

## Chapter 2

Alisha Menon, divorce lawyer and happily-ever-after skeptic, stared out of her office's sliding windows, a dreamy smile pasted on her face. She couldn't stop smiling. She hadn't stopped since the date last night.

*His name was Aryan.*

Humming a romantic tune while smiling, Alisha swivelled her faded blue executive chair back around to her desk, and tried to get her brain to focus on the work she'd been shamefully neglecting for the last two hours, ever since she'd waltzed into her office at her usual time at 9:00 a.m. sharp. She started reading the statement given by Jyoti Kumar's sister, Sheela, a few days ago, reinforcing Jyoti's statement of the repeated marital abuse she'd suffered over the years. And as it had been happening all morning, the words on the page blurred, merged, and Aryan's obsidian eyes—magnetic and enigmatic—floated on the paper. Alisha swivelled back to the window. It was useless trying to work until she stopped obsessing. It was insanity, what she was feeling.

She leaned forward, resting her hands and chin on the windowsill, and gazed idly at the daily seen panorama outside. Waves of stone buildings clustered together like uneven teeth, lining the grid-fulls of narrow streets that bulged with humanity. Bridges rose and fell and curved towards the Queen's Necklace and the Arabian Sea beyond. Fearless foot vendors wove in and out of traffic jams, selling their wares at signals—books, incense, flowers, fruits—uncaring of the danger. The city clamored around them, filling the air with the sounds of temple bells, car horns, wheel squeaks, the pigeons on the roofs. Oh, she loved it all—the energy, the chaos, the vitality of Mumbai.

Alisha rested her forehead against the window, willing away the ennui her infatuation had created. Was it infatuation? Yes, it was. She wouldn't lie to herself. She was greatly attracted to him. She had been drawn to him even before she'd met him. Their chats had often stimulated her into a similar

state of euphoria. She had laughingly called their chats “a virtual aphrodisiac,” an online “lust-a-fest.” But the reality of Wordfreak—of Aryan was so much more compelling.

Her mobile phone rang, saving her from madness. She twisted around, picked it up. “Hello!”

“You answered on the first ring, which means you’re not in a meeting. Or dead, proving Wordfreak wasn’t a dastardly or dangerous character. Tell me, tell me, tell me everything about your date, Leesha!” Diya Mathur was nothing except exuberance on legs.

Oh, Wordfreak wasn’t dastardly, but he was definitely dangerous.

“Tell me! Or is there nothing to tell? I knew it. I know how these Internet hookups work. All talk and no show. Didn’t I tell you? Would you listen? What happened? Say something. How awful was it?” Diya blathered on without pause.

Alisha shook her head. “If you shut up and let me speak, I’ll tell you.”

“Zipping it now.” Diya didn’t say anything for a couple of seconds and Alisha took that to mean it was her turn. She opened her mouth to speak, but Diya beat her to it. “And don’t leave anything out. Give me all the juicy details. Or should I say the un-juicy details of the flop date? He was horrible, wasn’t he? Ugly, short, nasty body odor, warts all over his face, oozing creepy Jack-the-Ripper vibes, right?”

Alisha ignored Diya’s outburst. “How come you didn’t call me last night? I was expecting to spill my guts to you.”

“Had a thing that went on till late. Then the troupe went to an after-party. Yada yada. Stop avoiding the convo, Leesha. Tell me everything.”

“Not avoiding anything except your big ugly nose,” Alisha said with a grin.

“Hey!” Diya’s outrage was immediate and loud. She was touchy about her nose, especially since she’d taken up modeling full-time.

“Fine. Are you sitting down? He’s...” Alisha built up the suspense to nail-biting levels before adding, “Great!”

There was an anticlimactic “Huh?” from Diya, followed by an explosion of questions. “Great? What does that even mean? What was so great about him? Be specific. Wait! Are you saying you actually *liked* him?”

It was shocking, Alisha had to admit. It was hard to meet a decent guy these days. Harder still to like him. And trusting a guy? *Pfft*. Forget it.

“The question, dear friend, is not what was so great about Wordfreak/Jack/Aryan, but what wasn’t great about him.” The ridiculous statement earned another nasal “Huh?”

“Never mind.” Alisha flapped her hand in the air, cutting off the ridiculous conversation before it deteriorated further. “Wordfreak, a.k.a Aryan, is gorgeous, stupendous, amazing and... He’s only twenty-five years old.” Her excitement deflated slightly then.

“What?” Diya screeched.

“Yup.” Alisha was torn between hopping up on her desk and gyrating for all she was worth—and she didn’t even like to dance—or, feeling bummed about the age factor.

“OMJeez, you’re not kidding. How? Why? I mean... Wow!”

“Don’t know. Don’t care. Well, I do care about his age, but let’s set that aside for a minute and rejoice in the fact that not all men are douchebags. What this proves, Ms. Skeptic-about-all-things-web-based, is that Wordfreak is more than what I expected, and the total opposite of what you expected and he... Did I mention he’s only twenty-five?”

There wasn’t even a squeak out of Diya. Apparently, she’d been rendered speechless. Taking full advantage of the minor miracle, Alisha launched into a delicious breakdown of her date, sparing nothing—words, moments or details.

“No way! He knows John Abraham?” Diya whispered in a suitably awestruck tone.

“Yup.”

“Wow! Leesha, you’ve hit the jackpot.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. He *is* only twenty-five...”

“Will you shut up about his age?”

“That’s easy for you to say since he’s not going to be *your* boy—” Alisha shut her mouth. Goodness. She’d almost called him her boyfriend after just one date.

Diya had no such time restraints. “Boyfriend? Boy toy? Potential lover? Significant other? Marriage prospect? All of the above?”

“Control yourself, Dee.” If hearts could dance, hers was breakdancing inside her chest. It was supposed to have been a dud date, Alisha thought. He could still turn out to be a douche.

She sighed. Who was she trying to convince? She’d always been attracted to him, even before she’d laid eyes on him.

“Wait a minute. What did you say his name was?” Diya asked.

“Aryan.” Of the obsidian eyes and dimpled cheeks. Alisha pressed a hand to her cheek, remembering the warmth of his large hand against hers. She’d tingled all over with that simple touch.

“Aryan Chawla, the architect. You said he was designing a vacation home for Johnny boy, so it has to be Aryan Chawla of Prithvi Homes. OMJeez! Leesha, do you even know who he is? He’s that wonder-kid that designs green homes,” Diya trilled.

“Who?” Alisha grimaced. “And how do you expect me to go out with him if you call him a kid?”

“Wonder-kid. There’s a difference. Anyway, you can be so clueless. Wake up and smell Page 3, darling.”

“What?” The Page 3 section of the newspaper wasn’t something Alisha read. She secretly thought all the humans who graced that page belonged on some far away planet completely alien to her. Aryan was one of those glitzy society people? Hadn’t she known he was too good to be true?

“You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?” asked Diya.

“Nope, and seriously don’t care to. How you can read that rubbish, and deal with those snobs, I’ll never understand.”

“Forget all that. Does he look as good in person? He’s absolutely hunky in print.” Diya sounded like she was having a cardiac arrest. She was panting very hard.

“What’s wrong with you? Did I give you my flu?”

“No, no,” Diya huffed out. “I’m running back up to my flat. Want to check if I’ve got it right.”

“It’s not urgent, Dee. Wait. Why are you running up six flights of stairs? Is the building elevator not working again?”

Diya wheezed like Darth Vader. “No. Exer...cise. Mah mor...ning exer...cise.”

Oh brother. “Then, for heaven’s sake stop talking. At least until you can breathe again.”

Diya worshipped at the altar of the fitness gods. To be fair, her profession depended on looking good, and she took that to heart and worked her pores out. The beauty gods had seen fit to grace her with abundant gorgeousness—fair, supple skin, a rosebud mouth, straight, shiny hair, and a long and elegant, though slightly snooty, neck. Giving weight to all of that was Diya’s innate sense of style.

Alisha put the phone on speaker and stood up to stretch, her bones making soft popping sounds as they eased. Twisting left then right, she let out a groan as her lower back rotated, lengthened and rearranged itself into a much more comfortable position.

If Diya was right, and Alisha rather thought she was, then Wordfreak was some hotshot Page 3 dude. So, the question was, what could she possibly do with a twenty-five-year-old hotshot? A slew of naughty possibilities rolled through her mind, burning her cheeks.

Truthfully, she’d never been this strongly attracted to a man before. They’d hit it off right from their first Scrabble game where she’d beat him with a tile-thumping two hundred and sixty points. That had put Wordfreak’s—Aryan’s, she had to start thinking of him as Aryan—back up and he had promptly challenged her to another game. She won the second one too. And a third and fourth, and then her luck had turned. He’d won the next couple of games.

Playing one match after another had opened the doors to chatting. Initially about online word games, and the books they’d read, and would recommend the other read. One thing had led to another, and soon they found that they could chat for hours, and they honestly enjoyed the repartee.

Alisha didn’t have many friends. It wasn’t that she was unduly shy or an introvert. She was simply cautious about who she let into her life. With Wordfreak, trust hadn’t been an issue. Her natural reticence hadn’t reared up because he wasn’t real, or so her mind kept rationalizing. Their friendship had

bloomed quickly within the confines of hidden identities. Until two months ago, they hadn't even known they both lived in Mumbai.

"I'm back!" Diya's voice oozed through the speaker, minus the huffing. "Googling him as we speak. I know I'm right. I just want to make sure. Did you look him up?"

"I don't use my office computer for personal business." The truth was she didn't want to know anything more about him. She didn't want to wake up from her dream. She wanted him to remain anonymous. It was safer that way. And foolish, she thought, sighing.

"Hang on. It's loading...slowly. Ah, here we go. Annd... I was right!" Diya exulted in the corroborated evidence.

"So what?" Alisha shrugged. "I already knew he was an architect."

"So what? Honey, you are so far out of your league with this guy you might as well speak Russian. Look him up, for heaven's sake!" Diya tsk-tsked, then added, "Okay, here's our new plan. Fairy Godmother Diya to the rescue. We must go shopping. Can you finish early? I'll pick you up from your office."

"Were you possessed by a Dementor in the last twenty-four hours?" The question was purely academic. Wordfreak would have sent her a high-five emoji for her clever Potter reference.

"He's a regular on Page 3!"

And that was supposed to induce her to ditch work and go shopping? "I'm not at all sure that's a good thing, gracing Page 3 regularly."

"Says you, Ms. Bookworm who hates to partay!" Diya said the word party like a gangster on Netflix. "Seriously, which self-respecting single woman in her twenties refuses to paint the town pink? All you do is work, Leesha. You work beyond your billable hours most days, and you still take work home to finish. You're surrounded by stacks and stacks of papers, and you still spend most nights all alone reading for pleasure. And you're asking me if I'm demented? Would you let your hair down for once and just enjoy doing something spontaneous and outrageous, something that cannot be bound and printed? I promise it will not lead to the next mass extinction of brain cells."

It was an old argument between them, and more or less true. Though, she wasn't as big a party pooper as Diya let on. She knew how to have fun. And if she ever forgot, her best friend had her covered.

"Dee Dee," Alisha began but was rudely cut off.

"For some unfathomable reason, Providence has decided to drop that super scrumptious man into your lap and, you being you, will focus on two silly points, sweeping the other ninety-eight salient ones under the carpet. You make me so mad sometimes. I want to come there and smack some sense into you. I'll bet you didn't even kiss him."

"Um, Diya?" Alisha began when it seemed safe to do so. Diya grunted, but otherwise kept quiet, so Alisha said her piece. "Can I point out one tiny, really insignificant thing? My lifestyle, or a lack thereof, did, in fact, help me land Mr. Super Scrumptious though, didn't it?"

There was a noticeable gasp at the other end of the phone, then peals of laughter filled the fiber optic lines spanning between them.

"Oh, how I envy that quick wit of yours. I'm sorry, Leesh. I'm so sorry that I dissed your choices. I deserve a swift kick. Your lifestyle doesn't suck. Really. In fact—"

Uh-oh! Feeling another rant coming on, Alisha nipped it in the bud. "Got to go, Dee. Expecting a client soon. Talk to you later."

"Hey! Not so fast. When are you meeting him again? When am I meeting him?"

*Crap!* "Soon. Bye." Alisha disconnected the line cutting Diya's "Hey!" in half.

Sometimes rudeness could be excused, especially in defense of self-preservation.

"And, what are you so cheerful about this afternoon? Well, evening now," Sameer Vaidya, co-owner and founder of Prithvi Homes, asked his nephew.

The nephew in question was bent at the waist over an angled drafting table slashing lines across a large sheet of graph paper, whistling while he worked. Aryan shot his *mamu* a wicked grin, prompting the older man to look at him even more curiously.

“I met someone,” he confessed. Not that a grinning, whistling Aryan was such a rarity, still, today he felt deliriously happy. Because of her.

He would climb mountains for her. Swim across oceans. He would leap into the cloudless sky just to see her sweet face, and bask in its glory. Suddenly, he couldn't think about life in anything but hyperboles. Aryan threw back his head and laughed at his foolishness. The sudden burst of sound startled his uncle, resulting in coffee sloshing on his uncle's khakis and the newspaper he'd been reading.

“What the hell!” His uncle sprang up from the office armchair with a curse.

“Shit. Sorry, Mamu.” Aryan grabbed a handful of tissues and shoved them in his uncle's hands, who dunked the thick wad into a glass of water and began wiping at the stains on his pants.

Aryan bent back to preparing the preliminary designs for a two-thousand square foot apartment in South Mumbai. They would start work on the site within the month. The apartment was on the twentieth floor with an east-west layout, good light and crosswind. Best of all, he'd been given carte blanche on the budget so he could design it exactly as he envisioned it.

“Must have been some date.”

Aryan slanted a grin at his *mamu*, who'd taken his seat again, minus the ruined newspaper which had been dumped along with the tissues. They'd just finished a meeting with a prospective client, and had decided to hang around the conference room to bounce off ideas for the new project.

“It was amazing.” She was amazing. He couldn't believe his bloody luck in finding her.

“Anyone we know?”

Aryan's mouth kicked up in a cocky grin. “No one you know, Uncle Sam.”

His uncle scowled at the *phirangi* moniker Aryan had bestowed upon him as a joke. Sameer Vaidya had become a diehard *desh bhakt* of late, voting at every election, expressing his liberal political opinions to anyone who cared to listen. Not many did, Aryan admitted, but did that stop Uncle Sam or his patriotism? Absolutely not. Only his sense of style—more GQ and no *khadi* whatsoever—kept his uncle from being tagged as a true “Gandhian.”



Aryan's personal politics encompassed two nations since he'd spent the first half his life in the UK and the recent half in India. He retained a British citizenship, but had an Indian resident card. Loyalty was important, sure. But, if one was affiliated to two countries, Aryan figured he had enough loyalty for both, and some to spare. And if a conflict of interest arose, seek the universal truth.

*She* held some of the same convictions as Uncle Sam. And he was positive they'd get along like a house on fire. The thought of her meeting his family—Mamu, Nanu, everyone—had his heart pounding like a jungle drum.

He straightened from the desk and rolled his shoulders to ease the stiffness along his spine. Drawing floor plans by hand was stimulating, but also a pain in his shoulders.

Was he jumping the gun here? He didn't even know her name. If she didn't reveal her name tonight, he wasn't sure what he'd do. What could he do, really? It wasn't as if he had her phone number or knew where she lived. Frowning at his limited options, Aryan looked up to find his uncle watching him with some amusement.

"I haven't seen you this spaced out since...never. What the hell is going on, son?"

Aryan propped his hip on the edge of the table, crossing his arms across his chest. "I told you. I met someone. Someone rather special, it seems." He looked away, feeling as embarrassed as a groom on his wedding night.

It was happening too fast, whatever this was, and there seemed to be little he could do to control it. He wasn't sure he liked feeling so powerless. Yet, what could he do?

An eagle flew across the wall of windows, drawing his attention to the vast expanse of cloudless pink and purple sky. The eagle turned, gliding in a large circle, enhancing the beauty of a Mumbai sunset.

A loud whistle pierced the air. Aryan jerked back to attention.

"What is wrong with you? Have you suddenly developed ADHD?" Uncle Sam asked.

"Ha-ha. Funny, Mamu, really funny."

"What is the matter? Talk to me, Aryan." His uncle came to stand beside him.

“I like her. Too much. It’s exciting. Yet, oddly daunting.” He couldn’t figure out if he was afraid of what she triggered in him or exhilarated as both of those emotions generated the same reaction—a high-speed race going on in his arteries and goose bumps popping up across his body. “She triggers something in me that no other woman has.”

Aryan turned to the man who’d helped raise him, and shrugged. With only a decade separating them, they were more like brothers or buddies than uncle and nephew. There was nothing he couldn’t tell Sameer Vaidya.

“Intense feelings can be terrifying,” Uncle Sam said with a half smile.

“It’s not lust.” Aryan set his jaw. That is not what he felt for Worddiva. Not only.

His uncle blinked, clearly incredulous. “Are you saying it’s love?”

Aryan’s body went taut and the denial was immediate. “Of course not!” Not yet, anyway. He shook his head, more confused than ever. “How was it between you and Neeta Mami when you met? I remember you telling me that sometimes all it took was a look.”

“Are you comparing your date to the moment I met my wife?” A speculative gleam appeared in Uncle Sam’s eyes.

“Just answer, please. And leave the analysis for another day.”

“Fine. It did take us only one look. And, of course, I was terrified. Sometimes I still am.”

Uncle Sam afraid? It was crazy. “Why?”

“Because marriage doesn’t automatically take the fear away. Sometimes, it increases your fear because you have more to lose. Can it work? Will it work? Is it working? Is it enough? Is it worth it? You’re constantly questioning the state of your relationship, and you have to work at surmounting the fears. Or ignoring them—although, ignoring doesn’t necessarily work. It’s hard to maintain a relationship, any relationship, and it takes time, dedication and commitment by all involved to sustain it. The ups and downs, the fights and make ups, it’s as invigorating as it’s frightening.”

“Life is a roller coaster,” Aryan murmured before the older man could.

“Absolutely. And, what a ride it takes you on!” Uncle Sam was a *bindaas* soul, a thrill seeker. He’d mellowed since his young and reckless days, but he still liked to get his kicks where he found them. “How did you meet her? Does Ma know?” he asked.

“You’re the first to know. I’m not putting the cart before the horse by bringing Nanu into it, or Neeta Mami. By the way, I don’t think Nanu is fine. She’s been ‘resting’ a lot this visit. She tires easily, and you’ll not believe this, she didn’t want to cook the other day.” That was not only shocking but worrisome. His grandmother lived to cook, and for her to not want to, that wasn’t good.

“She’s getting on in years, it’s natural she’s slow down,” Uncle Sam replied.

“Are you sure that’s all it is? She seems frail all of a sudden.” Aryan hoped it was what his uncle said and not an onset of some old age-related medical problem.

His grandmother stayed with him for a week every month “to feed her sweet boy wholesome, home-cooked meals,” even though she’d trained his household staff, including the cook, herself. It was an excuse to keep an eye on him, and everyone knew it.

Nanu hated the idea of Aryan rattling about alone in his flat. To tell the truth, he missed living at his uncle’s too. There was something inherently cozy about being in a full house. But, it had been time for him to move out, especially after Lara and Riana were born—his little cousins were four and two, respectively. Space had become an issue since their births, privacy another. Not that Uncle Sam or Neeta Mami had made him feel like an extra—the opposite in fact—but, it had been time to spread his wings.

“If you’re worried, I’ll talk to her doctor and set up an appointment. Is that what this is about? Did she,” Uncle Sam paused, his hand circled the air between them as if he was a DJ spinning a record at a nightclub, “set this up?”

“No. She hasn’t brought any ‘nice girls from good families’ to my attention in a while. She’s been behaving since the last time we both asked her to respectfully butt out of my life. It’s nothing to do with Nanu.” Aryan forked his hand through his hair, sliding it down to rub the back of his neck. In for a penny, in for a pound, he thought, and confessed it all. “It was sort of a blind date. Last night being the

first one. Uh-uh. Let me finish before you start bombarding me with questions. While I've only met this girl in person once, we have been communicating for several months now."

"Did you swipe right on some dating app? Is that where you met her?"

"Not a dating app. A game app."

Uncle Sam groaned. "Is that wise in today's socio-political climate? Everything boils down to he said/ she said, son. It's not a safe time to meet anyone, much less a stranger online. Are you absolutely sure she doesn't know who you are?"

Aryan was sure. He'd run through the gamut of questions four months ago. "I'm not a complete moron, Mamu. She didn't know who I was until last night. And not everything is political. Look, I know apps and chatrooms must seem shady to a man of your age—"

"Watch it, son. I'm only a decade older. Hardly a fuddy duddy."

Aryan grinned, gesturing his uncle to take a seat as he took one next to it.

"Then hear me out," he said and proceeded to explain in vivid detail how he'd been matched with a super smart and snarky woman by the Scrabulous app. How they'd been playing and chatting with each other for months before realizing they both lived in Mumbai. How he'd finally persuaded Worddiva to meet him. He didn't have to try hard. She'd wanted to meet him just as badly.

"You're not serious." Uncle Sam's eyebrows had shot up at the beginning of the saga and were glued there. Clearly, he had doubts about Aryan's sanity. No surprise there. Aryan had questioned it himself, many times, in the past few months.

"I'm as serious as a heart attack about her. It started out as fun and games. I mean, who the hell takes those chats seriously, right? I don't know when it changed. I don't know when it all started to mean something. No, I think it was that first time itself. We chatted all night long. Neither of us wanted to disconnect." Aryan still couldn't believe his good fortune. "To tell you the truth, I expected the bubble to burst last night. I went to meet her to put an end to the online idiocy. I was sure the real Worddiva would never match up to the woman my mind had conjured up."

"But, she did," Uncle Sam sighed.

“She’s bloody wonderful, Mamu.” Tara? Minal? Vandana? *What was her name?*

Aryan knew he was asking for the moon. She wasn’t from their community, their circle of friends and family. She was a stranger—a lawyer. If he was wrong, it wasn’t only his reputation on the line here.

“Fine,” Uncle Sam said at last. “If you’re sure about her, then I’m going to respect your decision.”

Tension drained from Aryan’s body. “Just like that?”

“Just like that.” Uncle Sam broke into a boyish grin.

Bawling would be sissy-like, but Aryan felt his eyes sting nonetheless. “Thank you, Mamu. Do you know how completely great you are?”

“Of course, I do. But it doesn’t hurt to keep hearing it. So, keep sucking up and I’ll even make you a partner in Prithvi Homes some day.”

As Aryan had already been promoted to partner the previous year, the winky joke only triggered hilarity between the men. Laughing, they stood up and embraced, slapping each other on the back. Aryan hugged his uncle hard as love squeezed his heart.

“So, when do we get to meet your Worddiva? What’s her real name, by the way?” Mamu asked when they finally stepped back from each other.

“A rose is a rose, call it by any name,” Aryan drawled since life was good. “I don’t know her real name. She never told me.”

He doubled over and laughed until his jaw hurt because Uncle Sam’s slack-jawed expression was priceless.