

***WRONG MEANS RIGHT END***

***Author: Varsha Dixit***

## ***Chapter 1: Find me a doctor***

'Kabootar Ja Ja Ja! Kabootar Ja Ja Ja!'

'Shut up!' Sneha sleepily moaned. Jerking a lazy arm out of the flowery duvet, she grabbed her incessantly ringing cell phone before it awakened her three- year-old son, Advey, asleep next to her.

'WHAT?' She whispered fiercely instead of the usual hello. Sneha kept her eyes closed, hoping to catch a few more winks afterwards.

'Hi Sneh! Did I wake you up?' Nandini cooed in her ears.

'Sunday morning! Calling me at, hold on,' Sneha lowering her phone raised the end of the comforter to glance at the slightly scratched, white and green dial of the small rectangular clock on her side, 'at 7:45 in the bloody morning. What do you think Sethani?' Sneha retorted, using the new moniker she had anointed Nandini with post her wedding to Aditya Sarin, the mega successful entrepreneur who over the last few years had become the globally recognized face of Indian business.

'Sorry!' Nandini chuckled. 'Just wanted to remind you about dinner tonig—'

'How many more of these torturous things do I have to through before you realize you are not shaadi.com?' Sneha hissed. In standard ten, Sneha had once saved Nandini from the bullies and after that, she had vowed to protect Nandini for life; from everyone and everything. However, post Sneha's divorce and consequent move to Mumbai a year and half ago, the tables had turned. Nandini was now Sneha's self-appointed guardian angel except for one problem that Sneha voiced, 'You may have angelic looks kultaKulta but on the inside you're all devil,'

'KultaKulta? me? I'm not promiscuous,' Nandini's chuckle softly.

'Never say never!' Sneha shot back.

'Very funny! Don't forget, 7:30 ish tonight. Wear something sexy.' Nandini hung up.

Sighing, Sneha slid the cell back on the table. She turned to watch her toddler son who slept facing her. Sneha's hazel eyes softened as she watched him snore softly, his chubby lips slightly apart. His little chest, under a worn blue and grey dinosaur sleeping suit lifted every time he breathed in and out, his soft dark hair falling on to his forehead. His small, puckered hand fisted tightly around his stuffed toy giraffe that with wear and tear now looked more brown than yellow.

'You are beautiful,' Sneha whispered softly, cupping the curve of his plump cheek. Even in his sleep, the boy felt his mother's touch and turned his face into her hand. Planting a soft kiss on his cheek, Sneha gently slunk out of her bed. Sethani had killed her sleep.

Yawning and stretching, Sneha came out of the bedroom. She saw less-her-maid-more-Advey's-nanny Amla, sitting on the floor in the living room perusing the English newspaper. Amla was the eldest daughter of a driver who had worked with the Sarins for over thirty years. Amla too, like Sneha and Nandini, had a connection to Kanpur; her family resided there with Aditya's mom.

'Baba sleep?' Amla asked. The young South Indian maid only spoke either fluent Tamil or halting English. A year ago Sneha had walked out of her marital house in Kanpur with four suitcases and two bodies, Advey and Amla.

'Yes Baba asleep,' Sneha replied.

'Coffee now?' Amla asked, gathering and folding the newspaper.

'Yes please. Thanks!' Sneha walked to the end of the living room of her apartment in Lower Parel that had the tiniest of balconies just wide enough for her to stand without bumping her ass to the wall. Oh, the joy of living in the city where houses were worth more than the families who lived in them and their assets combined. The glorious city of Mumbai! If The East India Company had a crystal ball that actually worked, they would have chucked the Kohinoor diamond and taken the city.

It still surprised Sneha that in Mumbai, a city so congested and so crowded, she experienced such soul-filling joy of being free like never before. Free from a shell of a marriage, free to be true to her son, to her dreams and the freedom to lead a life that might make her question the hours in a day but never her sanity or self-respect.

Sneha pushed her dark brown curls, currently crowding her face, behind the ears. 'Coffee Madam!' Amla stood at the door extending a cup to her.

'Thanks.' Sneha took the cup. 'No dinner tonight. We are going to Nandini's house.'

Amla snorted and walked back inside.

'Eggjactly!' Sneha and Amla held similar opinions about Nandini's recent matchmaking efforts. Sneha's fast-track divorce from Ankit was as old or as new as Nandini's marriage. Ironically, the day Nandini had moved into a new house post-marriage, Sneha had walked out of hers.

'Mama!' Sneha turned at the gurgle.

'Good morning sunshine,' Sneha crooned, picking up her son with one arm, loving the feel of his chubby soft body next to her. Advey was trying to get past her into the balcony, the only space

in the house he was barred from. 'No, not in the balcony. No kiddo,' Sneha clasped her son tightly, coming inside. Thus began Advey's first tantrum of the day.

The rest of the day passed in completion of chores and activities centered around Advey. The only downer about being the sole bread earner of the house was that family time was limited to weekends.

At sharp 7:30 that evening Sneha, Advey and Amla were at Nandini's palatial flat in Colaba. None other than the suave and gorgeous man of the house, Aditya Sarin himself opened the door.

'Hi! Come in,' Aditya flashed a broad smile. Advey squirmed in Sneha's arms ready to launch himself at Aditya.

'Where's Advey? Did you forget him in the car?' Aditya acted as if he did not see the vigorously moving child.

'Here! Adi here!' Advey excitedly bounced up and down in his mother's arms and stretched out his small arms, grabbing the collar of Aditya's denim blue shirt.

'Oh there you are little fella!' Aditya took Advey with careful ease. Sneha watched the gorgeous hunk handle her son like he was his own. Aditya's chiseled face broke into a wide crease that pushed his cheekbones higher revealing a smile that could warm anyone woman, any age inside out. Sneha too was no exception; however, her friendship with Nandini was strong enough for her too feel only asexual, sisterly affection for Adi.

Aditya and Nandini had gone through a tumultuous four-year relationship before finally tying the knot a little over a year ago. Even a cynical person like Sneha could not remain unaffected by their chemistry, thus she had happily played a pivotal role in bringing the lovers together.

Smiling, Sneha headed into the larger than large living room divided into two levels complete with a bar and an aquarium for a wall. She sank into a large, dark brown recliner. 'Where's Sethani?' she asked.

'Getting ready,' Aditya took a seat across from her. He put Advey down next to him on the beige sofa.

'He might get some stains on the sofa. He was eating apples in the car.' Sneha gestured for Amla to pick Advey up.

'Don't worry. That's what kids are supposed to do.' Aditya motioned for Amla to stop and said to her, 'Why don't you go and get something to eat from the kitchen?'

'Yes Aditya Sir,' Amla gave a rare, shy smile to Aditya that revealed a gap between her front teeth and her crush on him.

'Truly a ladies' man!' Sneha muttered taking in Aditya's fresh -from- the -shower look, complete with tousled wet locks brushing his forehead.

'Please!' Aditya replied, his tone defensive. 'What will you drink?' He smoothly rose to his feet.

'Adi who's the bakra today?' Sneha came to the point.

'You!' Aditya smirking quickly scooped Advey off the sofa and herded him to the gigantic aquarium.

Guilty man walking, thought Sneha. 'Can't you make her stop? Please.'

'Make her stop? You've known much her longer than I have,' Adi pointedly reminded her over his shoulder.

'You owe me!' Sneha threatened.

'For?' Aditya faced her, his tone teasing.

'Hellllloo! I was the one who did the famous reveal. Let the cat out of the bag?'

Aditya shook his head, still confused.

'Oh my God, did I not tell you about your mom and Nandini? The big secret!'

'Oh that!' Aditya's tone was casual.

Sneha scowled at him. 'Yes that. The big that that made all this happen.' Sneha gestured at the wedding picture of Nandini and Aditya in the glided golden frame adorning the wall in front of her.

'Made all of what happen?' Nandini voice interrupted.

Sneha waved a dismissive hand in Nandini's direction. 'OM Jizzles!' Sneha exclaimed seeing the flawless, short sleeved, grey gown Nandini was wearing. It fastened at her waist with a silver belt and then fell smoothly to the floor, clinging to her every curve as she moved.

Aditya came next to the few steps between the foyer and the living room. He extended his hand but Nandini did not take it. 'I can manage a few steps without your help Adi.' Aditya dropped his hand, smiling genially. Sneha rebuked her senses for reading more into the irritation that briefly coloured Nandini's voice.

'Isn't this a bit too much? I thought we were setting Sneha up,' Aditya said, watching his young wife closely as she bent to pick Advey from the floor.

Sneha glared at them both. 'I knew it.'

Nandini, giving Advey a smackeroo, paused. 'Gee thanks Adi!'

'What? You think she doesn't know?' Aditya sneered.

'Behave children! All three of you,' Sneha remarked sprightly getting up to unfurl the end of the carpet stuck to Advey's shoes.

'OM Jizzles? Still watching High School Musical?' Nandini teased from Aditya's side.

'And what about Kabootar Ja Ja Ja?' Sneha voiced, her expression dark.

Nandini giggled, 'Sorry! My bad!' She was unapologetically and solely responsible for getting Advey hooked to the damn pigeon song.

Just then, the doorbell chimed. Nandini went to the door. Sneha took shelter behind Advey bracing herself to grin and not growl at the new suitor Sethani was about to throw her way.

And then she heard the voices. Sneha grimaced. On second thought, she would rather face ten ridiculous suitors than this woman.

'Sneha you are here!' With a greeting sweet on the outside and patronizing on the inside, Mona, Nandini's recent self-proclaimed best friend, came through the door. HITCH! (Thanks to Advey's habit of picking up only cuss from entire sentences, Sneha and Nandini's colorful lingo had downgraded to age appropriate but confusing material).

'Hi Mona! Good to see you,' Sneha mumbled between pressed lips. With a quick disinterested glance, Sneha noticed Mona's short satin magenta, sheath dress with horizontal pintucks to flatter her slightly full figure. Mona's hair was a short, stylish bob with perfectly maintained light brown highlights. Mona was blessed with a pair of beautiful dark eyes, a slightly hooked nose and thin lips which were usually pursed, making them appear to be mere painted lines in her face.

'Hi Advey!' Mona animatedly called out. Advey ignored her. 'He's adorable. Isn't he Sam?' Mona turned to her husband who gave Sneha a quick curt nod.

'Hi Aditya! How's it going?' Sam, a portly figure in business suit at least one size smaller, came down the steps and shook hands with Aditya too boisterously. 'Heard about the new deal you signed. You will be needing consultants. My firm can help you with that.' Mona's husband only had work on his mind. That could explain why, even after seven years of marriage, they had no kids. Sorry! Sneha rebuked her mind for its pettiness.

'Sure! Let me look into it,' Aditya replied, lightly extricating his hand from the Sam's grip.

'I'm going to check the hors d'oeuvres!' Nandini smiled and went towards the corridor that led to the kitchen. Mona followed and so did a reluctant Sneha even as she gestured at Advey to behave.

Just then, the doorbell chimed again. Nandini stopped, glancing at the door. Sneha caught her sudden gulp. Nandini walked past Sneha to get the door. She was close enough to Sneha for the latter to glower and mutter, 'Who the hell have you called kulta?'

'Someone we all know,' Nandini chirped. Sneha trailed Nandini into the foyer as she opened the front door. Just as Sneha halted behind Nandini, a man stepped in.

'Bloody hell. She did not!' Sneha snarled to herself, her brows touched her forehead, shock writ all over her face.

'Sneha, Dr. Saigal! Dr. Saigal, Sneha!' Nandini trilled, flashing them a wide smile.

Dr. Saigal took a few steps inside and Sneha obligingly put her hand forward, 'Dr. Saigal... Advey's ...pediatrician?' Sneha's surprise had her speak disjointedly.

'Sneh remember last week when we had gone together for Advey's health check up? While you and Advey were with the nurse, Dr. Saigal and I got talking. That's when I realized that we all have so much in common. That got me thinking, we all should spend some time together. So here he is.' With a bright smile, and a sweeping gesture of her hands, Nandini moved, partially hiding behind the doctor.

'You are very kind and you have a beautiful home,' the doctor said, clearing his throat and turning around to get Nandini in his line of vision.

With a smile that was more of a grimace and eyes that shone brave and pleading simultaneously, Nandini was busy trying to gauge Sneha's response, wondering if it was safe to leave her hiding place.

'I'll be in the kitchen,' Sneha sharply turned around and walked away. The kitchen was at the back of the house and far, far away from the living room, giving Sneha enough room from the few she wanted to take in a chokehold.

Just outside the kitchen door, Sneha stopped and took a few calming breaths. 'Sneh!' she heard Nandini call out tentatively from behind.

Sneha turned to face Nandini. On seeing the guilt on Nandini's face, Sneha's anger quickly dissipated. After all, kulta and her warped convictions and schemes only had Sneha's good in mind. 'What are you doing crazy woman?' Sneha asked gently.

Nandini let loose a relieved sigh. 'You are not mad?'

'I'm beyond mad. I'm stumped. You have to stop this insane matchmaking. Please Nandini. Advey's pediatrician? Seriously?'

'I just want you to be happy!' Nandini started with her usual defence.

Sneha raised her hands to the heavens. 'For the last time woman, I'm HAPPY. Seriously ecstatic.'

'Because of Dr. Saigal's being here?' Nandini asked, her expression somewhat unsure.

'Nooo!' Sneha indulged in a few anulom-viloms she had learned during a free yoga session at work. 'Because of Advey, because of you, my work and yeah, even my divorce. There I said it. I'm a happily divorced single mom.'

'But how can you really be...' Nandini trailed off, her expression saying it all.

'You would be miserable without Aditya, you were miserable without Aditya. I remember that time. But Ankit and I were never you and Adi, Sethani. My marriage was a pain in the ass not only for me but even for my ex. I've told you everything.' Almost everything! Sneha kept that musing to herself.

'Ya after you separated,' Nandini accused.

Sneha gave her a direct look. 'You know me, Nandini, I deal with my own crap. Ankit and I got married for the wrong reasons. If Advey had not happened, we might have lasted only two months rather than two years, give or take. We did try to make it work though.'

'You tried to make it work. He just freaking started on with his ex-girlfriend,' Nandini said, her face tightening.

'Forget all that. It's in the past. I don't blame him. I have moved on but coming back to you, Shaadi.com, please no more of these matchmaking schemes and blind dates. I have suffered so many of these clowns. I'm scared of coming to your house now.'

'C'mon Sneh. Dr Saigal is good match. He's good with kids.'

'Duh...that's his job!' Sneha added sarcastically.

Nandini continued her cause. 'He's recently widowed and has a four-year-old daughter. Can you imagine being married to your child's pediatrician? Advey is growing. You know kids tend to fall lot sicker in their growing years, building up immunity and all,' Nandini paused satisfied she had made her case.

Seeming to deliberate, Sneha scratched her right temple, 'Given that very good logic, you know who'd be perfect for me?' she asked matter-of-factly.

Nandini walked into the trap. 'Tell me who? I'll have him over tomorrow.'

'My doodhwala!'



## Chapter 2: Sethani are you okay?

Sneha continued, 'After all Advey will consume more milk as he grows up, right? I could save some serious dough with that alliance. 'Nandini pursing her lips huffed, giving Sneha the evil eye.

Sneha wasn't done yet. 'Maybe I should try and see if same sex relationship are for me. Because Amla is irreplaceable. It'll be perfect! Advey will have two moms and a mad massi,' Sneha lightly touched her chin in wonderment. 'It's a foolproof plan! How did I not think of this before?' Sneha's pose and face briefly shone with sheer bliss and then she sobered up. 'Idiot!' Sneha lobbed at Nandini's irked face.

'Very funny!' Nandini stalked past her into the kitchen.

Sneha followed her determined. 'Hold on missy! Seriously, you'd better find me another pediatrician first.'

Nandini stopped mid-step. 'Why?'

'Because after tonight, I'm not going back to Dr. Saigal.'

Grimacing, Nandini said out loud, 'Now instead of a date I have to find you a doctor.'

'Good luck!' Sneha, putting on her best smile, turned around and headed for the living room. On her way, she passed Mona going in the opposite direction.

'Nandini?' Mona asked.

'Kitchen!' Sneha found Sam talking to Adi, Adi replying in monosyllables and Dr Saigal perched awkwardly on the sofa. As Sneha was on a damage-control mission, she headed for the doctor. In the kitchen, Mona found Nandini standing next to the counter that the staff was laying the appetizers on. Nandini appeared lost in her private thoughts.

Mona waved a hand in front of Nandini's face. The diamond ring on the third finger and the chunky diamond bracelet on her wrist caught the light and glimmered brightly. 'So what did Sneha say? Is she going to be a sport tonight?'

Nandini focused her eyes on Mona. 'I don't know, maybe inviting her pediatrician wasn't the smartest thing to do,' she confessed.

'Excuse me,' Mona twitched her mauve painted lips, 'I wish my other friends would be half as caring as you. You are only thinking of her good and of her son's.'

Nandini shook her head. 'I'm not so sure. Sneha keeps reiterating that she is happy. Maybe I shouldn't butt in.'

Mona uttered a priggish snort. 'C'mon. No woman likes to be on her own. It's lonely and crippling for her self- confidence. I'm a psychologist, I know what I'm saying. Sneha's in denial. You have to help her.'

Nandini's face held a wry grin, 'Help Sneha? She's the damsel who kicks ass.'

Pursing her lips, Mona pressed on, 'I know she's strong, or at least she's good at pretending to be.' Nandini opened her mouth but Mona continued. 'Moreover, being around you and Aditya and all your couple friends probably makes it worse for her. If I were you, I would not invite her to my parties.'

'Excuse me!' Nandini's face and tone were affronted.

'Let me rephrase that. Not invite her to all your parties. You don't want her to feel worse about her situation do you? Am sure Sneha feels lonely being around us couples. She just won't admit it.'

'Sneh's fine,' Nandini replied firmly. This time her lips clamped closely.

Mona let loose a kittenish laugh, 'I just—'

'Let's go back to the living room, everyone must be wondering where we are,' Nandini softly suggested. And she was right. Sneha had that exact thought as she was about to exhaust the topics she could converse on with Dr. Saigal or Pradeep, as he preferred to be called.

Aditya appeared at Sneha's side with a drink. 'For you?' He held a funnel shaped glass. Sneha caught the cherry and grated coconut swimming in the blue liquid.

'Strong?' she whispered, keeping her smile bright and fixed.

Leaning close to her in lieu of handing over the glass, Aditya whispered back, his face bland, 'Two of these shall knock you out.'

'Perfect!' Sneha took a big gulp of the drink.

Aditya fixed a glass of red wine for Pradeep as the latter insisted on sharing the cardiovascular benefits of drinking red wine.

'Maybe they should make it mandatory while working out,' Sneha voiced sweetly.

'That is one gym I wouldn't mind frequenting,' Aditya smirked.

'Which gym?' Nandini and Mona joined the others.

'The one Sneha is planning to open that would have the patrons drinking red wine as they worked out,' Aditya replied.

'Sign me up for that one too!' Mona replied.

Nandini and Mona headed towards the other sofa. Sneha moved her feet to make way for them.

'Oh gosh her skirt has a tear,' Mona whispered fiercely near Nandini's ear.

Nandini took note of the hole in the hemline of Sneha's simple khaki skirt. 'She mustn't have noticed it,' Nandini defended quietly.

'Get her a new wardrobe. She's always dressed up for work or in jeans.' Mona made sure to keep her voice free of any judgments. 'Shopping should pep her up. Works for every female I know. Trust me, I'm a psychologist,' Mona threw in as they sat down.

Unaware of how interesting her skirt had suddenly become, Sneha tucking her feet under her knees, struck a demure pose while carrying on forced conversation with Pradeep. Aditya duly provided the drinks and Nandini the food.

After dinner, Sneha followed the others back to the living room. Pradeep trailed behind her. He even joined her on the love seat she opted for. 'I'm glad that Nandini got us together,' Pradeep spoke, shifting his glasses further up the bridge of his nose as he fell back into the comfortable leather.

'Hmm.' Sneha smiled, trying not to focus on the large blackheads glistening around his nostrils.

'Advey is such a nice kid,' Pradeep remarked.

'Thank you.' Sneha hid her face in her drink— this time it was a glass of water.

'So Advey's father...?' Pradeep probed further.

Sneha lips stilled near the rim of the crystal tumbler she held. 'What about him?' she hedged.

Pradeep's laugh was awkward. 'You know what I mean.'

Lowering her glass and taking a deep breath, Sneha looked at him squarely in the eyes. 'I'm divorced. Advey's father works in Hyderabad. I'm his ex-wife and his ex-girlfriend is his present spouse.' Sneha was thankful that the others were engrossed in their own conversations or at least pretending to be. This was the only part she hated about her divorced status; revealing how quickly your ex had moved on.

Pradeep exhaled. 'I'm sorry!'

'Don't be. I'm not,' Sneha replied.

'Well, I lost my wife to cancer last year.' Pradeep confided.

'I'm sorry! Were you close?' Sneha almost bit off her tongue at the doctor's surprised look. Just because she did not understand closeness between a man and a woman did not mean that it did not exist, her kulta being a live and kicking example. 'I'm sorry. Please don't answer that.' Sneha apologized. She stood up. 'Excuse me. I need to check on Advey.'

She found Advey rollicking on the carpet next to the train set Adi had set up especially for him in one of the five guest rooms. Amla was keeping a close watch as Ben 10 played loudly on the gigantic flat screen on the wall.

'Mama!' Advey got up and rushed to her on his short legs. Grabbing him off the floor, Sneha hid her face in his soft light brown hair and inhaled his baby smell. Heaven!

'You're ok?' Nandini called out from behind.

Sneha turned with Advey still in her arms. 'Mathi!' Advey lunged for Nandini just as she lunged for him.

Sneha looked at Amla. 'Why don't you go and have your dinner? I'll watch Advey.'

'Okay Madam!' Amla rolled her eyes as she went out, letting them know that she knew when she was being politely kicked out.

'So give me a number kulta,' Sneha remarked sinking down on the bed. The bloody thing almost ate her whole. She quickly moved to a carved and upholstered mahogany chair.

'Number? What?' Nandini let Advey tug her to the train set.

'How many more of these blind dates do I have to go through?'

Sheepishly, Nandini met her eyes.

Sneha continued, her face unknowingly glum, 'You know what is really hard for me is not that I'm divorced, but having to tell complete strangers why I failed at something every woman is expected to adapt to like a second skin.'

In a second Nandini was across the room, sinking to the floor in front of Sneha, her expression guilty. 'Crap! I'll back off, I promise, if you agree to something.'

Sneha grimaced, 'Oh God, what now?'

'Let's go shopping! How about tomorrow?' Nandini implored.

Sneha could not help an inadvertent smile. 'I have to work.' Sneha slid down, joining Nandini and Advey on the floor.

'And I don't?' Nandini suddenly bristled.

'Not for a living!' Sneha pointed out in all honesty.

'So your work is more important than mine?'

Sneha made amends, 'No kulta. I did not mean it like that. Seriously.'

No you did, just like Aditya, Nandini thought as her hands straightened a section of the toy railway tracks.

'Sethani are you okay?' Sneha asked, closely watching Nandini's face.

'I'm fine,' Nandini brushed off.

The two friends were not as alone as they thought themselves to be. They missed the person hiding behind the partially open door. Mona had a smug smile as she went back to the living room. Her mind games were working, they had to. After all, she was a psychologist.

### **Chapter 3: You guys know each other?**

Next day, late afternoon, as Sneha in the graphics editing software open on her computer was trying to razor layers over an image, her desk phone rang. She knew the extension. It was the reception desk of her advertising agency.

'Sneha Gupta!'

'Ms. Gupta, ummm . . .' the receptionist had trouble finishing the sentence. Sneha gave an impatient sigh. The receptionist spoke hurriedly, 'Sethani is waiting for you here,' and hung up.

Sneha gazed at her wristwatch. 'Shoot, it's four already.' She hurriedly saved the open file, logged off her PC and grabbed her bag. She got to the lobby, dishing out hurried good byes to her team and colleagues. As Sneha entered the lobby, she stopped short, her mouth open. Sethani was planning another weekend massacre.

'Nandini!' Sneha called out with more force than usual.

'Hi Sneh!' Nandini smile was a healthy mixture of guilt and some more guilt. 'I was just talking to your colleague, Jigar!' She pointed at the bespectacled young man with curly dark hair in a pastel pink shirt.

'Were you talking to him or exchanging numbers with him?' Sneha's smile was ghoulish as she joined them.

'Hi Sneha! Did not know Mrs. Sarin and you were childhood friends,' Jigar's smile spilled out of his face.

'Ya till death- do-us-apart kind!' Sneha felt some satisfaction as she heard Nandini's nervous titter. 'See you later! Gotta go.' She spied Nandini saying a quick good-bye and whispering something to Jigar that she obviously wasn't meant to hear.

As they got into the elevator and the steel doors closed on them, Sneha's first words to Nandini were, 'No frigging way. Not him.'

'But he's so nice Sneh,' Nandini tried her best pouting expression.

'That Jigar is freakin' vying for the new promotion. He's my competition.'

Nandini's smile was dazzling. 'Well then dinner's a perfect way to bury the hatchet. You know, blur the line between enemies.'

Sneha's smile was threatening. 'I shall blur both you and him.'

Nandini snorted, 'Fine! Looking forward to shopping?' she changed the topic.

'Sure.' Sneha rummaged through her bag and pulled out her cell. 'You did promise we will grab a drink and a bite.'

Now Nandini threatened, 'Yes but after shopping. With emphasis on after.'

'Ya, Ya whatever kulta.' Sneha was busy typing a message.

'I already spoke to Amla. Advay is fine and he has had his evening snack and she was about to take him to the park.'

Sneha's smile was genuine. She put her cell back in her bag. 'Thanks Sethani! So where are we going?'

'You'll see!' Nandini answered as the elevators came to a halt.

Half an hour later just as the traffic, like an overflowing dam thanks to the rush hour, was about to burst upon Mumbai's roads, Nandini and Sneha in good time reached Phoenix Mall from Sneha's office in Mahalaxmi.

'What a wedding present!' Sneha remarked as she caught the reflection of Nandini's maroon Aston Martin Vanquish in the adjoining thick glass wall.

'I liked my older one just fine!' Nandini said while looking for change in one of the numerous slots in the console between them. 'Adi kicked up such a fuss when I thought of getting my old car here.'

Sneha's laugh was rude. 'I can just imagine that car parked between the fleet of obscenely expensive cars the Sarins have.'

Nandini rounded on her, her expression resentful. 'Ya but I'm not a Sarin. Should I simply discard everything I hold precious just because I married rich?'

'Don't be such a mirchi -ka -pakoda kulta. I'll willingly trade my car for this one if you wish. I'll even paint it a garish red,' Sneha remarked calmly.

Nandini made a face. 'Forget it. Why the hell is the checking taking so long?'

'Ask and you shall be answered.' Sneha brought the window on her side down to have a short tête-à-tête with one of the uniformed guards nearby. 'Some big ass jewellery exhibition! It'll be crowded. You still wanna go?'

'Heck yeah!' Nandini worked the stick shift and moved the car forward. 'To shopping!' Nandini exclaimed and promptly clipped the side of the car against the security post. 'Oops!'

'And that makes it seven. Stop punishing the poor car just because it's not your other khatarā.' Sneha saw the slight dent from the side view mirror. 'Will Adi be mad?'

'Nah! He'll just ask if I'm okay and again try to press the need to keep a driver,' Nandini grumbled, pulling into an empty parking spot.

An hour and a half later, the two friends flopped into the cane seats of a chic bar on the topmost floor of the mall.

'Two measly bags, that's it! You are impossible Sneh. Any other woman would have bought a store in this time.'

'Chill ya! You know I'm not much of a shopper. I appreciate the effort, but I know the real reason we are here,' Sneha remarked, grinning as she went over the laminated red and black menu card.

'You're such a twenty- nine -going -on- fifty.' Nandini frowned confused, 'What reason?'

'Nearly thirty-going-on-sixty,' Sneha's smile was goading. 'You just wanted to hang out with moi!'

'Ya that too. But I did want you to buy a new wardrobe.' Nandini should have been more careful with her words. 'Mona suggested a makeover—'

Losing her happy face, Sneha smacked the menu card on the table, loudly. 'Mona! She suggested a what?'

Nandini backtracked, 'Of course I wanted to chillax with you.'

'Un-freakin' believable' Sneha sat back in her chair, her lips pursed. 'Who is that Mona to critique my clothes? And you listened to her?' Her tone was accusing.

'Oh man! What a crowd. Look there!' Nandini tried her best to distract a glowering Sneha. She knew she had just put her entire array of footwear in her mouth.

'What!' Sneha peevish, tossed a careless look over her shoulder. They were seated right across from the pub door. Just then, Sneha's eyes fell on the group of people entering the pub. Her breath caught in her throat and Sneha felt time just freeze around her. Her body went slack; had she not been holding the armrests of the chair she would have surely slid to the floor in a tidy heap. The man in the middle of the crowd seized all of her attention and breath — the one with slightly wavy thick raven hair that sat upon a sculpted face with arched dark eyebrows over piercing green eyes that she knew by memory were dark green at the rim and a mixture of paler green, yellow and brown in the center, shielded by long lashes. She had not forgotten those eyes. The nose in a straight line started in a gentle slope under his eyes and ended firmly over a generous mouth with a slightly plumper lower lip. The chubby boy she remembered had been chipped away into a tall and lean specimen of raw masculinity. His strides were long, graceful and confident, commanding others to fall in a step behind.

No way José! Sneha thought watching the man, her mouth agape. His recent pictures did no justice to his actual persona or physical aura.

'Sneh! Sneha!' Nandini's voice broke into her catatonic state.

Sneha turned to face Nandini, her eyes round as saucers, 'Super canary shit! I don't believe it.'

'What happened Sneh?'

'Just don't look that way okay?' Sneha ordered vehemently.

'Jalti jawani calm down?' A concerned Nandini reached out to poke Sneha's hand. She struck her glass of water instead. The glass tipped over the side of the table spilling all the water on the table before it shattered on the floor.

'Hit kulta!' Sneha winced. 'Loody bell! You just had to didn't you?'

'You are acting like you have a fire in your pants. You want this water?' Nandini teased giggling.

A waiter appeared at their table. 'No problem, Mrs. Sarin. We will get you a different table.' He briskly began cleaning the mess. Another smiling server stood at their side, ready to whisk them away.

'I'm really sorry!' Nandini straightened to her full height. Sneha too stood up, making sure the menu card covered her face. 'I'll pay for it,' Nandini insisted.

'No worries Mrs. Sarin!' Even the manager joined the party. 'Please come, I have a table ready for you.'



'Is there anyone who doesn't know you?' Sneha mocked quietly, quickly falling in step behind a still- apologetic Nandini.

Sneha caught a glimpse of their new table and the others in its vicinity. Keeping the menu in front of her face, Sneha grabbed Nandini's elbow and pulled her back 'Hammit! No kulta. Not there, please anywhere but there.' The menu card dribbled the last few drops of water on Sneha's wrist. Reflexively she brought the menu card down and it caught Nandini's wrist.

'Oww!' Nandini's soft yelp was loud enough to be heard by the people around them.

Panicking, Sneha closed her eyes. And when she opened them a second later, her eyes of their own accord slipped to the next table where sat a party of three businessmen in similar dark suits. However, one of them was staring at Sneha, as if some old forgotten memory was waking up in his head. In a nano second, realization dawned in the familiar light green irises, and in response, Sneha's face turned a bright shade of red. She broke the eye contact.

Sneha watched from the corner of her eyes as the man, who she knew to be three years older than her, come out from behind his table. Turning her face away, Sneha cursed under her breath, 'Hit!'.

The man did the unexpected, he greeted Nandini. 'Nandini? Right?' Surprised, Sneha turned to gaze at him and then quickly averted her face as his rapier glance collided with her eyes. Sneha averted her eyes, thinking and praying that he had not recognized her after all. She had changed a lot since they had last met.

Nandini stared at him for a few seconds and then her words came out in a rush, 'Nikhil. Nikhil Chandel. Gayatri's friend?'

Sneha kept her curiosity to herself. How did they know each other?

'How are you?' Nandini tried to eclipse the sudden stab of guilt on her face and conscience but failed.

Sneha, in spite of her own unease, felt a twinge of anger. She did not have to see Nandini's face to imagine what she was feeling. Her kulta was guilty of nothing.

'Very well. Thank you. Congratulations on your wedding!' Nikhil Chandel's voice was deep and suave, hitting all the right notes of aloofness. Sneha scowled yet she did not look at him. Jerk! She formed an opinion of him right then, right there.

'Thanks... How is ...' Nandini trailed off awkward. The colour in her face rose.

'How is? Who?' Nikhil asked with banal curiosity but there was nothing banal about the glint in his eyes as he kept them fixed on Nandini's face.

Sneha, at Nandini's side, stiffened. Nikhil must have noticed the tiny movement. He finally swivelled his eyes to Sneha.

Nandini obligingly made the introductions, 'This is my goo—'

Nikhil cut her off. 'Hello Sneha. It has been a while. You remember me?'

Pulling in a deep breath even as her hands fisted at her sides and her chin came out at him, Sneha gave Nikhil her full attention. She schooled her expression to match the indifference she saw on his arrogant face, 'Hi Nikhil! It really has been a while.'

'You guys know each other?' Nandini asked surprised.

'Hardly!'

'Maybe!'

Sneha and Nikhil answered simultaneously.

#### **Chapter 4: Worried face, anxious eyes!**

Observing Nandini's comical expression, Sneha sheepishly rectified, 'It was ages ago. He's a friend of my cousin in Amsterdam.' Nikhil did not add to her statement. He watched them his eyes cold, face impassive, not giving any of his thoughts away. Sneha kept her eyes fixed on Nandini.

'Your table Mrs. Sarin!' The server interrupted.

'Well it was nice meeting you,' Nandini made a move towards the table. Sneha had already grabbed a chair for herself. Nikhil did not move, prompting Nandini to murmur, 'Would you care to join us?' Sneha bit her lip in annoyance and then noticed Nikhil watching not Nandini but her with hooded eyes.

'How can he join us? He already has company,' Sneha reminded defiantly thumbing her chin at him.

Sliding his hand into his black trouser pockets that sat well on his muscular and lean built, Nikhil smoothly disagreed, 'I would like to. Thank you for asking.' The flash-in-the-pan smile that started and ended at his mouth was solely for Nandini. Sneha he ignored. That only added to the building irritation in Sneha, even though she knew she wasn't her smartest when irked.

'We were almost done.' Nikhil glanced at the two men on his table. They promptly immersed their faces in their phones. At seeing the alacrity with which the men reacted, Sneha deduced that they worked for him rather than with him.

Nikhil moving forward took the chair from the waiter and pulled it out for Nandini. Before he could extend the same courtesy to Sneha, she hurriedly pulled out her own chair and sat down with a thump. The table shuddered slightly.

'Sneh!' Nandini reproached, grabbing her glass before it fell again.

'Sorry!' Far from polite, Sneha shot back, busying herself with the menu again. By the time they were out of here, Sneha had a feeling she would remember this menu by heart. All his loody fault, Sneha cribbed to herself.

Nikhil took a seat between both of them. For few minutes, there was complete silence at the table. Sneha kept her mouth closed and eyes exclusively on the menu purposely ignoring Nandini's frantic gaze. Sorry kultaKulta, in this you're on your own; if I step in you might have to rue more than a broken glass, Sneha thought.

Nikhil for his part appeared to sit quietly and stare indifferently, his eyes fixated on Sneha's lowered head.

Clearing her throat, Nandini broke the ice, 'So what brings you to Mumbai?'

'Work!' Nikhil turned his head to give her the briefest of smiles. 'My firm has organized the jewelery exhibition.'

Saala sunhaar (goldsmith)! Sneha thought acerbically, refusing to contribute to the conversation. Sneha was surprised by the intensity of angst she felt for the cold man sitting across from her. A rational part of her could not help but wonder, was it dislike for him or dislike of the embarrassing memories he awakened?

'Whatever!' Sneha blurted scowling fiercely at the table linen but both Nikhil and Nandini heard and misunderstood her.

Nandini hurried to smoothen the awkward moment 'Your firm?'

Nikhil's nod was brisk. With effort he moved his eyes off Sneha who avoided meeting his gaze as if he had the pink eye.

Abruptly Nandini lost the nervous look in her eyes and a slow saintly smile climbed all the way from her lips to her eyes. 'As in you own firm or you work there?' Nandini asked brazenly. Sneha widened her downcast eyes. She could strangle Sethani.

Nikhil's smile was downright frosty, 'A bit of both.'

'Ohh ok!' Nandini replied, smug. The waiter appeared on her side. 'Mangotini for me,' Nandini said

'Make that two please,' Sneha said, keeping her eyes pinned to the menu.

Nikhil had a sudden urge to grab that blasted menu from her hands and fling it across the room. Years of rigidly practiced self control came into play and Nikhil instantly thrust all emotion away from his face and mind.

The waiter glanced at Nikhil. 'Glenlivet with club soda,' Nikhil emphasized in a deeper voice, his words sounding more clipped than usual.

As the server moved away, Nandini trampled over all etiquettes of PC. 'So Nikhil did you re-marry?' Sneha nearly choked on her breath. She shot Nandini a warning look. It fell off Nandini like water off a duck's back.

Nikhil watched Nandini. His answer was a sneer accompanied by a single word, 'Never.'

Nandini wasn't finished. 'Seeing anyone? Anything serious?'

A sudden shake enveloped the table. Nandini and Nikhil grabbed whatever they could. Thankfully nothing spilled or shattered.

'Why did you just kick me?' Nikhil asked levelling his indifferent glance at Sneha. However, the mere glance altered to a reluctant gaze as his eyes ran over Sneha's features. Her forehead was clear and currently housed a few lines of tension which he knew were there because of him. Her deep-set hazel eyes fringed by thick dark lashes and a natural upward tilt at the end of her nose always gave her face a perpetual saucy expression. Moreover, the nose was thin and petite, the kind that suited a nose ring or a stud. Her lips free of any colour were a light pink, well defined with a natural upward tilt and rounded tips, the kind that could alter from a grimace to a grin in seconds. Hastily, Nikhil swung his face away, angry at himself for noticing details. He had seen and known far more alluring women with better manners and opinions.

Sneha grudgingly said, 'That wasn't meant for you.' The next word was even harder to utter, 'Sorry!'

Nikhil answered her with a silence that further maddened Sneha. He moved his hand from the table to let the server place a single malt scotch in front of him. 'So how often do you play footsie with each other?' He kept his somber face turned to Nandini, his tone disparaging. There was no emotion visible on his face. He could have been talking about anything from the weather to a bomb.

'Ha! Ha!' Sneha muttered darkly, tucking her feet under the chair. Had she left her wits behind in of the trillion shops they had visited? What was wrong with her? How could she let Nikhil speak to Nandini and her like that? Angrily Sneha looked up and opened her mouth the very second Nikhil shifted his face and met her eyes. Her hazel eyes widened at the caustic expression that briefly lightened the inner circles of his irises. Confused, Sneha shut her mouth without uttering a single word and reached out to take a desperate sip of the mangotini.

'Which cousin of yours is Nikhil friends with?' asked Nandini.

Sneha obstinately clamped her lips and picked up her glass.

Giving Nandini his signature cool smile that did not spill out of his lips or cause creases around his eyes, Nikhil stayed mum.

Sneha finally voiced softly, 'Kim di. My first cousin on mom's side. You've met her a few times,' she reminded Nandini.

Nandini nodded. 'Oh Kim di. Of course, I remember. She came down for your —' Nandini bit the word off. Just then, Nandini's cell buzzed. She glanced at it. 'It's Adi. Again and of course,' her smile was quick. 'Excuse me.' Nandini got up and walked away leaving Sneha and Nikhil alone. Sneha nearly put out her hand to stop Nandini. A sudden bout of awkwardness surged in her as she was left alone with Nikhil. Fresh colour climbed from her neck to her face as she felt Nikhil's eyes scrutinizing her.

After a few seconds of silence, Nikhil finally ventured a question, 'Adi?'

Sneha deigned to shoot him a quick pointed look, 'Aditya. Her husband? I thought you knew that?' Sneha glanced at Nandini who was busy talking on her cell. She shifted uneasily in her chair. C'mon kulta come back! Sneha tried sending Nandini a few cuss words telepathically.

'How well you know me,' Nikhil's tone was lazy and mocking.

Taking a deep breath Sneha resignedly faced him, 'We were just kids back then. I can't believe you are still mad about it.' She watched his face closely for a reaction. She didn't see any.

'I'm not.' Nikhil took a sip of his drink and put it back on the table with an air of finality. He smoothly got to his feet and looked down at her. Sneha unconsciously tipped her face back at him realizing in that instant that even if they were standing he'd be towering above her. Nikhil eyes ran over her upturned face framed by soft dark brown curls that fell below her shoulders. A sudden expression in Nikhil's eyes had Sneha feel some nervous flutters in her stomach. Shocked by her reaction to him, she hurriedly looked away.

'Gayatri is back from Europe. And she's not over Aditya.'

With those ominous words, wasting no time Nikhil walked away. And they call queens dramatic, Sneha thought even as she tried to fully absorb the meaning of those threatening words. Nikhil passed Nandini who was still on the phone and waved her a casual bye. He did stop to hand over a few notes to the server at their table.

In seconds, the two men at the other table followed him out. Nikhil might have freed her and the room of his magnetic physical presence, yet those green eyes and his parting words haunted Sneha's anxious mind.

## Chapter 5: Waiting for someone?

In a few minutes, Nandini came back to the table. Sneha had regained her composure by then.

'So what was all that about? You and Nikhil?' Nandini asked sitting down in her chair.

'BORING!' Sneha waved her hand dismissively. The less she said or thought about that insufferable man the better. However Sneha was still surprised by the intense revulsion, anxiety and everything else she had experienced around Nikhil. Has to be the shock of seeing him, it won't happen again, Sneha decided with a firm shake of her head.

'BS!' Nandini disagreed loudly.

'What?' Sneha asked distracted.

'You both were positively rubbing sparks off each other. Tell me woman! NOW!' Nandini whined, shaking her stylish dark hair vigorously.

'He did mention Gayatri was in town.' Sneha knew how to distract her friend.

Sneha's words had the desired effect. Nandini sat back chewing the side of a finger. 'Nikhil is extremely close to Gayatri and her family. They were always tight. If he's saying it and it's about Gayatri then it's true.' Nandini grimaced, 'Tit.'

Sneha rolled her eyes. 'The whole idea of mispronouncing cuss words is to bring them down a level, not make them worse.'

'What?'

'I don't say dammit, I say hammit. For bloody I'll say loody or poody. For shit I'll say hit or bit, not tit. Yuckkk!'

'Sorry!' Nandini grumbled even as she flipped Sneha the bird.

Sneha sighed, 'Don't be scared of Gayatri. Get that tattooed on your head if you must! But remember you and Adi did no wrong. Aditya was always in love with you and even a blind person in the room with you and Adi can sense that. Ok!' Sneha demanded an answer.

'I know, but he did break off the engagement with her because of me!' Nandini replied dully.

Sneha snorted, 'If I remember correctly, Adi broke off the unofficial engagement even before the official announcement of their wedding date. He did the right thing.'

Nandini exhaled, 'Oh well.' She shook her head as if to clear it and continued, 'Adi called. I have to go home. We have to go out with someone from work.'

'Cool!' Sneha grabbed her bags and got up.

'So you didn't tell me how you and Nikhil met,' said Nandini matching Sneha's strides.

'BORING!' Sneha reiterated as they exited the pub. The two headed for the elevators. Sneha firmly kept her face angled off the exhibition going on across from them. Thus she missed Nikhil standing at the entrance, his enigmatic glance steadily watching Sneha.

As Nandini pulled up front of Sneha's apartment complex, her nagging was still very much on. 'Why the fudge aren't you telling me?'

Sneha raised a shaking fist in front of her, 'Oh God kulta for the last time, he and I met ages ago and very, very briefly. Will you please quit it? Can I go now? Advley will be waiting!'

Grumpily Nandini pressed the auto unlock button. 'Fine. Wait and see who I invite this weekend,' she muttered under her breath.

'What did you say?' Sneha asked, grabbing her bags from the back seat.

'Nothing.' Nandini's smile was a ghostly spectre.

Narrowing her eyes momentarily and menacingly at her BFF, Sneha alighted and a quick goodbye later headed for the building elevators. The rest of evening was lost in cuddling, bathing and feeding her son followed by an hour or so of pending office work before she hit the sack.

Next day, Sneha headed straight for an exhibition after work. A very expensive and crowded exhibition.

She went up to the topmost floor and walked straight to the entrance of the large hall. For some strange reason the song 'Singham, Singham' clanked loudly in her mind. She swung open the tinted glass doors only to be instantly engulfed by humanity. The kind that wore excessive perfume, spoke softly and carried small clutch bags that housed multiple credit cards. The person Sneha sought stood close to the doors conversing with a young couple.

Nikhil noticed Sneha just as she saw him. A slightly raised eyebrow was all Sneha received as a greeting and then he went back to the conversation.

Uncertainly, Sneha moved to the side as she allowed others coming in behind her to pass.

A woman approached her. 'Could you open case number 14? My sister would like take a look.'

Sneha straightened. 'I'm sorry. I don't work here,' she replied.

'Oh sorry!' came the reply. 'It's just that your clothes...' the woman trailed off and hurriedly walked away. Sneha ruefully glanced at her clothes. A crisp white shirt tucked into slim-fitting black pants may make her look taller and take some voluptuousness away from her curves, yet it was the most common dress code for staff in the service industry.

Singham now played as 'Chewing gum' 'chewing gum' in her head. A bemused Sneha was about to look for a place to sit when Nikhil approached her. 'Waiting for someone?'

Sneha immediately altered her expression to severe, 'Yes. You!' Unconsciously, Sneha's hands balled into fists at her side. Why did she feel as if she had a fight on her hands? 'Is there somewhere we can talk for a few minutes in private?' Sneha asked evenly.

'I've already accepted your indirect apology yesterday,' Nikhil reminded her coolly. He knew he was purposely goading the woman in front of him but he could not help himself. Nikhil was no longer the eager to please, always polite kind of bloke. The sooner Sneha realized that the better. He knew better now, life itself had taught him that harsh lesson. Only give an inch if you can take a mile!

Sneha felt like gnashing her teeth but she would not give the exasperating man in front of her that satisfaction. 'Very generous of you,' she quipped sarcastically. 'It's something else.'

Nikhil seemed to debate for a few seconds, all the while staring at Sneha; his look piercing as if it was trying to pick on her thoughts. Sneha met his stare and stood her ground. The signal was clear to Nikhil that if Sneha wanted to talk then the talk would happen.

'Let's step out.' Nikhil did not wait to see if Sneha followed him. With quick, familiar, long strides he headed out of the already open glass doors. Sneha assumed that they would be heading to the pub across from the exhibition hall. On this floor that was the only other place with chairs. She was wrong. Nikhil marched straight up to the elevators and waited for her there.

'Here?' Sneha murmured surprised.

'You said it won't take long so I'm guessing you have somewhere to go,' Nikhil shot back. The icy tone of his voice told Sneha another story; he was eager to get rid of her.

Sneha tried not to feel insulted but failed completely. Her hazel eyes positively shot sparks at him. 'What did you mean yesterday when you said "Gayatri hasn't gotten over Aditya?"'

'I meant exactly what you heard,' Nikhil's reply was smooth even

Sneha had her hands pulled back, her stance defiant. The action only strained her blouse tighter across her chest drawing attention to her attractive curves.

'Was it a warning?' Sneha demanded crossing her hands over her chest, oblivious to the fact that it hid a part of her that Nikhil had suddenly discovered to be very fetching.

Pity! Nikhil pushed that thought away from his mind. 'Are you going to challenge her to a duel?' Nikhil kept his expression bored as his eyes skimmed over Sneha's head back to the entrance hall.



Sneha saw what he wanted her to see — his eagerness to get back to work. ‘Of course not. I just want to make sure that Gayatri knows her boundaries. Aditya and Nandini are married.’

‘And marriages last forever?’ Nikhil shot back. Abruptly his eyes intensely, and very briefly, clashed with hers. Sneha noticed the brown flecks in his green eyes.

‘Yes some are,’ Sneha retorted. ‘And as Gayatri’s friend you should give her correct advice.’

‘Is that all?’ Nikhil was terse.

Sneha was taken aback by his curtness. ‘Ya... that’s all.’ Not too many people on this planet left her tongue-tied. The Nikhil she remembered wasn’t one of them. What happened to him, Sneha wondered, staring at his chiseled face that held no softness.

Sneha thought she saw a flicker of amusement sparkle in his dead-as-a-fish stare but it was so brief that she was sure she had imagined it.

‘I’m not the only who has changed!’ Nikhil countered, his look astute.

Sneha inwardly cringed. Crap! Had she said that out loud? That might show that she cared enough to notice. No way José! ‘Bye,’ beating a hasty retreat Sneha punched the button to call the elevator. Nikhil did not stop her.

Even though they did not exchange another word, Nikhil quietly stood at her side until the elevator came and took Sneha away from him. ‘Horrible man!’ Sneha blurted to an empty elevator.

As Nikhil walked back to the exhibition he could not help but recall the Sneha he had met ages ago. Even then, she had been a pesky slip of a girl with an equally pesky affliction of wandering into other people’s lives. She had worn her hair differently then. Short curls that framed her face and ended above her shoulders unlike the tight bun today. Then her body had been that of a girl’s, lean, with the gait of a child. However, now her body was that of a woman with generous curves and inherent grace as she walked. He recalled the way her blouse had pulled taut over her torso. Frowning, Nikhil stopped short of the glass doors. How had her body of then and now stayed in his memory? His taste was different. Nikhil’s gut told him that Sneha would not know uncluttered or functional, the characteristics he sought in a woman and a relationship, even if they were her first and last name. She seemed like the kind to bring knives to a gun fight and it would make no difference to her if the cause was hers or not. That very instant Nikhil made a solemn resolution to not think about Sneha and stay as far as possible from the meddling woman who so easily got under his skin.

However one thing that Nikhil missed about Sneha was that she wasn’t easily thwarted. At the exhibition Sneha had discreetly picked up a business card of Nikhil’s firm, D.C. Inc, which provided his office address in Worli.

'I will find out where Gayatri is and meet that tart face-to-face, once and for all and without any of that insufferable jerk's help,' Sneha muttered heading out of the elevator. The exhibition was on until tomorrow so she knew Nikhil would be here and not in his office.

The next day around noon, feigning an appointment in Worli, Sneha left her office. A woman on a mission, all she was missing was a cape and a plan. After a short drive, Sneha pulled into the parking lot of the multistorey building with a completely tinted glass exterior. As she walked into the lobby, Sneha made sure to read the names of few other offices in the building. Seven of the uppermost floors in the building belonged to D.C. Inc.

Casually Sneha slid into the elevator behind a group of professionally attired people. After pressing the button for the topmost floor, she hovered in the back.

Sneha was nervous. By the time the elevator reached the top floor, she was alone in it.

'Ohhh!' Sneha recoiled just as she stepped out.

### **Chapter 6: A. Patel and Associates**

Did the building house a prison? Why were there so many security personnel? Near the elevator alone, she counted four.

'You are here to meet?' asked the guard closest to her, brandishing a forbidding looking gun.

Sneha gulped, 'Uhh umm, Nikhil Chandel.'

'You have an appointment Ma'am?' He asked next.

'Umm yes, kind of. I mean yes I do,' Sneha replied with more confidence that she felt.

'The code number please,' he requested, as another guard with a paper and pen joined him, ready to jot it down.

'What code?' Bewildered, Sneha fumbled.

'Whenever meetings are scheduled with Mr. Chandel or any other directors, a code Ma'am is sent via email.'

'Well I wasn't sent any code. No problem. I'll just come back some other time.'

Another guard stepped between her and the elevator.

'Just a minute. We need to check you.'

'Excuse me! Check me? What rubbish!' Sneha nervously pulled her bag and folders in front of her body. Where the heck had she come?

'Please come this way!' The guard replied sternly.

'No friggin' way!' Sneha made a move to jab the button to call the elevator. A strong vice-like grip on her elbow stopped her. She was about to scream her lungs out or do something equally rash when a woman popped her head out from a room at the end of the corridor.

'What's going on?' The elderly woman dressed in draped cotton sari asked stepping out of the door.

'Help me. Please!' Sneha wailed. The woman, with her salt and pepper hair tied neatly in a bun at her nape, beckoned the guards with some authority, 'Bring her to my office please.' She disappeared back into her room.

'You heard her. I want to go to her office.' Sneha brought out repressed indignation. The guard hustled her into the room. Sneha caught a glimpse of a clean, expansive room in muted shades of cream with a small fountain and expensive looking art on the walls.

The woman sat behind a clear glass desk that appeared as spotless and well-kept as her appearance. 'Your name Miss?'

'Who's asking?' Sneha fidgeted between the guards, buying time.

'Who's that?'

Sneha looked around. It was Nikhil's voice, sounding somewhat muffled. 'Where is he?' Sneha whispered to the woman in the sari. As an answer, she swivelled her computer screen towards Sneha. Sneha and Nikhil came face-to-face with each other yet again. Nikhil's expression was incredulous and Sneha's smile flustered. 'Hi!' Sneha raised her hand awkwardly in greeting.

'What are you doing there?' Nikhil barked. His expression turned dark and ominous as his green eyes glowed hostile. The guards left the room.

Sneha's chin rose defiantly and, purposely ignoring Nikhil's angry eyes burning a hole in her, she addressed the woman behind the monitor, 'I was actually looking for A. Patel and Associates and came here by mistake. A Patel and Associates have an office here right?'

Nikhil spoke with obvious impatience, 'Who at A Patel and Associates were you going to meet?'

Sneha was a good chess player with a bad poker face. 'I'm here to make a presentation to the managing director. A... Adarsh Patel.' She waved the folder in her hands in front of her. 'I'm trying to get their business.'

Nikhil was not impressed. 'Mrs. Ali!'

The woman swivelled the monitor to her. 'Yes Sir.'

'Please have Sneha take a seat in my office. I'm on my way. I'll be there in a few minutes.'

Sneha leaned forward, speaking urgently to Mrs. Ali, 'Please tell him I have to be somewhere else.' Sneha heard an impatient cluck from the monitor.

'Seriously. I should be on my way.' Sneha pointed at the door.

'Mrs. Ali, call Hiren,' Nikhil emphasized on the name, 'the M.D. of A. Patel and Associates and tell him Sneha is going to be delayed.' Nikhil did not get the satisfaction of seeing the expression on her face.

'Sure!' Mrs. Ali put a headpiece in her ear.

Sneha hastily put her hands out surrendering. 'Fine. I'll wait. I'll send Mr. Hiten Patel an email from my phone right now,' she held up her BlackBerry. Sneha gave Mrs. Ali her most winsome smile. Mrs. Ali rotated the monitor back to Sneha.

Feigning coolness that belied the anxiety eating at her insides, Sneha coolly met Nikhil's rapier-like gaze. 'Hiren and not Hiten,' Nikhil said. He saw Sneha inadvertently sink her teeth into her lower lip, a mindlessly endearing gesture that revealed her nervousness even though she bravely glared back at him. 'I'll see you in a bit.' Nikhil purposely made his words and tone rather imperious and chilly. She could see no softness in him.

'Fine!' Sneha voiced, her face composed except for the thin line of sweat above her upper lip and a rather red chewed-out lower lip. Nikhil's eyes slipped to her mouth, again. Biting off a cuss word that was directed more at his treacherous mind than the bothersome busybody in his office, he cut the connection and the screen went blank.

Haramchor! No haramkhor personified! Sneha fumed. It wasn't her fault that the first name of A. Patel and Associate's M.D. was Hiren and not something with an A.

Mrs Ali got to her feet. 'This way Ms.?'

'Gupta. Sneha Gupta.'

Mrs. Ali and Sneha walked into the foyer. The security guards were back at their post outside the elevator. She caught one or two smirks as she passed them. Sneha ignored them for she had a bigger problem coming her way in a few minutes.

Sneha and Mrs. Ali stopped at the last door that stood apart from the others for it was the only one monogrammed with two small gold leaves entwined at the stems.

Opening the door, Mrs. Ali ushered her in. 'Mr. Chandel's office. Please have a seat. Can I get you something? Cappuccino or tea?'

Sneha was tempted by the cappuccino but she declined. Mrs. Ali left her alone in the large room that housed sleek, contemporary furniture. The walls all around were lit up with lights lined discreetly at the bottom of the walls. A sleek rectangular glass table sat in the middle of the

room. A wire mesh black chair sat empty behind it. On the upper half of the wall behind the table was some kind of a mural painted in muted colours with an uneven surface. On the lower half of it a quiet waterfall that cascaded making soft lapping noises as the water flowed. The floor under Sneha's feet was dark and echoed her footsteps more than she would have liked to hear. Nikhil's office was overwhelmingly modern and stark. Just like him! Sneha fumed.

Apart from the dominant desk and chair she was staring at, there was another seating arrangement in the room. Just to the side of where Sneha stood lay two, rather large, black leather chairs, a black leather sofa, an oddly shaped glass table that had a silver coloured stump for its base. Sneha gingerly put her stuff on the table and sank into one of the black leather chairs.

A soft humming sound distracted Sneha from her scattered thoughts. It came from the desk. Curiously, she walked over to the other side of the glass table. The 27-inch Apple flat screen lay blank except for the miniscule blinking green light at the bottom right corner. A tempted Sneha chewed her bottom lip and smoothed some imaginary creases in her clothes. Her right hand shot out for a mouse. Except there was nothing on the table. Her hands searched the glass surface for a keyboard, or something to bring the monitor to life. It was then that she noticed the faint pale blue light on the surface next to her, a shining faint imprint of a hand. Tentatively looking up to make sure she was still alone in the room, Sneha placed her hand on the imprint.

'Whoa!' The screen sprung to life. Her luck had just changed: Nikhil's dayplanner was open on the screen. Using the imprint, which was a mouse of sorts, Sneha quickly turned the pages. 'Jackpot!' she exclaimed, her face lit up as she caught the entry for the day after. Sneha scanned a few more dates and then quickly shut the planner.

She moved back to the leather chair, her mood much more buoyant than what it was minutes ago. Sneha did not have to wait for long. Soon, Nikhil walked in, his steps sure and glance seething as he sank into the chair behind his desk. With trepidation Sneha would not show, she watched the animal-like grace of his taut muscular body further enhanced by his smooth grey and black pin-striped trousers and a white shirt that sat well on his broad shoulders. His hair looked tousled as if had run his fingers through it multiple times. Sneha felt some satisfaction hoping she was the reason for those running fingers. Nikhil glared at her before she could hide her unexpected smile.

'You wanted my attention? You have it. Why are you here? Don't give me the A. Patel nonsense,' Nikhil snapped. He did not raise his voice but every word he spoke sounded menacing.

Sneha hid her irritation but not all of it, 'Well hello to you too.' Her words earned her the narrowing of those glimmering green eyes. Unfazed she continued, 'Like I mentioned earlier, I am here by mistake. A. Patel and—'

'Show me the presentation,' Nikhil cut Sneha off mid-sentence.

'Excuse me? What presentation?' Sneha asked just as she realized what Nikhil was alluding to. Before Nikhil could say more, she waved her hands dismissively. 'Oh that presentation. The one for A. Patel and Shah associates?' Nikhil nodded, his eyes glinting. 'Sorry can't do. It's confidential.'

'What can your advertising company do for a tax accountant?' Nikhil fired next.

'Ughh, well you know—'

'What is the name of your contact there? The M.D. is no Hiren Patel. The company is run by Anand Patel. A. Patel and Associates,' Nikhil's informed her caustically.

'I knew it,' Sneha reflexively snapped her fingers. 'The name had to begin with an A.' Sneha's self-righteous smile was brief and died a slow, torturous death under his scrutiny.

'I'll repeat my question. Why are you here? Bear in mind I have only so much patience.' Again, Nikhil did not raise his voice by a single decibel but his nostrils became pinched. Sneha's face stayed defiant but Nikhil saw the slight flush on her cheeks and how her pink lips parted to take a quick gulp of air. She was nervous. Good! He thought. She should be!

'What will you do if I don't?' Sneha spoke quietly and took a step back as though she was anticipating him to lunge across the room at her.

Lunging might be a tad too much, but Nikhil definitely wanted to give her a thorough shake till all her hare-brained schemes fell out of her head. Silently counting till ten, Nikhil ran a hand through his thick dark hair. A few of those dark locks fell onto his forehead.

Sneha dragged her eyes away from his face. A cold man with colder manners, she dubbed him. Even still water held more ripples in comparison to Nikhil's impassive face. 'I want to meet Gayatri,' Sneha came clean.

Not saying a word, Nikhil leaned back in his chair and watched Sneha with hooded eyes revealing nothing of his thoughts. Sneha was the first to look away.

'Are you a friend of Gayatri's?' Nikhil asked, emphasizing his words.

A rude snort from Sneha answered that question better than words.

'Thought so. Are you married to Aditya?'

'C'mon! Really?' Sneha slung her bag on her shoulder. Talking to him was futile. She had to get out of the room. Nikhil's presence was stifling and overwhelming, especially when he stared at her with those hooded lids. That look was once again giving her flutters in her belly.

'Then whatever happens between Gayatri and anyone else is not your business,' Nikhil retorted just as Mrs. Ali brought in a tray with two cups filled with steaming liquid. The coffee teased Sneha's nostrils.

'You can take one cup away. Sneha was just leaving,' Nikhil ordered the older woman, his smile as usual starting and ending at his lips.

Even Mrs. Ali seemed a little taken back at her boss's manners. Nikhil noticed the hurt on Sneha's face. He refused to feel sorry for her, yet he continued to stare at Sneha wanting to see all the emotions that chased across her face and eyes. Mrs. Ali made a quick exit with the extra cup. Sneha waited just long enough for the secretary to exit the room.

'Your reasons for protecting Gayatri and my reasons for protecting Nandini are the same,' Sneha said, getting to her feet.

'I truly doubt that but do enlighten me.' Nikhil tore off the edge of a packet of sweetener as he poured it into his cup. He wondered if he should offer her a cup of coffee. After all it was the civil thing to do and he was a civil, rational man. Except he had a feeling that after his earlier rudeness, the hot coffee might just end up being thrown in his face.

Oblivious to Nikhil's thoughts, Sneha reasoned, 'Nandini is my best friend just like Gayatri—'

'Gayatri is family,' Nikhil cut her off 'Anything else?' Even as his hand lifted the tiny spoon to stir his coffee, his unblinking eyes did not leave her face for a second.

Sneha valiantly fought the urge to upturn the hot coffee on his head. So maybe Nikhil was a closet psychic. Giving him a last, quelling look with her nose in the air, Sneha turned away and wordlessly walked out. She tried not to stomp on the wooden floor.

Sneha was oblivious to the elderly bespectacled man, who after a few floors entered the elevator she was going down in.

'Zero IQ behavior and buffoons with weapons! You just watch Chandel, you just watch. Ha!' She threatened no one in particular as the elevator continued its descent.

The elderly bespectacled man standing next to her gave her a wary look.

'What?' Sneha countered belligerently.

'Nothing!' Mr. Anand Patel of A. Patel and Associates meekly countered, moving a little away from her.

A few minutes after Sneha left, Nikhil buzzed Mrs. Ali on the intercom.

'I need the CCTV footage of the time she was alone in my office,' Nikhil asked casually, reading his emails.

'Yes Sir.' As an afterthought she added, 'she seems harmless.'

Nikhil was quiet for a moment in which he was sure Mrs. Ali was squirming. 'The footage.' He hung up.

Mrs. Ali hurried to the security room. Her boss was a man of very few words who tolerated even fewer mistakes. The turnover ratio of their company was high, not because of the employees but the employer.

In less than ten minutes, she knocked on Nikhil's door.

'Come in.'

Mrs. Ali opened the door. 'The CCTV footage.' She carried a thin opaque CD case in her hand. Nikhil nodded. She placed the CD next to him.

'Thank you.' Nikhil gave her his usual smile that was forbidden to touch his cheeks and eyes.

'Thank you.' Mrs. Ali left his room.

Nikhil inserted the CD and watched the video. At the point when Sneha shouted, 'Jackpot', he frowned. Nikhil re-opened his planner which he knew he usually left open on his computer by habit and went back and forth over the appointments of the next few days.

'Hell no!' Frustrated, Nikhil rubbed his temples. He knew what had Sneha so excited. Sneha Gupta – the woman he did not want to meet again as her antics and actions, and not to forget her blouses, caused a cannonball sized chink in his armour – he knew, would be soon paying him a visit.