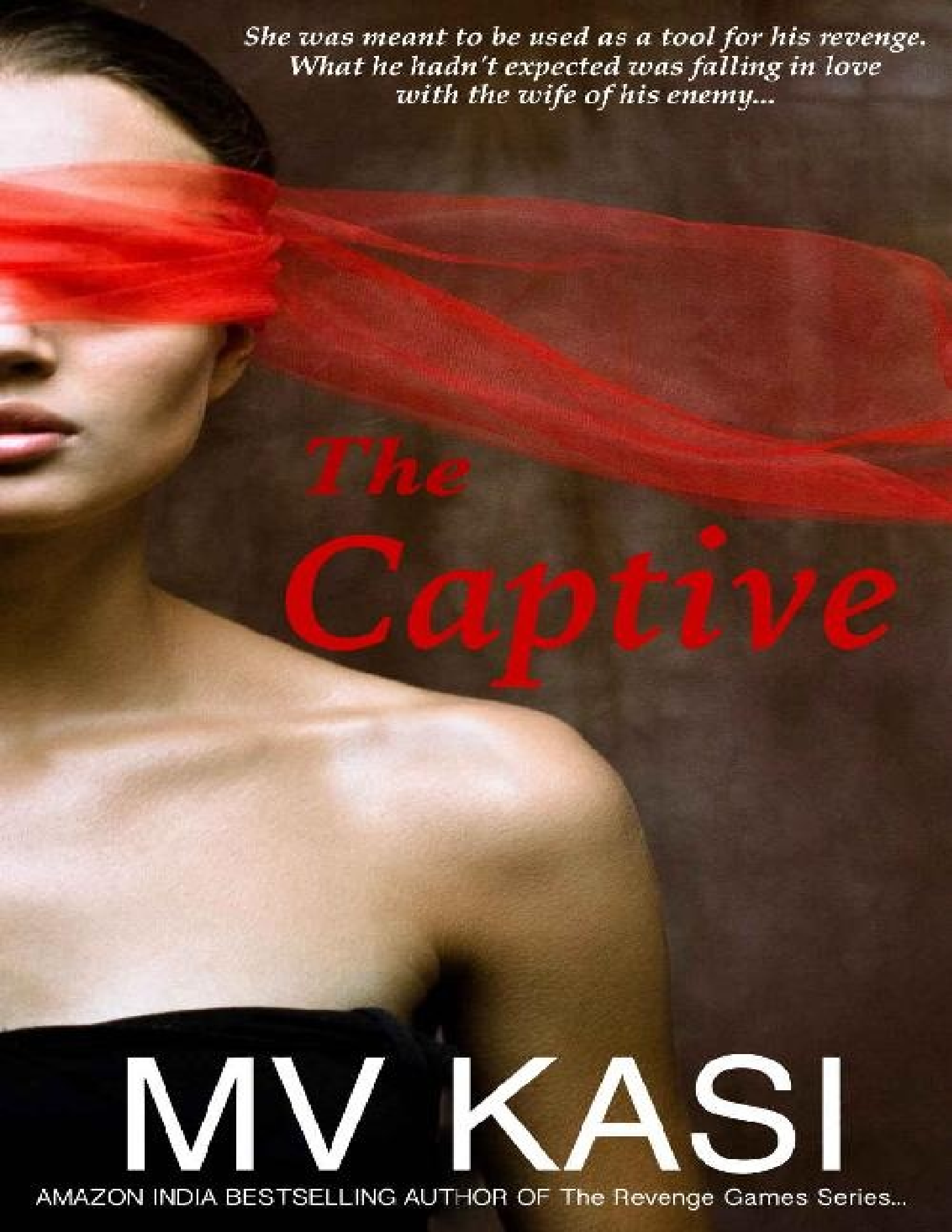
She was meant to be used as a tool for his revenge.
What he hadn't expected was falling in love
with the wife of his enemy...
The
Captive
MV KASI
AMAZON INDIA BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF The Revenge Games Series...

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EPILOGUE

The Captive

by

MV Kasi

The Captive

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Disclaimer

This is a fictional romance story. Please proceed with caution as the book contains sexual content and violence that are recommended for mature reading audiences.

If you choose to proceed, it is suggested that you keep an open mind for the intended experience.

Hope you enjoy the journey of the characters in this book.

DEDICATION

To all the survivors…

And to ALL my readers and my VIPs!
Thank you for everything.
I love you all!

DESCRIPTION

Nina Bhupati was one lucky woman.

Her husband, a political figure and a business tycoon, loved to keep her in a lap of luxury. Rich, handsome and caring, he was also what most women dreamed of as an ideal husband.

But their fairytale life blew apart when Nina was kidnapped and held hostage.

Between the distraught husband who badly wanted her back, and the brutal, determined man who was bent upon shattering her soul, Nina must survive her days and also the nights as—THE CAPTIVE.

EXCERPT

Nina hated the wait.

She sat in the corner of the room with her back against the wall and her eyes trained on the door. She was sure her captor would return to torture her painfully for stabbing him in the arm.

She felt a crippling exhaustion in her body due to lack of sleep during the past week of her captivity. Her head kept falling forward, trying to reach for the comfort of sleep. But each time it did, she jerked it back up, refusing to give in to sleep. Especially when she was at her most vulnerable.

She didn't know whether attacking him was a logical move. But when he had stalked her in a slow, unhurried manner, with menace radiating from his body, demanding his knife back, he had looked like a hunter who had cornered his prey. And she was his trembling, whimpering prey. Her mind had rebelled instantly at the comparison of herself with a prey.

She wasn't weak. She had never been weak. Even when the odds were stacked against her, she had always fought back. And so, not making this time any exception, she had sliced his arm.

And now, the thought of what he could do to her was tearing her apart.

Will he come to her room tonight? And if so, what will he do? Will he follow through his threats?

She thought about the video taken to send it to Suraj. Her captor had spoken about the follow-up videos. She didn't have to guess about his intentions of what the later videos would contain.

Nina's thoughts threatened to take her into darkness to escape into a place where there would be no worry or fear.

Don't you dare give up!

She shivered and rubbed at her trembling arms as her mind ordered her not to give in to fear. But even as she talked herself into being brave, her heart almost

stopped when the door to the room opened.

Her captor entered the room once again.

MV Kasi's Books List

The Revenge Games Series

SOULLESS (Book #1)
RUTHLESS (Book #2)

The Singham Bloodlines Series

BOUND BY REVENGE (Book #1)
BOUND BY HATRED (Book #2)

THAT SAME OLD LOVE
THE HOLIDAY AFFAIR
THE CAPTIVE

PROLOGUE

He got her. His prey.

He had been hunting her for a while. Following and observing. Mostly observing.

Months of detailed planning where he studied her daily schedule and pattern made it easy for him to get her. He didn't think it would be this easy though. He had thought she would always be surrounded by at least one of her bodyguards that her husband hired.

Even though he had drugged most of the bodyguards the previous night, he wasn't too sure she would make the trip without one of them.

He had definitely lucked out.

The first part of his plan was a success. He was confident, the rest would soon follow.

He wrapped an arm around Nina Bhupati's limp body and held her close before covering her with the blanket he had around him. If any of the sleeping homeless people woke up, all they would see is a homeless couple huddling together in the morning chill.

He had to hurry up before Nina Bhupati's driver who was still waiting for her at the front of the building, sensed an unusual delay and came looking for her.

His eyes lowered to the unconscious woman. She was surprisingly small and light. Over the years, he had watched her on the T.V and seen her pictures in the local newspapers and magazines. And for the past six months, he had been seeing her on his camera feeds as well. She had seemed more elegant, taller and also larger than life from a distance. She had also looked untouchable. But now, she simply looked tiny and helpless.

He dragged his eyes from her to look at the white SUV parked on the backside of the building. He knew he had to hurry. Each passing minute was increasing

the risk of discovery.

Not wanting to waste any more time, he picked up the unconscious woman and carried her rest of the way.

As soon as he neared the SUV, the door slid open automatically. He placed the unconscious woman on the floor of the SUV where a few blankets were laid before as preparation. Using the ropes, he tied her hands and legs. But before he could place a gag on the mouth, the woman let out a soft moan.

He knew that sometimes, despite being drugged, people did wake up in between.

Nina Bhupati's eyes fell open. He noticed that they were heavily glazed and her face had also paled considerably. Without wasting any time, he picked her up once again and took her out of the SUV. But before he could bend her forward, she threw up. Mostly on herself.

She moaned softly and was panting heavily when she was done.

And then, slowly, she looked up at him.

The upper part of his face was still covered by a hood. "Who…" she began. But before she could ask her question, her body became slack and she passed out once again.

He knew she wouldn't be waking up any time soon. He took her back into the SUV and laid her on the floor before he slid into the seat next to her. "Let's go," he ordered softly.

When the vehicle began to move, he cut through her soiled dress and pulled it off. He wrapped the dress in a newspaper and placed it in a plastic cover. The inner clothes were soiled as well, but he left them on for now. He removed the blanket he wore around him, and wrapped it around the unconscious woman. He didn't place the gag on her. Instead, he simply taped her mouth shut.

AN HOUR LATER, the SUV stopped on a busy street.

"When will you be back, Gaurav?" the man who was driving the SUV asked.

"Don't use our names when she's around. Not even when she's unconscious."

The other man nodded.

“I’ll be back in two days,” Gaurav replied, his eyes falling on the unconscious woman. “Meantime, secure the captive.”

CHAPTER 1

Darkness. Absolute and complete darkness.

The first thought that occurred to Nina was that she wasn't in her bedroom. Her head felt heavy and groggy with a dull ache thudding in the background. She felt dazed, and despite being incapacitated, she was sure it wasn't her large bedroom suite. Because there was no way she would ever sleep in the dark. At least not willingly.

The bed under her was hard. Not her expensive mattress topped by several layers of soft and high-thread-count bedding. The rough material rubbed against her bare shoulders and legs.

Why are my shoulders and legs bare?

Her breath began to hitch, and she rapidly blinked, trying to adjust her eyes to the dark. But still, all she saw was darkness.

Why am I not able to see anything!

Her head began to throb, and she began to tremble as panic started to take root in her.

It took her a few moments to realize she was blindfolded. She could feel the cloth against her lashes.

She tried moving her hands to reach for the blindfold, but she couldn't. Her hands were bound. And so were her feet. She tried to cry in frustration, but there was tape placed across her mouth.

God, what had happened?

She felt her lungs constrict, and her breaths came out noisy in the otherwise quiet room. A red haze appeared in front of her eyes, threatening to pull her back into unconscious while her panic turned into terror. She didn't want to pass out in fear.

Being alive is better. Being alive is better. Being alive is better.

She kept repeating that as a mantra in her head. It was something she and her sister had said over the years whenever life threw curveballs at them.

Nina had been through so much in her life, and she was finally beginning to get to a point where she was content with what she had. Then what went wrong? How did she end up bound and gagged in an unfamiliar dark room?

A choked sob escaped her. Tears would have filled her eyes behind the blindfold, if they weren't dry and scratchy due to dehydration. Her mouth felt dry, and her tongue felt thick and unwieldy inside her mouth.

Nina took in slow, deep breaths through her nose as she tried to curb her panic and the nausea that was welling up within her.

Being alive is better. Being alive is better. Being alive is better.

She repeated that again as she curled her body into a fetal position.

Several moments later, she felt the tightness in her chest decreasing slowly and the air move freely. Meantime, a strange feeling gnawed at her, while a memory struggled to form. She tried to reach it, but it kept slipping out of her head.

Okay, think slowly and calmly. What the hell happened?

All Nina recalled were sounds of a siren, hands lifting her and carrying her somewhere and her throat hurting after she threw up violently.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to recall what happened much before that. How did she end up in the situation?

Situation being, taken. Kidnapped.

CHAPTER 2

A day ago…

"You look ravishing."

Nina raised her eyes to look at the reflection of her husband in the gold-plated mirror of the dresser.

As soon as their eyes met, her husband smiled. "You know what would make you look even more breathtaking?"

Before she could respond, he wrapped a necklace around her throat. "This."

The solitaires encased within a delicate gold chain felt cool on Nina's skin. "Thank you," she murmured with a smile as her eyes lowered to the sparkling diamonds. "What did I tell you about expensive gifts?" she gently admonished.

Her husband let out a soft laugh. "I know, I know," he said, pushing her long, wavy hair to the side before kissing her cheek. "But today is our wedding anniversary. I wanted to pamper my wife."

"When do you *not* want to pamper your wife? You always do."

There was a rich masculine chuckle. "What can I say? I have the most intelligent and beautiful wife there is."

"Flatterer." Nina laughed at his exaggeration. She was done getting ready for the party being thrown in their honor.

Getting up from the antique-tufted chair in front of the dresser, Nina stepped closer to her husband. She straightened the collar of his shirt. "You are not that bad to look at, Mr. Bhupati," she said with a smile. "And if I recall, you were listed as India's hottest upcoming politician and entrepreneur of the year. Again."

There was a mischievous grin on her husband's handsome face. Before he could get back with a smart remark, there was a knock on the door. "*Suraj*.

People are waiting for you both downstairs."

It was her husband's PA.

"Give us five minutes, Radha," Nina answered. She reached for the small blue velvet box on the dresser and opened the lid. "Happy anniversary, Suraj," she said softly.

They were tiny cufflinks. They were not diamonds or gold or anywhere as expensive as what she was gifted, but as soon as Nina saw them, she fell in love with the antique silver and intricately carved pieces.

Her husband gave her a soft kiss on her forehead. "Beautiful. I love them. Thank you so much, sweetheart. Put them on me."

Nina smiled and removed the gold ones he already wore to replace them with her gift. Like she had envisioned, they really suited her elegant, handsome husband.

"Okay. Now we can go," she said.

They stepped out of their bedroom suite into a hallway where Radha was still waiting. Radha's eyes were immediately drawn to the hand Suraj had placed on Nina's waist, and then the diamond necklace, and then the cuff links.

Something flashed in Radha's eyes even though the face remained poised. "I received a call to inform you that your parents will be arriving a little later than scheduled, Suraj."

Suraj nodded in acknowledgement and then turned to look at Nina. "Ready, sweetheart?"

Nina was already dressed, but she knew what her husband meant. He was asking if she was ready to put on her mask. This mask was of being a social butterfly.

Nina didn't exactly love socializing. However, she still did it for two major reasons.

The first one was for Suraj's sake.

Suraj was a loving husband who always did whatever she had asked him for. In return, the minimum she could do as his wife was to socialize with his

political and business contacts.

The second and the most important reason for socializing—was for her cause. The more she exposed herself to the public and expanded her social network, the more she could do well for her cause.

“Ready as ever,” Nina replied before walking next to Suraj on the polished marble floors of their house.

Since their marriage, this was the only house they have lived in.

The house wasn’t overly large when compared to the standards of most people who ran in similar social circles. It was about ten thousand square feet and very tastefully furnished.

But for someone like Nina, who had once lived on the streets, it was still quite overwhelming.

Even though ten years had passed since one of the most eligible bachelors had married her and introduced her to a luxurious lifestyle, sometimes, Nina still felt like the fairytale life was just an illusion, and that she would wake up to a cold, damp and leaky room with a rotting, emancipated corpse.

No, don’t go there, her mind warned.

Nina shook away the dark memories and focused on the present.

The loud hum and buzzing of conversations could be heard when Nina and Suraj walked towards the dramatically curved staircase.

Nina knew that their formal living room was currently brimming with people.

As soon as she and Suraj were visible at the top of the stairs, there were loud cheers and claps along with several camera flashes.

“Mr and Mrs. Bhupati! Happy tenth anniversary!”

“Nina, love your dress and hairstyle. You both look stunning as always.”

“Nina, when are we going to hear the good news? We want to take pictures of your beautiful babies soon…”

Nina smiled through it all, placing her French-manicured fingers on Suraj's chest and posing for the pictures. No one except Suraj could feel the faintest of tremble in her hands.

Suraj's hand remained wrapped around her waist, squeezing her gently and helping her though.

Nina never felt at ease with the reporters. Because she always felt that one day, one of them would ask her the damning question, which would crumble her fairytale life.

The questions continued, mostly about when Nina was planning to conceive her husband's child.

Nina heard Suraj laughing. "My wife and I are still young," he said. "We have plenty of time before we start thinking about children. And I'm not ready to share her with anyone yet."

Nina let loose a shy smile, followed by a dazzling smile towards the crowd. "And please remember," she said. "Suraj and I hosted this party as a charity event. So everyone, dig deep into your pockets and contribute to the good causes." The good causes being donation for children's and homeless charities.

There was laughter, and most people brought out their check books when the volunteers for the charity organization approached them.

As usual, Suraj was immediately surrounded by people who wanted to either discuss politics or business.

"I'll see you later," Nina told him softly before gently pulling away from his arm.

She began to circulate within the crowd, greeting everyone with a bright smile.

The crowd was dazzling. Everyone was dressed in their finest. Bright, elegant clothes paired with expensive jewelry and accessories adorned the women. Nina was similarly dressed in an elegant red-colored, thin-strapped floor-length gown. Suraj's recent gift drew a lot of glances towards her neck.

She could hear the usual conversations about exotic vacations, recent luxury car purchases, and other similar topics that went with the upper classes.

“Nina! Come join us,” someone from a group called.

Nina smiled. “In a minute. Let me check on the food first.”

Even though Nina was the hostess, apart from attending the party like her guests, she barely had to do anything when it came to things like food or party preparations. All she did was approve the guest list and menu that Radha had prepared. Nina’s involvement began only when the party was over.

Nina’s eyes fell on the silver food and beverage trays that were used to serve food to the guests. The chef had definitely gone out of the way to impress the crowd for the occasion. Rich, expensive food was being served along with equally expensive drinks to accompany.

Nina recalled the time during the initial days of her marriage, when she had gorged herself with the food. The rich food had made her throw up or feel sick. It had taken her a while, to learn and control the urge of stuffing herself, as though she didn’t know where the next meal would come from.

She had come a long way since then.

“Nina!” a familiar voice of a woman called.

Nina turned to see a woman who was a close family friend of the Bhupatis. “Harika, how are you?”

The woman, along with a few others, came towards Nina. “I’m great. Looking fabulous as ever, Nina. What an absolutely stunning necklace.”

“Suraj’s gift to me for our tenth anniversary.”

There were lots of oohs and aahs from the women in the group.

“Love your dress. Did you design it yourself?” one of them asked.

“Yes.”

“Love it. I keep telling you that you should have a proper boutique.”

The fact that Nina didn’t have a proper store where she sold her creations was the main appeal. People appreciated things that were not easily available.

Nina designed clothes only in exchange for a large donation. A decade ago,

the amount she used to make while working in a tailoring shop was a fraction of what people now paid for her creations.

"So what else did Suraj do for your tenth wedding anniversary?"

"He's so romantic. I keep telling my husband to learn from Suraj."

Nina kept a smile pasted on her face while the questions and comments from the other women continued.

She wondered when she would feel completely at ease in the social setting. Even after ten years, she felt like an outsider and an imposter. Suraj kept reassuring her, saying that people loved her and accepted her as one of them. But she knew Suraj thought that way because he was blinded by his own view of her.

Nina's eyes fell on Harika who was unusually quiet.

As predicted, Harika's eyes were drawn towards Suraj who was talking to people.

Before Suraj Bhupati had shocked the hell out of everyone by announcing his marriage to Nina, Suraj's parents had been pressurizing him to marry Harika.

Harika was the niece of Bhupatis' business partner and investor. Harika's uncle was also one of the most influential people and was dubbed as the kingmaker by many. It was his money that was used during the elections and also to build or destroy many companies.

Suraj and Harika's union would have led to a powerful dynastic marriage. A fact which Nina's father-in-law never let her forget.

"Nina, we should set up another media event at a local school," someone remarked. "The last one you held had very good coverage and feedback."

Nina smiled. "Yes, I have a few planned during the coming weeks. I'll ask Radha to email you the schedule."

Nina spent the next hour mingling with the guests.

She was conversing with someone when Radha interrupted her. "Nina, Mr.

and Mrs. Bhupati have arrived."

Nina groaned internally. She looked around, searching for Suraj and saw him talking to someone. She recognized the person Suraj was talking to and knew the conversation must be critical.

Even though Nina knew her meeting with her in-laws would go much smoother with Suraj around, she decided not to disturb him. She followed Radha out of the main door and stood outside the house on the top of the marble steps. Her in-laws were getting out of their car, escorted by a couple of gunmen.

More than a dozen gunmen surrounded the house that day. Usually, there were only two of them. However, due to the event, where a lot of VIPs were expected to attend, a lot more security was added that night.

During the initial days of her marriage, Nina had a tough time getting adjusted to having an armed guard following her everywhere. At that time, Suraj's father held the top political position in the state. But now, after ten years, even though her father-in-law had stepped down from the position to take up the role of the political party head, Suraj still insisted that Nina take an armed guard along to most public events.

The past few months had made Suraj even more paranoid, mostly because he had received a few death threats. They were either from political or business rivals and sometimes even from the underworld who wanted Suraj to finance their causes.

"Good evening, Ma," Nina greeted her mother-in-law.

The older woman didn't greet or smile, however she nodded in acknowledgement.

But when Nina's father-in-law saw her, a sneer formed on his face. He waited until he climbed up the stairs and came closer, so that the only people who were within hearing distance were his wife, Radha, and Nina.

"Well, well. Look, it's the guttersnipe my son married and shoved on our family ten years ago," he spat. "Where is my son? Why isn't he there to receive his own parents?"

“He’s busy talking to the Bhansals about a business deal.”

At Nina’s calm reply, the older man’s look turned mean. “Ah. Still snooping around where you are not wanted? I’ve warned my son several times not to discuss business or politics with women. Especially you.” He gave her a sweeping look. “Why don’t you focus on something useful instead? Did you find out whether you are barren after all? Or have you already been successful in doing one thing right? If you can’t, then ask my son to get someone else pregnant with a child. I didn’t earn all this money and power for it to die because of a barren woman.”

Ignoring his comments and questions, Nina maintained a neutral look. “You must be tired after your journey. I’ve asked for your rooms to be prepared. Would you like to freshen up before you join the party?”

Nina had learnt that the best way to tackle a bully like her father-in-law was to show that his taunts and jeers weren’t working on her.

Her father-in-law glared while his wife looked embarrassed as always. “Your time is ticking, girl. If you don’t succeed in giving my son a child soon, I’m going to send you back to the gutter, either dead or alive. My son will be free to remarry and have children.” He then ignored her completely and went inside the house where Radha led them into their guest room.

Nina’s in-laws usually lived at their ancestral home which was a day ride away.

Thank God for such small mercies!

Each time Nina met with them, her father-in-law was extremely unpleasant to her. Even after ten years, he was still outraged that his only son, heir to a fortune, picked a bride who had no family background and came with nothing.

However, ego and false pride didn’t allow the senior Bhupati to bring up her background to any of their social circles. Whereas, in public, he kept telling his people about how he had no objection to accept Nina as his son’s bride because his son’s happiness was more important to him. He also used Suraj and her marriage to his political advantage, stating that he openly encouraged and

supported hardworking people of lower classes such as his daughter-in-law. And at that time, despite his rapidly lowering popularity due to communal violence incited by him, he still won the election because of his son's marriage to her.

Her father-in-law was a hypocrite.

With a deep sigh and a smile fixed firmly on her face, Nina went back to the party. She continued playing the part of a politician and business tycoon's wife.

She was speaking with someone when she felt a prickling sensation at the back of her neck.

Nina rubbed it away, but it continued getting stronger, until her entire body broke out in goosebumps.

"Excuse me," she said before twisting around and looking at the room full of people.

Harika was at a distance, talking to someone while her eyes were focused on Suraj.

Radha stood next to Suraj, taking notes.

Suraj's father was speaking to his business partner, Ganesh Verma.

None of them were watching her.

Nina's eyes fell on Harika's husband. He was standing at a distance, watching his wife stare at Suraj with longing in her eyes.

Nina felt bad and also empathized with the man. Harika's husband was treated with disdain most of the time by Harika's uncle. Suraj's father also had a few choice words to demean Harika's husband. *Another guttersnipe and interloper*, he said.

According to them, because Suraj had married Nina, Harika chose to marry way down than what she actually deserved.

Nina didn't agree with them.

Although Harika's husband, Raghuveer, didn't come from a rich, influential background, he was intelligent and worked very hard to get to where he was. He worked as a director of a luxury hotel chain that Bhupatis and Harika's uncle co-owned.

Suraj and Harika's uncle were more or less just the investors, but it was Raghuveer who took care of everything. Within a few years, Raghuveer had turned what was once a failing hotel chain into a profit-making luxury hotel chain. Nina had a late spa appointment at that hotel the next day.

Turning her eyes away from Harika's husband, she looked around the room. A few who looked at her, waved at her with a friendly smile. After returning their smiles, Nina went back to chatting with people.

The area between her shoulder blades continued to tingle. However, Nina ignored it.

For some reason, she'd been feeling that way for the last couple of days. It felt as though she was being watched by someone. Someone menacing.

Shaking away the irrational feeling of paranoia that was creeping up on her, Nina continued to host the rest of the party.

IT WAS CLOSE to two a.m. by the time all the guests had left.

After sending out instructions to the servants who were clearing the place, Nina headed back to the master bedroom suite.

Her feet ached, and her face hurt from all the smiling she did over the last few hours. She was badly looking forward to a hot shower and then hitting the bed.

Raising her hands, Nina twisted her thick, long hair into a knot on top of her head.

As soon as she opened the bedroom door, her eyes fell on Suraj. He had just stepped out of the shower, wrapped in a snowy white towel around his waist. She watched the play of muscles on her husband's chest while he dried his hair with another towel.

He was indeed a beautiful specimen of a man—both inside and out. He was always gentle with her. And with others, he was friendly yet firm. And when required, especially in business and politics, he was also shrewd.

"Hey, you are back," he said when he caught her admiring him.

She smiled. "Yes. Finally done hosting this year's party." She stepped out of

her high heels and groaned when her feet felt divine after hours of self-inflicted torture.

Suraj placed the towel in his hand on top of a drying stand before coming closer to her. “Sit,” he instructed softly, pushing her gently on the bed.

Nina sat on the corner while Suraj knelt down in front of her.

Over the next few minutes, her eyes rolled over in pleasure. “God, that feels so damn good,” she softly groaned.

He laughed softly. “You say that every time.”

“Because it’s true. You have a magic touch.”

There was more masculine laughter.

Her husband was one of the best when it came to foot massages.

Nina sat in silence and closed her eyes while Suraj continued massaging her feet. The tension of the day began to slowly unravel.

“I’m sorry,” she heard him say after a while.

“Hmm… for what?” she asked.

“Radha told me about the ugly confrontation you had with my father. You should have called me when you went to receive them.”

Nina opened her eyes. “I can handle him, Suraj. I’ve been doing it for the last decade.”

“I know. But you shouldn’t have to. He needs to learn that as my wife, you deserve every amount of respect.” An expression of guilt passed on his face. “You deserve more than just respect. You deserve happiness. And—”

“Hey,” she gently interrupted. She knew what he was about to say. She had heard him repeat those things over the years. “I’m fine, Suraj. And I’ve told you this repeatedly, I am more than happy.”

“But sweetheart—”

“No buts.”

He sat in silence, continuing with the massage.

Leaning forward, she touched his cheek. “You should go,” she said softly. “Radha must be waiting.”

His fingers paused briefly before resuming the massage. “Today is our anniversary, Nina.”

“Even more reason why you should go. You know I’ll be fine.”

He watched her silently for a while.

“Suraj, I insist,” she reiterated.

Whatever he saw on her face must have convinced him, because he got up and kissed her softly on her cheek. He then went towards his closet to pull out a night robe. “Are you going out tomorrow to donate food in the streets?” he asked.

“Yes. I’ll be gone early. Around five-thirty.”

“Five-thirty? Nina, it’s close to two-thirty right now.”

Nina smiled. “I know.”

“You barely sleep, Nina. I know you love what you do, but please take care of your health, too. I’m worried about you.”

“I’m fine, Suraj.”

He sighed. “Okay. But don’t forget to take the security along.”

Nina didn’t want to argue with him, so she simply nodded.

He came closer and kissed her forehead before pulling away. “I’m serious. When you return home, catch up on some sleep.”

“I will,” she said.

“I’ll see you later, sweetheart.”

“Goodnight,” she greeted softly.

Nina watched her husband of ten years, tighten the sash on his robe, before he slipped out of their bedroom, to slip into someone else’s bed that night.

With a weary sigh, Nina dragged herself from the bed and walked into the overlarge luxurious bathroom. She was tempted by the sunken bathtub that seemed to beckon her. But it was too late and she had an early start this morning. So passing the bathtub, she stepped into the glass cubicle instead.

The steam and the hot spray from the multiple jets of the shower began to take away any lingering tension.

Much later, Nina stepped out of the shower and dried herself with a thick towel. She then headed to the floor-to-ceiling walk-in closet and pulled out her comfortable night wear before she slipped it on.

The large clock on the wall said it was almost three o'clock when Nina slid under the soft bed covers. She turned to her side and stared at the fluffy, un-dented pillow next to her where Suraj's head usually rested.

Nina hadn't been lying when she told Suraj that she wanted him to be with Radha that night.

It was sweet that Suraj was reluctant to do so because of their tenth wedding anniversary. Suraj was always considerate towards her that way. And the bond and love, she and Suraj had between them was very strong.

Nina knew her husband would do anything for her, just like she would for him.

With that last thought, she allowed sleep to consume her.

CHAPTER 3

“Devi! Get up!” Nina screamed. But the prone body of her sister remained unmoving.

“Devi!” Nina began beating on her sister’s chest to see if that would get her sister to breathe or move.

“She’s gone,” a man stated softly.

“No! No! She can’t leave me. She knows I’m all alone without her. She promised we’d be together and wouldn’t leave like Uma did.” Nina was hysterical.

“We have to get away from here,” another man stated. “Someone will come looking for Pranit soon.”

Nina was clinging to her sister’s body, rubbing her sister’s soft hair over and over again. “Devi, please. Get up.”

Nina felt arms pulling her away. She tried to resist, but the arms, while gentle, were also firm.

Soon the entire room was engulfed in flames.

“Save her! She’s still alive! Please save her!” Nina continued to scream.

Nina jerked awake.

She was breathing fast, and she was trembling and cold, despite the blankets on her. The sound of her alarm continued to ring next to her. Reaching a hand, she hit the stop button.

When she continued to tremble, she pulled a thick comforter on top of her blanket.

Soon warmth enveloped her, and she closed her eyes to try and calm down.

It took a while for her body to stop shaking. And when it did, she realized that

her pillow was drenched in tears. She must have cried during her dream.

Will these dreams ever stop?

Nina knew they probably wouldn't.

Most of the time, she was able to put up mental shields to stop them. But lately, either due to fatigue or due to her irrational paranoia, the memories of her past snuck in.

Determinedly, Nina shook off the remnants of her dream and put her shields back on again.

She wiped her eyes and stared at the empty space next to her on the bed. Suraj would be back before the maids began their daily cleaning.

She slid out from under the warmth of a cozy comforter and headed to the bathroom to freshen up and get ready for the day. She knew she had to dress in layers since it was the winter season. Even though most of the day was quite warm, it did get quite chilly during the early hours.

SHE FINISHED BUTTONING up her dress before wearing a pair of flat, sensible shoes. She then headed down to the kitchens.

The cook was just finishing the packing. Thanking him, Nina picked up one of the large food bags that contained smaller individual containers. The food was made using the previous night's leftovers and had been modified to make it more wholesome and nutritious.

"Let me help you, madam." The driver picked up and carried the remaining food bags to the car.

After placing them in the trunk, Nina and the driver waited for the gunman to arrive. She had informed both the driver as well as the gunman of her plans for that morning.

When the gunman didn't join them, Nina asked the driver to check.

Fifteen minutes later, the driver returned without the gunman. "I think he's still asleep, madam. I've called him on his phone and knocked on the door as well."

Nina hadn’t bothered to ask any of the other gunmen to accompany her. In fact, the previous night, she passed an order for the rest of them to take off or come in later as they had been working quite late the previous night.

“Should I carry the food back to the kitchen?” the driver asked.

“No, that’s okay. We’ll only be gone for a couple of hours.”

The driver hesitated, but he nodded, not wanting to go against her wishes. “The usual place first, madam?”

“Yes, the usual place.”

The car pulled out of the long driveway. It seemed almost indecent to travel in such luxury to a place where there were people who didn’t have basic necessities. But Suraj didn’t own modest cars since he was always paranoid about her safety.

They passed through the quiet streets. There were barely any vehicles at five-thirty in the morning. Her eyes took in the familiar houses of the neighborhood she had seen during the last ten years.

Each house was bigger and more luxuriously built than the other. Nina knew most of the people who lived in those houses. She had been socializing with them for the good part of her marriage.

The car left the upscale neighborhood and drove deeper into the city. Traffic lined the roads and a lot of people were already up and moving about, either on foot or in their two-wheelers.

The car stopped next to a large abandoned building where a lot of homeless people usually stayed during the winter months. Even though it was early in the morning, most of them were lined up against one of the walls facing the road with the bowls in front of them. The rest were sleeping on the other side of the building.

Nina knew that once the day properly kicked in, most of the homeless would disperse, either to work in very low-paying jobs or to simply beg on the streets.

“Stay here. I’ll be back in a few minutes,” Nina instructed the driver. There was no parking near the building. She didn’t really need the driver to accompany

her since she was used to these roads and also used to being around homeless people.

She got out of the car and grabbed one of the food bags she had packed specifically for distributing at this place. She had two more bags that were to be dropped at other locations.

There were close to twenty people lined up against the wall. Nina started from the end.

An old woman smiled in gratitude. “God bless you, my child. May God bless you.”

Nina smiled back and continued distributing. When she almost reached to the end of the line, she paused.

The person sitting did not extend the bowl like the others. In fact, the person stayed completely still. The blankets that covered most of the homeless people at that time in the morning did not allow Nina to know whether the person was a man or a woman. But the large build made her think that the likelihood of it being a man was higher.

“Here,” she said softly and dropped a pouch into the bowl.

For several moments, the pouch remained untouched. The person did not grab it immediately like the others. Nina almost thought that the person might have been sleeping. But then, two large hands came out of the blankets to pick up the food.

A frown marred Nina’s face. She was pretty sure that the hands that grabbed the pouch looked clean. In fact, even the nails on the strong fingers had gleamed healthy pink, rather than the murky grime one usually found on a homeless person.

But before Nina could ask or say something, the person who was next-in-line began to shake his bowl in impatience. Nina resumed with the food distribution.

When she was done, she took the bag with the remaining food pouches inside the building to drop them off near the people who were still asleep.

She had just placed one near the last of the homeless people when she felt the

presence of someone at her back.

She whipped around, and her heart almost skipped a beat when she saw the dark, looming shape of a person standing only a few feet away from her.

She couldn't see the entire face because a hood covered most of it, and it was also slightly dark inside the building. However, she recognized the color of the hood. It was the same person who was sitting very still while she had distributed the food.

A thick stubble on a strong chin that was not visible, confirmed that it was a man.

A man who had followed her inside and was standing eerily still.

"H-hello," she said, her voice wavering slightly. "Did you want more food? I have a few more pouches remaining." She drew out one and extended it towards him.

The man continued to stand still.

Nina looked around surreptitiously. This part of the abandoned building was cut off from the busy street and the pedestrians. She shouldn't have ventured here, but she knew some children would be sleeping under worn blankets until it got warmer outside.

She could feel the man's gaze sizing her up. He was probably trying to see what valuables she had worn or carried with her currently.

Nina never wore any jewellery or carried any accessories with her while visiting such places. She had firsthand experiences in the past and knew that to do so would tempt a possible mugger.

Even though it was obvious that she had nothing valuable on her currently, every instinct screamed danger and warned Nina to run away.

But she stopped herself.

The man was probably just a poor homeless person who was looking for more food. Based on his size, she figured the food offered to him initially might not have been enough.

Then why was he not asking for more food?

Immediately, she felt guilty of suspecting him. She, of all the people knew how most of the homeless people, after having lived on streets for long and having no social interactions, didn't communicate much with anyone. What such people needed was compassion, not being treated as an object of fear or disgust.

Even as that reasoning ran through her mind, as soon as the man took a step towards her, her heartbeat increased further. The man did not reach for the food container yet, but he was standing close enough for her to be able to actually smell him.

He smelled of clean soap and a mild, spicy deodorant—not how a typical person living on streets smelled.

Nina quickly moved her eyes lower, only to meet with a broad chest that couldn't hide the well-packed muscles underneath a worn t-shirt.

The man definitely wasn't a homeless person.

Alarm bells began to ring louder within her. "What do you want?" she asked.

Her outstretched hand which held the food pouch was visibly shaking. She also knew it was too late to run. He looked strong enough to chase her and get her easily. So the only thing she could do was call for help.

Before she could open her mouth to scream, he was on her.

He pulled her close and placed his hand on her mouth and nose. At the first whiff of the slightly sweet smell from a damp cloth, Nina stayed completely still. She made some token struggles before she slowly let her body slump.

When the man felt the dead weight of her slackened body, he moved the cloth away from her nose and mouth. Immediately, Nina elbowed him hard in the stomach and kicked him even harder on the shin.

She heard a painful exhale from her attacker, and his hold on her loosened.

She barely took a step away and drew in a deep breath to let out a scream when she felt the grip on her tighten once again. She was banged into his hard chest, and then the cloth was placed back on her mouth.

This time, she began struggling for real. She scratched the back of the man's hands using her nails and tried to twist her head away from the cloth.

If I’m going to be a victim of a senseless crime, I will not go down easily!

She tried to kick the man’s shin again, but he was holding her too close. So, she tried to reach back and push the hood away from the man’s face. At least someone would see the face of her attacker.

But the grip on her remained firm, not allowing her to move much. She felt the hot breath of the man in her ears as she continued to struggle and kick. She was screaming, but the screams sounded way too muffled and not loud enough to get any attention. She knew she shouldn’t be screaming as that would draw in whatever drug he had placed on the cloth to work faster. But there was no other choice. She knew he would place the cloth on her nose and mouth, long enough for her to be unable to hold her breath.

Slowly, and in what felt like forever, her struggles grew weaker. Dark spots which had begun to appear in her vision were taking over completely.

No, this cannot be happening!

That was her last thought before there was complete oblivion.

CHAPTER 4

Present…

Nina shuddered in the darkness.

She tried to fight away the waves of panic and dizziness once again. She squeezed her eyes shut, breathing in and out, hoping she was having a nightmare.

But a part of her knew it was real. And she had no choice but to figure out a way to get out of the situation.

Who could have possibly kidnapped her and why?

There were endless possibilities. But one of the primary reasons could be money. It usually was. She was the wife of a rich and powerful man. Holding her for a ransom could be very lucrative.

Nina hoped that was the case, because it would mean that if all the demands were met, she could still go back to her life with only a few scratches and wounds.

But what if it wasn't a kidnap for ransom? What if someone wanted her either dead or badly hurt?

Her first suspect was her father-in-law. He had threatened her way too many times, saying he'd get rid of her and get his son remarried to a more suitable woman. A woman who could give him grandchildren.

Nina's heart thudded in panic, because that would mean, she would not be left alive.

But logic or maybe it was just wishful thinking that said if it was indeed her father-in-law, then why wouldn't he have her murdered right away and make it appear like an accident, rather than plan a kidnap?

Anything could go wrong with a kidnap.

The same logic held true if Harika wanted Nina gone from Suraj's life. But Harika loved Suraj too much to torment him with his wife's kidnap. A grieving husband was much better than a husband filled with hope of his wife's possible return.

It may or may not be any of them.

There was another possibility, too. Some of the minority leaders held a considerable threat to Suraj. His office had received several threatening calls, and some of the newspapers had also covered articles where a few of the leaders had openly threatened Suraj's safety.

One of the main reasons why Suraj had recently increased the security.

Then another reason of her kidnap loomed in her mind, jolting her.

No. It's not possible. Not after so many years. Why would anyone come after me now, after nearly a decade?

Nina refused to even think of the possibility. Instead she thought of her husband. Suraj must be sick with worry. She was sure he found out by now that she was taken and must have begun searching for her. Nina badly wished she could ease his worry.

Groaning due to the slight queasiness that still remained, Nina tried to get comfortable. At least as much as being blindfolded and bound allowed her to. The bed made creaking noises each time she moved.

Where am I?

She knew it was sometime during the day because of the sounds of birds and insects coming from the outside. The sounds were quite loud and combined with the lack of sounds of vehicles or people talking, she knew she wasn't anywhere close to her home. In fact, the clean and sweet smelling air also indicated she was quite far from the city.

The entire side of her body felt numb due to the lack of blood circulation. She tried to stir again, but she was tied too tight.

She froze when she heard voices and then sounds of approaching footsteps. Multiple footsteps.

There was more than one person.

Nina tried to keep her breathing even, although panic was overtaking her. *God, let them be kidnappers and not murderers*, she prayed.

The door opened and soon rough hands grabbed her and made her sit upright. The blindfold was untied, and then the ties around her hands and legs were cut. Nina flinched as circulation returned to her blood. It felt as though thousands of tiny needles were pricking her. She resisted the urge to curl down on the bed. Instead, she rubbed her arms and legs to ease the pain.

After a few moments, when the pain became bearable, she slowly looked up.

Her eyes first fell on the view outside a window. There was an endless stretch of dense tall green trees. She couldn't see any other houses around.

With her heart thudding, she turned to the side and looked at her captors—masked captors. They had plain white masks covering their faces which exposed their eyes and part of their nose and mouth.

There were two of them. One was a bearded, possibly middle-aged or an old man with gray hair. He appeared anxious, since he was shifting slightly while holding a bottle in his hand. The other man was younger with thick, dark hair.

As soon as she saw both of them, Nina knew they weren't the one who had drugged her and kidnapped her. These men were slightly shorter. Different from the tall man.

The older man stepped forward and held out the bottle to her. Nina hoped it was water and reached for it gratefully since she felt too dehydrated. Twisting the cap, she tipped the bottle up and took a gulp. She rinsed her mouth before chugging in the rest of the water in the bottle. Her stomach protested and threatened to push back the contents, but determined, she continued to gulp all the water.

After she finished, she looked at her kidnappers. "Who are you?" she asked. "Why was I brought here?"

There was no response.

"Is it money? You are holding me ransom for my husband's money?"

The older man shifted uneasily. “Ma’am, please—”

“We don’t owe her an explanation,” the younger man cut in. “By the end of it, she’s most likely going to end up dead anyway.”

Listening to the man’s words, cold fear slid through her veins.

CHAPTER 5

Gaurav's eyes were trained on the laptop in front of him. He watched as the screen showed the live feed of the front of the house where Suraj Bhupati lived.

The recording was made from a small, discreet camera that was placed on an electrical pole opposite to the house. The coverage was quite good. Not only was Gaurav able to see the entire front of the house, but if the curtains were open, then he could also look into the house through the huge floor-to-ceiling glass windows.

It had been more than two days since Nina Bhupati went missing. And since she was the wife of a high-profile person, within an hour of her missing, police cars and media personnel swarmed outside the house.

There was TV coverage and front-page news in every local newspaper. Everyone now knew Suraj Bhupati's wife was taken from near an abandoned building while she was donating food.

There were discussions about who might have taken her. And so far, no calls for a ransom were made. Names of a few business and political rivals were thrown during the discussion.

A few brave reporters even questioned Suraj Bhupati if he and his wife had an argument before she disappeared. It had bought a rare smile on Gaurav's face.

Gaurav closed the laptop screen. Pulling out his sunglasses from the SUV's dashboard, he put them on before getting out of the vehicle. And then, locking the SUV, he walked out from the guest parking where he had been waiting for the past hour.

He stood in front of a large apartment complex. Since it was a weekday and almost close to eleven in the morning, most of the children were at school. Apart from a few people strolling casually on the lawn, the complex was mostly deserted.

He went towards the stairs. His target was on the sixteenth floor, but he decided not to take the lift, where security cameras would be installed.

It took him less than fifteen minutes to get to the sixteenth floor. Despite his recent injury, and thanks to his regular workouts and strict exercise regime, he was barely out of breath when he stood in front of a familiar door.

He rang the bell twice and followed it with a knock before standing away from the peephole.

Even though most of the working crowd would be at their offices by now, Gaurav knew his *dear friend* was still home.

The door was opened by a sleepy-looking man. “Who is—” Before the man could register, Gaurav pushed the man inside the apartment and locked the door.

“Gaurav?” the man asked in a guarded tone. His sleepy eyes now appeared alert.

“Hi, Rohan. Long time, no see, my friend. I was disappointed that you didn’t visit when I was otherwise incapacitated.”

“I was busy with an undercover assignment. W-when did you return?” Rohan asked. “And why didn’t you call before coming here?”

Gaurav smiled. And the smile made Rohan take a step back.

Gaurav’s eyes moved away from Rohan to take in the decor of the familiar apartment. Several pictures of the man receiving awards for his work adorned the walls. His dear friend was an investigative journalist who took up many daring assignments. Rohan was only five years older than Gaurav, and was touted as being a daredevil and a brutally honest journalist.

Gaurav’s eyes returned to the visibly frightened man. “Call before coming?” he asked in a chilling tone. “I don’t think friends need to call before visiting. Right? If you recall, you never bothered calling me on that day.”

Rohan’s breath began to speed up. “Gaurav… whatever you heard is not true.”

Gaurav smiled once again. “What do you think I heard, my friend?” he asked before taking out a gun from under the leather jacket and holding it with one

hand.

“P-please. It was a mistake.” Rohan began crying.

“Mistake?” Gaurav asked him calmly. “You deactivated the cameras and told them the *exact* time to visit when nobody else was home. Quite a mistake, my friend.”

“Please… please… I didn’t mean it. I was just following orders. I also made sure that no one touched her.”

Gaurav felt the rage inside him to explode. “How very noble of you,” he said. “You know what? Since you have been such a good friend to me, I’ll give you a choice. Give me the names, and I’ll let you have a mercy death. If not, then it would have to be a revenge kill. And you’ve been my friend long enough to know what a bastard I can be when wronged.”

Gaurav extended his gloved hand with a bottle of pills. “Take two pills. Do it right now, or I will shoot you in your face.”

Gaurav expected a struggle or some fight. He was even prepared to chase and shoot the other man, but Rohan swallowed two pills before falling on his knees on the floor. “I was tempted,” Rohan cried. “They offered me a lot of money and many other perks. Once things began to move rapidly, I had second thoughts. But I was helpless to stop it.”

Gaurav refused to listen to anything. “Names.”

In between continuous sobbing, Rohan gave him the names and the details of what transpired on that day. After Rohan finished, he began pleading. “I’m sorry. Please, Gaurav, don’t kill me.”

“What about the SD card?” Gaurav asked calmly.

“I-I destroyed it.”

Gaurav didn’t say anything. He dragged Rohan to a room and found a pen and paper. “Write,” he ordered.

“W-write what? A confession? I’m ready to do anything. I’ll go surrender myself. But please, don’t kill me.”

“Write what you made Shruti write. Instead of studies, use the word job.”

Rohan tried to struggle away from his hold. “No! Please.”

“Start writing before I change my mind about a revenge kill.”

With shaking hands, Rohan began writing. After he finished, Gaurav took the paper and scanned the contents. Satisfied, he dragged the other man to the center of the room.

“Tell me how I can make this right,” Rohan pleaded, his voice was beginning to slur. “I’ll give you all the money they offered along with whatever I have.”

Gaurav caught his neck in a chokehold. “You think money will compensate for what you did?” he hissed. He wrapped the noose around the other man’s neck and dragged him towards the ceiling fan.

The other man struggled, but not hard, since the pills were taking effect.

Five minutes later, Rohan was hanging from the ceiling, struggling for a very long time.

Gaurav had deliberately made the drop short, which resulted in a slow, painful strangulation.

CHAPTER 6

Nina stared outside the window.

More than two days had passed since she woke up in captivity.

She had barely slept since then for the fear of being attacked or killed. So far, no attempt was made. After her initial confrontation with the two men, she was left mostly alone. Only the older man came into the room to provide her with water and some snacks. He placed the tray on a small stool which was the only furniture in the room apart from the bed and a chair.

The old man had a kind voice. But how good could he be if he was abetting a crime to keep her captive while also slowly starving her? She kept asking him about why she was taken, but he continued to keep quiet.

Nina sat up straight when she heard the lock of the door turn. The old man brought in a bottle of water along with a small apple.

“Mrs. Bhupati,” he greeted, not meeting her eyes.

“I need to shower,” she told him. Her clothes smelled faintly of vomit.

The room she was kept in had no closets. There was just a window and an attached bathroom. And the bathroom was tiny with only a toilet and a sink. She had tried to clean up as much as possible in that little sink, but the smell of stale vomit didn’t leave her, and grime on her skin only seemed to grow.

The older man looked at her with guilt. “Until—” He broke off and cleared his throat. “Until our boss gets back, we have clear instructions not to allow you out of this room.”

“Who is your boss? Please tell me why I was kidnapped?” she repeated. But like always, he remained quiet.

“Please, ma’am, just cooperate with us. Don’t ask too many questions. I’m not—”

The door banged against the wall, cutting off whatever the old man was about

to say. The other man whom she had barely seen since the last week strode in angrily.

“Is she giving you any trouble? Demanding more food?”

“No. She was just—”

“I requested for a bath,” Nina said quietly.

The younger man’s nostrils flared as he came closer to her. “You don’t get to make any demands here,” he hissed as an answer to her request.

“It’s not a demand. It’s a basic need. I feel filthy, and my clothes smell of vomit.”

“I don’t care if you smell of shit. You’ll remain in that state until I decide whether or not to allow you a shower.”

Nina knew the man wasn’t going to budge, but despite that, she forged on. She needed to forge on.

“I need to be clean. I can’t stay this way.”

“You will fucking stay how I tell you to!” he roared, wrapping his hand around her throat and pressing hard.

She struggled to get away, and her nails dug into his skin, drawing blood, but his grip did not loosen.

He kept squeezing until Nina began to see dark spots in her vision.

“Vikram! What do you think you are doing! Let her go!” The older man’s panic-laden voice shouted out the words while he tried to pry the man’s hands away from her throat.

However, the man kept at it.

Soon, Nina began to see a red haze, and darkness was threatening to take over completely.

“It’s better this way,” the man said. “Her death will accomplish much more than what her being alive would do.”

The older man tried to pry the hands away from her throat. “No. Stop!”

The pressure only got tighter.

“Let her go,” a deep, calm unfamiliar voice of a man instructed from

somewhere.

This time, the hands around her throat began to loosen.

Nina began to cough while she tried to suck in air. She collapsed on her knees to the ground as weakness took over her limbs due to lack of oxygen. The dark spots in front of her eyes took a while to clear up.

Through her blurred vision, she saw the tall, broad shape of a man.

“Come with me,” the man instructed before turning and walking away from the doorway.

The younger man followed behind him, but the older man stayed with a worried look in his eyes.

“Are you okay, madam?” he asked.

Nina managed to nod. She coughed some more and took in deep breaths before asking him the one question that ran through her mind during the period of her captivity. “Will I be killed?” she asked in a raspy tone.

“No,” he said gently. “You won’t be killed. They won’t gain anything by it.”

“They are holding me for ransom then?”

Something flickered in the old man’s eyes. He simply nodded his answer.

Relief hit her so hard that she almost collapsed. “Thank you,” she said.

The old man nodded again and went out of the room. Nina could hear the sound of the lock after the door was shut.

Maybe it was relief, or maybe it was the past week’s lack of sleep catching up with her, but her eyes drooped, and she allowed the darkness to take over.

CHAPTER 7

Gaurav was seated in a chair around the small circular table in the dining room. “What happened?” he asked as he watched Vikram pacing around in anger.

“I was teaching her how to behave while she’s held captive.”

“She could have died as the result of your lesson. That’s not what we planned.”

“Your plan is riskier. You can’t keep her alive at the end of it all. She will tell __”

“Vikram, stop. We’ve gone through this repeatedly.”

“I know! But I just can’t let you risk your life by sparing her life. You are like my brother. How can you just forgive—”

Pain and rage erupted within him at Vikram’s words. “I haven’t forgiven, and neither have I forgotten.” Gaurav had less than a year to cope and plan this. His pain and anger was still raw.

Vikram looked agitated. “Then for their sake and even for my sake, consider an alternate end to her captivity.”

Gaurav took a deep breath, trying to curb the temptation of doing what Vikram suggested. “Just follow the plan, Vikram. Killing her now might be easy and satisfying, but it’s not worth risking my plan.”

Vikram looked torn, but he nodded.

Gaurav looked at him calmly. “I visited a friend six days ago.”

Vikram nodded. “Did he confess?”

“Yes.”

Vikram shook his head in disbelief. “Even though everything pointed to him, I still gave him the benefit of doubt. Shruti treated him like her own brother!”

“I know.”

“Did anyone see you?”

“No. I stayed around to cover my tracks. After you go back today, don’t stay in touch with me. But if you find anything about the chip, only then get in touch with me.”

Vikram nodded.

“Use my apartment,” Gaurav instructed. “But remember not to call me unless you absolutely need to.”

They discussed the next course of action.

GAURAV STARED AT the disappearing car as Vikram drove away from the cabin.

He knew Vikram was concerned about him. Setting the captive free after everything, did mean signing his death warrant. But at this point, Gaurav didn’t care about the risks involved, and neither did he care whether or not he would come out of it alive. Only one thought dominated his life for the past twelve months.

Revenge.

His eyes automatically fell on the floor, below which was the room his captive was kept.

“Sir?” a man’s voice broke through his thoughts.

“How are you doing, Khan?”

The older man nodded gravely in response.

Gaurav indicated to a chair, but the older man remained standing.

“Khan, I would like to remind you that I wasn’t too keen on you being involved with Vikram and me in this plan. You know you can leave whenever you want.”

“No, sir. I have no doubts or regrets. I would like to help you in any way I can.”

Gaurav nodded at the older man who had been with him for more than six years.

“Did she demand anything in these two days?”

“No, sir. She never bothered us in any way. In fact… Vikram, sir… he more or less starved her from the first day. But still, she never complained. Just today, she has requested a bath.”

“I see.”

“I think Vikram, sir, might have hurt her badly just now. Can you… check on her?”

Gaurav frowned. “I’ll do it later,” he said even though he wasn’t ready to face… the captive. In fact, he didn’t want to think of her as a person. The only reason he didn’t want Vikram to kill her was because she had more value and bargaining power if she were alive.

“Thank you, sir.” The old man nodded and left the cabin through the backdoor of the kitchen. Khan was staying in the small detached cabin outside of the medium-sized two-floored forest cabin.

Gaurav didn’t immediately head down the stairs. He stared out of the window for a while. But he knew he couldn’t put it off any longer.

He had to face her eventually.

The captive.

Taking a deep breath, Gaurav got up from the chair and walked down the stairs. He paused right outside the room. Apart from the sounds of birds and insects coming from the outside, it was entirely quiet. He wondered whether he should brace himself for an attack.

Nina Bhupati had surprised the hell out of him.

Until then, he had only thought of her as a pampered and spoilt wife of a rich man who would scream or faint during an attack. And when he had planned to kidnap her, the only thing he took extreme care of was to ensure there was no one to help her. But the fact that she fought back, shocked him. She had even fooled him by pretending to lose consciousness the first time he put the drug-laced cloth over her face.

She was definitely not harmless.

Slowly, he opened the door and stepped in. It was bright inside due to the sunlight streaming in from a large window. Immediately, his eyes fell on the prone figure on the bed.

There was no movement whatsoever. The woman was either sleeping or pretending to be asleep. With a frown marring his forehead, Gaurav moved closer. He stopped short suddenly. His eyes were glued to the angry red bruises on her throat.

His heart began beating rapidly, and sweat broke out on his skin.

The bruises brought in ugly memories.

"Save her!"

"But sir… there's no pulse."

"I said SAVE HER!"

The doctor looked at him for a few moments. "Bring the defibrillator," he softly ordered the staff.

Electric paddles were hurriedly brought in.

"Charging… clear."

A bolt of electricity passed through the prone body, but there was no change in heartbeat on the monitors.

"Again," the doctor ordered.

"Charging… clear."

Each time, Shruti's body jerked due to the electric shock, but her face remained still.

A few more tries later, they stopped trying.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Gaurav."

Shruti was long gone by the time he found her and had gotten help. The post-mortem report had said she died of self-strangulation.

Gaurav had been the one who found her hanging by her neck from the ceiling. Closing his eyes, he breathed through his mouth like his doctor had ordered him to.

He took several deep breaths to calm him down. It didn’t work.

His eyes opened and fell on the woman lying on the bed. Instead of pity, rage began to swirl within him. He wanted to stop the soft rise and fall of the chest on the woman. A strong urge to finish what Vikram had started grew in him.

He wanted to hurt her.

CHAPTER 8

There was dirt and filth everywhere despite trying to clean the place as much as possible. Not even a little bit of space was left for her to be able to sit and rest her starving, weak body. Considering she was only ten and not very big, it should have been an easy task.

Inside the abandoned hut, there was only one rickety cot where her younger sister's body lay. She had been dead for the past twelve hours. The cause was hunger. The school had been closed for the holidays, shutting their only source of nourishment.

Despite Nina and Devi sacrificing their share of food, they were not able to gather enough for Uma. Their younger sister's seven-year-old body could not tolerate extreme starvation and had given up.

Nina sat listlessly on the floor, next to the cot. She was tired, hungry, and filthy. She tried to rest her body against the cot and close her eyes.

As soon as she did, she felt the crawling. The maggots from her sister's dead body mistook her own starving, filthy, and emancipated body to be dead as well.

Nina began screaming as they completely covered her flesh and tore into it.

Nina woke up with a jolt. She began to frantically brush her hands all over her body. It took several moments for the feeling of something crawling all over on her skin to subside.

She lay still on the bed, keeping her eyes focused on the window from where the sunlight was streaming into the small yet clean room.

She sighed softly in relief that she wasn't dead, and the maggots hadn't gotten her flesh.

It was another dream. No, not a dream. She was having another nightmare. At least it wasn't the other nightmare. This particular one was rarer, and it was most

likely triggered by hunger and near starvation.

She hadn't been given anything to eat since the previous day. And before she could get to the food, she was attacked and choked.

Suddenly, the hair on her neck stood up as she felt a presence in the room. She whipped her head around, and her heart which had been pounding hard due to the nightmare, picked up even more, threatening to beat out of her chest.

A masked man was standing at a distance from the bed, watching her.

How long has he been watching me?

She lay completely still as she stared back at him. A part of her questioned whether her current reality was better than her nightmare.

She took in the details of the man.

He was dressed entirely in black. The fabric of his t-shirt stretched tight across his broad shoulders and biceps as he stood with folded hands.

She hadn't seen him before. The only people she had seen in the last one week were the old man and the man named Vikram.

She then recalled that while Vikram was strangling her, a commanding voice had ordered him to stop. The voice must have belonged to this man.

Nina's breath hitched when the man began to walk towards her. She kept her eyes riveted on his masked face while she continued to stay completely still.

As he neared, a faint smell of a subtle cologne or soap filled her nostrils. A small frown formed on her forehead as a memory crossed her mind.

"It was you," she said. "You were the one who took me." The tall and broad shape looked familiar.

At her statement, the man's pace remained unchanged.

"Even though I wasn't able to see your face completely, I know it was you who was near the building while I distributed the food packages."

At that time, the upper part of his face had been covered in a hood. But she knew that if she were to rip off his mask now, she would see a strong chin covered by heavy stubble.

"I know you kidnapped me for a ransom? How much do you want?" she

asked.

He didn’t answer her. He kept watching her.

He let the suffocating silence stretch for some time, until his lips firmed. “Shower. Next room. Fifteen minutes.” He said those words curtly before turning and walking out of the room.

Nina sat still for a few seconds, trying to process what he meant. Then, immediately she got up and followed behind him. He went up the stairs, leaving the door of her room open.

Cautiously, she stepped out, and instead of following him up the stairs, she went towards the next room as he instructed. The door to that room was open as well. She saw another smaller door inside and knew it was a bathroom. Crossing her fingers, she went towards it and opened it.

Her heart jumped in relief when she saw a tap with a bucket and a mug under it.

She probably had very little time before someone comes looking for her. Quickly locking the door to the bathroom, she looked around.

She searched every nook and corner. She flung open the only drawer, desperate to find something. But there was nothing substantial. No shaving blades or razors or even a nail file to be used as a weapon. Everything was empty.

Didn’t these men use the bathroom?

Her eyes fell on the mirror. She could break the mirror and use the pieces as a weapon, but it would be too obvious.

Sighing in disappointment, she picked up an unused soap and shampoo bottle placed on the counter. It was the generic commercial brand, unlike the hand-made organic ones she had been used to over the last ten years since she shared the bathroom with Suraj. As long as her body didn’t smell of vomit, she didn’t care if the harshest of chemicals were used to make the soap.

She turned on the tap. The water was room temperature and had a strange smell to it. The water was slightly brown in color as well. She washed her hair

twice and scrubbed her body, until all the grime and smell of the stale vomit was completely gone.

And when she was done, she searched for a cloth to dry herself. Her eyes fell on a fluffy pink towel with red embroidery work. It looked so completely out of place that she stared at it for a few moments.

There were three people in the house apart from her. And she didn't think any of the three men she had met so far would select that particular towel.

Slowly, she took in the rest of the tiny bathroom. She had been in too much of a hurry to find a weapon and then clean herself up to have observed it in detail. But now, she took in small details like the carved soap holder, and the pattern of the mirror on the sink gave her the insight that a woman must have been involved in selecting or setting up the bathroom.

But who? Were any of her captors married? Or may be a female relative or girlfriend visited the place often.

Nina's heart beat faster in the hope of getting help from someone. She knew there wasn't any guarantee that just because another woman visited the cabin, the woman would be willing to help. But still, Nina clung to that small hope.

Drying her body with the towel, she stared at her discarded clothes. A thin cotton slip with underwear and a bra. There was no way she could wear them back right then. She took them to the small sink and washed them thoroughly before hanging them on the towel stand to dry.

Was it stupid on her part to step out of the bathroom in just a towel? But if any of the men had intentions of molesting her, they would have already done so by now, especially when she was unconscious.

With that thought in mind, she cautiously opened the door. When she pushed it wider, her eyes fell on the open shelves which had several shirts and pants that were neatly folded and placed inside.

She went there quickly and grabbed a shirt and a pair of pants.

They were too large, but she couldn't afford to be picky, and so she hurriedly donned the clothes. She rolled the sleeves and folded the bottom of the pants.

Once she was properly dressed, she looked around the room. It was as bare and devoid of anything to be used as a weapon like the one she was held captive in. This room wasn't that much bigger than hers either. The difference was that it had a bathroom with a shower.

But the bathroom floor had been completely dry, and there was no used soap. Maybe there was another bathroom, too.

Less than a minute later, she found her answer when she looked out of the window on the side wall.

There was a breathtaking view of a lake at a distance, and it was surrounded by the tall trees of the forest. She could see a few clothes hanging near the bushes next to it.

Nina's fingers trembled as she placed her palm against the window pane. She was making sure it was real and not a picture or a mirage her mind imagined.

Where exactly was she? She had been trying to guess it for the last one week, but all she saw from the room she was held in were the endless trees.

This picturesque lake looked unique. She tucked the image away in her mind to be able to provide to the police at some point.

Reluctantly, she turned away from the view and looked at the room she stood in.

She stood uncertainly, wondering whether or not she should get back to her room or go out. And if she went out, whether or not it was even advisable to do so.

No. I cannot be passive, waiting like a sitting duck for whatever fate had in store for me.

Her stomach growled, deciding it further. She hadn't eaten well in the past week because they hadn't given her a big enough portion. In order to stay alert and clear-minded, she needed every bit of strength and nutrition to face whatever came her way.

With that thought, she opened the door.

She hoped that the older man would see her first. She walked through a short,

narrow hallway and saw stairs at the end. As soon as she reached the top of the stairs, she saw the old man in the kitchen. Before relief could hit her, her heart jumped when her eyes met with the other man in the room.

Her captor.

He was seated in one of the chairs in a small dining nook attached to the kitchen. And watching her.

The look in his eyes as he swept them over her body almost had her running back to the basement. But bracing herself, she slowly walked to the dining table and sat in a chair opposite to him.

“Where are your clothes?” he asked quietly.

“Drying.”

He was silent.

“Have you reached out to my husband?” she asked.

She thought he wouldn’t answer, but he did. “Not yet,” he said in a curt tone.

She wanted to ask him why, but self-preservation demanded that she not question him right then. “How long will I be kept here?” she asked instead.

“As long as it takes.”

CHAPTER 9

Gaurav watched his captive's face while he broke the news to her. He had expected her to either break into tears or beg him to let her go or at least throw a huge tantrum for not getting the answers she expected.

But she remained quiet. He also noticed how, without making it very obvious, her eyes were systematically absorbing every aspect of her surroundings.

She definitely wasn't behaving like a kidnap victim either. She had way too much of presence of a mind and awareness of her surroundings.

And seeing her in his clothes agitated him further even though he knew she had no other option.

Shopping for his captive's clothes wasn't on top of his priority while he eliminated his enemies.

"Sir, madam." Khan placed two steaming bowls of food on the table.

Gaurav picked up a spoon and began eating right away. He was half-way through it when he noticed that his captive had only taken a couple of bites and was grimacing while staring into the bowl.

"Is the cooking not up to your standards, Mrs. Bhupati?" he asked. Although his voice was toneless, it held an underlying mocking infliction.

Her eyes flew up and met his. "This is delicious," she replied quietly. "And I'm hungry. And even if it wasn't good, I would still eat it. I've had half-rotten and sometimes fully-rotten food to survive."

He felt an unwanted sliver of intrigue at her statement. Was she trying to garner sympathy for herself? Or maybe make him and Khan think that she was one among the masses, and not a rich, pampered woman used to gourmet food.

He didn't fall for her lies or manipulation. "Then what seems to be the problem? Why are you not eaing your food?"

She raised her chin slightly. "My throat hurts when I swallow," she answered

quietly.

His eyes fell on the bruises around her neck. They had darkened considerably.

He refused to feel anything for her.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, he got up from his chair. “Let’s go,” he said.

She nodded calmly and got up to follow him to her room. They had barely taken a few steps when she swept in front of him. Before he could register and grab her, she kneed him hard in his groin. Pain exploded within him, and he collapsed on his knees.

Meantime, she flew towards the main door which was left unlocked after Vikram had left that morning. Khan was also not around. He must have gone back to his room.

With rage churning inside his stomach, Gaurav staggered up and chased after her.

She was fast. Ignoring his pain, he tried to catch up with her.

She ran in a zig-zag manner within the forest. But he knew every inch of the place and could easily gauge which direction she would take.

Still, it took him well over ten minutes to get near her. And only because she tripped on the slope. And instead of trying to stop, she curled her body, increasing the momentum while rolling down the slope further.

He increased the length of his strides, chasing after her.

Eventually, she ended up on a side of the lake with nowhere to run. She stopped and looked back at him briefly. When she saw him nearing, she jumped into the lake.

He jumped in after her.

She was swimming away clumsily, and it took him less than a minute to catch her.

She didn’t give up her fight. Her nails dug deep into his hands where he held her by the shirt to drag her towards the shore. She kept trying to twist away and also kick him again in his groin. But because of the water, her movements were

sluggish.

She ripped his mask away and tried to claw his face. “Let me go!” she shouted.

She almost slipped out of his hold and went under, taking several mouthfuls of the lake water. He held her hair and dragged her up. She coughed while choking on the water. Even then, she kept struggling to get out of his hold.

He dragged her face close to his. “Give up the bloody fight and come with me,” he ordered. They were only a few feet away from the shore.

She looked at his face which was now fully visible to her and stopped her struggles. She even remained quiet when he dragged her to the shore. He was just about to stand up when her head slammed into his nose.

His grip loosened once again, and she tried to roll away from him.

Breathing through his mouth, he caught her shirt and dragged her down on the ground before rolling on top of her. Their eyes met, and she glared at him murderously.

The next instant, a stone banged into the side of his head. A blinding pain burst inside his head.

Enraged, he imprisoned both her hands with one of his.

She kept struggling until he reached into his pocket and pulled out a gun. He pointed it at her forehead. “Stop,” he ordered.

Her eyes were defiant as she stared into his eyes. Water droplets mixed with the blood from his head injury fell on her cheek. She didn’t flinch. “You won’t kill me,” she said. “My husband won’t pay you any ransom for a dead body. He’ll demand proof.”

He watched her in quiet menace. “Do you want me to prove you wrong?” he stated.

Instead of giving in, “Fuck you!” she spat, struggling once again.

“I could,” he said quietly. “Although, you might want to reconsider your offer because it won’t be a pleasurable act for you.”

Her struggles died, and she froze under him. Her breathing became faster at

his threat.

He knew that she had just realized her precarious position as she lay under him. Only two thin and wet layers of cloth separated their bare bodies. He could clearly feel her panicked heartbeats against his chest.

She stared at him as though she wanted to oppose, but slowly her body became limp in defeat.

He still didn’t trust her. “If you try anything again, it won’t end well for you. Understand?”

Her nostrils flared at his threat, but she jerked her head once in a nod.

CHAPTER 10

By the time they reached the cabin, Nina was almost falling with exhaustion. The escape and the fight had taken a toll on her. She was hugely disappointed that her attempt had failed.

For some reason, she thought her plan would work. As soon as she had seen the unlocked main door, hope took root in her mind. Freedom had beckoned her. Even though she knew she had a very small chance—nevertheless a chance—she had put together a hasty plan to run out of the cabin and get far enough to hit a road where she would have stopped a vehicle to rescue her.

She knew she was a fast runner. She had fled many dangerous situations on foot before, too. She had almost made it. But the man, who was currently holding her arm and dragging her behind him, ruined her escape.

She could feel his body vibrating with anger. And even though she had pulled off his mask, she hadn't seen his face properly. The setting sun was behind him, keeping most of his face in the shadows. It made him seem unearthly and dangerous. And that, combined with his softly uttered threat to force her into submission, had killed the fight from her.

She hated that she was terrified of that threat. And she couldn't read him enough to know whether or not he would follow through. But she knew that keeping herself alive until they received a ransom, didn't necessarily mean not touching or harming her in other ways.

"Are you both, okay?" a worried voice asked. The old man was waiting outside the cabin door.

Nina watched as understanding dawned in the old man's eyes as soon as he saw their wet and bloodied clothes. Most of the blood was from her captor's head injury. Apart from some scrapes and bruises she got during her escape, she was mostly fine.

“Lock the door,” her captor instructed before stepping into the house.

Dragging her down the stairs, her captor shoved her inside the room. She stared at him, her eyes taking in everything.

He didn’t do anything to either cover his face or blindfold her. He stared back as though daring her to memorize his features. He kept his expression blank, and she couldn’t make out whether he was angry or agitated in any way.

A few moments later, without saying a word, he turned away. He stepped out of the room and shut the door. She heard the click of the lock.

Nina stared at the door for a while. She turned away and slowly went towards the bed, only to realize she couldn’t lie on it with her wet clothes. So instead, she walked towards a wall and sat on the floor and leaned against the wall.

Her hair and clothes dripped and formed a small puddle around her. She wasn’t cold due to the weather, but the adrenaline pumping through her bloodstream made her shiver. The weather outside and on the inside of the forest cabin was warm and humid.

She closed her eyes. She now knew how her kidnapper looked. He had dark, deep-set eyes. They looked cold even though he had obvious laugh lines around them. And the short buzz-cut hairstyle added to the intensity of his eyes. The rest of his features were sharp and striking. She would easily be able to identify him in a line-up or describe him to an artist.

Even while the thoughts of how she would identify him for the police went through her mind, her eyes drooped with exhaustion.

Just before she gave in to the sleep, one thought ran through her mind—she was tired, but not defeated.

CHAPTER 11

Gaurav strode angrily into his room. He had let his guard down around her and almost let her escape.

Damn her!

With angry movements, he shed his wet clothes, rubbed himself with a towel, and changed into a fresh pair of clothes. The places where she had scratched him on his arms and face stung. His head throbbed in pain where she hit him with a stone. Even his damn nose felt tender.

Nina Bhupati hadn't tried to escape in the last two days when Vikram and Khan were around. But she attempted it today.

Did she think that because he had stopped Vikram from strangling her, he wasn't dangerous? Did she feel a false sense of security with him, thinking he wasn't capable of killing her?

She was wrong. Damn wrong.

He could easily kill her. Hell, he wanted to kill her and had every reason to justify the killing. And if he couldn't do that—then he would break and destroy her soul.

He had waited long enough. He was going to begin the next phase of his plan. Grabbing the things he needed, he went up the stairs and opened the backdoor. "Khan!" he called.

"Sir?" There was a worried look in Khan's eyes.

"We are initiating the next part of the plan."

"But sir, you said we'd wait another week before—"

"I changed my mind."

Khan looked like he wanted to argue, but he just nodded.

Gaurav went down again and unlocked the door to her room. For a moment, rage swirled in him when he didn't find her on the bed or the chair. He was just

about to explode, but then he saw her.

She was seated on the floor with her knees raised, leaning against the wall that separated his room from hers. She was sleeping.

His anger slowly died at the sight. With her long, damp hair and clothes, and her face devoid of any make-up, she looked small and helpless. Gaurav's deeply-buried conscience tried to resurface along with a jolt of shame, making him clutch the handle of the bag harder. It even made him second guess his current plan, but then Sruthi's innocent face appeared in his mind, urging him on.

Taking a deep breath, he walked towards his captive and stopped a foot away. "Get up," he commanded.

She jerked awake at the sound of his voice, and when she saw him, her expression turned wary.

"Get on the bed," he instructed.

There was a pause. "Why?"

"Never argue with me," he warned softly. "If you want to come out of your captivity alive, then follow my orders."

She looked like she wanted to argue, but she kept quiet.

"Move."

With visibly shaking legs, she slowly got up and went towards the bed and sat on a corner. He closed the shades on the window partially, making the room appear much dimmer.

He opened the small duffel bag he brought with him and took out a rope and some duct tape. He pulled both her hands behind her and used the rope to tie her. And then, using a knife, he ripped off a piece of duct tape.

She didn't struggle when he stuck it across her mouth. In fact, her eyes still appeared wary, but there was no fear.

He needed fear.

He raised the knife in front of her and placed the tip at her throat. Even though her body stilled, her breathing remained normal.

Deliberately, he made a slow perusal of her body which was clearly visible in

his wet shirt and trousers. The soft cotton fabric clung to her generous curves. His eyes swept to her face, her neck, her shoulders, and deliberately lingered on her chest.

He heard her breathing hitch slightly, getting heavier. Slowly, he moved the knife lower and cut off the top two buttons of the shirt before pushing the ends apart, exposing a generous portion of her shadowed cleavage.

Her eyes widened in fear, making her appear even more innocent and helpless. Her entire body began trembling, but she kept her eyes locked on his.

He noticed that despite her obvious fear, her eyes were dry with no hint of tears.

A sliver of regret passed through him for wanting to break someone like her. But he kept reminding himself of why he needed to do it.

A knock interrupted their staring. And immediately, his captive's eyes flew to the door as though she was expecting a savior.

It was Khan. The older man entered the room and remained silent.

Gaurav didn't look away from his captive's face. "We are almost ready. Begin recording when I indicate," he instructed Khan.

Then tearing his eyes away from his captive's face, he went to his duffel bag and took out a mask to put on.

Khan continued to stay silent while he raised his phone to take a video of them. His eyes remained lowered on the phone screen. Gaurav knew Khan did not want to make any direct eye contact with the captive. Even though Khan supported him, he was still ashamed of this particular part of the plan.

Gaurav had already told Khan several times that he wasn't needed, but it was Khan who kept insisting he wanted to help.

"Start recording," Gaurav instructed and stood right next to the captive. He tugged her head back by her hair and placed the knife under her chin once again. Her chest was visibly moving up and down, and her breathing sounded loud in the otherwise quiet room.

"This is Nina Bhupati, the wife of Suraj Bhupati. Mr. Bhupati, I have your

wife. I know you must be missing her. So, I'm sending you a souvenir." Gaurav pulled the knife away from her throat. Then raising it higher, he sliced through a long, thick lock of hair he held.

He grabbed another handful and hacked it as well. He continued to hack rest of her hair using the knife.

Each time the knife sawed through a thick lock, he heard a gasp escape from his captive. It took a while to cut her thick hair. Once he was done, he held her by the remaining hair which was now only few inches long.

He deliberately lowered his mouth to his captive's cheek and let his lips graze her skin. He heard her noisy inhale, and her breathing came out in short, panicked breaths. "Mr. Bhupati, I think you'll not like the follow-up videos I send to you."

And then, he gave a slight nod, allowing Khan to lower and turn off the recording on the phone.

"Check whether the video came out okay," Gaurav instructed Khan. Meantime, he began to pick up the shorn locks and put them into a plastic bag.

Khan replayed the video. "It's clear," he said in a somber tone.

"Good. Leave the phone here before you leave."

Khan placed the phone on the table. And then, he hesitated for a second, his eyes finally falling on the captive's face who was watching him beseechingly.

Nina Bhupati looked small and broken with oversized clothes and her jagged haircut. Gaurav could see pity and worry flashing in Khan's eyes. Khan looked like he wanted to say something to comfort her, but then, he closed his eyes, and left the room, shutting the door softly.

The breathing of the captive grew even harsher and louder in the quiet room. Gaurav collected most of the remaining shorn hair into a plastic bag and put it inside the duffel bag. He then returned to her to slowly peel the tape from her mouth. Apart from the noisy breaths, she remained quiet while he cut through the rope around her hands.

As soon as she was freed, she lay on the bed and curled into a small ball,

hugging her knees, trying to cover her exposed skin from his gaze. What she didn't realize was that without her long hair covering her, the entire backside looked enticing in that position as the damp material of his shirt and pants clung to her generous curves.

Gaurav watched her, unable to tear his eyes away from her. Something about her fetal position called to him. Every instinct urged him to touch her. Whether to hurt her or to comfort her, he didn't know.

Irritated at his instincts and also for noticing her body, he stepped away from her. He pulled off the mask from his face and put it back in the duffel bag. He picked up the phone that Khan had used for recording and played the video. Although the background was dim, the faces were quite clear, and Nina Bhupati looked satisfyingly terrified through the entire video.

Her husband would be sufficiently tortured.

Gaurav would have to edit the video to add a synthesized voice instead of his. He was just about to lower the phone when he felt a slight movement. Before he could react or turn, Nina Bhupati grabbed the knife placed inside the duffel bag and quickly moved away.

She stood at a distance on the opposite side of the room.

With her jagged hair and with a knife held high in an attack position, she looked far removed from the glamorous society woman. She looked like a cornered wild animal.

She looked breathtaking.

Gaurav felt a dark, primal instinct rising in him to hunt and tame the wild woman in front of him. With great difficulty, he tried to tamp it down.

"Put down the knife, Mrs. Bhupati," he told her quietly.

"No! If you don't let me go, I'll kill you! I'll slice open your throat! I'll cut open your damn innards and leave you suffering in pain."

He smiled at her bloodthirsty threat. He knew it was far from a reassuring smile. "That's going to be quite gory and messy, Mrs. Bhupati. Are you sure you like going through that route? I already know you are somewhat of a clean

freak,” he softly taunted. He had seen how she organized the things in the room assigned to her, and as well as in the bathrooms she had used.

Her eyes flared.

He let out a deliberate sigh. “You are just delaying the inevitable. I can unarm you quite easily. The only thing you’ll achieve by making me tackle you is to make me even angrier.”

He held his hand out. “Return the knife right now,” he ordered softly, his voice holding quiet menace.

She shook her head vigorously and didn’t lower the knife. “You plan to hurt me, anyway. Before that, I’ll hurt you badly or kill you if you don’t allow me to escape.”

He didn’t say anything and waited to see what she would do.

She took a few tentative steps towards the door.

“There’s another man upstairs,” he said in a casual tone. “Do you plan on killing him as well? He has a soft spot for you. He’s going to be very sad and disappointed to know you would gut him and kill him to escape.”

Her hands trembled. “H-he won’t stop me.”

He let out another slow smile. “You seem to be quite confident of your charms, Mrs. Bhupati.”

She didn’t say anything and stood still. Too damn still.

Before even she did anything, he knew what her next move would be. The moment she began sprinting towards the door, he lunged towards her at the same time.

He was about to wrap his arms around her middle to pick her up, but she dodged and slipped away from his hands.

Gaurav frowned. He went at her again, but she dodged him again. They kept at it few more times, with him lunging and she dodging and escaping his hold. But the room was small, so he eventually had her cornered.

When he went to pull the knife away from her, she swung it, aiming straight towards his heart. Because of his quick reflexes, he was able to deflect the strike

using his arm. With the other hand, he held her wrist.

But by then, the knife had already sliced through the flesh on his arm. “Fuck!” he hissed at the searing pain.

Ignoring the pain, he maintained the grip on her wrist. “Drop the knife,” he ordered.

She stared at him defiantly.

He increased the pressure on her wrist. Her eyes were widened and glazed in pain, but she did not let the knife go. “Let go of the knife before I break your wrist,” he commanded softly.

She shook her head.

“There are no doctors around. And no possible escape for you. Do you want to spend the days of your captivity with a broken wrist?”

A choked sob escaped her as she understood his threat. Slowly, she loosened the grip on the knife.

He pulled it from her and stepped away. His arm hurt and was bleeding profusely.

He looked at her coldly before picking up the bag and walking out of the room, locking her inside.

CHAPTER 12

Nina hated the wait.

She sat in the corner of the room with her back against the wall and her eyes trained on the door. She was sure her captor would return to torture her painfully for stabbing him in the arm.

She felt a crippling exhaustion in her body due to lack of sleep during the past week of her captivity. Her head kept falling forward, trying to reach for the comfort of sleep. But each time it did, she jerked it back up, refusing to give in to sleep. Especially when she was at her most vulnerable.

She didn't know whether attacking him was a logical move. But when he had stalked her in a slow, unhurried manner, with menace radiating from his body, demanding his knife back, he had looked like a hunter who had cornered his prey. And she was his trembling, whimpering prey. Her mind had rebelled instantly at the comparison of herself with a prey. She wasn't weak. She had never been weak. Even when the odds were stacked against her, she had always fought back. And so, not making this time any exception, she had sliced his arm.

And now, the thought of what he could do to her was tearing her apart.

Will he come to her room tonight? And if so, what will he do? Will he follow through his threats?

She thought about the video taken to send it to Suraj. Her captor had spoken about the follow-up videos. She didn't have to guess about his intentions of what the later videos would contain.

Nina's thoughts threatened to take her into darkness to escape into a place where there would be no worry or fear.

Don't you dare give up!

She shivered and rubbed at her trembling arms as her mind ordered her not to give in to fear. But even as she talked herself into being brave, her heart almost

stopped when the door to the room opened.

Her captor entered the room once again.

He saw her crouched on the floor. “Come with me,” he said in a quiet tone.

Although the tone was quiet, dread shot up in her. She noticed that unlike the other man who had choked her, this man never raised his voice. It only made her fear him even more.

She shook her head at him as an answer even though her entire body trembled.

His nostrils flared. “I already told you what would happen if you don’t follow my orders. Move.”

With shaking legs, she slowly stood up, but made no attempt to go towards him.

He covered the distance and grabbed her arm. And then he began dragging her towards his bedroom.

Panic tore through her, and she dug in her heels. “No! I’m not coming!”

He threw her another cold look before continuing to drag her out.

Her panic exploded, and she began kicking and screaming. “Stop!” she screamed. When she tried to knee him, he held her arms and swung her up and threw her over his shoulder.

The impact robbed her of her breath. She couldn’t speak or shout. And her stomach hurt as it jostled against his hard shoulder.

As soon as he took her into the room, he set her on her feet with a jarring thud. And before she could scream once again, her eyes fell on the older man who was also in the room. He was pouring steaming, hot water into a large bowl.

Her mind froze.

Was her captor planning to pour boiling water on her skin? Was that better than being raped?

Her panicked brain threw in various scenarios her captor could use the boiling water and also the bed to rape her. He would send those videos to Suraj and—

“Stitch.”

It took a while for that order to process through her terrified mind. “What?” she asked in a shaking voice.

“You cut me open. So you’ll have to be the one to stitch me back up.”

Her eyes flew from the hot water and fell on the bandages placed on the table next to the bed. She could also see a needle and some thread. “I-I can’t,” she whispered, understanding what he wanted. Even though her brain knew she wasn’t going to be violated or physically tortured, the panic still remained.

“You can, and you will stitch my wounds.”

“I can’t,” she said with a weak voice. “I’ve never done it before.”

He watched her with an expressionless look. “You’ve never stitched before? Aren’t you supposedly one of the most sought-after exclusive clothes designers in the city?” There was a hint of mockery in his tone.

“I know how to stitch fabric, not… not… human skin,” she said with a slight involuntary shudder. Her stomach which was still a bit queasy after being thrown over his shoulder began to churn even more.

“It’s the same thing, Mrs. Bhupati. Get going.”

Her eyes searched for the old man in the room, but he wasn’t there. She realized he must have left them. She desperately hoped he would return soon.

“Move!” her captor snapped.

She jumped and followed him as he sat on his bed with his back to the headboard and stretched his legs in front of him.

Her legs faltered when she saw him removing his shirt and throwing it into a corner of the bed. Her eyes fell on his chest and lingered for a couple of seconds before looking away hurriedly.

When her eyes fell on his face again, she noticed that he was watching her with another expressionless look. Biting her lip to stop it from trembling, she slowly covered the remaining distance.

He pointed his chin to the table next to him. “Clean and disinfect the area before you begin stitching,” he instructed.

Taking the clean cloth the old man had left next to the hot water, she dipped it

in the water and wiped his wounded arm. The cut was open wide, and even though she wiped it with the wet cloth, fresh blood oozed out.

She didn't know why, but the sight of his blood almost shocked her. Maybe because until then, she had thought of him as a horrible monster. And to see him, bloodied and vulnerable like everyone else, it somehow forced her to think of him as a human.

"Disinfect."

His command snapped her out of her fanciful thoughts. He might be a human, but he was also a human who wanted to hurt her. With trembling hands, she picked up the small bottle left behind by the old man and poured some into the cloth. And then, she wiped it across the cut.

Her captor barely flinched, even though she was sure his wound must feel like it was on fire. He reached for something on the nightstand.

It was a whiskey bottle. Twisting the bottle cap using one hand, he picked it up and sipped straight from it. He took three or four sips before he placed it back on the nightstand.

Meantime, Nina was trying to put the thread into the needle. Her shaking hands made it even more difficult. Several tries later, she still was unable to put the thread across.

"Give that here," he said. His tone held impatience.

With shaking hands, Nina handed it to him.

Her eyes fell on his hands as he held the needle and thread. His hands looked large against the tiny needle, and his fingers were much longer and thicker than hers to be able to handle the fine thread. But at the first try, he pulled the thread across the needle in a smooth move and handed it back to her.

She was surprised and wondered where he acquired the skill.

"Get going, Mrs. Bhupati. I don't want to bleed all over my bed."

His voice snapped her out of her thoughts. She took a step closer to him and bent towards his arm. Her hands shook as she slowly poked the needle into the red, swollen flesh. Her stomach threatened to empty its contents.

“Here,” his deep voice rumbled.

As soon as she heard his voice, she gratefully tore her eyes away from her task. He was handing her the whiskey bottle.

“Drink. It’ll calm your nerves,” he said.

“I don’t drink,” she replied.

“It wasn’t an offer, Mrs. Bhupati. I’m ordering you to drink.”

She couldn’t read anything from his eyes or face, but not wanting to risk his anger, she took the bottle from his hands and took a tiny sip. The fiery liquid almost choked her. She coughed out loudly. Her throat stung, and tears filled her eyes. Even her stomach felt as though it was set on fire.

“Another sip,” she heard him order. She wanted to refuse, but as soon as she met his eyes, she picked up the bottle again to take another sip.

This one burned similarly, but she was much more prepared. She waited for him to order her to take a few more sips. But he didn’t.

As she waited, the fire inside her belly, turned into warmth, and she felt her body beginning to relax.

“You better start stitching before you get too drowsy.”

Taking a deep breath, she picked up the needle once again. This time her hands shook a little less, and she was able to stitch through the wound on his arm. When she reached the end, she made a knot. She looked around the table for something to cut the ends.

A small pair of scissors lay within the bandages placed on a tray. She picked it up and then froze.

Her mind was fuzzy but still functioning. Her eyes flew towards her captor. His eyes were closed, and his dark lashes were still against his cheekbones. His chest rose and fell evenly. He must have fallen asleep because of the drink.

This time she stared at his chest properly. Within the toned muscled abs were two obvious deep wounds that had recently healed. They appeared to be bullet wounds.

She wondered how he got them. Did he kidnap people for ransom on a

regular basis? He seemed fit and able. Why couldn't he make money honestly? He owned a modest house in the forest, too. So it wasn't like he was cornered and desperate to resort to such methods.

Why the hell do you care? And stop wasting time. Use this opportunity to hurt him and escape right now!

On instinct, her fingers tightened around the handle of the scissors.

"You might want to rethink your next course of action, Mrs. Bhupati." Nina jumped when she heard him speak.

His eyes were still closed, and his chest rose and fell rhythmically.

"I-I was just trying to find something to cut the end off," she said and used the raised scissors to quickly cut the thread.

His eyes opened and she was met with an intense stare. "I'm not your doting husband," he said in a cold voice. "You have hurt and bloodied me twice. If you hurt me again, I'll return that pain several times over. Remember that for the next time."

Instead of getting frightened by his threat, she was angry. No, not just angry. Furious.

"You may be able to hurt me," she said in a scathing tone. "But you should know that men who deliberately hurt women or cause them pain are simply pathetic. Hurting women or innocents is not being powerful, it's just showing weakness!" She had shouted the last part and was breathing fast due to anger and adrenaline.

The captor's nostrils flared, and he seemingly grew larger. Slowly, he stepped down from the bed.

Until that moment, he had either looked at her coldly or with no expression on his face. But now, he had a furious look.

Nina didn't step back. Her legs shook, but she somehow held her ground.

She flinched when his hand grabbed the collar of the shirt she wore and jerked her even closer. He wasn't hurting her, but she was terrified with the look on his face.

His dark, intense eyes burned with a rage. “Pathetic?” he asked in an awfully quiet tone. The contrast of the rage on his face and the controlled cold tone made her body tremble. “Then tell me, Mrs. Bhupati,” he continued in the same quiet tone that would have sounded casual to an outsider. “Tell me how every night you willingly slept next to a pathetic bastard?” He jerked her even closer and bent his head down until there were only a few inches left between their faces. “Tell me how did you let the pathetic bastard touch you with hands covered in an innocent’s pain and blood?”

His words cut through her fear and ricocheted in her mind. She stared at him in shock.

CHAPTER 13

Gaurav watched the shock on his captive's face.

Disgusted, he let go of her and held her arm to drag her back into her room. She didn't protest and followed behind him. He dropped her off next to her bed and turned to go back to his room.

"What do you want from Suraj?" he heard her ask softly as he neared the door.

He almost ignored her, but her next words made him stop.

"I know it's not money. It's quite obvious that you have something personal against him. What do you think he did wrong?"

He whipped around. "I don't merely *think* he did something wrong, I know it for a fact."

"What did he do?" she asked again.

He was angry at her probing. He didn't owe her any explanation.

"You obviously think I'm somehow involved. But what if I'm innocent in this?" she pressed. "Would you still think I don't deserve to know why I'm being kept here?"

"Doesn't matter if you are innocent," he said, even though he knew it would. "Your husband didn't hesitate to strike at an innocent for his selfish reasons."

"Who? Who was that innocent?"

His jaw clenched as he realized he had spoken too much. He was drunk enough for some of his defenses to be lowered. Maybe she knew that, because she kept pushing even more. "If you plan on torturing me and raping me to send those videos to Suraj, don't I at least deserve to know the reason why?"

He watched her face while she looked back at him fearlessly, waiting for him to answer.

One of the reasons Gaurav didn't want to tell her the truth was that there was

a small amount of possibility of her being rescued. If that happened before he could gather evidence and destroy his enemy, then not only his entire mission would end as a failure, but he would be putting Khan and Vikram in danger as well.

“Whatever wrong you think Suraj did to you, I’m pretty sure having a discussion with him would—”

“Shut up.”

She fell quiet at his order.

If he had doubts about keeping her in the dark, those doubts disappeared completely, when she took her husband’s side without even knowing anything. “I already told you, I don’t *think* it. I know it. Your husband took the life of an innocent person. In fact, two innocent people.”

His anger didn’t seem to faze her. She continued watching him, trying to read his face. “Innocent people who were also your loved ones,” she stated softly.

He didn’t say anything.

“I know how it is to lose a loved one. I’ve lost my two sisters. They were the only family I had.” Her voice was calm and deeply sympathetic.

Gaurav froze when she said the word *sister*. A part of his brain said she didn’t know anything about him. But the other part urged him to fly into a rage and kill her right then, because she might have known everything about him, even before he had kidnapped her.

Shruti’s so-called suicide wasn’t covered in any of the newspapers, but that didn’t mean Nina Bhupati wasn’t aware of every evil order her husband had passed. Maybe she was the one who gave her husband the idea, just so her luxurious life style wouldn’t be threatened.

He slowly walked towards her and stopped right in front of her. He bent forward and held her neck, pulling her closer, until their faces were only inches apart. Right under his thumb, he felt the pulse under her soft skin of her throat beating rapidly.

Gaurav knew it was his grief that made him want to lash out at the nearest

target. He tried to control the urge to snuff out the life of the woman his enemy loved.

“Please,” he heard her say, her warm breath falling on his skin. “I know grief and pain. I can see it in your eyes. I still mourn my sisters every day. Let me help you find the truth.”

Gaurav took several deep breaths as his hand on her throat trembled slightly.

End her! A voice inside him commanded. But slowly, and with great difficulty, he let his rational mind take over. He loosened the grip on her neck.

“Let me help you find out the truth and bring justice,” she said. “I know it won’t help you with the pain, but it will at least give you some closure.”

He didn’t remove the fingers he wrapped around her throat.

“Please. We’ve been through the same thing. Our loved ones were snatched away from us. Let me help you,” she repeated in a whisper.

He knew she was trying to establish a connection between them to invoke empathy towards her. She wanted him to think of her as an individual person with her own past and life, rather than a tool to be used.

It didn’t work. It just made him angry. “You can play your mind games all you want,” he snarled into her face. “But the only way this will end, and I’ll let you go free is, after your husband’s death.”

With that he let go of her neck and strode out of the room, locking it once again.

He headed up the stairs. “I’m going for a walk,” he told Khan who was waiting upstairs.

Khan looked at him and nodded grimly.

GAURAV WALKED THROUGH the familiar dark forest. Even though he had come to escape thoughts of what happened in the cabin a while ago, his mind still ran towards his captive.

“Why her?” Vikram asked, watching the couple on the TV screen.

Suraj Bhupati and his wife were in a government school. Nina Bhupati was distributing food packets and gifts to the children.

“Look properly,” said Gaurav.

Vikram frowned at the couple. “Yeah. Yeah. She’s Mother Teresa and Miss World wrapped into one. Bhupati is very lucky to find that bimbo. But what’s your point?”

“See how he looks at her,” Gaurav said.

Gaurav didn’t care about what Nina Bhupati was or how she looked. All he cared was how his enemy was looking at her. Suraj Bhupati was watching his wife with a tender look as she told the reporter about the importance of continuing the food program during the school breaks.

Vikram was silent as he took in that information.

“Neither of them are low-profile people,” Vikram warned. “If we get her, Suraj Bhupati is going to use his network and influences to get his wife back. We have to be prepared for a massive manhunt.”

“Of course. I expect the bastard to do nothing less.”

It was a well-known fact that Suraj Bhupati madly loved his wife, which was why Gaurav targeted her.

Nina Bhupati was close to her husband in all aspects of his life. Her husband had openly announced several times to everyone that his wife was his equal partner or was at least aware of every major decision he took.

Nina Bhupati may or may not have been directly involved in Shruti’s murder, but the fact that there was some chance of her involvement, automatically made Gaurav hate her.

He wanted to take from Suraj Bhupati what was snatched from him. He didn’t want Suraj Bhupati dead in a quick, merciful way. He wanted the bastard to slowly lose his mind. He wanted the bastard to lose all hope.

Just like he had.

CHAPTER 14

Six months ago…

The cool breeze from the river blew on the fire while chants filled the air.

Gaurav watched as the fire continued to burn brightly, fueled by the offerings made during the ceremony. He felt numb as he blindly followed the instructions of the priest.

They said it would make the souls of the departed rest in peace. They said the souls would leave the earth to make their journey towards heaven. If that were true, then he wanted to stop the ceremony and beg their souls not to leave him. He wanted to beg them to forgive him. Tell them it was his fault. All because of him.

I'm sorry.

He stared at the pictures of the two women, the only family who mattered to him or even cared for him.

It was said that one was supposed to recall all the happy memories of their departed loved ones. But each time he saw his mother's picture, he didn't remember her gentle smile or the way she held him in her lap while she stroked his hair and listened to his worries. Instead, he remembered her shocked face and her screams when she saw her daughter's dead body hanging from the ceiling.

Those screams would forever be lodged inside his head.

It pained him even more that he recalled the same sight when he thought of his sister. Instead of her mischievous smile and their silly sibling arguments, all he recalled was her pale face as she lay in the coffin.

"Sir, the ceremony has concluded. Please take a dip in the river," the priest instructed.

Gaurav got up and moved like an automaton. The water felt cold over his freshly shaven head, bringing him slightly out from the numbness. It made his grief even worse.

But along with his grief was anger—intense anger and hatred towards one man who was responsible for the grief.

The urge to destroy and kill grew in intensity.

All it would take is a gun with a bullet. He wouldn't need more because he wouldn't miss. If he were to kill the bastard, it would be at a point-blank range while Suraj Bhupati looked at his killer's face in horror and begged for mercy.

Rising from the water, Gaurav took in a deep breath of air while he blinked away the excess moisture.

Standing at a distance was a large group of people attending the funeral. His mother and sister knew a lot of people because of their friendly and helpful nature. Gaurav also had a big network of friends and colleagues who came to pay their respects.

Among the crowd who had come to attend the funeral, there was one attendee Gaurav did not want to talk to or associate himself with. But the older man stubbornly insisted he be heard.

"Give up your quest at least now, Gaurav," a well-dressed man with salt and pepper hair pleaded. "You have proved enough. Come back home."

"Yes, Gaurav. Suraj is dangerous. He's already attempted an attack on you," another man who was a few years older than Gaurav warned.

The throbbing from the knife wounds from an attack that had happened a day ago increased in intensity at the reminder.

Gaurav didn't reply to any of their concerns. At that point, he didn't care for his life. Neither did he care for the older man's concerns. In fact, Gaurav felt every bit of humanity, morals, and all other softer emotions slowly disappearing from him.

All that consumed his mind was one thought—he would make Suraj Bhupati and everyone involved in his sister's and mother's deaths pay.

CHAPTER 15

“Mr. Bhupati, we have notified everyone in the department that finding your wife and her kidnapper is our top most priority.”

“Then why the hell hasn’t your team found my wife yet!” Suraj more or less shouted at the IG of Police on the phone.

Almost ten days had passed since Nina went missing. When Suraj got back to their room in the morning, Nina had already left their home for donating the leftover food to the homeless.

Two hours later, a panicked car driver who had taken Nina there called Suraj to say Nina hadn’t yet returned to the car, and neither was she found anywhere around.

Suraj rushed to the place where she had gone missing. He and his men grilled every homeless person present there about whether or not they had seen anyone speaking with Nina.

None of them gave good responses. Most of them said they were asleep.

Soon, Radha had called the police on Suraj’s order, and the police took over the investigation.

“We are trying out best, Mr. Bhupati. Our best technical team along with the field team are working round the clock, sir.”

“Did you at least find the vehicle the kidnappers used to take her?”

There was a pause on the line. “The CCTV captured all the vehicles that drove on the street during that day, but none of the people who were driving the vehicles that day seem to be involved in Mrs. Bhupti’s kidnapping.”

“How can you bloody say that? My wife didn’t just disappear by herself!”

“We have been following each of those vehicles for the past two weeks and none of them appeared suspicious.”

“And what about the soiled dress you found of hers last week?”

Before the IG could answer, “Suraj…” a hesitant voice called from the door of the office.

“What?” Suraj snapped.

It was Radha. “We received a package just now. And it has…”

Suraj’s heart began to thud. He got up from the chair and hurried out of his home office. “Where is it?”

“Should I ask them to bring it here?” Radha asked.

“No! Take me there.” Fear began to grip Suraj’s heart, imagining the worst. Ever since Nina had been taken, he could barely sleep. His anxiety and worry increased even more due to lack of sleep.

The package was lying on the dining table. Slowly, with heart thudding, he opened the top of the package.

Inside was his wife’s beautiful lush hair, chopped and thrown carelessly into a cardboard box.

At once, relief passed through him since he had been expecting the worst. His Nina was still alive.

“There’s a printed message.” Radha frowned at the small piece of paper.

“What is it?” Suraj asked, taking the paper. A link was printed on it.

Suraj hurried back to his office desk and typed the link on the laptop browser.

There was a video recording.

As soon as the brief clipping finished, Suraj was angry. Some sadistic bastard had his wife and was torturing her.

Suraj immediately knew it wasn’t money the man was after. It was something else.

“Get the IG on the phone right now!” he ordered.

CHAPTER 16

Nina pushed opened the door to the hotel room that was slightly ajar. It was a large two-room luxury suite built on top of the hotel that was booked by honeymoon couples or VIPs.

Her heart began to thud. Where was everyone? It was supposed to be a party. Did everyone leave already?

She couldn't hear anyone. Maybe they left.

She was about to leave as well, but stopped when she heard something. It sounded like a grunt.

Cautiously, she threaded softly through the large living area and went towards the bedroom. The bedroom door was closed.

"Move, you bitch. Don't just lie there," a man's drunken voice said. "Move!" There were more grunts and noises of flesh hitting against flesh.

Goosebumps broke on her skin and every self-preservation instinct told her to run away from there. With heart thudding loudly in her ears, she turned the knob of the bedroom door.

It was open.

When she pushed the door open, the sight that met her eyes shocked her.

Nina jerked awake.

She was breathing fast once again, and shivers racked her body. But unlike most times when he had this dream, there were no tears in her eyes. At least no tears of grief.

Because instead of seeing Devi's face, Nina had seen herself in the dream.

The woman lying naked on the bed with dead eyes was her and the man violating her was her captor.

Being alive is better. Being alive is better. Being alive is better.

Nina repeated those words as she got up from the bed and went towards the bathroom window to stare out at the trees in the forest.

A week had passed since Nina's last escape attempt, and she had been confined to the room since then. Her meals continued to be brought in by the old man.

Nina had tried to engage in conversation with him several times, but each time she spoke to him, the old man simply bent his head down and murmured an apology to her.

She was frustrated by the lack of any communication.

After her first bath, each day she was allowed into her captor's room for ten minutes where she continued to take unsatisfactory showers with the small bucket filled with the metallic smelling water. The only thing that had changed was that she was given three additional sets of clothes.

So, after her shower and when she went back to her room, she washed the used pair in the small sink of her bathroom.

Meals. Shower. Washing. Sleep.

Those activities were on repeat mode each day.

Nina should have been relieved that she was left alone, but she wasn't. She hated being kept in the dark, not knowing what was coming next. Each time she went to sleep, she was always in an alert mode, bracing herself for an attack from the captor.

However, she hadn't seen or heard her captor for the the week. She knew he had left the cabin the very next day of recording a video to be sent to Suraj.

And once she had realized that it was just the old man guarding her, she had considered attacking him to try and escape once again, but the holster with the gun which the old man deliberately displayed held her back. Somehow, she knew her captor must have ordered the old man to wear it each time he visited her room.

The gun did give her a pause, because she knew if she failed, she would not

only sign her own death warrant, but possibly even Suraj's.

She had seen the hate shining in her captor's eyes. She somehow knew that her captor was not the kind to give up on his revenge just because his captive managed to get herself killed.

He thought Suraj was responsible for the death of someone he loved. Nina kept wondering who that person was. Was she a wife? A sister? Or a girlfriend?

And how was Suraj responsible for that person's death?

She kept racking her brain, going through every possible way Suraj could have inadvertently hurt a woman. And what really shook Nina was the fact that she didn't know whether or not Suraj was really responsible for a woman's death.

Nina loved Suraj. She trusted him with her life, but did she think he was capable of murder? If not with his own hands but allowing someone to take another's life?

Yes.

Suraj had seen and covered up a murder before. For her.

That fact made Nina love him even more, and made her want to protect him with everything she had.

Over the week, she had a lot of time to think. Obviously, her captor was going to be extra alert around her. She could no longer use a surprise attack as a tactic to escape. She had to think of a different way.

She came to a conclusion that in order to be set free and also save Suraj from whatever her captor had planned, she had to get to a point where her captor would listen to her.

Although she didn't know him well or spend much time around him, she knew he would be a tough nut to crack. There were two other men involved as well—the old man and the other man named Vikram. Between the three men, her captor seemed to be the one who made the decisions, and also the ultimate one to decide what her fate was to be.

She needed to find a way to get into his good graces.

Her captor had threatened Suraj with videos of her being forced by him. He probably thought that Suraj's honor existed in her body.

But he was wrong. The bond and love Suraj and she built and shared over the last decade was unshakeable.

She knew Suraj would love her no matter what happened to her or what she did for her survival.

And it was truly amazing how the human mind worked when it was in a survival mode.

Morals, ethics, or shame—they no longer applied in the same way as they did when one was safe and secure.

It was clear what she had to do.

She wasn't going to allow her captor to violate her body and soul. Before that happened, she was going to offer him her body.

In fact, she would make the first move. She would initiate the act. She would be the one who would allow things to proceed according to her plan and pace.

He will not be able to steal from her what was being given willingly.

Her captor could try and break her, but she wouldn't break. At most, she might bend. But before that, she'd do everything in her power to break him first.

CHAPTER 17

Gaurav was waiting in his SUV, outside a seedy bar and restaurant. He had just received information on the special delivery having reached Suraj Bhupati. Gaurav hoped the bastard was going crazy with worry and fear for his wife.

But that wasn't enough. Gaurav wanted Suraj Bhupati to be ruined completely. Gaurav already knew from the security cameras that Suraj Bhupati was barely sleeping. He was also turning the police force upside down for not finding any clue about his wife's whereabouts. He had even hired the best private investigators his money could offer.

The ring of a phone interrupted Gaurav's thoughts. Seeing the number on the screen, he answered it immediately.

"Where are you?" Vikram's voice asked.

"I'm waiting outside the bar. So far, no show."

Vikram and he had spent most of the week hunting down the identities of the rest of the bastards involved in Shruti's murder. So far, they identified two of the three men. Unlike Rohan, the three men were not known to Shruti, they were hired goons.

Shruti's murder was planned in such a way that even if it was somehow proven that she did not commit suicide, the real murderers wanted the alternative to seem like it was a random home invasion.

Gaurav was frustrated that the whereabouts of those goons was hard to track. Usually, such goons had no loyalty, and they worked for whoever was offering them more money.

"I think they all got information about Rohan's death. There are going to be in hiding for a while. The guy I am tailing has not returned to his usual place either."

The suicide of an award-winning investigative journalist wasn't front page

news. And so far, there was no article written to indicate that it was anything but a suicide. But still it was covered widely enough for the concerned people to remain alert.

"Any new article or investigation going on to raise suspicion?" Gaurav asked.

"No. They've all ruled Rohan's death as a suicide. There was no forced entry or struggle or any fingerprints."

"Then why would these goons suspect?" Gaurav asked in frustration.

"They have been criminals for so long, they usually go by their instincts. Let's just give them few more days before we strike again."

Gaurav was impatient. He hated the wait. But he had already waited for several months, so he supposed waiting a few more days shouldn't matter.

He reversed the SUV and began heading back.

AS HE NEARED the forest cabin, Gaurav allowed himself to think of the captive.

Khan had been providing updates to him on a daily basis. So far, the captive hadn't tried anything, which was good, because he had given orders to Khan to shoot her if she did. Not a fatal shot, but enough to warn her about the consequences of trying to escape.

He stopped the SUV and parked it about half a kilometer away from the cabin and walked from there.

As soon as he opened the door, he saw Khan in the kitchen, preparing a meal.

Khan saw and greeted him. "I'm almost done making breakfast. Please be seated, sir."

After driving all night, Gaurav wanted to freshen up first, but he was hungry enough to put off a quick dip in the lake until later. He pulled out a plate from the rack above the kitchen sink and sat on a dining chair.

"Sir…" he heard Khan say in a tentative tone.

"Yes?"

"Sir… madam has stayed downstairs all week. She hasn't caused any trouble.

Since you are back, can I… ask her to join us for breakfast?”

Gaurav frowned at the request. *Madam* wasn’t a bloody guest they had invited over. She was their captive, but he knew Khan had a soft heart.

“Fine.” He supposed she wouldn’t dare try to escape once again.

A few minutes later, she was escorted to the dining room by Khan.

As soon as his captive saw him, instead of looking fearful or cautious because of their last encounter, she stretched her lips into a small smile. “Hi,” she greeted softly.

Gaurav had already begun eating and froze mid-bite. A frown marred his forehead.

He didn’t bother greeting her back. It wasn’t her bloody drawing room, for her to still follow etiquette. She was abducted and being held forcibly.

She sat in the chair opposite to him and smiled at Khan while he served food on her plate. When Khan was done, she thanked him softly and started to eat her breakfast.

Gaurav noticed that despite the ill-fitting borrowed clothes, the hair he’d cut in a shirt, jagged manner, and lack of eating utensils, she still appeared elegant while she ate in smooth, graceful movements.

He continued to eat while he watched her. In between bites, she kept throwing small glances his way while her eyes slowly took in his features and body. Whenever their eyes met, she quickly lowered her eyes as though she was feeling shy.

It wouldn’t have been very obvious to a regular person, but Gaurav was experienced and also had very good natural instincts.

Nina Bhupati’s shy, sweet, helpless damsel-in-distress act was just that. An act.

Every little move of hers was planned and deliberate.

By the time they finished dinner, he knew what her next plan was.

His captive wanted to seduce him.

CHAPTER 18

Nina waited until the man was done with his dinner. And when he got up from the chair and was about to leave, she got up as well. “Can I go outside for a brief while?” she asked. “I haven’t gone out in the past week.” She gave him her best smile.

“No.”

Just one word, and his expression remained granite hard.

Nina’s smile faltered.

Nothing seemed to move her captor. And she thought she could actually seduce him? He didn’t look like he ever smiled, let alone know or feel passion.

Based on his looks, she had thought he would be used to getting attention and also maybe being with a lot of women.

He was handsome. But not the way Suraj was. Her husband was stunningly handsome with classical polished looks, and he gave the women around him the vibes of being safe and protective.

Whereas the captor, although handsome, looked dangerous and unpredictable. Maybe it was due to his buzz-cut and sharp, rugged features. And the heavy stubble combined with the stitches on his face and arm further added to the dangerous aura.

Some women preferred the dangerous, sexy vibes in a man. But Nina would never willingly want someone like him in her life, let alone be intimate with him. But she had to stick to her plan.

She kept the smile pasted on her face and tried once again. “Please, I promise I won’t try to escape. You can be the one to escort me.”

“I said, no. The only place I’m going to escort you is back into your room. Let’s go.”

Even though Nina expected her request to be denied, she still felt

disappointed. She nodded and followed behind him down the stairs towards her room. Just before she reached the end of the stairs, she tripped and bumped into him.

He caught her around the waist and straightened her.

“Thank you,” she said in a breathless voice, keeping her eyes locked to his.

His nostrils flared, and she saw the dilation of his pupils.

At that moment, she knew he found her physically attractive. Her plan to seduce him didn’t sound way too impossible now. All she had to do, was turn those sparks of attraction he felt towards her into roaring flames.

She deliberately walked very close to him within the narrow corridor, until their sides kept brushing against each other.

Suddenly, he grabbed her elbow and more or less dragged her the rest of the distance into her room. Then he picked her up and banged her against the wall and wrapped her legs around his waist.

She gasped as his fingers dug into her thighs as he moved his hard body in between them. The next instant her lips were captured in a brutal kiss.

She moaned in shock and pain. Barely a few seconds later, he pulled away. “Is this what you were after?” he asked, rubbing against her, letting her feel his hard arousal.

Her lips hurt, and her throat closed up in fear. She braced her hands on his shoulders to push him away.

His eyes were cold, and his mouth was twisted into a cruel smile. “It’ll take me less than two minutes to take you against this wall,” he said. “And even if I end up fucking you, it will *not* make any difference or alter the plans I’ve already set into motion. Do you still want to proceed with your ill-advised seduction plan?”

Nina’s heart thumped faster as she shook her head.

“Yes or no?”

With great difficulty, she somehow got her voice to work. “No,” she whispered.

He watched her for a few more moments before he slowly let go of her knees and moved away. “Then behave,” he warned.

Her legs shook so much that she collapsed on her knees as she watched him in fear.

With another cold glare, he left the room, slamming the door shut.

Her heart continued to thump erratically and it took her a while for her legs to stop shaking and the rest of the fear to dissipate completely.

Slowly, she stood up and lay on her bed. She took several deep, calming breaths until she could think rationally once again.

God! How was he able to read her mind so easily? And who was this man?

His unpredictable personalities confused her. Was he the same man who had cut off her hair and clothes, threatening her with rape and torture? Or was he the guy who turned her down, even though he knew she had wanted to seduce him. She had more or less thrown herself at him.

Was her captor a good guy or a bad guy?

A bad guy would have taken her offer immediately. He would not offer her a choice and warn her off.

She might not be a raving beauty, but she was not bad to look at either. If he wanted to get back at Suraj, wouldn’t having sex with his enemy’s wife be a bigger revenge?

It was strange.

Even though he might not be a bad guy, he was still the guy who wanted to destroy Suraj. And so, she shouldn’t let down her guard with her captor.

Nina took a deep breath, trying to sort out through the mess that was in her head.

After a while, she came to another conclusion.

She wasn’t going to give up her current plan of seducing him. She had always thought of herself as street-smart and be able to read people easily. And she knew even the hardest of people let down their guard with intimacy offered through seduction.

But unlike the obvious seduction, she was going to approach it differently with her captor.

Before she got to her captor’s body, she would first seduce his mind.

CHAPTER 19

Gaurav was furious.

He knew his captive was a shrewd and manipulative woman, but still, his body came alive like he was a fucking horny teenager. He was beginning to think that maybe Vikram was better suited to stay in the house, right next to her room. She wouldn't be able to drive Vikram crazy like this.

What the hell was so special about her?

Granted she was beautiful. Okay, more beautiful than any woman he had ever seen. But she was the wife of his enemy, who was evil and corrupt. Some of the evilness must have seeped into her over the ten years of their marriage.

How could he be so shallow? And why was he so tempted to take up her offer?

As soon as he felt her lean, soft, and curvy body brushing against his, he had almost lost his mind. He was only a few seconds away from tearing their clothes off and taking her against the wall.

To the hell with her!

He grabbed a fresh set of clothes and a towel before heading to the lake for a bath and swim.

As he walked through the corridor, he couldn't hear any sounds coming from the captive's room. When he had planned to abduct her, he picked the cabin in the forest specifically, because there was no one around for kilometers.

He had expected the captive to be constantly crying or banging on the door and windows begging to be let go. So far, none of that had happened.

Gaurav shook the thoughts of the captive away and took a deep breath. The air outside the cabin felt crisp and clean. He loved coming to this place. The first time he had been here was during his carefree years, when life was simple.

He had visited the cabin with his friends during a holiday. Vikram, a couple

of other friends, and he had come to spend a relaxing day in between their cross-country motorcycle biking.

He had liked this particular place so much that he had come back again a few more times. During the last visit, the owner of the cabin had mentioned to him about selling it at a throw-away price. Gaurav had immediately taken up the offer.

A smile covered Gaurav's face as he recalled how his mother and sister were horrified when he brought them to this place. They tried to make it as homey and comfortable as possible, but still, it wasn't a place for them to stay beyond a day or two. Even though the place barely had any decent plumbing inside the house and got very cold during the winters, he still loved it.

Six months had passed since his mother and sister were gone. It still hurt like hell, but he was able to recall the memories with them without going to pieces.

He shed his clothes and jumped into the cool water of the lake before beginning to take laps.

While he tried to relieve his body's lingering frustration through swimming, memories of seeing her for the first time played through his mind.

It wasn't in person. He saw her for the first time on the television.

"Heyyyy… I was watching that!" said the outraged voice of his sister.

Gaurav had changed the television channel. He preferred to watch sports or news. He was preparing for the most important exam of his life and wanted to take a break.

"Come on, T. You are glued to the TV, always watching some silly serial or the other. This is my turn." He surfed through the channels trying to see where the Formula One racing was being covered.

"For your information, G," she said, stressing the G part. "I was watching the news channel." Her voice came out haughty.

Gaurav raised his eyebrows and laughed.

"Seriously, I was." She jumped towards him and snatched the remote away

within a split second.

Damn, he should have been more prepared. Especially because he was used to being in a tug of war over the TV remote with his sister.

She changed the channel to the one she had been watching. Surprisingly, it was the news channel. However, it was not the one he watched to catch with current affairs, but the channel that was more gossip than the news.

"…Mr. Bhupati, are you happy that your son is entering politics like you?" a reporter asked.

There was a smile on one of the most powerful leaders in the state's face. "Of course. It makes me very happy."

"Are you okay that your daughter-in-law is not from a political or a business background?" the reporter probed.

"I was from a humble background, too. I'm proud to have raised a son who looked beyond such things. We are one among the masses, no matter what position we hold in the government or society."

The camera zoomed in on the young couple. Suraj Bhupati was smiling. He was often featured on television next to his father. Surprisingly, some of his speeches and the causes he took up sounded intelligent and thought-provoking.

Everyone knew Suresh Bhupati was grooming his son, Suraj, to be a political figure to be reckoned with. They all thought that Suraj's surprise elopement would impact his political ambition or at least make him less popular in the masses.

"Wouldn't it have been easier if you married someone similar from your background?" a nosy reporter asked.

Gaurav agreed. It would have been much easier had Suraj Bhupati married someone from another powerful family. Most people— including Gaurav—knew who was actually lined up as the prospective bride.

"Easier, yes. But one look at Nina, and my heart just knew. It was love at first sight," said Bhupati Jr. grinning into the camera.

“Aww…” Shruti sighed.

Gaurav snorted. “You need to stop watching your daily T.V soaps. There is no such thing as love at first sight.” The comment got him another sofa cushion thrown in his face.

Gaurav laughed. “Can we please end this torture and change the channel now? You can watch it later. I’m sure they will cover this news for the entire month.”

He snatched the remote back from his sister’s hands and was about to change the channel when his finger froze. Until then, Suraj Bhupati’s wife had never shown her face or spoken to any of the reporters. Whenever she was on TV, her head was bent down or facing away from the cameras.

But now, she stood next to her husband, smiling into the camera.

Gaurav vaguely heard a giggle from his sister.

“Beautiful, isn’t she?” Shruti asked.

“What?” Gaurav was still staring at the television screen.

“The girl, Suraj Bhupati fell in love with. Nina.”

He dragged his eyes away from the screen to look at his sister who had a satisfied grin. “She’s all right, I guess.”

Shruti burst out laughing. “There’s no such thing as love at first sight? You should have seen your face just now. Too bad she’s already married, and you cannot get her to fall for you like you do with all the girls.” There was a smirk on his sister’s face.

Gaurav shook his head before changing the channel. “You are too young to know that it’s not love Suraj Bhupati felt when he saw that girl for the first time.”

That earned him another pillow at his head. “I’m not that young! I’m only four years younger than you! And I know it’s definitely love!”

Shruti was too innocent and grew up sheltered to know the difference between lust and love. Like most men his age, Gaurav did find Nina Bhupati extremely attractive.

That was until he grew older and learnt to see people beyond the superficial surface.

Nina Bhupati could be the most beautiful woman he saw, but she was possibly harboring the ugliest heart and soul inside her.

CHAPTER 20

Another week passed, and Nina was still being held captive.

There wasn't a whole lot to do when one was held captive in a room. The days passed by quickly taking with them one of the most precious things

.

Time.

Time had always been her enemy more than her friend in the past. Time had cost her the lives of her sisters.

But now, she was determined not to let time cost Suraj's or her life.

However, there was nothing much for her to do. During the day, even though her captor was in the house, Nina's meals were still brought into her room. The only time she was allowed out was when she made a brief trip to the next room for a shower.

And whenever she came out of her shower, she could see her captor bathing in the lake outside the forest house. That was the only time she could see him.

She watched him swim in powerful strokes in the refreshing lake water.

What was his next plan of action? How was he going to avenge the death of his loved one? Did he already plan an attack on Suraj?

Being kept in the dark and the uncertainty was definitely making her lose her mind.

But she knew Suraj was doing fine. She could hear the news that her captor played each night before he went to sleep.

She knew she needed some form of contact with her captor. So, some days, she deliberately took her time to shower in the inadequate bath, just so she would be there when her captor returned. Even though he saw her come out of the bathroom, he ignored her. He kept typing something on his laptop while the old man escorted her back to her room.

It was frustrating.

How was she going to seduce her captor's mind if he barely even spoke to her?

Then it came to her.

If he didn't talk, then she would be the one speaking.

GAURAV LAY ON the bed to catch up on sleep, but his mind was too active to be able to relax.

Some of the transactions he had been trying to retrace were once again found.

Even though the bank had been quick to eliminate the proof from their database, they weren't able to do so completely.

Gaurav still had a long way to go, but he was glad he was at least a few steps closer to gathering evidence. The bastard was busy searching for his wife frantically to be focusing on anything else.

Gaurav clicked on one of the news links that streamed local news channels. Each night, apart from Vikram providing him with updates, he kept himself informed through the news.

So far, Suraj Bhupati had given several statements requesting whoever had kidnapped his wife to return her safely.

The local news channel that was currently streaming wasn't discussing anything about the kidnap or the progress. It was apparently a special program about Nina Bhupati's life.

Gaurav frowned in irritation. He clicked on another link. This channel was featuring the same as well. He tried a couple more channels with the same result.

Why were they talking about his captive's life as though she was an important national figure?

And most of the information was frivolous. It was about the dresses Nina Bhupati had designed and worn over the past ten years while she accompanied her husband to social occasions. And it was followed by heated discussions about the various hairstyles she had and which ones suited her the best.

Gaurav tolerated the video for fifteen minutes, hoping there would be some information about the latest updates, but the program continued in the same vein.

Disgusted, he closed the link and frowned at the laptop screen.

He heard a feminine scoff "*Great,*" said Nina Bhupati's voice. "*More than nine years of charity work and several awards for it, a few from even the president of India, but this is what people remember me by? Whether I look better with my hair up or down?"*

Gaurav frowned. For a second, he thought he was imagining Nina Bhupati's voice. Then he realized that the walls were made of wood, and one could hear almost everything the other spoke if they were loud enough.

He didn't reply, but he grudgingly agreed with her. Very few programs spoke about her charitable work or the awards she received. A few who did, it was mostly as a passing reference.

Gaurav knew Nina Bhupati spent a considerable amount of time on charity. One particular organization started by her was especially well applauded. The organization collected leftover food from functions and parties around some of the cities and towns in India and donated to the homeless and needy.

Although Gaurav knew the organization as such was a genuine one, he felt Nina Bhupati did it to either cover up or compensate for the evils deeds she and her husband participated in. And maybe also for tax reasons. He did do a detailed investigation of their charitable organizations, and so far he wasn't able to identify any anomalies. That and most of the businesses that the Bhupatis owned exclusively, remained squeaky clean.

"I didn't realize until now that I'm shallow enough to care what everyone thinks of me when I'm gone," she said. *"And I'm a hell of a lot more than just what I wear or my hairstyle."* There was a chuckle. *"Definitely more than my current hairstyle and clothes."*

A bolt of discomfort passed through Gaurav at the reminder. He didn't like the feeling.

"By the way, just so you know, I've had this short choppy hairstyle for most of

my life, until I was almost fifteen," she said. *"And it was by choice. And these clothes I'm wearing right now… they are way better than what I could afford or had worn most of my life."*

Apart from the fact that she came from a humble background and got married to a rich man, Gaurav didn't know anything else about her past. He doubted if anyone else did either. Because one look at her face and body, no one had ever thought of questioning why Suraj Bhupati had married her.

It hadn't really mattered to him either, but now that he had surfed through the channels discussing about her so much, he was curious to know what exactly his captive's past consisted of.

An old interview with her mother was aired recently by one of the channels. Nina Bhupati's mother was very forthcoming about her daughter. She had used the words like 'selfish', 'ambitious' and 'ungrateful' to describe her daughter.

There was a sigh. *"Maybe it isn't the people's fault,"* she said. *"After my mother called me ungrateful in her recent interview, probably talking about my dresses and hair was kinder. And just in case you are curious to know why she called me those names, it was because I wouldn't give in to her demands for money or acknowledge her as family. She isn't my family. My sisters were the only family I ever had."*

He could hear the creak of the bed as though she was settling in a comfortable position. *"Sure, my mother gave birth to me, but I stopped considering that selfish bitch as family from a very long time ago."*

Gaurav was taken aback by the usage of her language. Not just because Nina Bhupati had a public image of a classy, polished society woman, but also because the swear words were directed against her mother. However, he wasn't naive to think all mothers were selfless and loving like his had been.

Nina Bhupati continued to talk.

"I know we are supposed to love our mother because she is the first person we are connected to, and she is the one who gives us blood and nourishment and protects us while we are inside her stomach. And when we are born, even though

the physical cord that joined us is severed, another more important cord is formed. An emotional cord. That's what matters."

Gaurav could hear the wistfulness in her tone when she spoke of the bond between a mother and an unborn child.

"My mother and I had no such emotional cord," she stated. "She was selfish right from the beginning. Well… sometimes or rather most of the times, I'm selfish like her, too. Genetics, I guess." There was a self-depreciating laugh. *"But God knows how my sisters turned out to be such angels even though they were born from that devil's womb. In fact, both my sisters looked just like my mother. Ethereally beautiful. But they couldn't have been more different when it came to their characters. Uma and Devi had the purest of hearts, and their innocence shone through even though we saw hell while growing up."*

Gaurav wanted to ask her to stop talking because he knew she was trying to establish a connection between them. But he wasn't able to tell her, and neither was he able to tune her out. Something about the tone in which she was speaking, compelled him to listen to her.

"I was seven when our mother abandoned us. My younger sister, Uma, was only five at that time and my older sister, Devi, was nine. My father was already long gone by then. He had left us the night Uma was born. Apparently, he stuck around that long, hoping she'd be born a boy." There was a soft snort.

"My mother always cursed whenever she referred to him. She hated him for abandoning his family, but she did the same thing with us.

"She accepted a marriage offer from someone who was her ticket out of near-poverty. My sisters and I begged her to take us along, but she didn't agree. She said she was lucky that she even got such an offer. She said we sucked out most of her youth and her dreams from her."

There was a pause before she continued. *"I suppose, it was partially true, but it wasn't our fault to be born either.*

"Uma didn't even know that our mother had left. Because right from her birth, it was Devi and sometimes me, who kept taking care of her. When our

mother left, she dropped us with an older couple where she used to work. We wondered why they bothered taking us in, even though they had grown children who had left their home.

"We found out that very first night, when we saw the old man trying to slip next to Devi in her bed. The three of us screamed and shouted, and made a loud enough fuss. It had stopped the old man, but it got us thrown out of their house during the middle of the night.

"We didn't mind. As long as the dirty old man kept away from us, we were good. The neighbors knew what had happened, but they didn't bother to check on us or help us, because they feared we would end up being their liabilities.

"Somehow, we managed to survive on our own without any help. We thought we were quite smart to be able to do that, which we actually weren't. We were naive. Because we were just three homeless girls who were living on the streets."

CHAPTER 21

Nina leaned against the wall as she spoke. It had been a week since she began talking to her captor.

“Kamala was an old woman who took us in. She barely had space for herself in her hut, but she let the three of us stay with her. It was cramped, and it was loud when it rained, but it was still a roof over our heads.”

Nina was narrating the part of how an old woman had come to their rescue when they wandered into her temporary asbestos hut during a rain.

“But the city was changing pretty fast. Vast and empty lands were being replaced by tall buildings. Each time we were thrown out of our slum, we had to rebuild our hut somewhere else. Most of the time, the places had mold on the walls and pests like cockroaches and rats. We had even gotten used to the smells due to lack of decent toilets.” One of the reasons why Nina suffered through a borderline OCD to remain clean was whenever she saw filth, it took her back to those days.

“Whenever we lay down to sleep, Devi and I took turns to make up stories for Uma. We’d tell her about the huge house we’d build for the three of us with dozens of rooms and bathrooms. We’d talk about what each of us would have in our room as decor.”

Nina closed her eyes. She did set up two of the rooms in the house where she and Suraj lived. Those rooms had the same decor that her sisters would have liked.

Nina took a deep breath to forge on. She knew she couldn’t stop her narration.

Although, she did wonder what was going through her captor’s mind as she narrated her story. Was her past able to get to him? Make him view her as someone other than a rich man’s wife? Or did he think she was making up a story to draw sympathy?

She had noticed that whenever she began talking, there was complete silence from the room next to her. Before that, she would at least hear the creak of the bed as her captor tossed about restlessly.

Sometimes, she paused in the middle of her narration, trying to listen for some sign to indicate he had fallen asleep. But there was complete silence and Nina knew he was awake, listening to her every word.

Nina was reminded of the story of an Arabian queen who saved herself from her blood-thirsty brutal husband by narrating a thousand tales—one for each night.

Nina might not have a thousand tales to tell, but she had one tale. It was her tale. She had seen and experienced enough in her life to be able to speak through the entire length of her captivity.

What if you remain his captive forever? A part of her mind asked.

Something said he wouldn't keep her for long. She hadn't been lying to him when she said she saw grief in his eyes. He was a man reacting to pain and was lashing out at the target nearest to him. If she could convince him to see that she wasn't the evil he thought her to be, then she would be able to rewrite her and Suraj's fate.

She suspected her captor was a good judge of character, and he would definitely know when someone was lying, so she made sure she spoke the complete truth, and that her words came from within her heart.

"A year later, we mourned the passing of Kamala. She was easily over ninety, but it came as a shock to us.

"Four weeks after Kamala's passing, the school holidays began…" Nina felt her voice catch. She hated this part.

"Devi, Uma and I loved school," she continued. "For most kids, school was boring and everyone looked forward to the holidays. But for the three of us, school meant survival. It cultivated our hungry minds along with providing us with refuge during the day. And more importantly, the meal they served in the school during lunch was our only source of sustenance. And when the holidays

began, it meant… starvation."

Nina realized right then that the problem with speaking from the heart, was that a person would be forced to re-live those memories once again. As she continued to narrate the events that took place many years ago, she re-lived the desperation and hopelessness of that time.

She should probably be embarrassed to be baring her heart to a total stranger. Some of the things she was telling him, she hadn't even told Suraj, because she hated re-living the past. But now, when she narrated her life, even though it hurt a lot, it also felt cathartic.

"Ten days into the holidays, Devi and I gave Uma every scrap of food we could beg, steal or find, but that didn't stop our little sister's body from slowly shutting down and eventually giving up." It was brutal to watch their sister fading away right before their eyes and not able to do anything.

"When Uma died, it was a shock for Devi and me. Our entire existence was defined by how we took care of our little sister. With her gone, we felt incomplete and aimless." She had told her captor already about how Devi and she had been taking care of their sister until then.

"I stayed in the hot, sweltering asbestos house with the rotting corpse of my younger sister while Devi tried to get help. It took more than a day for someone to come." Nina had several recurring dreams of waking up in that sweltering tin house with the dead body of her sister.

"Over the years, Devi and I have always felt guilty, thinking that had one of us tolerated the advances from the dirty old man with whom our mother left us with, then maybe, just maybe, Uma might have been alive…"

She took a deep breath. "It's been close to twenty years, but I still mourn my little sister."

CHAPTER 22

“What do you mean you still can’t trace where the video was sent from?” Suraj was furious with the private investigators.

From the moment he saw fear in his wife’s eyes while the unknown man touched her, he could barely sleep during the nights. He couldn’t imagine the trauma Nina must be facing being held captive.

So far, the police or the private investigators could not find any trace or even the slightest of leads regarding the kidnapper or the location of where Nina was being held.

“Sir, the video was sent from an encrypted site—”

“I don’t need excuses! I need to see positive results! Not one bloody clue as to where my wife is for two bloody weeks!”

“Suraj…” Radha placed a hand on Suraj’s shoulder, trying to calm him down and offering him comfort.

“Two bloody weeks, Radha! Nina must be—” Suraj broke off, unable to continue.

The PI fidgeted before attempting to speak. “Sir, I’ll follow up with the police again. They think someone from the opposition might have a hand in this. Even I think—”

“Think?” Suraj erupted. “My wife is suffering through God knows what, and you all *think* that the opposition *might* have a hand in this? Last week you were sure it was for ransom. I’m bloody prepared to give them anything. Hell, I’m spending a fortune on your useless services. All I want is my wife back safe!”

The investigator remained quiet. And so did Radha. There was one thought that ran through their minds. And that was—whether or not Nina Bhupati was still alive.

CHAPTER 23

"*You are back,*" Nina Bhupati's voice said. "*You were gone for two days, and I had no one to talk to.*"

Gaurav grunted in response. He had given Khan strict instructions not to engage in any conversation with the captive.

"*I'm not complaining,*" she said. "*It's just that I'm not much of a talker, but I realized, talking to you has been quite cathartic. And you are a very good listener.*" There was a playful undertone in the last sentence.

What about that bastard husband of yours? Isn't he a good listener, too? Gaurav didn't allow those words to escape from him. Instead, he closed his eyes and let her soft voice wash over him.

Only a few days of listening to her, he was getting addicted. He was away for two days to follow up on the bank transactions. And while he was digging into the information, he also made a detour.

He met with Nina Bhupati's mother. She was exactly as how she was described. She was an aging beauty who was greedy and selfish to the core.

"Who are you?" the woman asked.

"I'm a reporter. I'm looking for any information you can give about your daughter." He showed an ID that was associated with a popular newspaper.

"Still not found, is she?" the woman asked.

"No."

The woman watched him with a shrewd look. "I'm not supposed to talk about her. My darling daughter sent her lawyers warning me that she would get me arrested if I did."

Gaurav knew that the woman was paid a good amount of money not to give out any defamatory interviews or information about her daughter.

“I will not mention your name or anything,” he said. “I’m trying to find out what sort of person Nina Bhupati was before she married Suraj Bhupati.”

She gave him a sweeping look, talking in his casual dressing. “What is in it for me?” she asked.

He pulled out a wad of cash and handed it to her. Immediately, she began counting.

“Not a lot, but it’ll do. I’m sick of keeping quiet. Especially for that selfish brat who has no gratitude for her own mother.”

“Is she your only child?” he asked.

An uncomfortable look passed on her face. “No. I had two other children.”

“Where are they?”

“They… uh… died in an accident. They were both such good daughters. Had they been alive, I’m sure they would have taken care of me. They loved me so much.”

Gaurav’s jaw clenched at the lie.

“Unlike those two, my middle one was a back-talking brat. Never happy with what I did for her or her sisters.” There was a snort. “Just because she got married to a rich man and lives in a fancy house, she thinks she’s above me. You should have listened to her language when she spoke to me the last time. Still a street urchin despite her clothes or status.”

Gaurav listened to the older woman’s ranting for some more time and then he cut her off, unable to tolerate her presence anymore.

She leeched out some more money before he left.

He had gone to check whether the tales he heard each night were real or not. He didn’t know why he cared either way. So what if Nina Bhupati was speaking the truth about her troubled childhood and life? It shouldn’t make any difference to him.

But it did.

“*So anyway, where was I*?” he heard his captive ask. “*Oh yes, our dressing.*

"*Devi and I always ensured that a layer of grime always coated our faces outside the school hours. And we cut our hair very short like that of most boys, not to attract any attention. For the longest time, people thought we were two dirty boys. Not that it helped in any way when it came to the child traffickers.*"

She told him about how she and her sister had escaped kidnap several times. He also discovered why she had the presence of mind when he had placed a drugged cloth on her face. She had experienced it personally when she was a child.

"*Unfortunately, a lot of children we knew couldn't escape like us," she said with a grim voice. Gaurav knew what the fate of the children must have been. Either they were mutilated and made to beg on streets, or they were killed for their body parts. The sad part was most of the children wouldn't have been reported as missing and neither was anyone looking for them.*

"*As I grew older, I started to get shallower," she said. "Do you know how it is like to be a teenage girl?*" There was a couple of seconds pause. "*Well, I suppose you wouldn't really know. It's different for teenage boys.*" Her tone was dry.

A reluctant smile covered Gaurav's face at her silly joke, even though his heart ached a little bit at her story. He had a sister, so he had an idea how it was for teenage girls.

"*Well, when I turned thirteen, I was sick of how I looked,*" she said. "*I liked a boy in my class. Unfortunately, he thought I was a boy too. He gave me an odd look each time I smiled at him.*"

He imagined her as a teenager, wanting the same things as what other teenagers had.

"*…but as time went by, despite the grime and layers of dirt, Devi's beauty still shined through. Sometimes, that turned into a problem.*"

CHAPTER 24

Gaurav was seated inside a seedy bar in the bad part of the city. He'd been barely there for an hour, and he had already seen at least four illegal operations happening out in the open. Drugs exchange, possession of weapons, sex-trafficking, and child labor.

He ignored the first three, but it was the last one that got to him. He saw a small boy wiping down the vacated tables while a half-naked woman danced on the stage.

Gaurav watched the boy for a while. He was small in build with a shaggy haircut and a grubby face. The kid kept his eyes lowered while he performed his job with utmost efficiency. The adults hooted and whistled. Some of the drunks shouted, but that did not stop the boy from clearing up the dirty glasses and plates before wiping down table after table.

The boy was used to this place. Gaurav wondered if it was really a boy, or a girl disguised as a boy, while working at a seedy place for her survival. Just like his captive and her sister had done.

The world was filled with children in need. One cannot pass a day without reading or hearing some or other horror story involving a child. But something about his captive's story got to him and was changing him.

He could not imagine a child of her age living on their own. Gaurav grew up with every possible luxury that a child could be given. Despite all that, he had still felt resentful when he wasn't given what he wanted.

Gaurav tore his eyes away from the child. He needed to focus on his current job.

Ten minutes later, his target entered the seedy bar. A six-foot man with a distinctive eyebrow scar on the right side.

The man sat at the bar for forty minutes, having five or six drinks in the

meantime. He sat quietly most of the time, watching the dancer on the stage. Soon, he was joined by a woman.

Gaurav could see them talking, but he couldn't hear anything. They didn't talk much. The woman kept her head lowered most of the time.

The man got up and began walking away from the bar. He went up the stairs accompanied by the woman.

Gaurav pushed away the drink he had been holding since the time he got there. Checking whether or not anyone was observing him, he casually went up the stairs.

There was a long narrow corridor and close to ten rooms with closed doors on either side of the corridor.

It didn't take very long for Gaurav to know which room his target was in.

"Stay still, you bitch!" a drunken shout came from one of the rooms. It was loud enough to be heard over the thumping music that was blaring from the dance bar below.

Gaurav stood in front of the door and kicked it hard at the corner, until the rusty lock gave in. He saw a half-naked woman sprawled on the bed while a drunken man fumbled on top of her.

"Hello, Jeevan," Gaurav greeted.

Gaurav looked at the girl who was watching him with widened eyes with desperation written all over her face. "Out," he told her softly.

The girl squirmed out from under the drunk and began scrambling out of the room. When she passed him, Gaurav extended a wad of cash to her. "Don't alert anyone," he said.

She nodded her head vigorously, her mostly bare, skinny body shaking either in relief or fear.

Shit, she barely seemed older than thirteen or fourteen. Was she underage?

Another thought passed through Gaurav's mind, jolting him. Was his captive forced into such circumstances for her survival as well? She hadn't told him anything like that happening so far, and he hoped that was because she hadn't

been that desperate.

“How dare you are to send her away! Who do you think you are?” a slurred voice demanded.

“Get up.”

The man watched him with his red-rimmed drunken eyes. His pants zipper was open, and his flaccid member lay grotesquely exposed.

Gaurav’s gut churned imagining his captive being under a drunken man, suffering through the advances silently.

The man lunged at him suddenly, and Gaurav barely escaped from being stabbed.

Gaurav was pissed. He had not checked the goon for any weapons immediately. All because his thoughts ran towards his captive.

“Who are you?’ the man shouted.

Gaurav smiled coldly. “I’m the man who is going to kill you.”

The man lunged again, but this time Gaurav was prepared. He dodged the knife and punched the man in the stomach.

The man doubled over, coughing and gasping. “What the hell, man!”

Gaurav punched him once again. “October 15th, who sent you on a job to kill a young woman and make it seem like a suicide?”

Even through the drunken stupor, the man’s eyes widened. “I-I don’t know what you are talking about.”

Another hard punch into the stomach, the man collapsed on the floor, mewling in pain.

Gaurav dragged him up by the shirt and threw another punch. This one was hard enough to break the man’s nose. The man squealed like a pig, and his blood sprayed on Gaurav’s shirt, pissing him off further.

“Tell me the names of who was there.”

The man looked fearful. “Please, I was just doing my job.”

Gaurav snarled into the man’s face. “Your job? You hanged an innocent woman and call it your job?”

The next punch dislocated the man’s jaw. Gaurav was pissed that it was going to be hard for the man to speak now.

The man began sobbing. His face looked like a bloody mess. It was misshapen with a broken nose and a dislocated jaw.

Gaurav made a fist and raised it on top of the man’s face. “Names.”

“A politician,” the man wailed and cried out. “A politician gave the order.”

Gaurav punched him again. “I already know that. Give me the names of the other people who were there that night and are involved.”

The man slowly confirmed the other names that Gaurav already had on his list.

Gaurav then proceeded to do *his* job.

He dragged the man downstairs from the backside of the bar. Vikram was already waiting for him.

Two hours later, after drawing out all the possible information from the man, they visited a funeral home during the afterhours.

CHAPTER 25

Nina felt restless. She had woken up earlier than usual that morning.

She looked at the wall that divided her room from her captor's. She heard him return late in the night. He had been shifting restlessly on his bed. She had wondered if he was trying to let her know he had returned and wanted her to talk. Or was he restless because of something else? She didn't know, and she was too sleepy to have woken up completely and start talking.

Currently, no sounds were coming from him room. She knew he must have stepped out.

"Mrs. Bhupati, your food." She jumped when she heard the old man's voice from outside the door.

She wondered what time it was. She had slept very late, feeling trapped and restless. She was worried about herself. About Suraj. About what the captor was doing while he was away. Everything.

She knew she had to initiate direct contact with her captor somehow.

"Come in," she said out loud.

The door opened, and the old man came in with a tray.

"Thank you," said Nina when he placed the food tray on a nightstand next to the bed.

The old man usually smiled back, but right then he was grimacing. The skin around his mouth had taken a decidedly grey pallor.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He looked at her with glazed eyes. And then, he collapsed on his knees, clutching his head. The mask he had on his face fell to the side, exposing his face completely. He didn't seem to care, because he was in too much pain for it.

Nina rushed next to his prone body.

"My medicine," he gasped out softly. "I… forgot… to take them this

morning.”

“Where?” she asked urgently. “Where do you keep your medicines? I’ll get them for you.”

“I-in… my… room. Outside.”

“I’ll be right back,” she said running out the door and climbing the stairs.

As soon as she reached the kitchen, her eyes fell on the backdoor which was open. She ran outside and saw a small detached cabin right next to the main house. She pulled open the door and frantically scanned the room and found a small cloth pouch on top of a nightstand.

She opened the zip and saw a couple of strips of medicine along with a few bottles of pills. Grabbing the entire pouch, she turned to head back.

Her legs faltered when she saw the outside.

She could escape. This might be her only chance to do so.

But that would mean the old man could possibly die. She also knew her captor was around somewhere close. He would capture her again.

And whatever level of trust she was building with him, it would be all wasted. The threat to Suraj was real. She knew her captor was determined to carry out what he set his mind to.

Not wanting to waste any more precious minutes when a man lay dying, she made up her mind. She rushed into the main house, grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, and ran down the stairs.

“I got the medicines,” she told the old man. “Which ones do you need? Please, show me.” She pulled out all of them and held it in her hands in front of his vision.

With shaking hands, he pointed at one of the strips.

She tore it open and popped the pill into the old man’s mouth and held the bottle of water to his lips. He was able to swallow it before he lay back on the floor. His breathing was shallow.

Anxiety and worry tore at her heart when he didn’t move for several minutes. Even though he didn’t speak much to her, he always had a kind smile to offer

her. He had even cooked some special meals when he didn't have to go to the trouble and offered her some basic food.

She knew she couldn't move him, so she brought a pillow and placed it under his head, raising his head and making him comfortable.

Much later, she heard footsteps climbing down the stairs.

"What's going on?" a harsh voice demanded.

"He forgot to take his medicines this morning. I just gave it to him."

With a frown, her captor sat next to the old man. Nina could smell the mild and fresh perfume of a soap. He must have gone for an early shower in the lake.

"Stay with him. Don't move," he ordered and hurried out of the room.

He was back with a small packet of biscuits. He placed one near the old man's mouth and lifted his head. "Eat," he said softly.

The old man's eyes opened slowly, and he did as he was told. He took a few more bites before closing his eyes once again.

"Is he going to be okay?" Nina asked.

"Yes," he said quietly. "He's diabetic. His sugar levels must have dropped when he forgot to take his medicines."

They stood quietly and watched as the old man's breathing became normal once again, but he still didn't stir.

"I'm going to take him to his room. Don't move." He picked up the old man in his arms.

Something stirred within Nina when he saw the worried look pass on her captor's face.

He was capable of caring for someone.

CHAPTER 26

Gaurav put Khan in the bed and covered him with a light blanket before heading back to his room.

His captive was seated in a chair with her breakfast untouched. He was just about to close the door to lock her inside, when he heard her request.

“Please, sit with me for some time. I would like some company.”

He didn’t move.

“Please, just for a few minutes,” she further pleaded.

Despite himself, Gaurav went inside. He supposed a few minutes wouldn’t do him harm. And she had indeed saved Khan’s life to have earned it. He sat in the chair next to the bed.

“Thank you,” she said with a small smile.

He remained silent and watched her eat.

It was quite intriguing the way she ate. She didn’t just eat like everyone else, she made sure she enjoyed and tasted every bite. And he knew why. Food had cost her the life of her younger sister.

“Tell me your name,” she said, savoring another bite. “Maybe not your actual name, but something I can call you by. I can’t keep thinking of you as *my captor*.”

He tried and failed to stop a small smile from escaping to his face. “Why not? I think of you as my captive.”

Her eyes fell on his lips, and her hand paused mid-bite for a second, before she resumed eating. “Maybe. But don’t you think you know enough about me to think of me as Nina?” she softly asked.

He already did think of her as Nina. During his dreams, when he had her underneath him, and was buried deep inside her body, he had called her by her name several times. But he wasn’t going to tell her that.

Hell, he didn’t even want to acknowledge that fact to himself. He felt disgusted that he thought of her that way. She was not only a married woman, but the wife of his enemy.

He had to keep repeating to himself of her married status each time he heard her voice. But each time his mind continued to think of her and craved her.

She was watching him and didn’t seem discouraged by his lack of response.

She smiled. “Okay then. I’ll continue to think of you as my captor and I can be your captive.”

The smile stirred something inside him. Along with the primal attraction he felt towards her, there was something else. A softer emotion. He wanted to pull her towards him and kiss her gently.

He immediately got up from the chair. “Your ten minutes is up,” he said gruffly. And then, he walked out of her room.

He went into his room, and sat on the bed and closed his eyes.

“Thank you for keeping me company,” he heard her say softly through the walls.

What are you doing? A voice inside him asked.

He was thinking of her most of the time. It almost cost him his life, a day ago, when a goon almost stabbed him.

And by visiting Nina Bhupati’s mother, a few days ago, he was risking discovery as well.

But he couldn’t seem to help himself.

He took a deep breath. His captive was slowly beginning to strike fear within him because he knew he was softening towards her and falling for her plan.

And he damn knew it was a plan.

He knew her choosing to talk was deliberate, but at the same time, he also knew her stories were real.

The experiences she and her sister faced since a tender age were sad and at times, horrific. They touched him deeply.

And they also made him admire his captive’s spirit. Not just because of how

she faced and handled everything, but also for the tone his captive used to narrate her stories. She spoke in a matter-of-fact way rather than in a sad, pitiable manner to garner sympathy from him.

And he didn’t pity her. He was proud of her. Each time she or her older sister overcame an obstacle, it filled him with a strange feeling of pride.

The way he viewed his captive was slowly beginning to change. She wasn’t weak and useless arm candy of an evil, rich man.

She was strong. She was a fighter. And not only because of the way she fought, but also because of the way she could endure, and survive.

Each time he listened to her voice coming through the walls, her strength shone through, captivating him completely with her tales.

He wanted her.

He didn’t just want her body, but he also wanted her mind and spirit.

And he also wanted her to want him.

It was insane.

CHAPTER 27

Nina was allowed to visit the sick, older man that evening.

She took a tray with dinner to him. Food that was obviously prepared by her captor. She didn't know why, but she was shocked by the fact.

When he brought the meal to her room, she had worried about the old man not getting any rest. Her captor had looked at her with his typical expressionless face and informed her that he was the one who had prepared the meal.

And the food, although simple, was pretty good.

"How are you feeling?" she asked the old man.

"I'm fine," he answered.

Nina could see that he was still feeling weak. She placed the tray on his lap after he sat up on the bed.

His eyes fell on the food. "Don't worry. I didn't prepare the food. Your boss did," she said with a smile.

He returned the smile. "Why should I worry if you had cooked?" he asked.

"Because I don't know how," she confessed.

He didn't look surprised. "My boss cooks well. He's cooked for himself and me whenever I was sick," he said.

He must have seen the look on her face, because he lost the smile on his. "My boss is not a bad man, Mrs. Bhupati," he said. "He's just a man fighting for justice in his own way."

"Justice for what?" she asked softly.

He fell quiet.

"Please, tell me. I already told your boss I'll help him find the truth. But if I don't know what happened, and whom he's trying to avenge, I can't help him."

The old man stared at her with a torn look on his face.

"Please," she pleaded softly. "Trust me. I will not allow anything bad to

happen to any of you. Just tell me why I was taken and whom your boss wants to avenge."

The old man lowered his head and stared at his food. "My boss didn't want to tell you anything because he was worried that if you escaped before he could carry out his plan, then you would bring your husband's men to us. He wasn't worried about himself. He was worried about me and… the other man."

Nina knew that the old man probably didn't recall saying the other man's name while she was being choked. But she remembered. It was Vikram.

She even wondered what relationship Vikram and her captor had between them. Were they related by blood, or were they friends?

Either way, she knew the old man and the other man must be pretty close to her captor, if they were risking arrest for her kidnap.

"You don't have to tell me everything. Just tell me why?" she pleaded again.

The old man stared at her, and then his eyes closed as he took a deep breath. "Your husband was responsible for my boss's sister's death," he said. "You husband gave the order to have her killed. He also made it appear like a suicide. My boss's mother died of a heart attack a day later."

Nina was stunned. "No," she said in a whisper. "That's impossible. Suraj would never do that. I'm pretty sure there's been a mistake."

The old man looked at her with pity flashing in his eyes. "My boss has proof, Mrs. Bhupati. Multiple proofs and witnesses who confirmed the fact."

Nina kept shaking her head. "I don't believe it. If there was proof, then why wasn't Suraj arrested or even blamed for it?"

"Your husband is a powerful man, Mrs. Bhupati. He has resources to be able to cover up the murder and not be associated with it in any way."

Nina's head spun. She knew Suraj. She trusted him implicitly. His moral code was much higher than hers. There was no way he would knowingly take an innocent life.

"Why would Suraj want to kill someone?" she asked.

"He did that as a warning to my boss. To show him what would happen if

someone went against him."

"Against him, how?" Nina asked, still trying to make sense of everything.

"My boss found—" The old man was about to reveal important information before he realized that his boss probably wouldn't be happy or maybe that it would endanger his boss.

"Found what?" she asked. "Is your boss an employee of my husband?"

The old man continued to stay silent.

"Please tell me. Does he work in any of the companies my husband owns? I'll try to resolve whatever happened. My husband isn't a bad man either. Whatever happened was tragic, but we need to get the truth out before anything happens to either of them."

"As I said, everything and everyone pointed to your husband, Mrs.Bhupati."

Nina wanted to argue, but she knew the old man wouldn't be convinced just because she trusted Suraj. "How do you know your boss?" she asked instead.

He contemplated before asking. "I was his cook and housekeeper."

"From his childhood?"

"No, for the past seven years."

"So, his sister and mother passed away seven years ago?"

"No. They died a few months ago."

"You knew them well?"

"No, they lived away from him."

"In a different city?"

"No. They lived close by."

"I see."

"Mrs. Bhupati, I'm telling you this because I don't want you to hate my boss. I know he did some things to you to question his morality. But until he lost his mother and sister, he wasn't like that. He was a carefree and a happy bachelor whose life consisted of his family, work, and friends. Wherever he went, he was the life of the party."

The last part shocked Nina. She couldn't imagine the grim, expressionless

face of her captor being carefree and happy, let alone as the life of the party.

“Was he, close to his family?” she asked softly.

“Yes. He was very close to his sister and mother. Even though he insisted they stay with him, his mother didn’t want to be a burden to him. She was quite a woman, his mother. Very hardworking. Even his sister, she was a bright, chirpy student and was on her way to becoming a doctor soon… before her life was cut short so cruelly.”

Nina felt both pity and empathy listening to her captor’s life before it changed irrevocably.

But she hated the guilt that was taking over.

Why was she feeling guilty? She knew in her heart that Suraj could not have been responsible for their deaths. But somehow her heart felt heavy with guilt and sadness.

The old man continued to talk.

“When his sister died, and his mother passed away due to the shock, my boss went to pieces. Before even he could mourn them properly, there was an attack on his life. Until then, he thought his sister and mother’s deaths were not related to your husband. But once the attack happened, he found proof.”

“Proof of what?” she asked.

“Proof that his sister’s death wasn’t a suicide. And that it was done as a retaliation not to reveal information he dug up against your husband”

Nina began to think furiously. “What does your boss do?” she asked.

When the old man didn’t answer, Nina prodded further. She had to know. “You said found something. Is he a reporter? Did he investigate something about the Bhupatis?”

A shocked and worried look passed on the old man’s face. “I’ve said too much.”

“No, you haven’t,” Nina reassured. “And I promise you that I won’t tell your boss about this conversation. Please tell me whatever you know.”

There was silence. “Even if my boss knows I’ve revealed everything to you,

he won’t hurt me.”

“Then what’s stopping you?” Nina asked.

“Although you are a good woman, Mrs. Bhupati, you would support your husband. I can’t risk my boss’s mission or his life by revealing everything.”

“I see.” Nina could sense that the old man wasn’t going offer any more information. “Thank you for trusting me with whatever you have told me so far,” she said, meaning it. “And please… call me Nina.”

“Nina,” he repeated said with a small smile. “Please call me Khan.”

“I will, Khan.” Nina was touched by his trust.

LATER, WHEN NINA returned to her room, her head spun with all the information and implications.

Her captor was a reporter who had some kind of information about the Bhupatis that could possibly destroy or at least damage their reputation. Nina couldn’t figure out what it could possibly be.

The Bhupatis owned too many businesses and ran several charitable organizations to be able to point at a particular thing. And even if someone had information and wanted to blackmail Suraj about it, Nina would have known about it. Suraj had never hidden anything from her.

Could it be her father-in-law her captor should be after? Nina knew her father-in-law was more than capable of using any means to snuff out any scandal that would touch his political career or family. Did her father-in-law pass the order to threaten a reporter and his family? Was her captor confusing her father-in-law’s threats to be Suraj’s?

But her father-in-law, for all his faults wouldn’t risk his son’s life or reputation. If someone were going after the Bhupatis for any wrong doing, her father-in-law would shield his son.

What if she asked her captor? Lay out all the cards and tell him what she found out?

But she was worried that would put Khan at risk. Khan trusted her. And even though Khan had said his boss wouldn't harm him, Nina wasn't too sure.

A strange feeling kept nagging at the back of her mind. It was trying to imply something. Something crucial.

Nina tried to close her eyes and think hard. But it didn't help.

That night, she couldn't sleep. Even though her captor hadn't left, he did not return to his room. She waited for a very long time. She was so used to talking to him, it felt unnatural not to.

Finally, she couldn't stay awake anymore. She slid into an uneasy sleep.

CHAPTER 28

“I warned you before, Mrs. Bhupati,” his deep tone growled into her ear.

He had her pinned against the wall with her legs wrapped around his waist. Only this time, he had somehow managed to remove their clothes.

She felt him moving inside her in strong, steady strokes.

Instead of fighting him off, Nina wrapped her legs tighter around his waist and moaned.

“You are loving this, aren’t you?” he asked with a cruel smile on his face as he watched her. The buzz-cut, the scars, and the stubble which gave him a dangerous aura, now appealed to her a lot. Her body hummed in pleasure as she took in his face.

“Your husband will like it even better when he gets to see us like this.”

Nina tore her eyes away from his mesmerizing face and looked at the blinking, red light of a camera set up in the room.

“No! No! Stop! Don’t do it!”

“The recording or this?” he asked, increasing the intensity of his thrusts. He leaned forward and kissed her hard on her lips.

She moaned once again, holding him, unable to let him go.

He pulled his lips away from her. “Should I stop?” he whispered in her ear.

“No, don’t stop,” she whispered. It felt so good. Their hot breaths mingling. Skin sliding on skin. The friction and the pleasure. It was addicting.

It was also building up to something.

“Oh God,” she moaned, closing her eyes and feeling every sensation heighten to a pitch.

He let out another cruel laugh.

Nina jerked awake.

Her breathing was unsteady, and her heart was pounding inside her chest. This time it was not from fear. Her entire body felt hot and restless. Her core throbbed and she could even feel a slick wetness between her thighs.

Oh my God!

What kind of messed up person has sexual dreams about their captor? Especially with someone who wanted to destroy and kill their husband?

Nina placed her hands on her hot, flushed cheeks to cool them down.

Her legs were entangled in the blanket. Pushing it, away, she got down from the bed and began pacing in her room.

Her body was still humming from the dream. And the dream had felt so real. She knew most of the feelings were from their last encounter, when he had held her against the wall and kissed her roughly, to teach her a lesson.

At that time, she was terrified of his touch. But in her dream, the similar touch invoked pleasure.

It was one thing to do things for survival, but to actually dream about it, and get aroused with it was beyond sick. Guilt and self-disgust tore at her.

Nina tried to reason it.

Maybe she was getting those dreams due to stress and also because of the recent revelations. Dreaming didn't actually mean that she was attracted to her captor in reality or wanted him in any way.

Yes, that was it. Stress, not attraction.

Some of her guilt was alleviated with that reasoning.

Nina continued to pace around the room. She stopped mid-stride when she heard footsteps and the door to her room opened.

It was her captor.

Her recently cooled cheeks began to heat up rapidly once again.

"Breakfast," he said, watching her with an expressionless look.

Her eyes swept over him.

He was wearing a sleeveless t-shirt and shorts. She knew he had worn similar clothes for the last three weeks, then why was she finding them fascinating now?

She tried hard, not to let her eyes drop to his muscled arms. *The arms that held your hips still while he drove into you.*

She sucked in a breath. “W-where is the breakfast?” she asked, her voice catching slightly. She didn’t see a tray in his hands.

“Upstairs.”

“Oh.” She felt stupid when she said that. But she didn’t know how to break the tension and awareness she felt towards him. And she was pretty sure it was just her who was feeling it.

He continued to watch her with his expressionless look, probably finding her entire demeanor and sudden awkwardness weird.

He looked at her for few more seconds before turning and leaving her room.

Nina sighed in relief when he left.

Oh my God. What’s happening?

It was definitely the dream that must have thrown her off, making her feel self-conscious around him. But at the same time, she also knew that after Khan’s revelations, the way she viewed her captor was also beginning to change.

She was beginning to empathize with him more. She even wanted to find out whether that carefree, happy-go-lucky man was still inside him somewhere.

And more than that, she badly wanted to demand information he had uncovered about Suraj. The information that apparently led to the deaths of his family and her kidnap.

CHAPTER 29

Gaurav slid an omelet into a plate and placed it in front of his captive.

Curiously, since the time she had come up from her room, she had kept her eyes lowered. Even her body language hinted at being uncomfortable around him.

Was this the same woman who had been talking to him for the past one week?

He found it strange. He wondered if this was another act or part of her plan.

If it was, he somehow wasn't enraged or offended by the fact.

"Don't you like it, Mrs. Bhupati," he asked.

Her eyes flew up to his face. She looked at him for a couple of seconds before lowering her eyes once again. He could see the color of her cheeks and ears redden slightly.

Interesting.

"It's very good," she murmured. "You are a good cook. Do let me know if you need my help in preparing the meals."

Once again, Gaurav found it strange listening to her voice while watching her in person.

In his mind, her voice had become an identity of its own. That was Nina for him. The moment he heard her voice as she spoke to him through the walls, everything within him calmed. He felt peaceful during those moments, despite everything happening in his life.

He felt close and connected to that voice.

And since that voice belonged to the person in front of him, it was difficult to hate her or feel anger towards her.

"Help me wash and clean up after," he said in answer.

She nodded.

She helped him clean up after lunch and dinner as well.

TWO DAYS LATER, when GAURAV opened the door to her room, Nina Bhupati had a determined look.

“I’ll make the breakfast this morning,” she said.

It took him a while to process what he heard as he was busy staring at her. With the sun rising behind her, she looked breathtaking.

“Why?” he asked.

“Well. Because I just hang around doing nothing while you cook meals for the three of us.”

“Do you know cooking?” he asked.

There was a pause. No. But I’ve watched you cook yesterday,” she said. “It didn’t seem very hard. And I’m a quick learner.”

She was looking at him expectantly.

“Okay,” he answered.

It was easier said than done, because Gaurav realized Nina Bhupati was a terrible cook.

An hour later, she scraped the half-burnt portion of the scrambled eggs into three plates. The remaining eggs in the pan were completely charred.

The bread was also toasted until it was dark brown, a shade less than burnt. As he bit into it, it almost disintegrated into powder. It tasted like ash.

He poured the lemon juice she had made into a glass to help him wash down the meal. At the first sip, he controlled the wince on his face as he tasted the bitterness.

And when she took a sip, she grimaced and ran to the kitchen sink where she spit it out.

“God, that’s terrible. How could you drink that? And we can’t give this to Khan. I’m so sorry,” she said, looking dejected.

“It’s okay,” he said.

She continued to look dejected.

“It’s not bad for a first time cook,” he said. “It could have been worse. The

wooden cabin could have caught fire."

She laughed, but still looked miserable. "Please, teach me how to cook," she said.

He was about to take their plates and head to the kitchen sink, but paused. "Why?"

"Because I want to cook sometimes, too. It's a basic skill and I'm ashamed that I never learnt it before. Either I was too poor to have afforded a proper kitchen or even the time to cook. Or I was too rich to be expected to cook. In the last ten years, each time I entered the kitchen, the cooks hovered around me anxiously. So I never learnt."

Silence ensued.

Until then she had only spoken about her childhood. This was the first time she was telling him something about her life as Suraj Bhupati's wife.

Gaurav wasn't sure if he wanted to listen to that part.

She didn't say anything else.

"Please, can you teach me?" she asked.

He looked at her hopeful face. "I'm not that great a cook myself. But I can show you to make some simple dishes," he said.

She smiled at him. "Thank you," she said, getting up from the chair to stand close to him near the cooking stove.

He threw away the burnt eggs and toast into the trash and put fresh bread into the toaster. He turned on the stove to make a fresh batch of eggs.

"Help me with the juice," he said. "But first, throw away the seeds."

That day, upon her insistence, he showed her not only how to make a simple breakfast, but also to make other meals, too.

Part of his brain knew it was beyond fucked up that he was teaching the woman he had kidnapped, how to cook. But he refused to dwell on it too much.

ANOTHER WEEK PASSED since Khan had fallen sick. Even though Khan had recovered, Gaurav insisted that Khan take rest from doing any of the chores.

Which meant Gaurav had to spend more time with Nina Bhupati.

Each morning, he opened the lock to her door after which she helped in cooking breakfast and other meals. Khan joined them during some of the meals, the rest of the time he ate in his room.

Gaurav didn't know what came over him, but one day he asked whether Nina wanted to go out for a walk.

"Can we walk around the lake?" she asked with anticipation in her eyes.

Gaurav knew it was risky and stupid for him to have made the offer to go for a walk. Because once they were out in the open forest, his captive might try to escape.

But each time he had seen her look out of the kitchen window longingly, he felt an ache in his chest.

"Yes, let's go," he said.

After breakfast, he took her near the lake.

"God, this feels so wonderful," she said, breathing in the cool and crisp air of the forest.

For the rest of the week, Gaurav continued to take Nina for a walk. Mostly around the lake. But sometimes in the forest too. And during that time, they didn't talk to each other. However, the quiet time they spent together enjoying the nature was something he began looking forward to.

He felt that because he couldn't let her out of her captivity until the end of his mission, he would try his best to not make her feel too trapped.

Gaurav knew his reasoning was skewed.

Because, no matter how comfortable he tried to make her, at the end of the day, she was still his captive, and he, her captor.

But he did wonder if that was the only way she viewed him as well.

Because, sometimes, while they cooked, he caught her having a strange look in her eyes as she watched him. She looked curious.

He also felt her eyes on him each time he returned from his bath in the lake, or joined her for walks, or when they had their meals together.

Something inside him hoped she didn’t view him as a complete monster and that he had some redeemable qualities. Because he wanted her to continue with her tales.

Each night, he lay on the bed, he waited for a long time, hoping she would talk or say something about her life. But she never did.

CHAPTER 30

“Get back to bed and catch some sleep, Suraj.”

Still a few more hours to go before the sun came up. Suraj stared out of the window at the twilight.

More than a month had passed since Nina had been taken. Since then, Suraj continued to have troubled sleep. “I can’t, Radha,” he said softly, continuing to stare outside.

“You are going to ruin your health if you don’t get enough sleep. Your blood pressure is already high for the past few weeks. You know what the doctor—”

“I know!” he snapped, cutting Radha off.

There was silence in the room.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s driving me insane, thinking of the possible reasons for Nina’s kidnap. Obviously, whoever took her has a personal grudge against me. I’m just sick of waiting for them to strike.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t care what they do to me. I just want Nina to get back home safely.”

“She will,” said Radha gently. “You know Nina. She’s not the kind to give up easily. She’ll make sure the kidnapper is brought to his knees somehow. She’ll make him drop her home safe and sound.”

A laugh burst out from Suraj at Radha’s description of Nina. Radha was right. Nina was a fighter. And not in an obvious way that one would expect. She was the kind to win the war and keep her enemy guessing as to what the hell had happened.

She had outsmarted several reporters by twisting their questions around. She had even outsmarted several established business tycoons and politicians when it came to arguments and strategies. One or two measly kidnappers would be nothing in front of her.

He smiled, imagining Nina returning and then telling him all about how she

had outsmarted her kidnappers and what she did during her captivity.

Suraj felt a strange peace settle inside him. He would continue to search for his wife, but he wouldn’t worry himself into an early death.

He got back into the bed and held Radha. “Thank you for the pep talk,” he whispered.

Radha smiled and held him. Soon, they went back to sleep, their bodies curled around each other, just like they had been sleeping together for the past fifteen years.

CHAPTER 31

Nina stared out of the window and knew she was in deep trouble. Her eyes were completely focused on her captor who was bathing in the lake.

They say that when survival mode kicks in, then the logical part of brain stops functioning, and everything points to three different options—fight, flight or freeze.

She had gone through the first two. Now, apparently, she was in the freeze mode.

She didn't know what to do.

Even though the threat to Suraj remained, and that too from her captor, she was unable to do anything. Because her mind was beginning to recognize her captor as human. A good human being.

Even though he had behaved like a monster with her initially, and was cold and cruel to her, she understood the reasons behind his behavior. And she knew there was a different side of him as well. When he took care of Khan, he was caring and compassionate. When he taught her to cook, or took her for walks, he was considerate.

As each day passed since Khan had fallen sick, she had even begun to see her captor as a man. A man with an amazingly hot body and with a face she was now terribly attracted to.

Her captor was only slightly taller than Suraj's six feet, and had a similar lean, muscular build, yet her captor's dangerous aura made him seem larger than he actually was. Instead of finding him intimidating, she was beginning to find him thrilling.

God, Nina. Look away!

Nina was unable to listen to the warnings her subconscious threw at her. She continued to stand near the window and kept her eyes riveted on the man

swimming laps in powerful strokes.

Everything he did, whether it was swimming or cooking or cleaning or even something as simple as taking a walk, he did it with such intense concentration, she wondered if he was really the outgoing person Khan had described.

Nina's thoughts froze when he stopped swimming and began emerging from the lake. Her body grew restless as she took in the sight. And to add to the restlessness, her captor didn't bother drying his body with a towel. He began walking towards the cabin, letting the cool forest breeze dry him naturally.

Her stomach flipped at the sight of him as he drew closer. But not out of fear.

He looked… hot. The stubble on his face, his rugged good looks and his powerful muscular body made him look like he should be on the cover of an outdoor or sports magazine. Her eyes followed him as he continued walking until he reached the cabin.

She took several deep breaths to calm down before he saw her in her agitated state. Just when she thought she had gotten her heartbeat to a normal rate, her pulse picked up speed once again when the door to her captor's room opened, and he entered.

She clutched the wet clothes she had washed, and walked towards the doorway. She was about to pass him and go to her room when he blocked her path.

"Nina," he said in a quiet tone.

With great difficulty, she raised her eyes to him, but remained silent.

"Why did you stop talking?" he asked.

She was surprised by his question. She didn't think he even noticed. "I thought you didn't want me to talk," she said. She recalled the last time she had wanted to talk about her past. She had waited for him to return to his room, but he had deliberately chosen to stay away.

Understanding dawned in his eyes. "I want you to," he said.

She nodded.

They both fell quiet. She expected him to move away, but he stood in her

way.

She felt the awareness heighten between them as they stared at each other. She couldn't read him as he had his usual expressionless look on his face. It was hard to look away and it was even harder to hold on to his stare. She felt helplessly drawn to the intensity of his dark eyes.

To avoid it, she lowered her eyes, only to be mesmerized by his lips that looked soft and strong at the same time. Her lips parted involuntarily.

She dragged her eyes up, about to ask him to step aside, but her words died when she saw something shift in his eyes. And before she knew it, his mouth crashed down on hers.

Her body responded immediately. Her hands moved on their own accord and held his shoulders, to pull him closer until their bodies were pressed together. She kissed him back with fervor. All thoughts of escape flew out of her mind, along with her sense of self-preservation. She didn't want to end the kiss or lose any contact.

It feels much better than my dream.

As though he could read her, he turned her and pushed her against the door. And then, his hands clutched her backside, pulling her even closer. She moaned in pleasure as tremors ran through her. And her body heated even more when she felt his arousal.

Suddenly, her captor's body stilled. And then immediately, he wrenched his mouth away from hers, and stepped away from her.

A deep frown crept across his face.

Nina watched him in a daze, trying to figure out why he had stopped. Slowly, she understood.

"Nina?" Khan's voice was calling from above.

THE NEXT FEW days, continued to be a torture for Nina.

The kiss between her captor and her constantly played in her mind, alternately invoking feelings of guilt and pleasure.

The reason for pleasure was obvious. She wanted him.

But the guilt was tearing her apart. And the guilt wasn't because she was married.

Unlike most marriages, her marriage was an unconventional one. Suraj slept with Radha, and Nina had no problem with it. She wanted Suraj to be happy. And in return, if Nina were to take a lover herself, Suraj wouldn't mind. In fact, Suraj had told her so, many times. He kept insisting she do whatever made her happy.

Nina had never been tempted to take a lover. Part of it was due to fear of discovery. Even if Suraj didn't mind, the outside society wouldn't understand. And she being a high-profile man's wife, it would not only impact her image, but also Suraj's.

Another major reason, she didn't take a lover during the course of her marriage was because she wasn't attracted to anyone whom she felt was worth the risk.

Nina felt guilty because she not only wanted her captor, but she also felt he was well worth taking risk over.

CHAPTER 32

Gaurav was standing near the cabin door to escort Khan to his room. He wanted to ensure that Khan was taking his medicines regularly.

“Goodnight, Nina.” Khan waved.

“Goodnight.” The soft reply came from Nina as she cleaned the dishes after the meal.

Dragging his eyes away from a small patch of soap suds on Nina’s forehead, Gaurav stepped out of the cabin.

He waited until Khan lay on his bed.

“Here,” he said, handing Khan the medicine pouch along with a bottle of water.

“Thank you, sir.”

Khan took his medicines and lay back on his bed. Gaurav was about to leave when he was stopped by Khan. “Sir?” he said.

“Yes, Khan.”

“Nina, I mean Mrs. Bhupati, is a good person. I don’t think she’s involved or even aware of what her husband is doing.”

Gaurav stayed silent. He didn’t want to discuss her with Khan. Because he, himself, was of two minds when it came to her.

“All I’m saying is,” Khan continued. “Please give her a chance to explain before she’s punished along with her husband.”

Gaurav nodded.

“And sir, I would like to return to the city next week.”

Gaurav knew that despite medicines and rest, Khan was feeling increasingly tired. “I’ve always given you the choice to leave any time you want, Khan.”

“I know.” Khan smiled sadly. “But I also know that tomorrow you are going to the city again. I’ll be here until you return.”

Gaurav hadn’t hidden anything about his mission from Khan. Right from the moment Khan insisted on being involved, Gaurav always ensured Khan was aware of everything.

“I’ll ask Vikram to drive you back.”

“Thank you,” Khan replied.

Waiting until the older man settled in, Gaurav turned off the lights and stepped out of Khan’s cabin. His mind was on the critical task he had to do the next day. He was going to hunt down the last goon involved in killing his sister. And once that was done, he would have to return to the cabin and keep a low profile for a while.

He stepped inside the kitchen and noticed that Nina wasn’t around. She had finished cleaning the dishes and must have gone back to her room. He was looking forward to listening to her talk that night. She began talking about her past once gain to him.

As he neared her room, he noticed that the door was wide open. And she wasn’t in there. She must have been in the bathroom.

He waited for her to come out, so he could lock the door from the outside.

“I’m here,” he heard her say softly. Her voice had come from the next room. His room.

Frowning, Gaurav went towards his room and opened the closed bedroom door, only to see a shocking sight.

Nina Bhupati was lying on his bed—completely and utterly naked.

Why the sight of her waiting on his bed to seduce him shocked him, Gaurav didn’t know. He was expecting something like this to happen right from the day she had rubbed her body against his in the narrow hallway, making it very clear to him that she was going to use seduction as a method to escape her captivity.

The only thing that had changed since that day was… he wanted to take her up on her offer right now.

But he knew that by taking what was offered, he would be stepping off an

edge into an unknown abyss.

Gaurav willingly jumped.

He stepped inside and closed the door before locking it. Then keeping his eyes locked to hers, he pulled up his t-shirt and shed his shorts along with his underwear, until he was completely naked like her.

He saw her eyes widen as she ran them over his nude body.

He returned the favor by taking in every inch of her delectable body which was illuminated only by the soft moonlight coming from outside the window.

She is stunning. And mine to take.

His body had craved her for so long that no second thoughts ran through his mind. In three long strides, he covered the distance between them and moved on top of her.

He groaned out loud at the feeling of his skin touching hers. The next instant, he seized her mouth with his and kissed her like he had wanted to in what felt like forever. And with one thigh, he nudged her legs apart to fit his hard body against her soft one.

It felt like heaven.

He heard her gasp and moan as he ran his hands over her soft yet firm curves. Her moans drove him crazy along with her nails digging into his shoulders. They drove him to increase the intensity of his kiss, wanting to consume her completely.

He growled when her nails dug into his shoulders hard enough to draw blood. It took him a few moments to realize that something was off. And that the tone of her moans was not out of pleasure.

He froze on top of her.

Slowly, he lifted his mouth away from hers and watched her face. He couldn’t see her clearly as darkness had taken over the sky because of the clouds. He could only hear her. Their loud breaths were the only sounds in the otherwise quiet room.

Reaching a hand towards the night lamp next to him, he switched it on. The

first thing he saw when the light illuminated her face was the fear in her eyes. Her hands were braced against his shoulders, the pressure was still leaning more towards wanting to push him off of her.

What the hell had happened?

Although he didn't know for sure, he could only guess what might have happened. She wanted to seduce him to bargain with him. Unfortunately, what she didn't count on was being attacked like an animal.

His eyes fell on her lips that were red and swollen, and he could feel her thighs quivering around his hips. She was completely at his mercy since he pinned her under him on the bed.

He should feel guilty. In fact, a better man would roll away and send her back to her bed.

But he didn't.

He wanted her. He was done fighting it.

But first, he needed to soothe the seductress under him until she lost her fear.

NINA'S BREATH SPED up in panic, and a gasp escaped her when her captor began to shift away from her.

"Please, don't leave," she whispered and dug her nails further into his skin to keep him from leaving.

He winced. "Shh…" his deep voice soothed. "I am not leaving," he said, pushing himself up a few inches until he balanced his weight on his knees on either side of her hips.

His eyes burned intensely as he moved them over her body. Slowly, he raised his hands to brush the back of his fingers against her breasts, eliciting shivers in her. And then, his hands moved lower, leaving a trail of heat that left her skin sizzling.

She slowly loosened the grip on his shoulders while his fingers gently traced her neck, her shoulders, her waist, and then returned to her throat. She felt transfixed by the look on his face as he explored her. All his attention was

completely on her, and his eyes looked reverent.

She felt his eyes on her lips and saw him lowering his mouth towards her. She involuntarily stiffened, but this time when his lips landed on hers, they were gentle. It was a stark contrast to how he had kissed her earlier, ravaging her mouth.

His kiss did not deepen, but instead, his lips kept brushing against hers softly. She let out a soft moan in protest when his lips left hers to move lower. They landed on her throat, making her further tremble. His mouth kissed every inch of her throat and chest before trailing towards her stomach.

Slowly, she felt her body beginning to come alive in a way it had never been before.

He twirled his tongue in her belly button, before following it up with soft kisses as he moved even lower. She let out a panicked gasp as he buried his face in between her thighs.

She clutched his head, but couldn't hold on due to his buzz-cut. And the prickly buzz-cut magnified every sensation as it rubbed against her sensitive skin.

Her breath came out noisy and choppy as she felt his warm breath on her intimate folds.

"Please," she whispered, torn between wanting him to continue or stop.

"Shh…" he said once again, soothing her as he prepared her for what seemed to be inevitable between them.

Her body jerked as she felt his lips on her intimate folds, and then without giving her too much time to adjust or protest, he feasted. His lips, teeth, and tongue tasted and explored her.

She felt overwhelmed by the sensations that hit her. She cried out and tried to move away, but he held her hips firmly.

He was relentless in his onslaught.

She couldn't take it anymore. And there wasn't a slow build-up like she thought there would be. Within what felt like split seconds, she simply

combusted.

She let out a scream, that she desperately tried to muffle into a pillow.

It was overwhelming and scary and wonderful—all at the same time.

Her breath came out in gasps as she tried to breathe in lungful of air. But before she could completely catch her breath, he moved on top of her.

Keeping his eyes locked on hers, he reached for her hands. He twined each of his hand in hers, and held them on top of her head.

She noticed that his breathing had turned even more ragged, and he looked out of control as before when he had seen her naked for the first time.

Her breath hitched in panic once again. She braced herself for a swift, rough, and painful entry, but when he began entering her, it was slow and deliberate.

He moved in shallow strokes, all the while watching her face as though he was waiting for her panicked breaths to completely disappear. And when her breathing turned into soft gasps, only then, did he take his time to join their bodies further.

It hurt, but she ignored the pain as his eyes kept her captive.

He was again relentless in his pursuit. Thrusting in and out, each time going a few inches further, making her gasp in pleasure and pain and in awe. He did it for a while, continuing to watch her face. Only when he filled her completely, did he stop.

They stared at each other. Man and woman. Captor and captive.

Nina felt shock and something much deeper between them. And it wasn't only because they were connected to each other in the most intimate way.

Not wanting to acknowledge the strange connection, she lowered her chin and closed her eyes.

Immediately, his hand let go of hers, to hold her chin and raise it. "Look at me," he softly ordered.

When she followed his order and raised her eyes to him, giving him her complete attention, he lowered his head and kissed her again on the lips.

And then, he began to move.

It was slow at first, drawing out soft moans from her. She held onto his shoulders, and tightened her legs around his hips while moving to his rhythm.

Each time he entered her, the pleasure inside her built up. She tried to move along with him, but soon her movements became erratic. He held her hips to calm her down while he continued thrusting into her at a steady pace.

She couldn't bear it after a while. She dug her nails into his shoulders and moved her hips wildly against his to find relief from an intense pressure that had built along with the pleasure. "Move!" she snapped.

She saw his eyes flare, and a growl rumbled in his throat. Then his control slipped and holding her still by her hips, his thrusts turned harder. And rougher. The entire bed shook with the intensity of it.

This time she wasn't frightened. She craved it. She lay still, simply clutching him, and letting him take over completely. All she did was simply feel the pleasure.

Soon, the pleasure inside her built even more in intensity, reaching the peak. Another scream tore from her throat as soon as she felt an explosion inside her.

She muffled her screams against his shoulder, biting into his skin as she got swept away by the waves of her release.

Vaguely she heard him groaning her name into her neck.

CHAPTER 33

“Everything will get better, Gaurav. Don’t worry about us. Just stay brave and do what you have to do.”

“I really hope so, Ma.”

He was driving his mother back from a temple. She had wanted to spend some time praying to God, asking for peace of mind while wading through the rough patch they were going through.

Gaurav parked the car in front of their modest house. “Sure you don’t want to join Rohan, Shruti and me for the movie, Ma?” he asked.

“No. You three go ahead.”

Gaurav nodded. Shruti’s exams were going to start soon. She was a topper and hard worker. Unlike most students, she actually liked to unwind before she began her exam preparations. Gaurav had called her the previous day and they made plans to watch a movie and relax.

Gaurav stood in front of the maindoor and entered the code of the security alarm to inactivate it. Meanwhile, his mother opened the main door using her key. Gaurav immediately sensed something was wrong.

It was eerily quiet and dark. His sister hated the dark, and she always watched a marathon of TV serials during the evening.

“Shruti?” his mother called out in a worried tone, probably thinking along the same lines.

He and his mother hurried towards Shruti’s room. It was closed but not locked.

Gaurav pushed the door open and turned on the lights.

*“**Shruti**!” His mother’s scream reverberated in the house.*

Gaurav woke up with a start. His mother’s scream when she watched her

daughter’s body hanging from the ceiling continued to reverberate inside his head.

He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths before opening them once again.

Everything was quiet except for the sounds of the birds within the forest as daylight crept in.

He turned his head and looked at the clock next to him. It indicated that he had barely slept for more than two hours. And then, slowly he turned and looked at the woman lying next to him on his bed.

Nina Bhupati was in a deep sleep.

Memories of the previous night rushed through his mind, along with the sounds of her soft moans and cries as he took her body over and over.

He forcibly pushed the memories away and he forced his eyes to look at the hand lying on his chest. Even in the soft morning light, the wedding ring on Nina Bhupati’s finger glinted brightly.

What did you do? How could you have risked your mission so easily?

As soon as his rational mind demanded answers, he realized that Nina Bhupati was a colossal mistake.

Being inside her body and developing softer feelings for her—was the worst mistake he made.

Moving her hand away from his chest, he slid out of the bed. He picked the clothes he had shed the previous night from the floor, and put them back on.

He heard a soft moan and saw her stir.

She slowly opened her eyes. And as soon as she saw him, her eyes turned even softer and her lips curved into a smile. “Hi,” she said shyly.

His body screamed that he should go to her, and greet her with a soft kiss before exploring her body once again, and this time in the day light.

Gaurav ignored his bodily urges and hardened his resolve against her.

Nothing would deter him from his chosen path.

“Get back to your room, Mrs. Bhupati,” he said. His tone sounded harsh to

his own ears.

Her smile slipped. “What?”

“I asked you to get out of my bed and to go back to your room so I can lock it from outside. Breakfast will be brought to your room later.”

“But… you and I… I mean, we…” She looked hurt and confused.

“You and I are nothing,” he said in a scathing tone. “You are here as my captive and as a tool to destroy your husband.”

She watched him quietly. “What about last night?” she asked softly.

“Last night changed nothing. My priorities are still the same. However, I must thank you for making your body available and showing such enthusiasm in bed.”

She shook her head as though denying his words. “You are lying. This past week changed something between us. And last night meant something. I could feel it in your touch. Please, tell me what changed this morning.”

He laughed and the sound came out harsh. “You overestimate your importance, Mrs. Bhupati. Nothing has changed,” he repeated. “And don’t act like you know me or mean something to me, just because we kissed once and spent time fucking last night. You are nothing to me and there’s nothing between us for me to feel. You threw yourself at me, and like any red-blooded man, I took an available body. It’s that simple. There were no feelings involved.”

She flinched at each of his harsh words while he said them.

“I see,” she said. He could see her drawing in her strength and dignity.

With shaky legs, she got down from the bed and pulled the blanket around her. Then holding her head high, she walked out of his room.

Gaurav followed her and as soon as she entered her room, he locked the door from the outside.

Even though it was way too early, he knew he couldn’t get back to sleep. So he went up to the dining nook.

He sat in a chair and looked out of the window at the serene lake within the forest.

“This is not right, son.” Gaurav heard his mother say.

Even though his mother was gone, sometimes, he heard her voice inside his head, guiding him just like she did when she was alive.

“I didn’t take anything she didn’t offer, Ma,” Gaurav replied softly.

“That doesn’t mean what you said or did after was right.” There was disappointment in the voice. *“You are not the same man you were. The one who refused to compromise on his high moral codes.”*

Gaurav scoffed. “Moral codes?” he asked. “What did my moral codes bring? They brought me nothing. They cost me yours and Shruti’s life. My moral codes died the moment I lost you both.”

“No, son. They did not,” the voice said softly. *“You sacrificed and gave up so much for your convictions. That part of you is still strong. Right now, it’s just buried under the pain and anger.”*

CHAPTER 34

Nina felt devastated. She didn't know why though.

Did she really think that after one kiss, and one night with her, and listening to her sob story for the past two weeks, her captor would think she was someone special? And that he would like her genuinely?

Yes, she stupidly did.

How very, very stupid of you, Nina. A voice inside her mocked.

Tears pricked her eyes as she clenched her teeth. She felt her heart thunder in her chest as pain and anger warred with each other.

She paced around the room. And each step she took increased the anger.

How dare he hurt her! And how stupid of her to feel the hurt caused by a man who meant nothing to her.

She should have known better, and she shouldn't care.

The feelings and emotions she had felt towards him were not real. And even if they were, they were *not* acceptable.

He was just a means to the ticket for her freedom. She had offered her body for the sake of survival. Not because he was something to her.

He is nothing to me!

She repeated that over and over in her head.

But deep down, she knew that she cared. And that she had hoped things were different with him because she had begun to admire him as a person.

She even bloody admired him still. How could she!

Despite knowing how the real world worked, she had dreamt. She dreamt that the night did mean something to him. As it did for her. She had wanted him to desire her, care for her, and also feel protective about her. But instead, he made her like a cheap, disposable object.

The hurt and anger grew in intensity along with despair. She lay on the bed

and curled her body, feeling empty and alone.

CHAPTER 35

“Nina, please have something to eat. You haven’t eaten anything since yesterday.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Nina hated wasting food. But the thought of eating anything, made her stomach churn. She knew that even if she tried eating something, her body would reject it immediately.

Khan continued to stand next to the bed. Nina could feel his concerned gaze directed towards her.

“Nina…” he said. His voice was sympathetic. “I don’t know what happened between the two of you, but all I can say is that my boss respects you and cares for you. I could see it in his eyes whenever he looked at you these past few days.”

Nina didn’t want to listen to Khan.

“I’m a married woman, Khan,” she said in a flat tone. “I only care for my husband. I don’t care for your boss in any way and neither do I expect him to care for me. And I’d appreciate it if you could leave me alone.”

Nina knew she was being rude to Khan, her only ally and friend during her captivity.

Khan didn’t leave right away.

“Mrs. Bhupati,” he said, reverting back to a formal address. “I’m an old man and I have seen enough in my life to have gained some wisdom. Whatever I’ve seen developing between you and my boss in the last few days… if not love, it’s something definitely close to it.”

Nina didn’t reply. She just closed her eyes and waited for Khan to leave the room.

She heard him sigh gently and clear up the dishes from the previous meal. As

soon as she heard the door lock clicking, she opened her eyes and stared out the window.

CHAPTER 36

"ALL DONE, THERE'S no one else left," Vikram said softly.

Gaurav and Vikram watched as the body of the man Gaurav had just killed burned in the incinerator.

Gaurav stared at the flames. For some reason, he had thought it would bring him some amount of peace after killing all the people who had murdered his sister.

But his mind still felt restless. And it wasn't just because Suraj Bhupati was still scot-free.

It was also because of his enemy's wife.

Each time Gaurav thought of Nina Bhupati, he felt an ache in his heart. And it kept growing each minute. And it wasn't just because he wanted her and craved her touch once again. It was something else. Something he had no intention of acknowledging.

BY THE TIME Vikram drove them to the forest cabin, it was already dark and Khan was waiting near the door step with his luggage.

"Keep a low profile for the next couple of months until we gather rest of the proofs, Gaurav."

Gaurav nodded at Vikram. He knew that by killing the last of the goons who had murdered Shruti, he risked discovery. All someone had to do was dig up which contract jobs the goons had done together.

"I'll stay in the cabin," Gaurav answered.

"Are you sure?" Vikram asked. "We can secure the captive in some other location."

"No. This cabin is fine. It would be hard for them to trace."

Vikram nodded. "Okay. If anything changes, call me. I'll keep in touch with

you as well."

"I will," said Gaurav.

He got out of the SUV and greeted Khan. He unloaded the supplies he had picked up for staying in the cabin for a long period of time. And then, he picked up Khans bags and loaded them into the vehicle. Then shutting the trunk, he turned to look at the man who had supported him unconditionally over the years.

"Thank you for everything, Khan," he said. "I hope you realized over the years of how much I valued your service."

Khan smiled sadly. "Yes. You have always been kind and caring towards me."

"I know I've told this to you before, but I've set up your retirement funds in your bank. You can draw them each month—"

"I remember," Khan cut in gently.

"Then I guess, this is it."

"I know, it won't be, sir. I'm confident we'll keep meeting until death finds me."

Gaurav remained silent.

"I know nothing will happen to you, sir. Nina will protect you—"

"Khan." This time it was Gaurav who interrupted him and smiled. "I know you and Vikram are confident I'll be able to come out of this without any ramifications. Well, I'll try not to get killed or arrested unnecessarily either, I promise."

Khan smiled again, this time there was only a hint of sadness. "I'm quite confident, sir. I'm also confident even Nina will join us at that time."

Gaurav shook his head at Khan's fanciful thoughts. 'Good bye, Khan. Take care of your health."

"See you soon, sir," said Khan, before opening the door and getting into the vehicle.

Gaurav waved at Vikram and Khan and waited until the lights of the SUV faded away in the dark forest.

He then took the supplies inside and loaded them into the fridge and the

cupboards. He was about to head downstairs, but he stopped. Instead, he stepped out of the cabin once again.

There was no moon that night, and Gaurav could barely see anything beyond a foot outside. But he still headed to the lake, using the light from his phone.

He could not bear to be anywhere around Nina with a dead man's blood or ashes covering his body.

He shed his clothes and left them on a stone near the lake before wading into the water.

He didn't take any laps. He just dipped in waist deep water and submerged his body under the water a few times until any lingering ash on his body was washed away.

There was no change of clothes. So, he simply got out of the water and walked naked to the cabin.

When he passed by Nina's room, he couldn't hear anything. But he knew she wasn't asleep. He knew she usually slept much later.

He put clean clothes and slid into his bed.

He couldn't sleep. His mind felt restless. He knew it was because he desperately wanted to listen to Nina. He wanted her to work her magic on him with her voice, alleviating the ache in his chest and bringing him some peace of mind.

"Nina, I'm sorry," he said, meaning it.

All he could hear was silence.

"I know I behaved badly with you the last time. Please forgive me and talk to me. I really need to hear your voice," he said softly.

There was silence.

"Nina?"

Silence again.

"I said talk." His voice had risen slightly higher and it came out as an order.

He knew it was illogical to expect her to forgive him that easily and follow his demand. But in his twisted mind, she owed it to him.

When she still didn't talk, irrational anger crept over him, and all the hopelessness and frustration he felt after the day's events made him erupt. He banged on the wall, until it shook. "I said talk!" he roared.

It was again met with silence.

He got up from his bed and stormed out of his room and then went into hers.

The lights were turned off, including the night light. He turned them all on and glared towards her bed.

What he saw killed his anger immediately. His heart almost stopped for a moment.

The sight in front of him, reminded him of how he had found his mother the morning after Shruti had died. His mother was lying still on the bed after she died of a massive heart attack in her sleep.

"Nina!" he whispered in a panic-laden voice. He heard the faintest sound of her breath. And then, seeing her chest rise and fall softly, his panic subsided.

She was lying on the bed with her eyes open. And even though her gaze appeared to be in his direction, the utter deadness in them made it seem like she was looking through him.

Slowly, he went towards her and knelt on the floor next to the bed.

"Nina," he softly said, touching her cheek gently.

She flinched at the touch, but continued watching blankly.

"I'm sorry, Nina. Please… talk to me."

When she continued to stay silent, he pulled her up, until she sat up in the bed, staring blankly.

He shook her slightly. "I said talk. If you are angry with me, show it to me. Don't just sulk." The last part he deliberately said to goad her.

He saw her eyes changing. The dullness slowly disappeared, and it was replaced by a blazing anger. Anger directed at him.

He saw it coming, but he didn't move or do anything to stop her. Her palm connected to his face with enough force to whip it to the side.

"If you can't free me, at least leave me in peace within this prison!" she

shouted, struggling to get out of his arms.

“I can’t,” he said in a quiet tone.

As expected, there was another slap. This one was with an equal amount of force.

She was breathing hard, and was watching him with a look that hit him even harder than any physical hurt could. “Do you feel better?” he asked softly. “Or do you want to hit me again? Hit me or hurt me however much you want, but please talk to me.”

She stared at him silently, and then slowly the anger in her eyes subsided and her shoulders slumped. “Why?” she asked.

“Because I had a horrible day. And I need to listen to your voice to make me feel sane.”

“I can’t,” she whispered. “Not anymore. I can’t bare my past to a person who treated me like trash.”

His chest felt tight, listening to the betrayal in her voice. “I’m sorry,” he said before kissing her cheek softly.

She let him.

Encouraged, he sat next to her and hugged her close, until her head rested on top of his chest.

“You said I was nobody to you,” she whispered.

“I was lying,” he replied, picking up her hand and kissing her palm softly. “You do mean something to me.”

“How can I mean something when you won’t even let me know your name?” she asked.

Gaurav paused. Then taking a deep breath, he said, “Gaurav. My name is Gaurav.”

Slowly, she looked up at him, and a small radiant smile broke on her face. “Gaurav,” she repeated.

Hearing his name from her lips felt strange and invigorating at the same time. He knew there would be ramifications later on, but he completely blanked his

mind, except for the woman in front of him.

He picked her up and carried her to his room to gently lay her on his bed. He lay next to her, facing her, and keeping a few inches between them.

“Talk,” he pleaded softly.

This time she did. Before that, she leaned forward and kissed his cheek where it still throbbed. She didn’t apologize using any words. But he knew her kiss was a way of apology. He felt touched that she felt bad for hitting him even though he more than deserved it.

“Devi was heartbreakingly beautiful,” she began. “And despite our disguises, there was no hiding that face, so she began to use her beauty to take care of me.” She inhaled a deep breath. “She took up jobs as a dancer in bars a first. People saw her and liked her, and soon she was hired in exclusive, high-end private events. I hated it, even though she said it was harmless. I wasn’t judging her. Hell, if given a chance, I would have done the same and maybe even more for my sister, but Devi didn’t allow me to. So, we compromised and I accompanied her whenever I could. Even though she was barely sixteen at that time, men of all ages leered at her and made indecent passes. Some of them were even bold enough to touch her. I hurt them all.”

“What did you do?” he asked.

She stopped speaking and had a stunned look on her face. Maybe because it was the first time he acknowledged or spoke while she narrated.

“I hurt them. Most of them were too drunk to react or hit back. I stabbed them with forks. Or kicked them in their balls. I even broke some of their noses.”

“Of course.” A smile covered his face, recalling how she had done the same thing to him when she had a chance to escape.

He felt the need to protect her even though she was more than capable of doing it herself since she was a child. He felt the need to wipe away her bad memories of her past and replace them with nothing but happiness and laughter.

And more than anything, he felt the need to protect her from him.

He watched her as she continued to speak. There was a faraway look on her

face, as though she was reliving her past.

“Whenever Devi took up a new job, I went along, and told the potential employers that we came as a package, and that I should be allowed into those events too. So I…” She continued to talk for the rest of the night.

Much later that night, when he watched her sleeping next to him, only one thought dominated Gaurav’s mind.

He knew Nina Bhupati’s end game—she was aiming for his heart. By revealing a part of her life, she was capturing piece by piece of his heart. And sooner or later, she would have all of it.

And by giving her his real name, he had taken the biggest risk.

Somewhere inside, he knew Nina Bhupati was going to be the one to cause his downfall. And he also knew he wasn’t going to stop her.

CHAPTER 37

By the time Nina woke up, her captor wasn't next to her on the bed.

No, not her captor. Gaurav.

Nina smiled. She didn't know whether that was his real name or not, but somehow it felt right.

She got down from the bed and made use of the bathroom before going upstairs.

Gaurav was making them breakfast. He didn't see her yet, so she took the time to observe him.

How could she even think he wasn't the kind she would ever be attracted to?

The strong, handsome face that was completely focused on the task at hand, the lean and muscular body combined with the smooth efficient movements, made her body warm and tingly.

He turned towards the dining table when he saw her and froze.

"Good morning," she said with a small smile. "What's for breakfast?"

He placed a plate he had prepared for her on the small kitchen table. It was a humongous heap of eggs and vegetables along with toasted bread. The portion size was twice as much as he served for himself.

"I want you to finish all of it," he said with a slightly stern voice.

Nina smiled. She knew Khan must have told him that she hadn't eaten since two days.

"I will," she said and began to dig into her food.

He was quiet, and kept his eyes away from her while he finished his breakfast. She noticed because she couldn't stop herself from staring at him. The grim, unsmiling mouth, the strong roman-nose, the small cleft she spied on his chin within the stubble—all of them fascinated her.

She missed seeing his eyes. But even without his gaze on her, she felt a strong

potent force making her gravitate towards him.

They finished rest of the breakfast quietly.

When she cleared the plates and was washing them in the kitchen sink, she felt his gaze on her back.

“I’m going for a walk. Would you like to join me?” he asked

Turning around, she held his gaze. “Yes,” she said with a smile.

CHAPTER 38

Two weeks had passed since Khan had left.

Everything was almost the same as before, when Khan had fallen sick .

Each morning Nina and Gaurav prepared their meals and had them together. And then, they went on long walks into the forest. Sometimes, when the weather was beautiful, Nina packed the food so they could enjoy a picnic by the lake.

“Almost done,” said Nina, pulling the last flower through the needle and thread, and then tying a knot at the end of the garland.

They had just finished their picnic lunch by the lake, but Nina kept them waiting to finish making a garland out of the wildflowers that grew in the forest.

Gaurav had picked most of the flowers.

Each time Gaurav went to the lake for a bath, he came back with flowers for her. Nina knew he did that because she had told him about her affinity towards wildflowers.

During her childhood, Devi and she would pick flowers from the roadside or parks to decorate their small room. Even though the places they lived were tiny, with the beautiful fragrant flowers, they felt like home.

Nina was touched that Gaurav had remembered and tried to make their cabin like a home.

Smiling, Nina ran her fingers on the delicate petals of the flowers in the garland.

Gaurav was sitting on the grass, watching her quietly. Nina wasn’t looking at him, but could sense his gaze. She knew that as soon as she looked at him, he would turn his gaze away.

Raising her eyes towards him, “How do I look?” Nina asked, putting a lone hibiscus flower in her ear.

As expected, Gaurav looked away. And when she continued to wait for his

response, he reluctantly turned and looked at her for a brief second before looking away once again. “Good,” he murmured.

Nina laughed. “Flatterer.”

She leaned towards him and put the garland she made around his neck. “I made this for you.”

Gaurav’s eyes fell on the bright colorful garland, and then, at her. His eyes lingered on her mouth as she smiled before he looked away once again.

“Let’s go,” he said softly, and picked up their picnic basket.

She got up from the grass, and grabbed his free hand, before twining her fingers with his as they headed back to their cabin.

Nina knew that even though Gaurav didn’t want to look at her, he didn’t mind her touch.

Or maybe he just didn’t want to be rude by shaking her off. But either way, Nina always found a reason to touch him.

Each night, Gaurav continued to bring her to his room. As soon as she lay on his bed, he lay next to her keeping a few inches between them while she talked about her past.

And as soon as she finished talking, just before she went to sleep, she always put her hand on his chest. She liked the feel of his heartbeat underneath.

She also touched him because she felt the need to connect with him with at least one of her senses. Either she had to talk to him, or listen to him, or touch him.

The compulsion only seemed to grow as days ticked by.

Was it a psychological thing one felt for a captor? Or something that one felt towards the only human around them? Nina didn’t know the answers.

All she knew was that she wanted a connection to Gaurav. A connection that went much beyond lust or desire.

She knew that on some level Gaurav understood how her feelings were changing. Because each time she placed her hand on his chest, he waited until he thought she had gone to sleep before he slowly picked up her arm and returned it

to her side. But not before he gently kissed her hand first.

That only made her smile inside. And also, more determined.

Nina deliberately began to hog the bed space. And even though she was a quiet sleeper, she pretended to be a restless one, always placing an arm or a leg on top of him.

Despite her teasing, and his restless sleep because of her, Gaurav didn't stop bringing her into his room each night.

And Nina no longer asked or spoke about why she was taken. Even when she spoke to him a little about her life in the past ten years, she didn't talk about Suraj. And neither did Gaurav ask her.

It was as though they were both in denial of their true circumstances. They preferred to be lost in their self-made bubble where outside world didn't touch them.

But Nina was well aware that what had initially started as a desperate plan on her end to escape and save Suraj's life, was turning into something else.

The lines were beginning to blur between what was needed and what she wanted.

CHAPTER 39

Gaurav woke up to the sounds of birds chirping in the forest.

Nina Bhupati was lying next to him.

Her arm was curled around his upper torso, and her leg was thrown across his hips.

Like all mornings, he felt a strong urge to reach out to her, and kiss her soft skin all over, waking her up. But with great difficulty, he stopped himself. The wedding ring she continued to wear helped him keep his hands to himself.

He slowly moved her arm away from his chest. But when he tried to move her leg, it rubbed against his morning arousal, shooting a bolt of pleasure through him.

He inhaled sharply, and then instead of moving her leg, he slid out the bed.

Nina stirred awake with the movements. Her eyes fell on him. “Gaurav?” she said in her sleepy voice.

Even though she had been calling him by his name from the past three weeks, each time he heard his name on her lips, a strange thrill ran through him.

“Yes?”

“Nothing. I like calling your name out aloud.” She smiled. “The name suits you,” she said with a twinkle in her eyes.

“I think so, too,” he returned in a dry tone.

She laughed out loud and sat up on the bed.

With the sun rising behind her and her sleep softened face with a wide smile, she looked quite a sight.

I could wake up to this sight every morning.

As soon as the stupid thought came to him, Gaurav squelched it.

“What?” she asked softly when she caught him staring at her.

“Nothing,” he replied. “You are a very beautiful woman. Like everyone else, I like looking at you.”

She smiled. “You barely look at me, Gaurav,” she said. “But my question wasn’t whether or not you were looking at me. My question was more about what do you see when you look at me.”

He saw. He saw the real her—her beautiful soul along with her beautiful body.

The soul and body he badly wanted as his own, but knew he couldn’t. Because she belonged to his enemy.

Gaurav didn’t tell her any of those things.

“Breakfast?” he asked instead, to change the topic and also to distract himself. She didn’t call him out and demand and answer. Instead, she continued to smile. “Yes. Teach me to make something new today.”

CHAPTER 40

“Almost there… higher.”

The large hands holding her upright pushed her a few inches higher.

“Little bit more.”

This time, she went up several inches, way past the branch.

Grinning, Nina grabbed the fruit from top of the tree and threw it on the forest floor.

“Okay, I think I have everything we need for our healthy snacks,” she said.

When there was no response or movement, she looked down. “Uh… Gaurav. You can put me down now.”

He slowly lowered her to the ground. And even when her feet touched the ground and she was stable, she felt his hands linger on her waist before he stepped away from her in a hurried manner.

That brought a smile on her face.

Nina picked the fruit from the forest floor and placed them into a basket. “Whew! It’s getting hot,” she said, wiping the drops of sweat that had formed on her forehead.

It was barely seven in the morning and the heat was slowly beginning to take over.

“I badly need a bath,” she said.

Gaurav was sweating too. His thin sleeveless shirt was completely wet on the back.

“Join me at the lake for a bath,” he said.

The thought of the cool water of the lake tempted her. Nina was sure it would be much better than taking shower with the metallic smelling water in the bathroom.

“I wish I could, but I’m not good at swimming,” she replied.

“I’ll be there with you. I won’t allow anything to happen to you.”

That brought a grin to Nina’s face. “If I recall you almost drowned me the last time we were in that lake.”

A small smile covered Gaurav’s face. “If I remember correctly, it was you who was trying your best to knee me in the groin in the lake. I was only trying to drag you out.”

A laugh burst out of her. “I’m sorry.”

“No, you aren’t.”

“Okay, maybe at that time I wasn’t sorry. But now, I am.”

He smiled. “Fine. Let’s go. Grab a towel and some soap.”

They went back to their cabin and packed their toiletries and clothes into a small bag before heading to the lake.

It was just like she had imagined. The water felt amazing.

Nina wasn’t a good swimmer. Suraj had tried to teach her to swim in their large swimming pool, but for some reason, Nina could never learn. She just didn’t feel comfortable in the deep water.

But something about being in an open lake surrounded by the natural beauty appealed to her.

Gaurav was right next to her. “Hold on to me,” he said and took her into the slightly deeper water.

Nina didn’t panic. She had curled her hands around his neck and liked the sensation of being free and weightless as she floated on top of the water.

“Do you want to try swimming?” he asked.

She nodded.

Gently, he let go.

All Nina knew was to doggy-paddle. But over the last few weeks, she had seen Gaurav swim in powerful strokes while she sat on the grass next to the lake with their breakfast.

She tried to mimic him. She didn’t succeed at first. She ended going under and swallowing a mouthful of water.

He pulled her up. “It’s okay,” he said in a gentle tone. “I’ll hold you. Try again.”

He placed his large palm under her stomach while she kicked and swept the water with her hands. She didn’t move very far, but determined, she kept trying, until she got a slight hang of it.

She had only taken two laps when her arms and legs protested.

“Tired?” he asked.

She nodded as response, her breath coming out in a wheeze.

He held her with one arm and swam in powerful strokes taking her to the shore.

“I’ll be back,” he said and went back to the lake.

Nina stared at him as he resumed his usual exercise. She had noticed that he always took twenty laps. Maybe because there was no other form of exercise to do in the forest, apart from walking, he used swimming to keep him fit and strong,.

Nina knew Gaurav would take a while. So she lay on her back on top of the fluffy pink and red towel before closing her eyes. Even though her muscles were overworked, she felt exhilarated and her mind felt free of worries.

She shivered slightly as a soft breeze blew over her wet clothes. Although, she was tempted to remove her shirt and pants before getting into the lake, she had chosen to keep them on.

But now the wet clothes clung to her body, making her cold.

She turned her head and saw that Gaurav was still swimming. So, she quickly shed her clothes and wrapped a thick towel and lay back on the grass, feeling lazy and content.

She closed her eyes, listening to the sounds of the forest.

But after a few moments, she opened her eyes when she sensed a gaze on her.

It was Gaurav.

She smiled at him sleepily.

He didn’t return her smile. In fact, he was watching her with an angry look.

All her sleep vanished. Nina felt confused. “What happened?” she asked.

He didn’t answer. His angry eyes took in her face and then moved down lower to her towel-clad body. They especially glared at her chest and her legs.

Nina wasn’t scared. However, her heart began to thud as she felt open and exposed.

There was nothing separating them except their two towels.

She stared back at him. She watched as drops of water trickled down from his wet hair to his muscled abs. When she moved her eyes lower, she saw his hard arousal straining his wet towel.

Slowly, with heart thudding even more loudly in her ears, she waited.

He kept watching her, his eyes alive with an intense fire. “I want you.” His statement erupted and sat heavily in the quiet forest.

“Did you hear me?” he demanded.

A small smile hovered on her lips even while her heart thundered. “Yes. You are shouting loud enough for it to be heard outside the forest as well.”

He didn’t return the smile. He stepped closer to her. “I’m tired of fighting a battle I know I won’t win. A battle I don’t want to win.”

That made Nina’s heart flutter. She widened her smile. “You are making me sound like an evil seductress.”

She gasped when he suddenly leapt on her. He caged her body, using his hands and knees in a predatory position.

“You are a seductress,” he said. “Teasing me and taunting me each night with what I badly crave.”

“Then why are you denying us?” she asked softly. “Why not take what is offered?”

His eyes continued to watch her with the heated look.

Nina took a deep breath. Then keeping her eyes locked to his, she loosened the knot on her towel and pushed it aside. She bared herself completely to him—offering her heart along with her body.

His eyes blazed as his gaze swept over her.

Nina felt his gaze like a physical touch while he took in every part of her exposed body in a slow, heated perusal. The last time they were together, it was night time. Even though there was lighting from a night lamp at that time, it wasn't anything like the bright shining sun above.

She felt conscious of her body, but it was overshadowed by the thrumming of her body due to anticipation.

When he still didn't move or touch her quickly enough, she raised her hands to grab his head and pull him closer for a kiss. But he captured both her hands and pinned them on top of her head in the soft grass.

She wanted to protest, but he killed her resolve as soon as he closed the distance between their lips and bodies.

He kissed her. It wasn't a gentle kiss. It was open mouthed, wild and hungry. And it was all consuming.

She kissed him back with equal desperation. And then, she moaned in protest when his mouth left hers. Soon it turned into a pleasurable sigh when he nipped her neck and then moved lower, until he reached the peaks of her breasts. There he lingered.

He paid homage to her aching peaks, until greedy moans and gasps were let out from her throat. She wanted to touch his body, but he kept her hands captured in his. When her breath turned too choppy, he slid even lower. He left a trail of kisses on her stomach before reaching his destination.

Her body trembled as anticipation filled her.

As soon as his mouth met with her core, she gasped. She clutched his head with her now freed hands. But his buzz-cut didn't allow her to grab on to his hair as he wreaked havoc within her.

His hot breath, his lips and his tongue lay siege while she twisted and thrashed underneath him.

"Gaurav," she begged again.

He slid up higher, and she watched him with glazed eyes.

His own burned with intensity. "Tell me you want this," he ordered softly as

he spread her quivering thighs wider.

“I want this. I want you. I need you,” she whispered.

His lips smashed on hers, and then he swallowed her gasp as he joined their bodies in one swift thrust.

As she predicted, it wasn’t the careful joining like the first time.

This time the joining was wild.

He was rough. He was hard. He was everything she wanted.

It felt so damn right.

Each time he joined their bodies until he became a part of hers, it filled up the longing she felt for him. It also filled up the sense of belongingness.

She opened her eyes and stared up at the wide, blue sky and the tall, green trees as pleasure filled her mind and body. She felt alive and free.

She knew that no matter what their future held, this particular moment—with the lake, the sky, and the man she craved—it would forever be etched into her memory.

His thrusts grew harder, making her close her eyes once again due to his sheer intensity. She clutched his shoulders, while all thoughts were wiped away from her mind.

When release came, it felt as though she was torn apart and put back again as a different person.

CHAPTER 41

A week passed in a whirling sensation of heat and passion.

It was almost like they were compensating for all the days of not touching each other.

Most of the breakfasts were forgotten. Lunches and dinners were hurried affairs. Even their walks ended with either him or her lying on the soft forest floor, filling the air with the sounds of their pleasure.

They just could not get enough of each other. Every look and every touch led to some kind of intimacy.

“Oh God!” Nina moaned. “Yes, yes, right there. Little higher. Ohh!!!”

“If you want me to continue, I suggest you stop making those noises,” a dry masculine voice said.

Nina cracked open an eye to look at Gaurav. He was watching her with a hungry look as he rubbed her sore leg muscles.

She was lying on her back on the grass next to the lake. They had just finished another swim lesson. Nina was so excited that she was able to swim without help, she rather overdid it with the laps. That combined with their marathon lovemaking had made her leg muscles sore.

She grinned. “You need to practice more self-control.”

He raised an eyebrow, reminding her of that morning when she more or less jumped on his bare muscled back while he prepared breakfast. It ended with her back against the table with him on top of her while sounds of grunts and gasps filled the air. Their cabin still smelled faintly of burnt eggs from the morning.

“It’s your fault,” she said. “You were cooking shirtless, and the way you diced those onions and used that spatula, you were deliberately being a tease.”

He laughed.

Nina loved watching him laugh. His eyes crinkled at the corners and she

could see glimpses of the carefree man in him that Khan had spoken about. His freshly-shaven look added to this carefree-look.

After they had made love near the lake for the first time, her body was covered in stubble burns the next day. That hadn't stopped either of them from continuing to make fierce, passionate love.

But he began shaving on a regular basis.

She loved to watch him shave. It added to the intimacy between them. And as soon as he shaved, the first thing he did was to kiss her with his smooth cheeks, filling her senses with the smell of tangy aftershave and the unique essence of him.

"Are you legs feeling better?" his voice cut into her thoughts.

"Yes," she said with a smile.

Then letting out a content sigh as Gaurav continued to massage her calf muscles, she closed her eyes.

The weather was turning much warmer lately since it was the end of the winter season.

After some time, Nina opened her eyes when she felt Gaurav's hands under her shoulders. He was lifting her up. "It's getting too hot. Sleep inside," he said softly, carrying her to the cabin.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and borrowed her face in his chest.

He put her on their bed. "Take rest while I prepare lunch," he said.

Before he could move away, she pulled him on top of her. "I'm not tired anymore, but I'm hungry," she whispered. Then pushing him away until his back hit the mattress, she climbed on top of him.

He watched her with a heated look.

"I'm very, very hungry for you," she said, kissing and nipping the warm skin on his chest before slowly moving lower.

THE WEATHER CONTINUED to be sweltering most of the time. Nina was turning her loose baggy pants into shorts. She had just cut off the sleeves of her

shirts as well and was stitching the seams.

Sometimes, she borrowed Gaurav's clothes, too.

"My mother liked stitching."

Nina was shocked when she heard Gaurav speak. Until then, he had spoken about his general likes and dislikes and even places he had visited with his friends. But he had never made any references to his family.

She looked at him as he sat next to her on their bed, watching her with an oddly lost look.

"As a hobby?" she asked cautiously.

"No. She did it for a living. That's how she was able to support my sister and me during college."

Nina didn't ask who supported the family when they were younger. She wondered if Gaurav's father was alive. Khan didn't mention a father. Nina could only guess that Gaurav's father must have died before he started college.

"Sometimes, I used to help my mother when she took on too many assignments," he said. Nina was reminded of the time he was easily able to put a fine thread through a tiny needle. "Even when I began to earn a living, and we could easily afford for her not to work, she still continued to run her store. She said she enjoyed staying busy and feeling useful."

"My sister got the inclination from our mother. She loved making her own clothes, too. Her friends were always swarming at the house, bent over some or other new dress she had made. My mother and I used to tease her saying she was a soon-to-be doctor, so she should be focusing on stitching human skin rather than bother about the latest fashions."

Nina heard the affection in his voice as he spoke about his mother and sister. He reached next to him and opened the nightstand drawer. He pulled out a small framed photograph.

"My mother and sister," he said softly.

Nina's heart beat rapidly. She knew that by showing her the photograph of his family, Gaurav was risking exposure.

But Nina didn’t want to think of their actual circumstances or the world outside. She wanted to focus on the current moment.

She looked at the two smiling women in the photograph. “They are beautiful. And they sound wonderful too,” Nina said softly, meaning it.

He put the picture frame on top of the nightstand, rather than returning it inside. “Yes, they were. And I’m sure they would have loved you, too.” As soon as he said that, his entire body froze as though he had realized what he just said.

Nina had no idea how to feel.

On the one hand, she desperately wished Gaurav would give up his quest for revenge against Suraj. But on the other hand, she didn’t want to breach the subject as it would break the connection or trust between her and Gaurav. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to ignore the world outside once again.

“I would have loved your mother and sister, too,” she said softly, meaning it. “And I also think that you were a wonderful son and brother.”

When he didn’t say anything, she felt the desperate need to hold on to the connection with him.

She sat on his lap, until she was facing him. And then, holding his face, she joined her lips to his. She poured all her desperation and fear of losing him in that kiss.

He held her, but he didn’t kiss her back. She knew he wanted to, because she could feel his arousal and the slight trembling in his hands. He was deliberately stopping himself from kissing her.

She pulled back to see his face. He had a torn look.

“Nina… don’t get attached to me,” he said.

An ache formed in her chest at his words. “Why?” she asked.

She watched him as he fought an internal battle with himself that was displayed when his eyes shone with intensity. “Because I’m a murderer now, Nina,” he said. “A bad person. In my quest for revenge, I’ve taken lives. Brutally. And deliberately.”

He watched her with regret in his eyes as he gently fingered her hair. “And if

you recall, I did hurt you several times. If you get attached to me, I'll only end up hurting you even more."

Her heart continued to ache with each word that fell from him lips.

She kissed him again. "You are wrong," she said softly. "You are not a bad person, Gaurav. And it's too late now. I'm already attached to you. I care for you. Just like you care for me."

He inhaled a sharp breath. "I don't care for you, Nina," he said.

She didn't argue with him. "Well, it's a good thing then, that I care enough for the both of us," she said, kissing his cheek softly before sliding her lips to his mouth.

"God, Nina," he groaned as though in torment. He rolled, until he lay on top of her. "I know our situation is fucked up. And I know it's wrong to touch you and need you like this or even dream of a future with you. But I can't seem to stop."

"Then don't," she said softly, parting her legs. "You know I want you, and also need you to touch me. I dream of a future with you, too."

He braced his arms on either side of her, devouring her with his eyes, fighting a battle with himself.

"Take me," she softly ordered, reaching her hands between their bodies and guiding him into her.

With a shuddering breath, he held her face before kissing her softly at first, and then slowly deepening it.

Soon, he did to her body what he did with her mouth. He possessed it and claimed it.

He drove deep into her, driving them wild with pleasure and sweet agony. And while he joined them together, he whispered words into her ears. He whispered what he felt, and how he felt, and what he wanted her to feel.

Like each time, they made love, her mind and body felt completely consumed by him.

THAT NIGHT NINA couldn’t sleep. Gaurav was asleep behind her. Even in his sleep, he held her close to him in a possessive way. His hand wrapped around her waist, cupping her breast and his leg was thrown in between her legs.

She usually fell into a deep content sleep as soon as he held her that way. But that night she felt torn.

“I know our situation is fucked up. And I know it’s wrong to touch you. But I can’t seem to stop. I dream of a future with you, too.”

Gaurav’s words resonated in her.

Although she didn’t think it was wrong for Gaurav to touch her, her rational mind warned her that he wasn’t meant for her. And that she should stop dreaming about spending her life with a man who had kidnapped her—a man who was also a criminal in the eyes of the world.

But her heart refused to accept the fact that they had no future together. And whatever she felt for him, it only seemed to grow each and every moment they spent together.

This man who stole her from her life had also stolen her heart.

Nina didn’t know if he felt anything for her. Because he didn’t speak much. The only thing he had shared was about his mother and sister that night.

But sometimes, when he watched her, it made her feel cherished. She felt it through his many gestures.

Maybe she was being naive and desperate. But each time he did something nice for her, like bring her wild flowers, or show her something beautiful within the forest, her heart hitched and felt full, thinking that he cared for her.

The fact that she was falling in love with him should have scared her. But it didn’t.

It made her feel alive. In fact, the time she spent with him made her feel free rather than being captive. It was as though something inside her that had always been frozen due to her life experiences was finally beginning to melt.

She was no longer constantly on guard when it came to her emotions or sensations. For years, she had adapted and became what was needed to survive. But now… with Gaurav, she felt as though she could be her real self.

That night when Nina finally slept, she did with a peaceful heart.

CHAPTER 42

Gaurav received a message from Vikram that morning. Suraj Bhupati's team had discovered the hacking into their corporate system. Currently, an investigation is going on to see which particular company records were compromised.

Even before he hacked into those servers, Gaurav had taken care not to zero in on any particular company. He had combed through all of them. He knew it would take some time before he could get at least one damning transaction that would tie the blood money to the legitimate money.

He was supposed to get back to the system in a few more days, but now, while the investigation is ongoing, he would have to wait.

"I killed someone," said a soft feminine voice said.

The statement was so unexpected, it took Gaurav a while to respond.

He was sitting outside the cabin on an easy chair. They usually sat outside during the evenings when they returned from their walk. Nina was seated across on his lap. He couldn't see her face as it was burrowed in his chest. He thought she was sleeping because he had kept her awake most of the night.

"Whom?" he asked.

"Someone who hurt my sister."

Gaurav kept quiet and waited. If she wanted to tell him the details, she would on her own.

The fact that she offered to tell him already showed the level of trust she had on him.

"I'm telling you this because if you think I'd not want someone like you because you took lives of people who hurt your sister, then it's far from the truth. You and I, we have more things in common than you think."

He picked her hand and kissed it. "You don't have to talk about it, unless you

want to," he said softly.

She took a deep shuddering breath as though she was bracing herself to the pain by recalling memories. Immediately, he felt the overwhelming need to go back in time and erase that part of her past in order to eliminate her pain.

"I want to," she said. "I want to share more than just my body with you."

Her statement shook him in a way that he thought wasn't possible. Because it was making him hope. Hope for a future. And hope that she felt the same way he did about her.

"Tell me," he said, rubbing her back, for both, comforting her, and also because he needed to touch her.

"I still remember that day very clearly," she said. "I was seventeen, and my eighteenth birthday was only a week away.

"Despite our upbringing or maybe because of the lack of it, Devi and I thought that monsters were ugly, and that they only lived in the dark, dirty underbelly. But life taught us that sometimes, monsters were beautiful to look at. And they could be charming and persuasive. They wooed you with beautiful words and promises. And they owned big fancy houses and drove big fancy cars, everything that someone who grew up on streets would desire.

"That's how the monster I killed was. He was handsome, charming and so persuasive that my innocent sister was swept away by his words. She met him for the first time when he and his friends had hired her services for an event. But after that, he continued to visit her at a place she worked during the day.

"It only took him a month to get her to agree for going out with him. He said it was to a friend's party, and he wanted to take her as a friend so he could introduce her to his friends. Until then, he had been asking her out, but she had refused to meet him alone. Although, my sister liked him, she was still street smart. She knew what would happen if she gave in easily to what he was chasing after. He must have realized that too."

She took another deep breath. "I like him, too. Whenever I was around when he came to meet her, he was friendly and charming to me. So when my sister

told me she was going with him, I was excited for her. I even made her a special dress.

“The night of the party, when she didn’t return home, I simply knew something was wrong.

Her voice pierced his heart. It became distant and dull with no emotion whatsoever. He continued to rub her back softly, trying to ease the ache while she narrated a painful part of her life.

“…by the time I found her, I didn’t recognize her. Her face was swollen, and her entire body was bruised and bleeding. She was gone by the time I found her, but the person who did that to her, was still there. He came at me as well. All his charm and friendliness had disappeared. I saw him for what he was—an animal. So, I killed him. I stabbed him in his neck with a broken glass bottle again and again until he was dead.”

Gaurav’s blood boiled when he heard that the man came at her. He wanted to go back in time and kill that bastard all over again. He wanted to inflict more pain to him than just being stabbed in the neck.

“I dream of that incident often,” she said. “Each time I wake up, there is only one thought that runs through my mind. That I shouldn’t have believed in his charm. I should have gone along with my sister to that party. And even if she didn’t want me to join her, I should have insisted hard until she agreed.”

She looked at him with an agonized look. “Sometimes, in my dreams, I was back in the hotel room. And instead of finding Devi naked and ravaged on the bed, I would actually see my older sister smiling and talking to someone outside in the party. She would then scold me for having come during the late night to accompany her back home. And then, she and I would return to our single-room home and sleep while exchanging funny incidents from the day. There are so many other similar scenarios that play out in my dreams as well. And in each scenario Devi was safe and alive and next to me.

“But those scenarios are often dominated by reality of what actually transpired that night.”

Gaurav wanted to tell her there was nothing she could have done even if she had joined her sister. But he knew guilt. And he had dreamt of various scenarios as well. He dreamt of how his life could have played out with his sister and mother staying alive.

If I hadn't left home to pursue my dreams…

If I didn't stand firm on my morals and beliefs…

If I hadn't been close to my sister and mother…

The list of those ifs was endless.

He didn't tell Nina to let go of her past. Because he knew it was easier said than done. Instead, he offered her comfort, and then drew comfort from her.

That night, Gaurav came to a decision.

When the time came for him to leave the cabin, he would give Nina all the details of what her husband was caught doing, and keep her in a safe location, until either he or Suraj Bhupati got killed.

CHAPTER 43

Nina slowly stirred awake. She opened her eyes and lay still when she realized Gaurav was still asleep next to her.

She liked being the first one to wake up. Because she could listen to the soft, steady rhythm of his breathing and also watch him to her heart's content..

Slowly, without disturbing him, she tried to turn around. But his arm tightened around her waist to stop any movement. Even in sleep, he held her close in a possessive way.

She smiled, staring out the window instead, where the first morning light was beginning to come in. She badly wished she could freeze this moment. She didn't want to return to her world where she would be stepping into Nina Bhupati's role even if it is for a brief while.

Her thoughts scattered when she felt him stir. She felt his warm breath before he kissed her on the sensitive spot where her neck met with her ear. A large palm cupped her breast possessively.

"Awake already?" his deep voice asked, causing her to shiver.

The shiver was her body's response to his early morning voice which was even deeper and huskier than his usual tone. Each time she heard it, she associated it with the times she woke up to his kisses and deep murmurs as he made love to her.

"Not that early," she responded. "We slept early last night."

Last night she didn't talk for long. Because she had reached the part of her life which she knew Gaurav wouldn't like hearing—the part about how she met Suraj and married him.

So far, even though she had made a conscious effort to not mention Suraj, she knew she couldn't shy away from telling Gaurav about that part of her life. She wanted to share everything with him.

And once Gaurav heard everything, he would know what type of person Suraj was. And then, they would find the truth about who was responsible for Gaurav's sister's murder and also the false allegations against Suraj.

Nina's thoughts scattered once again when Gaurav rolled on top of her.

"You are thinking," he said with a wicked smile. "That means I'm not doing a good job."

She laughed softly, and then moaned, holding on to his shoulders as he ran his tongue on her breasts in a slow lazy way. He sucked hard on her nipples, making her gasp and making her core clench in need.

Meantime, his fingers began doing delicious things to her body. She knew he could sense her intense need for him.

"Gaurav," she protested, when he kept her waiting deliberately, even though her body was screaming for him.

With a predatory smile, he slid up her body and kissed her. When he pushed her legs wide and settled his powerful body between them, she grabbed on to his shoulders once again. She raised her legs higher, and wrapped them around his hips, preparing for their joining. Her body thrummed in anticipation when she felt the tip of his arousal teasing her entrance.

He continued to kiss her deeply, his tongue showing her what he would soon do to her body.

Suddenly, he froze.

Even in the midst of a sexual haze, Nina could feel the palpable tension radiating from his body.

And then, she knew why. Her heart leaped inside her chest when she heard the sound of the bedroom door opening.

She whipped her head to the side, but Gaurav's arm blocked her view of the door. All she could see were the legs of a man. But before she could panic completely, the man retreated and shut the bedroom door. She heard footsteps walking away and going up the stairs.

Nina's heart was thundering in her chest. This time, it was with fear.

“Was that Vikram?” she asked in a panic.

Instead of a comforting answer, there was silence.

When she turned and look up at Gaurav’s face, everything in her froze. There was a rapid shift of expression in Gaurav’s face.

He no longer looked like the man she had spent the last six weeks with. There was no gentleness of a caring lover or the fierceness of a passionate lover. Right now, he looked like what he had been before.

Her captor.

He looked cold and emotionless. And alert.

“How do you know his name?” he asked, watching her face closely.

She tried to think of a way to turn the situation, but she couldn’t. There was no escape from answering him.

“I-I heard Khan calling his name when Vikram was choking me.”

Nina realized it too late that she had revealed she knew Khan’s name. Her breath sped up even more in panic.

Gaurav continued to watch her. She knew he could feel her heart thumping hard against his bare chest.

“It’s okay,” he said in a deep, soothing tone.

Unlike other times, his voice didn’t calm her panic

“I know Khan must have given his name to you,” he said.

Nina didn’t reply.

“What else did Khan say to you about me?” he asked in the same awfully quiet tone.

Along with panic Nina felt torn. She didn’t want Khan to get in trouble. How could she have a slip of her tongue?

“Please, it was my fault. I insisted and badgered Khan while he was sick and medicated. He didn’t want to—”

“Nina,” Gaurav cut her off. “Doesn’t matter how or under what circumstances he gave you the information. I just want to know what he told you. That’s all.”

He called you, Nina. Not Mrs. Bhupati. Which must be good.

“H-he didn’t tell me anything more.”

“Nina. Don’t lie to me.”

She knew Gaurav could read her. He knew her intimately in every way possible. Body and mind. She knew she couldn’t escape from the truth.

“H-he told me why you wanted to kill Suraj. And he told me you were an investigative reporter. He also told me the circumstances of your sister’s and mother’s deaths.”

He was watching her face closely. “Why do I want to kill your husband?” he asked.

“B-because you think he ordered your sister’s murder.”

Nina thought he would get upset with her choice of wording which hinted that Suraj might not have been responsible. But he didn’t seem upset. “Why? Why did your husband order that kill?” he asked instead.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “Khan wouldn’t tell me anything beyond that. Whatever he told me was to make me feel secure while I’m kept captive. H-he just wanted to say you won’t harm me because you weren’t a criminal.”

Her heart sped up when his body shifted subtly. They both were still naked and he was lying on top of her in between her legs. She could still feel the tip of his hard arousal against her entrance. One little thrust, he would be inside her. But unlike the last few weeks, when his body made her feel secure or aroused, the same body she had kissed every inch and made love to in every possible way, only intimidated her now.

Her breath came out in panicked gasps.

He continued to watch her, and she felt him brush the back of his fingers on her cheek. “Am I scaring you?” he asked softly.

She stared at the familiar yet unfamiliar face. She had rained kisses on that face and traced her tongue on his laugh lines. But now, it only reminded her of the time he threatened to rape and torture her to send those videos to Suraj.

“Yes,” she whispered truthfully.

He didn’t say anything. He bent his head and kissed her on her lips gently.

She tried to control her flinch, but couldn’t. He must have felt it, too, because he raised his head immediately.

He slowly rolled away from her, but she lay frozen on the bed, watching him.

He sighed. “Nina, I was honest with you,” he said. “You know I’m a wanted man. I’ve told you I’ve done things which might lead to my death or my arrest.”

Some of her fear melted and she was about to say that wasn’t why he scared her, but his next sentence killed her words instantly.

“I changed my decision on what has to be done next, Nina. It’s not how I wanted it until this morning, but under no circumstances can I risk Khan’s or Vikram’s safety for my personal revenge.” He looked at her in regret. “I can’t risk you trying to stop me from killing your husband.”

Her throat froze in fear and she watched him as he pulled up his shorts before stepping out of the room.

CHAPTER 44

“Why are you here without calling me first?”

Vikram was pacing outside the cabin. When he saw Gaurav, he stopped. “I didn’t want to call you because my phone might be tapped.”

Gaurav frowned. “What happened?”

“Someone linked Rohan’s and the goons murders together.”

“I see.”

“It’s only a matter of time, Gaurav. I want you to leave this place and go far away.”

“I can’t. Unless I kill Suraj Bhupati, I’m not going anywhere.”

“You can get him later, too, Gaurav. First just leave while I take care of Nina Bhupati.”

Everything inside Gaurav came to a standstill. “What do you mean?”

“You know she has to die if you have to carry out your remaining mission.”

“I told you already—”

“That was before you started fucking her. It’s obvious she’s just using her body to trap you, so you’ll let her go.”

Gaurav felt his temper rise at Vikram’s usage of crude words when talking about Nina.

“She’s my responsibility now. She won’t compromise my mission.”

“The hell she won’t. The moment she’ll get a chance, she’ll run back to her husband and have you arrested and eventually killed. And you know damn well that even after killing Suraj Bhupati you can still lead a normal life if you kill his wife who is the only witness.”

“No. She stays alive. And I won’t have us arguing about this fact once again.”

Before Vikram could say anything, they were distracted by the sound of footsteps on the dry leaves.

Nina was running away from the cabin.

CHAPTER 45

Escape.

That one thought dominated Nina's mind as she ran through the forest. Thorns and stones poked through her bare feet, but she did not slow down.

"Nina, stop!" a man's deep, commanding voice shouted from a distance.

On instinct, her mind was prepared to listen to his order. Just like she had been listening to over the past three months—during her captivity.

That same deep voice had also soothed her sometimes, frightened her sometimes, and the rest of the time… made her yearn. Her heart thumped even harder in her chest as she controlled her overwhelming mixed feelings and kept running.

The heavy footsteps continued behind her. "Nina. I said, stop!" There was anger and betrayal in Gaurav's voice.

Nina shook away the feelings of guilt. She had to escape. She owed her loyalty and love to Suraj. He was her husband, and they had been married for ten years.

Then what about Gaurav? Don't you owe him anything? And what about to yourself?

Her chest tightened at the thought of never having to see Gaurav again.

But he was her captor. He had snatched her from the life she had known, and took her to hell and back with him. But somehow, along the way, in the three months she had known him, he had also showed her things that she otherwise would have never experienced in her life. Things that made her feel alive.

No! I need to get back to Suraj.

A shot went off, resonating loud in the quiet forest. The next instant, Nina felt a sharp object piercing her arm. She gasped as she felt a blinding pain that threatened to paralyze her entire body.

Determined, she still forged ahead. She kept running through the dense trees.

Another shot went off. This time, it hit her in the shoulder. Her body flinched hard before she fell on the ground with the impact.

God, no! No! I can't fail. I have to get back to Suraj.

With great effort, she tried to get up. But she couldn't. She tried to grab onto a hard root of a tree and crawl through the forest floor.

But before even she could move, rough yet gentle arms held her in a firm grip and turned her.

"Nina!"

She tried to look at him. But her vision was beginning to blur and darken at the corners. "Please…" she said in a weak, fading voice. "Don't… hurt… him…"

And then, with every ounce of the remaining energy, she slowly raised her hand and held it to the cheek of her captor. She felt the familiar shape of his face. Her fingers touched his cheekbones, his nose, his heavy stubble, and his firm yet soft mouth.

"Gaurav…" she whispered.

"Nina," he agonizingly whispered into her palm.

I love you. The words remained unsaid from her while her hand slackened and fell to the ground. Soon, darkness took over completely.

"WHY THE HELL did you shoot!" Gaurav shouted as he frantically carried Nina's limp body into the house.

"She was escaping, Gaurav."

"So what? I told you to hold off the fire after your first shot!"

"I didn't hear you."

Gaurav didn't believe him. Vikram was like his brother, but Gaurav wanted to kill him right then. But first, he needed to save Nina's life.

"Get me the first-aid kit and some clean hot water. Hurry up!"

Gaurav placed Nina on the bed before cutting off her bloodied shirt from her

body. He then cleaned and disinfected the bullet wounds.

Nina's skin had paled considerably, and she was lying completely still. She barely flinched when he took the disinfected knife and cut her flesh to dig out a bullet from her shoulder. The other bullet had passed through.

He dressed the wounds before putting fresh pair of clothes on top of her.

Vikram was standing silently near the bedroom door. "What do you think is going to happen, Gaurav?" Vikram asked after a while. "You know damn well that by the end of our mission, you'll have no choice. You are just delaying the inevitable. Let her die. Only then will *you* be able to live."

"No!" Gaurav shouted. "She's going to live. I will not let her die."

"Gaurav…"

Gaurav looked at his closest friend and confidante. "I love her. If she dies, then there's no point in me wanting to live either."

Vikram stared at him in shock. "What kind of madness has gotten into you, Gaurav? She's married! And to your enemy who was responsible for the deaths of not only your mother and sister… but also your brother!"

Gaurav closed his eyes. "I know."

CHAPTER 46

Suraj Bhupati was in middle of an argument with his father and two of his business partners when he kept receiving a persistent call. “What?” he snapped in uncharacteristic impatience.

“Sir… Madam has been found.”

“Where?” Suraj asked urgently.

“The police found her outside the city limits. She’s been shot multiple times. She’s currently in the hospital.”

The investigative officer gave him the details. “Stay next to her. Don’t allow anyone apart from the medical team near her. I’m on my way.”

Suraj hung up the phone and began walking out of the room.

His father followed behind him. “Why would the kidnapper leave her?”

Suraj didn’t answer.

“I know she’s possibly barren. But get that woman tested to see if she’s carrying a brat inside her after these three months of—”

“That’s enough, father,” Suraj’s cold voice interrupted.

“Suraj, that man held your wife for ninety days. I saw the video he sent to you. If she’s alive for all these months, what’s to say she willingly—”

“I said that’s enough!” Suraj roared. “Nina is my wife, and you will show her the respect she deserves. Whatever happened to her, or what she did or did not do during her captivity, is not her fault. She must have done whatever she had to in order to survive.”

Suraj didn’t wait for his father’s answer. He rushed to his car and went to be with his wife.

CHAPTER 47

Nina woke up to a headache. A head-splitting kind of headache. The pain was too much.

“Mrs. Bhupati, can you hear me?” an unfamiliar voice asked.

She tried to open her eyes, and look towards the direction of the voice, but the throbbing in her head intensified. Without moving her head, she opened her eyes slowly. She kept blinking at the light coming from above. When her eyes remained sensitive to the bright light, she closed them again.

But before that, she caught a flash of the tall ceiling with white paint. Combined with the smell of antiseptic in the air, she knew she was in a hospital. “Why… what…” Her mouth was too dry and with each word, the pain in her head further intensified.

“Have some water,” the voice gently instructed.

She felt someone put a straw to her mouth. She began to sip greedily, taking as many big gulps as she could. When she was done, her mouth slackened and she tried to give in to her tiredness.

Her entire body ached as though it was one big bruise.

“Mrs. Bhupati, do you remember what happened?”

“No,” she croaked out. “What happened?”

There was a pause.

“You were kidnapped, Mrs. Bhupati. You were missing for ninety days.”

“Kidnapped?” Nina repeated blankly. Her mind was absolutely blank. Her entire head still throbbed so much that she couldn’t form a coherent thought.

“Yes.”

“I don’t remember,” Nina whispered. Her voice came out weak, and she felt the pain reducing along with the feeling of drowsiness.

There was another pause.

“We just gave her pain medications. They must be making her sleepy.”

“Mr. Bhupati was notified. He’s on his way.”

“He might want to take his wife to a bigger hospital. But we should tell him not to disturb her. She’s lost quite a lot of blood with the bullet wounds.”

The doctors and nurses spoke next to her. She hadn’t lost consciousness completely and could hear them.

Shot? Who shot me? And why?

And kidnapped?

Then it came to her.

Suraj. Her Captor. The forest cabin. The lake.

“I can’t risk you trying to stop me from killing your husband.”

The machines next to her began beeping while Nina began hyperventilating.

“Her blood pressure is going up!”

“Mrs. Bhupati, relax. Breathe in and breath out. Slow and easy. Just relax.”

Nina heard their instructions. She kept breathing through her mouth.

Being alive is better. Being alive is better. Being alive is better.

Nina repeated that in her head until the frequency of the beeping sounds in the machines began to reduce.

CHAPTER 48

Nina slowly began to gain consciousness. Her eyes opened to a familiar window with floor-to-ceiling curtains. The bed below her felt soft and plush. Too plush, because she had gotten used to the firm mattress or even the soft grass on her back.

A sob escaped from deep inside her.

She was back into her room.

With great difficulty, she sat up.

“Nina, sweetheart. You are awake.” She heard footsteps and then saw Suraj’s familiar face with worry spread across it.

“How long?” she choked out. “How long has it been since I was brought back?”

“Two weeks. You’ve been in and out of consciousness since then.”

She closed her eyes as her chest tightened painfully. A tear slid down her cheek. It was the first tear of grief since she had bid goodbye to Devi all those years ago.

“Nina. Sweetheart, are you okay?” Suraj’s worried voice asked.

Another sob broke out.

“Nina?”

She looked at her husband with tear-filled eyes. “I want to go back,” she whispered.

Suraj looked stunned. But recovering himself quickly, he sat next to her and wrapped his arms around her. “Oh, sweetheart.”

Her body shook as she cried. The pain of being away from the man she loved, felt worse than the bullet wounds. The thought of never holding him or being in his arms again, made her almost double over in agony.

“I miss him. I want to go back and tell him I love him.”

“Nina. You’ve been through a rough ordeal. I know you are overwhelmed with too many confusing emotions. Everything will be as before, sweetheart.” Suraj kissed her forehead and rocked her gently.

“No,” she said, burying her face in Suraj’s familiar, comforting embrace and sobbing her pain. “It’ll never be the same.”

Tears flowed uncontrollably as her body shook with heaving sobs. “Oh God, it’ll never be the same. I miss him. Oh God, I miss him. I love him so much.” She kept repeating it over and over.

Much later, Suraj tucked her back into the bed and lay behind her, holding her close. Even though her sobs subsided, the tears continued to flow.

Through a blur, Nina saw Radha approaching her and standing next to the bed. “Pain medications and some water.”

“Thank you, Radha,” Suraj said softly. He made Nina sit up and take a tablet before putting her back to bed once again.

Radha covered them both with a blanket. “Let me know if you need anything else to make you comfortable.”

Nina heard the compassion in Radha’s voice. “Thank you, Radha,” she whispered.

Radha nodded, and giving the couple on the bed one last look, walked out of the bedroom after shutting off the lights and closing the curtains.

GAURAV WATCHED THE couple from on the camera feed. It was from one of the cameras that he had installed to record the feed of the master bedroom window.

Nine months ago, he had been stalking the couple as well.

At that time, it was with cold detachment. But now, when he observed them, saw every kiss, and saw every touch between them, it made him feel like his heart was being ripped from his chest.

He watched as the woman he loved lay in his enemy’s arms on their marital bed.

He watched as the woman he loved wrapped her arms around his enemy, clinging to him while she dug her face into his chest as though he was her only anchor.

He watched as the woman he loved was hugged and kissed by his enemy who offered her solace while she spoke to him.

And then, he watched as the women he loved slept in the arms of his enemy.

Soon the lights were turned off, and the curtains were drawn.

For a long time, Gaurav stared at the screen.

He kept recalling the moments he and Nina spent together in the forest cabin. The way she had laughed. The way she had even made him laugh. The way she looked and held him when they had made love.

She had told him that she wanted to freeze their time together. She had told him and also showed him with her gestures that she cared for him and wanted a future together.

Were they all lies?

Of course, they must be. She had been his captive and whatever she did during her captivity was for her survival. Now that she was back in her world, she got over everything.

If anything, the time she spent with him in the forest would be recalled as a traumatic experience rather than a fond memory. Nina would only recall how he had cut off her hair and threatened her with rape and torture.

She wouldn't recall the time they spent with each other while she narrated her story or when they cooked together or when they made love out in the open next to the lake.

Gaurav continued to stare at the screen blindly.

"Gaurav…" he heard Vikram say. "Don't torture yourself."

Gaurav turned to his friend. "I'm leaving tomorrow," he said.

CHAPTER 49

A burst of flavors exploded inside her mouth with each bite of the food.

"If you are going to eat all the food, how am I going to tell whether or not it's as good as you claim?" Gaurav's voice sounded dry.

"Can you believe I made this dish?" Nina asked, taking in another spoonful of the bread pudding she had just made. The crunch from the almonds they had collected from a tree in the forest, made it even better. It had taken a lot of hard work to break the shell and take out the seed from inside.

He was smiling at her in amusement. "Leave some, or you'll end up with a stomach ache," he warned.

She grinned. "But it would be so worth it," she said, taking another spoonful.

Suddenly, his smile slipped a little on his face. And his face took on a familiar look she had been seeing lately.

It wasn't the heated look he sometimes got when he looked at her, like he wanted to tear her clothes off and make hot, passionate love to her on the spot.

Neither was it amusement when she made a conscious effort to make him laugh, so she could see him making use of those natural laugh lines he had around his eyes.

This look was tender.

He held her face and kissed her gently on her lips, making her insides melt. His lips lingered, and she felt his tongue softly licking away the sweetness from the sugary syrup that spread around her lips. She wanted to open her mouth and make him deepen the kiss. But she wanted to savor the moment the way it was meant to be.

"Yes, very sweet," he said softly when he pulled away.

She smiled at him. "I made dessert. So today is your turn to cook. And you

better start cooking, I'm starving!" she said.

She wasn't hungry, since she ate a lot of dessert. But she loved to watch him cook.

"Nina?"

Nina slowly opened her eyes, saw the curtains in her room and closed her eyes.

She didn't know how many days had passed since she returned to the Bhupati residence. But each time she woke up from her sleep and realized she wasn't in Gaurav's arms, she wanted to slip back into sleep once again because she believed her current reality was only a nightmare.

During her sleep and also when she was awake, every moment she spent with Gaurav continued to play inside her mind. She recalled the time they spent together near the lake, the time they spent together while taking walks, the time they spent together cooking inside the kitchen in the cabin.

The memories made her pain worse.

Suraj tried to spend as much of his time with her. But she was inconsolable

"Nina, sweetheart, I'm worried about you," he said. "You can't continue like this. You haven't even eaten well since you came home last week. I'm having a doctor come and check you today."

"I'm fine, Suraj," she answered numbly.

"No. You are not."

"I will be, Suraj," she replied before closing her eyes and recalling the time Gaurav woke her up early once to show her a rare and beautiful dance of dozens of vivid-colored butterflies right outside their cabin window.

She recalled the times Gaurav picked her and put her on top of his shoulders, so she could pluck the best fruits from the trees in the forest.

She recalled the time he carried her on his back for more than an hour because she had hurt her feet on a thorn during one of their walks.

But no matter, how many memories she recalled, it always ended with her

recalling the look of betrayal on Gaurav’s face when she had tried to escape from the cabin on the last day.

CHAPTER 50

"NINA?"

Nina slowly opened her eyes when she heard Suraj's voice. She stared at him blankly. He was dressed casually and was seated next to her on the bed. Standing behind him was Radha.

Nina didn't know what day it was.

"Nina, I thought giving you time to recover might help. But obviously it hasn't. You are wasting away, sweetheart."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"I'm not blaming you, Nina. I'm just saying talk to me."

Nina knew she had to talk to Suraj. She was being selfish, wallowing in self-pity rather than warn Suraj. But her brain seemed to be stuck in the freeze mode.

She knew that once she warned Suraj about Gaurav, the danger would then shift to Gaurav. Nina did not want any of the men she loved to be in any danger.

"Tell me about him, sweetheart."

She was silent for a while. Then making up her mind, she answered. "He asked me to call him as Gaurav. I don't know if that was his real name or not though."

Suraj and Radha were watching Nina curiously.

"I'm sorry for not revealing this earlier. I was scared for his life. I still am."

"So, it was just him who took you?" Radha asked.

"No, there were two other men who were helping him."

"Did they… touch you?" Suraj asked with an agonized look.

"No. Not in the way you mean. Only he touched me… because I wanted him to."

"I see."

There was silence.

Taking a deep shuddering breath, she looked at her husband. “Suraj… did you pass an order to have an innocent woman murdered as a warning to her brother to back off from an investigation?”

Suraj looked shocked. “No.”

Nina believed him instantly. She stared at him, and then burst out crying.

Nina knew she was a mess, and she needed help. But Suraj’s answer broke a dam inside her.

She hated herself for even having a smallest of doubt of whether Suraj was capable of something like that. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, throwing her arms around her husband and hugging him close.

He patted her back gently. “It’s okay. Nina, tell me what happened.”

She wiped her tears away and sat up straight. “I was kidnapped as retaliation against you, Suraj. Because he thinks you got his sister killed. As a way to ask him to back off.”

“Back off from what?”

“An investigation. He is a reporter. Or at least I strongly think he is one.”

A slight frown marred Suraj’s face. “What was he investigating?”

“I don’t know either. Another man told me what had happened and I couldn’t get the details completely at that time. All I got was that because of you, my captor’s sister was murdered, making it seem like she killed herself due to medical college pressure.”

Suraj frowned.

“We have dozens of reporters reaching out to us on a daily basis for some enquiry or the other,” said Radha. “But I can’t seem to recall anything big that would cause a scandal.”

Nina tried to think of what the possible damning information might be. “What demands did you receive after I was kidnapped?” she asked.

“None,” Suraj answered. “That’s what drove me crazy with fear and worry.”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered, knowing Suraj must have gone through hell not knowing what had happened to her. If things had been reversed, she would

feel the same about his safety as well.

“It’s not your fault, Nina.”

They were silent again as each tried to understand the motivation.

“The police found you passed out somewhere near a highway before taking you to a hospital. How did you end up there?” Suraj asked.

“I was trying to escape. But I don’t recall even making it anywhere close to a highway.”

“So, he shot you when you tried to escape from him?” Suraj asked in a careful manner.

“No. I was shot by another man when I was trying to escape. Gaurav must have wanted to save my life, so he probably dropped me where I would be discovered.”

“I see.”

Suraj held her hand as though he wanted to reduce the blow of the next question. “If you fell in love with that man, then why were you trying to escape him?” he asked softly.

Nina’s head throbbed as pressure built once again. She didn’t want to slip back into darkness where she didn’t have to decide whom to pick for saving their lives from one another.

She took several deep breaths.

“Because he still wanted to hurt you and eventually kill you,” she replied after a long silence.

“Oh, sweetheart.” Suraj gently squeezed her hand to comfort her. “We’ll sort out this mess soon. You just stay safe until then.”

“I don’t know, Suraj. I’m scared that either he or you might get hurt in the process.”

Suraj was quiet.

“Suraj… until I find him, I want you to stay alert. I know there’s always security around you, but please, be careful. Meantime, I’ll try my best to find him. And when I do, I’ll have him talk to you in my presence. I know we’ll have

this sorted.” She took a deep breath. “I know he’s a wanted man. But I-I don’t want him to get killed when he’s found.”

“We’ll try our best not to let that happen.”

Nina nodded.

“Media and the police want a statement from you, Nina. I’ve been putting them off for a while saying you weren’t conscious.”

“I need some more time, Radha. I’ll speak to them in a few days.”

Radha nodded. “Okay, I’ll hold them off.” And then, Radha looked at Suraj. “We have a meeting with Bhansals this afternoon at two.”

“Move it to tomorrow.”

“It is okay, Suraj. I’m fine,” said Nina.

When Suraj still stood with a hesitant look on his face, Nina slowly stepped down from the bed. “Please, I insist. I-I just want to stay in the room alone.”

Suraj began shaking his head. “Nina—”

“No. It’s not to wallow in some more self-pity, I promise,” she said with a wobbly smile. “I need a proper shower. A bath maybe. And I need to catch up on my duties.”

“You don’t have to, Nina. Radha has been taking care of some of the committee work. The rest, you already hired people to take care of operations.”

“I know I don’t have to, but I want to,” she said. “Just give me one more day. And I’ll pull myself together, I promise.”

Suraj watched her closely.

Although Suraj and she did not have a conventional marriage, they still had a strong bond of friendship. Nina knew Suraj could read her to know most of her thoughts like she knew about him.

“Please, Suraj. Go. You’ll be late otherwise.”

He nodded and then kissing her on her forehead, he left with Radha.

Nina walked into the large bathroom.

Since she had returned to the Bhupati residence, she had been showering regularly with cold water. She had wanted the cold water to numb her pain.

Although, most of her physical pain hadbecome numb, her other pain remained.

Setting of the water temperature to warm, she stood under the multiple jets to wash away the doubts and cobwebs in her brain.

Even though the shower didn't succeed in doing that completely, she felt much better.

She went out of the bathroom and called her housekeeper to send in her lunch early. And while she waited for it, she pulled out her laptop and settled back on the bed and opened the browser.

She typed **'Suicide of a student due to stress.'**

She was taken aback by the number of results that came back.

Then she added the keywords 'India' and 'medical college'. Still a significant number of results came back.

Then she narrowed the search by sorting them by date. She knew it happened close to a year ago.

She filtered the cases that had happened in the last one year. And then, she scrolled through them and bookmarked the ones within the neighboring states.

Nina noted down the names of the victims.

Picking up the phone, she dialed a number.

"Radha," she said when the phone was answered. "I need your help in finding a PI."

Radha went completely silent for a few seconds.

"For what?" Radha asked.

"I need help in putting together the list of medical students who had committed suicide recently in the past one year. I need information of all the victims and their family members."

"I'll try. We might have to take help from the police along with the investigators."

Nina began to panic. "No. Don't reach out to the police yet. Please. Just the PIs. Please, hurry. Also… can you put together a list of reporters who have reached out to us in the last one year with anything to be used a blackmail."

There was another significant pause before Radha answered.“Okay.”

“Radha… please keep this away from the police investigation. I don’t want… this to be made public.”

“Okay.”

Although Nina had known Radha for ten years and trusted Radha implicitly, Nina knew Radha’s utmost priority was Suraj.

Radha would rather save Suraj from a possible attack or from getting badly hurt than save Gaurav who was criminal in the eyes of the world.

Although, guilt tore at her, it was one of the reasons why Nina didn’t give Suraj, Gaurav’s name. Because Suraj and Radha had no secrets between them, and Suraj would do anything that Radha asked him to.

In fact it was Radha who had insisted that Suraj marry Nina.

CHAPTER 51

Ten years ago…

"Devi! Get up!" Nina screamed.

"She's gone," the man stated softly. "There's no pulse or heartbeat."

"No! No! She can't leave me. She knows she's all I have. She promised we'd be together and would't leave like Uma did." Nina was hysterical.

"We have to get out of here," she heard another voice say. "Someone will come looking for Pranit soon."

Nina was clinging to her sister's body, rubbing her soft hair over and over again. "Devi, please. Get up."

She felt someone grabbing her. She tried to resist when they pulled her away from her sister. The arms while gentle, were also firm.

She was taken out of the hotel to another place.

Nina didn't know how long she stayed there. She was in too much pain and grief to care.

"Please, let me help you," the man pleaded. "They will arrest you along with me for the murder. The man we killed is a son of a very influential man. They won't just throw you in jail, they'll even get you killed."

She wanted to say, *I don't care what happens to me*, but couldn't.

We are survivors, Nina. As long as we can, we fight. Because being alive is much better.

Devi's words resonated inside Nina's head.

Nina stared at the man blindly. "What do you want me to do?" she asked.

He took a deep breath. "I want you to marry me."

At the man’s insane declaration, some of Nina’s shock faded, and she stared at him. She had seen him on television and in newspapers standing next to his father who was the current chief minister of the state. He was handsome, he was rich, and most of the girls in the state adored him and dreamt about marrying him.

Then what could he possibly want with her? Nina refused to believe it was completely an act of charity to save her from jail.

She knew how real life worked. There would always be a catch.

His hand held hers and squeezed it gently. “Please, marry me. I’ll cover this episode up with a story.”

Nina didn’t want her sister’s murder to be covered up. But since the culprit was already killed, there wasn’t other justice to be done. If she were caught and declared the murderer, then she would spend the rest of her life in jail or like the man said, she would be killed by the culprit’s family.

Being alive is better.

Nina’s survival instincts kicked in. She knew Devi would want her to fight.

“Nina?” the man asked.

“Okay,” she whispered. “I’ll marry you.”

During the initial months of their marriage, it hadn’t been easy for Nina to adjust to a life of luxury and constant scrutiny, and neither was it easy for Suraj to have her as his wife. Her sadness and her anger at the world were directed against him sometimes. But he was always patient with her. With gentleness and genuine care, he softened some of the ice that had formed around her heart.

Suraj and she might not have an all consuming passionate kind of love, but theirs was love forged through friendship and caring.

Nina had promised to herself that come what may, she would always protect Suraj like he had protected her.

CHAPTER 52

Present…

It took a little over two weeks for the PI that Nina and Radha had hired to put together the information on medical students who had committed suicide by hanging.

The list had nearly a dozen cases. With heart thudding, Nina sat on the bed and opened the files.

She went through the pictures of the victims. Her heart felt heavy looking at the young innocent faces who had decided to give up on life.

She had reached the end of the list, and so far, none of them showed the picture of a pretty girl with a bright smile that Gaurav had in the picture frame in his room.

Nina was frustrated.

"Any luck identifying the pictures of the reporters I sent?" Radha asked.

"No," Nina answered in frustration.

Nina had gone through an extensive list of pictures of various journalists between the ages of twenty five to forty. So far she hadn't encountered the intense eyes of her captor.

A few days ago, Nina had met with the police and media to give out statements.

"I was given drugs and blindfolded during the time of my captivity. The last day, I pretended to take the pills even though I didn't. When my kidnappers left, I was able to escape."

"Mrs. Bhupati, can you tell us why you were taken?"

"Ransom," Suraj interjected. "I received an email asking me to shell out

money in change of my wife's return."

"But the earlier reports said no ransom demand was made."

When Suraj didn't answer, another reporter asked. "How much? And did you pay it?"

"That's confidential," Radha answered. "If you have further questions, please speak with the Bhupatis' lawyer. Thank you."

There were more questions asked all at the same time, but Suraj escorted Nina away from there.

"I've started to look at the investigation reports during the time of my kidnap." The PI was helping her through to see if there were any clues as to where she was taken.

"I know they are not very helpful and they keep going in circles," Suraj stated.

Nina agreed with him. She had read through some of the reports. There were no good leads whatsoever. Either her kidnap was very well planned or the entire police force and private investigators were incompetent.

Nina took a deep breath. "Just give me some more time to find him."

"We are making the investigation as discreet as possible, Nina," Suraj promised.

Nina nodded in misery. She badly needed to trace Gaurav. She also needed to know what he had been investigating that implicated Suraj.

When Suraj and Radha left, Nina returned to the investigation reports.

She saw an address of a link. She brought out her laptop and typed the link.

Her heart skipped a beat

It was the video recorded by Gaurav when he had hacked her hair off and threatened her with a knife. On the video, Gaurav had done a thorough job of acting as an evil kidnapper who wanted to torture and rape his victim.

Nina recalled her feelings at that time. She was both angry and terrified at the same time.

But now, she only remembered Gaurav's regret as he lovingly ran his fingers through her short locks of hair and kissed it while apologizing to her. And sometimes, he had even arranged wildflowers in her hair when they had lazed on the grass next to the lake after their session of lovemaking.

Three months had passed since her hair had been cut, and it had grown longer since then. It was falling on her shoulders right now.

Sighing and not wanting to drown in self-pity and depression while recalling her time with Gaurav, she closed the laptop and continued reading through the investigative reports.

Much later, Nina realized Suraj hadn't been joking.

She kept reading report after report where there were several leads which turned out to be dead ends.

When she slept that night, Nina's sleep was uneasy with dreams of Gaurav and Suraj having a bare -handed fight where each of them were determined to kill each other.

She woke in a panic.

Unable to sleep after the bad dream, she continued to read through the reports. It was almost morning and her brain was too tired by then, but a shock jolted her as her eyes fell on a name.

It was the name of one of the police investigators.

It probably is a coincidence. It's a common enough name.

Nina's mind tried to reason even as her gut shouted a warning.

Nina decided to go with her gut feeling.

CHAPTER 53

“Hello ACP, Vikram.”

Nina saw the man’s jaw clench at the formal greeting.

“Mrs. Bhupati,” he greeted back. She hadn’t seen his face when he had caught her in bed with Gaurav. But she knew it was him. Nina recognized the eyes and voice of the man who had come close to killing her twice during her captivity.

Vikram was a police officer in the Criminal Investigation department with an impressive job profile. He was known to have cracked cases in record time. He was also known to have been aggressive and relentless when it comes to dealing with the criminals.

It hadn’t been easy to track down Vikram.

The nagging feeling she had since the time she had woken up in the forest cabin after being kidnapped, became clear after reading through the investigation reports. She had a vague recollection of hearing a police siren when she was drugged and kidnapped. Even the investigation details of her abduction had stated that a police vehicle was patrolling around at the time of the kidnapping.

The vehicle used for her kidnap was a police vehicle.

That information, combined with the coincidence of one of the names of the investigating officers involved in tracking her, pointed to a critical fact.

Vikram was not only one of her abductors, but he was also one of the police officers investigating her kidnap. He had misled and bumbled the entire investigation to search for her.

And he was right to have wanted her dead.

He probably knew that despite the care he and Gaurav had taken to protect their identities, she would still be able to track them down if she were let go.

“Where is your friend?” Nina asked.

Vikram kept quiet and stared at her in a challenge, as though daring her to get

him arrested.

“I know it was you, Vikram. I rather you offer me the details yourself.”

Vikram’s jaw tightened. “Or else, what, Mrs. Bhupati?” he asked. “Don’t threaten me. You won’t like the results.”

Nina returned his threatening stare with a hard stare of her own. “I already don’t like the results,” she said. “I don’t intend to reveal yours or Gaurav’s identities as my kidnappers. If I did, I would have done so by now. But, of course, it all depends on whether you’ll tell me what I want.”

He glared at her, and she could see him debating whether or not to reveal any information to her.

She kept her eyes locked to his, refusing to back down or be intimidated by him.

Being an influential politician and businessman’s wife, she had a lot more social power than him in society’s eyes. And even if she wasn’t, she still had the leverage of being a kidnap victim of a police officer.

“All right,” he said grimly after a while. “What exactly do you want to know?”

“I know Gaurav is an investigative journalist. You don’t have to give me his full name. But tell me where he is, and why he’s targeting Suraj.”

“Gaurav is not his real name,” he said. “And he went away on my request as he’s a wanted man because of you. He might never return. And as to why he’s seeking revenge on your husband, I won’t reveal it to you. Ever. He’s my close friend. Even if you choose to build a case against me, I’m willing to risk my career and my freedom for him.”

Nina’s first thought was that the name of the man she loved—wasn’t Gaurav. But Nina didn’t care. She would refer to him as Gaurav in her mind.

And then, disappointment sat heavy in her stomach.

Vikram wasn’t going to budge. Gaurav had a loyal friend in him.

Nina was both proud and disappointed at the same time.

The disappointment and the feeling of a devastating loss was mostly because

Gaurav had left.

Even though she knew both Gaurav and Suraj were much safer with Gaurav leaving, Nina still felt the heavy blow.

Vikram was observing her closely. Nina knew she no longer looked like the confident woman who had come to demand answers from him. Instead she looked like a shaken woman who suffered a heavy loss.

“If… if you speak with him or meet him some time, can you let him know that Suraj is willing to talk and be open about any investigation. I checked with Suraj, and he told me that he never passed such an order to have an innocent killed.”

Vikram’s eyes hardened. “Yes, of course,” he said politely. “Anything else, Mrs. Bhupati?”

“No.”

Vikram nodded and called for someone to escort her outside.

Nina blindly followed the man.

Later, when she sat in her car, looking out the window, she realized that the possibility of never seeing Gaurav was now a reality.

CHAPTER 54

Two months had passed since Nina was found after her kidnapping, and life was back to being as before.

Nina was miserable.

“Ready, sweetheart?” Suraj’s voice called from their bedroom.

Nina looked at her reflection in the mirror. “Not yet,” she whispered to herself. She didn’t know if she would ever be ready or even feel happy.

Taking a deep breath and raising her chin, she went out of the dressing area and to her bedroom where Suraj was waiting for her.

Suraj had tried to cheer her up by spending most of his spare time with her. But Nina spent long hours of the day, continuing to do her charity and volunteer work and collapsed on the bed during the nights.

Charity work gave her peace of mind. She had spent the last ten years similarly and was somewhat content with it. Now, she became greedy and craved other things in life as well.

She wanted to be in love. She wanted color, and she wanted passion. And she didn’t just want those things from anyone—she only wanted it from Gaurav.

She knew she might never have any of it.

“Radha is waiting in the car.” Suraj’s voice was gentle. He kissed her forehead. “Sure you are up to this? It’s only been a couple of months since you returned. People will understand if you can stay home.”

Nina was tempted to take up Suraj’s offer to stay home. But she knew that, lately, she had reverted back to drowning in self-pity, and she was shunning a lot of social interactions because of it.

She knew she couldn’t go on like that. She had to get back to the land of the

living and do whatever best she could.

Suraj still needed her. Elections were only a few months away. In the last month, so far, even though she didn't socialize or accompany him to any place, people forgave her, because she had gone through an ordeal.

She had even heard that there were rumors being spread about her which would work against Suraj's political ambition. So she had decided to join him tonight in her first social outing since her kidnapping.

"I'm fine." She forced a smile. "What's the occasion?" she asked as she slid into the car.

"It's the annual function that Ganesh Verma hosts. Harika said she tried to reach you, but you didn't return her calls."

"I was busy," she said.

Soon, the car parked in front of the Verma's house.

It was a huge, showy house that screamed of wealth and power.

"Nina!" Harika greeted her with a smile. She was standing on top of the steps at the entrance greeting the guests.

Although Harika didn't live here, she hosted the parties on behalf of her uncle.

Harika's husband, Raghuveer, shook Suraj's hand. "Glad Nina could join you today. How are you doing, Nina?" he asked with a smile.

Nina forced a smile at the man. "I'm fine."

"Your parents are already here, Suraj," Harika said with a beaming smile.

It didn't fill Nina with dread. Maybe because Nina didn't care anymore, the senior Bhupati hadn't really been obnoxious to her lately. He had barely visited them in the last two months and even during visits, he barely spoke to Nina.

Nina knew it must have mostly been because of Suraj. He must have strictly warned his father about upsetting her.

Clutching Suraj's hand, Nina took a deep breath to face rest of the evening. As soon as she entered, she was dragged away from Suraj and people began conversing with her.

“Belize was just awesome. You should visit that place sometime, Nina. You’ll absolutely love it.”

“God, Nina. Ninety days! Weren’t you terrified?”

“Did you really not see any of your kidnappers’ faces?”

“What did they do to you for three months?”

“How did you escape?”

Two hours into the party, Nina realized that having the familiar circle of people whom she knew for nearly a decade, only made her even bitter and lonelier. Either people were lost in their own lives to bother asking how she was doing or there were probing questions about her captivity.

She was sick of fielding both.

Some of them even looked towards her stomach. Since she had lost a considerable amount of weight and looked fatigued, they thought she was pregnant. They had excited looks in their eyes, imagining the juicy drama that would ensue if she was pregnant. Would the baby belong to the husband? Or the kidnapper, they all would probably wonder.

The rude looks at her stomach only made Nina devastated. She badly wished Gaurav hadn’t been so careful with her all the times. She wished she had fallen pregnant from at least one of the times they had made love. Then she would have had a part of him inside her to cherish forever.

Nina knew she wasn’t thinking straight. Before she slipped into another bout of self-pity and depression, she excused herself, and went towards the powder room to pull herself together.

As she passed the well-lit hallway, she stared blindly at the expensive

paintings hanging on the wall.

Suddenly, she felt an arm grab her and a hand closing on her mouth. Before she could react or do anything, she was pulled into a bedroom.

Nina froze.

She couldn't see much due to the darkness. The hand on her mouth was removed slowly, and she felt the person stepping away from her.

Her heart pounded wildly in her chest as she stood waiting.

"Why aren't you screaming?" a deep familiar voice asked.

The sound of the voice, the one that haunted her dreams for the past month almost brought her to her knees.

A choked sob escaped her. Slowly her eyes began to adjust to the darkness, and she could see the outline of a tall, broad shape.

"Gaurav," she whispered.

She felt the tension radiating off of him.

Fumbling for the light switch around the door, Nina turned on the lights.

Her heart contracted as her gaze swept over him. She drank in the sight of his familiar features, feeling like it had been forever since she had seen his rugged, handsome face.

"Gaurav," she repeated his name again before closing the distance between them.

She reached a hand upward to brush a wayward lock that fell on his forehead.

His short lock felt soft and lush on her fingers. He looked different. Very different. Two months ago, he had been in a buzz-cut. And now, with slightly longer hair, he looked even more handsome and also less dangerous.

"It's really you…" she whispered once again, running her fingers over his face, tracing each and every dear feature of his.

The PI's following Vikram since the past couple of weeks, did not yield any results. Despite that, Nina still held hope that she would somehow find Gaurav. And that she would not spend the rest of her life without seeing or touching him.

Gaurav was standing still and watching her with a closed-off look. But when

she ran the pads of her fingers on his stubble, he closed his eyes. And as though he lost an internal battle, he opened them again and grabbed her close before covering her lips with his, in a deep, heart-wrenching kiss.

The warmth, the taste, and the feel of his kiss felt entirely familiar.

A tear rolled down her cheek at the overwhelming happiness that took over her.

They kissed each other deeply and longingly, until they had to pull back to breathe.

“I thought I’d never see you again.” Even though her tone was breathless, the accusation and devastation was evident in it.

“I thought so, too,” he confessed, gently rubbing his thumb on her lips. “And I also thought you would have led the police to me by now.”

“Never,” she vowed.

He kissed her once again until they both became breathless.

This time when they pulled back, his eyes ran over her body. “You look more like Nina Bhupati than my Nina,” he said softly.

Nina’s hair was longer, and she wore one of her older creations. She knew it was far from how she looked while she was in the forest cabin.

“I will always be your Nina, no matter what.”

His eyes flared. Something ugly and painful passed through his face. “I hated these last two months, Nina. One part of me was worried sick, wondering whether you recovered completely from the bullet wounds. And the other part of me was going insane that you recovered enough, and the bastard was touching you.”

“Gaurav…” She touched his cheek, offering him comfort.

He placed his hand on top of hers. “I can’t bear it, Nina. I know I have no right. But I can’t bear the thought of him touching and kissing and making love to the woman I love.”

Her face fell, unable to offer him words he wanted to hear. Suraj’s secret was not hers to tell. Even if withholding the information hurt the man she loved.

Although Nina trusted Gaurav with her life, she did not trust him with information that Gaurav could possibly use to destroy Suraj.

“I love you, too. I’ll follow behind you to the ends of the earth at any point in time. I’ll even come with you right now. But I can’t do that if Suraj’s life is at risk because of you. If you promise me—”

“How can you say that!” he spat.

A choked sob escaped her.

“Even though you claim to love me, and are telling me you’ll come away with me, why are you bargaining for that bastard’s life!”

“Because Suraj told me he is innocent,” she said. “Please, believe me. Suraj is willing to cooperate fully if he knows what he’s being accused of. And once his innocence is proven and his life is no longer in danger, I will free myself from my marriage and be with you.”

That didn’t seem to comfort Gaurav. “And if I refuse to believe in his innocence? What will you do?”

“Gaurav, please. All I’m saying is not to do anything rash. Just give him a chance first to—”

“Nina?” A voice called from the outside of the room. It was Harika.

Nina froze, unable to think of anything or react in any way.

“Nina? Are you in there?” Harika asked once again.

Gaurav was watching Nina quietly as though he didn’t know whether or not she would alert Harika and others of his presence. It broke Nina’s heart that he didn’t trust her.

“Yes. I’m in here. I… uh had a headache and was taking a short nap,” Nina answered.

There was a pause. *“Oh, okay. Sorry about that. Would you like medicine sent up to you?”* Harika asked.

“No. I’m fine. Just give me a few minutes, and I’ll join the party.”

“Okay. I’ll let Suraj know as well. He was looking for you.”

“Thanks. Tell him I’m okay.”

Nina could hear the footsteps as Harika walked away from the room.

Gaurav continued to watch Nina with another of his closed-off looks.

“Please, tell me what you were investigating,” she requested softly. “We’ll find out the truth together. And if… if… Suraj is guilty, then we’ll let the law take its course.”

“If he’s guilty?” he asked bitterly.

“Please. We need to get to the truth of what happened first—” she broke off in a gasp when he pulled her close and kissed her.

It was a quick, hard kiss, intended solely to rob her breath, killing her words and her thoughts at the same time.

“I had the truth even before I kidnapped you, Nina,” he said in a hypnotic voice. She felt his fingers brushing the peaks of her breasts through her dress in a slow back and forth motion. Each time the pads of his thumbs made contact with the hardened peaks, it was as though a bolt of electricity passed through them.

With great difficulty, Nina dragged her heavy eyelids open and tried to shake away the sexual haze he was drawing her into to avoid an argument between them.

Even though it was a circular argument between them—with her saying Suraj was innocent and him saying Suraj wasn’t—she was still determined to put her argument across. Suraj’s and Gaurav’s fate lay in making him listen.

“Gaurav please—” she froze when she heard footsteps walking outside in the corridor.

She looked at Gaurav in panic. “It’s dangerous for you to be here. There is always a lot of security here. Please, leave quickly before you are discovered. I’ll come to you, and we can talk then.”

He hesitated.

“Please. Promise me you won’t do anything rash in the meantime. I’ll meet you soon.”

He didn’t say anything. Pulling her close, he kissed her softly on her lips before letting her go. Watching his face and capturing it inside her heart once

again, Nina slipped out of the room.

She didn't get back to the party. She walked outside the house and sent a message to Suraj to let him know she would be leaving because of a headache.

LATER THAT NIGHT, Nina told Suraj and Radha about Gaurav's visit that night.

"Nina… sweetheart. I feel he might be dangerous. He might hurt you if you meet him again by your self—"

"No, Suraj. I know he won't hurt me."

"How do you know he won't hurt you?" Radha softly asked. "If he's not willing to trust you enough to tell what investigation got his family killed, then why would he not hesitate to hurt you, if he thinks you will be in the way of his personal retribution?"

Because he loves me, Nina wanted to say. But she didn't.

"I just know," she said, instead.

Radha and Suraj looked at her with pity before leaving her alone in the master bedroom suite.

Nina lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling as though it had answers to her questions.

Radha's words pierced Nina's heart.

Why didn't Gaurav want to trust her? How can love sustain without trust?

She knew what Gaurav perceived as her blind support towards Suraj was stopping Gaurav from revealing anything to her.

Now that he was back, she just hoped, she could convince him to trust her.

GAURAV DIDN’T KNOW why he took the risk to meet with Nina that night. But he had given up trying to analyze his obsession. He had tried to stay away and remain focused on the next and final part of the mission.

But even as he put together the evidence, he kept thinking of Nina.

She was the wife of the man he was about to destroy within a few weeks. Once he succeeded in that, there would be no turning back.

CHAPTER 55

“You can come pick me up tomorrow when I call you,” Nina told her chauffeur. She stepped out of the car in front of a Trinity Hotel, which was a part of the high-end chain of luxury hotels that offered several spa packages that required the guests to stay overnight or longer.

Nina waited in the lobby until her car drove out of the gates. And then she walked out of the lobby.

She began to head out.

She nodded at the security personnel at the gates who gave her curious stares.

Nina hated sneaking around. But she knew Radha was having her watched closely. And Nina didn’t blame Radha for that because she knew that unlike Suraj, Radha’s patience was wearing thin.

Radha was worried about Gaurav hurting Suraj for a yet-to-be known reason.

And at the same time, Nina was worried that Radha would somehow find Gaurav and have him arrested before he could hurt Suraj.

It was an epic, tragic mess.

A mess that Nina intended to resolve as quickly as possible.

She continued walking away from the hotel, until the sounds of honks from the busy street and the rush of the pedestrians slowly tapered away. Soon, she reached a corner on the street which was almost empty.

Ten minutes later, her heartbeat sped up when she heard the throttle of a motorcycle in a now empty street. A shiny black bike sped through the turn with reckless speed and headed towards her, only to come to a screeching stop right in front of her.

The driver was watching her.

Nina felt the biker’s eyes sweeping the length of her. She was dressed for a high-end spa visit. Her calf-length, floral sleeveless dress looked completely out

of place next to the bike.

The biker flexed his fingers, increasing the throttle of the engine.

Nina's heart thudded loudly as her eyes swept through the man riding the bike. A leather jacket covered broad and muscular shoulders, and a dark helmet completely concealed the biker's face.

Slowly, she went closer to the bike. Her eyes fell on the spare helmet strapped to the handle. She picked it up and put it on her head before climbing onto the bike. And then, she wrapped her arms around the biker's hard stomach.

The biker didn't say anything. Neither did she.

The biker increased the throttle of the bike once again before it sped through the streets.

Nina tightened her hold on the biker's waist until her soft breasts and stomach were crushed against a hard back. The wind whipped through her neck, hands, and legs, and the vibration of the engine under her added to the adrenaline rushing through her.

The powerful bike zig-zagged through the busy streets for almost an hour, until it stopped in an underground parking garage of a large apartment building complex.

Nina got off the bike and waited until it was parked. The biker held her arm and pulled her towards the elevators.

She followed him blindly. Both of them kept their helmets on.

After several tense seconds, the elevator stopped, and the biker pulled her once again across a long corridor to stop in front of a non-descript door.

The biker punched in a code on the keypad, unlocking the door before pulling her inside the apartment.

The biker turned on the lights inside while Nina swept her gaze around the inside of the apartment.

Once the lights were turned on, they stared at each other.

They moved towards each other at the same time. Nina tugged at the biker's helmet while hers was pulled away.

Soon, they were zig-zagging through the room with their lips locked.

Nina unzipped the man's leather jacket and pushed it away. Meantime, he pushed her against a wall, deepening their kiss. Then keeping their lips locked together, he swung her into his arms before carrying her.

She gasped when her back hit a mattress. Then she felt his hands on her as he ran them frantically over her. He began kissing her throat where her pulse was beating rapidly.

Blinding pleasure took over her body. She frantically pulled up his t-shirt and ran her hands on his heated skin.

Her dress was tight and didn't allow him to touch her bare skin below her cleavage. So, he pulled her dress up and ripped off her panties. Then he moved away from her briefly, and keeping his gaze locked on hers, he unbuckled the belt on his jeans and lowered the zip.

Her heart thudding loudly in her ears, she widened her knees, preparing for his incoming onslaught. She greedily took in his familiar, powerful body. But before she could have her fill, he moved on top of her.

She thought he would join them together instantly, but he slid down.

He kissed her, loved her with his mouth, and then began taking her soul with his tongue.

She moaned, she thrashed, and she begged. But keeping her locked in place as he continued his onslaught.

When she was about to shatter, she dug her nails into his shoulders. "With me," she gasped.

He moved on top of her and then entered her in one swift move.

She clutched him close while he groaned into her neck. "Nina," he whispered as though it was a prayer.

"Tell me your real name," she insisted.

He paused for a second, and then raising his head, he watched her face. "Gaurav," he said.

And then, he kissed her before beginning to thrust. She gasped and clutched

him as his movements turned hard and desperate and full of need. Animal-like voices tore through both their throats as he tried to bind her to him in every possible way.

She tried to control her release, prolong it for longer, but it was like trying to stop a hurricane. It ripped through her body, shattering her soul.

“Gaurav,” she cried, wanting to feel his name on her tongue. He didn’t let her say anything more. His mouth covered hers, kissing her over and over.

Over the next few hours, he unleashed his relentless, masterful onslaught that carried her through heights of passion. And she stayed with him every step of the way, matching him bite for bite, kiss for kiss and groan for groan.

With each joining, their need only grew further. She let him fill her and complete her the way only he could ever do.

And even though his body was demanding and fierce with barely any softness, he kept his eyes locked on hers, conveying his feelings. The contrast between the ferocity of his body and the gentleness in his eyes kept her at the edge.

“Nina,” he called out each time as his body shuddered in her arms.

Sometime much later in the night, her body became exhausted. But still, not wanting to lose his touch, she wrapped her arms around him, locking him close to her heart along with her body.

He tried to move away and ease his weight from her, but she tightened her hold.

“Don’t leave me,” she whispered.

“Never,” he replied softly into her ear. “No matter what happens, remember that my heart belongs to you. Always.”

He kissed her forehead, and flipped them until she was lying on top of him.

His fingers moved up and down her back in smooth, languid strokes, making her slowly slip into a deep, content sleep.

SOMETIME LATER IN the early hours of the morning, she woke up to hands stroking her bare body. Nina smiled as she stretched her body even while her sore muscles protested.

Then moving over him, she kissed the warm skin underneath her.

She kissed the scars left by bullet wounds, and then ran her tongue on the flat male nipples, and then the washboard stomach before sliding even lower.

Deep masculine groans filled the otherwise quiet room.

But before she could experience the thrill of making him lose control completely and shatter inside her mouth, she was pulled on top of him.

It was her turn to fill the room with the sounds of her pleasured gasps. He held her hips and then her breasts, controlling her rhythm as she moved on top of him.

The hooded look in his eyes as he watched her face, and then watched the undulation of her body while she took him deep inside her, pushed her over to the edge.

MUCH LATER, SHE lay in an exhausted heap while she watched Gaurav sliding out of bed to go inside an attached bathroom.

She knew they were putting an important discussion off. And she also knew that once Gaurav came out of the bathroom, she would begin to broach the subject, and then their reality would crash in again.

Regret pierced her at the thought of bursting the bubble they had formed while getting lost in each other’s arms last night.

Sighing, Nina reached for her phone to check the time. She frowned when she realized that her phone was switched off.

She turned it on and was taken aback by the number of missed calls from Radha.

Nina frowned. She knew Radha must have figured out that she wasn’t at the spa and was meeting with Gaurav.

Nina returned the call.

Radha’s phone rang, but it wasn’t answered.

It wasn’t that early. Radha usually woke up by six in the morning.

While Nina waited for the call to be answered, she heard the bathroom door open and then a strong arm wrapped around her midriff, holding her snug to a naked and blatantly aroused male body. “Come back to bed,” Gaurav’s husky voice instructed into her ear.

A shiver passed through her and wanted to obey him, but she knew that Radha and Suraj must be worried about her.

Her breath hitched and a small moan escaped her when she felt Gaurav’s fingers pinching her aroused nipples while he rubbed his arousal against her back.

“Nina!” Radha’s voice sounded frantic on the phone.

Nina’s body jerked in alarm and took a step away. “What’s wrong, Radha?”

“Suraj was arrested late last night. It’s a mad house with media and investors. They are looking for you, too.”

“What! Where is he right now?”

Radha gave the address of the police station.

“I’m coming right away.” Nina ended the call and hurriedly hunted for her clothes that were lying around the room. “Suraj was arrested last night. Shit I should have been there. My bloody phone turned off right when—” She broke off.

Her eyes fell on Gaurav and he was watching her with his closed-off look.

Her heart began to thud and a sick dread spread inside her stomach. “You knew,” she whispered.

He didn’t say anything.

“You knew what would happen and you deliberately texted me, asking me to meet you yesterday.”

“I’ve never lied to you about my intentions, Nina. I told you right from the beginning that I intend to destroy and kill Suraj Bhupati.”

“Is that what last night was?” she asked. “You intend to go to him while he’s

vulnerable, and rub it in his face that you were fucking his wife last night while his reputation was being shredded publicly?" She looked around at the ceiling and other corners of the room. "Should I be expecting to see a leaked sex video of you and me from last night going viral? That would definitely ruin Suraj's reputation."

Gaurav's eyes flared. He closed the distance between them and held her arms. "You know damn well that I love you. If given a chance, I want to build a life with you. Last night wasn't because I was getting back at him. I was keeping you away from getting arrested."

She shook her head and tried to get out of his hold, but he didn't allow her to. "What do you think would happen, Gaurav?" she asked. "You would destroy and kill your enemy and then marry his widow, who you think would magically live happily ever after with her husband's murderer?"

"Are you asking me to choose between avenging my sister and mother's deaths and building a life with you?" he asked quietly.

"No! All I'm saying is give Suraj a chance to prove whether or not he's speaking the truth! We'll both find the truth together. Don't hurt him before even he has a chance."

Gaurav didn't respond.

Nina's shoulders slumped in defeat and also despair. This time when she pulled away, Gaurav let her go.

She felt weary and defeated and bone tired of their hopeless situation.

She put her dress back on and took a deep shuddering breath. "I'm in love with you, Gaurav," she said. "But I also love my husband. Not the same way I love you, but it is still love. I cannot knowingly let anyone harm the person I love."

He didn't say anything.

She picked up her small purse and went out of the room.

He followed behind her. "Let me take you there."

"No. I'm going to the police station. Radha will know you were my kidnapper

and alert everyone. And if my father-in-law finds out you got his son arrested, ruining his chance in the upcoming elections, he's not going to spare you."

"I don't care," Gaurav said quietly. "I'm not letting you go there alone. Either allow me to drop you or I'll follow behind you."

Nina wanted to curse, cry, and rage in frustration and worry, but she didn't have time for such luxury.

AN HOUR LATER, Gaurav stopped his SUV outside a police station.

"Please, leave before you are discovered," said Nina. She got out of the vehicle and then hurried inside past the swarm of reporters.

"Where's my husband?" Nina demanded when she was inside.

The police personnel watched her with an uncertain look. And then their gazes were focused behind her.

When she turned, she saw Gaurav. He had followed behind her into the police station. Nina felt a bolt of panic. "Gaurav, leave—" she was about to warn him to leave right away when she saw him flashing a badge.

"Let her meet him," Gaurav said quietly.

"Yes, sir!"

A shock passed through Nina at Gaurav's command and a police officer's response to his command. She stared at his badge and then at him, but he held a closed-off look once again.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

Gaurav wasn't a reporter. He was a police officer! Nina tried to wrap that information around her head.

"How dare you!" a familiar angry voice of a female shouted while storming into the police station. "How could you do this!"

Nina stared blankly at Harika, trying to process what the other woman had shouted.

"How could you, Gaurav? Don't you have any sense of love or family pride?" Harika demanded.

Harika knew Gaurav? What did she mean by family pride?

“How could you do this to your own father?” Harika continued.

With heart thudding in a sick manner, “Who are you?” Nina asked Gaurav once again. She felt stupid for having blind trust in a man she knew nothing about. She was devastated he took advantage of her loneliness and need for love.

“He’s the one who got Suraj and my uncle arrested. He’s my uncle’s son, the great ACP Gaurav Verma.”

Shock reverberated through Nina at the revelation. It was not because Gaurav was a police officer instead of a reporter like she had thought. It was because of who his family was.

“Harika, that’s enough,” Gaurav commanded softly.

“It’s not enough! Is your duty more important than your own father? He had a heart attack, Gaurav!”

Nina continued to stare blankly as Gaurav spoke through clenched jaw. “I didn’t ruin anything. The moment my father thought it was okay to live a life of power and luxury using blood money, he ruined himself.”

All thoughts wiped from Nina’s head except for one.

Gaurav Verma was not only the son of Ganesh Verma, but he was Pranit Verma’s brother.

The man Nina had stabbed and killed for raping her sister. The man whose murder Suraj had helped her cover up.

If there was the slightest of hope that Nina could still be with the man she loved, if he spared her husband’s life, the fact that she had murdered his brother, completely destroyed it.

CHAPTER 56

Gaurav climbed the long flight of stairs in the familiar curved staircase.

The house he was visiting had ten bedrooms and fifteen bathrooms combined with several common area rooms that no one ever used. At least half a dozen people worked within the house to maintain it.

He reached the top of the stairs before heading to the master bedroom. A man lay on the bed with tubes attached to him.

“How is he?” Gaurav asked the nurse who was seated next to the bed.

“It wasn’t a heart attack. It was a mild panic attack. His condition is stable now. But he needs to rest.”

Gaurav nodded. “I’ll come back later. Call me when he wakes up.” He turned and was about to leave, when he heard a very faint whisper.

“Don’t go…”

Gaurav stopped, but didn’t turn.

“Please… son. Stay home tonight.”

Taking a deep breath, Gaurav turned around to look at the man on the bed.

The nurse looked at him. “He’s too weak right now to talk. It’s advisable not to agitate him right now.”

Gaurav nodded. “I’ll stay,” he said softly before leaving the room.

He walked across a corridor and pushed open the door to a bedroom.

It was the room he had slept in for the first eighteen years of his life.

Gaurav didn’t want to be here. But he did it as a favor to the older man who was his father by biology and not because of an emotional bond.

Gaurav was Ganesh Verma’s second child. Gaurav’s mother had died during childbirth. Since then, from the outside, Ganesh Verma provided almost everything that was required to raise a child. Everything except his time, attention or even basic understanding.

Even during his early childhood memories, Gaurav couldn't recall seeing his father much. And neither did he see his older brother. By the time Gaurav had turned two, his brother who was older than him by six years had been shipped off to an expensive boarding school where he stayed most of the time.

Even during the holidays, his brother barely visited home.

Gaurav was alone in a huge house with only the paid help to cater to his needs. By the time Gaurav was six, he was supposed to leave for boarding school as well. But due to severe health issues, the doctors had asked not to send Gaurav away.

That was when Ganesh Verma grudgingly hired a caretaker to look after Gaurav's needs while he attended a day school from home.

Saraswati was a young widow with an infant child when Gaurav was introduced to her.

Gaurav had expected her to be like any other paid help. He expected her to pity him and simply cater to his needs. But she was very different. She treated him with genuine affection rather than as a duty.

Soon he became so attached to her and her child that he began referring to them as his mother and sister. And by calling them as mother and sister, he felt the sense of security of having someone who cared about him.

Sure, he had a brother. But Pranit Verma didn't really have the time or inclination to spend with his much younger brother. And that too, with a boy who was always sick.

Gaurav and his brother grew up apart and relative strangers. And when Pranit died in an accident, only then did Gaurav's father take notice of him.

Gaurav's father demanded that Gaurav step into the shoes of his dead brother whom his father had been grooming as his heir.

Gaurav refused. He didn't want anything to do with his father or his father's vision. Gaurav had his own dream. He wanted to be a police officer.

Initially, it had started as a childhood dream after having grown up watching movies while he was often sick. But later, as he grew older and began taking

interest in subjects like computers and current affairs, the childhood dream turned into an aspiration.

Even though he was sick most of the time during his childhood and early youth, he exercised religiously until he built the strength and stamina to work towards his dream.

Gaurav's father would have none of it. Ganesh Verma called his dream a lowly one and not fit for the heir to the Verma empire.

But Gaurav stood up to his dream. He refused to be shipped off to the UK to pursue financial studies as his brother had. Instead, he began working hard to earn a seat in computer engineering at one of the reputed institutions in India.

But Gaurav's father warned him that unless he studied what he wanted him to, his father would not be financing his studies.

That was when Gaurav stepped out from his childhood home at the age of seventeen.

He had no money or home. He knew he would be able to get a seat in a reputed college, but he didn't have the money to pay their fee or support any other basic needs.

That was when the woman he called his mother decided to help him achieve his dream.

Even though she didn't have much money of her own, she quit her job in Gaurav's father's house as paid help.

Instead, she worked doubly hard outside and financed the money required for Gaurav to finish his college, and take the training required to achieve his dream.

With hard work and encouragement, Gaurav achieved his dream.

At the age of twenty-two, Gaurav became an IPS officer. And after training, he was recruited by the CBI in the anti-corruption division. He had chosen to work in that division in particular due to his interest in computer sciences.

Life, although a little stressful at times because of his job, was still good. He had a job he was passionate about, a family who loved and supported him, and friends with whom he spent his free time with as a bachelor.

Two years ago, he had been investigating a money laundering charge on a major national bank. Several transactions had led him to a popular five-star hotel chain.

Trinity Hotels were half-owned by the Bhupatis, Suraj Bhupati's name was on it in particular. The other half was owned by Gaurav's father.

Gaurav didn't want to take up the case initially since he was related to the owner of the hotel. However, due to new revelations, he didn't let the fact deter him from performing his duty. He went ahead by leading the investigation and dug up all the details and proof connecting the black money conversion to white, using the five-star hotel chain as the front.

The money came from the darkest underbelly. It was made through the blood of innocents. Money made from drug peddling, child trafficking, sex trafficking and more such illegal activities was taken and converted to white money.

In exchange for a significant amount of profit, Trinity Hotels used the money to show that their hotels were occupied to full capacity even though they weren't.

The electricity bills, the staff payrolls and many such operational costs gave it away. Gaurav began putting together all the proof to build a case against the owners of the hotel chains. Right in the midst of it, he received a few threatening calls to back off.

He hadn't. It made him even more determined to get to the bottom of it and lay everything out in the open. He had put the details of the investigation into a thumb drive, the backup of which was with his close friend who was an award-winning journalist.

Gaurav had given the thumb drive to Rohan as a precaution. He had also told Rohan that in case something happened to him, Rohan was to make the details of the case public.

A month later, Gaurav's sister was killed and all the proof disappeared. His mother died of a heart attack. And while Gaurav was grieving, there was a murder attempt on him, and he was shot in his shoulder twice.

In the span of a few weeks, Gaurav lost everything. His family, his hopes, and his trust in the justice system.

That's when he had decided to bring justice on his own.

He was even prepared to lose his life in his mission.

What he wasn't prepared for—was to fall in love with his enemy's wife.

Gaurav stared at the ceiling of his childhood bedroom as he lay on the bed and recalled the look on Nina's face the last time.

She looked devastated and betrayed.

Gaurav knew that by killing Suraj Bhupati, he would lose Nina forever.

He closed his eyes, and tried to imagine his life without her.

He just couldn't.

If, after everything, he somehow ended up making it out alive or not arrested, his life would still be equivalent to living in a vacuum without her.

He could almost hear his mother's gentle voice asking him to pick love over retribution.

CHAPTER 57

“How are you feeling, father?” Gaurav asked.

Early next morning, Gaurav was called by the nurse, saying that Ganesh Verma wanted to speak with him.

“I’m sorry, son,” his father said in a weak voice. “Please forgive me.”

Gaurav remained quiet.

“Please, son. I don’t know how long I’ll remain alive, but please, give me a chance to spend the rest of my days knowing my son doesn’t hate me.”

“I don’t hate you father,” he said, meaning it. He was angry and hurt by his father’s indifference, but he had never hated his father.

Ganesh Verma closed his eyes and opened them with a haunted look inside them. “Then you’ve been a much better person than I ever was, son, because I hated you for the longest time.”

Gaurav was taken aback with his father’s confession.

“I hated you because I held you responsible for the death of the woman I loved more than my life.”

Gaurav was stunned. He knew his mother had died during childbirth, but until then, he never knew that the reason his father behaved cold and indifferent to him was because he held him responsible for his mother’s death.

“I knew it was irrational, son. But in my grief, I just couldn’t face the reality of the situation. I couldn’t face that your mother was gone.”

His father reached for Gaurav’s hand and squeezed it weakly. “To avoid the pain of living without her, I ignored you and Pranit and drowned myself in work, wanting to acquire other things in life. Instead I should have been there.

“I should have been there to help Pranit be a better man and not the person he turned into until his death. And I should have been there to encourage you to be the man you wanted to be.”

Gaurav knew his older brother was well-known to have lived a lifestyle of excess.

Sex, alcohol, drugs and multiple affairs had filled most of Pranit Verma's life. He died when his hotel room caught fire. At the time he was passed out due to drugs and alcohol.

Until a year ago, Gaurav hadn't known that Suraj Bhupati was to blame for it.

Suraj Bhupati had apparently been with Pranit at that time with a few other friends. But because of a fight that ensued between them, since they both like the same woman who ultimately chose to be with Pranit, Suraj Bhupati deliberately ignored his friend while the fire broke out in the hotel room.

Gaurav had discovered that fact just before Trinity Hotels was to be investigated. Just before that, Gaurav was about to drop off from the case and let another officer handle it. But since he found out that Suraj Bhupati let Pranit die, it made Gaurav go after him.

"I didn't know what was happening at the hotel, son," his father told him weakly. "I might be power and money hungry, but I've never let dirty money soil my hands. I swear to it, son." The machines beeped as his father's heart rate sped up.

"It's okay, father." Gaurav held his father's hand in both of his.

"I know it's not an excuse, son. And I don't care if I'm arrested again for it. But I want to be innocent in your eyes."

Gaurav didn't know how to react or feel.

His father was right. It wasn't an excuse, but it was a thing that commonly occurred. Gaurav had seen that happen enough times, where one partner wasn't aware of the illegal things the other partner did within the company they both owned.

"Please, tell me that you believe me, son." Ganesh Verma who always had a larger-than-life powerful presence in public, looked old and weak as he looked imploringly at his son.

Gaurav took a deep breath. "I believe you."

CHAPTER 58

“I changed my mind.”

Gaurav was seated in Vikram’s house.

“About what?” Vikram asked.

“I’m stepping away from the case against Suraj Bhupati and my father. I’ll hand it to someone else.”

“You might get suspended because of this, Gaurav.”

Gaurav let out a laugh. “That’s the best-case scenario.”

“Are you still going ahead with the plan of killing Suraj Bhupati?”

“No.”

Vikram was quiet. “Was it your father who changed your mind? Or was it Nina Bhupati?”

This time, it was Gaurav who remained quiet.

“Nina Bhupati might never leave her husband. Have you considered the possibility?” Vikram questioned.

“I have,” Gaurav confessed. “I know I’m taking a huge gamble here. I’m willing to risk my career and maybe my life, too. But I want to make her happy.” The words sounded emotional and mushy, but they were the truth.

“And she’s happy if you don’t kill her husband?”

Gaurav nodded.

“I see.”

“I know it sounds messed up. Stupid and reckless on my part to be doing this even at this point.”

“It is.”

Gaurav let out a laugh. His friend wasn’t the kind to mince any words.

“What are you planning to do next?” Vikram asked.

“She told me she was willing to come away with me. So, I’ll be taking her up

on that promise. If I’m able to convince her, I’ll leave tonight.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know yet. But if I’m allowed, I’ll extend my long leave from work and take her somewhere far away where her husband or his family won’t be a threat to us, and the case details are out.” He smiled. “If she agrees, I’ll kidnap her once again.”

CHAPTER 59

Nina, Suraj and Radha were driving from the jail to a house owned by Radha.

After getting the bail required for Suraj's release, they knew they couldn't return back to their home or any of the places the Bhupatis owned because of the media circus.

Radha suggested they stay in this house until things settled.

Radha was briefing Nina with what they had found so far. "The money laundering transactions are quite damning. They are linking that money to drugs and human trafficking."

Nina heard the rest of the details with a grim look on her face. "But Suraj barely gets involved in Trinity Hotels daily operations. It's Raghuveer, Harika and their entire team."

"Suraj's name is listed as the owner, which automatically makes him guilty in the eyes of law," Radha replied.

"I will let the law take its course," Suraj added softly.

Nina took a deep breath. "The CBI officer who put together this case is the same man who had kidnapped me."

Suraj and Radha, stared at her in shock.

"I just found out a while ago. He's also Ganesh Verma's son. Pranit Verma's brother."

There was silence. Nina still couldn't wrap her head around how Gaurav was Ganesh Verma's son.

"He knows about what happened with Pranit and us?" Radha asked.

"No," Nina replied. "I had told him that I killed someone who raped my sister, but I didn't tell him it was Pranit Verma."

Gaurav would hate her. Nina wondered grimly, if he would destroy her, too, along with hating her.

“I thought he was doing this because his sister and mother were killed,” said Radha. “Although, I don’t understand how those women were related to him. Ganesh Verma’s wife died years ago and he had no daughters.”

Suraj looked taken aback, too. “Pranit was hardly the kind to talk about siblings. And Ganesh Verma never spoke anything apart from business or politics either.”

Suraj turned to Radha. “You think my father is involved in this somehow, too? Do you think he knew what was happening at the hotel and got the sister of the investigation officer killed as a warning?”

“I don’t know,” said Radha. “You know he is quite capable of it. And if he didn’t know Gaurav Kumar was Ganesh Verma’s son, then…”

“We need to find the real culprit with proofs,” Nina interjected.

CHAPTER 60

There were only two guards stationed outside the house in a very discreet manner. The house was located at the city outskirts and it wasn't one of the houses that the Bhupatis owned. It was owned by Suraj Bhupati's PA.

Gaurav was able to track it easily through Nina's phone.

He waited until the guards fell asleep. He knew they wouldn't wake up until the morning because of the drug in their food.

Using a small penknife, Gaurav cut through the window latch, allowing him to sneak into the house through the kitchen. Luck was on Gaurav's side because the house did not have an alarm system.

Threading softly on the floor, Gaurav headed to one of the rooms at the back of the house. He didn't know which one would have Nina in it.

It was stupid of him to come with a half-assed plan of taking her up on something she had told him if he promised to spare her husband's life.

"I love you, too. I'll follow behind you to the ends of the earth at any point in time. I'll even come with you right now."

Gaurav knew that Nina's love was both his weakness and his strength. For her, he was willing to give up everything. His revenge. His career. And even his life.

All because he wanted to see her happy and also have a chance at building a life with her.

Vikram had more or less called him a fool, especially because they were only weeks away from destroying Suraj Bhupati. Vikram had told him that once Suraj Bhupati was put in jail after the case details became public, Gaurav could go after the broken man's wife and claim her as his own.

But Gaurav knew his Nina.

Nina was loyal to the bone. No matter what hardship struck the person she cared about, she would stick next to them. It was one of the reasons why Gaurav loved her, even though the fact that she stuck next to her husband infuriated him the most.

Taking a deep breath, Gaurav opened the door to one of the bedrooms.

He was prepared for an ache in his chest that would come by seeing Nina sleeping in her husband's arms.

Another thought struck him all of a sudden. It hit him in his gut like a punch, inducing a searing jealously.

Gaurav hoped liked hell Nina and her husband weren't having sex right then. Because instead of having a calm rational discussion, he might just fly into a rage and break the promise he had made to Nina. He would just end up shooting Suraj Bhupati before carrying Nina away.

Calm the hell down!

Gaurav took deep breaths to get the image of Nina with her husband out of his head. And he knew it was late and everyone must be sleeping at this time.

His eyes had already adjusted to the dark. Taking another deep breath, he slowly took a few steps towards the bed.

Everything inside him froze at the sight in front of him. A bare-chested couple were twined around each other in a very intimate way. Gaurav knew they were sleeping because of the soft snores that filled the air.

Nina wasn't on the bed.

Suraj Bhupati and his PA, Radhakrishna were.

Suraj Bhupati was holding the other man the same way Gaurav had held Nina during the days spent in the forest cabin.

There was intimacy, there was tenderness, and there was passion.

Gaurav tried to reason why two men slept together that way when the wife of one of them was in the same house.

Several implications ran through Gaurav's mind, leading him to only one

conclusion.

Once Gaurav's mind accepted what he saw and what it meant, several other things fell into places.

Instead of appeasing him, it only made things worse.

If Suraj Bhupati did not prefer women, then the fact that he had left Pranit to die in a fire while fighting over a woman was a lie.

That doesn't mean he wasn't responsible for giving the order to kill Shruti.

Gaurav recalled Nina telling him several times that her husband told her he's wasn't guilty. She also told Gaurav that her husband wasn't even capable of giving such an order to kill an innocent person.

Gaurav was beginning to suspect that she might be speaking the truth. Gaurav also had a strong suspicion regarding who the real culprit.

He stepped out of the room and went into the living room before dialing a number on his phone.

Even though it was quite late, it was answered in two rings.

"Vikram," Gaurav spoke softly into the phone with urgency in his tone. "Raghuveer Anand. He might have framed Suraj Bhupati. Keep an eye on him. Don't let him escape."

Vikram didn't press him for details. "I will," was all he said.

Gaurav ended the call and walked to the room on the other side of the house. The bedroom where Nina was most likely sleeping.

When he opened the door to the room, the sight invoked a totally opposite reaction than what he got before. His heart wrenched seeing the woman he loved curled up on the bed, all alone.

The abject loneliness she might have felt during the ten years of her marriage hit Gaurav like a punch. He felt an intense need to remove her loneliness and fill it with happiness and laughter.

Walking towards the bed, he knelt down on the floor, right next to her, and brushed the back of his fingers on her soft cheek.

The night lamp was turned on because Nina hated sleeping in complete

darkness.

His heart wrenched once again when he saw the traces of dried tears on her cheeks. He knew most of her tears were because of him.

“I’m sorry, Nina,” he whispered softly. “I promise never to deliberately hurt you again.”

Nina stirred and slowly opened her eyes. “Gaurav?” she said.

“Yes.”

“I want to go back to our cabin.” Her voice was slow and modulated as though she was talking in her sleep.

“Me, too,” he answered, even though he knew she wasn’t completely awake.

“But how?” she asked, a soft sob escaping and piercing through her heart.

“I will make it happen. I promise.”

He picked up her hand and kissed her palm.

“Hold me,” she said softly.

Although it was madness, and he knew his safety depended on how quickly he could talk to her and convince her to leave with him, he still climbed into her bed and lay behind her, holding her close in a comforting embrace.

She let out a content sigh.

Gaurav realized how long and how much he had missed holding her like this.

The last time he had held her like this was nearly three months ago in the forest cabin. The previous night when he had met with Nina at his apartment, there was barely a moment of tenderness. At that time the raw need that he had for her after three months of being away from her, had taken over.

Nina slowly turned in his arms. She stared at him, blinking sleepily.

He held her face with both his hands and kissed her gently on her lips. She kissed him back, moaning softly.

Gaurav knew he was going to be in deep trouble as his body began to come alive. His hardness poked into her stomach through the soft material of her night dress, making her gasp softly.

As soon he heard her gasp, he heard the change in the tenor of her breathing.

He knew she must have realized she wasn't dreaming and he was really there with her.

Slowly, he released her lips and pulled away a couple of inches.

There was no shock or fear in her eyes. He could only see hope.

She smiled. "I knew you would come for me," she said, tears filling her eyes.

His chest felt constricted as he wiped away the tears that had escaped. "I would always come for you, Nina. No matter what," he said.

Another sob broke through her. "That's because you don't know the truth yet."

"The truth doesn't matter to me when it comes to choosing you over anything. Before coming here, I made up my mind not to kill your husband and to let the law take its course. I choose you over my retribution."

Nina looked relieved, but her eyes still held despair. "Letting the law take its course if for the best Gaurav. But about asking me to come with you... you need to know the truth first."

He wanted to wipe the misery off her face. "Nothing you say will ever make me give you up," he said. "And I found out the truth about your marriage, Nina."

That made her sit up straight on the bed with widened eyes. "You know the truth about my marriage?"

Gaurav sat up as well. "Yes. I saw your husband with his PA in the other room."

"This can never get out, Gaurav," she said urgently. "People will never accept him as their leader. His reputation will be completely ruined. And all the good he has done so far and wants to do in the future will be for nothing."

"I know," Gaurav said gently. He knew Nina loved her husband. But Gaurav wasn't jealous of that love anymore. It only made the love he had towards her, grow even more. "I know that if the truth gets out, his life will be in danger too," he added.

She nodded her head sadly. "Suraj and Radha have been together for over fifteen years. It's just so sad that two people who love each other as much as

they do, cannot be together in the eyes of the law. All because of the current society and the norms."

Gaurav knew Nina was right, and agreed with her that it was a secret Suraj Bhupati will likely have to carry until his death.

Gaurav knew how much it hurt him even now when he wasn't able to claim Nina as his in front of the world. He couldn't imagine having to do that all his life.

"Why are you here, Gaurav?" she asked.

"I came here to convince you to come away with me tonight, Nina," he confessed.

She smiled, but her smile held doubts. "I told you before. I would gladly go with you anywhere," she replied. "But there's something you should know about me first, Gaurav."

He knew nothing she'd say would make the slightest of difference to him. But he could see that it made a difference to her. "What is it?" he asked.

Her lips trembled as she got her words out. "I killed your brother," she confessed.

Gaurav was shocked, and then slowly comprehension dawned.

He closed his eyes and clenched his fists. "Please, don't hate me," he heard her whisper.

The revelation utterly devastated him.

When he opened his eyes, he saw that Nina continued to look miserable.

He threaded his fingers through her hair and held her cheek. He looked into her eyes and could see dread forming in them.

"How can you even bear to be in the same room as me?" he asked. "I'm the brother of the man who brutally killed your innocent sister."

Nina looked taken aback.

He hated that she felt guilty for killing an animal that had violated her sister. Guilty because she thought he would blame her for it.

"I stabbed and killed your brother, Gaurav," she repeated, as though she was

worried he didn’t understand what she had revealed.

“What you did was right, Nina. You were protecting yourself and your sister. I would have shot him, too, had I seen him do that to a woman.”

Hope filled her eyes. “You mean it?” she asked. “You don’t hate me for that?”

“No, Nina. I don’t hate you. I love you. And I don’t know what I did right to be able to deserve having the love of someone like you.” He kissed her softly on her lips.

A radiant smile broke on her face.

Gaurav felt his breath catch as he looked at the woman he loved. He now knew why his subconscious was so adamant not to let her go. Despite knowing she was married. Despite thinking she loved her husband, something about her continued to make him love her. Crave her. And fight for her.

It wasn’t just because he wanted to be buried inside her. It was because he was proud of loving a woman like her. A woman so beautiful, so kind, so fierce, and so loyal.

With her next to him, he knew he could take on the world.

And now, she became his very reason for happiness. She made him feel alive and free. She gave him hope.

He kissed her again. “God, Nina. I want so badly to be inside you right now. But the way I feel right now, I know it won’t be a quiet event. Your husband or his lover will hear us and might shoot me.”

Nina laughed softly. “I can try to be quiet.”

Gaurav groaned. “Don’t tempt me.”

She laughed once again, and then she sobered. “Gaurav, Suraj is innocent of the charges made against him. He doesn’t involve himself in the operations of Trinity Hotels.”

Gaurav nodded. “I have a strong suspicion about who was responsible for the whole thing.”

“Who? Harika—”

They heard a noise.

Before Nina could say anything, Gaurav pushed her down. “Stay down!” he ordered softly.

Nina must have sensed the urgency in his voice and followed his order.

Gaurav kept his eyes trained on a bright light that shone through the window before something shattered it.

Glass exploded, pieces of it, falling across the room.

“Crawl out to the living room right now, Nina.”

Just while they made it into the living room, they heard a similar sound of glass shattering coming from the other room where Suraj Bhupati and his lover slept.

“Suraj!” Nina panicked.

“No. Stay here. I’ll go check,” said Gaurav. Quickly searching around the room, he spotted a cupboard and pushed her into it. “Don’t come out unless I ask you to.”

This time she didn’t nod her head. Along with worry there was a slight challenge in her eyes.

“Nina—” he said in warning, using the tone he had done during the early days of her kidnap. The tone made the challenge grow in her eyes. He held her face. “Nina, I’m a trained police officer. I can handle this situation much better than you. But I can’t focus, if I think you will be in danger.”

Her eyes softened and she watched him with trust in her eyes. “I won’t unnecessarily put myself in danger. Go to Suraj,” she whispered.

Giving her a quick, hard kiss on her lips, he closed the doors to the cupboard. And then, holding his gun, Gaurav opened the door to the bedroom.

Two men swept into the room holding guns in their hands. They pointed them at Suraj Bhupati who was awake and sitting on the bed.

Gaurav didn’t see Radhakrishna anywhere.

Gaurav shot one of the gunmen in the arm and went behind the wall of the room away from the line of the fire. Meantime, he heard the sounds of a struggle between Suraj Bhupati and the other gunman. Gaurav swept in and knocked the

butt of the gun behind the attacker's head.

"Do you know how to shoot?" he asked Suraj Bhupati urgently.

The other man nodded and grabbed the attacker's fallen gun. "Where's Nina?" Suraj Bhupati asked with worry in his tone.

"She's fine."

Holding the guns in their hands, they went out to the living room. Three other armed men stood there, aiming their weapons at Gaurav and Suraj.

"Drop your weapons," Gaurav commanded.

An uncertain look passed on the men's faces, but another man joined them. "Don't listen to him!" the man snapped. "I'm the one in charge here."

"Raghuveer…" Suraj Bhupati said in a grim tone.

"Suraj," the other man greeted in a sardonic tone.

Suraj Bhupati continued to watch the other man with a grim look. "Why?" he asked.

Raghuveer smiled. "Isn't it obvious? Money, power… the usual reasons."

"You are my friend, Raghuveer. I gave you enough money and opportunities that you have multiplied several times over. And your wife's uncle gave you access to power with his contacts. Then why would you do something like this?"

Raghuveer's smile turned bitter. "That's entirely the problem, Suraj. You had to *give* me money first. And Ganesh Verma *had* to introduce me to people. All as an act of charity thrown at someone lesser than them. You, Pranit, and all the other rich classmates and friends, all you have done is to throw charity in my face.

"I bloody put in the hard work. I was the one who made deals with the devil and made Trinity Hotels the biggest brand in India. What did you both do? You were busy playing the do-gooder politician, and he, the hotshot police officer. Both of you don't deserve anything!"

"Why are you here?" Gaurav asked quietly.

Raghuveer looked at Gaurav. "Why do you think I'm here, Gaurav?" he asked. When Gaurav didn't answer, Raghuveer shook his head. "I'm here to

snatch everything you have," he said.

Gaurav held the other man's gaze. "I'm sure you already know about the will my father made, Raghuveer. You'll get nothing if you kill me. My father will never make you his heir. All of my property will revert to a trust."

"I know." There was rage in the other man's eyes. "Which is why I won't kill you. I'll spare your life once again like the last time. I'll let you rot in a jail."

After his mother and sister's funeral, Gaurav was shot in the shoulder by a masked man. He had blamed it on Suraj Bhupati. But now he knew Raghuveer had planned it, not knowing about the will.

"And how will you accomplish it?" Gaurav asked, even though he already figured it out. Gaurav knew he had to prolong the conversation and buy more time. Only fifteen minutes had passed since he had sent a code text to Vikram.

"I'll make you kill your mistress's husband, of course. A crime of passion. Quite a sensational reason to be imprisoned."

For a brief moment, Gaurav was taken aback. Gaurav hadn't known Raghuveer knew about him and Nina.

"Surprised?" Raghuveer asked with a cold smile. "It wasn't hard to guess who had taken the beautiful Nina Bhupati. Although, I was surprised you left her alive. I was hoping you would have your fun and kill her so I could frame you for the murder."

He turned to Suraj with a taunting look. "Quite a thing he and your wife must have had between the two of them during those ninety days. Why else wouldn't he kill her? And why else wouldn't she reveal the identity of her kidnapper?"

When Suraj Bhupati didn't show any reaction to that, Raghuveer became agitated. "Aren't you jealous, Suraj?" he demanded. "How does it feel to have your wife wanting another man? Despite giving her everything she asks for, if she still yearns for that other man? Doesn't it feel like a kick in the gut?"

Gaurav knew that Raghuveer didn't know anything about Nina and his relationship. Raghuveer was talking about something else.

Gaurav didn't care to know what it was, but he had to keep him engaged.

“How did you know I was here?” he asked.

“I didn’t. You were a surprise. I’ve been tracking Suraj’s phone for a while. And I knew he was in hiding here with his wife. The idiots who are sleeping outside are my men, too. Somehow I have a feeling you were responsible for them being incapacitated.”

Gaurav realized that Raghuveer had planned to murder Suraj Bhupati and Nina that night. His heart began to thud. The security men who Raghuveer had hired would be unconscious until the morning. Raghuveer had come with four additional men. Two of them were lying unconscious inside, and might wake up any time. There were just two other men with guns. Gaurav was willing to take the risk of attacking them as long as there was a distraction. He prayed the opportunity for the distraction would come soon. And he badly hoped Nina would stay where she was.

“Why did you lie to me about Suraj being responsible for my brother’s death?” Gaurav asked, wanting to distract the man from finding Nina.

“Because I knew at the time of your investigation, that it was perfect bait for you to continue with the investigation.”

It had been.

“And my sister?”

Regret flashed in Raghuveer’s eyes. “Nothing against her. She was just collateral damage.”

Rage filled Gaurav’s mind, but he controlled himself.

An armed man returned from searching the rooms. “There’s no one else, sir.”

“Search again, you idiot. I know she must be here in the house, hiding somewhere.” Raghuveer ran his gaze around the house. “Nina!” he called. “If you want to save your husband’s and lover’s life, come out on the count of ten. Or I’ll shoot one of them.”

He began counting. At the count of nine, Gaurav heard Nina. “Stop! I’m here.”

Gaurav knew the hired man would have found her eventually, but he still

wished she stayed in hiding. He also knew Suraj Bhupati and he were her weakness and she wouldn't allow anyone to hurt them because of her.

Raghuveer's henchman dragged her towards the middle of the room.

"I wish I didn't have to kill you, too, Nina," Raghuvver said with regret in his eyes. "You've always been good to me." He stepped closer to her, running his eyes over the length of her body.

Gaurav clenched his fists.

"Just so you know," Raghuveer continued. "All these years, whenever I was with a woman, I always imagined you in their place. So, I grew rather fond of you."

Gaurav was a trained police officer. He knew what the current situation was. And although his logical mind asked him to think rationally, he knew that if Raghuveer dared to touch Nina right then, Gaurav wouldn't stop until he killed the other man using his bare hands. Whether he was surrounded by armed men or not would make no difference to his actions.

Luckily, so far, Raghuveer didn't touch Nina.

And Nina didn't flinch or show disgust at the other man's words. "Why are you doing this, Raghuveer?" she asked softly. "You've always worked hard and you are much well-off and powerful than many people in your circles."

"Many people, but not all," Raghuveer replied. "With your husband gone and your lover rotting in jail, I'd be powerful than everyone I know."

Gaurav watched Nina and he could see the subtlest of change in her expression. It was enough from him to read her and to know what Nina was going to do.

Gaurav's heart pounded, every instinct in him screaming against what she planned.

Nina was taking a huge risk, but considering Raghuveer intended to kill her afterwards, Gaurav couldn't afford to interfere and stop her.

He wanted her safe, no matter what.

"Why kill me?" she asked softly. "With Suraj gone and Gaurav in jail, I'd be

quite harmless. Maybe I'd be willing to take up an offer of protection from another powerful man."

Gaurav watched Raghuveer as he processed Nina's words and what she was offering. A rapt look covered the other man's face.

"We both come from humble backgrounds, Raghuveer," Nina continued. "We are both outsiders seeking acceptance to be let into the circles of wealth and power. I understand how you feel, better than anyone ever could. And I rather choose life over death."

Raghuveer shook his head. "I don't trust you."

"What if I'm speaking the truth? Do you not want a chance of being with me? I know I want a chance to rub it in the other's faces that people like you and me, from our humble backgrounds, are much above them. Ten years of being Suraj Bhupati's wife never made me feel like I was his equal. I always felt like an outsider. But with you, I know I'll feel differently."

When Raghuveer continued to watch her, she kept her eyes locked on him. "It's not going to be easy of course. We'll have obstacles. Harika and her uncle. And maybe even my father-in-law. But best things in life are not without any risks. I'm willing to fight the world for my rightful place, but are you?"

Raghuveer sucked in a breath. "Yes," he replied. "I'm willing to fight. I have always fought for my rightful place. I created my own opportunities for whatever I wanted. After Suraj married you, I deliberately got Harika drunk and slept with her, so she was forced to marry me. She was my ticket to the so-called higher class. "

Nina smiled as though she was proud of his devious method to trap a woman to marry him.

Raghuveer watched her. "I want that life with you more than anything, but I still don't trust you." He looked at one of the henchmen. "Drug her. I'll take her back with me and then decide what to do next."

"Raghuveer, you don't have to drug me. I'll come with you willingly." But a cloth was placed on Nina's nose. She didn't struggle. Slowly, her body became

limp and her breathing turned even. She slid down to the floor and lay asleep, breathing evenly.

Raghuveer stared at her for a while and then looked at Gaurav and Suraj. “Looks like I won’t just get your money and power, but I’ll also get your woman.” He laughed. “She’s going to make it all the more worthwhile. Now, it’s show time.”

“Why would I keep quiet?” Gaurav asked. “You think the truth won’t come out?”

“Oh, the truth is going to come out, all right. But *my* version of the truth.” There was a smug smile. “I have proof that you were having an affair with Nina Bhupati. The security cameras caught you both during the party at your house.”

Gaurav didn’t say anything.

“What would that prove?” Suraj asked.

“Oh, that Gaurav Verma and Nina Bhupati were having an affair. Gaurav wanted her to be his, and he also held a long-term grudge against Nina’s husband. So, he decided to kill the husband.”

Gaurav saw gaping holes in the logic and the plan. But he didn’t want to interrupt the mad man. He continued to listen to him quietly. He tried very hard not to look at the floor towards Nina. He desperately hoped none of the goons or Raghuveer spared a glance at her either.

“So, you want to make it your word versus my word?” Gaurav asked.

“Yes. With the video proof and the personal grudge you had against Suraj, everyone will believe me. And even Nina will support me. She can say that you were pressuring her to leave her husband.”

Another barest of movement was caught in the corner of his eye.

He prayed that Nina wouldn’t try what he thought she would.

He’d seen her struggle while the goon tried to drug her. But she wasn’t drugged. He knew that because she had pulled the same trick when he had kidnapped her.

She was biding her time.

He knew his Nina was a fighter and a survivor. She wouldn't let it be. She would do everything in her power to save the lives of the two men she cared for and loved.

Gaurav was proud of her wiliness, but more than that, he was bloody terrified for her.

A loud scream came from one of the goons. The chaos and shock that ensued were all Gaurav needed. He hit the goon behind him with his elbow before turning and shooting Raghuveer.

He shot Raghuveer multiple times.

Gaurav frantically turned towards Nina. There was no one next to her. The goon she must have hurt, was lying on the floor, holding his groin area and rolling in pain.

Gaurav and Suraj overpowered the remaining two goons.

"Call the police," Suraj instructed.

"Already done," said Gaurav. The moment he had seen the lights on the window and expected an attack, he had sent a message to Vikram.

"I called them as well," said Radhakrishna who came out of a room to join them. "They are on the way." He touched the screen of his mobile. The video of Raghuveer's confession and threats played loudly at the background.

Soon, the house was surrounded by the police and media.

After a few more hours of giving statements, Gaurav walked next to Nina while Suraj held her and escorted her towards a car. Three of them slid into the backseat. Radhakrishna was in the driver's seat.

It took a while for the car to wade through the throng of reporters.

"Where are we going?" Radhakrishna asked.

"Let's go to my place," Gaurav instructed.

When they were out of sight from the crowd, Gaurav pulled Nina closer to him. "You scared the shit out of me," he scolded. "What if he suspected you were lying?"

He could see a small smile on her beautiful, tired face. "I knew what I was

doing, Gaurav. I had plenty of practice with you while you were my captor," she said.

Gaurav laughed softly, but he shook his head. "But still. Never take such risks again," he said in a stern voice.

Suraj Bhupati was watching them and smiling in amusement. "I'm sorry to say, but you'll soon discover that challenging my wife, will only make her even more determined."

"Shh… don't scare my captor away, Suraj. At least not until it's too late for him to escape from me." There was a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

Gaurav held her face. "It is too late," he said, kissing her softly on her lips. "You have captivated this captor my love."

EPILOGUE

Three years later…

"God! This place badly needs updated plumbing."

Nina was ready to take a quick bath in the inadequate shower of the forest cabin.

Gaurav was about to head to the lake for his bath. "No, it doesn't. It's perfect the way it is," he replied.

"Hahh!! That's because you want me to take a bath in the lake with you each time we visit this place."

Gaurav grinned. "So? What's wrong with that? In fact you should join me now, too."

"Nothing wrong. Except that when we are expecting guests within an hour. I doubt if our guests want to catch their hosts frolicking naked near the lake or going at it like two horny rabbits."

"Oh, come on. A quick dip, and we'll be back in time for you to fuss over the table settings and meals."

Nina supposed they had enough time for a quick dip. Besides, she hated showering with the metallic smelling water. "Okay, let's hurry up, then," she said, grabbing a towel and soap.

FORTY-FIVE MINUTES later, she ran into the cabin. "Oh my God! We are late. So, so, late."

"Relax. There's plenty of time. In fact…" Nina heard the husky tone and saw the familiar heated look on Gaurav's face as he watched her towel-clad body.

She laughed, placing a hand on his chest. "Easy there, tiger. We spent the last thirty minutes doing what we have been doing in past two days. Waiting until we

reach home later tonight, won't kill us."

"But it's the last day of our honeymoon!"

"Babymoon," she corrected, placing her hand on her still flat stomach. "Our honeymoon was a year ago when we got married."

"Yeah. Whatever the term it might be. I should be making love to my wife. Not entertain her ex-husband."

Nina laughed.

Gaurav and Suraj had become quite close over the past three years. And when Gaurav and Suraj got together, they talked a lot. And they teased Nina a lot, too.

It hadn't been an easy path for any of them.

The public had been so invested in Suraj and Nina's marriage that they deemed them as a golden couple. After the truth about Raghuveer was exposed, Suraj had to publicly announce that he wanted to dedicate his life serving people. And that although, he still respected and loved his wife, he did not want any family ties that would stop him from better serving the people.

Suraj and Nina divorced quietly.

A lot of people thought Suraj Bhupati was divorcing his wife because she couldn't give him children. The sympathy Nina received as an abandoned wife worked in her favor when she married Gaurav after two years.

The fact that Suraj took on the role of a father, during the wedding ceremony and gave Nina away to Gaurav became a huge sensation. Suraj's image in the eyes of the public rose even more as a man who sacrificed a lot to serve them.

And in public's eyes, Radha was a loyal man who stood through thick or thin next to their favorite leader.

Nina was surprised by how well Gaurav handled the long wait of two years until she was free to marry him.

Gaurav and she couldn't meet for long periods of time, especially when the public eye was focused on Nina just after her divorce. And although meeting in secret, added to the thrill of their reunions, each time Nina had to leave Gaurav's side, she could sense his restlessness. Nina had felt the same longing when she

had to sleep in an empty bed rather than in his arms.

Gaurav loved his job. She saw it in his eyes each time he spoke about it. And he was brilliant at what he did. She didn't just think that because she loved him or he looked amazing in his uniform. The medals and appreciation he received spoke volumes about his capability.

Nina was fortunate to continue doing what she loved as well. Suraj gave her the control to run the charities and organizations she began. She also continued to volunteer for the causes that were close to her heart.

Her duties didn't change much even after she became the wife of a busy police officer.

Although, lately her father-in-law, Ganesh Verma was trying to persuade her to take up the reins of the Verma investments and finances.

"Gaurav!" Nina laughed, and batted Gaurav's hands away when he tried to loosen the knot on the towel she wore around her. She shook her head at him. "And stop complaining about Suraj and Radha coming over. You were the one who recommended our cabin for their vacation," she reminded. "*The best place on earth*," Nina mimicked Gaurav's deep voice.

Gaurav pulled her close, and kissed her softly on the lips. "It *is* the best place on earth. This is where I held you captive, and where I fell in love with you, and where we most likely made our baby." He knelt down and kissed her stomach.

She looked down at him as he continued to kiss her stomach over the towel. She ran her fingers through his hair. "Small correction," she said with a smile. "This is where *we* fell in love with each other."

She loosened the knot on her towel, letting it drop, baring her body, along with her heart.

His eyes flared, and he ran his hands over her, eliciting shivers and goosebumps on her skin. "I thought you said we couldn't because they'll be here soon," he said in his deep husky voice that increased her anticipation.

She smiled. "They can explore the forest and lake. I badly want to seduce my captor, so he continues to be captivated by me."

He carried her to the bed and kissed her stomach. “Always, my love,” he said softly. “I’ll always love and cherish my captive.”

The End

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for reading THE CAPTIVE. Hope you enjoyed the crazy ride with Nina and Gaurav. :)

If you have read my previous works, you might have noticed that I prefer strong, kick-ass women as my lead characters. However, with Nina's character, I made a conscious decision to make her different. Nina, although still very strong, is not cold and distant. I loved shaping her as a generous-hearted woman who has enough love to spare for everyone around her.

Gaurav's character was inspired by real-life characters who have a tremendous passion to serve their countries. Despite their social background or circumstances in life, many of them have aspired and achieved their dreams. Hats off to those men and women!

Hope you loved Nina and Gaurav.

Thank You!

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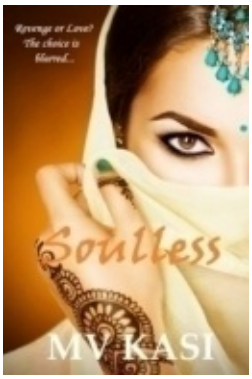

DESCRIPTION

REVENGE or LOVE? The choice is blurred…

Sia Sampath is the sole heiress to a billion-dollar fortune. Instead of enjoying her life, she flew halfway across the world with one burning desire—the need to take revenge, no matter what or who got in the way. But soon, she was reminded that sometimes, things in life don't always proceed according to a plan. Especially when it came to things related to the heart.

Ajay Manthena was a successful businessman who lived his life to the fullest. He always went after what he wanted. One look at the beautiful woman he accidentally met, he lost both his heart and mind. He was determined to make her as his own. What he hadn't expected was the shocking consequences to his hard pursuit.

RUTHLESS

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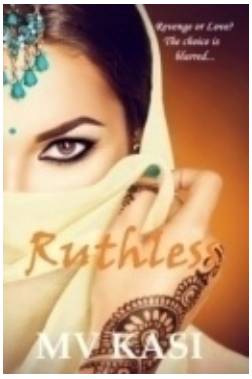

DESCRIPTION

LOVE and HATE are two sides of the same coin…

Sia and Ajay's story began where most romances ended. Instead of a happily-ever-after, their marriage began with Sia's manipulation and lies. However, over the course of time, they opened up to each other, each willing to work it out between them for the sake of their unborn child. And soon, it wasn't just about the baby. They had both fallen in love with each other.

But their happiness didn't last long. Dark secrets and betrayal were revealed. And this time, it was Ajay's manipulation and lies that were threatening to tear them apart.

With broken promises and a lack of trust, will Sia and Ajay find their happily ever after? Or was their love doomed right from the start?

Find out in—RUTHLESS.

EXCERPT

Sia pushed him away from her. "I hate you so much for this. I'll never forgive you for ruining everything!"

Ajay's eyes flared. He closed the distance between them, and held her arms. "You hate me? Show me how much you hate me," he growled, pulling her even closer.

The adrenaline rushing through her body picked up even more.

"Come on. Prove it to me," he whispered the challenge against her mouth before kissing her hard.

She bit him. Not the gentle bite that she often used to drive him crazy. But a punishing bite, hard enough for her to taste the metallic tang of his blood.

He didn’t flinch, and neither did he release the hold on her. She felt a strange combination of blood-lust, and another more familiar kind of lust coursing through her veins. But, before it consumed her completely, she shoved him away hard.

With blood tricking down his lip, he watched her with an intensity that made the blood roar in her ears, making it deafening, muting any reason or sense that would stop the madness from taking over her.

He wiped his bloody lip with his thumb and smirked. “I’m glad you had no one to take care of your pent up aggression. You are more than welcome to take it out on me tonight.”

Listening to his taunting words, she lost it completely.

She attacked him like an animal.

Baring her teeth and nails, she literally jumped towards him.

But he was ready for her. He wrapped both his arms around her possessively, crushing her close until she could barely move.

And then, he kissed her again.

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