

# ONE

“Life can’t get better than this,” Seema thought as Manoj gently let her slide down against his chest and lower torso. As the dance drew to a close, Manoj kissed her lips passionately.

The lights came on a few moments later and they were still in their own little world, lips locked. The clapping brought them down to earth. They found themselves at the center of the dance floor. The other couples had walked away and everyone was clapping. Seema straightened her clothes as the disc jockey walked up to them with a mike.

“Am I speaking to the best dancers tonight?” He asked the audience, the hundred-odd couples that had just left the dance floor.

“YES,” they shouted in chorus.

“Do they get a solo?”

“YES.”

“What is your pleasure madam?” the DJ asked with a formal bow.

Seema was flustered. How could she select the music she would like to dance to when she had just emerged from the heaven of Manoj’s arms?

“The lady would like *Hijo De Los Rumberos, La Excelencia* please,” Manoj said.

Seema clung to him, pleased that Manoj spoke for her. She felt the intense gaze of hundreds of eyes on her as the spotlight swung on them. She was dressed to kill—the combination of her diaphanous flame-colored top and red mini skirt was ravishing.

“La Excelencia,” the DJ shouted and took his place behind his equipment. Manoj walked back a few steps, bowed low and approached Seema. She responded with grace.

For the next few minutes the two of them were in their own world again. Their coordination more than their good looks made the other dancers gasp. Their chemistry made them a perfect couple. Thunderous applause greeted them at the end of their dance. They bowed to their audience, and walked to their table.

“Tonight my darling, you set the dance floor on fire,” Manoj said

admiringly.

“I had a wonderful partner,” she responded, with a warm smile.

“Just looking at you makes me want to dance,” Manoj said.

Seema blushed.

“You’re the most beautiful woman here.”

It was her birthday and her fiancé Manoj had brought her to the City Delights Discotheque. A candle-lit dinner was to follow.

“I never asked you, where did you learn to dance?” Manoj asked her.

“At a Latin salsa club near my office.”

“So you do spend some time on yourself. I’m glad. I have always seen you head straight home to be with your mother and sister.”

“You must have noticed how my mother worries when I’m out late. She’s been very protective of the both of us since my father died. And you know how Reema is.”

“We’ll soon take care of her. I have spoken to the general manager of a beauty spa service. She will fit in there perfectly.”

“But what about her graduation?” Seema asked.

“She’s just wasting time doing a BA,” Manoj said. “Steady work will make her responsible. And the pay is good. The manager is an old friend of mine; he’ll keep an eye on her.”

“You help us in so many ways.”

“For you, I can do anything.”

Seema felt overwhelmed; how much he loved her.

Manoj ran a finger down her bare arm and she shivered. “Your skin is so silky, and those long legs of yours drive me crazy. You look so sexy when you dance.”

Seema blushed. “I want to be perfect for you. Do you think I’m beautiful?”

“You are very, very beautiful, my darling.”

“And you are handsome and very good to me.”

“Your table is ready, Mr. Prakash,” a waiter said. Manoj got up, helped Seema out of her chair and led her to the restaurant in another part of the building.

The lobby was brightly lit. Manoj put his arm around Seema’s waist. He noted with pleasure how every eye in the hotel lobby was riveted on her, the way she carried herself with pride and confidence, her beautiful face and body and her sexy outfit. She was the most beautiful woman

there. The flame-colored sleeveless top and the blood red miniskirt showed off her shapely legs beautifully, and her dusky skin had a satin glow.

Seema noticed a change in Manoj's easy gait; she looked up at him. He was gazing at a group of older men sitting on sofas sipping cocktails. Manoj's expression had changed. He suddenly looked rather polite and respectful.

He led her to them.

"Manoj? What brings you here?" A distinguished-looking older man asked with a smile.

"This is my fiancée Seema, sir," Manoj replied, introducing her. "We are celebrating her birthday. Seema, Mr. Sanghani is the financial brains behind one of the largest investment banks of the world," Seema saw how Manoj was in awe of the man.

"And charges the earth for his advice," lamented an immaculately dressed gentleman. They all laughed. They were probably good friends and were pulling Mr. Sanghani's leg.

"But his greatest virtue is helping companies in trouble," someone else said. Seema turned her head around to see who had spoken. The voice was so ordinary, the tone so flat. Whosoever spoke did not want to draw attention to himself; he only wanted to inform his audience of Sanghani's virtues. "He likes to help entrepreneurs more than to earn money."

"You're embarrassing me, Doctor," Mr. Sanghani said.

"Mr. Sanghani is all that and much more..." Manoj said.

He paused for a moment and then introduced Seema.

"Seema manages the Ahmedabad office of Intellitel, sir."

Seema noticed how Manoj stood respectfully with his hands folded in front of him. Mr. Sanghani and the other men who sat with him seemed to be very important people.

"Ah yes, the Patels of Charotar own it. Good company. They were our former clients." Sanghani took a sip of his drink. "Is Nitin Patel still around?"

"He heads the software division, sir," Seema replied. "And happens to be my boss."

"He is a good fellow, but a little headstrong; tell him you met Sanghani."

“Certainly, sir,” Seema said, “I’ll definitely do that.”

“I am sure you don’t want to join us for a drink,” Sanghani said to Manoj. “But I am going to send you a cake for your fiancée’s birthday.”

Manoj protested.

“This cake is just a sweetener to lure you to my bank one day,” Sanghani said. They all laughed.

They exchanged pleasantries before the couple took their leave.

Manoj took Seema’s arm to lead her to the restaurant.

“Mr. Sanghani influences investments worth billions every day,” Manoj whispered to her. “And the well-dressed man next to him owns ten textile mills.”

“If Mr. Sanghani is so wonderful, why don’t you join his bank?”

“I am a top student of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. My pay package in the campus interview is the highest till today. If I join Mr. Sanghani’s bank, I will always be under his shadow.”

“And my darling wants to be better than Mr. Sanghani, right?” Seema took his hand and put it on her cheek.

Manoj smiled.

“Who was the doctor who said Mr. Sanghani helps everyone?” Seema asked.

“I don’t know him—he must be a billionaire if he was sitting with Mr. Sanghani.”

“Let’s forget billionaire doctors, let’s talk about us,” Seema whispered.

After the bright lights of the lobby, the candle-lit ‘You and Me’ restaurant was a different experience. Seema stumbled as her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, but Manoj’s arm was around her waist to support her. As they walked to their table, somehow, his hand snaked under her top and caressed her bare back.

“Manoj, are you trying to take advantage of a girl in the dark?” she whispered an admonishment.

“Just looking at you makes me feel I am taking advantage of you.”

They sat opposite each other, although Seema wanted to sit next to Manoj. The food was delicious and was presented beautifully. Manoj ate heartily while Seema picked at her food, looking across at the man with whom she had fallen in love at first sight and who in turn worshipped her.

\* \* \*

They had met in the most unusual circumstances at a bus stop. Seema usually travelled to office on a scooter and Manoj had a car. But as luck would have it, both of them had given their vehicles for service that day and were using the local bus service. They were soon sneaking glances at each other. While the other commuters gradually left, the two remained at the bus stop because their bus had not yet arrived.

Although it was December, unseasonal rains lashed the city with thunder and lightning. The rainwater falling on dry soil had released an array of fragrances. “Smells wonderful, doesn’t it?” the man asked.

Seema never talked to strangers, but that evening she broke her rule. One thing led to another, and within a week, they were as close as a couple could be.

Their match was made in heaven. Neither Seema’s mother nor Manoj’s parents, who lived in New Delhi, opposed their union. They were made for each other.

The only thing that Seema did not like and that seemed to cast a slight shadow on their relationship was Manoj’s attitude towards his parents. It seemed to her that his parents did not match Manoj in terms of sophistication and financial success. Both were professors of sociology at Delhi University, which for Seema was quite an achievement. Their solidly middle-class background and warmth had made Seema feel at home with the Prakash family. However, Seema suspected that Manoj did not care much for his parents because of their middle-class simplicity. Perhaps he was estranged from them for a reason, but she would take care of that. She would care for her in-laws and treat them like her own parents. If their son thought he was too good for them, their daughter-in-law would be like a daughter to them. But that plan was for the future.

\* \* \*

It was ten p.m. Her mother had told her to be home by eleven, no later. Seema was reluctant to let the evening end so soon.

“Thank you for eating vegetarian food,” Seema said as Manoj

polished off his pasta.

“You are my non-vegetarian dish,” Manoj said with a *filmi* leer. “I am going to eat you, baby...”

Seema felt a throb deep inside her. The dance, the intimate atmosphere and Manoj’s behavior all ignited heated desire within her.

However, she was not ready to sleep with Manoj yet. She wanted to wait till after they were married.

As they finished their dessert, the captain asked if they had enjoyed their evening. Manoj generously praised the discotheque and the food.

“Can I have my bill please?” he asked.

“Today’s dinner is complimentary, sir,” the captain said with a polite bow. “We just came to know that it is madam’s birthday.”

“But...”

“This is our small present to the senior financial advisor of our own bank, sir,” the captain said. “Our CMD told me to wish madam a happy birthday on his behalf. He has sent a birthday cake with our compliments. It’s in your car.”

“Bill, please...”

“Your car is at the porch, sir,” the captain said firmly. As the young couple stood up, a group of waitresses surrounded them and sang ‘happy birthday to you’ as they walked to the car. The valet was ready with the front passenger door open for Seema. The car was bedecked with flowers and boxes.

“Mr. Sanghani has sent a gift for madam, sir,” the valet said handing over the keys to Manoj.

“It seems you’re quite an important person,” Seema said, admiring his profile as he drove.

“Ours is the world’s largest bank in terms of financial transactions,” Manoj said. “And I am the youngest senior financial advisor. People respect the position I occupy.”

*How modest he is...*

Seema was startled when she felt Manoj’s hand on her bare knee.

“But there’s another reason as well. I advised the chief financial officer of this hotel on their loan processing and tax benefits. It helped them speed up the redesign and saved them a lot of money.”

“So you get free meals all the time, eh?” Seema asked.

“No, but more importantly, let’s not talk about work. Today is your

day,” he said. “I am taking you home.”

“Whose home, yours or mine?”

“Our home,” Manoj said.

Seema’s pulse quickened. Manoj had purchased a flat but had refused to take her there, saying she could see it only after it was fully furnished. She looked forward to visiting the new flat, forgetting her promise to be home before eleven.

\* \* \*

The flat was located in the posh Panchwati area, one of the best areas in Ahmedabad. Manoj drove into the basement parking area and they took a lift to the top floor.

“It’s a penthouse,” he said, using an electronic swipe card to open the door. As soon as they walked in, he took Seema in his arms and kissed her passionately. Overwhelmed with desire, Seema melted into him. Long minutes passed and then Manoj put his hands under her top and caressed her back, expertly releasing her bra strap.

“Not now, please,” Seema said breathlessly, and pushed him away. “I need to visit the bathroom.”

*He will have me on the night after our wedding, our suhag raat,* Seema thought. But was he angry? She could control her desires, but could he?

After she had straightened her clothing and fixed her makeup, she joined Manoj in the kitchen, admiring the modular cupboards and glass top gas rings.

“Are you angry with me, darling?” Seema asked hesitantly.

“Of course not.”

Manoj’s vehemence however showed that he was indeed angry. But then he calmed down slightly and turned and smiled at her.

Seeing his smile, Seema felt happy again. “What is that?” she asked, pointing to the machine he was using. She did not know what more than half the gadgets in the state-of-the-art kitchen were for.

“Coffee maker,” Manoj was calmer, but seemed a bit morose. Seema smiled; after they drank coffee she would make Manoj happy again. They had the whole of their lives ahead of them. She was standing behind him; she hugged him and tried to caress his chest.

This startled Manoj, who turned around with a reflexive jerk; his

elbow hit Seema on her chest, winded her and threw her, with a great deal of force, on the floor. The coffeemaker jug in Manoj's hand held boiling water, which spilt and fell on Seema's bare thighs. Seema screamed in pain and Manoj panicked and dropped the entire jug on her. He tried to pull out the electric plug from its socket and accidentally released steam from the espresso tube, which burned Seema's left upper arm.

The hot coffee jug lay on her right thigh, hot water dribbling on her left thigh and knee. The superheated steam blanched the skin off from her left arm. Huge blisters formed on her left thigh. As Manoj tried to lift the coffee jug by its handle, he failed to notice its side stuck to Seema's right thigh. When he pulled hard, the jug came away with a jerk, but he was horrified to see a patch of Seema's skin stuck to the jug.

Seema stopped screaming only to breathe. The sharp burning pain felt like it would soon kill her. After a while she felt nothing.



## TWO

It was one a.m.

The two men exchanged hostile glances.

“You mean to tell me that I should not report this case to the police despite thirty-five per cent second to third degree burns?”

“I will pay you for that.”

“Are you offering me a bribe?”

“No, but please try to understand.”

“If I don’t inform the police, I may lose my medical license,” the doctor spoke icily. “But don’t worry. I will do my best to help you. I am here to help, not to take advantage of you.”

“Yes of course. I appreciate that.”

“And I will treat the case only in Sterling Hospital. Not in my hospital.”

“But sir, you won’t be present all the time at Sterling. You will only do rounds.”

The doctor’s phone rang.

“Yes sir,” he said, “...if you say so... burns cause infection, that is why I avoid burn cases. That is kind of you, but the room and other charges will shoot up because I have to sterilize my operating room every time I dress a burns case. If you say so, sir...but very few people can afford... I will ask.”

There was a silence.

“It seems you called Mr. Sanghani for help after the accident.”

Manoj nodded.

“I will admit the patient in my hospital because he requested me to do so.”

If Manoj was angry, he did not show it.

“I will also inform the police, but I will ensure they will not harass you.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

There was a pause in the hostile conversation.

“The treatment may last for six months or more. I will begin by

removing the burnt tissue. Then I will dress the wounds daily. At the right time, I will administer skin grafts. Usually we take skin grafts from the thighs, but as her thighs are burnt, I may take skin from her back. The patient must remain in the hospital for at least three to four months, after which she may be released. But you must bring her here for her dressings.”

“Yes sir.”

“Whatever I do, her limbs will be scarred. She will never look the same again. Even if we graft skin, her limbs will look patchy. She will also have patches on her back. If you do not comply with these general conditions, please remember I will refuse to treat her.”

“Yes sir.”

“There is another thing. I described the conventional treatment for burns. There is an alternative therapy. It will lead to almost normal skin. However, I must start the therapy immediately. Mr. Sanghani told me to offer you this alternative.”

“What is it called?”

“Human Collagen Supplement.”

“Then treat her with that therapy.”

“There is a problem.”

“What is the problem?”

“The cost.”

“How much?”

“Approximately five million rupees.”

\* \* \*

The strange smell woke her. She opened her eyes to discover she did not know where she was.

Where was she? What was that strange smell? Why was she lying in a strange bed?

“...not a hotel where you pay more and get more...” someone was saying. “This is a hospital, please understand.”

“But doctor...” a familiar voice said. She tried to speak, but her throat was dry. She tried to move her hands, but couldn’t. Someone had tied down her hands. And why couldn’t she move her legs? Just a few hours ago she had been dancing with Manoj.

“Manoj. Manoj,” she croaked. But no one was listening to her. Her voice was so feeble that she could barely hear herself. She wished he would come to her and kiss her and hold her.

Where was she? Was she in his flat?

She tried to sit up and she felt intense pain in her left arm; it felt as if it was on fire. She wanted to rub her cheek, but her hands were tied.

“She is still critical. She will stay in the ICU till she is out of danger. And we allow only one person at a time in the ICU, for no more than five minutes, and only during visiting hours.”

A woman in a blue uniform came into her view.

“Feeling better?” she asked.

“My hands are tied,” Seema said.

“I will untie them.” Seema found that she could move only one arm and that also had a tube attached to it.

“Do you want to sit up?”

Seema nodded. The woman pressed a button on the side and the head of the bed came up. She could see Manoj, tall, strong and handsome, talking to a man in scrubs. A mask hung around the man’s neck and he wore a cap. Manoj towered over him, yet the man dominated the room. He came to her side when he saw her sit up.

“How are you feeling?” he asked. Seema recalled having heard his voice somewhere.

“What happened?” Seema asked.

“You have burns on your thighs and left arm. We had to operate on your burns”

The man extended a hand. The nurse handed him a torch. He shone it in Seema’s eyes and went away.

The nurse followed.

“I am so sorry, darling,” Manoj said, holding her hand.

It was then that Seema remembered how the boiling water had accidentally fallen on her. She remembered the pain; the mere memory frightened her. But now she had no pain at all.

She could not bear to see Manoj sad.

“Manoj, it was an accident,” Seema said. “I will get better. Tell me where are we?”

“I’ll call your mother and sister.” Manoj wouldn’t meet her eyes and touching her right hand gently, he went out. As Manoj moved the

curtains around her bed, she caught a glimpse of other beds beyond the curtains. There were other patients. She was in a hospital.

When she saw her mother, Seema was surprised. Her mother looked haggard and her eyes were red as if she had been crying. Her sister Reema looked fresh though. Reema was a late riser; how had she bathed and dressed so early? Or was it late morning?

*Was it the night of her birthday? Was today the next day? What was the time? She had to get to work...*

“What is the time? I need to go to my office.”

“I emailed and phoned your boss in the US yesterday,” Manoj said. “You are on sick leave; don’t worry.”

“Yesterday? But it was just yesterday that you spilled water on me.” Her mother looked sharply at her and then him.

“But...” Reema said.

Manoj intervened.

“That was day before yesterday. You have been unconscious for nearly twenty-four hours.”

There was something odd; why were Reema and her mother surprised when she mentioned that Manoj was the one who had caused the accident? But her head ached and she couldn’t think clearly. She felt sick and dizzy and her throat felt dry.

“Please madam, please sir,” the nurse came. “You must leave.”

A few minutes later, Seema was alone with the nurse. She began filling a syringe with a yellow liquid from a small bottle.

“Is that for me?” Seema asked anxiously.

“Yes, but you won’t feel it.”

The nurse opened a small lid on a plastic tube on her forearm, inserted the tip of the syringe into it and pushed. She felt no pin prick, just a mild burning sensation which spread through her arm. Soon she drifted to sleep.

