

## IMAGINARY MEN

### Chapter One

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I'm allergic to India.

I snort and sniff through my sister Durga's wedding, my eyes watering from Kolkata pollution, not because Durga is marrying the Bengali version of Johnny Depp. Not because I'm the eldest sister, twenty-nine and still single.

Sweat seeps through my *choli* shirt, and in this bright turquoise sari, I feel like a giant blueberry. I stand squished among dozens of relatives in an Alipore courtyard at the city's south end. This is Auntie Kiki's home, a two-story mansion in the British colonial style. A hundred guests dressed to the hilt, the women in saris, the men in traditional *dhoti punjabis*, long-sleeved silk shirts with loose trousers. A few bachelors prowl in ill-fitting suits, hair slicked back, cell phones plastered to their ears. I keep my gaze averted. I won't talk to any of these geeks.

Bengali Brahmin weddings often last for days, but Durga's ceremony is Brahmo Samaj, a progressive, secular form of Hinduism that rejects the caste system, child marriages, and the worship of idols. I thank my great-grandparents for embracing the Brahmo Samaj, or I'd be yawning through a thousand rituals.

The scents of coconut oil and sandalwood incense fill the air. Through the crowd, I glimpse my parents sitting near the dais. Onstage, the happy couple exchanges garlands as the *acharya*, the priest, chants in Sanskrit. The groom wears a cream-colored punjabi shirt and *dhoti* threaded with gold. Durga is a vision in the red bride's sari, red and white bangles, a heavy gold ring through her nose. Red dye, *alta*, stains her fingers and toes. Black kohl rims her eyes, making her resemble the great Hindu goddess Durga, after whom she was named. She gazes demurely at her feet and pretends to be a shy virgin.

Beside me, Auntie Kiki, all gray hair, uneven yellow teeth, and smiles, lets out a loud sigh and elbows me. "Ah, Lina, you're next, nah? Big Bengali wedding?" She winks, and I wonder, in mild horror, what she has planned.

"I don't know, Auntie. I'm not ready." Men have been nothing but trouble for me, but she won't understand.

"Oh, Vishnu! Nathu dead two years, and still you're not ready?"

"There aren't any good bachelors in California."

She pats my cheek. "You're nearly thirty now. Hadn't you better stop being so picky-choosy?"

"I'm not picky and choosy. I'm discerning."

“*Bhalo*. Good.” She nods her head sideways in the Indian style. “We’ll find you a husband tonight. I know this.”

My insides turn somersaults. What does she mean, *I know this*? What secrets hide in the folds of her sari? Auntie’s actually my great-aunt, the eldest of my father’s aunts. Her youngest sister, my father’s mother, died just before I was born. Because she’s the eldest of the female relatives, Auntie Kiki’s decisions carry the weight of a queen’s formal decree.

“What if I don’t want to marry an Indian?” I say.

“What’s the matter with Indians? Nathu was Punjabi, nah?”

“Nathu grew up in America. He learned to take out the garbage and make his own bed. He wasn’t like traditional Indian men who expect their wives to do everything for them.”

“Perhaps it wouldn’t hurt you to learn a little tradition.” Auntie’s lips tighten into a thin line, pulling her cheeks inward.

I’m up to my push-up bra in tradition tonight, I want to say, but I grit my teeth and smile. I know only a few words of Bengali, and I don’t practice Hinduism. What would a true Bengali man think of me? He’d label me damaged goods, spoiled by American decadence.

I glance around the courtyard until I spot my other sister, Kali. I frantically wave at her. *Please, rescue me from Auntie.*

Kali grins and rushes over. “Doesn’t Durga look *smashing*?”

“She’s beautiful,” I say.

“When I find the perfect shagadelic guy, I want a true *desi* wedding, Indian in every way.” Loosely translated, *desi* means “of or from my country” in Hindi. Kali’s obsessed with the homeland, but she also loves Austin Powers, Man of Mystery. She’s young, blooming like a lotus flower. Not that I’m chopped liver, but I don’t dress the way she does, all cleavage in a tight-fitting *choli* shirt. She manages to make a sari look like lingerie. I prefer not to draw attention to myself at these shindigs.

I whisper in her ear. “Aren’t you seeing a practicing Catholic?”

“I can shop around if I want.” She gives me a sly look. “I met someone tonight. His name is Dev. He has mojo. I think I’m in love.”

“Kali has no problem meeting bachelors,” Auntie says. “It’s Lina we must worry about. She’s a matchmaker in California and still can’t find herself a suitable husband.”

“Maybe I’m not looking!”

“We’ve all been waiting for you to find someone,” Kali cuts in. “You’re so good at it. You hooked up Durga with her hubby, didn’t you?”

“That’s different. It’s easy to match up other couples.” I specialize in hooking up American-born Indian women with their princes. I have an uncanny ability to see connections between potential mates, like silvery threads. But I haven’t seen a thread between any man and me since Nathu, and I don’t expect to see one tonight.

“Settle down, and you’ll not be all the time running around and working,” Auntie says. “Why are you so determined to remain unmarried?”

“I’m not determined. I’m busy. Besides, I like working.” I sigh in exasperation. She’s talking to Kali about how they have to help poor Lina, the elder sister.

I’m a hopeless case and a disappointment to my family. So what keeps drawing me back to India? Maybe a touch of the exotic, I think as a servant lights flaming torches around the perimeter of the courtyard. Maybe the humid summer climate on the Bay of Bengal. Maybe my Inner Princess expects a mythical prince to gallop through the smog and sweep me off my feet.

Auntie points into the shadows. “There, Lina. Look. Did you meet Nikhil Ghose when you were in Kolkata last?”

“Who?”

One of the suit-clad bachelors appears out of nowhere, grabs my hand, and squeezes. “Lina Ray? What a complete pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise, I’m sure.” I pull my hand away as politely as possible. I’m staring into the hopeful face of Pee-wee Herman on steroids.

A large woman in a gold sari, stomach folds rippling, barrels toward us. In India, belly rolls are still considered sexy. “Nikhil, son, where are you off to?” she shouts.

Auntie grips my elbow. “This is my accomplished great-niece, Lina. Lina, Nikhil Ghose.”

I stiffen, dust stinging my eyes.

“Pleased, pleased,” Mrs. Ghose says, nodding sideways.

“Lina plays classical piano and cooks very well,” Auntie says. “She’s here from America for short time, nah? You must come round for tea.”

Dumbfounded, I stare at Auntie. Cooks very well? I can pour milk over Lucky Charms, but Indian food is a mystery. And piano? This is a conspiracy. Auntie must’ve spoken to Ma, and now they’re desperate to arrange my marriage. I’ll never agree to a match with Pee-wee. He makes me want to drown myself in the Ganges River.

His mother gives me the once-over, and her lips turn down in a sneer. “She’s a bit thin, nah? Living in America all this time? Our good girls go thin and wild in America.”

“I wasn’t raised by wolves,” I say.

“She’s witty as well,” Auntie says.

“I like my women wild.” Nikhil gives me a disgusting wink. He even has Pee-wee’s voice.

I focus on the ground. He probably thinks I like him and I’m looking down out of shyness.

“Lina’s a good girl,” Auntie Kiki says. “Fitness craze in America has made her thin. Everyone wants to be slim there. They are doing these exercises, that exercises, all the time jogging, aerobics, spinning, Pirates -- “

“Pilates, Auntie,” Kali says, smiling. She’s going along with this farce.

Nikhil’s mother stares hard at me. Gradually, her lips lift at the corners. “Well, we’re pleased, of course, that you’re Sahadev Ray’s daughter. Doctor Ray’s daughter.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Ghose.” Darn, she traced my lineage. For once, I wish I were a sweeper’s child. These things matter in India -- whose daughter you are, whose granddaughter you are, who your second cousin twice removed is. Women have goals and dreams, but they often keep them secret, tucked away in their underwear drawers to be worn beneath their clothes, necessary but unseen.

“We shall come for tea, of course. Very pleased.” Nikhil’s mother is all impressed, my thinness and Americanness forgotten. She turns to Auntie. “The Rays are staying with you? When shall I bring Nikhil?”

He steps closer until I smell his curry breath.

“Tomorrow?” Auntie says.

No, not tomorrow. Not any day. Get me out of here. I’ll sit on the curb, contemplate the sewer system, anything but listen to Auntie set me up with Pee-wee. I force a smile and hope the sweat doesn’t show through the armpits of my *choli*.

“We’ll still be here tomorrow,” Kali says. I glare at her.

Nikhil’s mother smiles. “Tomorrow shall suit us well. Lina, Nikhil is successful in business, nah? Manufacturing and import-export. He’ll give you grand tour of the factories.”

“Just the two of us.” Nikhil spears me with a lecherous gaze.

My shoulders tense up. “Thanks, but I won’t have time. Lots of relatives to visit -- “

“Lina!” Auntie shouts. “We’ll find the time.”

“I really don’t think -- “

“We’ll arrange, nah?” Nikhil’s mother resumes reciting his many glowing attributes.

He stands so close, his hot breath sears my cheek. Sweat beads on my brow, and nausea builds in my throat. The *Jaws* theme plays in my mind, and then the answer glows like a rainbow. Of course, of course.

“I have some news,” I say.

“News? What is this?” Auntie asks. Her lips tighten.

All goes quiet.

I give a knowing smile. “I was waiting for the right moment, but maybe—” I pause for effect.

Nikhil steps back. His mother blinks.

“What? What’s this news?” Auntie’s eyes widen. “No, you’re not. You’re...already engaged?”

I nod, although it’s a big, fat lie.

“Oh, Vishnu! Why did your Ma not say?” Auntie shouts. “All this time we were arranging your engagement to Nikhil!”

Arranging my engagement? Before I’d even met him? This is worse than I thought.

Tongues cluck and gossip flies. Kali narrows her gaze. Perhaps she sees through my deception. “Is this true?”

“Yes, it’s true. My fiancé is quite high up.” I gaze into the dusty, darkening sky. “Accomplished. Rich. Very handsome. Gentlemanly and a bit dangerous.” I’m already beginning to picture him in my mind. He looks a lot like Nathu.

Oohs and aahs.

“Is he Indian?” Kali asks a question the others wouldn’t bother to pose. They just assume.

“In a manner of speaking,” I say. “He’s the perfect man.”

“What does he look like?”

“Tall. Dark, wavy hair. The most beautiful eyes -- he’s a dream.”

“Sounds a little too perfect,” Kali says.

“Why is this man not with you?” Nikhil snaps.

“He travels all the time. Here and there. Riding elephants into the jungle, touring his palaces, several properties -- “

“How can you stand being away from him?” Kali asks. “Don’t you miss him terribly?”

“Like the devil.” I sigh. “But he sends postcards.”

“E-mails? Love letters?”

I nod. “He embeds photos and poems in the messages -- “

“All this was happening, and you didn’t tell?”

I smile. “Isn’t the Internet amazing?”

Mrs. Ghose huffs. “Come, Nikhil.” She grabs his arm and yanks him away in search of another victim. My shoulders relax.

Auntie nearly swoons. “Congratulations are in order. We must summon your parents -- “

“They don’t know yet,” I say quickly. “It’s a love match, not arranged.”

“They don’t know?” Auntie’s eyebrows rise, and her cheeks puff outward.

“Things are different in America. Parents don’t chaperone their daughters on dates.”

“Ah, yes, this can’t be helped. All the same, this is good news. Marriage is marriage. Is it an auspicious match?”

“I believe the stars are aligned just right.”

“Who is he? What’s his name?” Kali asks.

“It’s a surprise. He’ll be traveling for...a few more weeks.” With every lie, I dig a deeper hole. I might as well climb in and let the dirt fall on top of me.

Auntie clasps and unclasps her hands. She’s in planning mode. “I must meet this man and make sure he is more suitable than Nikhil.”

“More suitable? I already know he is -- “

“I must know!”

“Of course, Auntie. Your approval will honor me.”

She smooths her ruffled sari. “*Bhalo*. You’ll bring him to India?”

Bring him? “He has business in San Francisco.”

How will I maintain this charade? Soon I’ll have to say Mr. Perfect and I have split up. He found a girlfriend in Germany or Italy, on his travels. He’ll go when I want him to go. But I can’t marry Pee-wee. What to do?

“You’ll bring him to India for a Bengali wedding, of course,” Auntie says.

“When the time comes.” No matter how long we’ve lived in America, we must return to India for this rite of passage.

I slip into the house to the bathroom. I lean my elbows on the sink and focus on breathing. In through the nose, out through the mouth. I can’t afford to have a panic attack here, in a Kolkata bathroom with a concrete floor and old-fashioned toilet with a chain hanging down.

I gaze into the mirror, at the black kohl smudged beneath my eyes. My hair, cut to my shoulders, is frizzy in the humidity.

“Lina, Lina, on the wall,” I say to my reflection, then let out a crazy giggle. “Who’s the biggest liar of them all?”