leave. His head would explode if he didn't.

"Aadi, stop!" She ran after him and trembled when he whirled to face her. His eyes that terrible pitiless nothing again.

"Don't tell me what to do!"

"All right, all right. I won't," she soothed him. Smiling tremulously at him, although she wanted to scream. She was so afraid...so afraid...why wasn't Dev here? He'd know what to do. He always knew how to talk Aadi down.

"Your parents are going to be so disappointed in you. That their precious

baby girl is sleeping with that half-gora boy. Does Grandpa know?" he said conversationally, while they trudged out of her balcony doors and into the pouring rain. Acidic words swirled in her throat, but she said nothing, just swallowed all her indignation and hoped to god that someone would see what he was doing. He was dangerous, unhinged.

She was going to hell for thinking this about her own flesh and blood.

"Where are you planning to go, Aadi? Tomorrow is Christmas. Don't you want to be with us?" she asked, tugging at his hand to slow him down. She was wearing fuzzy bunny slippers which were completely sodden with rain and deadening her progress across the lawn.

"No! I don't want to be here anymore. With liars and betrayers. I want out now." He shrugged and she was really scared now.

She took a deep breath, as if to scream and then choked because looming in front of them, right near the Bacchus fountain was Dev. Looking annoyed and angry. In fact, she was afraid of him too right now. And for him.

"What the hell are you two playing at?" he asked, as he pushed Aadi back a full step on the wet grass. Aadi stumbled, but Zara steadied him.

He shook off her hold and then, bunching his fist, punched his friend full on the face. Feeling skin squish and bone crack.

"You bastard," he spat, while he dragged Zara behind him. "How could you touch her, man? You're no good for her."

Zara screamed, but put her hands over her mouth. Aadi was crazy, there was no saying what he'd do right now.

Dev staggered back but didn't fall down. His nose streamed blood that got washed away in the rain that streamed around all of them. Lightning crashed overhead, illuminating the three of them, so Zara could see how strange this tableau was. Dev was bleeding, holding his nose and gasping for breath. Aadi was shaking with anger, while she was shaking with fear.

It was unreal.

"Dev!" she whispered, because she couldn't help it.

Aadi turned to her then and jerked her up by the arm, fingers biting into her skin. Cruel enough to leave marks. Marks she'd find for days afterward.

"Shut up. Don't talk to him. Don't say one word to him or I'll kill him. I mean it," he hissed. She nodded wildly, her eyes betraying her panic as she glanced past him to the boy she loved so much. Dev was still confused, still not sure what was going on.

"Hey, man," he said, placing a brotherly hand on Aadi's shoulder. "I don't

know what you're so mad about. It's late and it's cold. Let's all go back in and talk this out," he said reasonably. So reasonably that Zara believed, past the thunder of her own pulse and the fear churning to bile in her throat, she truly believed that her brother would listen. They would all go back in and talk this out.

Aadi dragged his hand over her throat and squeezed. Just enough that she gagged. Her hands clawing at his to keep from tightening, her eyes rolled back.

"If you touch me again, I'll kill her," he said reasonably too.

Dev's eyes widened; his face leaching color. "God, Aadi. Calm down," he whispered, moving back a step.

"Let's go, little sister. I think you're coming with me too," Aadi said, grabbing Dev by the lapel and shoved him down. He went down without a struggle. Aadi kicked him hard, once, on the face and then with Zara screaming took her away to the garage, just a hundred feet away.

Dev watched them go with a sense of unreality. His nose was bleeding, aching. His face hurt and so did his whole body. Panic was filling him, squeezing the breath out of him as he saw Zara's small, pale face, the way her hands clutched at her cousin's choke hold, her silent screams echoing in his head. The sense of terror only worsened as he heard the start of an engine in the garage, the Mercedes, and realized that Aadi really meant to leave.

Really meant to go away in this nightmare of a storm.

Cursing, swaying, he got to his feet and ran behind them. His long legs eating the hundred feet with ease and then he was getting inside the Jaguar, thanking providence that nobody in their family thought of locking their cars. He twisted the ignition and backed out with a spurt of gas and gravel.

He could see the tail lights of the Mercedes while it weaved wildly on the driveway and then rounded the curve that led to the tall gates.

He shot into reverse and, with prayers, hopes, curses, drove after them with all the speed and skill he had.

Dev was almost there, almost reaching them, when lightning struck the driveway in an ominous flash. Then he heard the explosion. Heard it before seeing it. At first, the black iron gates swung open and he thought that it was just his hearing playing tricks on him because of his hyper-panicked mind. His hand slipped on the wheel, and felt the heat. He could barely believe

what he was seeing. Even through the aches and the pains and the hurt and terror.

The grey Mercedes was turned on its side and was blazing on the hood, while the gates swung open.

He was out of the car even before he stamped on the brake and sprinted towards the flaming car with inhuman speed. His breath backing in his lungs, vision graying, while he prayed like he'd never prayed before. Please, God, let her be alright. Let them be alright.

Please, God...

He got to the side of the car, kneeling down by the passenger side, and he could see Zara screaming. Her eyes wild with terror, her hands banging on the windows, trying to push through the glass. Her lips moving, screaming...

He punched in through the glass, shattering what was left of it on her face and she screamed some more, throwing her hands up. And then he dragged her out, trembling, trembling with the effort to not scream himself. She clutched him for a second but he couldn't hear her, see her, feel her... couldn't see beyond his own terror.

Then he heard what she was saying.

"Aadi. Aadi is inside. Get him out. Get him out."

He placed her gently on the ground and ran to the other side of the car, the side that was beginning to flame, the car rocked on its side, the wheels spinning madly. The heat burned his face, singed his hair, but he yelled, "Aadi, you there? Aadi!"

He couldn't hear an answer.

The fire on the hood flamed brighter, higher, like someone had thrown gasoline on it. And, at that exact moment, another tremendous bolt of lightning hit the car.

He flinched, as it exploded in a supernova of flames and he was thrown back by the impact of the blow. Glass and metal rained around him along with the rain. And the screams and the silence. The awful noise of death.

But beneath it all, like a ghost, like death, like God himself, he heard a gravelly voice whisper to him, "You betrayed me, pal. You betrayed me."

### *The next day*

Zara was tired. She was staring at the pretty, snow-wrapped window of the Chicago Mercy Hospital and she was tired. But she couldn't close her eyes. Because if she did, if she closed her eyes for a single second she'd see it all again. She'd see the orange glow of the fire, the screaming panicked eyes of her brother as he looked mutely at her. She'd see the way Dev had been spotlighted in the single instant before lightning hit them all.

And she would scream.

And this time she would never stop.

Zara whimpered, as she lay on her uninjured side and tried to hold the screams inside. What had she done?

"Zara, you need to rest," Aunt Vaidehi said tiredly, running a hand over her forehead in a maternal gesture. She had refused to see her parents, nearly hysterical when they showed up, but allowed Aunt Vaidehi in. Aunt Vaidehi needed her. Zara scrunched her eyes tight and breathed through her mouth. Her heart, a dried-up shriveled ball in her chest, broke some more. Like a giant hand was squeezing it into even tinier bits.

"I am fine," she said. For the hundredth time.

"You aren't. You look terrible. And you haven't said a word. And Dev is crazy with worry."

"I don't want to see him," she whispered through bloodless lips. Digging her nails into her palms. The lie of those words beat in her shriveled up heart. She wanted to see him, touch him, so badly she was physically ill with it.

"Baby, I know, you're angry at him, but he had to pull you out first. You were closest to him." Aunt Vaidehi was crying softly, as she tried to get her niece to understand why it was her son and not she who got to die. Zara sucked in a sharp breath, feeling it stab like thousands of knife wounds right down her throat. Right to her stomach. And every inch in between. "I--"

"He won't leave until you see him, Zara. Please, please, for my sake," Aunt Vaidehi begged her. The mother who'd just lost her only son.

So, Zara said nothing. She nodded her head.

She knew the exact moment when he entered the room. The air seemed to be stronger, she was aware of her body, her pulse, her heart. She was aware of her own guilt. She knew those footsteps like the back of her own hand. Steady, assured, already so much like a man.

She closed her eyes and didn't want to face him.

"Zara." There was a wealth of agony in that one word. A world of love. She gulped her own tears down. They wouldn't help her now. Nothing could.

"Dev." She opened her eyes and saw that he was crouched by her good side. His bandaged hand hovering in the space between her forehead and nose. She

drew back a fraction of an inch, wincing as the gesture hurt her already bruised head. Apparently the impact of the explosion had knocked her backwards by twenty feet and left her with a minor concussion.

She didn't care. She'd killed her brother.

"Zara, I thought I'd lost you," he whispered in a voice so thready, she thought he'd lost all capacity to speak. Only his eyes, those blazing eyes were alive. With joy and love so incandescent, it was like looking at the fire again.

She had no right to the love.

"You didn't," she said, while his hand came down and cupped her cheek. Dozens of tiny wounds dotted her skin, all bandaged and iodined. Because of the glass that had shattered on her face.

"Your face, I'm so sorry," he said softly, brokenly. One tear tracking down his stubbled cheek.

She felt her own wave rising up and fought it down. It had to happen now. Before he said anything else. Before her own need weakened her. Zara Subramanian had grown up twenty years overnight and it was time to put that to good use.

"Don't touch me, Dev." She moved one taped hand and removed his hand from her cheek.

He was stunned, upset, she could see that.

"You don't mean that." He smiled. His devil-may-care smile and she remembered.

"I do." And then said the words that would make him hate her forever. Make him go away. "I do mean it. In fact, I don't want you to touch me ever again, Dev. I never want to *see* you again." Her voice was as dead and empty as her soul. Her insides.

"No. You're just angry, the trauma..." He shook his head, a shock of hair falling on his bandaged forehead. Looking shockingly black against the white cloth.

"You're upset. But you don't mean that." He was so sure, so certain.

Then he looked into her eyes and his heart froze. It simply froze, just like this moment. There was hate in her eyes, blinding, consuming hate. And anger. Disgust. Grief so terrible, he sucked in his breath.

"Stop saying that," she snapped at him. "I mean every word I say. You know I do."

"Why?" It was a bottomless whisper, although his mind, his heart had already started accepting her words. She wasn't one for lying, his Zara.

"Because, you killed him," she said coldly. "You killed him, Dev. And I'll never forgive you for it. So go away now. Go away before I tell them all what happened. Before I tell Auntie Vee that her precious Dev put her son in the ground."

"That's not true! What are you saying? Why are you saying this? Please, Zara, I love you." He tried while his breath, his heart shattered inside of his chest, and the grief he'd seen in her eyes, now transferred itself to him. His body became weightier, heavier, like the weight of the world rested on his shoulders.

"No. You don't understand, Dev. I hate you. I hate you for what you did to me and my brother. Go away before you destroy what's left of my family," she whispered fiercely. Her eyes gleaming with the conviction of her words. Her hate.

"Don't say that. Please," he begged her.

"It's true, isn't it? He wouldn't ever have done this if it weren't for--" Her breath hitched. And she turned her head away from him. Just her head. The rejection absolute.

"Go away, Dev. I don't love you anymore. And don't bother coming back." He didn't say a single word, just knelt at her feet. The only sounds in the room were his harsh, choppy breathing and the steady beep of the monitors that gave readouts of her vitals. But she didn't turn her head and she didn't see him. And that, that convinced him more than anything that she'd meant everything she said.

She couldn't love him anymore.

The blow had him reaching for his feet unsteadily.

"Are you sure?" He asked in a hoarse voice.

She didn't answer.

She didn't have to.

Without another word he walked away from her.

And only when she was certain he was gone, when she knew he wouldn't hear her, when nobody would hear her, she started screaming.

She screamed for a long time.

#### Three

Ten Years Later GWBG (Geeks Will Be Geeks) Bar & Bistro Pasadena California

Zara didn't know why she was nervous.

It wasn't like she'd never been to a bar before. She had, in New Orleans during Mardi Gras and in Ireland where the most raucous of the lot could be found. She even liked the fuzzy, friendly atmosphere, the jukebox listing, and the general cacophony that could be found in most bars during Happy Hour. It made her feel like she was part of something fun. Gave her a good feeling and Zara counted every good feeling she had.

Ergo, no need to feel nervous.

Zara sipped her Pellegrino water with a single sliced lemon, while she tried to count to ten and calm the hippos running rampant in her stomach. It didn't help, but the activity gave her time to check out the bar and distract herself that way.

It wasn't a big bar by any standards. Bay Area real estate did not permit for palatial rentals. But, right now, with people standing three deep on the scarred pine-width floor trying to get the Latino bartender's attention, it looked like it could hold the entire population of the suburban town of Pasadena. The colors were an interesting mix of ochre yellow and muted brown with a generous splash of red thrown in. The booths and tables that dotted the back of the bar were old oak, with lines scratched into them. The seats were cracked vinyl and creaked with age and good use. The pool table jammed against one corner of a wall held a single swaying bulb under which four players were intently lining up for their shots.

But pride of place was given to a Miss Pacman machine, which actually had a small line of people waiting to play it. The music was incomprehensible and loud under customer chatter. The place was neat, evidenced by the clean although cheap flatware in which her drink was served.

GWBG was not your typical dive bar.

She was fifteen minutes early, because she always liked to prepare, so that nothing would surprise her, faze her. It helped her do her job better. As interim Chief Executive Officer at AllMart, she needed to be on her toes all the time, ahead of clients, the Board and the plethora of staff she inevitably

commanded.

At twenty-six, Zara Subramanian had everything she had ever worked for. Simply because she had worked impossibly hard for it. Because, honestly, since she'd turned sixteen, failure had never been an option for her.

But she was thinking about the possibility of failure today.

She'd been thinking about failure, the meaning of it, the philosophies of it a lot in the last three months. What did it mean: to fail? Was it when life just swept you away in a riptide and you either learned to swim or drowned in your own bile? Or was it when you were so alone and so cold you knew you could never be warm again?

Both these things had happened to her and she was still here. Still surviving. Then why did it feel like her whole life was a yawning chasm in which she was bound to do nothing but fail? Life, given quarter of a chance, ripped you open and left you bleeding all over the street while people looked at you and laughed.

She was so done being life's bitch. And so, here she was. Feeling nervous and like a failure.

Zara glanced at the simple gold watch that announced the time to be sevenfifteen.

He should be here in five more minutes.

Dev was nothing if not a creature of habit.

Ex-engineers and wildly successful business owners had that one thing in common, she assumed.

Zara swiveled in her bar stool, looking at the neon green entrance with a caricature of a nude girl holding a laptop covering strategic parts of herself. Even with her ramrod straight posture and superior height that discouraged ninety percent of the male population from making advances toward her, she couldn't see beyond the crowd waiting for drinks. The guy next to her smiled pleasantly at her. A tech geek type who had surgically enhanced teeth and gelled blond hair.

He made her feel nauseous right now.

She turned her head in a dismissive gesture and Geeky Guy shrugged and gave up the pursuit.

She looked at her watch again.

It was seven-twenty.

Where was he?

He'd spotted her the minute he'd walked into the bar.

He figured if he was ninety and blind he'd still be able to see her.

It had always been like that with him for her.

A surge of anger filled him, as it always did, when he thought about her. This wasn't often, admittedly, because he wasn't prone to regrets anymore. There was no point in taking stock of life and being bitter all the time, when there was life to be lived. If the last ten years had taught him anything, it was that.

That, and to never need anyone ever again. And vice versa.

She looked right at home in the downtown, upscale joint he ran. Even if she was slightly overdressed for California weather in black jeans, expensive boots and cream trench coat, with all that hair streaming neatly down her back. She looked exotic and expensive. Her face was in profile, but even from across the room he could see the defined sharpness of her cheeks, that pointed chin.

How much, he mused, had she grown up?

Silvio, his bartender waved at him, and he wiggled his fingers at him. Silvio also pointed at the sexy, Asian woman who'd asked about the boss and his regular entrance time. Dev shook his head. Silvio shrugged and went back to serving drinks. It was no concern of his, if his boss didn't want to hit that.

Dev spotted a couple of the regulars, waiting at the back and went to meet them. They were currently fourth in line at Miss Pacman. All the while keeping an eye on her.

"Hey Shiv, still looking to beat my high score?" He high-fived the lean man with the old school punk rock t-shirt.

Shiv shot him the finger. Shiv's friend, wearing a purple monstrosity of a cap with the words Prince Unicorn tiki'd on, said, "Nah. He is looking to beat mine. Which is higher than yours."

Dev grinned. "I am canceling your tab for being rude to the host, Nico."

Nico St. Clair hugged him hard and said, "Bro. We invested in this place. We are the hosts."

"Yeah, five grand apiece, remember?" Shiv chimed in.

"I think over the last five years, you two have run tabs that can be valued at 5x your original investment." Dev was clever that way. He could talk entrepreneur jargon when it suited him.

"You wish." Nico snorted.

"Dev, who is that extremely hot Indian female in the uncomfortable trench coat who keeps checking the door out and may I get her number, please?"

A part of him was enraged that Shiv would talk about Zara like that, but he was also amused. "You could ask her yourself. We do need entertainment for tonight, don't we?" He winked at Nico.

"And what makes you think I'll get shot down with that babe?"

Dev looked at Zara, toying with the peanut bowl. Zara turned heads, period. She stood out like a hothouse flower in a garden of orchids, even though she was dressed sedately. It was small consolation that other men were as affected as him. Pheromones, he surmised.

Or, maybe, it was just him.

"Trust me," he murmured. "I have a feeling about this one."

Maybe he could never get over her. The one who got away. Or more accurately, the one who sent him away. He wondered idly, while he made casual chitchat with Shiv and Nico, if it was bone-deep curiosity or bone-deep anger that was making him make her wait.

He'd made his peace with his situation a long time ago; there was no time for regrets. His time away from the family had taught him that. And Dev Banerjee, Caltech alum, successful bar owner, loyal friend and all-round good guy with a mean streak, knew better than most how ephemeral life really was. So he wrung pleasure out of every single moment he could find and moved on to the next best thing.

It had worked for him just fine, this last decade.

But yeah, he couldn't deny that a part of him, the boy who'd been lost and alone more than he could bear and who'd been left by everyone he'd loved, that part wanted closure. Another man might have even wanted revenge. And, while it was satisfactory, in the long run; all that bitterness was unproductive. And, closing in on thirty, he knew a thing or two about being at peak productive levels at all times.

So, Dev wasn't that man.

He didn't want revenge, but he damn sure wanted closure. He wanted information too.

It was hard, it had been horribly hard staying away from his former life for as long as he had. And now that she was here, in his bar, no coincidence that, he was going to get his answers. His satisfaction.

And by God, he was going to start getting over her.

#### Four

"Excuse me," Geek Guy said five minutes later in which Zara had finished her water and looked at her watch at least three times. She sighed and glanced at him.

"Yes?"

"Do you mind sharing that bowl of peanuts with me? My bowl is empty, you see." He grinned charmingly and Zara conceded that he was good-looking, in that American boy next door sort of way.

She pushed the bowl his way.

"You don't want some?"

She gave him a brief look. "I'm allergic."

"Oh."

"Yes."

She pushed her glass to the edge of the table and debated over checking email. She had email OCD.

"How about some dinner then?"

God! Persistence, thy name is Man.

"Look--"

"Steven," Steven smiled toothily. Showing all thirty-two of his surgically perfect teeth. His blond hair was haloed in the dim lights of the bar as was his California tan. And, for a second, Zara wished she could be the kind of woman who said yes to having dinner with strange men. Then she dismissed the thought as inconsequential and turned to the matter at hand.

"Look, Steven. I appreciate the offer and I am flattered. But you'll have better luck with some other interested woman." She was nothing if not brutally honest. She'd discovered it was the best weapon she could deploy against persistent males.

"But..."

"Seriously. Give it up." She smiled now and it notched her face from startlingly attractive to beautiful.

It wasn't that she was smiling, or the arrangement of facial muscles and the showing of teeth. It wasn't even that her face looked so classic in repose that Steven found himself tongue tied for a single second.

It was that when she smiled, her eyes didn't. They remained so distant; any man who looked at her had to wonder at the secrets that were locked in there. But Steven was more than persistent. He was pugnacious. So, he put one

hand on her knee and said, "I don't give up that easily, babe. I am a startup entrepreneur."

Zara's eyes narrowed at the intentional breach of personal space and the fact that now the man was annoying her. She was considering her next move when Steven was jerked off his barstool and flailing about wildly.

"I am friends with startup entrepreneurs and they aren't assholes," Dev said casually as he let go of Steve's collar and jerked the barstool off.

Steve fell down butt first with a very indignant squeak. "I am going to sue you, asshole."

Dev squatted down, all impressive and *looming* in his jeans, tee shirt and sport coat combo and smiled pleasantly. Except his eyes were hard as emeralds and looked out of place on that tough, go to hell face.

"You could definitely try. We have security cameras installed here by a startup founded by a friend. They come with audio. It would be lovely to have you explain how you were groping this lovely lady when she said no."

The whole thing took about ten seconds to resolve but Zara couldn't keep her eyes from swinging wildly towards him in that first instant. All her unexpressed yearning hit her in a colossal wave. Then she remembered why she was here and everything quelled inside.

"Hello, Dev," she said evenly, finally acknowledging him. Dev took his time looking up at her. Peasant at her knees to her royal princess. The spit dried in her throat but she held his gaze. Inside her trench coat, she clutched her fingers together.

"Hey, Zara. Beat it, Steven," he said still mildly, uncoiling to his full height. Then, he took Zara's arm proprietarily and walked her away from the stirring crowd.

And she was shocked into silence. She let him tow her away just because he was touching her, towering over her, his eyes tracking her with apparent carelessness. She followed him because it seemed easier to follow than speak. Her heart was pounding so rapidly, she felt a heart attack coming on any moment now.

But of course, she couldn't. To have an attack, you had to have the organ. And she'd lost hers ten years ago.

"Dev, wait."

She squared her shoulders and stopped his steady progress through the floor. All around them, the normal ambient sounds inside a bar continued. Music

played, people yelled, orders were filled and the din was enormous and comforting. Her initial moment of inertia over; she didn't want to go anywhere with him just because he could take her.

"What? Afraid to be alone with me?" He turned to her, spearing her with a cool look.

She shook her head immediately. "No, I," she hesitated. "I just wanted to tell you that I like your place."

He grinned at the obvious deflection in her statement. But let her get away with it, because he was intrigued now. More than he wanted to be.

The Zara he'd known before would have either slapped him or hugged him, chattering nineteen to the dozen when he'd summarily dragged her from her barstool. The composed woman with the quiet eyes who stood before him had just let him lead her, before digging her heels in. He could *sense* the old stubbornness in her, but he couldn't see it.

Zara smiled back.

That was what was wrong, he realized, when he saw Zara's smile. The same, empty polite smile she'd given Steven, the Geek Guy. The smile that made her seem all the more beautiful because it didn't reach any part of *her*. It shadowed her brown eyes to black, but that could be the lighting in his bar. He doubted it, but it was a possibility.

Dev narrowed his eyes.

What had *happened* to her?

"Thanks, honey. It's nice to know you still like something about me." His voice was deliberately scathing, just so he could get a rise out of her.

In the old days, taunts worked as well as touches. Invariably, she rose to the challenge and yelled at him. It used to turn him on, and he wanted to see if it still did. God, was he a masochist or what?

Her eyes widened the slightest bit. Acknowledging the hit, she nodded. "I understand how you would feel that way," she said.

He almost sighed. Why was she acting off-book?

He tugged at her arm, thin under the soft coat. "Come on, honey. We need to get to a quiet corner before we start rehashing the old days. This momentous occasion requires support in the form of alcohol, don't you think?"

Zara glanced quickly at him. To see if he was ridiculing or insulting her. But he just held her gaze quietly, a lock of hair still falling on his forehead and the old urge to brush it back rose up in her, choking the breath out of her.

She didn't do that, of course. "We need to sit. We do need to talk. I...I need

your help, Dev."

The way she said his name, it curled around his belly, just as surely as he'd curled his hands in her hair once. Tight, tightening bonds he'd given up, until he felt that pull, inexorable and strong, like time had not passed. Like this remote woman had not pulled out the facsimile of his heart with a few, well-chosen words and left him all by himself.

This was what the anger was all about, he knew that intellectually. But he was running on emotions right now, and he rarely did that. Because of that, he was doubly careful when he said, "We'll sit down and talk. But I sincerely doubt you need me for anything."

Again, it was a calculated dig. Again she didn't respond.

She nodded. "Fair enough. Where are we going?"

To his own intense and uncomfortable surprise, he said, "My apartment. It's upstairs and certainly more private than a rowdy bar. Are you brave enough to come into my parlor?"

The old Zara would have rolled her eyes, grinned her pixie grin that showed the slight imperfection in her front molars, and retorted with something sharp. This Zara sedately nodded, her hair falling forward in a straight curtain to cover her face from him.

He wanted to retract the offer, to say that he didn't want to be alone with her but he didn't. He'd always faced problems head-on. And when had she been anything but that? An annoying pest when she was tagging along on his escapades with Aadi, a disturbing teenager when she grew into her bones and, later on, he hadn't been able to see past her.

Following her example he was silent while he escorted her out the bar and into the building entrance. The building, like the bar, was a charming mixture of elegance and working class ethos. And he'd had fun building it from the ground up, much like angel investing in his friends' startups from his small nest egg after graduating Caltech. The lobby was small but spotless and tastefully furnished in marble with an urn of flowers and a small arch that housed the elevator bank.

Dev stabbed the down button and folded his hands under his chest to look at her. Condescendingly.

She might have not seen him for ten years but she thought she knew every nuance, each expression that crossed his face, those changeable eyes. So, Zara wondered at the cause of the condescension.

"Drop the act, Zara," he said finally. So harsh she wasn't sure she heard him

right.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said, drop that damned ice queen act. I don't know why you're putting it on, whether to needle me or to just be a bitch, but drop it." His fingers wrapped around her arm, again, just hard enough to pressure. And what made him really, really mad was the fact that she was still silent.

Stock still. Like she was surprised.

"I...it's not an act," she managed at last.

He searched her eyes for a long time then, and this time she had to fight to keep her serene face on. It was too easy to remember that she could yell at him; for the way he was talking to her, treating her, saying these things about her just to provoke her. She could cleanse out her anger and it could be forgiven. The possibility existed. Too easy and too tempting.

Zara wasn't given to temptation nowadays, and hadn't been for a long time. Nor was she often surprised but she was now.

This man, this Dev, she didn't know him. He was impulsive, where before he'd been thoughtful. He was successful, even if he wore faded jeans, a plain blue tee shirt that smelled of detergent and fabric softener which clung to his muscles in just the right way, and a bespoke sport coat. And he was angry, just like he had every right to be. At her, for appearing now without any warning, and for sending him away so many years ago.

He was also so much more handsome than he'd ever been at nineteen.

Age had defined the sharp features of the boy and turned his jaw and cheekbones angular and precise, shadowed with day old stubble as they were right now. His eyes had tiny lines fanning from the corners. And his nose still had that small break from ten years ago. His mouth, sensual at nineteen, now looked *masculine* and sensual. His hair was cut neatly, but it still waved in the front, falling on his forehead more often than not.

And his physique had matured, honed, until he was six-feet of all muscle. From a chest that was not the product of religious gymming, to feet that were firmly planted in his size twelve boots. From the way his well-built legs filled his jeans and the lean strength in his shoulders; he was all man at thirty. Even his voice had deepened. Where before it had felt like tequila poured over her skin, now it was whiskey taken with a shot of ice.

Hot and cold and commanding attention even when she didn't want to give it. But even his physical presence, distracting as it was, didn't make her aware of the changes in him. It was a *quality*, he had now. A solid awareness and

the surety that he would win all battles, simply because he could, with his steel will.

She wondered what had happened to him to filter out all that arrogance she knew burned in him and tempered it into the hard core of strength and skill she'd found in this new man. She wondered then if she would like the answer. She stopped wondering.

He was staring as intently at her as she'd been at him and it humiliated her to know that he knew that, but the elevator pinged open at that precise instant. He pursed his lips and stepped in, half-dragging, half-pulling her in with him. She went willingly again, not wanting to aggravate his current mood.

"Like what you see, honey?" he asked casually. Just to break the passionthick silence.

She wanted to start violently, to tell him all that was inside of her. But she couldn't. "You were always handsome, and you knew that, Dev. You don't need me to fall at your feet to provide an ego boost."

Then he did the strangest thing. He looked at her laughed. It was a muted chuckle, but it did startle her for a second. She looked at her feet as the elevator purred up and wished that she didn't have to do this.

She'd said yes to coming up to his apartment precisely because she knew he'd expected her to refuse. But that didn't mean that she wasn't filled with trepidation. Nerves were eating her stomach, until she was sure the lining was all gone. She so badly wanted to clutch her stomach, because her hyperacidity was acting up too, but she couldn't. She had a feeling; he was just waiting for her to make a sudden, impulsive move before he moved in. For something.

"You're something, Zara. Not what I expected, but you're definitely something." His eyes glittered and she wanted to smile too. It would have been nice to smile, even if he'd vaguely insulted her.

"Thank you."

His grin faded from his sexy lips but remained in those killer eyes. "You're welcome, honey."

"You don't have to call me that." She jerked a shoulder, and the elevator doors pinged again. Opening into a white lobby filled with paintings on the opposite wall.

He stepped out, raising one brow inquiringly so that she had to step out too.

"Call you what?"

"Honey. I don't like it."

He grinned, lethal fast. "I know. It's why I do it."

Her lips tugged into the semblance of a smile, this time with something close to pleasure and he felt that in his gut too. He cursed his own body's betrayal. Pheromones, he reminded himself. It was just pheromones. It damn well better be.

Zara took a mental and physical step back as she looked past him to the lobby and into his home. His irritation at her evasion came back, but he banked it down. He'd become a little patient over the years, having had to deal with recalcitrant suppliers and obnoxious customers on more than one occasion. Whatever game she was playing, he would figure it out.

And then he'd beat her at it.

"Well." His mouth quirked. "Mi casa and all that. Welcome, Zara."

She preceded him through the tastefully-appointed lobby that was filled with lithographs and prints of some very good, even noted works. The living room was done in dark blue with dark oak furniture, with windows that showed the view of the neighborhood in a flattering way. A very strong, masculine room that reflected the man who lived in it. She took in the open-plan kitchen on one side of the room, and saw that there was a pot kept on the stove.

Had his girlfriend left that for them to share later?

The pain of jealousy, long acknowledged and dealt with, came again. But she didn't show it by a flicker of an eyelash.

"It's beautiful," she said simply as she caught his questioning look.

"Sit." He commanded while he moved to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator and she heard his muffled voice as he rooted through it. "Beer okay?"

She picked the brown leather couch which had a pretty orange knitted afghan thrown over it and it was again a female item, causing her to speculate about the other occupants in his apartment. His life. She knew nothing about him other than what she had been able to digitally glean from social media and the private detective she'd hired. Knew less than nothing about what he'd done for the last ten years. Who he'd done it with.

And yet, in some ways, it was like he'd never left her. As if he'd always remained. Joy, sharp and painful, rose through her. The ease with which he'd accepted her sudden, unannounced reappearance made her think that maybe he was still the same. Maybe he could forgive her for all that she'd done. She knotted her fingers together again.

Of course, he wouldn't. How could he when she hadn't?

Zara looked up evenly at him, as he approached her with two local brews. "You should know, before we get any further, that I meant what I said."

He flopped down beside her, disturbingly close, so that she could smell his cologne and a musky scent that was his own. She'd never forgotten it, smelling it for weeks afterwards. In her hair, on most of her clothes, on her bed. She'd been driven to hallucinations by his scent.

"Honey, I know you always mean what you say. But what was it this time?" All laughter seemed to drain out of him and what remained was a tired, weary man who was merely curious.

Good. If he was curious. He would at least listen. God, she hoped so.

"I do need your help. It's why I came back."

To his credit, he simply nodded and asked, "What kind of help do you need?" "Before we talk about it, there are some other things you need to know," she began in that same even tone.

"Like what?"

Zara answered mechanically. "Grandpa Sundar is dying. He's ill; he's had his third attack this year and it's made him very weak. That's one thing." She took a deep breath while she watched him from the corner of her eyes.

He carefully placed the opened bottles on the glass coffee table in front of them. "What do you mean? Ill? How ill?"

"Pretty bad. The doctors say he might not last the year."

He closed his eyes, as if the image pained him. And she wanted to put her hand on his shoulder. Rub it, give him some comfort. Only the knowledge that if she touched him, she'd fall apart stopped her.

"What other things?"

"Because of Grandpa's...situation, I am running the business for now. And the Board is not happy about it. But you know how they are. They think I am not capable of handling AllMart." He opened his eyes, but she could only see honest curiosity in them.

"I see," he murmured. The AllMart Board consisted of people trusted by Dibankar and Sundar, friends and family, since it was still a privately-held company. If he was surprised that the Board was not in favor of the only remaining heir leading the company, he did not show it.

"Grandpa S is of the opinion that I should not be devoting my life to running the company. The Board agrees with him. Especially Auntie Vee."

He nodded, smiling mirthlessly. "Of course. They want what's best for you." She swallowed, because she still had to tell him the most devastating truth of

all.

"So you need me to come back to the mother ship and...?"

Her eyes flashed. Chagrin. Disappointment. Pain. Quickly masked. "There is an annual Board meeting which is going to be held in two months, where they will vote for a new CEO. I want your vote as Director. I also want to nominate you as co-CEO, effective immediately. To work with me for a couple months. If you're ok with it."

"And if I said no?" He was speculative now, perversely so.

"I am hoping you won't, when you hear the rest of my reasons for coming here and seeking you out," she answered quietly, proudly. Even though it was as close to begging as she could come.

"Hit me." He swigged directly from the bottle.

"My parents died three months ago, in a car crash. So did my husband. He was the CEO when Grandpa retired and was supposed to ease the transition, but they all died. We managed to keep it from the media so far because, like I said, Grandpa is not well at all. I have no else to turn to. Grandpa thinks it is too much work for me and I am afraid to challenge him when he is so weak because if he died then Aunt Vaidehi and I'd be all alone in the world."

She said the words so simply, so baldly, that for a long second he couldn't believe her.

"I know," he said in a low voice. "About your parents. About your husband." "How?"

He could have told her that one of his oldest friends had taught him the nuances of tracking people's digital footprints over summer break, sophomore year of college but that was not precisely illegal so he said, "Heard it through mutual friends. The usual."

"I don't have any friends. The funerals were family only and even they couldn't make it. How did you know?" There was the slightest bit of animation in her, that reminded him of the old Zara who was like a pitbull on scent.

"Does it matter now? I should have...I wanted to reach out and contact you then, but I didn't know how. I'm sorry, Zara. I'm so sorry." Regret and grief and old anger lodged in his gut, while he tried to rationally process the barrage of family tragedy she'd been dealing with. Alone.

"Ok. Thanks." He sounded sincere, she supposed he had no reason not to be. She held his earnest compassionate gaze for a long moment, and then dropped her eyes to her knotted fingers. Zara had her heart encased in ice, but

that didn't mean it wouldn't shatter. Into a million, little, unsalvageable pieces.

"And there's one more thing."

"What else, Zara?" His breathing was ragged, she could hear it.

"He had a son," she whispered, while her nails dug into her palms. "Aadi. He had a son."

The bottle finally slipped from Dev's nerveless fingers and hit the floor with a resounding crash. The beer spread over green glass and onto the clean floor, while time stood still and Zara felt it seep out of her like her own grief. It would be nice, she thought with aching numbness, to cry. Just once. To cry.

### Five

Dev remembered the night he'd left Zara's bed at the hospital with brutal clarity. People abandoning him was nothing new, his mom had died (something he knew couldn't rationally be helped) but she had left him, and his dad had buried himself in work forevermore. He'd been an acutely sensitive boy who'd survived on the grace and affection he'd found with Sundar Subramanian's family. So, when Zara had asked him to leave and the rest of the family had been too grief-stricken to even think of checking up on him...well, it wasn't something he had ever been able to get over.

That twin punch of abandonment and betrayal still lived in him like a livid bruise.

What had helped then was throwing himself back into his studies. His dad had, of course, lost no time in telling him about how Zara not wanting to be around him could affect the business and he had better make friends with her for the sake of said business. His dad had, of course, not thought to ask about what took place that night.

Dev had refused. His dad had cut him off. And that had been that.

Overnight, he'd found himself in an unfamiliar situation. That of impending pennilessness. If it hadn't been for his core group of friends who'd helped him transfer to Caltech and his grades had been enough to bag him a semi-scholarship, Dev knew impending pennilessness would have become actual reality. He'd worked two jobs, bartending and security, much like his best buddy Kit and managed to put himself through school. As it was, he'd lived on ramen noodles and two dollar beer for the remaining years of his undergrad and was violently allergic to noodles of any form now.

But he had made it. He had made it out. And he'd thrived. With the help of his new family, friends such as Shiv, Nico, and Kit. He'd saved every single penny while working his two jobs and then invested in his friends' tech businesses to repay some of what he owed them. When two of those businesses had received billion dollar valuations, he'd cashed out and seen more zeroes in a single check than he'd imagined possible.

All in all, Dev had become good at weathering brutal, unpleasant shocks.

But now, hours later, while he stared at a sheaf of papers that might have as well have been in Ancient Greek, he was overcome. He was back to being nineteen and his world had crashed in on him again.

"The papers seem to be in order," Dev said, as he went over them again. They were on his couch and Zara was sitting a sedate three feet away, her

boots tossed on the floor. Her coat slung on the couch armrest. A flare of satisfaction and pain went through him as he saw her. In his home. His space. As he'd once taken for granted she would always be.

"Yes. It's all in there. Brett's birth certificate, his pictures. The DNA test. His school reports. His blood group," Zara looked up from her own laptop. She was working on the pitch deck they'd be presenting to the Board at the AGM. They hadn't yet gotten around to talking about the business, but she had a little faith now that Dev would help her.

She was still here. He hadn't thrown her out when she'd dropped all those truth bombs on him. And he was, even now, a gracious host. Having served them a quick dish of cold pasta and good wine, while they discussed her revelations.

He seemed open to coming home to meet the family. It was more than what she'd hoped for, prayed for. But she should have remembered he was like that. Unpredictable, thoughtful, and intensely loyal when it came to family. Grandpa was family, even if she herself was the pariah. Not that he had given the slightest indication that she affected, *had* affected him, in any way. Ever.

"And explain to me, again, how we came to know that Brett even existed?"

Dev pinched the bridge of his nose in a gesture of exhaustion. And she stared at his strong, capable hand, remembering a Christmas morning when she'd watched it do things to her fully-clothed breasts. Her long-dormant body awakened a little, so that she wasn't really aware what he'd asked of her.

"Hmmm?"

"What happened, Zara? Did the sky fall out and the good fairy godmother dropped the little boy on our laps?" His voice was just laconic enough for her to think that maybe he knew she was affected by him. She also noted the way he'd adopted the collective plural. *We, our.* He was already in. And, of course, she wanted it that way.

It was time to end the past. At least, for everybody else.

"His mother came, actually. She sought us out a few months ago. You might remember her. Lily Fallahil."

"Yeah, I remember. Aadi had had a thing with her before he--"

She nodded, thankfully not letting him finish the sentence. He still could feel the punch of grief when he thought of Aadi. Young, bright Aadi. Crazy Aadi, at the very end. What a waste.

"So it's not like her claim was completely unsubstantiated. The private investigator we hired to look into the affair, spoke to people who'd known

them both back in school and what she said jibed with his report." Zara tapped the edge of her laptop, a little unnerved at the way he was staring at her. Intently, focused completely on her. He used to do that before too, and she loved it, loved the tingly feeling in her belly it gave her to know that she could inspire such attention. Now she just felt cornered, exposed.

He nodded. Pushing aside the unreasonable feeling of hurt that threatened to pulse again because, of course, the PI had spoken to everybody in Aadi's past. Everybody but him. More of the family closing ranks on him.

"Also," she added, because she saw the shadows in his eyes. "Look at the pictures. He's just a *gora* version of Aadi at age ten."

Dev nodded shortly, gazing at the picture of a dark-haired, gap-toothed, skinny boy. He was holding his feelings in, and she was grateful that he was. Exile from all the people he cared about wasn't what she'd anticipated when she'd asked him to walk away. But it was how it had all ended up. And it wasn't something she could explain away in a few, bald sentences.

She wasn't sure she wanted to.

"Anyway, after all the tests were done, Grandpa and Aunt Vee wanted closer contact with Brett. Lily had moved to California to be closer to her own brother, Drake, for a while before coming back to Chicago. She wanted Brett to get to know his dad's family. Lily was adamant about that."

"Ok. So, Brett is now settled at Sycamore?"

Zara shook her head. "No. Lily has her own place. Near us. She works as an office manager at a law firm. Aunt Vee and Grandpa want her to move in permanently but she refused. For now, she is allowing the company to pay for Brett's education. He is going to our old school."

His mind whirled as he thought about the thousand ways Lily Fallahil could be snowing the family. Money was just one of them. Were they all that blind or that stupid? Or had they forgotten how business was done? Had Grandpa S gone soft in his old age? And what about Aunt Vee? How did she feel about having an illegitimate grandson?

"Right. And Lily doesn't want anything else except contact with the family?" "Yeah. She's fiercely independent." Zara's lips quirked in that half-smile again.

"And everyone is cool with this arrangement?" There was barely a perceptible pause before Zara nodded, her shiny hair caught up in a knot with a pencil on top of her head. His body jerked in response, reminding him of his prolonged celibate state, and what this woman could do to his hormones.

She was also hiding something, he surmised.

"Yes, everybody was okay with that."

"Even." And he hated himself for wanting to know. "Your husband?"

Her chocolate brown eyes widened, but she nodded again with the barest of pauses, "Yeah, Ravi was ok with it. You remember him from school? He was a couple years ahead of you? Lacrosse captain? Ravi Singh."

"Grandpa S was okay with you marrying Singh?" he couldn't resist asking.

"Grandpa S asked me to marry him. It wasn't," she hesitated. "Some great love match. He had a great head for business, and he wanted a piece of the action."

"Right." He nodded as if he truly believed it. As if he could understand how a man could take one look at her, so aloof and unapproachable, and not want her. Just to see her lose control. "He wanted the business."

Zara shrugged. "Yeah, he did. He was very good at it. Grandpa was very pleased with him when we got engaged four years ago. The company needed the stability."

And you, Zara, did you need him?

She looked speculatively at him, as if she knew what he was thinking. Switching gears, he said, "Tell me about AllMart. I want to know what I might be getting into." Although he could have told her down to the last penny about the company's P&L statements. His father might have disowned him so he didn't have his shares in the company anymore, but he was good at tracking the digital footprints of people as well as organizations. Shiv had been a good teacher.

"In the last ten years, Grandpa S managed to triple the number of stores we have in the mid-west. We recently acquired a small but profitable chain in the East Coast, East Coast General, and that is operating independent of the primary operations. Turnover is up by 10% and annual revenues is close to the number that Grandpa wanted." She named a sum in the mid-seven figures, a conservative estimate from the data he had on the company.

"Sounds like you have it all under control here." There was sincere admiration in the statement.

She shrugged, like it didn't matter. "Most of this was Ravi and Grandpa's doing. I have been CEO for three months. It's the first quarter that sales have dipped by more than 20%. The labor union at East Coast General has been striking for a week asking for fair pay. Forty percent of the workforce is women and their CEO has had a heart attack in the middle of negotiations

last week. The new MD is being a sexist pig and doesn't deal well with women. I am scheduled to be there day after tomorrow."

"Why have sales dipped by more than 20%?"

She closed her eyes as a whisper of shame went through her. "Our previous vendors discovered that there were discrepancies in the accounts and want to renegotiate their contracts."

He leaned forward. "Discrepancies?"

Zara opened her eyes. "One of the employees under Ravi was stealing money from the vendors and placing it in an offshore account. Undercutting them. They found out. Two hundred of them left us. The remaining want newer contracts. I've managed to hold off on lawsuits but the Board is not in favor of settling with them. I need help."

"Yeah," he murmured.

"I think, if we presented a united front the Board would back down. They know you. Grandpa instated your shares again, but we were so busy dealing with his hospitalization that the papers were never sent to our lawyers and then yours. I have them with me for you to sign. And the union thing..." She hesitated. "I could really use your expertise there too. We just need to come to an amenable agreement with them and for the MD to sign off on it. I have done all the research already to make it viable for us."

He didn't doubt it for a second. If there was one thing he knew about Zara Subramanian, it was that she was thorough. She'd been a thorough researcher at fourteen, when she'd been asked to present a speech in school on pro-uniforms. And she'd dug facts about World War I and Thomas Burberry. The woman didn't leave a stone unturned in her quest for perfection.

She'd been a thorough kisser too, a traitorous part of his mind whispered.

"Of course, you do. You're CEO, aren't you?"

She nodded stiffly. Whether from pride or exhaustion he couldn't tell.

"Congratulations, Zara," he said sincerely.

She looked at him inscrutably with her mocha eyes and then nodded again. Even more stiffly than before. "Thank you. I..." She swallowed. "I have to know this. Are you helping me? And if you are, then why?"

He cocked his head. Smiled a funny little half-smile. "Isn't that what you needed from me? My help? After ten years of no contact whatsoever. You come in and tell me your grandpa is dying, your parents are dead and that my best friend who I murdered had a son no one knows anything about. Isn't this some combination guilt-come-nostalgia trip to get me to do what you want?"

"You didn't kill Aadi."

The smile faded as if it had never been. "That's not what you told me back then. When you banished me. A man doesn't forget stuff like that, Zara."

She resisted the urge to fidget but held herself perfectly still. "I know. I just meant... I didn't know what I was saying that day. I was..." *Destroyed. Ended.* 

"Yeah. I know." He ran a hand over his face. "We don't have to rehash ancient history anymore as long as you don't go digging into my motivations, ok? I am here for the next two months. Just like you requested. Let's leave it at that." Then without giving her time to formulate a response he continued, "What are you working on, right now?" He jerked his head in the direction of her laptop that she used for traveling purposes.

She instantly slipped back into business mode. Familiar and comfortable here. "The pitch deck for the AGM as well as responses for the labor union." "Excellent. Can I take a look at what you've come up with?"

She gave up her computer after a brief internal struggle.

As he settled more comfortably and started scanning her work, she knew she had no right feeling that instant flash of resentment she'd felt when he'd asked to see her work. He was a businessman, and maybe it wasn't FMCG retail, but food and beverage did come under retail, and he was obviously intelligent. He knew his stuff. Very well.

The PI who'd compiled the background on Lily had also unearthed the bare bones about Dev, like she'd requested. He'd transferred to Caltech on a partial scholarship immediately after Aadi's death, worked as a bartender at the bar he owned now and security work for a big tech company. After finishing school, he'd continued working his two jobs. Then he'd gone into business with a guy named Kit Barranos, his colleague at the security gig and a classmate at Caltech, who'd given him seed money to start the bar, along with three other friends. He'd also invested his savings in a couple of businesses, which had turned into billion dollar companies and was considered something of an angel investor in Silicon Valley.

Those investments became successful enough that he'd bought the whole building his bar was situated in, and one another in Lake Tahoe where he ran a resort that he'd managed to sell off to a major hotel chain last year. In the end, Dev Banerjee, former scion to a grocery department store chain, had done very well for himself.

There was no serious relationship, no serious women, even though the PI had

dug up a couple of photos with a red-haired girl who'd been kissing him. And all the jealousy that had been directed at nameless, faceless women who could've been kissing him, holding him, loving him through the years had coalesced and been directed at this one woman.

Jealousy that Zara, intellectually, knew she had no business feeling.

She glanced at him now. Already occupied with the task before him. Yeah, it was best if they didn't rehash the past anymore. It was best to keep this as professional as possible. She reminded herself that she was prepared for whatever he would throw at her. Accusations, recriminations, anger, derision, and insults.

She had been prepared for everything but this, she finally acknowledged. The shock, the blessed numbing shock of having him by her side finally lifting and leaving her with acute pleasure and pain. And the discomfiting awareness that this man, in his faded jeans and tee shirt, with his hard-planed face, had drawn more animation out of her in five minutes than her husband had ever been able to. Pain because she had no business feeling pleasure at all that he was here with her.

He was here, when Aadi wasn't. Her stomach hurt and she turned to the other side, taking a sip of the excellent Pinot Grigio.

Seeing him hadn't hurt. Not nearly as much as this moment when she asked herself why she was prepared to accept his anger, but not his presence. And why everything was starting to hurt again, when she'd locked it all up and thrown away the key ten years ago.

Then she decided that thinking about Dev and how he made her feel was unproductive and, in the long run, inconsequential, counted backwards from hundred as her therapist had told her and drifted off to sleep. To a dreamless, black sleep.

It was pitch-black when Zara woke up. In her hurry to fly back from New York to Chicago and then onto the West Coast, her internal time clock had gone out of whack and she was insanely hungry right now.

She was also; she realized with growing panic, tucked against Dev on the couch. Warm and snug against his side, his length stretched next to hers, his hand around her waist, trapping her beside him. Making her aware of the hard planes of his legs, the muscles of his thighs, the rise and fall of his breathing drawing her unwilling eyes to his chest. His muscle tone that was unlike what she thought she knew about engineers and bartenders.

Arousal, a constant companion since she'd set eyes on him, balled low in her stomach, dried the spit in her throat, pounded in her heartbeat. She continued gazing at him shamelessly, wanting this stolen moment of time, when she could look her fill of him.

His face was pleasingly covered in stubble, dusting that sexy, stubborn jaw, his nostrils flared with his deep breathing, and his throat worked a little in his sleep. His hair was flopped all over the armrest and she smiled at the disarray it caused. But it was his eyes, closed and flitting behind his lids that fascinated her. And his lips, slightly open. His lips had been so talented back then, not very wide, or very full, just right. They'd fit perfectly over hers, and she wanted them, wanted them so badly right now.

She bit her own lip in frustration.

"Stop looking at me like that." He spoke so suddenly, that she nearly jumped out of her skin. As it was, she trembled once on hearing the deep timbre of his voice and the wiggles her insides produced on command, and pushed back from his chest where she'd been leaning over him.

"I don't know what you're talking about." She was prim and steady. She hoped.

He opened his eyes and the force desire in his stare blew her off any course she'd been willing to take. His pupils were dilated and his irises were nearly black with what he was feeling, what he had no trouble communicating to her.

"Zara, don't lie to me. It's your one redeeming quality."

Meaning, I hate everything else about you.

"I didn't, Dev. Let me go," she said, as she tried to get up.

For a single, mad instant he thought about kissing her and calling her lie, but

then decided against it as he heard the loud rumble of her belly. He grinned and took his numb arm back. God, had it been that long since he'd spent the night with a woman? Correction, he never spent the night with a woman if he could avoid it. That implied some sort of commitment and he didn't do commitment.

He could blame cuddling with Zara on the fact that her sudden appearance had rattled him but Dev didn't lie to himself as a habit. It was a sudden urge. He didn't like it. And he didn't know how to deal with it.

To get over his internal discomfort, he teased her, "Looks like you have other needs to feed." Reaching a long arm out and pressed a button. A soft light blinked on and she blinked too, against it. His grin faded and he pressed back from her.

"I could eat a horse," she confessed, as she sat up and brushed her hair back from her shoulder.

"When was the last time you ate, Zara? You didn't really eat my excellent ravioli, last night, did you?"

She frowned. Yesterday morning, she'd read the final report from the doctors on Grandpa and made an executive decision. She'd nibbled on a sandwich on her way to 'OHare. "I don't know," she admitted. "With the time difference, my body clock has gone haywire."

He narrowed his eyes and swung down from the couch. "You should know better than to starve yourself like that. As it is, you look exhausted."

She didn't, she knew that, but she smiled all the same. "You sound just like Aunt Vee when she is on one of her rants about getting me to eat on time."

"She should. Come on, let's get you fed before we hop on a flight back for home sweet home."

Zara sat up and resisted the urge to stretch the kinks on her side. It had been years since she'd slept next to someone peacefully. It was a novel experience for her.

"Won't your girlfriend mind if you just left without a word?"

Dev grinned and to Zara it felt exactly as if the light had come on again. Too bright to handle.

"Jealous, Zara? Or fishing?"

Zara tamped down on the irrational jealousy that reared its green head again. She had to get over it. He wasn't hers. She'd made sure of that. "I was just concerned. I don't want to upset your life any more than I already have."

Dev looked at her for a second before he burst into laughter. Genuine,

bellyfuls of laughter. She frowned and got up from the couch, tucking her tee shirt in where it had ridden up.

"Let's get some food into you. I need to get my proxies in place and then we can be on our way. If that's ok with you."

"It's fine. Why are you laughing at me?"

He stopped laughing. She looked so solemn, the world's most solemn woman. It was unnatural how still she really was. "You've made a habit of upsetting my life, Zara. I was just laughing at the irony of it all."

She nodded. "Ok. That's ok, then."

He leaned over and gave her a quick back hug. Their first voluntary contact.

Zara froze because her back felt as if it was on fire, snug as it was against his chest. It was a non-starter hug, lasting mere seconds. But her senses went on hyper alert. She saw that his shirt was shoved back to the elbows and light hairs dusted on his calloused hands, which looked even stronger in the dim lights. Zara swallowed a wave of dizziness. And it threatened to overtake her as she forced herself to turn around and face him.

His face was in complete shadow, but he still took up all her space. He breathed the air she should have been breathing and she was annoyed with herself. She held a hand out and it brushed his built stomach and she wanted to swallow again. This was *not* good, she lectured herself.

He stepped back the merest inch and she looked at him. Their eyes and mouths were perfectly aligned, and in the dark interiors of his living room, who would care if she leaned in, if she pretended to stumble and tasted his lips just once? Just one damn time?

Self-preservation prevailed and Zara stepped back. Her skin hummed with awareness. "You said something about food, right?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I'll see to the food. You can figure out our travel plans. Divide and conquer."

She nodded. They took care not to touch each other again.

Zara immediately got on her phone and started making flight arrangements while Dev brewed coffee and mentally sorted out his life so he could go back home to the family that had not really wanted him. Shiv would handle the day-to-day ops in a pinch. He knew the staff roster and had automated inventory for him three times. He was also excellent at Miss Pacman contests and that always drew the crowds. Plus, the suppliers knew him too.

Yeah, it could work.

He called Shiv up while he whisked batter for pancakes. Shiv answered on

the fourth ring. Groggily.

"Whoever this is better have a good reason for calling me this early in the am."

"It's me, Dev. And I do. And it's almost ten, dude."

Shiv bit off a curse and Dev was silent. "What's up?" Shiv asked.

"I was just thinking of 2007. Do you remember 2007, Shiv? Winter break was coming up and we'd just finished our exams. You were failing Advanced Programming, I think it was Oracle they were trying to teach you when you decided to ban the class."

"I remember." Shiv sounded a lot sharper now than three seconds ago.

"Do you remember how Professor Bachman basically threatened to have you arrested because you TP'd his car and they found security footage of you at the scene of?"

Shiv was silent. He remembered everything. "I also remember that it was you who first wiped off the footage from the school's server using, may I add, skills taught by me. Then you went with Kit and pleaded my case to not press charges and screw up my already screwed up record. Now. Why the hell are we going down memory lane? What do you want?"

"I want you to remember that you owe me big time. Big time, buddy," Dev said cheerfully.

"Why?"

"Because you're going to go straight. Because you're going to come work for me. Actually, you're going to take over GWBG for me for a few weeks."

Shiv was quiet for a few moments. "Why am I taking over GWBG for you?" "I'm going back home."

"Yeah, right."

"Shiv." Dev saw Zara bending down and wearing her boots. Another spear of desire shot through him. Unwelcome. Uncomfortable. "I am serious. I'm going back home. It's time."

"Does Kit know?"

"Not yet. I need to go home and take care of a few things first. But are you in? I'd go back in peace if I knew you were going to take care of things here."

"Yeah," Shiv was ungracious. "Yeah ok. I'll take over GWBG for you for a few weeks. Till you come back."

"Awesome. Thanks, Shiv." His gratitude was sincere. "Grab some coffee and call me back. I'll figure out your task list by then." He bit into a cookie as he

sorted out his life into neat little checkmarks that Shiv would be able to follow. Dev mentally crossed his fingers that his brilliant, erratic best friend wouldn't burn his life down around him. He poured the batter into the buttered skillet and smiled at Zara who gave him a tentative smile of her own. And wished for something stronger than coffee himself to wash out the inappropriate desire.

They made Chicago at nine, that night. The layover in Seattle had taken a little more time, due to runway trouble and they made their final connection with minutes to spare, travel-weary and jet-lagged out of their heads.

At least Zara was, even though she put up a good front.

She was half-dozing as they made their way out of 'OHare since Dev had thrown a handful of clothes and underwear in a beat up duffel and announced that he was ready to leave. He was supporting her elbow without her being aware of it, and it gave him an odd jolt in the region of his heart as they moved as one through the crowd, to the slightly chilly night.

"You have a car in parking?"

She shook her head, her hair falling over her cheek. She shoved it back unceremoniously and took her cell out. Dialing, she said to him, "We have a car service on standby, for emergencies like this. He'll be here in fifteen."

Her fingers shook as she scrolled contacts, and he noted the gesture. He took the phone away from her, the same way he'd taken her sensible and monogrammed baggage and silenced her with one, implacable look.

She glared at him. "I need that to call the car company."

"You can't wait here for fifteen minutes. You can't last fifteen seconds. You need a shower and sleep, Zara. We'll get a cab."
"But."

He shook his head and his hold on her trench-coat clad elbow tightened. Enough that she felt it through three layers of clothes. Like always.

"Don't argue with me, Zara. I am tired too and I am ok with admitting it." She shrugged, but didn't drop her eyes. "Fine. Be a bully."

He half-grinned and it knocked her fried brain completely out. She almost groaned out loud. Physical reaction aside, this whole being sexually aware of him thing was irritating her now. Mostly because it was so inconvenient. And because she knew how vulnerable she truly was.

"A cab for the bully, please."

She sighed and stepped right to the short cab-line. "You're lucky we came at peak hour. Its hell finding cabs otherwise."

A cab pulled up to them and she opened her mouth to give the driver the homestead's address, but he said, "Where do you live?"

"What?" She stared blankly at him.

"Do you live with the folks?" He spoke slowly, as if she needed help deciphering the simple question.

"No." She shook her head. "I don't."

"Then where do you live?"

"Wicker Park. It's closer to work."

Code for Ravi's place. But he didn't let that thought deter him. "Fine, we'll go there."

"Wicker Park," he told the cabbie, and opened the back door for her. She stared at him for a long instant.

"Don't you want to go see the folks?" she asked, putting the simplest question first. The other dark, dangerous, complicated questions, she refused to voice. Even if her pulse was pounding in her ears at the thought of spending one more night with Dev.

"I do. Just not right now. We'll go in the morning."

"Oh," she said, and glanced at him in the process of getting inside the cab. He grinned again, and said, "But it doesn't mean I will be staying there." "Oh," she said again.

"I am going to stay with you. It's just better for the business, since you know a lot of it, and I need all the help I can get," he said easily.

And he sounded sane. He sounded sensible. He sounded like the only reason he would ever want to be under the same roof as her was because he had to talk business and facts and spreadsheets with her. He sounded like he hadn't looked at her with insane desire in his eyes just hours ago.

"Oh," she said, for a third time.

The cab pulled away, and Dev stretched his legs out. She glanced at the worn knees of his jeans and forced herself to not swallow. He didn't mean anything by his announcement. And it did make sense, that he should have her by his side, when he was going to be overseeing operations along with her anyway.

Still the idea of spending the coming days and nights in his company made.

Still the idea of spending the coming days and nights in his company made her think that maybe there wasn't just good intentions involved. Maybe he wanted to make her pay a little too, for what she'd done to him.

As she glanced at his hewn profile, while he was busy checking email, she

knew that he wouldn't have to do anything. He'd just have to look at her. He'd just have to breathe. And she would pay.

### Seven

Dev had woken up in a lot of strange places in his thirty years. The comfort of home had truly never been his because of his workaholic father and a succession of nannies who'd tried to do their best by a strong-willed, stubborn, attention-starved toddler. He'd felt at home at the big mansion at Riverside Heights, but more often than not, at least since Zara had grown up overnight, he'd felt alien there too.

Forbidden desire had a way of screwing up your priorities.

And then, later on, college and the awful time after Aadi's death had truly divested him of any notions that he had any place called home. His years in Caltech and after hadn't been brutal, but they had bred in him more of the transient, fleeting need for accommodation that he'd been anyway building up to. Even his apartment, the one over the bar was more of a convenience and a tax break although he had tried to infuse it with personality and color.

Which was why he was doubly surprised, almost annoyed by the fact that Zara had chosen to live in this ostentatious place at one of the more posh addresses in Chicago. It was a generous apartment, with three bedrooms and a huge living room with an open-plan kitchen and a stunning view of Lake Michigan. The color scheme was muted, in deference to the violent abstracts that hung on almost every wall in the place. Reds, violets, blues, yellows even, dear god, orange, had made their way into the paintings.

The designer kitchen looked unused, and the fridge when he'd poked around inside had revealed a fair amount of food to prove that Zara actually lived here. They were in neatly boxed and labeled containers. *Leftover biryani*. *Murgh masala*. *Paneer makhanwala*. *Dal*. The scents and tastes of Ma DSa's cooking. He supposed that was what annoyed him. That this place had so much color and none of it belonged to the woman who'd shown up at his bar and turned his life upside down with a few well-chosen words.

Again.

Now he wandered the length of the living room, freshly showered and dressed in the spare jeans and shirt he'd brought in his carryon bag, preferring to load up on papers that were relevant to keep his business running, than personal items. As it was, his exhaustion had lifted early enough, after six hours of solid sleep and he'd been awake at five in the morning, coffee in his hand watching Chicago wake up.

He'd been back here a couple times in the last decade. Once when Kit had

opened his martial arts studio and the other time to see his father before he died. And yet...Chicago was home. It held his heart in a way he did not like. Just like the woman who'd disappeared into a bedroom after last night's almost argument. She'd been dead with exhaustion, not that you would know it just looking at her. But he knew where to look, and he'd seen it in the pinched look her eyes carried when she'd been studying too hard the previous night and had missed out on sleep.

She might be closed off to him emotionally, and maybe he preferred it that way, but he could still read her like a book physically. Which was why he didn't know what to make of the fact that she'd wanted him, and he hadn't done one damn thing about it. It wasn't because she'd been staring at him, when she'd woken up from her deep sleep, or because he'd felt the change in her breathing when he'd hugged her platonically. Sure, she'd retreated immediately and he hadn't been able to reach her after that, but she'd wanted him all to herself just for that one moment. He knew that. He just didn't know what to do about it. And he didn't know how he felt about it.

As it came to everything about this new Zara, Zara 2.0, he was confused, off-balance and on low arousal. Three things he didn't want to be, at any point.

A slight sound alerted him to the fact that she'd come in, and he turned to survey her. She was dressed much like him. Jeans, and a top that belted with a silver chain around her slim waist, drew attention to her long legs encased in flat boots, her hair a shining curtain that was left to lie around her shoulders. No makeup on her young face, no jewelry whatsoever, her warm, brown eyes austere.

He wondered if Ravi, the husband who died, had loved her and if she was mourning him. He wondered where her wedding ring was.

"Good morning." She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

"Good morning." He sipped coffee.

"I hope you slept well. Time change does weird things to people." Zara was scrupulously polite, moving around to the kitchen and pouring herself a cup. She gulped it down absently, flicking through the stack of mail left for her on the counter. And he was angry. He was more than angry, he was furious.

He'd come here to help her, had put his own life on hold, he damn well wanted more than social politeness and empty phrases. He wanted passion and life and answers.

With barely a thought in his head he walked towards her, and she still continued riffling through the envelopes, head bent. Some instinct must have

warned her of his intentions though, because her head snapped up at the last instant and her eyes widened a fraction, before his head descended down on hers and he kissed her.

Zara had been physically, sexually attracted to precisely one man her whole life. It had shamed her, had made her aware of her own shortcomings as a lover, as a wife, because even if Ravi had never said anything, had never made her aware, he knew that he wasn't that man. He'd never been that man. And she'd often, sometimes despite constant warnings and the tight rein she kept on herself, dreamed. She'd dreamed that she was fourteen again, and playing tennis with Dev. Her young body alive and aware of every move she made. Of every move he made. She'd dreamed that she was fifteen and she had danced precisely two dances with Dev at the only prom she had attended. But most of all, she dreamed of the summer when she'd turned sixteen. And had actually taken matters in her own hands one day at the homestead's swimming pool and kissed Dev. To her intense shock and delight, he'd kissed her back. They'd been inseparable that summer, trading stolen kisses as much as they could.

The flush of first love giving her memories a soft, hazy glow. Like seeing everything through a rose-colored filter.

She dreamed, more often than not, of Christmas Eve years ago, when she'd been so ecstatically happy, so terribly wanted that she always woke up drained with fatigue and anticipation. She'd dreamed even though she had promised herself she wouldn't, because that was her punishment. Her penance.

But even in her wildest dreams, and she'd had some wild, desperate dreams, she'd never imagined she would get to do this. Hold him in her arms again. Arms which were currently trapped between his body and hers, burning from his heat, while his lips steadily devoured every inch of her mouth, conquered it and her will, her mind, with one, hot, wet kiss.

His lips, always the right fit for her, shaped themselves to her lips, and opened her mouth with no effort at all. His tongue swept in, and made itself at home, and she could do nothing but drink in his scent and his taste, coffee and Dev and kiss him back, like her life depended on it. His lips were brutal almost, but it didn't matter.

She was kissing him, he was kissing her, and that mattered.

Which was why, the shock was greater when he thrust her away from him ten

seconds later, and looked at her with eyes that glittered. His breath came in short bursts that she felt on her nose, her face; his nostrils flared.

Zara was sure he could read her desire and her capitulation in her eyes so she waited for him to make some sort of move. If he gave the slightest indication that he wanted her, then...then what, what right did she have to expect that from him?

"I am not sorry for that," he said, as he took her chin firmly in his hand. "Dev."

"I just wanted to know if you really knew how to feel," he added carelessly, letting her go so easily, she would have stumbled if the counter hadn't been there to support her back.

Of course, that made sense. He was angry, enormously angry at what she was asking of him. What she had done to him. This was just payback.

And yet....Zara nodded, eyes clear, and wiped her mouth. "I understand. It doesn't mean anything."

And the words were sincere. She sounded like she believed that he could kiss her like there was no tomorrow and know there was nothing but the moment behind it. He stared at her, at her swollen, nude lips, and had to wonder exactly how she had grown up, if she could confuse lust and potshots like that.

At what had happened to her which made her value herself so little.

Because the gesture, when she'd wiped her mouth clean of his trace had seemed desperate, iron-willed but desperate. And, for one short moment, her breaking heart could be seen in her light-brown eyes.

"We should get going," he said, because he had to get out of here. Before she pulled him any deeper with her hard shell and her needy eyes. "I am sure the welcoming party has already called you." He grinned in an effort to lighten the atmosphere.

Zara nodded, thinking of the five messages Gramps had left her, and the seven am wakeup call Aunt Vee had given her, demanding to know where the hell they were. She'd waited a couple more hours, mostly because she had needed to sleep and come to terms with the energy needed to cope with a full family reunion. And the knowledge that jet-lag couldn't save her every night he stayed with her.

Not now. Not when he'd kissed her like that. With all the expertise and none of the tenderness she'd once expected from him. And yet, the edge to his demand, his skill, had been blanked by the sheer rush of her own pleasure.

Her own response. She'd wanted him to kiss her, go on kissing her. Do things to her. Go way beyond first base.

And that was why she needed time to compose herself. Because she was running full-tilt scared, now.

"Yes, they are a bit impatient." She acknowledged with a tiny smile herself, her mind on the blinker, as it absorbed the full impact of the devastating man who stood in front of her. He was wearing regular, every day clothes and she could see the fresh pores where he'd shaved that morning, but it wasn't the defined planes of his face that made her breath catch.

It was that Zara had dreamed of seeing him like this. First thing in the morning.

She'd known when she'd decided to ask him for help that seeing him again would be hard, would be impossible. She hadn't known it would be so deliciously torturous or that it would bring awake all of her nerves one by one. And that he could hurt her with not just his words but his touches.

Zara resolved there would be no more lapses and nodded once, scooping the mail in one hand.

"Let's leave, shall we? The folks have prepared a wholesale buffet breakfast for you."

Her insides wiggled into a jelly-like formation when he took her elbow, and guided her out the apartment but she kept her head high and her profile serene, so that to the outside world they were a handsome couple, two people who had been friends and who were now business allies.

Then why, Zara asked herself, did his heat melt her frozen heart, even though it had gone away right behind him when he'd left her hospital bed?

# Eight

Sycamore Drive was home.

He had convinced himself that it was just a house, a fairly large house with terraces and French doors where he'd eaten sumptuous food and hung out with his very first best friend. His brother. He had convinced himself that he didn't miss it. The connecting room next to Aadi's where he'd spent most of his childhood and teenage years. That he hadn't thought about Zara's bed, where they'd spent an entire summer napping and horny as only adolescents could be. Innocent as only adolescents could be.

It had been self-preservation, of course. But...this house was home.

And he had missed it. Even if things had changed. Everything had changed.

For one thing, a bright, red bike was thrown carelessly against the elms. It had to be Brett's. Aadi's son's bike. An odd sort of pain shot up his heart, as he cataloged more changes. The hedgeroses had changed color. Now they seemed to be purple.

And had the house always been this *small?* 

Out of habit, Dev looked to his left. The lawn was neatly manicured, evenly maintained. There was no statuary. No fountain. He imagined they didn't need any more visceral reminders of the night.

His words were muted. "It's different...and yet exactly the same."

Zara glanced at his stern, almost harsh profile, the hawk-like nose and those kissable lips and she couldn't remember if she'd ever felt this nervous ever in her whole life. And it wasn't because she was rattled from their earlier encounter; it was because this was her life now. The people in this house, the security she gave them, this was the sole purpose of her life and she didn't want to be found wanting in this regard.

"Brett likes butter pecan and strawberry ice-cream." She braked to a stop in her tiny Mini Cooper that she'd garaged at the apartment for the time she'd been away.

The car had been too small for him to drive although she had no doubt that Dev drove like he did everything else. With quiet competence and silent ruthlessness. It made her wonder if he was this ruthless when it came to lovemaking too.

She looked out the window of the car, as the errant thought shot through her brain and missed his grim look.

"Interesting info. Thanks for the heads-up."

"I just wanted you to know so you could bond with him. So you could get him to like you," she explained needlessly, turning again to look at him. Her beautiful face devoid of every emotion. She wiggled the stuck door handle. It didn't give.

"I am far more interested in Lily, Zara."

He reached past her to open the door at her end. His hand brushed her right breast, hard and hot and she wanted to shrink back in her seat. The need to have him touch her, all of her, spurted through again, and she kept her gaze straight ahead with pure will. She also kept her mouth shut with the same will. The door opened with a little click and they got out.

"I don't know how you drive this tin can." Dev stretched his legs and back. She almost smiled. "I like it. It's sexy."

Their eyes met and held, hazel clashing with brown and Zara was the first to look away. It was a strategic retreat and they both knew it.

A child's shout could be heard in the distance, followed by the sound of an exasperated female. Dev turned to look just as a bright, dark-haired tornado came crashing through the side of the house and ran straight towards Zara.

"You came back, Auntie Zara."

Her arms came automatically around the boy and she smiled at him. Really smiled at him.

Dev felt the impact of that loveliness in his gut.

"Hey, champ. How was school? Did you ace that math test?" She brushed his hair back from his thin face and continued walking with him towards Dev.

"It was okay. I didn't do badly. Seventy-eight." The boy grinned slyly. "I got an extra hour on the Wii for it."

"You drive a hard bargain, don't you?" she asked him, affectionately.

Brett nodded emphatically. "Mom said so too."

They stopped in front of Dev, who oddly felt bereft, like he was intruding on something intensely private.

It was unsettling to see the boy. This child who was proof that his friend hadn't just passed from this world without leaving any mark except grief. It was downright disturbing the way emotion spilled out of Zara as she spoke to the boy, touched him.

"Brett, I'd like you to meet somebody very special," she said softly to the boy, kneeling down beside him.

"Is this Uncle Dev?" he asked, suddenly transferring all of his attention to the man in the tough leather jacket, red sneakers and aviators.

Dev raised a brow and said, "Who has been talking about me? Not your Auntie Zara, I hope." Then he grinned too and Zara's arms tightened around Brett's waist. There was pure mischief in that devilism smile.

"No," Brett said. "She doesn't talk much. Mom said you might be coming. Are you going to stay with us now and work at AllMart?" he scrunched his nose. And Dev, who could remember Aadi doing the exact same thing as he struggled through calculus and trigonometry and world geography in high school, was hit by a wave of grief so hard he couldn't see straight.

He held his hand out and said in a voice huskier than usual, "Yes, yes I am. If your Auntie will have me. Maybe you can put in a good word for me." He smiled at the end, trying to not hold onto the boy. To not gather him and hold onto him, this piece of his old friend whom he'd lost forever.

Brett squeezed his hand, his thin fingers speaking of a growing boy, and asked, "What's in it for me?"

Zara smiled in a lopsided way and Dev glanced at her as he answered, "How about all you can eat butter pecan and strawberry ice-cream?"

Her smile came full-on now. And it was just for him. Something loosened and tightened in his chest at the same time.

Brett lunged from Zara to him in an instant, and hugged him once, hard. "Deal," he promised; his brown eyes exactly like his father's.

Dev hugged him back briefly, feeling the imprint of the wiry body against his own, and remembered the rare childhood times when he and Aadi had hugged. The kinship strong even then. He passed one hand over the little boy's hair, "Name the time and place, Mr. Hard Bargain."

"And what did he wheedle out of you, Dev?" A sultry voice asked him pleasantly, and he looked up from Brett's smiling face, to face Brett's mother. Lily. Aadi's one-time girlfriend. The woman who could be snowing the Subramanian family now.

"Hey, Dev," Lily Fallahil said, looking like a female version of Brett, with her petite height, blond hair and blue eyes.

"Hey, Lily," he said, extending his hand again and shaking Lily's. "Strange times, huh?"

Lily laughed nervously, and brushed her chin-length hair back. "You have no idea, Dev."

Zara straightened from where she'd been kneeling on the driveway, wincing inwardly at the grit that had stabbed her knees. She knew she was

superfluous now. She had seen that look in Dev's face before. Once before, when he'd been so preoccupied with her, he hadn't been able to see anyone else. Now that same look was back, but not for her. For Lily. Brett's mother. Lily, whom he had known too, before.

The way he had looked at her, with single-minded concentration, was merely a ploy used by all successful people to trip their opponents up with the intensity of their stare. And if Lily's instant nervous reaction was anything to go by, he was largely succeeding. The fact that it hurt Zara to see him looking at another woman like that, with all that energy and intensity, made her miserable. More miserable than she'd figured.

Even though he had said, he had warned her, he was more interested in Brett's mother.

And who wouldn't be? She wasn't built like a damn giraffe, and she didn't feel like a fraud every time she put on makeup and smiled. She wasn't completely dead from the inside.

Except, a tiny voice whispered, she hadn't been dead when she had curved around him and snoozed on his couch. And she hadn't been dead when he'd brutally kissed her to prove some weird sexist point.

Lily and Dev were talking now about California weather, as sound rushed back into her ears, and she became aware that she had been staring quite rudely at the two of them. She waited for a lull in the conversation and when none seemed to come in the next ten seconds, made to move unobtrusively.

Dev's hand shot out from nowhere and held her against him, right next to him.

He looked at her and asked smiling, "Where do you think you are going?"

She was startled, slightly breathless from the contact. "Inside. To see Gramps. And Aunt Vee. See if anybody needed anything. You two have a lot to catch up on, I can see. So--" With rising embarrassment, she realized she was babbling like an idiot. She didn't have to explain herself to him. Or her.

She dropped her gaze to his beat up sneakers and wished that she'd kept her mouth shut just like she had in the car. Just like she had at the apartment.

"Good idea." Dev nodded and looked at Lily. "What say we carry this little munchkin inside?" He then hefted Brett up with one hand and held him dangling up in the air.

Brett squealed and said, "I am not a munchkin."

He looked at the child, grinning his gap-toothed smile, and considered. "You're right," he said. "You're not a munchkin. You're a little munchkin."

Brett laughed some more because Dev had transferred his bundle to Lily who laughingly wrestled with him for a minute. Dev's hand remained on Zara's waist, heavy, male and so *there* that every nerve ending stood up in awareness. But it was with Lily that he walked, expecting Zara to follow, who did, because it was either that or be dragged behind like a little munchkin.

Lily gave her a small smile and said, "Come on in, everyone's dying to see you."

Zara smiled back. It didn't reach her eyes. But then again, it never did.

## Nine

Zara had known her family had missed Dev. They had missed the other son, and that it had been sheer strength of will that had kept them all from crumbling after the blows had struck them, one by one. Starting ten years ago, with Aadi's death. And Dev's 'abandonment,' which had caused everyone even more pain coming at the heels of Aadi's death.

She had been insulated against that pain, the pain of his immediate loss and departure because she had been grieving her brother. Grieving for him till she went mad with it. But the months had passed, the grief had settled into numbing acceptance, and then the other ache had settled in. That of having lost her heart. Her Dev. Of wondering and wanting something she had promised herself she wouldn't want.

She had been horrified to find that Pradosh uncle had cut Dev off from his will and left him with nothing after they'd had one of their almighty rows. It had been Grandpa S who'd saved Dev's seat on the company Board, who'd left him with an avenue to come back home. She'd had nightmares about that for weeks on end.

At first, Grandpa S and Aunt Vee had all assumed he had left because he had been hit hard by Aadi's death. But as days, weeks, months went by without a phone call, an email; they had worried. She had stopped them from communication by telling Gramps, *lying* that he had told her he needed some time alone. The reason she had done that was panic. The loss of her brother was slowly fading, but the need for Dev still remained, in stunning force, and it had scared her that if she saw him again, her promises and her penance would break.

And she'd just beg to be with him,

So, with various excuses, she had fended them off for a couple of semester, and then when they didn't hear from him, when they heard what Pradosh had done and how Dev had moved to California, they had all slowly lost hope. They had given up, and in a way it was as if he had died too.

It had taken her a year more before she realized that she had not only deprived herself of Dev's presence, but Aunt Vee and Gramps and her own parents too. They had all needed him, but in sending him away, and so cruelly, she had made sure that he'd stay gone not just from her life, but theirs.

And that was a loss that had been pointless made all the more so, because no one knew why.

Except, here he was.

"Aunt Vee." He bent down and hugged the small woman who'd kissed his hurts and scrapes as much as she had Aadi's. Then he lifted her straight off her feet and she squealed in a very Aunt Vee-like manner. When he brought her down, tears glittered in her shadowed eyes. The years had been kind to Aunt Vee. Her face was unlined except for crow's feet around her eyes and her graying hair was pulled back in a demure bun.

"Beta..." she whispered, as the tears spilled over, touching his shaved cheek. *Beta. Son.* 

Dev's heart cracked open at the incantation. "Aunt Vee, I missed you."

"I don't think so," Grandpa S said. But his weathered and beaten face, held the pain of having survived three heart attacks and losing most of his family, while he watched helplessly. Dev bent down to touch Grandpa S's feet, in a gesture of respect and affection that had been drummed into him from before he could stand.

But Grandpa S would have none of it. He pulled Dev into a hug from his throne of a wheelchair, the prince returned. And Dev squeezed his eyes shut and hugged the old man. Words failing him.

Looking at the byplay unfolding before her, the tears and talking and looks of such love, Zara felt sick. Guilty and sick at what she had caused.

No amount of penance, no amount of self-flagellation and no matter how hard she worked, she would never be able to make it up to anybody in this room. Her sins were enormous and indescribable. She had studied hard at school and college in an effort to fill the void that both Dev and Aadi had left in the business and in the family, but she had always been aware she was lacking.

Always found wanting.

She had even married Ravi in an effort to please her grandfather, so that the business would be secured. Especially since her own father was the least bit interested in it, and Pradosh uncle had passed away four years ago.

She might as well have picked up the phone and called up Dev ten years ago, because it was the one thing, the only thing they had needed.

And judging from the smiles and cautious way Dev was talking, the way he was hugging Aunt Vee and rolling his eyes at some maternal comment she'd made, they were what he needed too.

She had kept him apart from them; she had done this. Zara's eyes burned at the way Brett was climbing up his arm to his capable shoulders, and the way Aunt Vee kissed him on the cheek he offered her. The pride and light in Grandpa's eyes was all because of him, and even Lily was looking at him with less suspicion than she'd had when she'd first heard Zara's announcement.

Everybody was exactly where they belonged.

Her nails dug into her palms as she finally understood the enormity of what she had done to all of them. But most of all to him. To the boy she had loved beyond sanity, and the man he had become.

"Times change, honey," Ma DSa's gravelly voice came from behind her.

Zara whirled to find their housekeeper looking at her with wet eyes, a mixture of sympathy and sadness on her wizened face.

"I know," Zara said, but her nails dug deeper, gouging grooves into her. But even this pain couldn't distract her from the other, poignant, massive pain.

"Times change," Ma DSa repeated, "If you want them to."

And Zara couldn't tell her, even though her eyes were burning like they were on fire; that sometimes things changed even without someone wanting them to. Sometimes they changed beyond redemption.

At that exact moment, Dev spied Ma DSa standing behind Zara and he strode over to her, enveloping her in a bone-crushing hug. Ma DSa didn't say a word. She held on for all she was worth, her breath escaping in a loud gasp.

"Ma," Dev whispered. *Mother*. Ma DSa ran a comforting hand over Dev's back, the skin wizened from years of use in the kitchen and Sycamore Drive. It was such a pure gesture of love that Zara turned blindly away from the two of them to get a glass of OJ.

She did hear what the housekeeper told the prodigal returned. "You're home."

You're home.

And it was as if he'd never left.

"Gramps looks alright," Dev said several hours later, as they were driving back to her apartment. The day had been...healing. Food and rebonding with family, giving him back a great part of what he had been missing for so long. Unconsciously, because once he had walked away from Zara and her family, he had stopped thinking about them. It was supposed to hurt less if you pretended it didn't exist.

And Aadi's son, Brett was great too.

Lily Fallahil was a good mother from what he had seen today. But was that enough? Did that mean she wasn't trying to take the still-grieving family for

large sums of money or whatever else she could get off of them, using her son as leverage?

They all loved the kid. Who wouldn't? He was happy, well-adjusted, just like Aadi at age ten. Planning new schemes to get the stuff he wanted. It was heartbreaking and amusing at the same time. Family reunion time meant they hadn't talked business at all, but he wasn't going to lie. He was worried about Lily and Brett on the Board front too.

The timing of it all couldn't have stunk more and that was what he wanted to talk with Zara.

Zara who had barely spoken to him all day. Who had managed, by a miraculous feat, to avoid him for the entire time they had been at the family home. Even now, she had wanted to give Lily and Brett a lift to their Central Park home but she had refused, preferring to drive back in her beat up station wagon.

So Zara had been stuck going back to the city alone with him.

"It's because of you," she said at last, looking out the window again. Like the view fascinated her.

"Me? His grandkid had him in splits showing him how to bowl to the stumps. I was just a willing spectator, Zara," he said, grinning, as he remembered Brett's earnest attempts to master the reverse swing. Cricket was a game he still occasionally followed, even if it was online.

"Yes, you. You came back. You're here now. Grandpa will be alright now," she said.

"Aunt Vee looks younger than ever before," he commented as he executed a deft turn and they were sliding back into city traffic.

Zara half-smiled. Yes, Vaidehi had been looking better than usual, her hair highlighted again, her as-yet unlined face made up for the first time in ages on a family occasion. Usually they all dressed up just for a party or an event. Family time had become silent and morbid and foreboding. They had never managed to pull themselves out of the abyss of loss she had tumbled them into so long ago.

Her smile faded.

"Well, like I said, they are really happy to see you, Dev. They need you here. And I didn't really realize how much until today. You were great with Brett." He looked at her. "I have had a little practice with kids, Zara. I am actually godfather to my friend Nico's daughter. I am not a total monster."

Of course, he wasn't. He wasn't the monster. She put a hand on his arm,

which immediately hardened beneath her, like he couldn't bear for her to touch him. She let it rest there for just a moment and removed it before saying, "I never meant to imply otherwise, Dev. I guess, what I am saying, is--"

His own hand shot out and caught her wrist, just like before. "Yes, what are you saying?"

She looked at his hand, holding hers imprisoned, and then at his face, hard planes and harsh angles. Handsome and unapproachable and all man. His cologne, something that reminded her of the open ocean on a winter day, had wrapped around her car, around her, filling every breath she took with him. Tantalizing, male and untouchable. Shivers ran inside of her, rattling everything back to life, just like an electric current would have done.

"I guess, I am trying to...apologize."

"Apologize?" The word echoed in the confines of the car. Zara found it hard to breathe. "Apologize for what?"

Her smile was tremulous. "All sorts of things, Dev." She cautiously wrapped her fingers around his wrist, right at the pulse. It beat so steady and true.

"Funny. An apology is not what I want from you."

"Then what do you want from me, Dev?" she asked him quietly.

His grip changed, gentled, and yet became even more unbreakable, when he answered, in the same, quiet tone, "You. I want you."

## Ten

"The Board meeting is on the twenty-fifth, next month. The agenda will be sent to them a week before, and we need to sit down with Matt Lauderhorn, our CFO before EOD. I want him to explain the quarterlies to you. Ken can you pencil that in?" Zara told her assistant Ken Ho, who rapidly nodded and jotted it down on the yellow, legal pads he favored.

"The meeting with the East Coast people is for day after tomorrow, and Ken has already prepared a packet for you to take a look at."

Dev held up a hand, loosened the tie he had worn in deference to his first day at work as a dedicated member of the Board. "Ken, can you do me a solid and get the MD for East Coast General on the phone. Pronto?"

Zara frowned but she didn't want to undermine Dev's authority minutes after she had announced to all and sundry in an all staff memo that he was Dev Banerjee and that he would be joining the family business, effective immediately. So she nodded shortly when Ken looked at her for approval. Then he said, "Alexa, please connect us to Kevin Manderley."

Dev looked around to see who Alexa was. Zara smiled and whispered to him sotto voce, "Ken's virtual assistant is called Alexa. She isn't real."

Dev nodded his head. VAs he understood. Hell, Shiv's friend Bharat was building something that was going to blow every virtual assistant out of the water.

The intercom rang a couple times before Kevin's assistant came on the line. When she came to know who it was on the other line, she tried to shaft them away and Dev smoothly took over. "Beverly, this is Dev and I am new here. I literally just flew down from Los Angeles, yesterday. Could you please help me out and patch me through to Kevin? I wouldn't ask except I don't have Kevin's cell number."

Whether it was that extremely masculine voice or just plain ornery luck but Beverly relented and Kevin Manderley came on the line.

"Manderley here."

Dev continued smiling, as he swiveled in the guest chair in Zara's office. "Hello, Kevin. This is Dev Banerjee here. I work with Zara Subramanian, the CEO, here at AllMart and I was just hoping to get to know you a bit better. Find out what the problem is over there in Poughkeepsie."

"Has Zara delegated you to do the dirty work now, Dev? I scared her good last time, did I?" Kevin bit off.

Dev stopped swiveling. His smile still stayed on his face as he answered pleasantly, "Zara is a very capable woman and most certainly does not need me to do her dirty work. In fact, if it were up to her, she'd have hired a couple of South Siders and capped you in the knees for the way you've been paying your female employees. Fifty seven cents on the dollar. Tsk tsk. That's too much hardball, Manderley. Way too much."

"That fucking--"

"Of course," Dev continued even more pleasantly. While Ken's eyes almost bugged out. Zara's lips twitched but she managed to keep a calm demeanor. "If it were really up to me, I wouldn't hire someone else to come after you. I maybe an engineer with a master's in business but we geeks prefer to do our dirty work ourselves. I'd not break your knees, of course. I'd start with the fingers. The sound of a thumb cracking is so deliciously primal."

There was a small window of silence when no one spoke. The air did not stir. Then, Manderley exploded. With curses, threats, invectives. Each one more virulent than the other. Dev put his finger on the Mute button, allowed him three minutes to rant before he unmuted and said, in a totally different voice. The voice he had employed with Geek Guy Stephen.

"I would advise you to be quiet now, Kevin. And listen to me. In fact, have Beverly take down notes because I am not going to repeat myself and I want this in place when I fly down to Poughkeepsie day after tomorrow. Number one, you're resigning from the position of MD, effective immediately. Think of worthy female candidates who can take your place. Send me a list within the hour. We will vet from our side and finalize day after. Number two, I want a draft of the email that you'll be sending to the union negotiator beginning with an apology at the gross oversight of an ancient company struggled to break off the shackles of sexist and uneconomical practices, are you taking all this down Beverly?"

"Yes, sir," Beverly squeaked.

Dev continued his spiel while Zara and Ken looked at each other in mutual horror and admiration. What had they unleashed here?

"Well," Zara said a few hours later, when Dev had finally hammered everything down the exact way they wanted, this time with lawyers in on the call. "I guess you are the boss now."

Dev scratched the back of his neck. "I am just doing what you wanted me to do. Helping the mothership stay afloat."

"Thanks," she said, a tad dryly. And then immediately felt small. Here he was, trying to help her and she was being churlish because he had managed to do in exactly one phone call what she had failed to do in three weeks. It was galling. But Dev was helping the mothership stay afloat.

And he looked, what was that word he had used? *Deliciously primal*. He'd shed his tie and jacket and was dressed in a green silk shirt and severe black pants. As befit the scion of a multimillion dollar family business. It was not his fault that her heart kept giving erratic bumps when they accidentally brushed against each other. Or he winked at her while he spelled out terms of negotiation and broke her breathing pattern.

"You're welcome honey. Now, can we blow this joint for some food? I am starving."

"Ken can order in some food. What would you like?"

He shook his head. "I want to go out. Stretch my legs. Breathe the smoggy Chicago air. See Wrigley Field and have a hot dog. Come with?"

The image was tempting. The offer even more so. Walking with Dev. Eating with Dev. Being with Dev. Tempting and dangerous. She shook her head and looked at her laptop screen. The numbers for the fall shipment in store number 43 swam in front of her.

"Nah, I'm good. I'll grab a sandwich later. Enjoy your hot dog, Dev."

Dev hesitated for a second, but she was already busy at work and he didn't have the heart to press her on it. He knew he'd been rougher with Manderley than he could have been, and that it played in her head that she hadn't been able to make the man submit to fair terms by herself. But, he justified it this way. He was doing it for her, anyway.

"Alright. I'll see you later."

Zara nodded but continued working. Dev walked out whistling.

A few minutes later, Ken came in. "Wow. So that is Dev Banerjee. Color me impressed."

Zara's head shot up. "I'm sorry. I didn't catch that, Ken."

Ken looked quizzically at her. "Are you alright, Zara?"

"I'm fine. What did you say?"

"I said, Dev can get anyone to do anything." Ken shook his head in awe and admiration and Zara bit down the tiniest bit of resentment that reared up. "I mean, I know he runs his own place and all. But seeing it all in action?"

Zara stifled a sigh. "Yeah. I know. I know."

"I am ordering lunch for everyone. Would you like your usual?"

Zara thought briefly of hot dogs at Wrigley Field and a man who was exactly what everyone around her needed. And nodded. "Yeah. Turkey sub, extra mustard, no mayo please. It's what I want."

I want you.

He'd stated this quite categorically a week ago. Capturing her wrist and all her numbed senses with that one statement. Then he'd let go of her hand and casually moved on to Brett's reverse swing tactics. As if he hadn't just shifted her insides tectonically with his statement.

And ever since then, he had behaved like he had said nothing damaging at all. Not by word or glance or touch had he given any indication that he even remembered what he'd told her. That it meant anything.

Of course, he had called Grandpa S and Auntie Vee last night to bid them good night and today morning. He had even called Brett and Lily and made plans to meet them after work, when he was back from Poughkeepsie.

She told herself she was happy, he was playing the part of the prodigal son more beautifully than she could have asked for. But she didn't trust herself around him anymore.

Ken waved his hands over her face. "Zara. Zara? You're gone again."

Zara wrenched her mind back to the task at hand.

"I haven't gone anywhere, Ken. Am right here."

That was the only thing she was good at. Staying frozen in place. And Zara was nothing if not good at being good.

### Eleven

In an anti-climactic moment, Zara ended up going to Poughkeepsie alone. Labor negotiations went smoothly because everything that needed to be in their favor had already been initiated by Dev before she got on the plane. Still, she ended up spending two days on the east coast, in a little motel room with spotty WiFi and the world's best clam chowder. The food was delicious enough that she'd had it for lunch and dinner, twice.

The spotty WiFi meant she had more time to brood than she permitted herself and it caused her to replay that infernal, nothing-kiss far more often than she liked.

Dev and she caught up twice a day over phone. And emailed over important developments. Not to mention the in-app, intra-office messaging on Slack. All in all, it wasn't as if she had any actual reason to miss him.

But she did. And it sucked.

She landed in Chicago on Saturday afternoon after a delayed flight and called up Sycamore Drive's landline to check on the family. Someone picked up after a couple rings.

"Hello," Dev said easily, a smile audible in his voice. "Sycamore Drive. Dev here."

Zara jolted. "Hello, Dev. It's me. I thought I'd call up Aunt Vaidehi and tell her I've landed," she said politely.

"Hey, stranger. You're back? I thought the flight was not supposed to land till four. I was planning to come pick you up...No, Brett. Hold the ball tighter," he yelled.

"That was considerate of you. Thank you." God, could she sound more uptight?

"Take a cab here, will you? We'll hold lunch for you."

"No, I don't think so," she snapped out before she could help herself. Then she closed her eyes and stopped walking in the middle of the terminal. "I meant," she continued in a calmer tone. "I'll go home, shower and get in to work. There's tons to catch up on."

"Don't be ridiculous. It's the weekend. You have to rest. You've been at it for sixteen hours every day with Manderley."

"I know." The snappish tone was back.

"If you don't feel up to hanging out with the family, that's fine. Go home, relax and do not think of going in to work today. That's an order, you hear

me?"

"You're not my boss, Dev so stop acting like one."

"And you're not an unreasonable woman, Zara. So stop acting like one. And chill out for the weekend. The office can get by without you for a day or two."

Immediately she went on the defensive. "I know I am not needed anymore, Dev. But I have a job to do too, and I would like to be left alone to do it in peace."

His frown was as palpable over the phone as the smile had been. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Zara looked at her tightly clenched fist and the flare of acid burning in her gut. "Nothing. Sorry. I didn't mean that."

"Are you alright, Zara? Did something happen in Poughkeepsie that you didn't tell me about?" he said, gently.

She let out a shaky breath. "I am absolutely fine. Nothing happened, Dev. I guess I am a little more tired than I thought. I'll go home and chill, like you suggested. Will you let everyone know I made it back home safely?"

"Sure, I'll do that." He hesitated for a second. And before he could say anything more that she would react to, Zara hung up.

He was right. She needed to chill the fuck out out, right now. Maybe even take a swim in that kidney-shaped pool attached to the apartment. Before she cemented her behavior as an unprofessional, unhinged lunatic.

At the homestead, Dev heard the dialer tone before he could tell Zara he was coming to see her right now. Like the lovesick, obsessive-y teenager he no longer was. For a second there, when she'd been snapping at him, it had felt as if the old Zara was back. The one who always called him on his BS. The one who was as eager to argue with him as she was to kiss him.

He didn't know what to do with the new Zara, with her ice queen fragility and backbone of steel. Cold showers weren't helping, being patient and friendly wasn't helping. Thinking about inventory problems at AllMart wasn't helping.

"Who was that?" Lily asked, as she came in for her customary refill beer.

Dev looked at the handset he still held and sighed. Loudly. "I don't know. I don't know anymore."

Then, because he didn't want to miss out on anymore family reunion time and because he really wasn't a moping teenage boy, he went out and hung

with the people who wanted him. Instead of pining for the woman who wouldn't even tell him goodbye.

Zara hadn't taken any time off for ages, forever, it seemed to her. For so long, for the past ten years, she'd just about managed to atone for everything she'd done to the family and the business. Because, rightfully, Dev was supposed to take over from Grandpa S when the time came. He'd been taking all the business courses along with his engineering major. He'd been groomed to be the heir since the day he was born. Aadi had expressed an interest in the law, so he was studying business and pre-law at Yale.

But she had changed all that, she had taken that away from the family. She had taken that away from the family business, and so she'd worked herself past bone and breath to make sure they never felt let down in any way. Of course, they did, and she knew it, but she did try so hard, and that she knew, mattered. She'd been trying for ten long years, and in these years, she'd somehow missed out on the simple art of relaxation.

After Aadi's death, she'd immediately set her goals on graduating high school as soon as possible, because things were needed to fill her time. She'd summered at AllMart trying to learn the business from the ground up, before leaving for college.

Six years later, and she'd had her master's in business, accounting and finance, which was her first love, and then struggled to helm the company from the ground up, when Grandpa had had his first attack. Thankfully, Ravi had been there to hold her hand and get her through all the stuff she needed to get through in order to earn her rightful place as the CEO.

Of course, it wasn't enough. She could try all her life but she didn't have the right chromosomes that Grandpa S and the rest of their family and friends-led Board needed in order to truly believe in her abilities. At best, they could envision her as co-CEO, especially as they were considering taking the company public or merging with a competitor.

But no one knew, not really, how ill-equipped and undefended she felt. She'd never told anyone. Sometimes, it seemed the day Aadi died, she'd died too.

She tried to not think about it, about any of the hurtful things her past, her life held, as she took a cab to her sweet Wicker Park apartment, which would be mercifully unoccupied and she could truly chill out, without having to watch her back.

Zara took a quick shower once she reached home and resolved to continue

working because it was unproductive to reminisce and it made her miserably aware of all the things she was missing in her life now. Things she had no business missing. But sometimes, like today, it was hard.

Zara shut the laptop down with a small smack, thoroughly disgusted with herself.

It was one thing to be obsessed with one particular man because she'd never been obsessed with anybody else. But this wasn't just mere obsession; this wasn't just about her wishing she had the courage to kiss him, just once, like he had that. Taking her off-guard and forcing her to feel, everything she'd sworn she'd never feel.

This was something else, something beyond obsession. More.

This was pure need. Base need and she wasn't ready for it. She was thinking about regrets and the past and what-ifs. A dangerous game, if ever there was one.

"I need a drink," she muttered, rising up from the comfy leather couch. Her one contribution to this apartment and placed her laptop in its bag.

He may be completely unavailable to her; and she was waiting for the other shoe to drop when it came to how he felt about her, but the man still knew her better than anybody else.

He knew she had to relax, unwind. Except she didn't know how.

Wine, she decided. Wine should do the trick.

Zara padded to the refrigerator and poked around. She frowned, there were three bottles chilling in the special wine cooler her husband had had installed in the refrigerator. Ravi had been big into electronic gadgets, and she'd tried to share his enthusiasm, except...She shook her head forcibly to get over her mope and removed the first one that caught her eye. It was a '71 Merlot, whatever that meant.

Zara shrugged, hunted for the corkscrew and, after opening the bottle, poured herself a generous amount in a long stemmed wine glass that had been part of her wedding china collection. Because she hadn't had anything to eat in so long, the first sip hit her system stronger than it would have otherwise. It also spread through her body, a warm, mellow feeling; taking out all the little kinks and pains that sitting in front of a computer for long hours gave a body. She smiled, liking the feeling, identifying it for the buzz it was. And took another sip.

Within minutes she had finished the first glass and poured herself another, even fuller one, almost emptying the bottle in the process. She wandered the

apartment, looking at everything with a critical eye. She'd lived here for months as Ravi's wife, and three months after that as his widow and yet she couldn't find a single imprint of her late husband or her in this place. They'd been such workaholics they didn't have any pictures together. In fact, even saying the words 'late husband' felt empty, unreal.

Just like the house was empty. A showcase, like her.

The thought depressed her, so she drank some more, finishing the first bottle and opening the second.

She glanced at the expensive artwork that perfectly framed the muted walls. The colors swum dizzily as she tried to make sense of them. Zara laughed, enjoying the unique sensation of being pleasantly drunk. Chilling out was exactly what she needed today.

How did Dev know exactly what she needed?

Because she didn't like the answer to her mental meandering, Zara decided now was as good a time as any to make a grilled cheese sandwich, finish the rest of the wine by the pool while watching the sun set by the lake. Something she had never, ever considered doing for her entire adult life. And definitely not since she'd acquired this beautiful, soulless apartment with its gorgeous views.

Zara looked at the remaining wine in her glass, topped it off, and did exactly that.

This was how Dev found her two hours later, when he came home. Restless and uneasy at the abrupt conversation they'd had.

# **Twelve**

Zara was floating. Ok, maybe not literally, but in a beautiful, weightless way, she was floating. Sprawled on the glider by the pool, with her empty glass and her half-finished sandwich, she looked at the inky black sky that signified night. If she squinted her eyes really tight, she imagined she could even see thousands of stars that were out in full force, little lights that had been strung out for her personal party.

And she was happy, content, to just sit and watch them wink out one by one. For perhaps, the first time in her life there was no meeting, no agenda and no deadline. No rush. There was just the now, there was just the moment.

And the moment felt good.

Then a face swung into view under the sky, obscuring her private party. The face was rugged and tanned and had devilish eyes she still dreamed about, and lips that knew how to kiss her mindless. Those lips were now twitching into a small, amused smile. A lock of hair fell on the masculine forehead of that beloved face and she reached a hand out to brush it back.

But somehow, her hand refused to coordinate even that much. It was floating, weightless, as if she was made of clouds.

"Exactly what," Dev drawled, as he knelt beside her, "have you had to drink, sweetheart?"

She blinked mulishly at him. Her heart thudding like crazy at the casual endearment. He'd not called her sweetheart, ever. Not even when they were dating, if two months of feverish groping in inappropriate places could even be called that.

"Why are you here?" she asked, trying to sit upright, but failing to do that too.

His smile turned into a full-blown grin, amused and knowing. So male. It made her even more mulish.

"I live here too, Zara," he reminded her, placing one hand on the edge of the hot pink glider, close where her knee was propped.

She could see the slight dusting of hairs on his wrist, where he'd shoved the cuffs of his shirt up during the course of the day. In fact, crouched down beside her, in casual jeans and flannel shirt and tee, he looked far too appealing for her.

But then again, he could wear sackcloth and ashes and he'd appeal to her.

"I know that," she said, trying to sit up again and succeeding this time.

Her heavy swathe of hair fell on one shoulder, and his fingers twitched. Her eyes noted the gesture but she didn't know what to make of it. Her mind was pretty muddled in most ways. "How was the family luncheon?"

He couldn't mistake the heavy scorn she'd imparted to the last two words, but couldn't exactly believe she cared where he was. Or who he was with. Surely, she wasn't jealous.

"It was awesome. Ma DSa made mutton biryani for me. Our favorite. They missed you." He shrugged his impressive shoulders and her belly skidded insidiously. "Although I'm pretty you sure did not miss anyone, considering it is wine 'o clock here." His careless smile only made her belly clench some more and she had to actively restrain herself from reaching out and touching his lips.

Oh God, she had to gain some control of herself.

His grin faded because her bleary, half-drunk gaze made her seem more uninhibited than he had ever seen her.

God, was there a woman alive who turned him on more than Zara? On a normal day, wearing a full suit of clothes, with her ten feet of armor and KEEP OUT signs, he wanted her. Just because she was Zara, because he had always wanted her. But tonight, with her hair literally down, her eyes slumberous and heavy in the moonlight, those mile-long legs totally visible under her excuse for a skirt, the lacy edges of her unabashedly sexy red bra visible under the diaphanous tee she wore and the heart-stopping beauty that only she possessed; he wasn't sure how he was keeping his hands off her.

Not when every instinct he had, screamed for him to take. To mate.

She frowned. "I haven't had that much."

He raised his brows. "Oh, yeah? Is two bottles not considered 'much' nowadays, slushy?"

"Don't call me slushy," she said, the frown deepening, forming grooves on her forehead. Making her appear young and vulnerable in ways he hadn't thought her to be. "And I couldn't have had two bottles."

"If you haven't, then you've given a damn good imitation, honey." He couldn't help grinning at her.

Zara drunk was way more fun than sober, serious Zara. For one, he could read her eyes. He hadn't been able to do that from the moment he'd seen her again. She was so guarded, so intent on bottling everything up, he couldn't imagine the pressure she was living under.

She pouted, adorably, sexily; and all his careful, friendly concern turned into raging lust that quickly. Her lush bottom lip quivered as she regarded him.

"Don't call me honey," she announced, as she swung those gorgeous legs off the glider, nearly breaking his nose in the process.

She tottered, on bare feet, and instinctively clutched his shoulder to keep her balance. Every muscle in his body tensed at her innocent, helpless touch.

He looked up at her, a goddess; a desirable woman in moonlight and asked quietly, "Why not?"

Had Ravi called her that? Did the endearment bring back memories of her dead husband?

"It's what you called Beverly and all those other women on the phone when you sweet talk them into giving you things," she replied, and then clapped her hand over her mouth at what she'd just said. Her eyes were horrified, and incredibly his glass-green eyes darkened in the waning light as he stood up too, slowly, slow enough for her to step back if she wanted to step back.

Zara discovered that her legs had gone boneless a while ago and she needed to hold him in order to stand upright. It wasn't altogether a disconcerting notion.

"I do what?" he asked, when he'd straightened to his full height and towered over her. Or so it felt like to Zara.

Her eyes and mouth were level with his, for Pete's sake. But it wasn't his height so much as he took up all the space around her, going from easygoing to lethal in seconds. It wasn't his presence so much as her awareness of it.

God, she was so *aware* of him. The precise musk of his scent, mingled with his aftershave that she'd found in the guest bathroom. The way the slight breeze stuck his shirt to his defined chest, and those impressive shoulders. The sheer hardness of his lips as he formed her name. Without her consent, her fingers fisted on his shoulder, even as she felt hunger strike her in a dozen pulse points.

"You tell women what they want to hear so they'll give you what you want," she said, looking at the way her fingers were curled on his shoulder, instead of into his eyes. She was afraid that he'd see that she wanted him to talk to her that way. In that cajoling, appealing way so he'd get what he claimed to want.

Her.

"Are you implying that I behave inappropriately in anyway, Zara?" he asked, forcing her to meet his still-amused gaze.

He wasn't taking her seriously. He thought she was drunk. Zara's lips tightened and the light of battle glinted in her eyes. A fact he couldn't see because she was facing away from the light.

"I am saying that you are aware of exactly what you do to women," she said. The raised brow was back. "And what is that, exactly?" he asked, willing to play along. Wanting to see what else she revealed in this drunken mood.

"You make them want to..." she trailed off as she gazed at him. The patience coupled with the laughing knowledge in his beautiful eyes, made her run her other hand up to his shoulders. She smiled too, slightly, wickedly.

"Zara." There was a perplexed edge in his seductive voice.

She stepped closer to him, he automatically stepped back, right where she wanted him. She gave him a hard shove, using all the strength she had left and he flailed, losing his balance. His foot skidded and he went over the edge

of the pool, right into the water with a huge splash.

She laughed; a husky, freeing sound. "Push you into the pool, Dev."

He came up sputtering, shaking water out of his hair and eyes. "Dammit, Zara," he growled.

She laughed again. "You deserved it," she taunted him. "You've been teasing me enough. Maybe a good dunking will cure you of that." She looked pleased at the idea.

He swam to the edge of the pool in a lightning quick motion, while she gazed at him. Snagged the bare ankle nearest to the edge and looked at her with an evil smile.

"Good point," he said, before he tugged her off-balance and watched with grim satisfaction as she shrieked and flailed and followed him in with a loud splash. Dev got dunked all over again but he considered it worth the effort, especially as he thought of the benefits of sobering Zara in the warm pool.

But...where was she?

She'd gone down two seconds ago, and the pool wasn't deep enough for anything serious to happen to her. On the other hand, she was seriously, pathetically drunk so maybe her limb coordination was somewhat suspect and he should have thought a moment before paying her back for her stupid stunt.

He went under and saw her floating face-down, a few feet away, and cursed inwardly. He immediately hooked one arm around her waist and dragged her back to the surface, his heart pounding loudly in his chest. She'd looked so eerily still, with her hair floating behind her like a banner. It had nearly stopped his breath.

"God," he muttered, as she groaned, a second later and coughed water all over his face.

"Aarghhh." He turned his face away.

Zara tightened her hold on him, plastering herself all around him, because there was no way she could keep her balance in her current condition. Her legs were like jelly, her spine was quivering, and her breath was suspended between her stomach and her lungs.

"Boy." Dev shook his face, droplets of water falling all over her. Making her extremely aware of the intimacy of their positions.

He was treading water easily, while she sort of floated around him, anchored to him by her hands on his waist and his around hers. Zara gulped, desire hitting her as strongly as the wine had. Only it was more immediate, more

potent and infinitely more dangerous. What would he do if he came to know how much she really wanted him?

Always him.

"Quit looking at me like that," he muttered, as he started walking backward, towing her with only a little difficulty.

She stood her ground, planting her feet on the bottom of the pool, suddenly unwilling to get away from him. This was the most he'd touched her in so long and she wanted to savor it. In her inebriated, uninhibited state, she could admit that she loved touching him. And she absolutely loved him touching her.

"Like what?" she asked him, watching her hands drift up of their own accord. They were brushing his nape now, tangling in the wet strands of his silky hair. His grip tightened, turning almost brutal, and she felt it in every nerve of her body. She wished he'd grip her higher on her chest.

"Like you want me," he growled; his eyes completely unreadable.

Incredibly, she smiled. "Why?" she asked, linking her hands behind his neck. Treading water closer to him. "I shouldn't?"

"You're drunk, Zara," he said, inching back toward the edge of the pool. Hitting solid wall now. "You don't know what you want."

The smile turned female, powerful. Seductive. Dev almost groaned out loud. Man, oh man, why did it have to be her who jumpstarted his hormones just by breathing?

"I may be drunk," she said, brushing closer to him, the tips of her breasts meeting the hard wall of his chest, and it took all of his will power to not train his eyes down there. Where he knew the red lacy bra was completely visible under the wet shirt.

His hands ran down her wet, rippling back, of their own accord, and settled on the tops of her hips. He was almost cross-eyed with the effort to not breathe her in, sultry and inviting, even when she was fully drunk. Even when he knew she was going to regret this the minute sanity returned.

"But, Dev," she whispered. "I know what I want."

"Stop this, Zara," he said, desire and self-preservation making his voice harsher than ever. "Don't play games with me."

She tilted her head, and the acute vulnerability he'd only glimpsed in her hit him again with staggering force. "I don't know how to play."

"I am in hell," he muttered, half to himself. Because he could fight himself, but he could never fight what she did to him when she was vulnerable and aching with need. A need that was born of equal parts desire and heart. A heart he'd thought was iced up.

"No," she shook her head. Her eyes were witch-black in the dim light. "You're not. I am in hell."

And then before he could blink, she leaned into him and kissed him.

Zara's brain had stopped acting hours ago, now she was working on pure emotion. And emotion demanded that she kiss Dev, just once. With all the desperate need and tangled desire she had inside of her. Just so she could feel alive this once. She pressed closer to him rubbing her cold lips against his, teasing him into kissing her back. For a single second he didn't respond at all, just stood passively against her.

Then in a flash, he cupped her butt closer to him, almost holding her on him, and kissed her back. Kissed her wild, kissed her like he used to. Not just with lips and teeth, his tongue sneaking into her mouth, stealing everything from her. Sucking hers, making her gasp and moan at the sheer intensity of one kiss. With such deranged need. Not desire; need.

She tightened her hands around his neck, mashed herself against him, and kissed him and kissed him.

He drew back a little, raced one kiss after another to the corner of her lips, to the middle bow, to her pointy chin, and she arched her head back to give him more access. He followed his kisses to the edge of her jaw, down her vulnerable throat to where her neck met her shoulders. He bit her gently, marking her visibly and she gasped.

Desire was like drowning, Zara thought wildly, even as she delved her hands into the inside of his very proper shirt to find his satiny hard, wet back. It consumed you and you floated inside of it, and...God, his back felt so good. Even against the cold tiles of the pool, he was warm.

He was incinerating her, with his kisses and the way his hands were moving restlessly over her back, under her shirt to find naked skin. He unsnapped her bra inside the wet shirt and brushed his thumbs over the back of her breasts. She moaned again, going rigid against him, holding him so close, because her knees weren't working anymore. The shirt hampered him so he couldn't cup her like he wanted to, couldn't do half the things his fevered, heated brain was imagining.

Zara dragged his head up from where he was assaulting her neck and kissed him again. Fully, passionately and using every ounce of feeling she hadn't

allowed herself to feel in over ten years.

He tore his mouth away and dropped his head on her shoulder, his body trembling with visible effort.

"God, Zara," he whispered, a dark, sinful whisper.

She was so mindless, so taken that she couldn't think beyond him. Beyond Dev.

"Let's go inside," he muttered, still lying against her, the wall supporting both of them.

"Ok," she murmured. And she placed her head on his shoulder too. That capable, comforting shoulder that she'd needed all her life. That she'd never allowed herself to need. Her eyes closed because it felt so right to stand here, in a pool being held by Dev.

It felt enough.

Five minutes later, Dev's breathing returned back to normal and he raised his head off her shoulder. Her head flopped onto his chest. Her eyes were closed. A tiny snore came from her.

He grinned ruefully.

Here he was, half-mad from wanting her, and she'd gone off to sleep after almost attacking him in a pool.

Thinking about the vagaries of fate and the way one woman could twist a man up, Dev hoisted his sleeping burden out of the pool and toward her room.

It was a damn shame, he thought, that he didn't have the heart to seduce her when she was sleeping.

But he knew he wouldn't. Because she slept on in his arms, her form curled around him, trusting him to take care of her. And not for anything in the world would he break that trust. Not even for his own selfish needs.

Or for that matter, hers.

### Thirteen

The next day, just as he had predicted, hell, as he had known, she went back to behaving as if nothing had happened between them. As if he was just a coworker in the damned company.

And he couldn't read her eyes again.

It irked him. Irked him enough that when she asked him to accompany her to Sycamore Drive for Sunday family lunch, he told her he had plans. And she didn't press him about them, which irked him some more.

So it was that he found himself at loose ends, with nothing to do. No company crisis to sort on a Sunday, no report to go over and no irate vendor to appease. Dev grabbed his jacket and left the posh, empty apartment before he barfed. As luck would have it, his phone rang as he was contemplating his options once out on the street.

He grinned. "Asshole," he said, by way of greeting. "It took you this long to answer my messages?"

"Asshole back," Kit Barranos said, on the other end of the line. "Some of us have to do honest, physical labor with our hands unlike you manicured pussycat CEOs."

Dev laughed. "I am coming over. Text me your address." "Yeah."

And that was that.

Kit ran a martial arts studio up near the posher districts, where the society moms sent their prep school kids for a couple semesters to round out their resumes for their college applications. His regulars ranged in age from twelve to fifty-six and consisted of men and women who were serious about the act of getting physical. The studio specialized in the primary martial arts – tae kwan do, jujitsu, and karate – and had a small championship cage at the back. Kit had three such dojos in the state.

He had eschewed becoming an engineering marvel and taken on something earthier, more energetic in the city of his birth. Kit was also one of the four people that Dev had been able to count on in all his adult life.

Now he was sincerely impressed as he the entrance to the dojo, done up in simple red and black with a kitschy playful dragon logo that said, haha: *Enter The Dragon*. As a testament to Kit's second love, the security in the place was state of the art, with infra-sensor cams in all directions. He shoved off his

glares and walked in. The lobby was surprisingly tasteful and well-maintained with a potted plant and everything.

"Hello," said a pretty receptionist. The plaque on her workstation read *Hello*, *Saina here*. "Welcome to the Dragon. How may I help you?"

A pretty receptionist who worked at a martial arts studio was exactly what the doctor ordered. "Hi, Saina." He smiled pleasantly. "You can start by giving me your number."

"You can help by not flirting with my receptionist."

Dev was punched and winded by two twenty pounds of warrior, but struck out blindly. It connected with some solid muscle and Kit grunted. They grappled for a minute more before Saina used two fingers and whistled loudly. They broke apart, hair and clothes mussed, sweat dripping down their foreheads.

"Gentlemen," she said, just as pleasantly as Dev. "This is a place of business. Please conduct your jackassery off the premises."

They slung their arms around each other and smiled at her. Angels once more. "Sorry, Saina. It's how we greet each other," Dev said.

"No, it's not," she retorted.

"No," Kit agreed. "It's not. Come on, brother. Let me get you some ice before that pretty lip off yours swells properly."

"I missed you too, pal."

Kit's apartment, much like his own, was situated above his place of business. They took the fire escape stairs and went up to the third floor and ducked in through the window. It was functional in the extreme but contained a multitude of boy toys. The latest in everything. An HTC Vive headset with companion set. A monster five feet of TV with 3D playing capability. And every, single, popular MRPG ever. Dev was in heaven.

Kit supplied them with beer and chips and they took up positions on matching comfy chairs.

"You up for this?" Kit asked him.

"Bring it on, baby."

Then they settled down to the serious business of kicking some monster, mythical ass for a couple hours. In 3D. By the time three beers each had been guzzled down and the bowl of salt and vinegar chips was down to the last few salty bits, Kit turned to Dev and asked, "So how are things at casa Sycamore Drive? You adjusting to living at home?"

Dev gave a kind of half-shrug. "Nah. I am not staying with the family."

"Really? They're allowing you to stay a hotel?"

He shook his head. "Nah. I'm staying with Zara."

Kit was stunned for a second. Then he hooted with laughter. Then he killed off the bad guy while Dev watched and took the treasure required to advance to the next level. "Why is that funny?"

"It's not funny. It's hilarious. Also tragic."

"What are you talking about?"

"Only that you never got over this woman for as long as I have known you. And now you're staying with her. As in living with her. In her home. And you think this is normal behavior."

"Her place is close to the city. We get faster to work from there."

"Bull. Shit." Kit's Mexican-Asian heritage shown through in his odd-colored eyes. They were tawny. Amber. And they were trained on Dev like a target being locked by radar. "You're not over her. Worse, you're torturing yourself by doing this. But that is expected. You always were a masochist."

Dev wanted to deny it. He truly did. He was flaming mad at Zara's blow hot, blow cold attitude. At the way she did not reveal anything real about herself. Hell, she didn't even smile at him if she could help it. The original damned ice queen. But he was a masochist because it just made him want to melt all that icy reserve, when she looked through him.

"I want to help them. It's just a couple months. Then I am leaving." "Really?"

He nodded. Wished that the beer in his hand was something more potent. Anything to take his mind off the fact that Kit could be right.

"You're so whipped, man. She calls you and you come. I bet she didn't even have to say please."

Anger and recrimination burned low in him. "Kit, I love you like a brother, but you've got to quit talking about Zara like this. You understand?"

Kit shrugged. "I didn't say anything you aren't thinking. Besides, what's with this kid thing? Your old pal Aadi had a son?"

Dev stopped playing. Ran a hand through his face. "Yeah. Brett. His mom was Aadi's last girlfriend. Lily. His exact opposite. I would have made a move on her when I saw her except--"

"Except you were bonkers for Zara," Kit finished. "Give me the lowdown on Lily."

Dev didn't bother to deny Kit's assessment. "She's a fantastic mother, man.

So hands on and tough at the same time. Brett's a good kid. Aunt Vee and Grandpa S are practically blooming in front of me, when I watched them with the kid. With Lily. Her brother's Drake Fallahil. He works in the Valley. Is founding partner at a VC firm. I think he was four years ahead of us at Caltech."

"Was he now?" Kit murmured.

"Yeah. He is due to fly in soon. I want to get a read on him. In the meantime, I think..." Dev let out a breath. "Can I ask you to do a background check on Lily and the kid? As a favor?"

"What are you hoping to find, Dev?"

"Ideally? Nothing." He could afford to be honest with Kit. "But I still want to make sure everything is on the up and up before I am done here. And I don't trust anyone else but you."

"I am not cheap," Kit warned, an old refrain.

"I can afford it," Dev shot back. He un-paused the game. "And I can now settle down to kicking your ass in peace now."

"Just one question before we begin, pal."

"Yeah?"

"How long did it take before you went after the fair Zara again? Five minutes? Twenty? Did you manage to wait a whole day or are you completely whipped?"

Dev's thumb hovered on the controller while he flashed back to last night and the desperate way she had kissed him.

No. I am in hell.

How was Zara in hell when he couldn't stop dreaming about her and woke up with embarrassing morning wood? When he wanted to make love with her more than he wanted to take his next breath? When, maybe, he was nothing more than a convenience for her?

"When I beat you, pizza's on you," he replied eventually.

Kit's reply was a snarky whistle. But to his credit, he shut up and they played. And when Dev beat him fair and square, he even paid for the pizza.

Dev ended up at Lily's small cottage for his evening dinner, unwilling to return home until he was sure Zara would be in bed. That plan backfired because, to his dismay and surprise, he found himself falling in love with the boy, despite all efforts to remain unmoved.

Brett's every gesture; his every innocent question had memories of Aadi

surfacing up effortlessly. And Lily had so far not questioned his need to come and practice the reverse swing with her son or help him with his science homework. He'd come here to dredge up information about Lily and ended up being thoroughly charmed.

It did set the pattern for the next week though.

He left for work before Zara woke up, kept contact to a minimum with her during work and then had dinner at Lily's cottage or with Kit. Not that Her Highness even noticed his comings and goings.

In his more insane moments he wondered if she'd loved Ravi, regardless of what she'd said, or not said, about their short-lived marriage. When his brain reasserted itself, he was profoundly grateful that he hadn't touched her any more than he already had. He wasn't exactly sure if he could have taken her walking away from him after actually making love with him.

All in all, it wasn't with the pleasantest frame of mind that Dev turned up for the weekly staff update on Friday.

Zara was sitting in her customary place near the head chair, on the right, one long bone-colored shoe dangling from her toes, while she smiled at something her assistant Ken told her. She was wearing another snazzy suit. This time a respectable, colorless beige. And her head was secured in another chignon, at the base of her neck.

She didn't look haunted or vulnerable. And it irritated the hell out of him. Pretty much everything did, right now.

"Good morning, everyone," he said coolly, coming to a stop behind Zara's chair and laying one arm on her shoulder.

She instantly straightened from her slouch, the smile fading as if it had never been. Her expression poker-straight.

He removed his hand and felt the breath move out of her chest and it made him want to turn her chair around and give her what-for. He settled for walking past her to his own chair and staring at her, until she was forced to meet his eyes. He cocked his head when she did, and smiled.

"You look like you're having a good time." Purposely, he addressed her.

She gave a small shrug, fiddling with the pencil next to her. "It's all right."

"If Ken is this funny, maybe we can have him Emcee the Board meeting, what say?" He leaned back in his chair and regarded both Zara and her jovial assistant.

Zara's eyes flashed once before she curbed the emotion and answered quietly, "We were just talking about a meme he'd shared with me. It wasn't

official business."

"Oh really? Ken, please share it with the rest of us, too. God knows we could all use a good laugh. Right, Zara?"

"If you say so, Dev."

"Don't tell me you're actually going to defer to me this meekly."

She looked startled. "I am sorry?" she asked, distantly.

"Nothing." He turned back to everybody else, who were watching their little byplay with obvious fascination.

"What's on the agenda for today?"

"We're experiencing a small issue with the mainframe that handles outgoing inventory," Joe Mohair, the supply chain head began with a small, uneasy smile. "It's nothing major. Our guys are on it as we speak but I thought it would be prudent to discuss tactics while we figure it out."

Dev nodded. "Alright. Prepare a memo sheet with action points and what was done to resolve the issue and we can see if it can be replicated for faster turnaround time."

"Actually, maybe Dev could take a crack at the mainframe breakdown," Zara said coolly. Crossing her legs and looking down her nose at Dev.

"I beg your pardon?" He was already scanning for other important matters in the daily docket and so only had half an ear to her.

"I said maybe you, with your IT expertise, could take a look at the mainframe too. See if we can fix the problem sooner. You did go to school to study computers, right?" Her voice was all well-modulated professionalism and her eyes flashed holy damnation.

Zara had finally come to play.

"I studied engineering and business administration with a minor in computer programming the last two years," he murmured.

"Be that as it may."

For a second he thought about calling her out for making it personal, but she was actually responding to him and sucker that he was, he didn't want to lose that. Even if it meant that they were sparring about office matters.

"Alright then, Joe," he said, smiling at the nervous supply chain head. "Patch me into the mainframe and I'll see what I can do. If you're ok with it."

To no one's surprise, Joe was. He did as he was told quickly and the rest of the department heads filed out while Zara stayed behind.

#### Fourteen

Zara knew she had provoked him intentionally. She didn't know why and she didn't want to take it back so she tapped her pencil furiously, relentlessly, her heart drumming inside of her chest like wild horses were dragging her somewhere. But outwardly she was completely, regally silent.

Not for anything would she ever admit to him how much he intimidated her. Or how much he hurt her with his continued reserve and distance, when she wondered where he went after work. Every. Single. Night.

Once the room was empty, there was only palpable, tangible silence. Neither one of them was eager to break it.

Finally, Dev sat down in the chair next to her and it creaked as he leaned against the back. She forced herself to breathe evenly, her gaze focused on the pencil. Suddenly, a brown hand came down and snatched the pencil from her hold. She snapped a horrified look at him as he coolly, immediately snapped the pencil in two.

"Good," he said. "I have your attention now, don't I?"

Looking autocratic and so very much like her grandfather that it hurt her heart. Since she'd gone to him, her heart hurt so much. It beat so much, so loudly, she was forced to hear it. Feel it. She didn't like it.

"You always have my attention, Dev," she said.

And only she knew how shamefully true that was. This past week had been even worse than the one before. Because, for eight whole days she had to wonder if she'd imagined the wonderful, wonderful things he'd said and done to her in the pool. And it was slowly, gradually driving her insane.

"You really want me to work out a computer programming glitch?"

"You don't think you can?"

He grinned and she had to intentionally keep her eyes from blinking. For a second there, he looked like the old, boyish Dev she'd loved. "Baby, you have no idea what I am capable of," he declared. Then he rolled up his sleeves and stretched his hand out for her computer. "May I?"

"Use your own, please?"

Dev shook his head. "Nah. This is for your benefit. Besides." He added with a wink. "I work better with an audience."

So she silently passed her computer onto him and waited for him to do what he did. Within seconds, he had logged into the mainframe program that handled outgoing inventory and was quickly using MSQL to check for

anomalies. He was also chatting on Slack, their in-house messaging app, with the engineers who were handling the issue. His fingers flying over the keyboard as he checked and compared rows and columns of figures that were absolutely incomprehensible to her.

"There is a price mismatch for an entire batch of items from vendor number 467," he murmured about an hour later. "It's what is creating the glitch. Everywhere else the items are showing as the same price and this batch is coded wrong. Could be a genuine mistake or they could be trying the old undercutting scam. Good thing, the new program is working as it should and providing the right kind of intelligence."

Zara checked the Slack message she received from Joe on her phone. It said the exact same thing. How good was he that he'd been able to detect the problem in less time than a group of engineers whose job it was to look for and problem solve for these things?

"Right."

He hooked a size twelve shoe around the spine of her chair and drew her forward to his side, till he could cage her in front of him. She swore to herself she wouldn't tremble or cower.

"Are we done playing power games then?" he asked, softly.

"I wasn't..."

"Yes, you were. And I admit it, it was fun sitting here and playing with numbers. Way better than writing emails and talking to people till my jaw aches. But, if you ever undermine my authority in front of the staff again, you're not going to like the consequences."

""What?" She was stunned at the casual turn of phrase and the promise of latent violence she could see shimmering in him. Violence that had been contained so far underneath the civilized geekboy exterior.

"What did you just say?" She stared resolutely at him; even though her heart was beating so fast she knew he must hear it. There was something... uncivilized about him in this precise moment. As if he really was capable of hurting her, when she knew, with every last ounce of conviction she had that Dev Banerjee would never lay one finger on her with the intention to hurt

"I said, if you ever insult me like that again you're not going to like the consequences."

Her eyes widened because that's not what he'd just said. Yet, the implied threat was there, except...it had taken on a new meaning now. A whole new level of meaning. Drugged heat spread through her body as she imagined...

things.

"I may have been out of line but you were too. When you made that nasty crack about Ken," she said.

"I know. I'll apologize to Ken for it. But I hope we're clear."

Unwittingly, her eyes dropped to his beautiful, compressed lips. And his blazing eyes noted the action. "We are. I'll see you later."

"Sure," he said, with controlled savagery in every line of his body.

Zara exited the room, her head held high, her back ramrod straight. Her head swimming with fatigue and complicated emotions that were surfacing after a decade of numbness. Despising him; but herself even more.

That bastard, she thought the next day, pasting on a pleasant smile for Drake Fallahil who had come down from Palo Alto for the weekend barbecue. He'd driven Brett and Lily in a Tesla Model S that Brett could not stop yakking about. Drake was the proverbial tall, dark, and handsome in simple jeans and tee, except he had the most interesting shade of red hair, it was almost orange.

It went with his odd, exciting personality.

That ruthless, condescending bastard.

"Hey." Drake nudged her with his shoulder, grinning down at her from his six-three height. "Stop scowling with your eyes," he said. "You'll get wrinkles and look old." He winked.

"So what?" Zara shrugged, sipping on her rum and coke. Since her last disastrous encounter with alcohol, she had steered clear of wine. As it was, she was on very shaky ground and on the verge of throwing out her 'roommate.' She didn't want to further compound the already tense situation between them.

"So, all the males in Chicago will die of a broken heart." Drake was as droll as they came.

She grinned at him, nudged him back. "Well," she said. "It's a good thing you don't live in Chicago then, isn't it?"

Drake waggled his eyebrows and she choked on her next sip. "You hitting on me, Auntie Zara?" he asked.

"Why?" she returned, entirely comfortable with Drake since she'd met him. He was so easygoing and affable, despite his impressive size and even more impressive job. He was the founding partner of a VC investment firm, and dealt daily in seven figures. "You want me to?"

Just then, Brett barreled into the both of them, dragging a self-conscious Lily in his wake.

"Sweetie," Lily admonished when he came to a full stop in front of them, grinning his gap-toothed smile. "You must not run like that in public."

Brett shrugged, much like Zara had a minute ago. A lift of the shoulders, that was more belligerent than defensive.

"I'm not in public, Mom," he muttered. "I'm with family."

Zara blinked at the absolute conviction in his voice, the casual acceptance. This young boy who'd suffered so much, had more courage than she would ever possess in her whole life. She reached out and brushed one hand over his dark head.

"You're so very right, champ," she said, training his attention on him. Intense brown eyes stared back at her. Her brother's eyes. Aadi's eyes. "You're with family now," Her voice went husky at the very end.

Lily smiled uncertainly, as she saw unguarded emotion in Zara Subramanian for the first time since she'd met her. For months, Aadi's sister had been cool, reserved, even correctly polite with her, that Lily had known she was found wanting in the eyes of the other woman. The woman who'd been with Aadi when he'd died.

And it had always bothered her. But now, as she understood the tremulous smile Zara was giving her son, she wondered if it hadn't been reserve at all. Maybe it had been self-preservation. And she knew all about self-preservation.

After all, no one touched her now except her son.

"Come on, champ," she said, because Drake was frowning at the three of them, aware of the undercurrents but not the cause behind it.

As far as he was concerned, he was here to protect his sister and his nephew from this so-called family, although he tolerated everyone well enough. And he seemed to enjoy bantering and borderline flirting with Zara.

"Let's leave Auntie Zara with Uncle Drake so she can teach him some manners." She even winked to lighten the mood.

Drake waggled his eyebrows again, making Brett giggle and Zara chuckle.

"Like not running in public," he intoned in an aggrieved tone, guaranteed to make a ten-year-old break out in laughter.

"Uncle Drake can run too, can't he?" Brett asked, hugging her once, hard. She hugged him back automatically, but her eyes were arrested by Dev watching her from across the yard. Even in the heavy night and near

darkness, she could make out the exact glitter of his eyes.

Anger and something else, something even scarier twisted inside of her, as she deliberately turned her head and winked at both Drake and her nephew.

"Yeah, Uncle Drake can do whatever he wants," she answered softly. "He is family too."

Drake threw a friendly arm around her shoulder and said, "Hey, anytime you want to race, just say Get Set."

"The question, Fallahil is this. Would you Go?" She gave him a come-hither smile. All talk. No action.

And the easy, amused laughter vanished from his eyes, a more intense shade of blue than his younger sister. "Not if you don't want me to, Auntie Zara," he murmured.

Zara's stomach skidded as she realized that maybe Drake wasn't as harmless as he made himself out to be. "It's a good thing then that I have no intentions of racing you."

Drake drew his arm back with something close to regret as he heard the gentle but firm refusal in her well-bred, but surprisingly husky voice. Drake had had cause to speculate on Zara Subramanian's emotional state since she was so damn friendly with him, yet so very distant. He was reasonably sure it wasn't because of the husband who'd died so very undeservingly four months ago.

She'd looked at the husband exactly as she was looking at him, the one time he had met them both. Smiling, but not with her eyes. She only smiled around immediate family, especially her nephew.

*Well*, he shrugged mentally, *newer pastures*, *Fallahil*.

"You'd lose Auntie Zara," Brett said confidently, completely oblivious to the turn the conversation had taken. "Uncle Drake is really, really fast."

"You bet I am, honey pie," Drake agreed ruffling the boy's head. A surge of affection replacing everything in his mind. No matter how many times he looked at Brett, he could never get over the extraordinary creation his sister had produced.

Brett frowned. "Don't call me honey pie," he said. "It's girly."

Lily laughed. "You don't mind it if I call you that."

"Me too," Zara chimed in.

Drake grinned raffishly, feeling a third, as yet not neutral presence draw nearer to them. "So why not me?" He winked at his nephew. "Honey pie."

Brett scuffed the dirt with his All Stars. "Because, Uncle Dev told me that

honey pie is for girls. Boys should be called champ or pal, like he calls me." "But what did I tell you about snitching, pal?" Dev asked, as he joined the group and sighed theatrically at his nephew.

Brett screwed up his nose, delighted to be the center of this much attention, hamming for all he was worth. "I don't know...hmm...It was something like, don't do it, yeah?"

Dev picked up Brett on one swinging arm. "And do you remember what happens to snitches?"

Brett shrieked as his uncle wrestled with him all the way to the pool. And he was laughing, enjoying himself with the abandon and honesty that only children have.

The three adults converged around the absent boy all looked at the dark-haired man, who'd not acknowledged any one of them for the two seconds he'd actually joined the conversation.

Zara's temper, which had been on slow simmer the whole day, the whole damn week truth be told, felt it explode through her. Enervating her, exhilarating her with the pure, clean strength of it. She folded her arms and tapped her feet and couldn't wait for the ride back home, when she could give him a piece of her mind.

Finally.

He could treat her however he wanted, but Drake and Lily were decent, nice people and he had no need to take out his foul temper on them. He had no right, and it was time someone set him straight on these facts.

Vaidehi came down to the three of them, smiling and asking Drake if he wanted to refresh his drink. Zara tamped down on her rage, and went back to making pleasant, polite conversation, casting just one last, enraged look at Dev's wet denim-clad form.

And Drake, who caught it, stopped wondering what it was, that tripped Zara's emotions. He knew, exactly who tripped her into feeling, and it wasn't him. He experienced that pang of regret that his sister acknowledged with a small private smile. Drake lifted his shoulder in an Ok gesture and went back to just bantering with the elusive Zara.

Dev couldn't make out Zara's mood as he slowly drove them back to Wicker Park in his rental Mercedes hybrid. He'd taken out the lease the first day of work, claiming knee injury if he drove in her tin can of a car even once more. And, since it meant spending less time with him, Zara had given

in without a qualm.

Now, she wished that she had brought her own car here, instead of accepting his suggestion of driving together. As it was, her roiling emotions were too close to the surface of her skin for her to not ignore the absolute composure in him. He was completely unruffled, as if he hadn't intimidated her a mere twelve hours ago in front of the whole office.

As if he hadn't snubbed her and Drake for the duration of the barbecue, appearing at her side only to remind her that even though it was Sunday tomorrow, they were still working against the clock so they should catch some sleep. Like she was a damn child who needed to be tucked into bed on a school night.

"Had a good time, tonight?" she asked him evenly, looking out the window of the car. Seeing the lights blurring as he drove quietly, competently through the streets. She hated and envied him his outrageous capability. At that moment, she hated everything about him.

Even the fact that his almost dry jeans and a basic black tee was a good look on him.

"Yeah," he smiled, remembering the utter joy of playing water polo with Brett and, later on, Lily. "Yeah, I did."

"Good." She couldn't resist being snippy.

"Why?" he turned to look at her averted head, as they paused for a red light. "You didn't?"

"Of course, I did."

"I was just checking."

"I would have had a better time if you'd been polite to Drake," she muttered. Unable to contain herself a moment longer.

He laughed; a short bark of a laugh. "You're kidding me, right?"

She glared at him. "You were mean and rude to him and you know it."

"Why do you care?" he returned, piqued that she thought so much of the redhaired giant, laughing and flirting with him, while never giving *him* the time of day. Even though she'd seduced him out of his freaking mind and then pretended it never happened!

"What do you mean, why do I care?" She stared at him as if he was talking Farsi. "You're not supposed to be rude to guests. Ma DSa would have walloped you if she came to know."

He shrugged, the movement turning claustrophobic in the car. Making her aware of him on so many levels, she didn't like any one of them. "Why? Are

you going to snitch on me?" he teased, unable to fathom why she would take so much umbrage over his lapse of manners.

She screwed her nose up, much like Brett had done. "Course not. I know what you do to snitches."

"Well," He drew the word out. Gazing at her with latent heat in his lightcolored eyes that she could see in the darkened interiors of the car. She saw his eyes anywhere, everywhere. Even in her sleep.

"I don't think I am going to throw you into the pool, sweetheart," Dev said. "I know what happens to you when water hits your system."

She flushed, because she knew exactly what he was talking about. And she couldn't believe he had the utter gall to bring it up now. When she was so flaming mad at him.

"I'm not your sweetheart, Dev. Stop calling me that."

"No," he agreed, shifting into first with practiced ease. "You're Drake's, I suppose."

Her jaw dropped open, and she could actually see all the blood rushing to her head with the vehemence and violence of her rage.

"Although, judging by the meager attention you gave him today, I have to wonder, if even he can make the cut," he continued in a casual voice.

She clenched her jaw in an effort to not scream at him hysterically.

"Tell me something, Zara," he asked, giving her a witheringly cool glance that she felt down to her toes. "Does anything melt that ice queen blood of yours, or are you just frozen through and through?"

Zara didn't think, as her vision hazed completely with anger so enormous it threatened to choke her. She twisted in her seat, reached a shaking hand out and slapped him once, soundly.

The sound echoed in the confines of the purring car. His jaw tightened as his eyes glittered into slits.

"I suppose this means that Drake Fallahil doesn't know his sweetheart was frenching me a few days ago." His hands were rigid on the steering wheel, as he braked to a stop in the underground garage of the apartment.

Her breath heaved out in a gasping whoosh, as she considered punching him square on the nose, breaking it.

His hand caught her slender wrist before she could finish thinking the thought. "Don't even think about trying it," he said, softly, in a neutral voice. Violence erupted from him as suddenly as it had from her.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" she hissed. "Judging me? Screwing

with my head? Insulting me when it suits you and ordering me about the rest of the time?" She wrenched free of his hold, got rid of the seatbelt in a jerky movement and pushed open the car door with a force he didn't know she was capable of.

Dev considered letting her walk away, letting her be righteously angry with him. Because, at least, she was feeling something for him. She was reacting to him, instead of letting him treat her like he would. But his hormones were snarling with his brains and they demanded that he go after her.

As he watched her stride away, the ground being eaten up by her swift strides, proud and confident, vibrating with emotion, desire exploded into instantaneous, alarming life inside of him. And he knew he wasn't going to let her walk away from him anymore. He wasn't going to let her mess with his head.

Not this time.

Dev got out of the car with controlled movements, locked the car and stalked her. Predatory intent gaining with every step he took towards her.

## Fifteen

Zara knew she had deliberately provoked Dev and had no explanation as to why she had done it. All she knew was the adrenalin rush coursing through her after she'd stalked away from him. After she had slapped him. She couldn't believe she'd done that. Her reactions were so all over the place. She pushed viciously at the lift button, wanting to be in the safety of the metal cage, before he caught up with her.

Wild and unformed ideas dancing through her head, of locking him out of the apartment. Making him spend the night away from here...like he always did anyway.

Her head lifted, the second she sensed his presence behind her. Animal heat poured off of him in waves. Determined to not give him any satisfaction whatsoever, she didn't turn and face him defiantly like her instincts urged her to.

To her surprise and wariness, he didn't do anything, just stood behind her, waiting for the elevator to open for them.

It came after five unnerving seconds of silence, and opened with a small tinkle. Zara stepped inside and punched at the door close button. But Dev's hand caught the door and he came in, purposefully. Indomitable. She didn't flinch when he whirled her around the moment the doors closed.

"I told you before." His fingers bit into her shoulders through three layers of clothes. His eyes gleamed and his face was a harsh, imposing mask, reminiscent of the man he'd become, the man she'd forgotten him to be. "Do not play games with me, Zara."

"And I told you before that I do not know how to play." She threw at him, trying to jerk out of his hold.

"You're not playing? You're not *playing*? Then what the hell are you doing?" He pushed her back to the wall. Intentionally crowding her.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Is Fallahil your boyfriend?" he asked, brushing closer to her.

Her bones went limp, although she straightened her spine against the debilitating rush of desire that swam to the surface at his merest touch. At the way he was looking at her right now. Consuming her with his eyes alone. "Why the hell would you think that?"

"Because," he stepped into the lee of her thighs, forcing her to accommodate him. "There is no way Drake Fallahil thinks you're just friends, judging by

the looks he was giving you."

"What do you care who I date anyway? What's it to you?"

She tried to move away from him, but he made it impossible for her to do so. Especially as he ran his hands down her shoulders to her wrists and yanked them over her head in a sudden erotic movement.

The gesture brought her torso closer to his, and to her eternal regret and excitement, her nipples stiffened when they brushed against his hard chest. He didn't mistake the arousal darkening her mocha brown eyes, even though it was banked beneath all that heaving rage.

"I don't want to care," he said, looking her straight in the eye. "It's everything to me."

"Go to hell, Dev. I don't care to play *games* with you," she spit at him. Straightening her head, when she wanted to melt into him.

The violent edge went out of him even as she watched him, aroused and angry and excited all at the same time. It was replaced by that appalling need that tugged at her too. So much need.

"Dammit, Zara, do you want me to beg? Would that make you happy?"

"Now what the hell are you talking about?" she demanded. "Have you completely lost your mind?"

"Yes," he answered. Dipping his head the necessary inch needed to align their mouths and eyes. "I've lost my frigging mind to want to do this."

"Do what?"

She wished her voice sounded less shaky, her body was less yielding. But that was like asking for the tide to stop turning. She already knew what he wanted. She wanted it too. She'd *only* wanted it, enough for her to become incensed at the easy, callous way he'd treated her. *Even* after the easy, callous way he'd treated her.

"Do what, Dev?" she asked, again.

But her eyes were wondering now, and she'd called him Dev. And so he did what he wanted to do. He lost his mind and gave it to her. He looked Zara straight in the eye, jerked her closer to him and whispered in her ear, "Make love to you over and over again until you become as crazy as me."

Her breath shuddered out in a gasp, but she didn't say a single word, as the elevator doors pinged open on their floor.

He released her, backing away from her slowly, with quiet purpose. "I'm sorry for what just happened. I shouldn't have done that. I'll go." His eyes were watchful, more, respectful. And Zara knew he wouldn't touch her until

she asked him to. He would never take advantage of her that way, no matter what the situation or the provocation.

When the doors started closing, she came away from the wall, her eyes still on his. She placed one hand on the door. "Are you asking me or telling me?"

"I don't know. I don't know up from down anymore. I only know I want you," he muttered, running one hand over his face in a befuddled gesture that cleared things up for her in the exact second.

She smiled, female and powerful. "Make love to me over and over again until I become as crazy as you, Dev."

His hand dropped limply to his side.

She came out of the cage and stood close to him without touching him.

"Don't say that," he said; a light of something close to desperation in his glass green eyes.

And in that moment, he was both Dev, the boy she'd loved hopelessly all those years ago, and the honorable, indomitable, *decent* man he'd become. He was everything she'd ever wanted, everything she'd ever dreamed of.

And she wanted him, sexually, emotionally, crazily and irrationally.

"I'll say it," she said, huskily. "I'll say it over and over again until you believe me."

"God, Zara," he said, although he was coming toward her. One step, then another, then a third. "Stop talking."

"I want you, Dev," she said. "I always wanted you. Always. All my life. I lo..." Her words were strangled in her throat because he'd reached her and claimed her mouth and her for himself.

With a tremor born of relief and knee-weakening desire, she closed her arms around him and gave in to the inevitable.

Dev knew, in a dim corner of his mind, that for the last three weeks, this was all he had wanted. He knew that he had been headed for this...fall since the first moment he'd seen her. He'd seen her and he'd wanted her. It was as basic as that. Because Zara was not just some woman he could be intimate with, and then walk away from.

She was his heart in a way no one else ever could be. She was the first girl, the first *person* he'd loved with desperate, hopeless faith. She was part of the company, the family he was trying to help, and she was so damn vulnerable he doubted even she knew it.

But more than all of this, Zara was dangerous for him. Just by breathing in

his vicinity.

He knew all of this in a dim corner of his non-functioning mind, but he continued to kiss her. Claim her with his mouth alone, like he soon would with his whole body, his whole being.

He nipped tiny kisses all over her lower lip, and snaked his tongue out, touching the tiny bites sustained on the soft skin. And she made this sighing broken sound that arrowed straight into his gut and hooked her even deeper in him. She ran restless hands all over his front, finding warm abdominal muscles beneath the tee shirt.

He twined his tongue with hers and kissed her so forcefully; she dropped her hands and just held him with nerveless fingers. Dev felt triumphant, like a conquering hero because he wanted her weak and helpless and at his total mercy. He'd dreamed of ways to have her. For days, it was all he'd done. Maybe even before that. Maybe forever.

And now he was going to fulfill every last one of his fantasies.

Dve gentled the kiss, her nails leaving marks on his chest, and rasped against her neck, "Bedroom. Now."

She made a small sound that he interpreted as agreement, and then ripped the light blue shirt she wore with her jeans. Zara gasped at the causal violence in his action, and the feral desire in his eyes. She made one last-ditch attempt to cover herself, but he tugged at the ripped ends and said softly, "Let go."

Her honey-warm eyes went huge with trust, as she let the shirt fall to the floor and stepped closer to him.

Dev felt something alien and colossal move through him at that simple sign of faith. Something beyond simple desire, which was the only way he could rationalize having her. It felt dangerously close to tenderness, and if he wasn't careful he could even...Dev shook his head, even as he brushed one hand over her trembling, molasses-soft back and she instantly snuggled into him in a completely natural gesture.

In fact, she wound her arms around his neck, pressed closer to him and kissed him. Sweetly, lingeringly, with long-dead emotions that came back to life with a vengeance.

Dev tunneled his fingers into her mass of hair, holding her head straight as he kissed her back, quickly taking all the emotion pouring out of her and turning it into white-hot passion. Zara gasped at the sensation of being wanted so much, so fast that she could only hold on and let him lead the way into this dark and dangerous world of satin murmurs.

She didn't know how, but she found herself being walked to her bedroom, even though it felt like floating. Flying. She didn't have legs. They belonged to Dev, everything did.

He cupped her bottom closer to his pelvis and her legs did turn to water at the strength of his erection. On instinct she didn't know she possessed, she rubbed against him, making him mutter aloud, harsh and guttural. His hands became rougher with her, streaking over her thighs, the tops of her breasts still in her lacy blue bra that he unhooked with deft fingers.

This time there was no shame, no modesty, and she willingly tossed the garment aside, all the while mating with his indecently seductive mouth.

He stopped kissing her long enough to back her against the wall that led to the passage where the bedrooms were, and dipped his mouth on a searing path to her breasts.

"God," he muttered, even as he kissed one pebbled nipple and she shuddered violently against him, her spine going weak, the top of her thighs burning, needing him in uncontrollable desire. Zara moaned, as he plied her breasts with single-minded attention and his magic mouth. Lost to everything but him.

His hands were rough, the pads calloused, and they roamed over her silky smooth belly, causing her warm brown skin to heat and inflame. Arousing thousands of fires in her wherever they touched. Her elbows, the crooks of her armpits, the underside of her breasts, and she couldn't do anything but get completely seduced in the circle of his arms.

He braced one arm behind her back, while the other one trailed over the jeans she still wore, unzipping, to find the silkiness of her inner thighs. He didn't undress her completely, even as he sucked and nipped and licked her breasts to a point that just his breath exploded inside of her with the force of orgasm. And when he dipped one finger to find her warm and willing for him, she did

orgasm, just from his touch alone. Holding him hard and fast while the wave of pleasure rode her, wrung her inside out.

Dev lifted his head and saw Zara, her head thrown back against the wall, eyes closed, goddess-beautiful, caught in the most intense throes of passion. All ice, all reserve melted. For this moment, she was totally, completely his.

Possessiveness, like he'd never felt before, not even for her, filled him. Made him want to take her in the most barbaric way possible, because he was a hairsbreadth away from exploding in need. He pulled the pants down with shaking, impatient hands and she stepped out of them and her functional cotton panties.

Her eyes opened, glassy with need and satiation and he wanted her even more than before.

"Your turn." he said, in a low tone.

Her breath sighed out in a long, liquid wave, and she complied, running wondering hands over his chest, before helping him out of his tee shirt. She ran the same hands down his muscular, sculpted, tanned chest that was more a product of religious jogging the whole year round than any gym. Past his well-defined pecs and to the tiny trail of hair that disappeared into his jeans.

Zara brushed her fingers down his fly and he hissed.

"Hurry," he growled, curving his hand around her nape as he deeply kissed her.

She laughed, the witch laughed, as she tackled his belt with efficiency and then unbuttoned the fly. She ran a nail inside the stiff material and he jerked with the provocation. He stumbled back a single step and shucked out of his jeans and boxers with economy of motion if not grace.

Zara's mouth opened on a soundless gasp, even as she looked her fill at his lean, lightly hairy thighs, his muscular, long legs and everything in between. Her heart thudded in anticipation, and she wanted to crawl out of her own skin into his. Because he could reduce her to mindlessness with his hands and mouth. Because he looked familiar, beloved. Beautiful. His face was all planes and angles in the light reflected from the windows and his eyes were chips of glass that burned through her.

She loved him so much.

Tears filled her eyes, tears that had not been allowed to fall for years on years, and he stepped back, closer to her, looking at her with a delirious mix of tenderness and lust, cradling her cheek in one hand.

"Zara, honey, you're protected?" There was a gentle question in him, a cautious hesitancy in him, even though he was holding her as if he would never let her go. As if he had no intentions of doing something stupid as that.

"Yes," she whispered. "Don't make me wait, Dev. Please, don't make me wait." The tears slid down, even as he brushed them away with his thumbs and gazed solemnly, scorching her kiss-swollen lips.

"All right," he said.

And then with far more gentleness than rugged passion he lowered her to the floor and made love to her. Taking her to the heavens with each stroke, each brush of his body against her. Made love to her because with Dev, that was

all there would ever be.

Love.

And it was his name, his love that echoed through her when they found the peak together. Gripped tight in each other's bodies.

It was a long time before Zara woke up or, at least, it felt like that to her. Sometime during her nap, Dev had dragged pillows off the couch and placed it behind her head, and covered them both in a light comforter.

There was no illumination in the room save the faint light from the windows and the world outside, the light of the moon. And it was in this light that he was regarding her, head propped on his fist. Patiently, seriously, with intense concentration.

Unaccountably, she felt shy now. Even though they were still sprawled intimately against each other and she felt every inch of his sexy, male body around her. She turned her head away, her musty hair falling on her cheek. He reached over with his other hand and trailed the hair behind her ear, lingering over the slanted, almost too-thin bones of her cheeks.

"Man, you're gorgeous," he said, quietly. Contemplatively.

It stunned her enough into looking at him. There was actual disbelief in her eyes, her vulnerable, flushed face. "I'm not."

She snuggled closer to him, when he placed a hand beneath her shoulders and she came easily to his side. Trustingly. Willing to take the chance that he would not hurt her. "I'm tall and thin and I never eat enough."

Dev grinned, as he combed her hair over her back, the touch shuddering tiny ripples of latent yearning into life inside her. "Sweetheart, models starve themselves to look like you."

"I don't look like a model, Dev. Stop flattering me."

"I dated one. She was a catalog model for one of those ecomm websites. We met at a pride parade that GWBG's sponsors every year."

She didn't say anything, just pinched his butt. Hard. He howled and she grinned up at him. "Tell me more," she invited.

His grin widened because, for this one moment, she looked like the old Zara. The girl who would as soon fight him, as kiss him, sometimes both at the same time. Her old spirit was still there, buried under all the layers of constraints and reserve and duty she imposed on herself. He idly wondered how she would be, when she really let herself go. When she really started living, embracing life to the fullest. Stunning.

She would be stunning.

His heart stumbled because he wouldn't be there to see that happen. He wouldn't be able to see Zara live, because he had his own life to get back to. A life he had built away from Zara. Especially her.

"I'd rather talk about you," he answered, unable to stop touching her. Playing lazy circles on her satin shoulders. "You're not a model. You're three-dimensional and alive when you let yourself go."

"What do you mean by that? I am alive all the time."

"Are you?" he asked, so quietly, not sure if he wanted her to hear him.

But she heard him anyway.

Her hands reached up to his neck and she kissed him fiercely. Forcefully. And he responded, losing his mind all over again. But not really caring, because she was in his arms. And she was begging him to make love with her again.

And again. And he obliged.

Because that was his fantasy too.

Zara couldn't sleep.

Wrong, she thought the next morning at five, a cat-contented smile playing on her thoroughly bruised lips. She didn't want to sleep.

She wanted to savor this night, every single moment of it. Because it was the culmination of a lifetime of forbidden needs. And every one of those needs centered on the man snoring softly beside her in her huge white Queen Anne bed. Sometime during the night of prolonged lovemaking, they'd come to her bedroom and collapsed on the bed.

Spooning together under the covers, as naturally, as rightly, as if they'd been sleeping together for the last ten years.

But not for a minute did Zara think that this changed anything. Not for a minute did her regret or her guilt lessen. If anything, the abandon and worship with which Dev loved her made her feel more tangled, more hopeless each time. But she didn't stop him, reaching for him, sharing herself with him as generously as she knew how. She knew no other way to give him her love, her heart.

For so long, she'd tried not to dream about being with Dev like this. Sleeping through the night, wrapped in each other's arms. His breath in her hair, his scent surrounding her.

With ripping clarity she remembered that last conversation they'd had under

the mistletoe back in Chicago before everything got destroyed. And for a single, sunshine-world filled moment she thought about what her life would have been like if it had happened exactly like that. If she had finished school and gone to college with him.

Would they be married by now? Would they have had children? Little boys and girls who had his devilish grin and his changeable eyes.

*I wonder if maybe you're better off without me, sometimes.* 

Zara shut her mind off, with the practice of long training, because these thoughts hurt her. She knew this night, with all its memories and implications, would hurt her too. When he was gone from her world and she would once again have to learn to live without him. But it was such a small price to pay.

It was a price she was willing to pay.

Because there was nowhere in the world she wanted than to be with Dev.

And in the rising dawn, when he slept, unaware, exhausted, holding her with arms and legs thrown over her, as if he was afraid she would escape in the night. As if she would even have the will to, she mustered the courage to whisper the words she'd not allowed to pass her lips in ten long years. Words that had been her curse and her strength for as long as she could remember.

"I love you, Dev. I love you so much."

Then she squeezed the tears back into her eyes, into her being and held him as tightly as he held her, and drifted off into the sweet oblivion of sleep.

The nightmare, when it came, hunted her into screams and wakefulness.

# Sixteen

Dev was dreaming. Dead, exhausted, nameless figments of dreams that he couldn't remember from one second to the next. All he knew was that he was content, beyond all of his dreams. Ever since he was little, he'd been a light sleeper, a condition that had worsened when he'd move to SoCal and forged an entirely new life out of nothing. He'd stayed alert at all times, sometimes even in his sleep. He had spent the night with a woman before, but even then, there had been a sense of awareness of his surroundings.

The plain truth was, he trusted no one anymore.

And that fact translated itself even in his sleep.

Except...he was sleeping. Dreaming. Deeply. Contentedly, exhausted beyond words by Zara and her eagerness to his every touch, his every kiss. And he was completely ok, more than ok with it.

So, he was unprepared for the sheer vehemence of Zara's screams when they started a few minutes later.

He woke up, jerking upright, heart pounding, brain muzzy, and glanced in panic at Zara. Twisted on the sheets, kicking them away, her eyes closed, face contorted in a rictus of terror. He tried shaking her, gently at first, and then with more force when she didn't stop.

"Zara," he said, trying to reach her. To get through to her. "Zara, baby, it's all right. It's just a dream. Wake up, wake *up*."

He shook her hard, settling her into him, when she finally opened her eyes, glassy with remembered horror. Her nails dug into his shoulders, trembling with effort and emotion. Her wet hair hung in long, sweaty ropes. They'd showered before tucking into bed a couple hours before.

"It's just a dream," he whispered, tucking strands of sweaty hair behind her ear.

For a single second her eyes went enormous, filling with tears and she held him, almost imprinting herself on him. Then finger by finger she let him go, and slowly turned her head away.

"I'm sorry," she said in a husky voice, lower than usual. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

"Does this happen often?" He neither listened nor accepted her stilted apology.

He also forced her chin back to him, so she couldn't hide anymore. But the icy composure, the walls he hated, they were all back. He could see it in the

distant way she held her head, and the deep evenness of her breathing. He felt it in the physical way she withdrew from him, even though he was sprawled all over her.

"Does what?" She made an effort at smiling, and it hurt him more than outright rejection.

"Stop acting as if everything is alright, Zara. And let me in. I am here." He came this close to pleading. His fingers unconsciously tightened on her bare arms. "I am here now. And you can tell me anything. You can trust me."

This time the smile that came from her was more natural, less heart-breaking. "Of course, I trust you, Dev. Why on earth would I not?"

Because you keep secrets from me, I can see them in your eyes.

He combed gentle hands in her hair. "No reason, baby. Now do you want to tell me why you gave that very convincing impression of a screaming banshee?" He eked out a smiled, although it was too dark for her to see the sheer worry in his depthless eyes.

She tried to turn away, he held fast, and she gave a gusty sigh. And made him acutely aware of their combined nakedness. He manfully tried to ignore the way her breasts brushed his ribs as she suddenly turned back and burrowed into him, hiding her face in his chest.

"I still dream about it all," she said, in a raw voice.

He stroked soothingly over her back, and felt the shudders running through her. Jesus, how fragile was she?

"What? Mom, dad and...Ravi?" He didn't want to bring her dead husband here, not to the bed where he'd just made love with her, but he had no choice. She was clearly not just upset, but damn near traumatized, and here he was, wanting to jump her bones like a sex-starved maniac.

"Oh, Dev." There was a wealth of regret in her voice, muffled as it was. "I still can't get beyond Aadi, how am I supposed to deal with mom and dad's loss?"

Foolishly, he was glad she didn't mention the husband.

"Zara."

His hand stilled on her back, but she knew he was there. He was listening, *he* was listening. And for once, she wanted to talk. It made no sense, but she wanted to tell him. Now, when it was too late.

"My therapist told me back then that the only way to deal with my nightmares was to try and consciously think about Aadi and the...incident whenever I could, so it doesn't surprise me." There was a certain wry caution

he hadn't heard in her. "My natural instincts have always been to just get through the day tired enough to only sleep. No nightmares. And it works."

"You're not tired now, huh?"

She shook her head. "Not mental exhaustion, not like that."

"Zara." His concern transmitted itself to her in one word and made all the walls inside her crumble down.

"He was crazy that night," she whispered, the words coming too fast. "When he first knocked on the balcony door, I thought it was you. But it wasn't. It was him. He looked wild, so wild, Dev. And he asked me how I could betray him with you. How I could leave him all alone like that. He hit me, when I tried to assure him nothing had changed. If I didn't know any better, I'd think he was on something, but Aadi was a straight arrow like you. I wish we'd never left my room. I wish that every night."

Through a tremendous effort of stubbornness and strength she'd earned over the years, she kept her voice even. And forced the tears down. "When you found us, I was so glad. So glad because then the nightmare would end. Aadi would go back to being the brother I loved so much because you'd talk him down from wherever he was. But he hurt you, he wanted to hurt you. I am so sorry about that. So very sorry."

"It's not your fault," he murmured, his emotions in complete chaos. But one thought shone through like a beacon.

Aadi had hit her. He'd hit Zara. How could he?

"It is. I should have told him about us, or warned him or something. I don't know what was wrong with him. He told me that, in the car, when we were driving away, he told me that I should have told him. I should never have loved you. I wasn't supposed to love you. I had no right to be with you. I thought he was insane..." Her words trailed off, as she relived the awful, hideous horror of those final moments in the car with her brother.

"Oh, sweet God, Zara."

"He told me if I ever went near you again he'd kill you. Then he'd kill himself. He said...God, Dev, I think something was wrong with him, that he was...unhinged. But at the end, when it flipped, when the car flipped," she stopped. Gulped. He held her closer. "He told me to kick the door and get out. He wanted me to save myself while he died." Her words were a bottomless whisper.

"Zara."

"How can I not blame myself, Dev? My aunt lost her only son, you lost your

best friend, and my grandfather lost his grandson and future heir that night. Brett lost a father without ever knowing him. How can I make it up to any of them, even if I try so hard? Even if I try all my life."

For answer he kissed her once, hard and brutal, forcing her to respond to him in this moment, when they were still alive, and they were still here.

"Listen to me, Zara," he said, tearing his mouth away from hers, his eyes glowing with the intensity of his emotions. "It's not your fault." He tried to make his voice as convincing as he could. She had to believe him. "What happened that night is not your fault. Aadi hitting me is not your fault, flipping the car, telling you all those crazy things; is not your fault. It's not." He wanted to shake her, because he saw that she was completely unconvinced.

"Zara, babe," he said, trying for logic now. Gentling his voice and his hold. "No one blames you, no one. Not Grandpa or Aunt Vee or Lily. They love you. It was a terrible tragedy. An accident. The therapist was right. You have got to face it and let it go."

*If I let it go, what will I have left?* 

But she didn't. Instead she raised her drenched eyes and said in a broken voice, "I wish I could do it all again. I'd do everything different." *I'd never let you go*.

"Isn't that what life is all about?" he asked, lightly. "Second chances?"

And in that moment, he wanted to believe that life was exactly all about second chances. If so, he wasn't going to squander a second of the chance he'd been given with Zara. To get to know her, to be with her. To hold her as long as he humanly could.

"Do you believe in second chances?" she asked, a thread of hope raising its timid head in her eyes.

He felt baffled, unsettled, completely shaken by all that was running riot in him. Tenderness, protectiveness, admiration, lust, this was all part of it. But there was something more...so much more, he was afraid to put a name to it.

He kissed the top of her head, sweetly, a benevolent benediction.

"Of course," he said. "I absolutely do."

And because it was Dev, because he still didn't know the worst parts about her, she wanted to believe too.

"Then so do I," she said, softly, her heart in her eyes, if he could but look for it.

But he only saw the tremulous desire coursing through her, transmuting itself

to him and he tightened his hold on her hair, and lowered his head to kiss her. Healing her, holding her in the surest way he knew how. And she let him, because for tonight, for this one night, she wanted to believe him.

The next morning, he was showering, whistling quite loudly, and Zara was making coffee, when the answering machine picked up a message. It was Lily.

"Hey, Dev. What's up with you and dinner? Are you blowing hot and cold on me?" Nervous giggle. "Anyway, let me know if you can make it or not. So I can pretend to make other plans." Another nervous giggle. "Ok, bad joke. But seriously, let me know about dinner tonight. Can't wait to see you. Brett says hi. Take care. Call me."

*Can't wait to see you.* That was flirty, wasn't it? She was not paranoid. Were Dev and Lily just friends or something more? She wanted to ask him about it but was afraid of what he'd tell her. Besides, what he did outside of work was really not her business.

He was doing her outside of work too. Now.

The thought was crude but true, nevertheless. But just because he was sleeping with her didn't mean...No. Dev wasn't like that. He wouldn't do that to her.

But he could want Lily in a different way. He could want to love Lily because Lily was everything Zara was not.

So, it seemed as if her fairy tale was over even before it had ever begun.

Funny thing was, she didn't feel like Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty. She felt like the wicked stepmother who'd trapped Prince Charming with her needs and her half-truths. And who didn't want to let him go now.

# Seventeen

She was still keeping secrets from him.

Dev knew that as surely as he knew the slide numbers of the pitch deck for the Board meeting. It irked him, it confused him, and it disturbed him in ways he couldn't really catalog. On the surface, she was Zara, efficient and warm and looking at him with that special intimacy that only lovers share.

And they had been lovers, every night for the past month, since the day of the barbecue.

She shared unstintingly, when it came to lovemaking. Sometimes, God, he felt sometimes that no man had ever touched the way he was. But how could that be possible?

She'd been married, been engaged for years before. She'd buried a husband. Maybe not someone who had inspired great passion in her, but nonetheless, she hadn't been a green-eyed innocent, when they'd first come together. Then why did he feel that he was...unlocking her with every kiss, every consummate touch they shared?

He could handle the physical. The journey that she was making toward discovering herself, he could understand that. He was even helping her with it. And he was a red-blooded man; so he was enjoying it a hell of a lot.

The conversation they'd had about Aadi's last words, had definitely proven that she had a lot to overcome. If nothing else, he knew her well enough to know when she believed him and when she was just paying lip service to his words.

After this, they entered murky ground.

Intellectually he could posit as much as he wanted on how they were just friends who'd also become lovers. In reality, he was not at all sure what they were.

And it was all because of the secrets she was keeping.

Secrets about Ravi Singh. And something else. Something he could see moving through her beautiful brown eyes when she thought he wasn't looking at her. It looked so much like grief and yearning twisted together, he knew that it had to be a reflection of what he wanted her to feel.

Of what he was beginning to feel for her.

God knew he hadn't wanted to open his heart to her. The last time he'd done that, she'd casually pulverized it to bits.

But, even without meaning to, she pulled at him. Pulled him in. With her air

of absolute reserve and then the way she kissed him every single time with the same desperation. How long, he mused, was a man supposed to hold out against something that wonderful, even if it was meant to go nowhere?

But through it all, it hurt, all these mixed, murky, pesky emotions hurt because she was still distant from him. Not physically, not sexually, but in all the other ways that counted. He knew it in the way she held herself apart when they drifted off to sleep in the early hours of the morning, tangled in each other. Exhausted.

He knew it because of the shutters he could see in her eyes even now. Could see it in the way Ma DSa stroked her hair when they went home to Sycamore Drive and visited with the family. They'd tacitly decided to keep their relationship away from the family. As in he had followed Zara's lead and she'd never said anything. And while that old rejection burned anew, he was furious about Zara keeping things from him even now. As if Ma DSa knew something about her that he didn't. As if she still needed walls from him.

What would it take to smash down all those barriers?

Dev poured the Stress Buster Slinky from one hand to the other as he contemplated this problem even while conducting conference calls to the fifty district vendors on his list that he had to sweet talk into signing up with them before the Board meeting. Not for nothing did he own a successful business that ran in the black, if he couldn't even multitask.

And before he could credit himself with altruistic motives about being the noble son who'd come back to save the family business, he knew that wasn't why he was doing this at all. There was nothing altruistic or good about him. He was doing all of this because he wanted Zara. Open to him, without any secrets, and the only sure-fire way to do that would be to finish the business, and then get personal. If everything was murky once he actually reached there, Dev figured he was a realist. He would be prepared for anything. Even an unhappy ending.

"Yes, Grandpa. The last of the vendors have been signed on. Yes, Dev has been able to give personal guarantees to most of them and that has been enough to convince them to stay with us. Yes, we are preparing a special report on the development, which we will share during the Board meeting." Zara tried to rub away the pinching feeling she had on her forehead.

"I have no doubt, Dev and you can handle everything, Zara," Grandpa S said.

She smiled. "Thanks for the vote, Grandpa. Now if only the rest of the Board was as easily convinced."

"I don't want you working twenty four/seven for the company that you forget to have a life." His voice went gruff, as it always did when he was emotional. "I don't want you or Dev ending up like me."

Zara blinked. "Grandpa, I don't think there is any danger of Dev or me ending up like you."

"Alone, Zara," he said softly. "I meant, I don't want you ending up alone." She had no answer to that but she ended the conversation on a positive note. Her headache was now a full-blown reality. She popped in two extra-strength

Tylenol and washed it down with orange juice.

Alone? Yeah. The one thing she wasn't was alone right now. Her days were spent in closed confines with Dev and four others. While her nights belonged to him. Zara acknowledged with a quick rub to her aching nape, that not getting enough sleep was making her more antsy and anxious than she already was. Being with Dev meant she wasn't alone anymore. It was not something she could take lightly.

More importantly, her body couldn't take it lightly. It was so aware, so attuned to where he was, what he was doing, it appalled her at some level. The slightest touch, the business-like looks he directed at her, they interfered with her brain, made her long to...She stood up abruptly from her easy chair, restless and antsy all over again.

It was no use pretending it hadn't happened.

She was hopelessly, crazy-in-love, love with him. More accurately, she was just allowing the love to resurface again. The way she had, so blithely, so confidently, when she was sixteen and hadn't known the sacrifice demanded of something like this. She knew, without any illusions, that he cared about her. Dev was too decent, too honorable to not care about her. But sheet-burning sex and a shared history did not make a great love match.

He didn't love her, not if he was still 'hanging out' with Lily. He couldn't. They didn't talk about it but Lily's flirty message resonated in her head at odd moments. But then he kissed her and she would forget everything but him and the heat he generated inside her, warming her cold heart.

He couldn't love her and even if, by some miracle, he could forget all that had happened between them, there was still the tiny confession she had to make. Namely that she was responsible for the way things had ended for him. Zara pressed shaking fingers to the middle of her closed eyes.

They hadn't really talked about what would happen after the Board meeting. The future was a murky thing that existed only in a calendar. But, more and more, she was starting to panic. When he was gone and, of course, he would go, what was she going to do? How was she going to survive it a second time, when she still hadn't gotten over the first time?

Sometimes, especially at night, when he made love to her so sweetly, so tenderly, with all that intense passion and need, when she knew she was the focal point of his universe, it was so hard to hold back and not tell him how she felt. Simply hold onto him till the world ended and damn the consequences. It was so hard to look him in the eye and not say three simple words she had no right to say anymore.

*I love you.* 

She was playing emotional acrobatics, emotions that had been slumbering, in deep freeze, waiting for Dev Banerjee to stroll back into her life and kiss them, literally, awake. On the one hand, she was an addict who was going back for more and more of his touches, his kisses, the way he was kind to her in little ways, like pulling the sheets over them when they slept. And, on the other hand, she was ruthlessly trying to maintain a crucial distance from him, because if she gave him everything, even if he didn't want it, then she'd be left with nothing.

Then, she'd be all alone again.

"Stop it," she whispered to herself, harshly. "For god's sake, stop it." And went back to work. The one thing that had never let her down.

"Zara?" Ken came in a few hours later, with a sheaf of papers to sign and she opened her eyes to see him. Smiled tiredly at him.

"Are you all right, Zara? You don't look so hot today," he said.

She knew it was just idle banter. That Ken didn't see her in any sexual way, but Dev didn't know that. He only heard the word 'hot' and saw red, as he came in behind Ken.

Zara upped the smile to endearing; it reached her wonderful, honey-warm eyes. Ken blinked, looking owlish behind his stylish glasses.

"Gee, Ken, you are so good for my vanity," she teased him.

He handed her the expense reports she'd asked for and she quickly initialed them.

Dev was toying with a pen on her desk, idly spinning it on the surface of the table, while he waited for Ken to conclude his business and leave. It was after

all, after ten, and Ken would clock out soon enough. Lord knew the boy worked hard and never complained. But right now, Dev wished him to Honduras.

"Thanks, Zara," Ken said, warmly, too warmly. Probably reeling from the impact of that smile. "You're so awesome and you don't even know it."

"Why?" she asked. "Because I okayed a three-hundred dollar pair of sunglasses?"

"Well," he shrugged. "Yeah. That's not why you're awesome."

"They why?"

"Because you're freaking amazing and you don't even know it."

"It's late, Ken," Dev interrupted smoothly, still twirling the pen casually.

"Whatever's left can be done tomorrow, can't it?"

Ken looked at Zara, unsure. "I still have the final reports to compile--"

Zara smiled at Ken. "It's all right, Ken. It can wait till the morning."

"Don't forget you have the final meeting with the department heads tomorrow for final inputs in the pitch deck," Ken said, with a touch of regret, as he powered down his laptop and slung the bag over his shoulders. A young, hip assistant.

Zara massaged her neck, pulling at the dozens of tiny muscles that protested from long hours of bending over a computer. "Yeah, I remember. Well, let's see. Maybe a miracle can save us before the damn meeting and we can present credible figures."

"I thought I'd already saved you," Dev murmured, unreasonably jealous of the easy byplay between Zara and her assistant.

"Huh?" Zara turned to look at him blankly, as if she'd forgotten he was even in the room.

Anger joined the jealousy, making a monster rise in his chest. Hurtle him toward something wild he wasn't exactly sure he could control.

"Nothing," he said, shortly. "Bye, Ken. Good night."

Ken looked at the way the CEO was looking at the co-CEO and high-tailed it out of the room before he became a casualty in whatever was going on between them. It was bizarre, he mused; how blind most of us are.

Inside Zara's office, she frowned at him. "You didn't have to be so abrupt with him, Dev."

He merely cocked a brow, and had heat rushing through her system at the gesture. But then again, anything he did exploded heat inside of her.

"I didn't." It was a statement.

"Then." She controlled the 'why' with effort, and instead went back to her seat to get on with work. "If you have something to discuss, maybe we should get on with it."

He smiled; it wasn't a particularly pleased smile. With a dull thud, Zara realized he was upset. She didn't know about what, but he was upset.

"Dev, is everything all right?"

She wanted to place her hand on his, which was still twirling the pen restlessly. Faster and faster. But she didn't know how she would be received. Intimacy was something she knew nothing about. And intimacy with Dev scared the living daylights out of her, even as she longed to experience it.

The pen stopped spinning; he sent it skittering toward her. She caught it by reflex, and then he caught her wrist. He half-jerked her out of her seat, and slanted his mouth across hers. Hard, ruthless, dominating. And like always, she responded. Enthusiastically, and desperately. As if she couldn't believe he was kissing her.

When she opened her languorous eyes, she was startled to see the remnants of fury in his depthless eyes.

"Dev." Her voice shaky in way she couldn't really make herself care about. This time she brought her other hand to touch his cheek in a tender gesture, the only one that she permitted herself to make. "If you wanted to kiss me, you should have kicked Ken out two hours ago."

She could joke about it, he thought, a nameless fury still coursing through him. She could stand there and make fun of how much he wanted her. When he couldn't breathe when she was around, because he wanted her so much. The languor disappeared from her warm eyes, leaving them wary. And for some reason it infuriated and aroused him even more.

Right now, everything did.

"Dev, I--"

"I'm going to take you right here," he said, conversationally.

And had the incredible pleasure of seeing the shock and awareness hit her system. Making her face grow warm, and heating her eyes despite herself. He could feel the change in her pulse with the wrist he still held. Could feel it in the slight tremble that coursed through her at his stark words.

"And you're going to let me do anything I want to you, Zara." He rubbed his thumb over her beating pulse. "Anything I want."

Her eyes rounded at the blatant threat in his words, in his glowing eyes that had been so furious just a second before. They were still furious, blade-sharp,

but there was something else too, mingling with the anger.

Arrogance.

She felt corresponding hunger at the way he was making his intentions clear to her, but she also felt fear. A fear that hadn't completely gone away, no matter how many times she twined her body with his. Fear that the complete control he exerted over her, over himself, would vanish and she would be swept away in the riptide of what spilled over. A part of her wanted to experience it, but the other part, the hugest part of her was so very afraid of what he could do to her.

Of what he could bring her to. Oblivion.

Swallowing over a dry throat, she tried to ease back, and murmured, "We can go home, Dev. And then we can--"

He shook his head, not letting her finish. In that moment, he looked dark and dangerous, the nineteen-year-old teenager who didn't give a damn about anything or anyone. Except her. He wanted her, so he would have her.

Desire tightened the nerves playing in her like a bowstring.

"No," he said. Rounding the table to come to her side, not letting go of either of her hands. "Here. Now."

"Dev," she tried again, over a pounding heart and suddenly shaky hands. At the way he was stalking her, claiming her without coming close to her. "Please, let's be reasonable. It's the office. Someone might come."

"Let them."

"Someone might see."

"I don't care."

"Dev."

"Zara."

He had reached her, with slow, purposeful steps, and he let go of her hands. She gripped them together, tight, in order to slow her raging body down. She couldn't look at him, she thought wildly. It was too bright, so bright, as if she was looking at the sun.

"Look at me, Zara," he commanded then, as he plucked her waist and placed her on top of her ruthlessly organized table.

She gulped, and did as he asked. She was afraid of what he might do to her, if she didn't.

"You're scared," he murmured, running his hand down to her throat, where a pulse beat strong and sure. Visible.

"I'm glad. You see. Before I'm through." He leaned forward and nipped her

at the base of her jaw, and had her head swimming. "You're going to be terrified of what I can do to you. You're going to love what I do to you. You're never going to forget what I can do to you."

# Eighteen

He cruised his hot, sexy lips, over hers, almost, but not-quite-kissing her. Her lips parted on a husky, soundless gasp, and her fingers curled into him. "You're never going to forget me. Never," he whispered against her trembling mouth.

Then he kissed her.

She'd expected utter, unrestrained violence, and was doubly, excruciatingly surprised when he just played with her. Soft, butterfly-soft kisses that had her aching for more. For deeper passion. For everything. She leaned closer into him, wrapping her legs about his waist, drawing him closer to her center, her heat, wanting to feel his potent heat with a desperation that unnerved her, but didn't surprise her anymore.

She curled her hands around his neck, inviting him to get nearer, closer. Take everything, without words. He grasped her wrists, and placed them on the table behind her, all the while kissing her softly. Dreamily.

Because of the position he'd placed her in, her back was arched into him, her breasts brushing into his hard chest, bringing them into such close contact, she felt singed through two full layers of clothes. A ragged moan escaped her, as he darted his tongue into her willing mouth, and she captured it aggressively, kissing him with the same force he always showed her.

As if he'd just been waiting for that signal, his kiss changed course. Became demanding, enervating. He drained all the sweetness from her mouth, claiming it all. She kissed him back, treating him the same way. Her chest pushed into his with wordless insistence, making him groan with the power of his own desire. The need to control still remained, but barely.

Mostly, he just wanted to have her. Never stopping. Endlessly.

He shucked off her suit jacket over her elbows, leaving it on, and went to work on the buttons of her pale yellow shirt, a marked contrast to the shocking pink of her suit. The shirt didn't come off fully and he could see passion flush her body exquisitely, as he trailed his fingers over her quivering stomach.

"Hurry," she murmured, against his lips.

With restrained savagery he tore the straps of her lacy bra from the shoulder so that it fell between them in pieces. Her breath sobbed out in a needy gasp. She twisted against him and the constraints of her shirt and jacket. Restless and demanding and he controlled her with his lips and his hands.

"Don't move your hands," he said, near her ear, as he bit her lobe, and ran rough hands over her back under the jacket and the shirt.

"Dev." His name came out as a plea, a need so enormous she couldn't contain it. Her eyes were already closed, her breathing was heavy, and she looked ready to be taken.

Dev discovered it wasn't enough. Her surrender wasn't enough. He wanted more. He wanted everything. He wanted things that her dead husband hadn't taken from her. Wanted her to give them to him willingly.

He unzipped her skirt, and walked his fingers over the base of her spine. Her back arched violently, at the intimacy he was generating in her. He cupped her bottom in both hands and lifted her off the table. Tugging the skirt off in the same motion so that it slipped down her legs. When he sat her back down, she was naked from the waist down.

Her head fell on his shoulder, her breath coming in spurts, even as she strained to be closer to him, against him. Her hands were feverish as she tugged at the buttons on his shirt, tackled his belt, drawing it from the loops of his formal pants with a slight hiss.

"Leave the pants on," he rasped, against her throat, where he was assaulting her thoroughly, enjoyably. He'd placed her hands back against the table, and to ensure her captivity he'd bracketed them with one wrist.

"Let me go," she whispered, her voice velvet-rough in the throes of passion, trying to free her hands from his gentle possession.
"No."

It was a bottomless word, a sure answer. And it undid her more than anything he'd ever said or done to her.

She opened her eyes at last, and craned her head back to look at him, her hair streaming over his hands, her hands. An uncomfortably, excruciatingly erotic position. There was such savage splendor in him, she thought. As if he could brand her as his.

It brought her own desires bubbling like a geyser, just underneath her skin. Pouring over her, hot, insistent like his eyes.

She rubbed against him, loving the slight friction against his coarse chest

hair, and felt him shudder once.

Zara smiled.

Control was a double-edged sword now.

In answer, he dipped his head and suckled on her already-sensitized nipple. She cried out, at the sheer completeness of the sensation. He snaked his hot tongue out, and circled it around the tip, drawing it strongly into his mouth, hearing her pant and shudder over him.

The shirt and the jacket slid lower on her hands, almost down to her wrists.

He blew softly on the point he'd just sucked and watched her slender frame ripple with desire and weakness. Her legs tightened around him involuntarily. He was so hard, he was short of blowing his fuse, but he couldn't help it. While every muscle inside him screamed to pound into her, make her his in the surest way possible, he wanted to prolong this moment. Prolong the inevitable.

His heart thudded inside his chest as he traveled his mouth all over her, kneeling at her feet, worshipping her legs, the backs of her knees, between her legs. Covering every single, glorious inch of her with his touches and his kisses. Marking her, marking her all over.

She'd become mute, by the time he journeyed back to her mouth, and kissed her with all the unfettered desire he felt for her. Their bodies were sweaty, passion pearling around them, turning the air dark and humid. It was like walking through honey. His name was a litany, a prayer on her lips.

The sanity he wanted to take her past.

When he undid his pants and stepped toward her, into her, she welcomed him. He dragged his hands into her billowing hair, arching her neck, forcing her to open her eyes.

"Look at me." He was harsh, almost brutal.

His beautiful face was pared down to the most basic of emotions, cheeks drawn in, lips tightened in anticipation of the pleasure to come. His eyes were glittering chips of light, piercing her, bleeding her, making her his in millions of ways, in every pore.

He slid into her wet waiting warmth, eliciting a small cry from her. Her nails dug grooves into the table, opening her to him in the most primitive way possible. For a long, suspended moment, he stood there. Watching her, watching her watch him. His flesh hard and alive inside her silken warmth, feeling emotions batter at him.

Emotions that had no place in what he was doing to her.

Except, there it was...greed in her eyes. Need.

Dev began to move, banding one hand around her back, bracing the other over the table. She groaned at the tactile friction, which in turn made him groan.

Then he began to move, steadily, rhythmically, in tiny movements that tortured her, fed her need, and fanned it. Fire consumed her, licking across her skin, with every stroke and every move he made. Blindly, she searched for his lips and kissed him, breaking the last tenuous hold he had on the animal inside of him.

It burst free, demanding, arduous, punishing.

His strokes turned fast, lightning fast, pushing and pushing her into a realm past everything, filling all the holes inside of her, stealing her dreams. She clenched around him, as the pleasure began to gather inside of her, a rising storm that could no longer be contained.

And when the storm hit her, he followed her in it. Emptying himself inside her in a way he'd never done before.

"That was..." Zara trailed off, as she looked at Dev thirty minutes later. He grinned at her loss of words, looking very smug and male in that moment.

They were entwined on the floor behind the desk, wrapped in the remains of her shirt and his. He couldn't stop touching her, nor she him. There was an increased level of awareness that wasn't lost on either of them, even though they were both loath to admit it.

What had just happened between them could neither be called sex nor making love. It went past both.

Zara wanted to believe it was love; soul-crushing, debilitating love. But couldn't.

Dev was afraid that it was love. The only love he was capable of. It terrified him.

He kissed her adorable, spent mouth now, and was surprised when she answered him back with fervor.

"You're insatiable, woman," he growled, even as he ran his hands down her hips and squeezed.

She purred and turned fully into him, content to lie just so. Naked and entwined with him on the floor of her office.

"Only with you."

He was forced to break the kiss he'd instigated to look at her at that very telling statement.

She shrugged.

"What?" she mocked. "You didn't know that?"

"With you I don't presume to know anything, sweetheart," he answered, wryly.

She stopped playing circles on his defined chest and gave him a disbelieving glance. "That is not true and you know it. You know me best of all." "Do I?"

But it wasn't an accusing murmur. The strange storms that had possessed him were gone; the previous, affable, unruffled man returned. She wasn't sure if she wanted that dominating, exciting man gone just yet. She'd loved being led by him into utter helplessness.

"What do you want to know?"

*Did you love your husband?* 

"Did any guy ever seduce you in your own office?" He even grinned slightly, to take the edge of his question.

She answered him with a quiet, almost reproachful look. "There was just Ravi before you. And he found me a huge disappointment because of...well, let's just say, I wasn't what he was used to."

"And what was he used to? Frigid ice queens?" He couldn't imagine a man alive who couldn't want Zara when she was uninhibited and controlled by her desire.

She gave a tremulous smile at that. "Dev, Ravi had no interest in me sexually. He preferred women who were more...receptive than I was."

"What do you mean?" Confusion entered his languid gaze.

"I mean," she shrugged again, a twitchy movement. "He couldn't make me respond. And he got tired of it quickly." Like on their wedding night. "And there were always willing...companions to keep him occupied."

"Jesus, Zara, you don't mean to tell me he was cheating on you." This time there was no mistaking the utter shock in his voice.

She looped her arms around his back, hugged him closer to her, relishing the small intimacy.

"He was just reacting to a situation I had created, Dev." She was so earnest, so accepting he was forced to blink. "I couldn't want him. Worse, I couldn't make myself want him. And he knew that. He also knew divorce was out of the question because of the company. And to be very honest I didn't really

care what he did as long as he was co-CEO and allowed Grandpa to retire in peace. So, it wasn't all that bad."

Dev looked at her, and asked in a very careful tone. "Did you love him at all, Zara?"

She gave him a wry look. "No, Dev, I didn't. And I wasn't expected to. Everyone knew that."

"Everyone's crazy," he said so fiercely, she was forced to chuckle. It was a different thing that her throat was clogged with tears that she couldn't let fall.

"It's all right, Dev," she assured him. "I knew what I was doing. Grandpa needed him, and he wouldn't stay any other way. Besides..."

"Besides what?"

You weren't there. She wanted to say it out loud. Tell him what was in her heart, overflowing it, so that it spilled into the blood that ran in her body. Wanted to tell him that the other man had sensed she didn't completely belong to herself, much less to him. Because she was always in love with the ghost of a boy she'd sent away.

"Besides, I was only interested in saving the company. Especially after grandpa's condition came to light....Ravi was a good friend. He was...there when I needed him."

*When I wasn't. When I should have been.* The words echoed in Dev's head. His eyes narrowed, and she knew the tender moment was over.

The past...she thought, achingly. No matter where they were, how close they were, the past would always catch up to them. Come between them.

"Well, I am glad someone was there for you, Zara," he said, as he disentangled himself from her.

"Dev," she scrambled to sit up, as she saw him reach for his pants and shrug them on. "It wasn't what you think it was."

He gave her a mild look. "You don't know what I think, Zara."

"Then tell me," she demanded, struggling into her own skirt. The bra was a lost cause, so she just tried to button her shirt up.

He shrugged. "It's over now, isn't it? You're here now. With me. And your husband's dead, so whatever he did doesn't influence anything anymore."

Even though he wanted to break the man he'd never even bloody seen into tiny little pieces for daring to think he could demean Zara by betraying her the way he had.

He was even more upset that Zara didn't find anything wrong with the way her sainted husband had behaved. It made him wonder if she was capable of genuine, real, depth of feeling.

"Yes, it doesn't," she agreed. Wearing her mangled jacket, buttoning it up with precise movements. "I am here with you." Just saying the words sent a jolt careening through her, fear and pleasure mingling inside her.

"And we can be together some more when I get back," he murmured, tipping her head back for a kiss.

"From where?" she asked, hazily.

"Dinner." There was not even a tinge of regret in him as he continued. "I am late as it is, but I do have to make it."

She let go of his shirt, opening her eyes, suddenly wary and distant. "Where?"

Dev brushed his thumb over her lower lip. "What difference does it make? I'll be back. Don't worry."

She clenched her fists, trying to contain the fury, unreasonable fury, rising within her. "With Lily?"

He didn't answer, but she caught the faint hiss of his escaping breath. Agony, jealousy, surfaced as suddenly as the anger had.

"You'd go from me to her just like that?"

He pressed his thumb deeper into her lip, hurting the tender skin. "Shut up, Zara. You don't know what the hell you're talking about."

She wrenched free from him, crossing cold hands over her cold body. All the passion, all the contentment drained out of her in a single second. But then, history mocked her, one second was all it took. One second for everything to end, to be destroyed.

"You didn't answer my question, Dev." She turned away from him. "I suppose that's answer enough."

For a long moment, he didn't say anything. "Yes," he answered in a quiet, final sort of voice. "It is."

Zara stood for a long time, after he had walked out of her office. And she was reasonably sure; he had walked out of her life too.

She just didn't know what to do with the rest of it anymore.

So she just stood there.

# Nineteen

Lily Mae Fallahil had loved precisely three men in her life. One of them was dead, the other had tried to take care of her all their lives. The last one was about ten years old, and the light of her existence.

At first, when she'd found out she was going to have a baby; it had been the most terrifying days of her life. Aadi was gone, first out of her life and then, by the time she had worked up the nerve to tell him she was pregnant, out of this world itself.

And she was all alone, not in the literal sense of the word, of course, but she was away from family and home.

After the shock wore off, she comprehended the new reality she was faced with. A person was growing inside her, a person for whom she was utterly, completely responsible. Every decision she had made for her future so far was void with her pregnancy.

There was never any doubt, not for a moment, that she would give it up or worse.

Yes, the idea of being a single mother terrified her, then and now, but Brett was her baby. He'd always been her baby and she was going to raise him.

The first thing to do had been drop out of school. Law school was hard enough without adding an extra person inside of you to the mix. Her vague, fiery hopes of being an environmental lawyer had been swept away in the blink of an eye and a new one had taken its place. That of providing a good home to her unborn baby.

And that had meant going home to Drake in California.

Thankfully, their father was dead and Drake had taken her in, no questions asked. Mom was a forgotten quantity, not a stellar example of motherhood. She had taken off when Drake was seven and she was four, for brighter pastures. It was rumored she was married to a prince of a small principality, but no one knew for sure. And no one cared. For all their childhood, Lily and Drake had raised each other.

And, for the last ten years, Drake had helped raise her son.

He'd been there in the delivery room, gone to pre-natal classes with her. He'd painted the nursery for his nephew, and assembled their old cradle for the baby. Drake had been the father figure Brett needed.

And because of that, Lily had never thought it necessary to inform his real father's family that they had a grandson. In her mind, Brett was hers. Even if

now she had chosen to share him with Aadi's family. He was her flesh and blood, although he had inherited his father's dark hair and his brains. Sometimes, when she looked at her son and he smiled at her, she was forcibly reminded of all the choices she had made. Unwise and foolish.

And of all those choices, loving Aadi had been the worst.

Yet, she couldn't regret anything. Not the law school dreams she'd given up, or the job as office manager she held now, in the prestigious law firm of Pickwith and Sons in the city. It was all worth it, the hours of worry over a tummy ache or a spiked temperature. Of scrimping to provide for her son. It was worth having no life, no friends at all, because of the boy currently sleeping snugly in his race car bed that he was very soon going to outgrow.

Lily felt a pang as she switched off the small bedside light that he insisted on sleeping with, a pang only mothers felt. And brushed one hand over his tousled hair.

God, how much she loved him.

Now here was this family that wanted, suddenly, and for all intents and purposes, genuinely to be a part of his life. Wanted her to share him with them. Her baby boy.

Was it any wonder that she was equal parts resentful and grateful?

Yes, it was nice, more than nice that Grandpa S spent hours with Brett, telling him about the good old days when the family business was just starting up. Grandpa S treated Brett like a normal kid, not the son of the grandson he'd lost so very tragically. And because of that, she was able to warm up to him. Let him in.

Vaidehi Subramanian, though, was another matter. There was no doubt she loved Brett. It could be seen in the way her eyes lit up every time Brett hugged her. Aadi's eyes. But what she thought of Lily herself was a mystery. She was polite, even nice at times, but Lily knew, Vaidehi could never fully forgive her for all the things she'd supposedly done.

She knew, in a twisted way, that Brett's grandmother blamed his mother for the death of her beloved only son.

Then there was Ma DSa, whose approval seemed to matter as much to the family, if not more. Thankfully, Ma DSa had eaten the chocolate chip and oatmeal cookies she'd made for the very first 'family visit' and pronounced her satisfactory. Lily always felt a little less judged when she was around.

Zara, on the other hand, was a complete enigma.

Lily didn't admire, envy, and simultaneously pity another woman like she did

Zara. The first time she'd seen Zara, Lily had thought the woman was an automaton who ran on figures and spreadsheets. There had been no animation in her, no life. Then she'd taken one look at Brett and dropped to her knees and simply hugged the boy close.

Lily had never seen so much heartbreak in one person than she had in that moment in Zara.

Zara had everything she'd ever coveted. Beautiful clothes, enviable height and figure and ravishing good looks. A high-powered career, and a handsome, go-getter husband. Then she'd seen Zara's eyes and known she'd had nothing.

In the months since she'd first interacted with Zara, Lily had tried not to speculate on the guarded wariness with which Zara treated the whole world. Even now, she couldn't honestly say that she and Zara were more than just acquaintances who were also accidentally related. And she had tried to get past the idea that what had happened to her cousin brother had not affected the girl so much.

She would have been what, sixteen, when Aadi died.

And she had been in the car with him.

Maybe what she had seen, experienced, had closed her off emotionally and mentally. Maybe this was the only way she could function. But, it had all changed now.

Lily knew love, because she felt it in every single cell of her body for her baby. And the way Zara Subramanian looked at Dev was love. The way she tried to *not* look at Dev was love. Hopeless, almost pathetic love.

It made Lily feel sorrier for her, because she understood the anger and loneliness when this kind of love wasn't returned. Not that Dev didn't not have feelings for her. He did. It was all he talked, when he came over for dinner.

Talk about not talking about Brett's cool aunt.

It amused Lily to see her son being used as a subtle pump for information. And, for herself, she knew exactly what Dev was doing.

What his end game was.

He thought she wanted to fleece the family through the grandchild.

But she hoped the time they spent together, the long-winded, often heated conversations about the state of the world and which park in Southern California was the best for hiking they had, had made them cautious friends if nothing else. She'd been waiting for Dev to show up, actually, from the very

beginning. Surprised that he hadn't been in touch with the family at all for the last ten years. Maybe, he couldn't handle the death of his best friend too.

Death did affect people in strange ways.

She tried to not remember about the craziness that had possessed her when she'd found out about Aadi's demise. Oh, how she had loved the wounded, desperate boy he'd been. Even when everything had gone pear-shaped.

Lily poured a glass of Shiraz and relaxed on the overstuffed couch, shaking off all the bad memories threatening to plague her. It wasn't often that she got time to just sit and brood. Active ten-year olds demanded all of your time and attention, especially if there was no one else to share the burden with.

Sometimes, in her deepest dreams, she longed to find a capable shoulder, a comforting touch, someone to talk to in the middle of the night. Worry with. Share her greatest pride and joy with.

And then, like all dreams, it vanished when daylight woke her up.

At twenty-nine going on fifty, Lily Fallahil knew exactly what her priorities were; how her life was mapped out. And none of it included happily ever after and sailing into the sunset with some mythical man of her dreams. Such dreams were for the lucky few.

The rest of us, she thought with a musing sigh, just make do with the blessings we've been given.

The shrill peal of the doorbell interrupted her melancholic reverie.

She frowned, glancing automatically at her home attire, of faded shorts and an old tee shirt that belonged to her son. Since it was a little chilly, she'd added Drake's old Caltech alumni sweatshirt to her very attractive outfit. Was it Drake?

But no, he would have called her to let her know he was coming.

And she'd given up on Dev as a lost cause after nine-thirty. The man was nothing if not punctual.

So, she was doubly surprised when she opened the door and found him, coat in hand, looking a little lost and a whole lot miserable.

Dev had had a lot of time to think about things on the forty minute drive from the city to Lily's house. And one of the things he'd finally understood was that Zara didn't trust him. She let him into her body, into her mind, and into her past, but she didn't share the most important parts.

Her heart and her soul.

And he discovered he needed her to.

Hurt was the paramount emotion he'd felt as he'd walked away from her. Away from the office where he'd taken her without any finesse, like a madman. He couldn't fathom, not really, how a woman who was so responsive to his hedonistic lovemaking, had no clue at all when it came to his feelings. Or for that matter, her own.

He'd stopped in his office, raided the mini-bar of the little liquor he kept on hand for visitors who conducted business better with it, and drunk steadily before deciding that Lily would still have dinner ready for him. He knew Zara was still in the office, because he'd seen her spiffy little car in the underground lot as the Lyft he'd called for peeled away from the building.

Throughout the ride he'd thought about all the cutting things he could have told her. About the explanations he could have given.

But the simple truth was, in the end, he didn't trust her either.

There was too much history between them for anything to grow out of whatever they had going on. It wasn't simple sex, and slowly, inevitably, it would have become something else entirely. Something he was sure he didn't want. In a way, it had had to end.

So it, whatever it was, had ended now.

He should have felt better. Dev assured himself he felt better, as he looked at Lily's concerned face.

"Hi, what's cookin'?" He smiled widely.

"What do you mean, Dev?"

"I mean." He propped one shoulder on the doorway and peered down at her. "We have a damn dinner date and I am here to keep it."

Lily frowned. "Dinner was hours ago, you moron. Brett was so disappointed you didn't show up. I had to give him an extra hour with the video game to pacify him."

This was the reason she didn't have time for men in her life. They let you down. Ultimately, invariably, no two ways about it.

Dev sighed, ran a hand over his face. "I'm sorry," he said in a low voice. "The damned Board meeting has everyone itchy. And then later, I meant to call but I got...sidetracked."

Lily sighed, and shook her head. "Have you eaten?"

He shrugged. "Not really, no."

"Come on in, dummy."

She led the way to her small, homey kitchen that she and Drake had painted and papered last summer. Brett had been the glue holder and had a fun time getting splashed by paint. The kitchen, like the house, was a bit on the smaller side but cheery.

There were four rooms, all bright and cheerful. A living room that also doubled up as the game room, with all the electronic toys strewn all over the floor. Brett's bedroom was done in bright blue with splashes of red, and a motif of Transformers, one of his pet robot obsessions.

The living room was a ragtag of thrift store furniture and IKEA. The coffee table had been salvaged from their father's storehouse and had been refinished by Drake in his spare time. In fact, even more than the bank loan he'd cosigned for, Lily owed her brother a lot more for her home, and she never forgot it. Not that he would see it that way.

He was a lot like Dev that way.

Doing what needed to be done. And not making a big fuss about things any way. After all, how many men did she know who would just appear out of the blue and take over running a multi-million dollar retail company without batting an eyelash? Or take in a pregnant, almost certainly clueless younger sister and help her rebuild her life without chipping at her self-esteem? Not many.

Not one.

For that alone, Lily turned back to Dev and hugged him once. Fiercely. She only came below his chin, and so felt very safe, as he returned her hug. Tight. Clutching her as if she was a lifeline and he was floundering.

She drew back, and asked him quietly, with concern, "Dev, what's wrong?" He managed a smile, it looked terrible. And Lily knew it concerned Zara in some way.

"Nothing, not one thing, Lils. Can you just feed me? I am starving here." She wasn't going to pry, Lily promised herself. It wasn't her place and she didn't know if he would let her anyway. So she nodded and walked into the kitchen, flipping on lights as she went.

"Brett sleeping?" He tossed his coat to the chair next to the one he was sitting on.

She nodded as she poked around the refrigerator for the makings of a turkey and ham sandwich. "Yeah, he waited till about ten-thirty. And then went off like a light." She smiled. Her son's ability to conk off at will was something she admired and envied him for. Some nights, she couldn't do anything but stay awake, considering, thinking...worrying.

"I really am sorry, Lily. I should have called. I am an idiot. I'll apologize to

him personally"

She shot him a look over her shoulder. "Well, if I know my son at all, it's going to cost you."

He smiled, and there was a spark of life in his tired eyes. "Somehow I knew that."

Swiftly, with the long practice of feeding a perpetually hungry child, she set the sandwich and a steaming cup of coffee in front of Dev who looked at it without seeing it. Lily debated with herself for a moment and then sat down next to him, squeezed his hand. The dining table was an old oak circular affair, and comfortably held four mismatched chairs.

"Seriously, what's wrong, Dev? I can help, if you'll let me," she said, sincerely.

He looked at her unfathomably, and Lily had the errant thought that to be loved by Dev would be a terrifying, life-changing experience.

Zara, you lucky, lucky girl.

"You ever got everything you wished for and then discovered you wanted more?"

She grinned, turning her from passably pretty into more than attractive. "Nah. I got me a son, Dev."

He grinned too. "Yeah, you did. And he's amazing, Lils. You've done a superb job with him."

"Thank you, my good man." Then her eyes sobered and she continued, "I am really glad you think so. Maybe you can convince the rest of the family to cut me some slack too."

Dev laughed, it was a surprisingly bitter. "They haven't cut me any, Lily, and I've been away for ten years."

Now she frowned at him. "What are you talking about, Dev? Grandpa is always singing praises of you to my son. Vaidehi is so proud of you, I think she's going to burst one of these days. As is Ma DSa, when she isn't complaining of how naughty you were as a boy. And Zara--"

"Yeah, Zara's a real champ, isn't she? Saving the family, saving the company, saving the whole damn world." The bitterness was thicker.

"Dev," Lily laid one hand over his clenched fingers. "Did Zara do something, say something? I'm sure she didn't mean to."

"Oh, yes, she did. She knows exactly what she is doing."

"Zara's a...complicated woman," Lily said, cautiously.

He raised the water glass. "Amen to that."

"So, sometimes, with complicated women, you don't always know what's going on," she ventured.

"I know exactly what is going on, my naïve darling Lily. And so does she. Apparently mind-blowing sex does not give us any rights over each other."

"Oh." She let out her breath in a huff. She had suspected that there was more to the casual looks they shot each other during family dinners. But mindblowing sex... *Zara*, *you stupid girl*.

"If she can't let me into her heart, why should I let her dictate to me about who I can and cannot see? I mean, it's just dinner," he demanded, biting into the sandwich.

"I don't get you, honey."

"Zara's got it into her head that you and I are involved." He spoke around a mouthful of rye bread.

Lily couldn't help it, she chuckled. "What?" she exclaimed. "Is she completely blind?"

He nodded. "My thoughts precisely. If she thinks so less of herself, it's no business of mine. But when she thinks that low of me, it's time for me to get gone. Which is what I have done."

And Lily heard the latent hurt in his hard voice. She responded to the hurt. She squeezed his wrist again. "Dev, honey. I hope you told her that there's nothing going on between us."

He stared at her. "She is not supposed to think something was going on between me and *anybody else*. What is wrong with her? Has she no faith at all in me?"

Lily privately wondered if Zara had any faith in herself, but knew it was not her place to say anything that damaging.

Instead she smiled. "In a way, I'm flattered. I mean." She batted her lashes crazily, enough to have a smile tug at the lower corners of his lips. "You are, like, super-hot. According to Tanya, Brett's girl pal."

"Yeah, yeah. Lay it on thick now. But I remember that you turned me down for a drink back when we were kids, Miz Fallahil."

"That's because I had moon eyes for your best friend, pal."

And just like that, with those words, the light mood darkened. A heavy weight descended the room.

"I can't reach her, Lily," he said, quietly. "There are so many issues messing her up. Aadi's death, her parents'. That bastard of a husband who cheated on her from day one, apparently. I think she's forgotten how to feel."

"Maybe she just needs someone to remind her," she said.

He returned her long, cool look. "Yeah. Maybe, she does. But it's not going to be me. Come twenty-sixth, I am out of here. My life waits for me."

"And what do you have in it that you can't wait to get back to?"

He started to speak but stopped. Considering. Dev was stunned that there wasn't a single thing he missed about his life back home. Not even the business he'd sweated blood over. Sure, he missed his friends but he could always go back and meet them or have them come here. Besides, he had Kit here. He didn't need anything the way he needed...refused to need Zara.

Dev scowled. "Shut up, Fallahil."

She gave him a bland stare. "I never knew you for a quitter, Dev."

"I wasn't," he agreed. "Then she beat the heart out of me when I was nineteen and I learned different. Now, can I crash on your couch for tonight, or are you completely heartless too?"

Lily was tempted to say no, to insist that he work out his problems with Zara. If anybody deserved happiness, it was the both of them. But she also knew about pride. And hurt. Knew the fatal combination that was fruitlessness and love.

So she said, "I'm a completely heartless bitch, Dev Banerjee. But if you make breakfast, you can stay as long as you want." She spoiled the tough-girl speech by grinning wildly at him.

He squeezed her hand back for the first time, and she saw that he was hurting. He was really hurting, and even he didn't seem to know it.

"Thanks, Lily. You're a life-saver."

"Anytime, sweetheart."

But she did wonder about whose life she was saving. Or not.

# Twenty

Zara was wracked with nerves the day of the Board meeting. Sure, their agenda had been sent a week before and been vetted thoroughly. All actual doubts regarding the special adjunct presentation for onboarding the vendors had been cleared via phone, Slack and email. For all intents and purposes, this meeting was just a formality.

But she was wracked with nerves, as Dev and Zara rode the elevator that would take them up to the conference room where the Board members were gathered. They hadn't really spoken since the big fight after which he'd spent the night at Lily's. The more intimate aspects of their relationship had gone into deep freeze, much like it had never existed.

Dev had made no attempt to come home from work all these nights and she had not attempted to talk to him. What was there to say anyway?

He'd chosen Lily. He'd made it clear where she, Zara, fell on his list of priorities and while she did not have much pride where he was concerned, she had enough to not beg him to come back to her. Besides, just yesterday, she'd heard him talking to a friend called Shiv. Telling him to keep his seat ready at their weekly poker game back at the bar.

He was going back.

It truly was over.

So, there was nothing to say really. Now, if only she could convince herself of that very same thing, everything would be perfect.

"Zara," Dev said. She started, almost visibly. He put an arm around her shoulder and she held herself rigid from the effort of not leaning into him. God, how she wanted to. He spoke to their combined reflections on the mirrored doors. "I never said this before, but I am so proud of everything you've done so far. These last few weeks. I would not have made it without you. You're amazing."

She shot him a startled look. Was he serious?

"I just thought I'd put it out there. When I declare truce." He added a charming, completely empty smile to go with his charming statement. She knew this smile. It was what he used with the underlings and the vendors and basically anyone he needed to agree with him. It twisted something inside of her to see that smile directed at her.

"Sure, Dev," she said. "Truce it is."

"I meant it, Zara," he insisted. "You've single-handedly managed to hold this company together when so many others would have failed. It's admirable. And amazing."

"Sure, Dev," she said again. "Thank you." And she gave him the same empty smile he'd given her. Mercifully, the elevator doors pinged open, eliminating the need for further conversation.

The Board members for AllMart Co. comprised family and friends from the Banerjee and Subramanian families. Pradosh's cousin Mayur and his daughter Paromita, Dev's cousin, represented the family. As did Pradosh's accounting and golf buddy, Joe Hamilton. Similarly, Zara's parents' seats were now taken by other members of the family, while Aunt Vee held two seats, her own and Aadi's. Grandpa S was Chairman and the company lawyer made an even nine.

Zara leaned over and hugged her aunt and Grandpa, who was busy conferring with Dev, while he gave her an absent hug in return. She greeted everyone else warmly and then went to fiddle with the projector, which was being handled by Ken and another assistant. Dev was murmuring something into Paromita's ears and making the woman blush. Zara's lips thinned but she continued with the task at hand.

It did not matter to her what Dev was doing and with whom. It could not.

Finally, the meeting was called to order and Ken dutifully sat down to record the minutes of the meeting.

Zara and Dev began the presentation they had rehearsed at least fifty times in the last week. They ran through the pitch deck, starting with where the company had been in the last quarter. The issues plaguing the vendors. The labor negotiations. Everything was spelled out in black and white.

Then, in a smooth move that Zara had not anticipated, Dev said, "Zara will take us through the different solutions we have deployed to overcome each of the above-mentioned issues. Point by point. Over to you, Zara."

Because she was used to not displaying any emotion, Zara stepped forward and handed the clicker to Dev who took over showing the slides. "One of the first issues that we, as a company, had to deal with was the issue of trust. Our vendors no longer trusted us and made it very clear when they pulled out of existing sales level agreements just to dissociate themselves from us. There was a systemic error that needed to be addressed by management. On priority. Here's how we did it." She took them through the personal phone

calls that were made, the way the vendors were narrowed down into hopefuls and rejects and all the other methods employed to bring procurement back to an acceptable level.

The East Coast General debacle took a good twenty minutes and Zara turned it over to Dev, because he had done all the hard hitting on that one. The PR generated from championing equal pay had been invaluable in bringing the vendors back. Together, they spoke of the various discounting sale events that they had run and the online tie-ups with global giants which was beginning to yield revenue now.

For the current quarter, the loss was an acceptable twelve percent and dropping monthly. And they had not had to announce major cutbacks and layoffs in order to make it happen.

"This is why," Dev said, winding down. "I propose that the Board make a unanimous decision to nominate Zara Subramanian as the sole CEO of AllMart Co. for the next three years. Let the record show so."

Zara's eyes widened but she kept her mouth shut. He didn't want to be co-CEO with her? What did that mean?

Grandpa's busy eyebrows went up and disappeared into his hair. But he looked consideringly at his granddaughter. She was immaculately put together in flare pants and a lacy cream shell, her hair streaming in a sleek ponytail, her brown lipstick still staying on after hours of talking. She looked so much older than she really was. Just twenty-six.

"Is this what you want?" he asked her.

Dev squeezed Zara's wrist, a hot, warm presence. And she curled her fingers into his palm, under the table.

"Yes. I'd like that," she said.

"Then I second the motion and let's put it to a vote."

And just like that, five minutes later, Zara became the leader of the company she had served all her life.

A few hours later, Zara squeezed into Dev's cabin and shut the door behind her. He was standing, hands in trouser pockets, brooding out the window. It was a classic handsome guy pose but, for some reason, she knew he was incredibly, extremely lonely.

"Why did you do that?"

"Do what?" He didn't turn around to see her.

"You know. Propose that motion. Make me CEO. Make it seemed like I had

masterminded everything."

He shrugged. The seams of his ridiculously pink shirt stretching. He had paired the pale pink shirt with a steel grey blazer and matching tie and it was a stunningly sexy look. Zara's stomach tumbled down when he turned around to face her. "It was the right thing to do. And you have. Masterminded everything. That is."

"Thank you then," she said softly. Tears sticking to the back of her throat. "You're amazing too. You've always been."

"Thanks, Zara. Is there anything else you needed?" It was a clear dismissal.

"Will you be coming to the barbecue tonight?"

He shrugged. "I think so. I'll swing by for a bit. I'm thinking of leaving tomorrow."

"So soon?" The words exploded out of her.

He shrugged a third time and she wanted to hit him. "Might as well get started. I do have a life back west, you know. Stuff to do. Bars to run. Etcetera."

"Right."

"I'll come back though. For the monthly director meetings and to see the family. You can't get rid of me again." His tone was offhand, but she knew the threat behind those words were real enough.

She deflated. Her pleasure in the promotion and the vote evaporating under the weight of everything that was unsaid between them. Everything that had gone wrong between them.

She'd thought, even now she'd really thought, she had no illusions at all about what Dev thought of her. Even when she had stupidly assumed that it was just sex between them, she had hoped he would want to stay. If not for what they had between them, but for the family. But that last night, when he'd made love to her to within an inch of her sanity, she had known it wasn't just sex.

She didn't know what it was. And maybe part of it was because of her lack of experience, but the other part...she wanted to cry when she thought about that other part that had bloomed inside of her, after that encounter.

Hope.

For a little while, thirty minutes maybe, she'd actually felt hope, life move through her. Free and unfettered by guilt or responsibility or duty. For a little while she'd just been...alive. Just been Zara in love, making love with an exciting, brilliant man. It had been a novel, liberating experience.

But, like everything else that came to Dev; even that had been taken away from her.

She knew he didn't love her. Not like she loved him. He couldn't and she didn't expect him to. But she didn't also expect complete callousness.

And wasn't that the whole problem, Zara acknowledged tiredly, looking in the reflection on her windows. A tired, wan-looking woman stared back. She had impeccable makeup, perfect hair and the saddest eyes ever seen on a person.

She wasn't supposed to expect anything.

"I wish you well then. I'll see you at the barbecue."

And Zara escaped before she made an utter fool of herself and did something really stupid like beg him to not leave her ever again.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Sure."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Goodbye, Dev."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Good luck, Zara."

### Twenty One

"Well," Vaidehi said a few hours later, as she ladled steaming *dal makhani* into a serving bowl and placed it on the picnic table. "Let's get started without Zara, shall we? Who knows when she will be done answering her emails?"

"It's her first day on the big job, Aunt Vee. Give her a break. She'll come down from her room soon enough." Dev stacked the Meissen china next to the bowls and dishes of yummy food that Ma DSa and she had prepared. There was *biryani* (marinating since morning), butter chicken, roasted lamb, three different kinds of vegetable stew for the vegetarian cousins, mango pickle, fried *papad* and the *dal makhani* that he swore was straight up food of the gods.

"I was hoping..." Vaidehi gave him an absent pat on the shoulder. And smiled a little sadly.

"Hoping what?"

"That you'd stay on. Everything is so much better, so different now that you're here." She ran one hand over his hair in a familiar maternal gesture and he fought the urge to reach out and hug her. The last weeks had been hard enough as it was, without him being undone by affectionate gestures. He honestly didn't know how he could have survived it if it hadn't been for Lily's quiet friendship and Brett's noisy chatter.

"My baby boy," she said, blinking herself. Hardly looking like a grandmother in the fitted jeans and trim top she wore. "You've grown up so much."

He rolled his eyes and gave her a one-armed hug. "God, Aunt Vee. You make it sound like I conquered China or something."

"Hey," Lily commented as she strolled over, holding a huge bowl of what looked like mashed potatoes. She placed it on the table next to the cucumber *raita*. "If anyone can, I swear, you will."

"I am staggered," he dead-panned.

"You'd be mistaken. Dev here was good at strategizing," Kit said quietly as he joined the threesome, seemingly out of nowhere. Lily shot the tall, buff martial arts studio owner a startled glance. She couldn't help it. Kit had *presence*. He wore the same clothes as Dev. Jeans, a beat up tee and a leather jacket to go with it. His boots were less Timberland and more workman, of course, and he had the most intense pair of tawny eyes. "I was the one they

called for executing."

"Oh." Lily didn't know what other response to give.

"You must be Karthik," Vaidehi said, giving him one of her warm, maternal smiles. "Dev has told me everything about you. I am so glad you came tonight." In a gesture that shocked and stunned Lily a little bit, the man hugged Vaidehi tight and talked to her in unaccented Hindi. "Dev told me there would be *biryani*. I didn't need any more convincing."

Dev grinned and munched on a crisp *papad*.

Kit straightened and smiled easily at all of them. Lily smile was small and unconvincing. Her eyes slid away from his intense look. "If you're looking for your son I saw him by the pool. He was on his skateboard."

Lily's chagrined gaze collided with his. He kept his face purposefully neutral. She was intelligent, stacked and came with too much baggage. *She was a single mom*. Too bad he'd found all of her so appealing when he'd done the backgrounder on her.

"Thank you, Karthik," she said formally. "That is very observant of you."

"Call me, Kit," he said. "It's what my friends call me."

"Thank you all the same." It was an icy brushoff. Kit smiled and tucked his thumbs in his pockets and Lily kept her eyes trained on his face with effort, when there was endless legs to be admired.

"You're quite welcome, Ms. Fallahil."

"I'd better go see what Brett's up to before he drowns that skateboard," she murmured and melted back into the waning twilight in the direction of the pool.

It was Kit who saw the absolute misery and heartbreak on Vaidehi's face before she managed to wipe it clear. He wondered if it was the thought of her dead son or the woman who'd given birth to her grandsom that made Vaidehi sad tonight. Then, he deliberately whistled appreciatively at the food. "This is food fit for kings. People would go to war for this *raita*!" Vaidehi smiled, as his comment was designed for her. And they chattered about the tastiness of potato salad versus *desi raita*. When Vaidehi sauntered back into the kitchen she said, "Dev, could you please check on Zara and ask her to come out from her room, please? This much dedication to work is unhealthy."

"She is here already. Playing with Brett," Kit said smoothly, before Dev took it on himself to make some cutting remark. His eyes were hard enough, as it is.

Something, Kit figured, was terribly wrong.

It took enormous effort of will but Dev did not turn and watch for Zara. After this afternoon and the last few weeks, when he had waited and waited for her to come and talk to him, do something...well, he was done being rejected.

Kit touched his rock-hard forearm and said, "Talk to her, you fool. She's miserable too."

Now, he did turn and see her. She was wearing form-fitting jeans, from the store itself, golden sneakers and a simple green tee shirt with some sort of overlapping collar. She was laughing at something Grandpa S was telling her as she tried to get on Brett's skateboard and failing spectacularly. There was a breezy air about her, a state which he'd rarely seen her in.

"Yeah," he said. "She looks heartbroken."

Obviously she'd found company and solace in work and family, the foundations of Zara's life. And, he wondered, as he was wont to in his darker moments, if anything she had ever told him was real. If maybe she had played him from the beginning just so he could do a good job for the company and the family.

Kit shook his head, as he covertly watched Lily Fallahil, looking like a teenager herself in her yellow tee shirt and denim mini-skirt, her hair flying around her face, skating on her son's board. "You're not just an ordinary fool, Dev. You're a blind fool."

He shrugged. "Whatever." Then he snagged a glass of iced tea and drank it down in one gulp. "I suppose you have all the information I asked for?"

Kit ran a hand down his face as he tried to think of a way to answer the question. "Dev--"

Lily came sauntering by just then and gave Dev's arm a squeeze. "What are you doing here, sweetie? The real party is by the pool." She smiled cheekily at him.

And Kit blinked. Lily's smile wobbled slightly under the unnerving stare of Dev's friend. It slid down to polite when Dev ran a finger down her cheek and smiled softly. "I'll come in just a second, honey."

He pushed his sunglasses back into place and looked nothing like a geeky engineer turned millionaire. Lean, tough, with just a touch of go-to-hell looks. In fact, he looked sexy and unattainable.

As Zara idly glanced at him charming Lily, she remembered with striking clarity, how he'd looked the night she'd met him in his bar. Supremely in control, supremely confident. A man used to getting what he wanted.

And he didn't want her anymore.

And if she kept on living her life like she was living it, she wouldn't be able to want anything either. She'd waste away. And she'd die exactly as she'd lived.

Without living at all.

It was time, Zara decided, to start living.

"Good to see you smile, child," Ma DSa said, materializing behind her.

She turned and saw her nanny, the woman who'd been more mother to her than the one she'd buried and embraced her, holding onto her stout, stocky frame. Smelling coconut oil and flour. The scents of childhood. Of happier times. Ma DSa hugged her back, squeezing her with all the strength she had. "I didn't smile," Zara said, leaning back.

"Yet."

She nodded. "Yes. Yet. Can you tell Grandpa S, Aunt Vee, and Lily to meet me in my room for five minutes? It's really important." She let go of Ma DSa and mustered up the courage to walk across the lawn to Dev and the tall, scary man he was conversing with.

"Dev. I need to talk to you," she said just as a folder exchanged hands between the men. The name on the folder caught her eye.

Aadiraj Sreedharan.

She glanced up at Dev. "What is this?"

He shrugged. "Nothing important. Nothing for you to worry about."

"Actually," the tall man with the unreadable eyes cut in quietly. "I think she might want to know about this. So should your family."

She rounded on Dev, ignoring the other man. It wasn't easy to do. "Did you have Aadi investigated and did not tell me?"

"I had Lily investigated, you idiot," Dev shot back. "Remember, you came to me? With concerns about what Lily was up to? Lily had a child with Aadi. So, yeah he was investigated too."

The logic of that reasoning was infallible so she nodded tightly. "Fine. Then, we can do that now too. I need to talk to all of you, anyway. Let's go in. Ma DSa is watching Brett."

"Is everything alright, Zara?" Vaidehi said, as soon as she bustled into Zara's corner room on the first floor. The room that she had occupied again today, preferring to come straight here after the meeting instead of going to her apartment. Because her apartment was too claustrophobic and filled with

ghosts. Ghosts of a sad marriage and more recent, happier times. Days and nights spent with Dev Banerjee, the boy who had come back and stolen her heart anyway.

It wasn't just the nights filled with passion that she was running from. It was the quiet mornings, the lingering looks over steaming cups of coffee. Casual touches and kisses. The sharing of an impossible workload and someone who understood the pressure she was under, without undermining her. She had come home to effectively get over everything he had awakened, unlocked inside of her. Because only he could.

She didn't blame him for completely shutting her out...but, Zara knew, it was time she stopped blaming herself.

It really was high time.

Zara shook her head and said, "Yes, everything's fine."

"Then why did you assemble us all here?" Grandpa S demanded, clamping on the end of an unlit cheroot, the only one of the day he was now permitted to smoke. More often than not, he just kept it unlit around him, using it to gesticulate and pontificate.

Zara looked at the worried, curious faces of all she loved. Vaidehi looked concerned, Grandpa was puzzled, Lily was confused and the new guy kept watching Lily when he could get away with it. Dev, on the other hand, was stony faced. And she wished, ardently, that he would stand by her side right now. Holding her hand, offering her quiet support like he had for the past few weeks.

How could she ever repay him for everything he'd done for her?

The only way she knew how.

She'd let him go.

"I just..." She plunged her hands into her pockets, the gesture pushing some of her streaming hair to the front of her shoulders.

Zara took a deep breath. "I need to apologize," she looked straight at all of them. "To all of you."

"What?"

"Why?

"Oh no, honey."

She shook her head and held up a hand to stop their conversation. "I'd like you all to let me talk. Let me finish. Because." Her vision wavered a little as she saw past the window down to the lawns where Brett was running in circles around Ma DSa and the enormity of her actions hit her again.

"I've done terrible, terrible things," she whispered.

"Zara, honey." Vaidehi was shaken. Her disaster radar was very finely tuned. After having survived the loss of a husband and a son and her brother and sister-in-law, a woman learned to recognize the signs early on. And she knew that whatever Zara was about to reveal, was something she didn't want to, maybe, hear. "Maybe..."

"Let me finish, please."

She subsided, while Grandpa S clamped tighter on his cheroot. Lily merely looked perplexed as to why she was invited to this gathering.

"The night Aadi died, he wanted to run away that night," Zara said brutally, plunging open that raw wound with no preparation, no warning. Vaidehi's bright brown eyes filmed, Lily's mouth thinned. Dev's face hardened even more, if that was possible.

She kept her eyes trained on him.

"He'd seen me and Dev...he'd seen us together. We were in love. We kept it a secret from the rest of you because we wanted it to be our secret, just ours." The guilty pleasure of those heady days still sneaked through her, even as she faced the open-faced shock on her dear family's faces.

"And he got angry, unreasonably angry and the bottom line was, I was scared that he'd do something to himself or to Dev...he wanted to leave and I followed him to make sure he was ok. When we got to the fountain," She didn't have to explain which fountain it was, they all knew. When she had come from the hospital, Zara had taken an axe to that statue and smashed it to pieces. "Dev was there. Because he was supposed to meet me at midnight." She swallowed and still kept her eyes on him.

He looked violent.

"We were supposed to celebrate Christmas together first, only with each other. I opened my door in the first place because I thought it was Dev.

"But it wasn't...it was Aadi. I wished, every night after that I have wished I hadn't kept my door open so he wouldn't have come in and he wouldn't have gone to the damn car...Aadi said things, mean ugly things that I know, I know he didn't mean. To Dev. His best friend. He punched Dev in the nose, broke it. I shouldn't have gotten into the car with him, when I knew how unstable he was, but I did."

Zara looked at her clenched hands, seeing that terrible, terrible night unfold all over again.

The sound of drumming rain. The desperation in her beloved brother's face.

"In the car, he told me we were never coming back. He told me he'd never let me go back to Dev. He told me I had to pick him, because I was his sister. And I hit him, I wanted him to turn back, and the car skidded and he lost control and..." She shuddered and took a deep breath.

"Don't," Aunt Vee said, in a tremulous voice. "Stop it. Grandpa can't take it anymore. Can't you see your grandfather is ill?"

Grandpa S was rigid, motionless, the cigar forgotten, fists clenched on his lap. Zara went and knelt in front of him.

"When Dev came to see me in the hospital, I told him I hated him. I told him I blamed him for Aadi's death. I told him he'd killed his best friend. And I told him to never come near us again," she whispered.

"I sent him away. When you needed him the most, I sent him away. I took away both your heirs, because I couldn't face my own guilt, Grandpa," she continued painfully.

"I loved him so much. So much. I knew I had no right to be happy with him, and I would have. Sooner, later, five years later, I would have looked at him and been happy. And I had no right to that. So I sent him away."

A door slammed and she knew. He'd gone. He hadn't stayed. Kit followed him, unobtrusively.

"I'm sorry," she said softly, brokenly, bending her head. "I've been trying to make it up to you ever since, even though I can't. I can never make it up to any of you.

"I am so sorry, Aunt Vee. I am so damn sorry."

Aunt Vee was crying, great, silent tears that came from grieving for ten years. That came from never knowing what exactly had caused her baby's death.

"I am telling you all this, because I am tired..." Zara wiped her own tears. "I am so tired, Grandpa. I want to stop feeling tired."

"Why?" The word, from a broken, old man, seemed to be the ultimate effort. Her eyes swum with tears she couldn't allow to be shed here. "Because I haven't lived, Grandpa. Between being the grandson who died and the one who went away, I stopped being me. I erased me. And I don't want to do that anymore. I want to be selfish...more than I deserve to be."

"I wanted you to be happy, Zara," Aunt Vee said, stooping to hug her niece. "It's all I have always wanted."

"Aunt Vee..."

"I lost my children. I lost my grandson," Grandpa S said roughly. "Do you think I am going to stand by and lose my only remaining blood?"

Zara gave a muffled sob and stood up, the three of them, becoming a unit. The strength of their embrace, their love, giving them the courage to get through this moment.

"I should have told you all this before, years ago, I just..." Zara hiccupped once, wiping more tears from her face. "I didn't want to be alone. I thought you'd hate me. I hate me."

"Stupid girl." Vaidehi stroked her hair in her familiar gesture. Zara laid her head on her shoulder and felt a sort of peace steal through her, that she'd never been able to find before.

"I told you. Family forgives. Family loves."

Zara looked up and saw Lily looking unhappily at all of them. "That includes you too, Lily," she said, softly.

For the first time, acknowledging the other woman's place in the family. As Aadi's son's mother, and maybe, Dev's love. If the thought hurt, she didn't let it shadow this moment.

"Yes, come here, girl," Grandpa said, all gruff now that the emotional moment was over.

Lily shook her head. "In the spirit of confessions, I suppose I had better make mine too."

"What now?" Vaidehi asked her tiredly, sitting down on the edge of the bed. Grandpa S next to her, while Zara went to where Lily stood near her dresser and held her wrists for one moment.

A silent gesture of support and solidarity.

"I don't know what he told you all, but I broke up with him, about a week before winter break."

"He told us, Dev and me, that he had chucked you for bigger...uh." Zara frowned and broke off. Realizing that elderly company was present.

Lily gave a small chuckle. "He was so beautiful, so...driven...how could I not love him when I saw him?"

Vaidehi blinked because she heard genuine heartbreak in the woman's voice. And she began to revise her opinion of the woman Aadi had loved and fathered a child with.

"We had a couple of classes, pre-law, ethics in journalism and social media impact. And I was struggling a little, so the professor directed me to the brightest student in his class. Aadi. I was a goner when he smiled at me."

Lily shared a small look with Aadi's mother. They both knew the smile. Aadi's son had it.

"I loved him so much. I believed all of his fantastic plans. We would open our own law firm, save the planet, as soon as we graduated and passed the bar. We would marry, get a small house, nothing like Riverside, and have a bunch of kids and live happily ever after. The semester went by so quickly, I thought it'd last forever." Lily smiled, as she thought of how naïve, how incredibly naïve her eighteen year old self had been.

"Then, one night at dinner at a friend's. He hit me for the first time."

Vaidehi's sharp intake of breath could be heard audibly. "No," she whispered.

"He apologized, cried and said it would never happen again. He'd hit me because I was talking to a professor. The next time, it was because I didn't have strawberry ice cream in the freezer. That was the first time I saw him using. Cocaine," Lily whispered.

"God, *no*." Vaidehi pressed nerveless fingers to her lips.

"He would be excessively romantic, crazy even. And then he'd be withdrawn for days. Not talking to me. Depressed, deeply depressed. I didn't know how to reach him." Lily made herself walk over to the suddenly frail woman sitting on the bed and reach out to her.

"Then I found out I was pregnant."

Vaidehi raised beaten eyes to her.

"I couldn't stay with him anymore. I had to ask him to leave me. I couldn't risk him harming my baby. I went to California. I dropped out of school, and he came home. Then he...I heard...And I couldn't believe it."

Vaidehi's cold fingers gave a slight pressure and gave her the courage to finish it. "I could have told you, all these years I could have told you about Brett. But I didn't. Because I was afraid you'd take him away from me. You'd see Aadi in him and want him for yourself. I couldn't take that chance, Vaidehi. I couldn't give up my son."

Grandpa S reached a shaking hand and squeezed their hands.

"It's the past," he said. He glanced at Zara, who looked stricken. "Everything is in the past now. We move forward. As a family we move forward," he repeated.

Zara looked at her grandfather. She nodded.

And she knew what she had to do.

"I..." She looked at the window again. Even as Lily and Aunt Vee were crying softly, holding each other, holding onto each other. And she was stroking Lily's hair, much like she did Zara's.

"I have to go somewhere."
Then she fled the room to find Dev.

### Twenty Two

She'd felt like this before, Zara recognized dimly. She'd felt this young and hopeful, filled with all sorts of careening emotions spilling out. When she was sixteen, and Christmas was approaching, and she could stay home away from the jocks and the studs of high school who'd branded her the Ice Princess and other unflattering names. When the world had been hers for the making.

As she ran downstairs, into the kitchen, she wondered if everything she felt was visible.

Years of schooling her face to not show her emotions, to not have any emotions in the first place, was a hard lesson, and she'd learned it too well. As she looked at the French doors, she only saw a flushed, slightly out of breath woman, standing, staring at her reflection. Even her long stream of jet-back hair looked in control.

"Stop being so afraid," she whispered to herself, even though the whole place was filled with people.

People who, if they caught sight of her, would want to talk to her. Ask her hundreds of things and make her waver in her purpose. She didn't want to waver anymore.

"Are you talking to yourself, Auntie Zara?" Brett asked her, as he came barreling in through the doors. There was a telltale smudge of sticky brown on his lips, and he hid his hands behind his jeans as soon as he saw her.

Zara took all this in the single second it took for her eyes to travel behind him and see Dev trailing the boy, smiling indulgently at him. His face changed when he saw her. Shuttered. She didn't expect anything else. A hundred different thoughts ricocheted through her, in that first instant. But for the life of her, she couldn't cogitate a single one of them.

"What?" she asked, a little blankly, glancing at her nephew again. "No, I am not talking to myself, sweetheart."

Dev tousled Brett's hair and said, "Let's leave Auntie Zara alone, champ. She's having a rough day, actually."

"No, I..."

"If I leave Auntie Zara alone will you not go, Uncle Dev?" Brett rounded on his uncle without compunction, ever the negotiator.

Now, it was Dev's eyes that snapped to Zara's stunned ones. And he said, carefully, "I'm sorry, buddy, but it doesn't work that way now, does it? I

have to go back to Pasadena. My life, my work, my home is back there." "But."

"Brett," Zara said, with all the authority of a mother, enough so that Brett would turn and look at her. He did.

"I think your mother's looking for you. Why don't you...ah, go clean up before she finds out you've been raiding the chocolate milk again?" She drummed a conspiratorial smile to go with the wink. And Brett quickly considered his options.

He weighed arguing with Uncle Dev against his mom's wrath.

With a slight shrug, he hugged his Uncle's waist, wow, the man was tall. And then said, "I better go and wash up. Mom's going to be mad otherwise."

Dev rubbed his hand over the boy's rangy back. "Yeah," he said. "You do that."

Brett scampered off in the general direction of the bathroom. Zara pushed her hair behind her ear, not sure where to begin. Or even how to.

Dev's kept his hands in his pockets in an effort to keep them off of her. Although, the way she was looking at him right now. A little lost, a little unsure, so vulnerable; he wasn't sure what he would do if he touched her.

"I loved him so much. So much. I knew I had no right to be happy with him, and I would have. Sooner, five years later, I would have looked at him and been happy.

Her ugliest, most shameful secret was out. And he had not reacted to it at all. "I have to go."

"I need to talk to you," Zara blurted out.

He waited. She was forced to continue rapidly, "Not here. And I have things to...can we go somewhere? To talk? Just to talk?"

He took his time trying to sift through the uncertainty, the tremor in her words. The sheer incoherence of her words. What was her angle now? Did he even want to find out?

Then she placed her hand on his arm. "Dev, please," she whispered.

He cursed mentally, while he nodded. "All right. Your place. I have to pick up all my things anyway."

She looked like she wanted to say something, but she swallowed. Removed her hand and said, "Thank you."

"You're not going to thank me by the time we are done, sweetheart," he said grimly, as he snatched a beer bottle and poured it down his throat, just for want of something to do. He didn't like this new, compliant Zara at all. She freaked him out.

"You might be wrong about that," she murmured.

"Honey," Dev said two hours later, in a bad parody of an interested lover, standing in the middle of the living room of the apartment he had shared with her. "You got me. Now what are you going to do with me?" *I love him so much.* 

God, if the world ended he'd never stop hearing the heartbreak in her voice when she'd said the words he wanted to hear the most.

Zara hung their coats up on the stand, and answered evenly, "I have several things I have to say to you. I don't know if you'll like hearing some of them." He dropped down on the white couch, stretched his long, booted legs onto the coffee table. "Is this some kind of delaying tactic to keep me from leaving?" She struggled with the momentary hurt that he would think her to be as conniving as that. But, then again, she hadn't given him all that many reasons to trust her either. It was time that changed too.

"I want wine." She walked over to the kitchen. "Do you want some wine?" Zara had just removed the Merlot from the cooler rack and was turning back to get the glasses and she bumped into him. She yelped.

"Quit messing around, Zara. If it is another emotional speech to pacify your guilt, then I don't want to hear it. You hear me? I don't want to hear it." He ordered her, as he placed the bottle very carefully on the counter. And without meaning to, the bitterness seeped through.

On impulse, she touched his cheek, which had a little stubble that scratched her palm. "Oh Dev," she said, softly. "I know that. I know you don't want to hear it or anything else I have to say. I know you don't want me. I get that. I am not asking for forgiveness here for what I've done to you."

He took a ragged breath. "You haven't done anything to me, Zara. Now let go of me."

"I broke your heart, Dev," she said simply. "Ten years ago, I lay in that hospital bed and I broke your heart. Knowing full well you'd never forgive me for it. Knowing full well that I was going to lose you."

"Stop talking, Zara." His voice went ominous. "I don't want to hear anymore. I don't care."

She stepped closer to him, held his face in both her palms. The one person who mattered more than anything in the world. "You don't have to care. But I need to tell you anyway. Because I care."

"Why?" he breathed, even as he held her elbows tightly. Not sure if he was struggling to let go or haul her closer.

"Why do you think, Dev?"

"Tell me anyway."

"Because I love you."

His hands dropped from hers. His body turned to stone, and his eyes to shards of glass. And she continued talking, fast, tripping over her words. "I love you, Dev. I've always loved you. I loved you when I was fourteen and I saw you kissing Barb Newburn at my pool party. And when I was *married* to Ravi and he knew it. But this man you've become? Brave and honorable and beautiful on the inside, I love you the most. Even when I asked you to leave me alone."

Tears streamed down her face. And she didn't let go of him.

"I've been alone for ten years, Dev," she whispered. "Since I sent you away. And I did it to punish me, me not you, because I thought Aadi died because of me. Because I've always believed what he told me inside that car. That he died because I loved you. I didn't break your heart, Dev, I broke mine that day. I broke my heart and I've been paying for it ever since because I have no one."

She knew the tears made her look ugly, twisted. Desperate. But she also knew if she took her hands away from his face, his blank, closed-up face; he'd leave her. He would never let her get it all out.

"I have loved no one but you, Dev. I don't want anyone else. And I wanted to tell you that just this one time."

"You sent me away to punish yourself?" Dev growled. And he looked murderous, feral in that moment, even though his face had not changed expression at all.

She nodded. Guilt and misery and years of suffering lining her face, her drenched eyes.

"You made me feel I was responsible for his death, you said it, right to my face. So you could *punish* yourself?" He dragged the words out. "You had no right to do that, Zara. Not to yourself. Not to me."

Zara wet her dry lips. "I know," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry, Dev. Even if I can't make it up to you. And an apology is not enough."

"You're damn right it's not enough." His hands closed around her again, digging into her flesh. Leaving marks, wanting her to feel pain. Physical pain, the kind that was rending him apart right now. "It's not enough. It's never

going to be enough."

"I know."

"You *don't*." He shook her. Once. Hard. "Do you have any idea what you did to me when you asked me to go away?"

"I know that it felt like my heart was bleeding all over the floor, and there was nothing anyone could do to save it. I know that I had no will to be happy, or even smile or--"

"Stop it," he said, harshly. "Stop acting like you cared about me. Like you care about me now, or about anything except this precious company."

"This company is all I have left, Dev." Her soft words made him more savage. "This company. This legacy. With you gone and Aadi gone, I had to keep it going. It was my penance."

"And you didn't think...in all these years you didn't think you'd tell me all this?"

She closed her eyes now. "My greatest penance was never to see you again, Dev. I knew if I saw you, even once, I'd be happy. I'd be so happy. You're all I need to be happy and you don't even know it."

"Stop talking, Zara."

"When you went away that night to meet Lily, when I was consumed with jealousy, I wanted to run out after you. And tell you, beg you, not to have dinner with Lily. I wanted to tell you I love you. I love you, Dev. I lo--"

Her words were, once again, cut off by the brutal pressure of his mouth on hers.

Zara's half-sob was muffled against Dev's lips. And, for now, he wanted it that way. He didn't want to hear anymore. Her declarations of love or the supposed mountain of guilt she'd been struggling under. Nothing mattered.

Nothing mattered, he told himself fiercely, but this moment.

The now.

He kissed her as if he could physically stop the words pouring from her. She curled her arms around his neck, pressed closer to him, molding herself into him. Kissing him back with open abandon. When he finally raised his head, to see her hopeful eyes, something moved through him. Lust, need, coupled with that raging monster that had been briefly free the last night he'd held her like this.

He was very much afraid the name of that monster was insanity.

To combat his own desperate thoughts, he hauled her over him and kissed her again, tunneling his hands into her hair, thrusting his tongue deep into the honeyed sweetness of her mouth, kissing her over and over again. Allowing her no time to respond, to make demands of her own. He swept her backward, walking her to the open French doors, and into the fragrant, dimly lit garden.

All the while, he was busy unbuttoning her jeans, shrugging off her top, baring her naked, trembling body to his gaze.

When they ended on the chaise lounge kept at the edge of the garden, he was busy suckling her hard, biting on her, drawing on her, and she was writing, moaning, breathless with the demands he was making on her. Absolute passion. Absolute pleasure.

Zara felt sensations bombarding her, pulling at her from all sides. Until it felt like she was being battered inside a riptide. His hands were everywhere, the curve of her knees; the inside of her thighs, between them. Her toes, her fingers. Every inch in between. She was unaware of the low, keening sounds emanating from her throat. Only of the intense, almost liquid delirium she was going under, when he kissed her in her most intimate place. Her fingers fell away, then clutched his fully-clothed back, twining her fingers restlessly into the strands of his silken hair. To draw him closer, to get him to stop. Zara arched, seeing the stars overheard on the black, stifling sky, as he lapped all over her, relentlessly plunging her into a world where there was no name, no reality, nothing but the hot heat of his mouth, and the exquisite pressure of his fingers.

When she shattered, it was with his name on her lips.

But even that wasn't enough; he was still driving her on, urging her to take her next blind steps into the unknown. Giving her no chance to catch her breath. Making her bold enough to tug his shirt off, explore the corded muscles wrapped around his chest, his shoulders. Run shaky, drugged lips over his heart and hear the furious drumming.

They tumbled over the lounge into the damp, fragrant lawn, wound around each other.

But this time, it was her chance to prove her power him. Power she didn't know she possessed. When she unsnapped his jeans, his breath hissed. When her hair streamed over her shoulders, trailing over his thighs, his hands fisted on the grass, drawing it out by clumps.

She ran her whole body, sinuously, seductively, over his magnificently aroused body, watching him shudder, feeling weak and incredibly strong at the same time. When he hauled her over his chest, pressing her breasts against his chest, to kiss her as deeply as he was going to love her, she felt the power move through her again. Power and something else, she recognized as love.

For once, just tonight, she knew that she loved him. *He* knew that she loved him. She loved making love with him. And it was without shadows or regrets or ghosts.

And it was enough.

He flipped her under him in a move too rough to be sophisticated. When his fingers gripped her hips in preparation of his penetration, leaving bruises that would show; she knew it was her he wanted in this moment. Her and not Lily. Not any other woman. And she gloried in the knowledge.

Her thighs opened wider, gripped him tighter to her.

He slipped into her, and groaned. He braced his hands on the fetid ground, their mingled sounds; the fertile smells all heightening the moment beyond rational thought. Her nails dug deep into his back, scoring him. He leaned over and kissed her, softly, then with increasing pressure, holding the position as long as he humanly could.

And when he no longer could, he wrapped his fingers around hers, squeezed them tighter, and took her on that dizzying, dazed ride.

Before it was over, it felt as if they were fused into one being.

He made love with her once more, with the stars as witness and the gentle sound of the water lapping against the sides of the pool. And for an instant, just one instant, he thought about staying there with her. Holding her close, holding her near his thundering heart. Watching the sky turn blue in the rising dawn.

It was with that regret that he left her, in the early morning.

### Twenty-Three

#### One Month Later...

Exactly a month later, Zara couldn't pinpoint what was different with her. What had shifted inside of her so she could get up every day, go to work at the job which gave her genuine pleasure and which she loved so much. It was a poor substitute for the Dev-shaped hole in her life but it was consistent and chaotic and she loved it.

On the other hand, she had to deal with the fallout of Dev's walking out. Only this time, he had just walked out on her.

Everyone else was full of news of what Dev was doing. Brett had chattered excitedly about the new 3D headset that Uncle Dev had sent over, which had been invented by one of this friends in Caltech who ran a company now. It was a comm device too, so they could talk all the time. Of course, this meant that Lily and Dev spoke daily too.

Aunt Vaidehi and Grandpa S received twice-daily video calls from Dev. And even Ma DSa had been swayed by the homemade Bebinca recipe he'd sent her. This time, Dev wasn't gone. He hadn't disappeared. They were all dealing with Lily's revelations and the little report that Kit Barranos had put together, trying to reconcile the bright, brilliant Aadi they knew with the moody, manic drug addict he'd become in the end.

But this time, Dev was there. A bulwark of strength and support. This time, he was in touch with everybody else but her, and she knew she deserved no better.

To intentionally tell him her reasons for doing what she did...she was not surprised he'd left her. In fact, retribution should have been on his agenda. But, she acknowledged with a small prick of tears behind her eyes, Dev was not like that.

He wasn't vindictive. He didn't lug around guilt like a cage that you'd fashioned for yourself.

He was a brilliant, decent, confident man with the world at his feet. He probably had all the women in his bar drooling over him, as they gushed about how much they had missed him.

Jealousy, a constant companion, had her wondering which of those women were now cooking on the big pot on his stove. Which of the nameless, faceless women were snuggling with him under the afghan throw on his couch.

She tried to not think about these things because, invariably, they depressed her.

It was difficult to discipline herself to not think about him, oh, less than a thousand times a day. Even with the massive workload she had taken on herself because it was the surest panacea to a broken, but now healing, heart.

She had promised herself this much, the morning after she'd woken up from the deepest, best sleep she'd had in years, and found him gone. She'd promised herself she wouldn't act pathetic and needy. She would let him go. She would let him be happy. She owed Dev that much, at least.

Because, these last few weeks with him, whether he knew it or not, despite herself, she had learned to be happy.

She'd learned to be Zara. To love Zara, even if he didn't.

She'd learned to forgive her brother, her *Anna*. To not blame herself for a philandering husband. To look beyond the obvious panacea of her work and find meaning in other parts of her life that were not labeled 'Work' and 'Family.' Not surprisingly, she didn't have many parts. She didn't have any girlfriends or hobbies or pastimes that she'd cultivated.

She'd been a zombie. Half-alive. Existing on fragments from the past and the promise of a future that would now never materialize.

The tears became a ball lodged in her throat, which she valiantly swallowed. Blindly, she reached into the paint can and dipped her roller in. Mechanically, with the latest alternative rock band blasting on her iPod dock, she started the soothing process of painting her apartment on the weekend.

Her phone buzzed. It was Lily. She had never called Zara. Ever. So, this was a first.

"Hey, Lily," Zara said cautiously, dipping her brush in the can. Watching the sunny yellow drops drip down one by one. They looked pretty. The color would liven up the room. "What's up?"

"Zara. Did I catch you at a bad time? Hope you're not too busy."

Zara didn't know it, but Lily was using her best office manager voice. "Nah. I am not doing anything important. What's up?"

Lily sighed. It was an audible sound. "I hope you consider us to be friends, Zara."

"Of course, Lily. Without a doubt." She sat down on the lower rung of the step ladder she'd purchased on her last impulsive trip to Costco. "Why would you even ask that?"

"Because, I'm about to either be a very good friend to you or a very bad one."

"I don't understand."

"Why are you messing with Dev?"

Zara's jaw dropped open. "Wha— what?"

Lily sighed again but forged on. "Do you know that boy fell in love with you when he was seventeen and he never got over it?"

Unsurprisingly, tears gathered at the back of Zara's throat. "I never got over it either, Lily."

"I know. But you're a woman, and you've learned to live with unendurable tragedy. And you're smarter than that moron. So, I have to ask you again, why are you messing with Dev?"

"I am not messing with him, Lily." She gripped the phone a bit tighter. "He left me. I told him I loved him and he left me." And maybe it was the right thing under the circumstances, but it *hurt*.

"So what?"

Zara's jaw dropped again. "I beg your freaking pardon?"

"You're not deaf. You heard me just now. I said, so what? So what if he left you? So what if you told him you loved him and he left you? Are you giving up on him so easily?"

Zara had no answer to that pointed and decidedly offensive question. Was she giving up on him that easily? Did she think he wouldn't love her back? Or that she didn't deserve to be loved? Was it the product of years of conditioning herself to not need anybody, especially Dev? Was it because of the casual negligence her parents, bless their souls, had shown her all their life?

*Or was it because she was that big a coward?* 

It certainly was easier to coast along in the aftermath of her actions than to do anything proactive with them. Yes, she'd told him she loved him. But then she'd let him go. She had wanted to keep him all to herself, mold all her dreams with him at the center, but she had stood by and watched him leave as he left for Lily's, and then, to the other side of the country.

"I...don't know," she said softly.

"Zara, I'm sorry and I know it's none of my business..."

"Lily," Zara cut in, as she dipped the roller in the can. Zara painted with renewed determination, formulating plans, sifting them, shifting them as she considered and rejected possible scenarios. There was a very good chance he would never want to see her again; he'd be content with her signature in the shareholder's reports. But she wasn't. Not anymore.

If Dev had taught her to be happy, to rely on others, to believe in second chances, then that's exactly what she was going to do.

"Shut up. And thank you."

Lily sniffed. "I was hoping you'd say that. Now what are you going to do about it?"

### Twenty-Four

### One day later

The bar was hopping at precisely seven twenty nine pm. It was the weekend after all and even the geeks came out of their hackathons to drink on the weekend. Zara walked in to GWBG's with renewed purpose. She wasn't tentative anymore. And she wasn't a mass of roiling, repressed emotion.

She was free. And, it was time to let Dev know that.

One month was long enough to let him stew with his wounded emotions. And, no doubt, he was hurt. Wounded.

She would never, as long as she lived, forget the absolute wiped despair on his face, before he'd schooled it into an unreadable mask. Every time he'd touched her that night, the edge of sadness, of lingering grief had been there in him. She hadn't known to dispel it, only to soothe it. But now, when she herself was not weighed down by her own smothering guilt and grief, when her relationship with the family was healthier, more open, she knew how. She'd love him.

Completely, without any reservations, without expecting anything from him, giving everything she had to him. She'd love him with every last breath she had. She'd court him into loving her back, if she could.

But, here, where he was. It made no sense to court him from halfway across the country. Dev needed someone to put him first, to make him their family. And he was here. He always had been hers. Her own family would understand. They had Lily and Brett now.

Zara hummed along with the Kings of Leon boomed on the recessed speakers of the bar, as they sang about giving up New York for Tennessee. She was giving up Chicago for Pasadena, but the same principles applied. She slid into an empty bar stool, crossed her legs and waited for him to show up.

Dev was never late.

Dev found her humming.

Of all the ways he had imagined seeing her, and he'd imagined several desperately romantic scenarios, he'd never imagined it would be to find her whistling.

It was hard, unbelievably hard to reconcile the fragile, almost breakable Zara he'd left sleeping on the chaise lounge a month ago, with this one. That Zara

had been brittle. Tears had been swimming in her eyes, which she hadn't let fall, and the aching vulnerability in her beautiful face had been heart-breaking. That Zara had told him she loved him, had always loved only him, wanted only him, and she'd looked like she would keel over if he didn't need her back.

The agony he'd sought to quell in her, in himself, had only been part of the reason why he'd made love with her that night. But, truthfully, he'd never be able to resist her. Defenseless and broken, destroying him with every word that came out of her mouth, he needed her. Inside his skin. His very bones.

He knew now, what he'd suspected when he'd seen her across this damn bar, just a few weeks ago.

He'd never get over her.

Pheromones, blind need, everlasting love, call it what you want. He'd never get over Zara. So it was time to settle this once and for all. Claim her as his. As he should have, ten years ago.

"She's back," Shiv said, as he stuck his thumbs inside his jeans pocket and scanned the bar. He was feeling itchy tonight. Staying in one job for as long as he had with this one was troubling him. Making him want...for things he had no business wanting.

"Yeah," Dev murmured. "So she is."

"Are you going to do something about it?"

"I'm thinking about it."

He took his time, strolling up to her. She wore the same cream overcoat, jeans, and boots combo that she'd worn the last time. The overcoat was draped on the stool next to her. She slayed him with how radiant she looked. He nodded at Whitey, his bartender for the night, and the guy slung a pint of beer in her direction. She yelped and almost slid off her stool at the sudden movement.

Dev caught her around the waist in one hand and the beer in another, hemming her in.

"What the--?" She broke off as she turned around and saw Dev, smiling secretively. Looking dangerous and windblown in his jeans and leather jacket, just a little gaunt, enough to make her think maybe he'd missed her too.

She wouldn't scream, Zara promised herself, shakily. No, she wouldn't scream or launch herself into his arms. Not the very first second he

showed up.

To give herself time to compose, she took the glass from him and took a healthy gulp. "Was that move meant to frighten me?"

"Not really, no." He settled himself on the stool next to hers. The crowd around them intensifying as a tour bus coterie walked in. "Hello Zara, nice to see you."

"Hello Dev, nice to see you too. You look very well."

"Thank you," he murmured. "What are you doing here?"

She shrugged. "I came to get a drink. This is a bar, isn't it?" The ice queen was back.

He smiled. It was all teeth. He did not know what fresh game she was playing and he didn't like it.

"You didn't call." It came out more as an accusation than as a calm statement, which was how he'd intended it to be.

She leaned into him, until all he could see was the golden ring around her eyes. There was a hint of wariness that he'd never seen before. This Zara wasn't hiding things from him out of necessity; but because she could. He instinctively understood that. The knowledge alternately pleased him and made him a little wary himself.

"I know," she said. "I figured you didn't want me to call."

He leaned in close too, and their knees brushed. Dev was once again reminded of that comparison he'd made about Zara. Of her being a hothouse flower in a sea of orchids. Now he could see the fire in her. He suspected; so could she.

"Why would you figure that?"

Zara smiled, and it was lovely in its sadness. "Dev, I basically confessed to ruining your life ten years ago. I don't know if you want me around trying to mess the rest of it too."

"Don't you think I would have told you if you'd ruined my life? Then or now?" he asked her with maddening patience.

"But--" Confusion clouded the clear brown of her eyes, and he realized he'd never seen her this carefree. Ever. At least not for the last few weeks.

"But what?"

"You...you, we..." she struggled. And he snagged her arms, brushing his thumbs over the fleshy part of her elbows.

"Yes, what did we do, honey?"

She flushed. She actually flushed. "We made love," she whispered. "We

made love and then you left me before I could wake up. And stop you, or make a messy scene," she ended in a stronger voice.

He sighed, humor lightening his eyes, and laid his forehead against hers. "You had years of therapy, didn't you? Don't you know the difference between a strategic retreat and outright leaving?"

"You were strategically retreating from me?"

"I tried. I was coming back next week," he admitted in a husky voice. "I was putting the bar up for sale. Wrapping up loose ends."

She closed her eyes, as she let the implications, the wonderful, un-admitted implications of those three sentences wash over her.

"Why?"

"You know why, Zara. You've always known why."

Now, finally now, she permitted herself to move her arms around his waist, hold him close in the noisiest bar in all of California. Hold him as her heart wanted to.

"Tell me anyway."

"I will," he said, kissing her forehead and leaning back against the circle of her arms. The jukebox was playing an early 2000s number. The singer was singing about her beloved taking her by the hand and take her somewhere new. "As soon as we finish all the unfinished business between us."

"I was thinking this could be all about pleasure? No business." There was a smile in her eyes, a song in her heart. She looked breathtaking. She took his breath away.

"Aadi," he said. "What Lily told me later, what Kit confirmed in his report. God! I should have known, somehow, I *should* have known. I knew, something was off. Something was wrong. But I thought it had to do with Lily. Not this, Zara. God, not drugs." His voice cracked. And Zara held him closer.

"Listen to me, Dev," she said, forcefully. At once accepting and letting go of everything, all the bad memories, all the ghosts, everything except the deep, abiding love for a boy who'd died too young. As she had every day for the last month. "It's not your fault. Aadi's death was not your fault. Whatever he'd been doing to himself was not your fault. Just like it wasn't mine."

He squeezed her tighter and just held on, trying to squeeze the stupid tears back in too. He swallowed convulsively once and finally breathed clearly. There was time enough to grieve for Aadi later. His brother. His earliest friend.

"It's not, Dev," Zara insisted. "It's not your fault. You loved him like a brother, he was your best friend. But you couldn't see into his head, couldn't understand what Aadi himself couldn't understand. So, it's not your fault. What happened ten years ago is no one's fault," she ended fiercely.

"And how do you figure that?"

She smiled now, tremulously. "Because, you told me so, remember? For so long I've been punishing myself for things that were out of my control. I actually believed I wasn't supposed to be happy, I was supposed to die alone. But I can't...I can't not be happy. I won't die alone."

Something moved into him, light as bird's wings. He thought it was grace. Love's grace.

"Why not?"

"Dev."

She touched his cheek once, in a supplicant, affectionate gesture. "Because you're alive. You're here. Maybe not in my arms, maybe not in my life. But you're there, somewhere in this world. How can I not be happy in a world that holds you, Dev?"

Now it was his turn to close his eyes. When he opened them, his breath was ragged and his eyes glimmered with wild emotion. She was afraid to name them.

"Is it any wonder that I haven't loved anybody but you my whole life?" A tear gathered in her eye, spilled out at the quiet, almost ruminative words.

"I love you, Zara. Exactly the way you love me. Forever and always. And after that if I can manage it. Every day since you beaned me for kissing Barb Newburn at your pool party, when you were fourteen and drove me crazy by

She smiled again. "I didn't think you noticed."

wearing that leopard print bikini."

"Oh, I noticed all right," he said mock-grimly. "I noticed all the boys hanging around you, trying to get a peek at your boobs and I was so mad I kissed Barb."

"I'll kill you if you ever do something like that again."

He nodded. "Yes, dear." She was not fooled by his meek acceptance. "I also love the woman you've become. Strong and decisive and responsible. And I still can't get enough of your boobs. Now, we have to clear up this ridiculous notion you have of ruining my life and what not."

"We do?" Her hands were dancing in his hair, willing him close enough to kiss him.

"Stop that," he admonished her, giving her the most devilish smile.

And she thought, with a wrenching pang, *Aadi should have seen this*. Seen love like this. But he didn't, he couldn't. And that was just the way it was.

"Yes, we do," he continued. "Do you have any idea how nineteen-year-old boys operate?"

"Not really, no."

"Well, they have a lot of pride. They have a lot of things, unspoken, mostly stupid, macho things to prove to the world and to the girls they love. Especially to the girls they love beyond sanity."

"Oh."

"Now imagine this one foolishly proud boy, who's been all alone his whole life. And imagine that the one person who he thought would never leave him, basically tells him to leave *her*. Imagine him being so damaged and demented by his own grief that he listens to her instead of *fighting for her*. Fighting with her until she listened."

"I thought you knew in your heart that I deserved to be alone," she murmured. "I thought you'd at least fight and I could take back everything, even though I didn't want to."

"Zara." He touched her lips in a sweet gesture. "I was crazy with love and grief, and mangling pride in that mix left us in this god awful mess. Not to mention your Trojan-sized guilt complex. So if you've been begging me for forgiveness, I should too."

More tears poured out of her. Cathartic, cleansing. "So much time wasted. All this time wasted, when I could have been with you. I don't think there's any forgiveness for that."

He shook his head, brushing his nape to her fingers, brushing her tears away in the very crowded bar. "No, there isn't. But someone very recently enlightened once asked me if I believed in second chances and miracles."

"And?" Her heart, hopeful and bright, shone out of her eyes.

He smiled, slowly, taking her breath away with the utter love and certainty she could see in him. Pouring out of him. Rubbing his thumbs dry over her cheeks.

"Yes, yes, I do."

"Oh, Dev."

She lifted her lips to his for a kiss that never came. Instead he insinuated his hands between them and dug at something in his jacket pocket. To her intense, stunned, almost weak-kneed surprise, he held a worn blue square

velvet box out to her. Before dropping down on one knee in front of her.

Her hand went to her throat, where her heart was trying to leap out of her skin.

"You told me you didn't want to mess the rest of my life up, Zara," he said, solemnly. "I think you should. You should mess my life up, fill it up with laughter and passion and children and wonderful memories."

"Oh god." She leaned weak-kneed against the bar, and he jerked her upright, clutching her completely numb fingers in his hand. He also stood up, while someone whistled. Finally realizing something monumental was taking place here.

"I wanted to give you this ten years ago, as a symbol of what I felt." He snapped the box open and a tiny chip of a diamond in a simple gold band stared back at her. It had lost some of its luster, some of its shine. "It was supposed to be a promise of forever."

Zara thought it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

He took it out and slid it onto her shaking ring finger. "Now, I'm thinking I won't have to spring for a pricey engagement ring."

She closed her hand around his, raising drenched eyes to his. "No," she said, glad her voice rang strong and clear. She was not going to screw up this moment by blathering like a baby. "You don't. But you're damn well going to ask me."

He grinned, his old, devil-may-care grin. "Zara Subramanian, I've loved you all my life. And lost you for longer than I care to remember. Marry me so I never have to live in a world without you."

She leaned up and kissed him once, softly. Her hands stealing over his nape.

"I will, as long as your promise to never kiss another woman again. Ever."

His lips hovered over hers, washing her in his sweet, drugging scent. "How about I promise to kiss only you, forever?"

She sighed. "Works for me."

And Dev kissed Zara, in her first, her only last kiss.

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Read an excerpt of Encore (working title), a story of music, heartbreak, and the love that lasts forever after between two lost souls. Coming February 2018.

Read an excerpt of Shiv's story in CROSSING LINES: Book Two of

Geeks of C@ltech. Coming March 2018.

### Excerpt from Crossing Lines: Book Two of Geeks of C@ltech

# Coming Soon

He needed a fresh start.

Shiv Naren Pal was good at those. He'd done it at seven, when his mother had walked out on his dad and him with her oncologist boss at the nursing practice where she worked. He'd done it again at seventeen, just as he was about to graduate high school and one tiny error in judgment had almost, *almost* cost him his future.

Now, eleven years later, he was about to do it again. He just hoped one of his oldest friends and current part-time employer would see it that way. Shiv was hopeful but he was also prepared. He had the money and the data to back up his plan. His fresh start.

"Explain to me once again. What it is that you want?" Dev asked, while he tipped chairs back at GWBG's, the bar he owned. Dev Banerjee was a stand-up guy. The only man Shiv could count on, apart from Kit. And Kit was, well... he was family.

Shiv stacked the chairs on the tables and gave the legs a good wipe down with the dishtowel tucked in his jeans' waistband. He considered how best to answer Dev.

"I want to run GWBG. I want co-ownership of the bar." Even saying the words, slowly and carefully sent a jolt through him.

It was such a fucking adult thing to say.

I want to run a bar. I want co-ownership and all the responsibilities and million headaches that came with it. Shiv had never thought he'd want it for himself. Content to be a rolling stone, drifting from loft to studio to a two bedroom sub-let, lugging his survival kit duffel bag with him that contained all he needed to make a living. Make a life.

And now, here he was, wanting to put down roots.

God, was he crazy or was he crazy?

Dev gave him a mild look. "I heard that the first ten times you told me, bro. I am just trying to process what this means to you. What do you want, Shiv?"

Shiv stopped the wipe down and moved to another table. Having practically taken over management when Dev had flown down to Chicago to 'help out' the love of his life, he was more familiar with the bar's cool down routine than ever.

Stack chairs on tables. Wipe down. Check inventory. For which he had instituted a simple, cost-efficient RFID tag system that only needed a barcode scanner and a handheld tablet. See that the kitchen was completely shut down, have a pep talk with the bartenders if required after splitting tips. Switch off everything and, after turning on the alarm, leave.

Only to do it all over again in six short hours.

It was surprising, but he loved it. The sheer routine, the predictability of it. He loved it.

So, again, he took his time answering, stepping into the alcove that held the handheld and scanner. He started the inventory check. Dev had taken to sweeping the confetti and paper streamers and cheese string (yuck!) that a few too-enthusiastic patrons had liberally sprayed the tiled floor with. Shiv didn't blame them. It wasn't every day that the bar owner got the happy ever after of his dreams.

"I can double your profits in three quarters. Less, if I am allowed to hold hackathons in the back."

"No." Dev's answer was unequivocal. "No more hacking for you. You've gone straight. You swore to Kit and me and the rest of the gang. No going back on that, Shiv." Dev used his own towel to wipe down the spindly legs of a chair.

Shiv considered cursing, but they were right. He had promised them. Well, he had more or less announced that he was finally going legit. And that had been as good as an oath for their gang. They were going to hold him to it. Period.

"These would be legit hackathons. Like the ones sponsored by corporates and accelerators, which our fair state of California abounds in. It could be our version of Games Night or Ladies' Night." Shiv grinned, his eyes taking on a gleam that Dev did not like. "We could have Ladies Hackathon Nights. Drink for free, code for free."

If Dev's entrepreneur heart buzzed at the idea of using this new twist on ladies nights and giving it a tech angle, he didn't show it. He just gave Shiv a look. The Look. The look that Kit had bequeathed him when he realized Shiv was staying back in California after graduating Caltech and not moving to Chicago with him, as they had originally discussed.

"I am still not hearing what I want to hear."

"If you'd just tell me what you want to hear, I'd say it Dev," Shiv shot back. He was done with inventory. They were running low on tequila, (har har, like that was news!) and he quickly made a side note on the tab. The order form from their regular vendor appeared and he filled it in.

Yeah, he'd streamlined inventory alright. It had taken him like a cool two hours to do it and he'd had so much fun doing it.

"You know, I think Bharat would get a kick playing around with this system," he murmured. "Give it a kick so we don't have to manually order up booze every time. Automated replenishment. Wouldn't that shave off time we could better utilize elsewhere?"

"You're presuming that we will always need copious amounts of tequila. Isn't that a faulty premise?"

Shiv held up a bottle of Jose Cuervo in mock-salute. "You're kidding, right? This is a bar. We are always going to need copious amounts of tequila."

Dev stopped the wipe down and stared at Shiv. He looked thoughtful. Shiv could feel a flush creeping up his neck at his scrutiny. To combat his intense awkwardness he said, "If you don't want to, it's okay. I am cool with it. It was just an idea. A notion. And a bad one at that."

"Shiv," Dev said quietly, "Will you stop fronting with me for one second and get real? I can see this place obviously means a lot to you. I should have

realized it when you started making system upgrades without consulting me." He gave the younger man a wry smile. "But I built Geeks Will Be Geeks from seed money given to me by you and Kit and Rohan. I could not have done anything without you guys. This place... It's not just my business or my career. It's—"

"Your life. I know," Shiv finished for him.

"Then you know I need to know why."

Shiv laid down the tablet and the scanner. Checked the number of whiskey brands they were stocked up on. Fourteen on the pricier side, twelve midrange and three that might as well be water. The mid-range ones had more margins but actually cost less. It was your classic rule of averages at work. When you give people the option of something too cheap or too expensive, they always went for the middle option.

And you made a killing.

"Can we do multiple choice with this then? Give me options and I'll try and be straight with you."

Dev didn't answer. He continued finishing the wipe down. And Shiv bit off a curse. "Damn it, Dev. Why does everything have to be about communication with you?"

"Because, you don't talk enough, Shiven." It was a shortening of his first and middle names. Which meant Dev was heart attack-level serious.

Shiv vaulted the three feet bar, and landed on the other side on his knees. Dev whistled as he was meant to. Not many people could pull off the bar vault. Shiv stood up, dusting confetti and cheese string off his palms. "These people do not know how to party," he commented.

"You had sole custody of that cheese string can." At Shiv's sheepish smile, Dev sighed. Relented the tiniest bit. "Sit down. Talk to me like an adult instead of the introverted man-child you pretend to be. And we might have a deal."

They pulled out two chairs from the nearest table. Shiv gripped his palms,

now sticky with goop and paper.

"I..." His throat felt uncomfortably tight. "I want to be better than what I've been so far. Adult. I want to have a home. A life. I want..." he hesitated as he revealed the deepest, most personal thing about him, "roots."

Dev reached out and gripped his knee. His jeans were faded at the stress points, so Shiv was able to feel the comforting pressure of his friend's hand. It gave him the courage to finish saying what he had to say. "I know Kit expects me to go back to Chicago and start over with him. But I can't. This place."

He waved a hand to the closed door which was painted a garish neon pink and had a picture of a nearly naked, sexy bombshell strategically holding a laptop. GWBG was written on the laptop's decal. It was cute and kitschy and the patrons loved it.

"This place is home for me. I belong here. And I want to... belong here. Here," he repeated softly.

"I assume you've worked out the financials of it all?" Dev was confident enough that the question was largely rhetorical.

Shiv nodded. "I have. I have enough for a down payment on the bar for now. I was hoping to get one of you to co-sign a loan for the rest. From a bank."

"A loan," Dev mused. "As opposed to just bypassing the network security at Bank of America and wreaking sweet hell on some poor unsuspecting schmuck's accounts!" Shiv had actually done it once, on a dare. Dev had seen him create something called a dragon worm that took down the security of a national bank and transfer millions into someone else's account. Of course, he'd transferred the money back too immediately.

Shiv was about the play, not the pay. Thank heaven for small mercies.

"Yes. A loan. With all my tax statements and 401K in order and everything. I am straight now, aren't I?"

"And you spoke to Kit about this?"

Shiv hesitated. Dev squeezed his knee again. "Dude, you've got to talk to Kit. He would want to weigh in on this. I am not saying I am not up for it. I am," he assured Shiv. "This actually works out pretty fucking perfectly for me. I am not going to have to spend time hunting for a buyer and GWBG will be in safe hands with you."

"I'm guessing the apartment doesn't come with the bar?"

Dev actually owned the whole building he operated his business from. He had owned a couple of businesses, a resort up in Lake Tahoe that he'd sold for a tidy profit. He'd held on to this building though. It was choice real estate.

Dev shrugged. A marked change from the withdrawn, moody bastard he'd been for the last month, since he came back from Chicago and Shiv realized Dev was going to leave soon. For good. He just hadn't known it then. "I don't know. Not right now, though." His smile was self-deprecating. "I guess I am not willing to give up my roots here either."

"Makes sense." Shiv's knee bounced, a product of his inability to sit still, be calm for more than five minutes. "I want this, Dev. I'll work hard. And I am not running anything by Kit."

"Dude." Dev pressed a hand to Shiv's knee. It stopped bouncing. "You *have* to tell Kit. He bailed you out of jail. Jail."

Shiv took a deep breath and rubbed the back of his neck. "I never said I won't tell Kit. I'll tell him when the time is right. But right now? This is between you and me. So, if you don't want to do it. That's fine. You can say so. No big deal."

Except, of course, it was. And Dev knew it. But, out of left field, he said, "Did I thank you for your last job? For helping Kit out with that voicemail message between Lily and Drake when I was in Chicago?"

"You don't have to thank me. I am glad I did some good before hanging up my black hat," Shiv said.

"You did," Dev murmured. "You very much did. It kickstarted Kit's investigation and helped us... my family, so much. I can't ever thank you

enough. So I am going to ask you again, are you sure?" he asked.

Shiv didn't answer. He'd made his case. He'd presented his data. And Dev would either know he was good for it. Or not. Either way, he was done talking.

The outside door opened and a tall, stunningly attractive Asian woman stepped in. She was dressed bizarrely in a man's shirt and jeans and no shoes.

"It is cold here in October, you guys," Zara complained as she walked on tippy toes, avoiding the detritus of the impromptu rave last night had become. She shivered, her fall of hair swinging forward to lie on her shoulders as she closed the door behind her.

Immediately, Dev stood up and loped over to her.

"Hey." His voice was several octaves lower. Intimate. "I thought you'd be sleeping." He ran a hand down her back and hugged her at the waist. She leaned up and planted a side kiss on him, her palm lingering on his cheek. Murmured something that made him grin.

Shiv turned away, even more uncomfortable with the PDA than he had been at having to open up.

"Shiv," Dev said lazily a second later. "Why don't you work up a decent proposal and we can discuss it properly? Like entrepreneurs?"

"I'll email it to you now." Shiv shot up and dug his phone out of his pocket.

Zara laughed and twined her fingers with Dev's. The small chip of zirconia she sported flashed in the dim light. "Later, Shiv. Please? Also, can you finish closing up on your own? Dev is going to be... occupied."

Shiv gave them a thumbs up. Dev chuckled. He shot his friend a glance and saw that Shiv was already turning back to the work at hand. Shiv wanted the bar. He wanted to run the bar.

Stranger things had happened...

"Dev," Zara said conversationally as they went up the elevator to his

apartment. The one he was still not ready to give up. "You better not be thinking about whatever proposal Shiv wants to send you right now."

He snagged her closer and plastered her against himself, kissing the knees out of her. "No," he said. "I'm not. I'm thinking about what I'm going to do to you once we reach my bed."

She smiled against his mouth. This woman who'd held his heart for the better part of their lives. And decided that if Shiv wanted a little bit of home, if he wanted roots, then Dev was not going to stand in the way of that.

### Excerpt from His Sunshine Girl

## By Preethi Venugopala

June 20, 2014, Sreepuram

As days progressed into weeks and weeks into months, Shalini became an indispensable member of Arundhati's household.

Her days began at six am every day when she joined Arundhati on her morning walk. They would walk to the nearby hill through the lush green paddy fields, and pastures that were home to rare wild blooms before returning home in time for breakfast. She loved those hours when Sreepuram sparkled with magical mist. The morning raga of the birds always fascinated her. Were the birds thanking the creator for helping them survive another cold, dark night? Or were they praising the beauty of the morning? Or was it love that she heard ringing in those melodies?

They would walk the miles, allowing the energy of the dawn to penetrate their being. The glittering dewdrops on blades of grass would remind Shalini of her grandma. Her bedtime stories had hinted that the dewdrops were, in fact, beads that had fallen from the necklaces of fairies. She would then wonder if those fairies were hiding among the shrubs, patiently waiting for them to pass.

During those hours, they talked. Arundhati studied Shalini daily and watched the light that shone in her eyes and the lively spring in her steps while out in nature. That spirit vanished the moment they stepped back into the house. Once inside the confines of the home, the girl immediately donned an invisible veil of propriety and professionalism and acted the role of a paid assistant. Arundhati wanted more from her; she wanted her to discard the veil and become the lively girl who appeared during these morning walks.

According to Parvathi, Shalini suffered from an issue of low self-esteem right from childhood. Her failed marriage had further strengthened it. Parvathi wanted Arundhati to talk to her about it. Yet every day she failed to begin, until that morning two months after Shalini first came to Sreepuram.

"Shalini, do you believe in the power of thoughts?" asked Arundhati, as they stood atop the hill to take in the beauty of the sun that was slowly peeping out from the distant hills.

"The power of thoughts? I am not aware of it."

"Okay, then listen. I have come to understand that our thoughts are powerful. They, in a way, define us, our life. Our thoughts become our truth. And believe me, we attract into our lives all our life experiences," said Arundhati.

"Does that mean I attracted all that sadness into my life? Who would consciously attract bad things? I can't agree with that line of thought." Shalini's voice wavered. She appeared agitated by the direction the talks had taken.

"Who said we are consciously doing it? It happens unconsciously because we are not aware of the power of our thoughts. Now tell me, do you love yourself?"

"Yes. We all love ourselves, right?"

"Does that mean you love everything about you unconditionally? Do you never criticize yourself?" asked Arundhati.

"No. Not that way. Obviously, something is wrong with me that prevents people from loving me. I guess it is my appearance, mostly my skin colour. I cringe whenever I see myself in the mirror. I resemble a charred doll, lustreless and disgusting. Who would love me?"

"A charred doll? Is that what you think you look like? The colour of your skin doesn't define you. It doesn't make you ugly. Trust me, you are one of the prettiest girls I have seen. Your features remind me of those murals of goddesses. You don't realize how pretty you are. Stop criticizing yourself for all that you think you lack. Instead be thankful for everything you have," said Arundhati.

Funnily, the first time Shalini felt her colour was a problem had involved a Goddess. She had dressed up as Goddess Parvathi for a solo dance competition at an interschool fest. The makeup man lamented he might have to use a full bottle of foundation to make her look fair. She still remembered

the giggles that greeted his remark. She had used the humiliation and anger she felt in the dance. When she won, he had congratulated her but the embarrassment remained as a sore memory.

"I have turned into a pessimist. I don't believe anything good can happen to me. I don't think I can love myself."

"If you don't love yourself, how can you expect others to love you? You say you cringe when you stand in front of the mirror. Why not look into the mirror and tell yourself that you love how you look? You have hated yourself for so long. Try a different approach. Tell yourself that whatever happens, you will be there for yourself. Trust me, at the end of the day your happiness depends only on yourself," said Arundhati.

"I am not that strong. While I was married, I used to ask God whether he created me to be disgraced daily," said Shalini, a teardrop sliding down her cheek.

Arundhati went near her and pulled her into a hug. Shalini wept.

Does Shalini discover the joys of truly being herself and be empowered? Will she have the courage to find love and keep it? Find out by one-clicking on **Preethi Venugopala's His Sunshine Girl** <a href="http://hyperurl.co/HisSunshineGirl">http://hyperurl.co/HisSunshineGirl</a>.

### Excerpt from The Captive

### By MV Kasi

Darkness. Absolute and complete darkness.

The first thought that occurred to Nina was that she wasn't in her bedroom. Her head felt heavy and groggy with a dull ache thudding in the background. She felt dazed, and despite being incapacitated, she was sure it wasn't her large bedroom suite. Because there was no way she would ever sleep in the dark. At least not willingly.

The bed under her was hard. Not her expensive mattress topped by several layers of soft and high-thread-count bedding. The rough material rubbed against her bare shoulders and legs.

Why are my shoulders and legs bare?

Her breath began to hitch, and she rapidly blinked, trying to adjust her eyes to the dark. But still, all she saw was darkness.

Why am I not able to see anything!

Her head began to throb, and she began to tremble as panic started to take root in her.

It took her a few moments to realize she was blindfolded. She could feel the cloth against her lashes.

She tried moving her hands to reach for the blindfold, but she couldn't. Her hands were bound. And so were her feet. She tried to cry in frustration, but there was tape placed across her mouth.

*God, what had happened?* 

She felt her lungs constrict, and her breaths came out noisy in the otherwise quiet room. A red haze appeared in front of her eyes, threatening to pull her back into unconscious while her panic turned into terror. She didn't want to pass out in fear.

Being alive is better. Being alive is better. Being alive is better.

She kept repeating that as a mantra in her head. It was something she and her sister had said over the years whenever life threw curveballs at them.

Nina had been through so much in her life, and she was finally beginning to get to a point where she was content with what she had. Then what went wrong? How did she end up bound and gagged in an unfamiliar dark room?

A choked sob escaped her. Tears would have filled her eyes behind the blindfold, if they weren't dry and scratchy due to dehydration. Her mouth felt dry, and her tongue felt thick and unwieldy inside her mouth.

Nina took in slow, deep breaths through her nose as she tried to curb her panic and the nausea that was welling up within her.

Being alive is better. Being alive is better. Being alive is better.

She repeated that again as she curled her body into a fetal position.

Several moments later, she felt the tightness in her chest decreasing slowly and the air move freely. Meantime, a strange feeling gnawed at her, while a memory struggled to form. She tried to reach it, but it kept slipping out of her head.

Okay, think slowly and calmly. What the hell happened?

All Nina recalled were sounds of a siren, hands lifting her and carrying her somewhere and her throat hurting after she threw up violently.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to recall what happened much before that. How did she end up in this situation?

Situation being, taken. Kidnapped.

Can Nina win the deadly game of cat and mouse she finds herself in? Can she outwit her kidnapper, the man known as Gaurav? Find out what happens next in this tense and gripping dark romance by one-clicking on **MV Kasi's**The Captive www.smarturl.it/TheCaptive.

#### About The Author

Aarti V Raman always wanted to be either a writer or a lawyer, so she tossed a coin and ended up choosing writer. She is the first novelist in her family, but hopes she won't be the last!

Aarti is a romance writer from Mumbai, whose third novel "With You I Dance" (Fingerprint! Publishing) debuted in the Amazon India Bestseller (Romance) category when it released in April 2016. Her other two books are romantic thrillers called "White Knight" (Leadstart Publishing, 2013) and "Kingdom Come" (Harlequin MIRA, 2014).

She also dabbles in content marketing, conducts creative writing workshops and holds a journalism degree that she puts to good use in her other career. She has also appeared as a speaker at literature fests in India.

Happy ever after are her three favorite words, even when she is attempting to write Young Adult Urban Fantasy along with steamy contemporary romances starring complex, urban Millennials with a global twist. Sometimes, there are guns and car chases too.

She loves to hear from her readers and friends on email at <a href="mailto:kingdomcomethebook@gmail.com">kingdomcomethebook@gmail.com</a>, on Facebook as <a href="mailto:Aarti V Raman-Author">Aarti V Raman-Author</a> and on <a href="mailto:Twitter@RT writes">Twitter@RT writes</a>.

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