

CHAPTER 1

Adjusting his tie, Anshuman Kale studied his reflection in the mirror and reminisced about the events of the years gone by.

It had been some time since he had allowed himself to revisit the past. A very long time, actually. Seven years and two months, to be precise. Things had changed quite dramatically in the course of those seven years. From a shattered boy, with bitter misgivings against loved ones, to a successful entrepreneur on the brink of global recognition, Anshuman had indeed come a long way.

He blinked repeatedly in an effort to bring himself back to the matter in hand. “It’s just another day,” he whispered to himself. But it wasn’t as simple as that. And he knew it.

The gleaming luxury brand watch gifted to him by Alisha told him that it was time to get a move on. He washed his hands once again by the bathroom sink and dabbed a tiny amount of perfume on his wrists. His hands trembled. Anshuman was nervous and he had valid reasons to be. But still, it bothered him.

He heard a knock on the bathroom door. “Are you okay? You’ve been in there for a while now. Isn’t it time for you to leave, babe?” Alisha’s melodic voice rang out.

He emerged from his bathroom and walked straight into a tight embrace with the woman he loved. He ran his hands through her long, luscious hair and stared longingly at her face. Adorned with sharp, attractive features, he had once referred to her face as ‘crafted to perfection.’ He was so grateful for her, he thought to himself. Though, he did wish he told her that more often.

“I’m really late for work. I’ll see you in the evening,” she said, planting a quick kiss on his lips. “Good luck for today,” she paused, before adding with a twinkle in her eyes, “and don’t forget your engagement speech for the evening!”

“Really?” Anshuman groaned. “Must I?”

Alisha smiled in response. They had been through that a number of times and as reluctant as Anshuman was to speak in front of an audience, there was no way she was letting him off on their engagement night.

Anshuman collected his thoughts once Alisha left. He opened his closet and carefully chose a pair of shoes that had never been worn before. *A man’s shoes need to look as polished as the man himself*, his father would say.

He tied his shoelaces firmly and began to wonder about the big night that awaited him—an engagement dinner party with his future in-laws, Alisha, and hundreds of other guests. Far too many people for his liking.

He put on his tailored suit and buttoned it up, his mind still busy tracing their story back to the early days. When he had first met Alisha, he hadn’t known that convincing her dad to consent to their marriage would take years. But all of that changed a few weeks ago when Alisha’s father, Harshvardhan Saluja, finally gave his blessings. Following which, things started happening at a feverish pace.

The wedding date was fixed in a matter of days. The venue and

other details also got worked out before Anshuman could get his head around it. After having battled for consent for what seemed like eternity, the speed of recent events had taken Anshuman by surprise. But because Alisha was over the moon with how things were moving along, he hadn't really suggested slowing things down. He didn't want her or anyone else to think he had lost interest. That aside, the engagement party in the evening was hugely significant; it was the first public demonstration of consent from Mr. Saluja.

Anshuman approached his balcony, reminding himself to shut the blinds before he locked up. Instead, reacting to an impulse, he opened the door to the balcony of his twenty-seventh floor apartment. Holding the rails, he took a deep breath, drawing in the fresh air. Situated on Spencer St., in the heart of the Melbourne CBD, his apartment welcomed him every evening, opening him up to breathtaking views of the Docklands, Etihad stadium, and the vast expanse of the deep blue ocean.

His phone beeped. It was Hari, his business partner. *Where the hell are you? They are here*, read the text message. Hari followed up with another message confirming that things were in order and all that was required were the relevant signatures; Anshuman's being one of them.

Hari's text messages brought Anshuman to the other big event in his day. The one he was terribly late for. He yanked his keys off the peg on the wall, slipped his wallet and phone into his pockets, and locked up his apartment.

While he waited for the lift, Anshuman thought about Hari's messages. He had met Hari back in India, almost eleven years ago. Having been classmates through their four-year engineering degree, it was when they had worked on a project together that they knew they were onto something special. On completion of their degree, the boys had decided to pursue further education in Australia, with a view to set up a business there.

They ended up doing more than that. A successful tech start-up followed and before they knew it, a large Silicon Valley based

firm was keen to buy a huge stake in their company. The success of their business meant unforeseen wealth. And for two middle-class boys from India, that meant the world. But while Hari was hugely motivated by money and profit, Anshuman had bigger plans.

For him, money had always been a means to an end. He would be characteristically reticent, when it came to sharing what he actually wanted to achieve in life. His ideological views never went down well with the purely commercially-minded folks. It was only Alisha who understood. Only Alisha knew that Anshuman wanted to serve people. Only she got how important it was for him to be able to enrich other lives. And unlike many others, who articulated the same in the name of lip service, Anshuman was actually committed to making it happen.

But for that, he first needed deep pockets. He and Hari had spent the last few weeks negotiating hard with the prospective buyers from the U.S. All that hard work meant that in the space of the next few hours, after the involved parties had signed, Anshuman's net worth would increase by ten million.

An hour later, big men in big suits had concluded their business deal. After a round of signatures, vigorous handshakes, and back-patting, Anshuman and Hari found themselves alone in their office. Hari popped a bottle of celebratory champagne and poured Anshuman a glass.

Anshuman's phone though, wouldn't stop ringing. Alisha was the first one to call and congratulate him officially on the deal. Her parents then joined in celebrating the good news. His to-be in-laws, Mr. Saluja in particular, seemed to go a bit over the top, as Anshuman had come to expect of him.

While Anshuman's drink remained untouched, Hari finished two rounds of the champagne by himself and left for the bank, leaving Anshuman alone in their office. Anshuman closed his eyes and swirled his drink, like a pretentious wine connoisseur. He took

a moment to enjoy the silence and the rare moment that he had got to himself. Amidst an already eventful day, he now needed to find time to write that speech Alisha had wanted. His mobile continued to ring and after the first few calls, he chose to ignore the ones that followed. And then an unknown number flashed across his display. He ignored it the first time and then it came again.

“Anshuman here,” he said, after picking it up on the caller’s third attempt.

“Anshu! Do you want to guess who this is?” chirped a bright female voice.

Anshu hesitated for a moment. “I’m afraid, I can’t.”

“Not letting you off the hook that easy. Come on, buddy, you know me very well.”

“Madhumita?”

“Nope!”

“I give up.”

“Here’s a clue. You once put a frog in my bag.”

His mind raced through the canals of time. Decades whizzed past in his head, until he stopped at the precise moment in time when he had helped sneak a frog into a girl’s bag. “Sheila Mathur! You in Melbourne?”

“Sheila Sinha now! My husband got sent on work to Melbourne, so I came along.”

“How did you get my number?”

“I have my ways, Anshu. So, do you have time for lunch?”

Anshu and Sheila settled on an Italian restaurant in the Southbank area. Located behind the Melbourne Arts Centre in the CBD, the restaurant had a sprinkling of outdoor tables. Making the most of the sunny day, Anshu and Sheila chose a prime spot by the Yarra River, and began filling in the blanks on each other’s lives.

Sitting across from Sheila, Anshu took a sip of his red wine. “Her name? Alisha.”

Sheila picked on the side-salad with her fork. “Alisha, huh? Nice name. I’m so glad you are settling down. It’s been . . . almost eight years since we last met?” Sheila said, after taking a moment to get the number right.

“Your farewell party was the last time we met. You left us all ahead of time searching for greener pastures.” Anshu asked for the dessert menu from the nearest waiter. “So, Sheila Sinha, any kids?”

“A little boy. You?”

“Nice. No kids for me,” said Anshu, “I thought it might be a better idea to get married first!”

“Anshu, it’s so good to meet you. I think of those years all the time.” Sheila broke into a grin. “God, you and that Indira in particular used to be so mischievous! You troubled me so much.”

Anshu winced at the mention of Indira and Sheila did not miss it. She considered changing topics, but remained silent instead.

After a few seconds, Anshu asked, “So how’s Indira? Must be married with an army of kids by now?”

The colour from Sheila’s face vanished in a split second. “When was the last time you spoke to Indira?”

Anshu let a sigh precede his words. “Things weren’t the same between Indira and me. After you left, it all got pretty bad. It’s almost been seven years now.”

“Seven years?”

“Something like that.”

“You haven’t been in touch with her at all? Not even with her mother?”

The change in her tone was obvious to Anshu, making him frown. “No. Why?”

Sheila moved forward in her seat and placed her hand on Anshu’s. “Then you don’t know what happened, do you?”

CHAPTER 2

“Today is the best day of my life,” declared Alisha Saluja to her work colleagues.

She wasn’t just referring to Anshu’s successful business deal. His recent success as an entrepreneur was significant, of course. It had taken him months of serious financial modelling and endless negotiations to get the deal through. Deep into several nights, he had discussed every little detail of the merger with Alisha. She was no expert on corporate acquisitions; it had just made her feel included in Anshu’s life. Knowing that she was Anshu’s confidante, that she was the person he trusted most, made her believe in the world again.

After she left him that morning, Alisha walked into work flashing a million-dollar smile. When she called it the best day of her life, she was in fact referring to the party in the evening; the official celebration of their recent engagement.

“I don’t care! You are making a speech tonight,” she said, when she called to congratulate him on the

successful deal with the American buyers. “It need not be a long one. Short and sweet is good.”

Anshu relented. This wasn’t a battle he could win. “Alright. So, do you want to know how the deal panned out?”

“Yes! Tell me the whole thing in detail. Did they agree to your conditions?” She demanded in excitement.

Anshu smiled on the other end of the phone. The woman he was to marry loved detail. Especially when it came to him. “You don’t have much on at work, do you?”

“I do! But nothing’s more important than knowing all about your business deal.”

Anshu filled her in on the meeting. Ranging from the final signatures, to the colour of the suits people wore, to every noteworthy clause in the agreement, he covered it all. Over the years, he had learnt to share a lot of information with Alisha with great efficiency.

“Allie, I am getting another call. It’s from your dad,” Anshu said, interrupting their conversation.

“No worries. You go talk to him. Make sure you work on that speech, Mr. Kale!” She said, before hanging up. She smiled, thinking of Anshu’s reluctance for public speaking.

Anshu did not fit the typical ‘male’ mould. All the men she had known in her life had one thing in common. They cheated. It all started from her philandering father. Harshvardhan Saluja, a rising star in the political landscape of Australia was the perfect husband and father. In the eyes of the public, that held true. Behind closed doors, it didn’t. Her mother, Debra ‘Debbie’ Saluja had decided to choose the path of forgiveness, turning a deliberate blind eye to his affairs over the years.

Alisha’s own experience with men hadn’t been pleasant. Her last boyfriend, had cheated on her with her best friend. The betrayal, on both counts, had left her grappling with a big question—how can you trust a man who hides, cheats, and lies?

The one and only exception to that rule she held about men was Anshu. An introvert. But an honest introvert.

Her colleagues at work interrupted her thoughts, asking if she wanted to join them for lunch. Alisha turned them down. She had an appointment at a beauty salon.

While Alisha was busy getting a blow-dry done, Anshu was at lunch talking about a woman named Indira, who Alisha didn't even know existed.

A few hours after Anshu had met Sheila for lunch, he stood on the porch of the Saluja household, taking a moment before ringing the doorbell. The party seemed to be in full swing; he could hear the chatter on the other side of the door and braced himself for the social ambush that would follow. He stood there for a while, thinking about Indira. Anshu had never really mentioned Indira to Alisha. He wasn't sure anyone else, apart from him, would understand. And besides, Indira wasn't important anymore. Or so he had kept telling himself for all those years.

"I need to talk to Alisha!" He told himself. But he would have to wait till the party was over. For now, he would have to put up a brave front and wear the social mask he so hated.

"You're so late!" Alisha opened the door, half-concerned, half-angry. She had worn the bewitching black dress he had bought her last week, which always contrasted delightfully with her milky complexion, blending in perfectly with the subtle blush contouring her cheek bones. But that night, Anshu failed to be cast under her spell.

When he walked in, hung his coat, and failed to show any recognition for her dress or even look at her, she held him by his elbow. "You alright? You look like you've seen a ghost."

He forced himself to snap out of the world he had been hurled into. "I'm fine."

“Must be all the money that suddenly came flowing your way, Mr. Millionaire!” she pouted with her bee-stung lips dressed up in Russian red, which had always drawn a kiss from Anshu.

The money! He had forgotten all about it. He walked right past her, not taking the invitation to give her a quick kiss. She looked on, not used to being rejected by him. The hard work she had gone through at the beauty salon, the expert blow-wave, had all gone unnoticed.

Alisha couldn’t understand why Anshu looked so stressed. If it was about that speech, she couldn’t care less. If it bothered him so much, it wasn’t worth it.

That night, Anshu withdrew into his shell. He headed straight for the bar and drowned himself in an entire bottle of Scotch. He locked himself up into his own little world, shutting himself away from the hordes of guests who wanted a piece of him. He did not make an engagement speech, despite Mr. Saluja begging him to do so. It was only after Alisha intervened, informing her parents and guests that Anshu was not well, that a semblance of normalcy returned to the party.

She took him upstairs to her room and tucked him into bed. “I shouldn’t have forced all this on you,” she said, unsure if Anshu was capable of comprehending what she was saying. She had never seen him so drunk. “Just reminding you, I’m off to Warrnambool tomorrow with my folks for a few days. You can stay here for as long as you want.”

She shut the door and returned to the party.

The next morning, the throbbing pain in his head just wouldn’t subside. He found it impossible to drive Sheila’s words away.

It had been difficult to ignore thoughts about Indira last night—thoughts that had once been exiled. For the last seven years, he had believed that he had banished Indira into the dark inaccessible recesses of his mind.

He pushed the duvet aside and looked across the bedroom. This wasn't his room. But he was familiar enough with it to know it belonged to Alisha. An empty bottle on the bedside table reminded him of the role alcohol had played last night.

When the chatter in the party, the words of celebration spoken by Alisha's father, the I-can't-wait-to-get-married mutterings by Alisha herself came back to him, he realised that all evening, the only thing he could hear was what Sheila had said. He clearly remembered his reaction when Sheila told him about Indu—a loud expletive from him in that Italian restaurant had turned many heads. Sheila had placed her hand on his, trying to comfort him, before he had started crying uncontrollably.

Damn Sheila! Why did she have to talk about Indu? He once again thought of how he had sought the friendship of alcohol to hide himself at the party. He vaguely recollected how Alisha had brought him to her room and put him to bed. But while everything else was a blur, he distinctly remembered appreciating the silence and the half-empty bottle of wine that he had been left with once she had closed the door on him.

He slipped on some toothpaste onto his index finger and felt the fluoride kick some freshness into his morning. He looked at his reflection after spitting the paste out. He had developed dark circles under his eyes of late, and his friends who had known him attributed it to the long hours of work that he had been putting into his business. He ran his hand through his hair, trying to recreate the work of a comb. His bushy eyebrows had always caused Alisha to want to drag him to get them 'done' but he would never have any of that. He sighed and ran his right hand across his brown, chocolate-complexioned face, picking a small patch of hair under his right chin. He hadn't shaved as cleanly as he had thought.

He slowly walked down the sweeping staircase, expecting to meet his soon-to-be in-laws and find out how embarrassing he had exactly been last night. Or maybe they would let their daughter do

the honours. But it was absolute silence that greeted him. Where was everybody? The chilling silence was the exact opposite of last night—a noisy colosseum of plastic faces, atrocious lipsticks, and artificial affection.

He approached the refrigerator after responding to desperate pleas from his stomach. Before he could grasp the handle, he saw a Post-it note with Alisha's handwriting informing him that she had gone camping. She had mentioned something last night at the party, but it wasn't important then. It was important now. He wanted her to be with him so he could pour his heart out to her. He read it again—she was gone for three nights with her parents to Warrnambool, about four hours from Melbourne. He tried to call her but he kept reaching her voicemail. She did say in the note that phone reception would be patchy.

Anshu showered and wondered if he should call Sheila and ask her for advice. But why was he even considering advice? It should be an easy decision. He should just . . . NO, it wasn't easy at all. His heart and head were embroiled in a bitter war, ripping him into two halves. But this time his heart just felt too heavy to be ignored.

The thought came to him and he grabbed it—too scared to think about it, before he changed his mind. He called Alisha and left a message. He knew what her reaction would be, but he would cross that bridge when he came to it. He jumped into a yellow cab and reached his apartment.

Four hours later, he held a hastily packed bag and a boarding pass for India.

At thirty-three thousand feet in the air, the scenes from the past rushed at him. Anshu's reverie was broken when the airhostess came with the first round of meals in the flight.

Unknown to him, a frustrated Alisha had tried repeatedly in desperation hoping his phone would ring and that the message he had left on her phone was just a joke.