

FALGUNI KOTHARI
SAMPLER



FALGUNI KOTHARI

PART I
SOUL WARRIOR



SHUNYA: NOTHING AND
EVERYTHING



Kuru Kshetra Battlefield

*Day 17 of the Great Kuru War, seven thousand five hundred
years ago.*

Death is hot.
That surprises me. I'd imagined death as cold and brutal. Merciless. But in truth, death is hot as blood, and constant like a heartbeat.

Thrum. Thrum. Thrum. My lifeblood ebbs to the rhythm. My head ripped from its torso by *Anjalika*, the arrow of death that burns even now with the energy of the sun. Struck from behind like some novice. Felled in battle by that lily-livered usurper the Heavens smile upon—Prince Arjun. *Brother Arjun.*

What have I done?

I harness the thought. Cease all reflection and wrench free of my mortal body. I soar up, up into the gloaming, snapping the ties that tether me to life. Dead, I have no use for ties.

“A matter of perspective, Karna, O son of my godsire.”

The unearthly words strum through the air, and I quiver like a plucked bowstring, overcome as much by the voice as its blasphemous claim. “Bonds of devotion nourish the soul, brother.”

There is that word again. *Brother*. Unpleasant laughter wells up in me. Alive, I am abandoned, denied my birthright—Celestial or royal. Death, it seems, changes everything.

A bright, nebulous light brings forth Lord Yama, the God of Death, atop his divine mount. His elephantine thighs ripple beneath a silken *dhoti*, ochre and crimson of color, as he guides the mammoth water buffalo to a halt. An iron medallion sways against the God’s powerful cerulean torso, its center stone an ethereal blood orange.

Hypnotic. Pulsing with life. I am drawn to the stone.

“Piteous waste,” Lord Yama mutters, surveying the carnage of war far below us.

I trace the trajectory of his gaze and behold the battered remains of my army drenched in the evidence of its mortality. Is it true? Have we died in vain?

Words form inside me and I will them out. “Shall we go, my lord?”

“Ha! Impatient to be judged, are you? Anxious to have your fate revealed?” asks the Judge of the Hell Realm. His red-black eyes burn with intelligence and compassion in a blue-tinged face that is long and lean and hard. “Rest easy, brother-warrior. You are not bound for the Great Courtroom.”

Not bound for Hell? Where then? Fear has eluded me for so long that I take a moment to recognize it. A hollow-bellied feeling it is, as annoying as a bone stuck in my throat.

“My lord, I have done bad deeds...terrible deeds in my life. I have waged wars, this horrendous bloodshed, and all because my pride could not—would not abide rejection. I have sinned. I must atone for my actions.”

Lord Yama smiles in a way I do not like. “You have redeemed yourself admirably, Karna. You forfeited your life for the greater good today. The deed far outweighs any misguided ones. Be at peace, brother, and enjoy the fruits of your karma.”

There is but one place to enjoy such fruits—the Higher Worlds.

I’d rather burn in Hell for eternity. I say so. “I won’t live amongst the Celestials.” Coexisting with the very souls who’ve spurned me is unthinkable. Watching *her*—for she would surely reside in Heaven soon—will be eternal torture.

Yama shakes his head, the horns on his crown slashing to and fro. “I thought you might say that. Relax. Your destiny lies elsewhere.”

“Am I to be reborn then? Am I to begin a new life, and forget the past?” Pain, sharp as a blade, lances through me at the thought. Forget my past? My family? Even her? Was that my punishment? To forget all that made me human?

It must be so. For have I not betrayed them as surely as I’ve betrayed my prince regent?

“Human rebirth is not your destiny, either. You are chosen, brother. Your war skills are needed for a higher purpose.” The God slips off his mount, his garments rustling in agitation. “This unjust war has pushed the Cosmos to the vortex of a cataclysm. Tomorrow, the Kuru War will end. Fearing its outcome, the Celestials rolled the Die of Fate and have unwittingly bestowed on Demon Kali untold powers.” Lord Yama bares his fangs in disgust at the foolish gamble. “Imagine the havoc that *asura* and his minions will wreak on the weak if left unchecked. The Human Realm must be safeguarded during Kali’s dark reign.”

I can imagine the horror only too well as I have battled with evil all my life. But I am done with wars. I am done with defeat. I won’t waste another lifetime fighting.

“With due respect, my lord, I am not the man for this task.”

“You are not a *man* at all,” Yama thunders, fists shaking. “You are the son of Surya, the Sun God. Accept that you are no ordinary soul.”

I say nothing. I think nothing. I feel *something* but I squash it down.

Lord Yama’s thick black brows draw together. “Demon Kali will try to pervade every particle of good that exists in the Cosmos, beginning with the corruptible Human Realm. Once he obliterates all of humanity, he’ll set his sights on the Celestials. Kali will not stop until he’s destroyed our way of life. But you can stop him. You are light to his darkness. Do you understand now why you had to betray him? Your beloved humans need you, Karna. I need you. Our father believes in you. Claim your rightful place in the Cosmos.”

Impatiently, Lord Yama removes the iron medallion from his neck and holds it out. The vermilion sunstone glows as if his soul is on fire. Nay! It is my soul that is on fire.

Indescribable energy curls through me. I gasp, though not in pain. I shudder and feel myself grow large, grow hot. Was this rebirth?

I am strong, full-bodied and lethal once more. Then I roar as light bursts forth from my very core and I throb with glorious, blinding power. When I come to myself, my world has changed again. Bubbles of color shimmer all around me: cobalt and saffron, azure and rose. By karma! They are souls. Infinite floating souls.

“Behold the spectrum of life: the worthy, the notorious, the righteous and the sinners.” The God of Death’s soul was a worthy sapphire blue with a tinge of silver. “Your duty, should you choose to accept the office of the Soul Warrior, is to hunt down the red-souled *asuras* and crush them. Whatever you decide, I wish you a long and successful Celestial

existence, Karna,” Yama booms out and vanishes into the purpling sky.

The parley has stunned me. The world of color holds me in thrall. I was dead. Yet, now I am not. A new path lies before me. *Unwanted, unwelcome*, I insist on principle. I close my eyes. Open them to stare at the medallion cupped in my hand—a golden-hued hand at once familiar and not—and know myself for a fool. I do want this. It’s what I am.

Bastard-born. Rebel. Son. Husband. Father. Warlord. And protector. I fist the talisman, buoyed by its concrete warmth. *This is who I am.*

I am the Soul Warrior.

DWANDA-YUDDHA: THE DUEL



The Himalayan Mountains

Five thousand years ago

Absolute darkness shrouded the Human Realm, and had for three days and three nights. Some believed the occurrence was prophetic, like the prolonged *amavasya* or new moon night that had heralded the Great Kuru War two thousand years ago. The war had given birth to the dark Age of Kali, the age of *asura*. In contrast, hope was ripe that this event would trigger the Age of Light. But the Bard wasn't here to succumb to superstition.

The first day without the sun's light had spread confusion and chaos across the realm. The second day had brought desperation in the breasts of humans and fear in the belly of Celestials. The third day—today—was a feast for the *asuras*. Death lay everywhere.

The human world burned without its sun. How soon before the Heavens went up in flames?

The Bard's troubled eyes reread the last line. Then he deliberately scratched it off, lifting his long, pointed talon

from the parchment made of dry palm leaf. With a sigh, he rested his aching hand on his trembling thigh. He would spare a moment to ease his body, and his mind from the strain of observation and due recordkeeping. If he didn't, he'd forget his duty as Witness of the Cosmos, and begin to question fate.

Despite the fire that crackled close to his right knee, and the feathered form of his upper body, he was cold. An icy wind had settled around the Pinnacle of Pinnacles, where he sat cross-legged on a seat made of rock and snow. He'd chosen this perch because it gave him an impartial view of the events happening in the world. He was the Bard, entrusted with keeping the Canons of the Age of Kali, just as the Soul Warrior was entrusted with keeping the Human Realm safe from *asuras*. Would they both fail in their duty today?

The Bard shook off the heavy despair the darkness had brought into the world. He mustn't judge. He shouldn't question. He would sharpen the talon on his forefinger, dip it into the vessel of ink kept warm by the fire, and write this tale. That was all he could do. Be the witness to history.

So he raised his feathered hand and began to write again while his eyes, sparked with power, knowledge and magic, saw clearly events unfolding from great distances. A thousand kilometers to his right, Indra, the God of War and Thunder, fought the Dragon. Indra did not fare well. But that didn't concern the Bard as much as the clash between the Soul Warrior and the Stone Demon. Over and over, his eagle eyes were drawn to the duel taking place in the heart of the world, not only because it was a magnificent battle to behold, for it was, but because its outcome would decide mankind's destiny.

The Soul Warrior was more than a great warrior. Karna was a great soul. Fair, honorable, brave and resilient, he was

the perfect protector of the Human Realm. Of course, there were other reasons he'd been chosen to fill the office of Soul Warrior—there always were when Gods and demons were involved. But Karna's existence was a testament to righteous action and if anyone could bring back the day, it would be him.

But how did one vanquish stone, the Bard wondered?

Avarice and cruelty, two nefarious desires, had made Vrtra and Vala attack the Human Realm. Three days ago the Dragon had swallowed the Seven Rivers in the north, and the Stone Demon had imprisoned the Sun God, his daughter, and all the cattle of the region in his cave.

The Bard paused his writing as a thin vein of lightning winked across the skies, but without the accompanying roar. Indra's strength waned. His thunderbolt hadn't left Vrtra screaming in pain this time. The Bard spared a moment's attention on the duel, just enough to note that the Maruts, the Celestial Storm-gods, waited in the clouds to rescue their god-king in case of a calamity. Indra would survive even in defeat. Of that, the Bard was sure.

But Karna had no one at his back. His might and god-powers had depleted without the sun's healing warmth and light. His divine *astras*, weapons, had not slowed the Stone Demon down, at all. Only the conviction that he could not fail his godsire, his sister, and the innocents under his protection drove him now. His birth family had once abandoned him to his fate, but he would not abandon them to theirs—such was the greatness of Karna.

The Bard crossed out the last observation. No questions. No judgment. No praise, either. The canons would be free of all emotion. He wasn't here to embellish history or glorify the history-makers, as some bards were wont to do.

It wasn't embellishment to write that the foothills of Cedi were drenched in the Soul Warrior's blood. Or observe the

gushing wounds on his body, despite his armor, that would make the hardiest of warriors bellow in agony, but not him. It wasn't embellishment to write that the Heavens were empty for the Celestials had come to Earth to watch the battle, firelight cupped in their palms to light the warrior's way.

The Naga, the Serpent People, also looked on, hissing from the mouth of the portal that led to their underground realm beneath the hills. The Serpent King will not choose a side. Vrtra and Vala were half Naga, after all. All across the Human Realm, demons roamed free, taking advantage of the darkness and preying on human flesh and human souls. It was a terrible moment in history. The *asuras* had the upper hand in the eponymous age of Demon Kali.

Vala did not have arms and half a leg, but still he came at Karna. He had an ace up his sleeve. There were plenty of creatures about, an entire mountain close at hand. He began to chant the spell of soul transference. It was the darkest of all magic, the possession of another's soul. Soon, he would be whole again and stronger than before.

Battered and bleeding, the Soul Warrior veered away from the Stone Demon. He leapt over boulders and charred vegetation. The onlookers called him a coward. Had he forfeit the duel? Has he forsaken mankind?

Karna dove for *Manav-astra*, the spear of mankind, he'd thrown aside yesterday after his bow, *Vijaya*, had shattered under repeated use. In one smooth motion, he rolled, picked up the *astra*, coming up in the spear-thrower's stretch. His tattered lower garment billowed about him as a gust of wind shot through the air. His muscled torso glistened with blood and sweat, tightened as he pulled the arm holding the spear back.

He meant to throw *Manav-astra* at Vala. A futile attempt, to be sure? As long as Vala was made of stone, broken or not,

his body was impregnable. Karna should have waited for Vala to transfer his soul to an onlooker. Then Karna should have vanquished the possessed creature.

Taunting laughter reverberated through the foothills of Cedi. Vala had reached the same conclusion. The Celestials looked at each other in angry silence, unable to interfere. A *dwanda-yuddha* duel was fought between two opponents of equal size and strength alone. The humans hadn't stopped screaming in three days, the din simply background noise now.

The Bard scribbled the observations onto the parchment in no particular order. He wished he was a painter, for surely this was a picture worth a thousand words.

The demon hobbled toward the warrior, who stood still as stone with his arm drawn taught behind him. Then finally, with a roaring chant the Soul Warrior shifted his weight from his back leg to his front and let fly *Manav-astra* at the Stone Demon with all his remaining might.

Karna didn't wait to see the ramifications of his action. And there were plenty to come. He ran into the mountain cave to free Vala's hostages. Within moments the rock face rent in half, and bright streams of light speared through the terrible darkness. A new day had dawned on the Human Realm after three days of perpetual night.

The sun's power was too bright, too full of hope. Yet, the Bard looked on pensively, wondering if the Soul Warrior knew this wasn't a victory. It was merely a reprieve.

**To continue reading, be sure to pick up *Soul Warrior* at
your favorite retailer.**

PART II
MY LAST LOVE STORY



CHAPTER ONE



Love is a dish best served naked.

As a child, those oft-quoted words of my father would have me rolling my eyes and pretending to gag at what I'd imagined was my parents' precursor to a certain physical act.

At thirty, I'd long ago realized that getting naked wasn't a euphemism for sex.

Neither was love.

It wasn't my father invoking the expression just now, though, but my husband. Nirvaan considered himself a great wit, a New Age philosopher. On the best of days, he was, much like Daddy had been. On the worst days, he was my tormentor.

"What do you think, Dr. Archer? Interesting enough tagline for a vlog? What about Baby in a Petri Dish?" Nirvaan persisted in eliciting a response from the doctor and/or me for his ad hoc comedy, which we'd been ignoring for several minutes now.

I wanted to glare at him, beg him to shut up, or demand that he wait in the doctor's office like he should've done, like

a normal husband would have. Khodai knows why he'd insisted on holding my hand through this preliminary checkup. Nothing of import would happen today—if it did at all. But I couldn't perform any such communication, not with my eyes and mouth squeezed shut while I suffered through a series of uncomfortable twinges along my nether regions.

I lay flat on my back on a spongy clinic bed sheeted with paper already wrinkled and half-torn. Legs drawn up and spread apart, my heels dug punishingly into cold iron stirrups to allow the fertility specialist's clever fingers to reach inside my womb and check if everything was A-OK in there. We'd already funneled through the Pap test and stomach and chest checks. Like them, this test, too, was going swell if Dr. Archer's approving happy hums were anything to go by.

"Excellent, Mrs. Desai. All parts are where they should be," he joked only as a doctor could.

I shuddered out the breath I'd been holding, as the feeling of being stretched left my body. Nirvaan squeezed my hand and planted a smacking kiss on my forehead. I opened my eyes and focused on his beaming upside-down ones. His eyelids barely grew lashes anymore—I'd counted twenty-seven in total just last week—the effect of years of chemotherapy. For a second, my gaze blurred, my heart wavered and I almost cried.

What are we doing, Nirvaan? What in Khodai's name were we starting?

Nirvaan stroked my hair, his pitch-black pupils steady and knowing and oh so stubborn. Then his face rose to the stark white ceiling, and all I saw was the green-and-blue mesh of his gingham shirt—the overlapping threads, the crisscross weaves, a pattern without end.

Life is what you make it, child. It was another one of my father's truisms.

Swallowing the questions on my tongue, I refocused my mind on why we were here. I'd promised Nirvaan we'd try for a baby if he agreed to another round of cancer-blasting treatments. I'd bartered for a few more months of my husband's life. He'd bartered for immortality through our child.

Dr. Archer rolled away from between my legs to the computer station. He snapped off and disposed of the latex gloves. Then he began typing notes in near-soundless staccato clicks. Though the examination was finished, I knew better than to sit up until he gave me leave. I'd been here before, done this before—two years ago when Nirvaan had been in remission and the idea of having a baby had wormed its way into his head. We'd tried the most basic procedures then, whatever our medical coverage had allowed. We hadn't been desperate yet to use our own money, which we shouldn't be touching even now. We needed every penny we had for emergencies and alternative treatments, but try budging my husband once he'd made up his mind.

"I'm a businessman, Simi. I only pour money into a sure thing," he rebuked when I argued.

I brought my legs together, manufacturing what poise and modesty I could, and pulled the sea green hospital gown bunched beneath my bottom across my half-naked body. I refused to look at my husband as I wriggled about, positive his expression would be pregnant with irony, if not fully smirking. And kudos to him for not jumping in to help me like I would have.

The tables had turned on us today. For the past five years, it'd been Nirvaan thrashing about on hospital beds, trying in vain to find relief and comfort, modesty or release. Nirvaan had been poked, prodded, sliced and bled as he battled aggressive non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. I'd been the stoic spec-

tator, the supportive wife, the incompetent nurse, the ineffectual lover.

And now? What role would I play now?

As always, thinking about our life left me feeling even more naked than I was in the open-fronted robe. I turned my face to the wall, my eyes stinging, as fear and frustration bubbled to the surface. Flesh-toned posters of laughing babies, pregnant mothers and love-struck fathers hung from the bluish walls. Side by side were the more educative ones of human anatomy, vivisected and whole. The test-tube-like exam room of Monterey Bay Fertility Clinic was decorated in true California beach colors—sea-foam walls, sandy floors, pearl-pink curtains and furniture—bringing the outdoors in. If the decor was meant to be homey, it wasn't having such an effect on me. This room, like this town and even this country, was not my natural habitat, and I felt out of my element in it.

I'd lived in California for seven years now, ever since my marriage, and I still didn't think of it as home, not like Nirvaan did. Home for me was India. And no matter the dark memories it held, home would always be Surat.

"All done." Dr. Archer pushed the computer trolley away and stood up. "You can get dressed, Mrs. Desai. Take your time. Use whatever supplies you need. We'll wait for you in my office," he said, smiling.

Finally, I can cover myself, I thought. Gooseflesh had erupted across my skin due to the near frigid clinic temperatures doctors tortured their patients with—like a patient didn't have enough to suffer already. Medical facilities maintained cool indoor temperatures to deter inveterate germs from contaminating the premises and so its vast flotilla of equipment didn't fry. I knew that. But knowing it didn't inspire any warm feelings for the "throng of professional sadists with a god complex." I quoted my husband there.

Nirvaan captured my attention with a pat on my head. “See you soon, baby,” he said, following the doctor out of the room.

I scooted off the bed as soon as the door shut behind them. My hair tumbled down my face and shoulders at my jerky movements. I smoothed it back with shaking hands. Long, wavy and a deep chestnut shade, my hair was my crowning glory, my one and only feature that was lush and arresting. Nirvaan loved my hair. I wasn’t to cut it or even braid it in his presence, and so it often got hopelessly knotted.

I shrugged off the clinic gown, balled it up and placed it on the bed. I wiped myself again and again with antiseptic wipes, baby wipes and paper towels until the tissues came away stain-free. I didn’t feel light-headed. I didn’t allow myself to freak. I concentrated on the flow of my breaths and the pounding of my heart until they both slowed to normal.

It was okay. I was not walking out with a gift-wrapped baby in tow. Not today. No reason to freak out.

I reached for my clothes and slipped on my underwear. They were beige with tiny white hearts on them—Victoria’s Secret lingerie Nirvaan had leered and whistled at this morning.

Such a silly man. *Typical Nirvaan*, I corrected, twisting my lips.

Even after dressing in red-wash jeans and a full-sleeved sweater, I shivered. My womb still felt invaded and odd. As I stepped into my red patent leather pumps, an unused petri dish sitting on the workstation countertop caught my eye.

The trigger for Nirvaan’s impromptu comedy, perhaps?

Despite major misgivings about the direction my life had taken, humor got the better of me, and I grinned.

Silly, silly Nirvaan. Baby in a petri dish, indeed.

* * *

ONE THING I'd come to love and respect about doctors was their ability to remain unruffled in the most bizarre circumstances.

A large mahogany work desk headlined the length of Dr. Archer's office. I took my seat before it, my stomach twisting like Twizzlers. Nirvaan sat on my right, gregarious and talkative like always, as if all was right in his world, as if he had every right to reweave the very fabric of my existence forever and ever.

But there was an animation in him today that I hadn't seen for some time now, and I let it wash over my qualms. If I overlooked the thinning hair, the tired curve of his spine and the melting muscles beneath his shirt, he almost looked like the man I'd married.

For better or worse, Simeen. I can't say no to you.

He'd always been there for me. Always. No matter what I'd asked of him. Did he not deserve the same courtesy in return?

My husband caught me staring at his profile. He winked, grinning wolfishly, and my lips responded to his charm with a helpless smile.

Dr. Archer cleared his throat and began his spiel. He skimmed over our options—from the cost-effective natural fertilization via intrauterine insemination to the more expensive intracytoplasmic sperm injection, or ICSI. That method involved injecting a single sperm—Nirvaan's—directly into my extracted egg in order to fertilize it. Dr. Archer explained how my eggs would be extracted and the zygote reintroduced into my womb for gestation.

I loved that he spoke directly to me. He addressed Nirvaan only sporadically. Childbearing was a woman's

prerogative, after all. Though, in my case, I'd hardly use the word *prerogative*. *Coerced* would be more apt.

My fingers hurt as I gripped the armrests of my chair. I wasn't ready to be a mother. Not yet. Maybe I'd never be. The thought of being responsible for another person's health and security scared me like nothing else. Nirvaan knew that—or he ought to know it.

I'd thought of children as waves crashing over a distant horizon. I'd discussed—or, no, we'd never discussed having a baby, Nirvaan and I. Not before we'd gotten married. Not after. Not until Nirvaan had been diagnosed with cancer, and the option of freezing his sperm before his first chemo had come up—a treatment that had left him irreversibly sterile.

I didn't want to deny my husband his wish. But I did not want a baby. Not now. Not when our lives were in flux again.

"You have a good chunk of information to sort through." Dr. Archer wound down at last. The walls in his office weren't the calming colors of the Pacific Ocean. They were the no-nonsense white of his doctor's coat. "Meanwhile, we'll start monitoring your cycle. You need to come in for a detailed consult next week, Mrs. Desai. We'll do blood work and a preliminary ultrasound. Narrow down the best route for you. Prescribe medications for maximum ovarian stimulation and so forth." He glanced at his desktop monitor. "I have Monday afternoon and Thursday morning open. Or you can call my assistant for later dates."

"Monday's great," replied Nirvaan while I pretended to scroll through my largely appointmentless phone calendar.

Monday was only three days away. I could be pregnant by the end of the month.

My husband would be dead this time next year.

My breath turned to stone in my lungs. The white walls of the doctor's office shrank. I thought I'd finally scream.

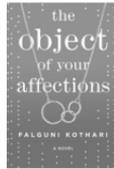
"Call whenever you're ready." Dr. Archer's words were

kind. His pale blue eyes were kinder. “Call if you have questions or any doubts. Your youth really is in your favor, and it’s not infertility we’re dealing with in your situation but extenuating circumstances. Even though we have a limited amount of your husband’s sperm to work with, we have an excellent success rate, Mrs. Desai. Rest assured.”

Hysteria bubbled up in my throat. He thought I was worried that this wouldn’t work. How do I confess to him—to *anyone*—that I was petrified it would?

**To continue reading, be sure to pick up *My Last Love Story*
at your favorite retailer.**

PART III
THE OBJECT OF YOUR
AFFECTIONS



PARIS



The things we did for love.

“Did you know that the global wedding industry is worth three hundred billion dollars? The US stake alone is fifty-five billion?” I waved my phone displaying the appalling data in front of my husband’s face.

The stats—horror of horrors—had gotten worse in the two and a half years since our own wedding.

Neal, as usual, didn’t share my outrage at mankind’s follies, so he shrugged as if the matter was of no consequence to him—which it wasn’t—and with infinite patience he brushed my hovering hand away from his face and continue to do unspeakable things to my mouth.

We were attending our fourth wedding of the year. Fourth! And, I’d been invited to half a dozen baby showers over the past ten months—two of which I hadn’t been able to avoid. As if squealing over fake fluffy bunnies wasn’t bad enough, such events were filled with busybodies who wanted to know when I was going to deliver some “good news” of my own. Seriously, the next person who asked me that question was going to end up in the city morgue. On an autopsy

table. Exactly what was the correlation between pregnancy and “good” news, I had no clue. As if *not* being pregnant was “bad” news? *Aargh!* I could scream.

I’d bet that when Neal and I gave them our special news, they wouldn’t care for it either. Our families were going to go ballistic when they heard that we were considering gestational surrogacy when I was perfectly capable of bearing children.

Well, physically capable. Mentally and emotionally? The jury was still out.

Since Neal had more faith in our mothers than I did, he was welcome to explain it to them when it was time.

“Homo sapiens. Bat-shit crazy lot,” I mumbled from the corner of my mouth, trying to keep my lips from moving as Neal worked on them, while going nearly cross-eyed as I recounted the zeroes that were peppered across the wedding industry article in *Reuters*. “And never satisfied with their lot in life.” Maybe it wasn’t *billions* but *millions*.

Nope. Eleven zeroes tacked behind the cardinal number three. My hope for humanity plummeted to earth. If that didn’t prove beyond reasonable doubt that Man itself was the natural disaster devastating the world, I didn’t know what did. What kind of senseless, overbred animal spends that kind of money on a fantasy ceremony solely created to propagate an even bigger fantasy, that of a perfect union and its glory-ever-after?

Don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t against the institution of marriage. I fully approved when compatible people tied the proverbial knot or cohabitated in a mutually beneficial fashion. Like my adoptive parents—the second set, as opposed to the first abominable pair—who’d been an excellent example of a square peg in a square hole kind of couple. Mr. and Mrs. Samuel and Lily Kahn had been harmoniously well matched

on all fronts until the Judge's death separated them four years ago.

A second great example was my own marriage, which, though not of the square-peg-square-hole variety, was nothing short of marvelous—on most days. I'd married an amazing man who stroked my brain as vigorously as he stroked my emotions...and other interesting carbon-based assets. I'd absolutely hit the jackpot in the supportive husband sweepstakes. So, it behooved me not to screw things up and tread carefully with the surrogacy plans. *Do not dictate. Discuss.*

Neal and I had narrowed our list of potential surrogates down to two women and then reached a stalemate. Neal preferred Martha who came highly recommended by his close friends in California. I liked her too—our interviews had gone well—but she lived simply too far away. I couldn't even begin to imagine the scheduling and travel nightmare for both Neal and I every time we had to make it to a doctor's appointment. If it were up to me, I'd Skype in for the ultrasounds. But my husband wanted to actively experience the entire gestation since it would be the only one he'd—we'd—have. The other candidate was from Connecticut, just two hours away by car. We could see her every weekend if we wished. However, we hadn't clicked quite so well with her as we'd done with Martha. *Le sigh.* It would be so much easier if our surrogate lived in or around New York City, but compensated surrogacy was illegal in New York State thus not an option.

Well, no point in stressing over it right now as we weren't making any decisions this weekend. Better to put everything away and bask in my husband's masterful strokes instead.

Neal's touch was liquid cool on my face, arousing even when he didn't mean to stimulate, as it moved across my eyes and cheeks, brushed over my chin and throat. Though he

didn't look it, the dear lad was dead on his feet—Who wouldn't be after a sixteen-hour flight?—hence the one-word responses, grunts and shrugs at my attempts at marital repartee. Or, was he still brooding over our impasse about the surrogates?

Time-out, Counselor. Repetitive.

Either way, my husband was simply too sweet for not succumbing to a jet-lagged stupor after his whirlwind business trip to Asia. Instead, he'd rushed home from JFK, dumped his travel suiter, taken a hasty wake-up shower, loaded our wedding weekend bags in our metallic blue Tesla, picked me up from the courthouse only to dodge traffic for the next two hours on the I-87 North until we reached the vineyard in time for my college friend Lavinia's wedding rehearsal dinner. After all that dashing around, he was still on his feet taking care of my needs. Mind you, I had asked nicely for his help in putting on my war paint. Neal was just so much better at makeup than I was. So, yes, I would recommend the state of wedded bliss—or even unwedded togetherness—to anyone who'd had the good fortune to find herself (or himself) a Neal Singh Fraser.

In summation, I wasn't against marriage. What I objected to was the hoopla surrounding the ceremony. The wanton waste of time, money and resources in the planning and execution of said hoopla. How could anyone with an ounce of empathy justify spending such garish sums of money on a frivolous party when there were children starving in the world? When scribbling names in front of a marriage registrar in city hall—or the like—worked just as well as an elaborate exchange of vows in front of a priest or officiator? What difference did it make if two souls merged into one entity in front of four people or four hundred? The object of the exercise was to legalize a couple's commitment to each other, wasn't it? But no, some people weren't satisfied until a three-

ring circus supplemented their nuptials, even when they knew, deep in their hearts, that sooner or later another even bigger circus would herald their uncoupling. Point in fact were the hundreds of embittered divorces and child custody battles filling up the dockets in family court. I'd been six when I was dragged into one such despicable battle between my first set of adoptive parents, so I knew firsthand what happened when love died and marriages fell apart. It was *that* kind of wanton waste I objected to. Not that I expected Lavinia and Juan's upstate New York lovefest to end in divorce. Or my own marriage. I didn't.

Oy vey. Did I?

Neal sidestepped to the vanity and abruptly I was nose-to-wall with the embossed yellow leaves on the maple-colored tiles. We were inelegantly squashed inside a bathroom that was tinier than my office at One Hogan Place—a space the formerly taciturn Lily Kahn had pronounced to be the size of a matchbox. As the crusaders of justice and the wielders of morality, assistant district attorneys deserved nicer offices, Lily had once emailed Manhattan's District Attorney, my boss, and cc'd me on it. My adoptive mother had morphed into one opinionated *meshugenah* since the Judge's death. It was another thing driving me batty these days—Lily's battiness.

Her growing obsession with horoscopes, incomprehensible at best, was getting to me. Last week, it had portended a change in my personal and professional life according to Lily. And today, I'd been asked to join a task force that was being set up between the DA's office and the United States Attorney's office, jointly, to look into a human rights violation case. That took care of the professional change. The personal shift could either mean a bairn or a divorce trying to procure said bairn. Double *oy vey*.

After a lightning exchange of brushes, Neal repositioned

himself before me. He settled one hand on top of my head to hold it steady, and with his right hand, he began to trace my full, shapeless lips into a discernable form. My mouth molded into a natural goldfish moue that needed special care. Indeed, my mouth and what came out of it warranted close attention. *Consider the offer carefully, laddie. Your freedom depends on it*, was my daily counsel to the perpetrators of crime. I'd do well to heed my own advice for the decisions I—oops, Neal and I—had to make.

“Quit fidgeting, hen. Nearly done. Close yer mouth. And no, don't frown so. And don't press yer lips together just yet,” Neal instructed in his lilting Scottish brogue that never failed to capture my attention. More, the deep commanding baritone demanded immediate compliance.

I froze on the closed toilet seat and tilted my face up to look into my husband's loch-blue eyes. Fringed with thick sooty lashes, those eyes combined with his voice produced gooseflesh all over my skin even though he didn't mean to stimulate me. Was it any wonder then that I'd given in to Neal's mad vision of our own wedding? I still felt ill whenever I recalled—fondly, mostly fondly—the sheer wantonness of our three-day festivities. The truth was that I found it impossible to say no to this man when he was in the mood to charm.

“Now press.”

I pressed my lips together and tasted strawberries as Neal plied his expertise on shaping them. God! But I loved him—all six feet two inches and one eighty-eight pounds of Scottish-Indian stubbornness. I loved being married to him. And yes, I'd loved getting married to him, exchanging vows and rings and kisses under the ballroom chandelier of his family's residential castle in Scotland. Our wedding might have been a self-indulgent waste of resources but it had come from a place of love and pride, and no one was in debt because of it.

We'd made promises to each other in front of all the people who'd mattered to us—correction, everyone except the two people I'd loved and counted on the most in the world back then had blessed our union. My perfect day of joy would be forever tainted due to their absence.

At least, the Judge had had a legitimate excuse for missing my wedding, being dead and all. But my best friend and maid of honor, Naira, had bowed out at the last minute. Her husband's business had been in trouble. Kaivan the Criminal had gotten his comeuppance the Indian media had claimed, and still Naira had stuck by him like a good little wife. Her choice had broken us for a while—I was a prosecutor, for God's sake, I couldn't stand by criminals. And then he'd died.

Things were slightly better between us now. We messaged each other off and on, and I mostly understood her stance, her choices—especially now that I knew just how much I would do or endure for Neal. But I still felt acid well up inside me when I remembered just how awful I'd felt on my wedding day. How desperately alone.

Neal cocked an eyebrow at me, divining my mood dips as expertly as he was reshaping my lips. "Are ye practicing your apology to her in your mind then? Is that why yer nervous?"

My back and shoulders went taut. "Why should I apologize? She's the one who got all bent out of shape because I pointed out the truth."

"And I suppose ye would let people get away with bad-mouthing me to yer face, aye?"

"If it was the truth," I began but stopped when Neal's second brow joined its twin high on his forehead. Another stalemate. I let my shoulders droop. "Fine. I'll be...nice." I didn't do apologies. Mainly because I didn't make mistakes or speak out of turn.

Neal was right though. I *was* nervous about meeting Naira. It had been four years since we'd seen each other in

person. Two days ago, I'd received a message from her after weeks of iMessage silence: Hopping on a plane to NY. See you at Lavinia's wedding.

What the hell kind of message was that?

"Stupid weddings." I pressed my phone to my stomach, willing the awfulness to abate. I was a mess at weddings—about weddings. I was better at marriage.

Because it served no purpose to get upset about the past or the state of the world, I made a concerted effort to shut a mental door on all my current grievances pertaining to weddings, best friends, starving children—any children, for that matter—and the task force. All that could wait until Monday. This wedding would not.

Sexy times with my amazing man should not.

Said amazing man skimmed a long finger down my nose and tapped its slightly upturned tip—yup, I'd been born disdaining the world—as he scrutinized my face.

"Ye look bonny. Now get dressed so I can start on yer hands." He'd offered to paint henna designs on my hands.

Neal was a globally coveted jewelry designer, a metal artiste and an honest-to-goodness lord—he was fourth in line to a Scottish baronage—and as such an expert on beautiful things and luxury lifestyle. He pulled me to my feet and nudged me out of the miniscule bathroom to get on with getting dressed. I stopped in the doorway to thank him with a kiss but he'd already turned to face the mirrored vanity and was putting my makeup bag to rights.

My pout swelled into a laugh as I watched my husband recap bottles of glitter and gold, click-shut eye shadow palettes, wipe faux-hair brushes with tissue and pack each one of the items into their designated pockets in my cosmetic bag with ferocious care. For a man who dabbled in paint, pencil shavings and liquid metals for a living, Neal did not handle mess well. He tolerated my slovenliness without

batting an eye though, and it was one of the million things I loved about him. One of the zillion things I hoped would never change between us.

I hugged him from behind, pressing a kiss on the nape of his neck, careful not to mess up the fashion-plate paint job he'd done on my face, complete with intricate swirls of a *bindi* design in the middle of my forehead. It shone like a piece of jewelry embedded into my skin. The women at Lavinia's three-ring circus were going to hate me—they always did when Neal did my makeup.

My thank-you left a perfect bow-shaped pink kiss on his bare, sandalwood and verbena-scented skin.

"There now, my gorgeous-ship. You've been branded as mine like the Fraser sheep on your family's farms." I wasn't a possessive person by nature, but with Neal all bets were off. I continuously did things against my better judgment with Neal, for Neal.

We were going to have a bairn together! If that didn't explain how weird my life had become with him, I didn't know what did.

Amused, his gorgeous-ship twisted around to shoot me a smug grin. Shirtless and barefoot, he still managed to look sophisticated and sexy. He was turning me on, probably why his smugness didn't irritate me. And gauging from the height of the tent in his pants, my lingerie-clad state was affecting him too.

Neal had been away at the Hong Kong gem and jewelry trade fair for the past week and we hadn't even hugged properly when he'd picked me up from work this afternoon, much less ravaged each other like we usually did after one of his business trips. And, today was our third engagement anniversary. It was our marital duty to put everything aside and celebrate with monkey sex.

"Fuck henna hands and wedding rehearsals. Let's fuck." I

slid my hands up his hair-roughened chest to his shoulders, my intent as clear as the day was bright.

Third engagement anniversary. We'd been together for more than three years already. It baffled me that we'd lasted this long, considering we'd come together in an explosion of instinct and not intellect. After a mere six weeks of dating, Neal had impulsively suggested we get hitched on the night I'd taken the bar and in my post-exam fugue state I'd grunted, "Why not?"

I'd changed my mind the next morning, after guzzling down a gallon of coffee and sense. And lost them marbles again, a couple of months later, when I'd been giddy with excitement that I'd passed the bar on my first try. We were married within a head-spinning six months of my proposal. Best impulsive decision of our lives.

Neal's hands came to rest on my hips. "Didn't ye say this weekend is dedicated to yer college friends?"

"Doesn't mean I need to be joined at the hip with them. However, you and I can be." I nudged his hips with mine. "We'll claim that you were jet-lagged and I was exhausted. Unless, you have your heart set on spending the night flirting with my friends?" I tweaked his ear playfully, confident of his answer.

"Dally with strangers or shag my wife? Now that's an impossible choice." Neal's lips kicked up in a sexy grin as he took the phone from my hand and set it aside. He freed my hair from the clip holding it up and out of my face. My bra was next, unhooked and tossed over his shoulder. Released from their lacy cage, my boobs thanked him by perking right up.

I giggled when he swung me up in his arms, and tension drained from my body as he carried me into the barn-style bedroom only slightly larger than the bathroom. It felt roomier though, as evening light poured in through the case-

ment windows that showcased the lovely Hudson Valley and its river. The vegetation was slowly turning to gold outside. Unlike Manhattan, where the trees had only just begun to blush. Fall in New York was breathtaking. The vivid, fiery colors; the perfect weather—bright and crisp and spicy with the taste of pumpkin lattes and sangrias on your tongue. How could I have resisted falling for Neal in New York in the fall?

Careful not to jostle the outfit and accessories I'd laid out in one corner, Neal lowered me to the double bed. The coverlet was cool but its textured roughness felt surprisingly good against my skin. I sighed as pleasure spiked and washed away the last of my anxiety and irritation.

I pushed down my panties and kicked them off as Neal divested himself of his dress pants. We were naked in seconds, and then he was on top of me, crushing me with his large, warm body, my mouth with his. I bowed up and moaned as he slid into me, flesh to flesh, stretching me. Every nerve inside my body snapped like an electric charge. We'd starved for each other for a week, been separate entities for seven fricking days. We didn't need priming. We needed to devastate. Quick. Desperate. Now! Climax came quickly for both of us.

Spent, we lay there, breathing hard in the aftermath, hugging, laughing, still joined and shuddering with after-shocks. Perhaps a little disappointed that it was over so quickly.

Neal pushed up on one arm, but he didn't get off me. I didn't want him to. Not yet. He began to rain kisses on my face, nipping my jaw, teasing my ear, licking my collarbone.

"Better?" he asked, his voice gruff with satisfaction, his face ruddy with love. The scar on his chin, the one he'd gotten in a ski accident years ago, before I knew him, was stark white against the dark red skin where I'd sucked. The

rest of him glistened and I felt my pores open too. His blue-blue eyes watched me with humor and a good dose of fatigue. *He* was the one tired and he was asking whether *I* was feeling better. Because he knew Naira's text had upset me.

Love gushed through me, quicker and stronger than my climax. I was glad I'd taken the time to be with my man, to take care of him. I ran a hand through the jet-black thickness of his hair, which tended to curl just above his shoulder. In three and a half years, he'd become as familiar to me as my own face. Every freckle, every scar, every hair follicle, so very dear. I'd missed him so much this past week, especially with everything that was happening at work. With Naira. With the surrogacy. He was always so encouraging and supportive. He loved me. It was such a wonder that he loved me at all, much less when I was a witch to him.

"I lo... ACK!" I began in a whisper and ended up shrieking as the room phone screeched into existence. My heart, beeping with affection a second ago, slammed against my chest with the impact of a judge's gavel. Wildly, my eyes sought out the culprit—a quirky 1980s-style phone on the nightstand that ought to be in a museum, certainly not for use anymore.

"That is possibly—No! That sound is several decibels worse than the FDNY sirens. *Gah!* It's the sound the hounds of hell would make if they'd been forced to skip dinner."

Neal stretched out an arm to reach the nightstand—he didn't have to stretch far—and answered the phone with a brisk "Hullo!" that belied the laughter rippling through his body. Obviously, he didn't think anyone had deprived Satan's hounds of their kibble. With a wink and an, "Och, aye. Here she is," he pressed the phone's receiver to my ear.

It was Karen, Lavinia's pregnant maid of honor. It figured.

“Paris! Is your cell phone on silent? I’ve called and called and left a dozen messages. Are you okay? Not about to pass out for the night, are you? Because Lavinia will kill you if you do. Are you ready to partay? We’re all already here.”

Yup. I was in hell. In college, I’d run myself ragged trying to graduate summa cum laude in journalism and philosophy with a minor in Latin while making it my personal mission not to miss a single night of partying. Every month like clockwork, I’d collapsed from sheer exhaustion, sometimes passing out right in the middle of whatever I was doing, and would sleep for two days straight. What did it say about me that my friends didn’t think I’d matured since then?

“We’ll be down in fifteen minutes,” I said coolly. Karen disconnected the phone without another word apparently satisfied that I was awake and lucid.

I passed the receiver back to Neal. “I should’ve said I had work to finish tonight. Or, you could have brought back a disease from Asia. Yes! We could both be infected by something sinister and avian right now. Something nasty and contagious. Damn it! I’ve been trained to think on my feet. Why didn’t I think of it?” I wondered if it was too late to try the excuse.

Neal laughed heartily—I often amused him with hyperbole—sending our joined bodies aquiver again. Now, I was truly sorry I hadn’t thought of an excuse. I needed more than that quickie with him. But I also wanted this night with my friends. It had taken seven years for us—all of us including Naira—to come together since graduation. It was like a homecoming.

I also couldn’t let Lavinia down. Not for her wedding.

“Ye can’t ditch the lass. She came to our wedding and clocked in full attendance.”

If I’d ever been in doubt that my husband could read my mind, those words cleared it up. But I wasn’t programmed to

give in without a fight—the reason I was a damned good prosecutor.

“The only reason Lavinia came to our wedding was because you paid the air and hotel fare for my friends and family. And arranged for corporate discounts at various hotels for those interested in a Scottish holiday *after* the wedding. Why wouldn’t she have come?”

He’d offered Naira the same red-carpet arrangement and she’d still not come. *Ugh. Don’t rehash the past. It’s done. Finished.*

“Paris.” My name didn’t sound nice as an admonishment. Sometimes, I disappointed him with my quick criticisms and judgments.

“I didn’t mean it negatively. But fine. I take it back.” Arguing simply for the sake of having the last word never served any purpose. “I love you to the moon and back. You know that, right?” I took his face between my hands and kissed his mouth, quick and wet. An apology. I kissed him again and again worth several apologies. “Your eyes are red. If you’re tired, I can go by myself.”

The nonred part of his eyeballs twinkled green and blue and purple in the slanted sunlight. What did I tell you? Wicked charmer. “I slept on the plane. I’m fine for a bit. But, I’ll probably need to crash after meeting yer esteemed friend.”

He planted a soft kiss on my shoulder, then taking care not to hurt me, he rolled off and sat up on the bed. Even so, my body curved in response to his movement and I gasped as grief welled up inside me. No matter how many times we came together and drew apart, or how, in anticipation of the disengagement, I readied my body for separation, clenching it tight, or scolded my heart to behave itself, I still felt hollow when he left me. Like he’d abandoned me. Cast me out. Rejected me. Have I mentioned I have issues? Obviously, we

couldn't stay joined together like a pair of incestuous conjoined twins forever, but my body didn't seem to understand it. Knowing this, knowing me, loving me, Neal never withdrew without a heads-up like that kiss on my shoulder.

We resumed our dress-up dance then, swirling around the room like a pair of professional ballroom dancers. Mid-October temperatures had cooled the room even without air-conditioning and the sweat dried off our bodies quickly. Deodorant took care of the rest. I rice-papered my face, and it was enough to repair my makeup. Last, I slipped a pair of emerald-cut diamond earrings onto my earlobes while checking my appearance in the mirror above the TV unit.

Neal stood behind me, adjusting his tie. His dark suit complemented my copper-and-blue brocade jacket that I wore over a pale blue summer dress.

We were always a study in contrasts, whether in or out of clothes. I was tan to his fair, voluptuous to his lean; a frugal vote to his extravagance. His mixed-race heritage and my evidently South Asian DNA had blessed us with bold looks and hardy genes. I liked how we fit—not totally in sync but complementary like the set of decorative vases on the console table by the TV. I adored who we were, together and separately. I valued the person I'd become from loving him.

"Here, let me help." Neal took the two-inch thick emerald-cut diamond bracelet from my hand. It wasn't hard to clasp shut, even one-handed, but my mind had been elsewhere and I'd missed the clasp's opening twice now.

"The henna would've flattered it, but I enjoyed these hands on me better," he said gruffly, closing the bracelet around my wrist. Then he kissed the back of my hand.

The bracelet was a Sotheby's certified Neal Singh Fraser classic. He'd given it to me on our first wedding anniversary. I'd accepted it reluctantly not wishing to hurt his feelings. Make no mistake, I loved my bracelet. Took delight in it

more because Neal had made it himself. Not just designed it or hunted the planet for the perfect stones to set in it, but also fashioned it with his own hands like an old-fashioned goldsmith and not with the help of machines or hired artisans. I couldn't imagine how he'd done it or how long it had taken him to cast and shape and finesse the train of interlinked pink-gold rings. Each ring in turn was alternatively pavé set in smaragdine—Neal's brand's signature emerald green color—and white diamonds. I marveled at his talent. I did. But owning expensive pieces of jewelry did not sit well with me no matter the sentiment attached to it. It was a frivolous indulgence just like a circus wedding. And I disapproved of it.

It wasn't the first piece of jewelry Neal had given me but it had become the last. Maybe that's why I was partial to it. A few weeks after our anniversary, I'd told him that such presents made me feel uncomfortable instead of happy, and I couldn't enjoy them as he meant me to. He'd stopped giving me expensive trinkets after that. Instead, he planned special things for us to do on our special days in addition to donating large sums of money to Right is Might—our NGO of choice and the reason we were together.

Neal understood my soul. He cared about the betterment of humanity. He might not be as politically driven as I was, but he cared. And that was another one of the zillion things that made him amazing.

"Henna my hands tomorrow," I said by way of compromise.

My husband liked to pretty me up, and I indulged him when I could. It was what marriage was about, wasn't it? Knowing each other's peccadilloes and loving that person anyway? Working out a compromise where one could? Like I'd compromised my stance about not ever having children,

and he had compromised his by having only one, and with a surrogate.

Then, before I got too analytical or anxious again, and before Karen sent out a search party for us, I took my husband's hand and dragged him down to the wedding rehearsal dinner, where unsurprisingly Naira didn't show. My best friend had become adept at breaking her word.

"No amount of rehearsing prepares you for marriage," I told Lavinia later that night as part of my bridesmaid's duties. "You have to wing it just like you do everything else in life."

How I was going to wing being a mother though, I had no fucking idea.

NAIRA



Hope glittered like morning dew across the lawn of Lavinia's wedding venue. Crisp and cool, it soaked into my shoes, tugged at the hem of my peach-and-gold tissue sari as I jettisoned out of the taxi on a patch of green at the edge of a full parking lot. Hope was the only emotion I clung to these days. Hope, and the desperate desire not to quit.

I was late for Lavinia's wedding. Not the fashionable make-an-entrance sort of late, but Indian Standard Time-late—meaning monstrously late. I'd be lucky to catch the tail end of the wedding ceremony.

I'd overslept. In fact, I'd slept for thirty-six hours straight, and that was after zoning out for most of my sixteen-hour Mumbai to New York direct flight. I felt wonderfully rested. The grogginess in my bones, the listlessness of mind that had debilitated me of late was gone. The fruits of a deep, dreamless sleep—or of not being under my family's watchful thumb?

I started forward, the world sparkling before me. Bright white tents rose along the length of a converted barn to the

right, and fields of grapevine dotted with trees strung with mirrored balls and fairy lights rolled for miles to the back and the left. The sun burned above it all, saturating the land with its golden joy. There was a paddock on top of a rolling hill beyond the parking lot and a group of dapper wedding guests were gathered there, clicking selfies and groupies with a pair of tuxedoed cowboys on horseback. Rather adventurous guests, I thought. Also, I'd missed the ceremony if people were spreading out and taking photographs. Or, maybe not. These days clicking the perfect selfie was more important than watching the main event itself.

I increased my pace, meandering through a garden-like area toward an enormous tent from which a sizable number of guests poured out, some with heaped plates and some without. More guests were clustered around the garden, nibbling on hors d'oeuvres or sipping bubbly or cappuccinos. Everyone was chattering animatedly as if discussing something magical. Yup. I'd definitely missed the ceremony.

I couldn't believe I'd gone to sleep on Thursday night—I'd landed at JFK only that afternoon—and woken up straight on Saturday morning, completely missing Lavinia's rehearsal dinner. I hadn't slept through the night in more than three years, let alone through two nights and a day. I hadn't even woken up for food, and only once to use the bathroom. I hadn't heard my phone vibrate at all. Shocking, when every sound it had made for three years had affected me on a visceral level. I'd finally woken up this morning to a gazillion missed calls and texts, mainly from my mother and mother-in-law—everything from "Are you ill?" to "Have you been kidnapped?" I'd replied that I was fine and getting ready for the wedding. But I hadn't called them back. I didn't want to speak to them. Not yet. I didn't want to get sucked back into the quicksand of my problems. I didn't want to think about my life. I needed a break. I wanted one month to myself. One

week. Just one day. To be free. And I wanted to spend that time salvaging my college friendships and my sanity.

Trepidation knotted in my belly along with hope and desperation. I didn't know what kind of reception was in store for me. It would be awkward, of course. I'd disconnected with most of my college friends after graduation some seven-odd years ago. Not Lavinia and Paris, but the rest. In my defense, it was difficult to stay in touch when you lived half a world away. *Difficult but not impossible*, my conscience pointed out evilly. I ignored it.

The truth was my life in Mumbai had consumed me, kept me busy with work and domesticity, with travel, the social scene and, eventually, the problems. And my friends had grown busy in their own lives in the US and wherever else they'd settled after college. But I needed my friends now. I needed some positive connection to this world.

Stop beating around the bush, Naira. Admit that you need Paris Jaya Kahn's unique brand of tough love to help you sort out the mess you've made of your life.

Paris would call a spade a spade and wouldn't allow me to do any less. I didn't need to be mollycoddled or petted or protected or lied to. I needed someone to tell me to stand up and take control of my life, choose my own path and destiny, as no doubt Paris would. The reunion depended entirely on her though, and whether or not she still considered us friends. The last time we'd met in person was nearly four years ago when she'd been sitting shivah for her father. The last time we'd spoken on the phone was the week of her wedding two and a half years ago. We'd fought. Brutally. Since then, we'd communicated strictly via texts and emails, coldly exchanging no more than a birthday greeting or condolence message, and recently through likes, LOLs and applicable emojis on each other's social media.

I'd sent her a brief text just before boarding the plane, so

she knew I was coming, was prepared. Perhaps I should have called? But my plan had been so last-minute. And I'd thought it would be easier to meet her with everyone in one fell swoop amid the happy buffer of a wedding celebration. Then, depending on the vibe, I'd meet my friends one-on-one and reestablish rapport. But now, I wasn't so sure. I'd chosen to ignore Paris's black-or-white nature. You were either loyal or you weren't a friend. You were either good or bad, nothing in between. She'd always had strong opinions and a rigid moral compass. She'd never approve of the choices I'd made in the past three years. She hadn't approved of the ones I'd made before either. My twanging nerves weren't unjustified.

Pieces of gravel began to slip into my open-toed pumps, making me wince, and I hobbled toward a nearby bench to sit and take them out lest the sharp edges tear into my skin. I didn't have time for medical emergencies. I had an agenda in New York and only a limited amount of time to fulfill it before suspicions arose.

Some of the other women were having similar trouble with the gravel, and were either leaning on their partners, shaking out their shoes, or had found a place to tidy up like me. I exchanged smiles with the salt-and-pepper-haired lady sharing my bench.

"It was a beautiful ceremony, wasn't it? Everyone is wearing such lovely clothes." She roved an appreciative eye over my bedecked self. "Are you family or one of the bridesmaids?"

Given my unmistakable South Asian appearance and attire, complete with bangles and *bindi*, the lady's assumptions were entirely logical. Lavinia had asked me to be her bridesmaid and to wear something peach today. She'd invited me to be a part of the ceremony and I'd let her down.

Speaking of logic, it struck me that I shouldn't presume

things about Paris. If I'd changed in the last few years, she would have too. Maybe she'd softened her stance on life the way I'd hardened mine. After all, Paris had gone and done the unthinkable. She'd allowed herself to be domesticated.

"Bridesmaid. Lavinia and I were in NYU together," I explained to my bench partner, swallowing the laugh that always bubbled up whenever I thought of Paris as a wife. Sloppy, stubborn, commitment-averse Paris—a socialist to boot—had married a Scottish-Indian gemstone baron. She'd married one of the high-flying Singh Frasers. I couldn't get over it.

Regret chased my amusement at the thought of Paris's nuptials. I hadn't been able to go.

My stomach tightened. I didn't have time for regrets either.

Not to be rude, I exchanged a trickle of small talk with the lady—Penny—as we resumed our walk up the path. Penny, it seemed, was Juan's cousin from his mother's side, older by two decades so more like an aunt. She gushed over the lively nontraditional and nondenominational ceremony and the venue and how, unlike her initial apprehensions, the two-hour train ride in from New York City hadn't been all that taxing.

I agreed that the commute to the vineyard was easy. Several times during my years at NYU, I'd ridden up hereabouts with friends to go apple picking or hiking or skiing, traveling via different and invariably the cheapest modes of transportation available to students. Taking the Metro-North from Grand Central to Poughkeepsie was so much easier than having to endure the bumpy five-hour plus bus ride from Times Square or Penn Station.

I hadn't taken the train this time, but a private taxi. I'd been so late, and I couldn't have managed running through the station and hopping on and off a train in a sari.

Penny and I parted ways inside the largest tent where she made her way to one of the buffet lines in the corners. People were scattered across a thick array of lilac-bowed chairs that swept around a staged arbor decorated with blush pink-and-peach peonies. The groom was on the stage, laughing and taking photos with his mates. I didn't see Lavinia or any of our mutual friends there.

Lavinia's parents stood just off the stage surrounded by well-wishers. I began to make my way to them, to offer my congratulations and ask where Lavinia was. I took two steps and abruptly stopped as a couple of things occurred to me. If I asked about Lavinia's whereabouts, they'd know I'd only just arrived. They'd crack a joke or two about the tardiness of Indians from India. Worse, what if they snubbed me?

Lavinia's parents were from Mumbai. They knew about my circumstances. The whole bloody country knew.

Heat shot through my belly as I imagined their looks of sympathy and censure. The shaking heads. The downturned mouths. The disgust. The sneers. Damn it. I shouldn't have come. I wasn't ready to show my face in public.

Why had I come? What was I trying to prove and to whom? Had I seriously thought being a spectacle in New York would be less ugly than it had been in Mumbai? That I'd magically wrap New York's give-a-damn veneer around me like six yards of courage in a single day?

I turned on my heel, blindly seeking an exit. When was the next train to Grand Central? I fumbled with my clutch, pulled out my phone and brought up the train schedule. I needed to call the taxi back or find another one. Right this minute, I'd even settle for a bareback gallop to the station on one of those horses in the paddock.

In my rush to flee, I nearly sent a gigantic urn filled with calla lilies and lilacs flying into a group of elderly aunties

waiting in the food line. They looked at me as if I'd lost my mind. They weren't entirely wrong.

"Are you all right, honey? You look a little peaked. Put some food in your belly," one of them said helpfully. "Or are you one of those who only lives on cheese?"

"Not cheese, Mina. Grapes. My granddaughter only eats ten grapes a meal."

I backed away, thanking them and apologizing profusely, while they continued to jabber among themselves about the idiocies of the very young. Then, I simply sagged against the first wall I came across. It took everything I had not to slide to the floor and curl up like a petrified worm.

Be strong. You've taken the first step. You're in New York. Don't panic now.

I fixed a glare at a hanging wooden arrow sign pointing the way to the bar and the bathroom. I breathed in, debated my next move, breathed out and scolded myself. Once again, I had choices to make: imbibe a shot of Dutch courage or throw up. Stay or go? Now or never? As my panic ebbed, I began to notice other things. The rough wooden wall against my back. The scarcity of people around me. Good. No one had witnessed my idiotic behavior except the aunties. I headed for the bathroom before I got splinters in my clothes or skin. I'd freshen up and try this again—being around people.

The tent transitioned into the barn hotel through a long rustic hallway. Stag heads with oversize antlers leaped out of the walls, and thick leathery furniture had been placed in strategic alcoves along the corridor. The space was a stark contrast from the fairy-tale-like wonderland of the tent or the earthiness of the valley outside. Thick pillars of candles burned all over the vaulted room—rooms, plural, as the corridor led to a narrower lounging area, which opened to a furnished great room decked out in more lavender-scented

candles, flowery decorations and an enormous antler-style chandelier swinging from the open-beamed rafters. A fire roared inside a huge hearth, the flames leaping high enough to lick the bear head on the wall above it.

My panic attack had completely faded from the sheer shock and growing anger I felt on behalf of the deer and bear heads looking down on me. Those poor animals. To be hunted, exposed, victimized like that. I knew exactly how they'd felt before their heads had been lopped off.

So many people had wanted Kaivan's head on a spike for what he'd done to them—correction, what their greed had allowed him to do to them. Now those same people had turned their spiteful eyes on my head.

I wondered, yet again, if it was my brother-in-law, Vinay Singhal, poisoning everyone's minds and leading the hunt. Either way, if I didn't want to end up as a taxidermy metaphor, then I had to convince Paris to help me. I had to get over my bad, her mad and everything in between and patch us up. And to do that, I had to stay and see Lavinia's reception through. Cowardice was a luxury I couldn't afford. Neither was pride.

The restrooms were burrowed beneath the grand staircase in the great room. I joined the queue of women waiting to use the facilities. I would not flee. I would stand and face the music—even the ghastly techno music Paris listened to—without cringing or crying. I was going to tell her my pathetic story—well, most of it—and she was going to listen.

Through some lovely ladies inside the restrooms, I found out that the bride was taking pictures in the tent at the back of the barn. So, there I went, pumped up with renewed determination.

I found them immediately. It was impossible to miss the fourteen or so swirls of peach gliding and twirling across the dance floor with *diyās* in their hennaed hands. They weren't

only taking bridal photos for posterity, Lavinia and her bridesmaids were doing a last-minute dance practice before the reception. It warmed my heart that Lavinia had asked me to wear peach today. It made me weepy. I had one good friend in this city still.

Paris had been the maid of honor at my wedding even though traditional Indian weddings didn't require one. But Paris had declined to be Lavinia's MoH, citing crazy work hours as an excuse. Now that I could believe as Paris's work ethic was as immovable as Mount Everest.

My first glimpse of Paris confirmed my suspicions that she'd changed since our last meeting. It was a shock to see her even though I'd seen photos and videos of her life on Facebook. Gone was the unkempt Paris with the cropped hairdo and aggressively black wardrobe. The woman across the room wasn't just beautiful—Paris could never be something as benign as beautiful—she was stunning in peach silk *sharara*-style pants and a halter neck blouse made of a frothy gauzy fabric that had been stitched together in clean lines. No doubt her fashionable yet frill-free outfit had been designed by Helen Pal, Paris's fashion designer sister-in-law. Well-groomed, her hair shimmered halfway down her back in a long straight line. Her face glowed with happiness, her makeup was subtle and highlighted her best features. And, would wonders never cease, was that a hand-painted *bindi* on her forehead? Like the ones models painted on for fashion shows?

Hadn't I known it? I felt like clicking my heels and yodeling. I'd assured Paris she'd stop traffic if she just bothered to groom herself. She hadn't been interested before. Or rather, she hadn't cared about outward beauty, always rebuffing my attempts to lure her into an afternoon of shopping and salon treatments. She'd dissed my battles with beautification as frivolous nonsense and a complete waste of valuable time.

My heart lifted when she smiled at Lavinia and said something that was no doubt smart and sarcastic. This was Paris. Sarcasm was a given. Years rolled away and my cheeks began to hurt from grinning. They hurt also from trying not to cry.

I'd missed her. Unbearably. Why had I stayed away for so long? I started toward her. There were so many things I had to tell her. So many gaps we needed to fill. Then someone screamed my name and I jolted to a stop. I was only a dozen feet away from my bestest friend.

Paris whirled, her eyes darting across the tent, zeroing in on my face. Her mouth formed an O of surprise before she snapped it shut. Her hands, red and gold with faux henna designs, were cupped in front of her body as if she was begging for alms. A tiny flame shook inside the *diya* she held, lighting up her face in a soft, golden glow.

The *diya* brought another tidal wave of NYU memories to mind. We'd used *diyās* as props in our intercollegiate dance-offs. Only those *diyās* had been made of battery-operated plastic, not the real deal like these ones.

Before I could take another step, I was surrounded by our friends. Lavinia launched herself at me after setting her *diya* down on a table, the flame dancing madly as though sensing our excitement. I hugged her tight and wished her all the happiness in the world, abjectly apologizing for my tardiness. I was a bad friend.

"It doesn't matter. You're here now," she said, happy tears filling her eyes.

Nothing could mar a bride's happiness on her wedding day. Not ill-timed friends or even absent ones.

God, Paris, I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry for not being there for you on your wedding day.

I hugged Aria and Olga and Stacey and Karen, who was huge and pregnant and looking very much like a fertility

goddess in a one-shouldered blush pink Grecian-style gown. I hadn't known—hadn't expected that one of my friends could be pregnant. I should have though, as we were all crossing into our thirties on our next birthdays.

I couldn't quite control the dash of envy I felt at Karen's fecundity even while I drowned in sheer joy. We all jostled for space, bouncing madly, uncaring of the spectacle we made of ourselves. I even embraced a couple of women I didn't know and was introduced to between the hugs and screams. We were attracting attention with our hysteria, people were staring at us. But, for once, I was beyond embarrassment. I had nothing to feel ashamed about here, nothing to be careful about. Everyone was shouting and laughing and hurling questions at me. I felt welcomed and wanted. I felt as if I'd come home.

I looked for Paris in the mayhem. She stood stiffly only a dozen feet away. Shock had melted from her face, coolness taking its place like ice sheets glazing over stone. Maybe there was even a sliver of disgust in her eyes.

Stop being a fucking doormat. You're better than that, she'd hurled at me over the phone when I'd called to tell her I wasn't coming to her wedding. She hadn't believed me when I'd said the decision was mine.

I swallowed the hurt that had taken up residence in my throat since that conversation. I wanted us to—*needed* us to forgive each other for our unkind words. Tears wet my lashes but I didn't blink. I wouldn't look away. Couldn't.

"Hi," I whispered, hoping she wouldn't make a scene. Yet, I braced for attack.

Paris broke eye contact and shot a wry look at Lavinia whose face shone with an *I told you so* expression. Nothing should mar a bride's happiness on her wedding day.

I really hoped we wouldn't have our showdown here. Our friends grew quiet around us, waiting for the inevitable

explosion. Paris had a volatile temperament and I was no meek mouse—or I hadn't been before.

I took a step forward, then another. Paris didn't move. My rib cage hurt when I released the breath I'd been holding. She wasn't leaving. That was...good. I wanted to run to her. Hug her, hard. Apologize to her and yell at her at the same time for...everything.

Then suddenly out of nowhere, a bunch of girls ran between us, giggling and shouting. I stepped back automatically. One of them had a man's shoe in her hands. The groom's shoe.

I grinned, recognizing the *joota chupai*—a custom in which the bride's sisters hid the groom's shoes, then made him buy them back. Ostensibly, to teach the groom the art of marital negotiation before he left the *mandap* or wedding site. Kaivan had taken my older sister, Sarika, and her family to the Maldives as his shoe-release remuneration. Sarika's husband, Vinay, had given me money and that too only after I'd reminded him, several times, that he owed me. My smile died. Like how he repeatedly reminded me of what Kaivan and I owed him now.

A gang of boys thundered past us to catch the girls and snatch the shoes back. It seemed Juan's family had been apprised of this fun but mercenary little Indian wedding custom.

I looked back at Paris, wondering what fun customs had been part of her Jewish-Scottish-Indian wedding, again feeling awful that I hadn't been there to see it.

Everything happened in slo-mo next. Paris did a double take as a boy headed straight for her. He was looking over his shoulder, grinning with the impudence of youth. She dodged a head-on collision by swirling out of his way as he dashed past her. As she turned, her stole slid off her shoulder, falling to the floor in a graceful heap. She reached for it in reflex.

The flaming *diya* in her other hand tilted as she bent low. Oil spilled from the earthen cup splashing the hem of her beautiful *lehenga* pant. Oops. It was impossible to get oil stains out of embroidered silk. Then Paris flinched as if hurt.

The oil was that hot that it had burned her?

“Paris! Your hand. The *diya*!” I yelled, rushing forward.

But my warning came a second too late. Paris slipped on the spilled oil on the floor, her arms flailing for purchase. She righted herself promptly, but in doing so, lost her hold on the *diya*. It smashed to the floor, its contents flying willy-nilly. The flame went out and I whooshed out a breath. Disaster averted. Then suddenly, the silken hem of her *lehenga* began to blaze.

Holy shit. I wondered if Paris would ever forgive me now.

To continue reading, be sure to pick up *The Object of Your Affections* at your favorite retailer.

PART IV
ROYALLY YOURS



THE MAID AND THE GARDENER

Jasmin

For the third time that day, Jasmin Karim made her way down the back stairs of the east wing of Buckingham Palace to the Red Salon, where the bridal bouquet awaited spritzing. Ms. Jones, the royal florist, had chosen the large room specifically because it was as cool as a refrigerator—the cold would keep the flowers from wilting, she'd explained. The salon was on a different floor than the royal bridal suite, and Jasmin had been scampering up and down between the two rooms all morning.

As the soon-to-be bride's lady's maid, Jasmin was in charge of the bridal wardrobe, including care of the exquisite bouquet of divine-smelling flowers. The arrangement had to be kept well-hydrated right up to the ceremony. Hold the water spritzer bottle about six inches away from the flowers and give them ten good puffs every hour, on the hour, Ms. Jones had instructed.

In truth, Jasmin was glad to have an excuse to get away from the royal suites for a bit. There had been such a palaver

that morning between Princess Gracie and Princess Georgie, over hats of all things.

Although, nothing could temper her mood today. Jasmin's lips curved into a silly smile. Prince Richard was marrying his love, Miss Meredith, tomorrow, and it was going to be a glorious day—hat debacles notwithstanding.

Weddings made people crazy. Jasmin had been front and center in all three of her sisters' *nikaahs*, and knew how tempers could run high for months leading up to the ceremonies. The royal wedding was no exception. Even with a slew of wedding planners and event organizers nitpicking every detail, things had gone awry. But everything would go smoothly tomorrow, Jasmin thought, nodding firmly as she strode toward the Red Salon.

Her steps faltered as a horrendous crash echoed through the east wing hallway. At its heels came the high-pitched yips of a couple of very excited dogs.

"What on earth . . . ?" she cried, and charged forward. But in her rush to turn the corner and investigate the source of the sounds, Jasmin tripped on her own sturdy Mary Janes and went sprawling onto the carpet.

"Oomph!" Winded and utterly mortified by her clumsiness, Jasmin blew loose strands of hair out of her face and pushed herself up on all fours. Then she froze, spotting the open doors of the Red Salon. She was positive she'd closed them behind her an hour ago. And the barks were coming from inside!

Alarmed, Jasmin lurched to her feet and rushed—or rather, hobbled—into the room, coming to an abrupt stop just inside the door. She stared in utter devastating, disbelieving horror. The table she'd dragged from the French windows to a side wall, as per Ms. Jones's instructions to keep the flowers out of the path of direct sunlight, had somehow toppled over, smashing the vase containing the

bridal bouquet to the floor. Water, petals, and shards of glass were scattered everywhere and . . . and the corgis were using the bouquet as a chew toy!

“Oh. My. Goodness. Oh my goodness! Who let the dogs out?” she cried, grabbing hold of her head with both hands. What had happened here? Who’d caused such havoc? She looked around wildly for the culprits, but there was no one in the room except for her and the queen’s corgis, now fighting over the bouquet.

“Oh my goodness.” She dashed full tilt to rescue the bouquet, ignoring the sharp pain in her ankle from her earlier stumble. How had the bloody corgis managed this?

“Shoo! Get away from the flowers . . . and the glass. Bad doggies. Bad!” She tried to grab whatever was left of the bouquet, and found herself in a tug-of-war with both snarling mutts. Then, as abruptly as the commotion had started, the corgis tired of the game and released the flowers, sending her flying backward onto the ground. Without so much as a look in her direction, the dogs imperiously trotted out of the room. Jasmin didn’t waste a second; she shut the doors and locked herself inside.

She took a moment to wipe sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand while her bosom heaved. She stared in horror at the carnage the dogs had left in their wake. Shredded flowers covered the carpet, and the tangled wire skeleton of the bouquet lay sadly in the middle. *Shit.*

She wondered if the disaster would lead to her being drawn and quartered in the Tower of London. *Big, giant dollops of shit.*

Jasmin buried her face in her hands and groaned. This could not be happening. This was supposed to be the best week ever, leading up to the most romantic day ever. This was supposed to be her chance to prove to everyone that she wasn’t here simply because of her father’s position as Super-

intendent of the Royal Household, but that she deserved her promotion from a regular maid at Windsor Castle to Miss Meredith's personal lady's maid. It was by her father's recommendation that she'd been transferred to the palace to attend to the new bride, and she'd already messed it up. Mrs. Christy, the housekeeper of Windsor Castle and Jasmin's old boss, had fought against the promotion. She thought Jasmin was a clumsy, inept twit.

Mrs. Christy had been so right.

With a deep breath, Jasmin drew her hands from her face. Maybe it wasn't all that bad. Maybe . . .

Nope. It was bad. Very bad. She couldn't believe two itty-bitty balls of fur had done so much damage in less than five minutes.

She sank to her knees on the carpet, rocking her body back and forth and calling on Allah for help. But even prayers didn't settle her stomach. She pressed her forehead to the carpet and moaned. If she didn't have to keep her topknot impeccable—not a hair could be out of place as per the housekeeping dress code—she'd have curled into a comma on her side and wept. She was in so much trouble. She flinched as a commotion broke out in an adjoining room. It sounded like Mr. Henry, the assistant to the royal butler, and Ms. LeDoux's personal bodyguard, that sweet Mr. Mike. Jasmin had unpacked and organized the wardrobe of the glamorous pop star and maid of honor, Katrina LeDoux, the day she'd flown in from America. And even though it wasn't his job, Mr. Mike had helped her carry the heavy boxes up the stairs.

Jasmin sat up as the shouting escalated. *Please don't come in here.* Mr. Henry seemed extremely put out about something—again. Normally a stoic man, the wedding and its myriad complications were undoing him. The thought of being caught with the destroyed bouquet and being incin-

erated in the crossfire of Mr. Henry's temper left Jasmin cold.

She sprang to her feet and rushed to the en suite bathroom. It was all she could do not to wail at her predicament. She stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror—she even looked a mess. Hurriedly, she splashed her face to cool her cheeks, and passed wet hands over her hair to smooth her escaped strands back into place. Slightly better.

While she considered her options—run away or confess?—she filled a tumbler with water and drank deeply to cool her insides, too. She should clean up the room. Destroy the evidence. *Yes.* Jasmin grabbed several towels from a linen closet and got to work.

In the salon, she set the table upright. Then, hitching her maid's uniform up to her thighs, she squatted and began picking up the bigger shards of glass before mopping and re-mopping the floor. She worked quickly and silently, her heart leaping into her throat whenever someone so much as walked past the room.

What was going to happen to her? Their Royal Highnesses would never forgive her for ruining their perfect day. She would never forgive herself. Oh, why had she ever agreed to take on such responsibility? She should never have let the pep talks from Benji, her best friend and palace colleague, bolster a false sense of confidence in her. She was not meant for stress and—

Wait. *Benji.*

Jasmin blinked at the sopping mess in her hands. Benji! Of course. He was the answer. But where in the world was he? She sat back on her haunches, frowning. Was he back from his flower-buying trip? He had to be. The wedding was tomorrow. And hadn't he left her a message yesterday and she'd forgotten to call him back? She smacked her forehead, getting to her feet. Then stopped short.

Ugh. She'd promised Papa that she'd quit running to Benji every time she got in trouble. She was an adult now, nearly twenty-two years old. She had to grow up and fight her own battles.

Her father's disappointed face swam before her eyes but was immediately replaced by his expression of horror as she got arrested, handcuffed, and taken to prison by royal decree.

Jasmin shuddered. She had no choice here. And who better to help her with a flower-related emergency than the royal junior gardener who also happened to have a degree in horticulture?

A sprig of hope bloomed inside her as she pulled her phone out. "Benji! I need your help."

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Formatting and cover design by Kate Tilton (www.katetilton.com)