

ONE

In the summer of 1971, I was still learning how to pour tea correctly from my grandmother. I was not Japanese either, nor a geisha. I simply had the misfortune of being the granddaughter of Zaitoon Begum, the widow of the last Nawab of Jalalabad.

Wearing her usual *gharara* and French lace *duppatta*, The Broad watched me impassively as I picked up the china teapot with a trembling hand and tried to keep it steady.

“Put it down. Tell me what is wrong.”

An easy one, thank God.

“One is supposed to have a firmer grip,” I replied with composure.

“Don’t be ridiculous. One is supposed to fill the teapot no more than three quarters. Now lift the Wedgwood, which is only half-filled, and therefore not an accident waiting to happen, and pour.”

I was convinced she was born from Satan’s rib, probably around the same time as Eve was of Adam’s. She’d married my poor unsuspecting grandfather, who had the foresight to play, and then use as escape route, the gentlemanly sport of polo. God was kind to him. Five years after their marriage, he died. The Broad never forgave him. It wasn’t his death that bothered her. It was that little detail that he’d died playing polo. She felt he should’ve died doing something useful.

I put the strainer on the teacup and lifted the other teapot.

“Oh dear,” she murmured.

I looked down.

Ooops. One must always hold the strainer in one’s hand and never, ever make one’s life easier by putting it on the teacup. In a swift movement, I lifted the strainer, and poured the tea. Unfortunately, in my nervousness, some of it spilled in the saucer.

She was still watching. She was always watching, like God.

I searched my mind frantically, for what ‘one’ was ‘supposed’ to do in such a dilemma. Change the saucer for formal tea. Although it wasn’t comfortable, it was still an informal gathering. It had to be, we were related. So, place paper napkin on saucer, hide offending article in a plate

away from the discerning eye of the guest, or in this case, omniscient grandmother.

I looked up again. She smiled.

Well, not really. She relaxed her mouth a little, and that was what passed for her smile. I shifted my sieve-holding hand to the next teacup and poured.

“Ahhh.”

Now what? I wasn't born to pour tea, couldn't she see that?

Baba caught my eye and winked in encouragement. The highlight of my childhood and adolescence, was that twice a year, a big, genial man who reminded me of Santa, used to visit us. Jovial and funny, he brought me presents—useless things that The Broad never did, like chocolates, and heels and other girly things and I loved him with all my heart. I could laugh, relax, make mistakes and not hate myself for making them. Baba didn't mind a little spilled tea in his saucer.

With The Broad I could never laugh. We appreciated each other's sarcastic verbal punches but an honest to God laugh was rare, if ever. As my sarcasm had honed, she'd livened up more and more and so by twenty, I was quite adept.

Baba, and his wife, whom I called Bua, a less intimidating version of The Broad, had returned from England for good that summer. Bua wore a uniform garb like The Broad. Hers were saris. She wore them day or night, formal or informal; rain or shine it was always saris—immaculate and tasteful. She was an Indian Muslim and, like so many Pakistanis, had relatives on both sides of the border.

“Sorry, Bi Amma,” I murmured.

Major faux pas. One was not supposed to fill multiple cups of tea and keep one's guests waiting while their tea got steadily cold before their helpless eyes.

The Broad waved a delicate bejeweled hand and said, “Oh, never mind, we'll try again tomorrow. Now I need my cup of tea. Sanaullah, bring us some tea and pour it for us.”

I was a disappointment to her, like my mother. She'd taken after her father rather than having the decency to be her mother's carbon copy. All I ever heard was how she'd had a 'foolish nature just like her father', which meant that she was a pleasant, trusting person, unlike The Broad and me. We were sarcastic, cynical, know-it-alls.

The Broad never mentioned Nameless, the penniless adventurer my mother had had the gall to ‘fall in love’ with and marry. The story was that my handsome father, the charming cretin, had come to Jalalabad for a trip and my nineteen-year-old mother, having fallen in love, had eloped and married him.

When they returned obsequiously for The Broad’s blessing, she was having none of it and turned them away in anger. They loped around for a while, till Zainab—my mother—became pregnant, no doubt in some dark and dingy room Nameless had rented. Depositing her promptly at Gulaab Mahal, he disappeared. My mother died two years later of pneumonia, I’d heard told, but I knew she’d died of a broken heart. Nameless killed her.

If I hadn’t had Zafar to listen to my cribbing, I might have gone mad. Zafar was my half-brother. The first secret and deserted wife of Nameless found out his most recent whereabouts and followed him to Jalalabad when I was two. She didn’t quite die on our threshold the minute she gave Zafar into the questionable care of my grandmother, as gossip seemed to suggest. She died three days later. He was seven at the time and remembered that she’d been sick for a long time.

Zafar and I loved one another the moment we set our green eyes—a common legacy from our absent father—on each other. No one ever noticed his green eyes though, the lucky bastard. No one even mentioned that they were green. Mine though, were the bane of my life. People melted as soon as their eyes met mine. ‘Unusually green’ and ‘almond-shaped’ were words I’d heard so many times, they didn’t mean anything anymore. If my eyes made people want to love me, my caustic tongue cured them soon enough.

Zafar hated Nameless. I had a love-hate relationship with the idea of him. I wanted him to come back, cry and beg for my forgiveness, which I would grant after a lot of emotional blackmail. That was how the story ran through my head for years. As I grew older though, questions cropped up in my mind that left me disturbed. Why hadn’t he ever tried to come back to find out what had happened to me? Didn’t he love me at all?

I tried not to think like that. My imaginary scenarios were so much better.

I was probably the only citizen of this country to be homeschooled. I knew we were amongst the privileged few. We discussed the fate of the nation as if they were problems our friends were having; thrilling but sad.

The Broad and two retired army oldies with a huge crush on her, were my tutors. I learnt everything she did as a child, even ballet. She'd had a tough childhood. Her French grandmother and the paternal Nawab elitist grandmother were in constant competition apparently. She'd ended up having to learn multiple languages, *kathak* and ballet, amongst other things.

"Back straight," Miss Brown, intoned patiently for two of the longest years of my life.

"Is that all you see, Miss Brown? Look at her feet," The Broad countered, or something similar designed to criticize Miss Brown and her methods. She was told every day that she knew nothing, and if The Broad herself were younger, she'd do a better job of it herself. Every day, I had to sit with Miss Brown and comfort her for hours afterwards. Until the day I decided to steal ancient family silver to buy her passage to England, and provide enough money for her to survive on till she could earn her livelihood. Even though nothing was proved to incriminate me, I had to do extra French for a whole month in penance. The Broad knew. She always did.

My homeschooling was fun, though. My education encompassed old Hollywood, Indian and Pakistani movie classics. I read Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Milton, Rumi, Shakespeare, Iqbal, Saadi, Voltaire, Plato, and Al-Ghazzali. My head was full of philosophies I was too young to understand, or appreciate fully. Nonetheless, I enjoyed them and I had a great foundation.

I was even subjected to a free lesson on sex education by The Broad. I was twelve and saw two birds at it, only I thought that the aggressive bird was trying to eat the sparrow and I ran screaming around Gulaab Mahal, "Save the bird! Save the bird! It'll kill her!" Instinctively I knew the sparrow was female. When Tariq *Chacha* found the bird in alleged danger, he snorted, turned red, and ran. I screamed. He didn't slacken his whirlwind speed.

The world was a cruel place that day.

That summer of 1971, things began to change. The most momentous event was the return of the dreamboat, the prince among mortals, my one and only, Kunwar Rohail Khanzada.

After thirteen years of living a nomadic life of leisure, he'd come back with his daughter. His wife had died in childbirth. He was a distant relative and would have been Nawab since he was the only male descendent left, if the custom hadn't been abolished. I'd last seen him when I was about nine. That was when I'd fallen in love with him. By the time I was ten, I'd made plans to marry him. Zafar knew and had made promises to aid and abet me.

It was time to set the plan in motion because Kunwar was here, at last.



TWO

Kunwar was even more magnificent than I remembered. He was darker than was fashionable but the hazel eyes made an intriguing contrast. He was tall-ish, very broad, and had silky, black hair. I'd touched it when I'd sat in his lap as a nine-year-old. He'd been twenty-eight, I think.

Kunwar, a Hindu title some people had retained, suited him. I referred to him that way because it sounded so romantic, and he was so dreamy. I just couldn't call him Rohail...uh...no way. His daughter, Manhal, loved me immediately. I'd been counting on my eyes—some good out of them at last. How long was he going to be able to resist them?

Turned out, nearly all summer.

His stubborn refusal to acknowledge me as the possible mother of his thirteen-year-old and all his future children rather flummoxed me. I was at my wit's end. I called up my partner in this ill-fated scheme for help.

"Zafar, the eagle has not landed—the eagle refuses to land actually. I need help."

"What?" He sounded tired.

Zafar had trained to be a lawyer. He'd even started working with a respectable firm in Jalalabad. However, that was no excuse for dullness.

"I said, the eagle..."

"I heard. I just don't know what that means. You're not going to start on about your grandfather's prized falcons again are you?"

"Zafar, eagles are not falcons, they're...oh, forget it. I'm talking about Kunwar, you idiot."

The fool started sniggering. I didn't like that. I knew exactly what to do, to keep him in line.

"Remember our pact, Zafar. You help me with Kunwar, and I'll help you with Mahnoor."

Mahnoor was Colonel Farhat's daughter. The only law firm in Jalalabad, and where my foolish brother worked, belonged to Rtd. Colonel Farhat Ullah. Zafar and the boss's daughter seemed to have

caught each other's eye and so I had to pretend to be her friend, pass on love letters and arrange meetings when I could. I was a regular pimp.

Zafar wanted to marry her eventually. Everyone knew Zafar's story. Sadly, the world was a prejudiced and judgmental place. The Colonel, however, would do anything The Broad told him to. He'd even accept abandoned sons of 'Nameless' adventurers as sons-in-law.

"Fine. What do you want me to do?" He sounded just a bit cross.

I smiled. It vanished as soon as I realized I didn't have an answer to his question. What was one supposed to do in such situations?

"I don't know. Tell him I know how to pour tea correctly. I can impersonate Ava Gardner."

Silence.

"Zafar?"

"I was contemplating the repercussions of those disclosures."

I did sarcasm well. I didn't take it as well.

"You know, I think Uncle Farhat just dropped by. I'll pop down and see what he thinks of prospective sons-in-law, shall I? Did you know Baba's son's coming soon? Must be of marriageable age and—"

"Cut it out."

I laughed. He sounded so churlish.

"Well then?"

"You're too young for him and it shows. Behave in a more grown up way, if you can manage that? You can start with showing proper respect to your older brother."

Of course. That was it.

"You do have brains! I need to make him realize I'm fit to be a mother. Brilliant, thanks Zafar."

What I needed was a different wardrobe. I was up and away on a shopping spree.

I returned home later that day to find The Broad sitting with someone, their backs towards the entrance. My eyes went straight to Kunwar, sitting on the opposite sofa. Those hazel eyes in that darkish complexion just made me all gooey inside. I put on my dazzling, innocent-but-yours smile, and looked into his eyes, which were full of shy amusement and doubt.

Soon, my love, I promised. Soon, all the doubts will vanish.

I was dressed up older, thanks to Zafar's input. My hair was curled into flirty abandon. I would've worn red lipstick and clinched the deal but I'd desisted, knowing The Broad would likely kill me. 'Good girls' wore red lipstick only after they were married.

I gave a pretty little sigh and sat down beside him. Kunwar smiled but wouldn't look at me. God, how shy could a forty-year-old millionaire be? The more he procrastinated, the more determined I became. I had saris with tiny blouses lined up as my next sensual attack on him. I really couldn't figure out what else to do. The tiny blouses were my last resort.

Just about then, the compulsion I'd been feeling to look left became too strong and I did...to behold a specimen of alpha male. He was perfect; from his dark, slightly wavy hair, cut to perfection, to his dark, dark eyes with defined eyebrows, a straight beautiful nose, the sexiest mouth I'd ever seen, and a golden complexion. Even though he was seated, I could tell he was tall.

I hated him on principle.

First off, he was too perfect to be any good to anyone else. Secondly, he was looking at me with his eyes full of mocking laughter. I could tell he knew what I was on about with Kunwar, because he shot a bland stare towards him. Kunwar chortled. Alpha Male narrowed his eyes and looked a little dangerous.

My attention was diverted by The Broad's glare.

In icy tones she said, "Chandni..."

No matter how many times I'd heard it, no matter from whom, it remained sickening and horrifying. It was disgusting. I hated my name. It made me sound like some prostitute from Pakeezah. Apparently my mother had thought sensible names were not for daughters of Nameless abandoners. What was wrong with a good old-fashioned name like Salma? Anything was better than this.

"Please, Bi Amma. Call me C." I choked with embarrassment.

Alpha Male looked at me with his smoldering eyes and said, "It's such a beautiful name. It suits you. Why would you want to have it mangled?"

I knew he'd be dumb. Something's got to give.

I fell even more in love with Kunwar because he snorted at his inane stupidity. Snorting and giggling of any sort were not permissible in the presence of The Broad, especially not by me. I flashed Kunwar a warm, take-me-I'm-yours smile.

I froze Alpha Male with my coldest look. You side with The Broad once, you are never on Team C. Never.

His eyes held something more than just laughter. It was something I'd never seen so blatantly in any one's eyes before, but recognized instinctively. Desire.

I looked away, uncomfortable and bewildered.

“Chandni, this is Taimur. Ali's son.”

This was Baba's son? Surprised, I looked at him again and he smiled as if we were old friends. Bloody hell, his teeth were perfect, too. I sneered. Surprise registered in his eyes and then, caution.

Good.

How those two nice people managed to hatch this pagan god of indecency oozing sexual magnetism I didn't know, but I wasn't going to let him come between Kunwar and me. I knew The Broad. She was already eyeing me with warning glances that spoke volumes, and eyeing Alpha Male with loving, come-hither, marry-my-granddaughter glances. Oh, the cheek of her!



THREE

When he saw me that evening, Baba came forward wearing the biggest grin ever, and asked me, like he was presenting me with my favorite toy, “Chandni, have you met my son?”

He was an intelligent, reasonable man and that he’d been reduced to asking such obvious, stupid questions pained me.

“Yes, I did Baba. In the afternoon...er...pleasure.” I was merely being polite.

Alpha Male laughed and, boring his eyes into mine, queried, “Was it really?”

I glanced at Baba, who was still smiling at me like a happy Buddha. So I had to nod. Shaking his head at my obvious cowardice, with that annoying I-own-the-world attitude, he said with a cocky grin to his father, “Yes...I think.”

Baba hugged him like he’d been lost at the Kumbh *mela* and just been found after years and years of separation. I knew what was going on. Thankfully I had inherited my brains from The Broad.

Yes, I think? Yes, *I think?*

Throughout dinner I flirted with Kunwar like a shameless hussy. He looked darker than usual. He was blushing under the tan and—progress at last—he flirted right back with those golden eyes, glancing often at Alpha Male, relishing his discomfiture. He couldn’t do anything but watch.

To kill his ‘yes I think’ fantasies forever, I froze his hot glances to me with contemptuous icy looks. His response was a uniform lazy smile, his eyes telling me things I dared not think about even in the confines of my head. My vivid imagination transported this golden, pagan sex god and me into that scene from *Gone with the Wind*, when Rhett Butler lifts Scarlett in his arms and carries her upstairs to ravish her. My cheeks felt hot. He grinned in his cocky knowing way. I was out of my depth with these sexual eye-games, but I could cut with my tongue so, *en guard!*

“Taimur, do tell us about your life in England. Your studies? Girl-friends?”

That earned me a glare from The Broad. Alpha Male choked on his water and Baba snickered. Looking surprised, Alpha Male glanced at him. He shrugged. Demure Pakistani Muslim girls didn't talk about girlfriends and boyfriends, especially in front of their elders. I didn't know how to be that paragon of virtue. I'd been brought up by The Broad.

I continued unfazed.

"I'm sure you've had many? I mean, society is so much more open in England and we are so conservative here. I'm sure you already feel...claustrophobic."

The Broad looked crestfallen. I grinned and winked at Zafar, who shook his head at me, amused and impressed. Alpha Male was history.

Narrowing his eyes, he watched me speculatively for a moment, then turned towards The Broad with a disarming smile and said, "Western culture is so different from ours. Girls over there don't have the same values as our girls do. Sometimes, it's downright embarrassing for the...er...traditional male."

His eyes worked their magic on her. The Broad blushed and tittered.

My world shook for an instant. Mouth hanging open at this betrayal of twenty years' worth of training, I glanced at Alpha Male in shock. His sardonic look claimed, *is that all you've got?*

I was too horrified to react.

"Of course, you're right. What a sensible boy."

The Broad launched into her East versus West complex and all was forgotten and forgiven. She hadn't even noticed the obvious contradictions. 'Our' culture? He'd lived in England all his life!

Never once did he look at me again the entire evening. He was smug in his total victory.

Evil Moriarty.

* * *

Later that week, The Broad had a grand dinner reception as a sort of welcome for all the prodigals who'd returned. Finally, I had my chance to act out my final seduction of Kunwar. I chose a blue sari with a brief blouse that showcased all that I had to the maximum. I was sure Kunwar didn't have a chance. Once I knew he'd arrived, I descended the staircase

in a regal, nonchalant gait, and spotted him standing with Zafar and the others.

He looked up. All I had to do was hold his eyes but the gorgeous idiot dropped his, albeit reluctantly. My disappointed gaze, as it wandered aimlessly, was captured by a pair of dark eyes that refused to drop or look away and held mine as if there was nothing else in the world that mattered except me. As the seconds ticked away a triumphant gleam invaded those sexy evil eyes.

Uriah Heep.

All evening his gaze kept locking with mine because the poor man was besotted already, I could see. He was done for and he didn't have the brains to see that I wasn't interested. He'd most likely never been denied a conquest and he didn't know how to respond to my disinterest.

I'm spoken for, you Wickham, you. Darcy awaits me.

Ignoring him, I batted my eyelashes at Kunwar, who looked as if he was going to go into a fit of convulsions at my unladylike display of sexual overtures.

"You know, you should enlist Manhal's help."

Sound advice I thought, and turned to see evil Moriarty considering me with a thoughtful expression.

"He's too dense. You're wasting your talents on him."

I was too flabbergasted to say anything, which gave him the upper hand and he continued, "He's too old for you, don't you think? You seem smitten, though. It's quite sad actually, to see you make such an effort. You virginal Asian girls don't know anything about seduction. I'll have to give you tips."

From sheer embarrassment to rage to shocked amazement, I whizzed from one stage of ire to another in seconds. Was it any surprise I was speechless? Still, he wasn't done.

"I mean the tiny blouse, the hair—genius—but..." He paused as if to mull it over. I could feel my eyes beginning to sting. How dare he talk to me about such a personal matter?

Frowning, he said softly, "I think you're trying too hard."

Evil Moriarty had a point. I continued to glare at him out of sheer spite.

"Now, now Medusa, I'm trying to help."

"Did you just call me a monster?" I choked.

People melted at my gaze. They did not turn to stone. Where was all that sarcasm when you needed it? Nowhere, apparently.

“Maybe,” he said, off-handed and unconcerned. “More to the point, there’s only one way to win him. You have to make him jealous.”

Nodding to himself as if he’d found the answer to a puzzle, without further ado, he put his hand on my bare back, and herded me out to the balcony. For the life of me, I couldn’t get the image of those two sparrows at it—on this very balcony—out of my head.

“Not only am I offering you advice, I’m generously offering myself for the job.” He let go of me. Moving a mere inches away and tilting his head, he added with a smile, “You’re welcome.”

My breath hitched with embarrassment and the burning became more acute in my eyes. Did he care? No, Alpha Male was on a roll.

“I’m sure people tell you all the time that you’re extraordinarily beautiful? You’re too smart to take that seriously, I’m sure. A woman’s body is far more important than her face. And yours is...”

He let his gaze wander all over me and I felt like the ugliest thing on planet Earth.

“Not too shabby. You’ve got nice curves...if they’re real?”

My face burnt off, I think. Alpha Male was getting too familiar with me.

“What?” I managed. It was the wrong thing to say.

Unabashed, he asked, “Nothing padded?”

My mouth fell open in a little oval of shock. He grinned. He’d scandalized me. He knew it and basked in the advantage it gave him. Smiling that lazy predatory smile he’d probably perfected when he was still in his knickers, he asked, “You do want him, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Then follow my lead. Let’s make him jealous.”

I scoffed, “You think he’d be jealous of you?”

“You’re right,” he agreed with too much speed. “He’ll probably need more than just us hanging out here...”

His voice dropped a timbre, “...alone...”

Another slow, leisurely step forward, voice softer, “...in the dark...”

I stood immobile. He came closer, adding in a whisper, “...this sultry night...”

There was hardly any distance left between us to speak of. His breath fanned my cheeks. “If maybe, I do this...” Putting his hand on my back again, he pulled me closer, “that might work. What do you think?”

My breath hitched.

“Now look...hic...Uriah...hic...Heep, this isn’t...hic...England and I’m not...hic...some hippie girl you may have...”

I caught myself just in time.

“Please go on.”

I glared at him.

Grinning from ear to ear, he said, “I insist.”

“I think...hic...I should go back in,” I managed to say stiffly.

“And here I thought you had more spunk than that, Medusa. Pity.”

I wasn’t going to play into his hands that easily. “Good hunting, Bagheera,” I said archly and tried to push him away. To no avail.

“If you’d just stop flirting with me for ten seconds, we might be able to talk strategy for you and Rohail.” Before I could disabuse him of his misconceived notions, he continued, “See, you have to understand the game first, before you can play it. Rohail is...”

“K...hic...Kunwar...”

He paused, staring at me as if I was daft.

“Kunwar?” he asked, surveyed me with pity and sighed. “That bad, huh? Kunwar. So romantic. Okay then, *Kunwar* is of another generation. He likes to do his own pursuing. Man is a hunter. We hunt, especially the elusive quarry. We want what we cannot have.”

“W...why...hic...that’s...just...hic...stupid!”

“That was profound, Medusa. But that’s just how it is.”

He radiated sexuality. I could think of nothing else except for his nearness and my bare skin under his warm lean hands.

“So, what’s with the hiccups? Nervous tic?”

Hell, yeah.

“Certainly...hic...not.”

“If you’re so nervous just standing with a man alone, with two hundred people a shout away, what are your plans for your wedding night?”

“I beg your...hic...pardon?”

My wedding night? Even I hadn’t thought of my wedding night, yet. And in any case, I’d thought I’d ask Kunwar—

“You’re going to tell him to ‘give you time’ aren’t you? You’re just the sort to do that kind of thing.”

Spawn of evil.

“I...hic...”

“You’ll say you need to ‘know’ him better ‘before’. You’ll marry him happily enough, but you won’t let the poor bugger get it on and...Are you crying?”

“N...hic...no!” I denied with too much vehemence.

“There’s nothing more unattractive than a tearful female, contrary to popular belief.” He sounded bored.

I started to cry in earnest then and whispered with all the loathing I felt for him, “You Heathcliff.”

I hated Heathcliff. He wasn’t an anti-hero. He was a crazy son-of-a-bitch, as was this guy. I had to tell Baba that his son was actually living a pauper’s life somewhere, while this spawn of Satan roamed the cobbled streets of London in designer suits. I knew all those hot looks had to hide pure evil. I was hardly ever wrong.

I whirled around in my tiny blouse and was off and away before he could say anything. I heard him trying to apologize.

Stuff it, junior, I thought.

* * *

For two whole days, I was depressed. I didn’t come out of my room and didn’t want to dress up or anything, even when Manhal came to see me, which meant *he* was here. Nope. Nothing. I’d played my last card and failed. Not only had Kunwar still remained impassive, worse, Heathcliff knew of my predicament, had made fun of me and made me cry.

I never cried. Not unless I was truly angry. Not ever because I was miserable. He’d made me feel like a fool. How had he known what I was thinking? Everything he’d said about the wedding night made me feel like a foolish melodramatic girl, high on romantic notions. I couldn’t forgive being made to feel like a fool.

Of all the men in all the world, it had to be him? It just wasn’t right. He should have been mesmerized by the eyes and *I* should have laughed at *him*. I moaned in misery and was deep in the depths of despair. I heard

someone knock at my door, I whimpered in response without thinking or looking.

The door opened. I heard a chair being lifted and brought closer to my bed where I was lying prone and lifeless.

“You look like hell.”

Satan.

I jumped up like a skittle. Gritting my teeth, I whispered, “Out, Satan.”

“Patience, Medusa. I came to apologize. I hadn’t meant to hurt your feelings, just trying to help.”

He didn’t look sorry. He looked delicious. He rocked the chair on its hind legs, staring at me with his sex-filled eyes.

“Help? That was help?”

“Well, yes. Did I, or did I not save you from your wedding night fiasco? I’m certain you won’t be saying anything of that sort to m...your future husband.”

Well, he was right there but he was never going to know.

“You know, your problem is you don’t trust people. You think I don’t want to help you ensnare Rohail.”

“I don’t want to ensnare him. I want him to fall in love with me.”

“Ah, yes, the fairytale syndrome.”

“Oh, just shut up, Rumpelstiltskin, and get lost.”

He laughed. Then said in a matter-of-fact voice, “You look and smell like a bad shrimp.”

“I’ve never smelled in my life and don’t smell now. And you shouldn’t be here smelling me anyway, Tramp.”

He laughed again and said, “I do bring out the best in you don’t I?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, ‘Enry ‘Iggins.”

He got up, calm as day, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, with his glorious smile in place, sauntered over, and kissed me on my forehead. Just like that. That cretin. I kicked him. My reaction was a little late coming and he’d reached the door by then. My forehead was still burning with the touch of his lips. Bloody Heathcliff.

“Bi Amma’s worried. Get a grip and come out. You have ten minutes or I’ll be back...”

I jumped out of bed and ran to the washroom, his wicked laughter following me. Why I was smiling I didn't know, because I was angry. Yes, I was.

That Dorian Grey.

