

Birthstones

Suresh sat across the kitchen table from the slender woman, sharing a last evening cup of tea, surprised yet again by how lovely Priyanka had become over the years. When he'd first met her, she'd been a scrawny gamin of a child; now his cousin Priyanka was as gorgeous as the Bollywood film stars she revered, with large, wide-set eyes, high cheekbones, perfect skin. She could have been an actress if her parents hadn't been dead set against it. Throughout her childhood, they had kept her under strict lock and key, and now, everything had changed.

"I don't know how you stand it," he said, softly.

Priyanka shook her head, setting her long black braid swinging. "It's not as bad as you think, truly. This isn't America, where every young teen moves out at the first opportunity. Here, it is normal to live with your parents for your entire life, if the house is big enough. Housing is so expensive in Chennai -- there's no way we could have afforded an apartment of our own. A nurse and a teacher do not make that much -- not as much as a fancy American police detective," she said, with a brief, teasing smile. And then, sober again, "They were kind to let us live here."

He knew what Priyanka meant, of course. When his cousin had come out, her parents had thrown the proverbial fit. But faced with the choice of losing their daughter entirely, or embracing her lover -- well, perhaps they hadn't embraced Nita. Not exactly. But to allow the woman to move into their home was well beyond the typical Indian

parent. It was pretty amazing. He would never had expected such open-mindedness from his Uncle Ranjit. But of course, living in America, he'd never really known the man.

"I'm sorry I didn't come sooner," Suresh said. It had been almost three decades since his last visit to India, his father's homeland; he had only been five years old. His visit to India held only the memory of this house, large and white and whirring with constant fans.

Priyanka reached out and lay a quick, compassionate hand over his. "We're just glad you're here now, cousin. I think this visit will be good for you."

"It's nice to be around so many children," Suresh said. They were distracting, at least. In this big joint household, Priyanka was the elder child, the thirty-five-year-old daughter whom they'd all long ago assumed would die an old maid. She had a younger brother, long married and with four kids -- the noise of raucous children echoed through the old house, and the thunder of their feet through the halls sometimes seemed as if it would bring the ancient roof down.

"We're hoping to adopt, after the wedding," Priyanka said quietly.

That was why he'd come, ostensibly -- to attend what was surely a landmark event, the first lesbian wedding in the family -- in the neighborhood. Possibly in the whole city. But the wedding was just an excuse; the truth was that he couldn't stand the echoing emptiness of his house for one moment more; Priyanka's invitation had arrived on the tenth anniversary of his wife's death. Suresh had months of vacation saved up from the police department -- he'd spent it all in one big rush. And now he was here, in this house that smelled of sea and jasmine, sitting across from the one cousin who had

written him postcards all through their childhood. The one who had called after his wife's death. He had come for Priyanka too.

"I think you'll make wonderful parents," Suresh said. Not that he really knew Nita, but if Priyanka loved her, that spoke well for her. Though it was no guarantee -- lovers were mistaken in their beloveds more than one would guess. More than one would hope.

Priyanka opened her mouth to say something else, but was interrupted by a screech ripping through the quiet night air. Trained reflexes took over, and Suresh squeezed her hands once, tightly, commanding, "Stay here!" And then he was up and gone, racing through the halls to the source of that terrible sound.

He passed through three large rooms before finally bursting out into the courtyard. The house was in a traditional style -- the main body sported two wings, and sheltered behind the house, between the wings, was a wide courtyard, planted heavily with broad-leafed trees. Normally a welcome retreat from the heat, tonight the pleasant scene was marred by a girl on her knees, weeping, and his uncle standing above her, raising a thin cane in one trembling hand. He whipped it down against her back, which was protected by only the thinnest of blouses, and would have hit her again if Suresh hadn't taken three quick steps across the stones to catch his uncle's arm in his hand.

"I cannot allow you to continue," Suresh said, as firmly as he could. It wasn't easy, despite his police training -- Uncle Ranjit was two decades older than he was, and Suresh had been raised to respect his elders. His father would be appalled to see him

raising a hand to his uncle -- but his father would also never have hit a servant, as this girl so clearly was, marked by the cheapness of her clothes, the darkness of her skin, and the Telugu words that fell out of her mouth, words he couldn't understand. He knew what she said, of course, nonetheless -- what they all said. *I didn't do it, it wasn't me, it was someone else, it's all a mistake.* Sometimes they told the truth, sometimes not. He didn't know, and it wasn't his business to find out -- not now, not here. But he couldn't allow his uncle to keep brutalizing the girl, regardless.

Uncle Ranjit deflated beneath him, dropping the cane to the stones. He wasn't a large man -- tall, like his children, but thin and wasting with age. It was surprising that he'd had the strength to hit the girl as hard as he had -- hard enough, Suresh could now see, to draw blood. Suresh let go of his uncle's arm and let the man pull away, not trying to meet Uncle Ranjit's eyes. In situations like this, it was generally best to let a man save face. It saved trouble.

"Appa? What's going on?"

Priyanka had ignored Suresh's request, of course. Why did women never listen? She stepped into the courtyard, hesitantly at first, and then, when she saw the state of the girl's back, she rushed forward. "Aarti! Oh, you poor thing!"

At the sympathetic voice, the girl threw herself into Priyanka's arms, still weeping and letting out a stream of Telugu. Priyanka answered in kind, mixed with English and Tamil in a jumble of words that the girl seemed to understand. Reassurances that it would be all right, that her cousin Suresh would fix everything, just wait and see.

At that, Suresh stiffened. What was Priyanka talking about? This wasn't his problem. Why would he get involved?

"Suresh, kunju, please." He sat in the kitchen again, this time facing his aunt across the table. She had dragged him in there, made tea, and loaded a plate high with sweets. Weapons in her arsenal.

"Aunty, it's not that I don't want to help." His aunt was clearly distressed, and he was fond of her; Aunty Kaveri was plump and kindly, and she had always been willing to sneak an extra piece of jalebi to a hungry, growing boy. In his memory, she smelled of almonds and vanilla, but today, she just smelled like fear. Why was she afraid? It was *her* ruby necklace that had apparently been stolen. "I just don't know what I can do for you here."

"But you're a Detective! It's your job to deal with such things, no?"

Suresh fiercely wished that he were at home in Riverwood, where he not only had the staff and resources to actually investigate such a crime properly, but where he also wouldn't have to deal with anguished relatives, abused servants, and a temperature that was climbing into the 90s. It was hard to think when he was drenched in sweat. He had come here -- well, Suresh wasn't sure why he had come here. A change of weather, a change of scene, a break from everything he had known. Perhaps Suresh had hoped to get away from the grief he'd left behind, the disaster that his intimate life had become. But he hadn't asked to be pulled into a new set of family entanglements. "Aunty, I don't have my men here -- "

"Nonsense!" She practically spit the word out. "Just talk to the girl, please. If she did it, she will tell you. You will make her confess."

He could see that his aunt was hoping rather desperately that the girl, Aarti, actually had stolen the necklace. It would make everything simpler.

"And if she didn't take it?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

To her credit, Aunty Kaveri hesitated only a moment before she stiffened her back and said, firmly, "Then you must find out who did take it. And we will compensate the girl."

It seemed wrong, to let them throw money at the girl to quiet her just complaints, but on the other hand, Suresh suspected that if they gave Aarti *enough* money, she and the family she supported would not thank him for interfering.

Maybe if he took this case, he could at least get something good out of it. "No matter what I find, no more beating the servants, Aunty. Please." He added the *please* as a sop to her pride; no one of her age would enjoy having a boy scolding her. Even if the boy was almost thirty. "You have to stop him." In America, he could have brought his uncle up on charges, but the idea was ludicrous here.

"No more," she agreed, and then sighed, her body seeming to collapse in the wood chair across from him. "Thank you, Suresh. You're a good boy." And she pushed over the plate of toffee.

Priyanka was still tending to Aarti's back, so he started his questioning with the timid cook. He listened to him dutifully, took notes in a small pad. It wasn't easy to understand any of the servants -- Suresh's Tamil, the product of childhood Saturday classes with other immigrant children in a neighborhood community center, was far from

fluent. And the servants' English wasn't as good as his family's -- his relatives spoke English for his comfort, although they also mocked him gently for the weakness of his Tamil. But in any case, he was fairly sure he had the gist of what they had to say. The cook knew nothing useful, and neither did the gardener or the woman who did the laundry and other dirty chores.

Apparently, the only reason Aarti had been suspected was because she worked upstairs regularly, helping with the children and cleaning the family's rooms. She would have been regularly in and out of Aunty Kaveri's rooms, and would have known exactly where her jewelry was kept. Nonetheless, the servants were united in their protestations that Aarti hadn't done it. That wasn't surprising. The servants in this household seemed close; they were like family to each other, and one thing he had learned was that family would almost always lie to protect each other, whether there was need for it or not.

Suresh couldn't condemn them for it -- he would have done the same. If his wife, his Sarita, had committed a crime, he would not have hesitated -- he would have lied as loudly, as often, as was required to protect her. Even if she had committed murder. And if they had managed to have a child -- Suresh suspected that he would have done far more than simply lie to protect his child. When family was on the line, you couldn't expect people to be honest, to be good. It wasn't human nature.

"Thank you for your time," he said, in what he hoped was passable Tamil. He rose from the kitchen table -- he was spending far too much time at this table, it seemed, and drinking so much tea that he thought his belly would explode. It was the only way to keep from being stuffed with sweets -- if he wasn't careful, he wouldn't fit into his clothes when he returned home.

The gardener reached out, laid one gnarled hand on his arm. The man's hand was criss-crossed with scars from thorny plants, dark with ground-in dirt. But his face was shiny clean, tipped up at Suresh, and there were tears in his eyes as he said, "Please, sir. Please, she did not do this. Aarti is a good girl, a good worker. We are *all* good workers here, for many years. Please, sir. You must make them understand."

And there was *that* too -- if Aarti fell, they might all come under suspicion. So often people's fates were linked together, and if people would lie or do worse to protect family, how much more would they do to protect themselves?

"I will do my best," Suresh promised, ambiguously. He gently detached the man's hand from his arm, and pulled away. There was more work to do.

He couldn't just interrogate the family. Suresh had no authority here -- no authority beyond his aunt's command. And while she would probably back him up if he insisted on interviewing the family members, one by one, it would be better if he *didn't* act like a police officer in this house. The more they thought of him as one of their own, as just another relative, the more likely they'd be to open up -- or slip up. Either would work.

It was almost eleven, and Suresh briefly considered going to bed. This could wait 'til morning, surely -- there were no lives at stake, just a piece of sparkly property. But when they were tired, people were vulnerable, more likely to make mistakes. As long as he could, he would keep asking questions.

He found Ari, the son of the family, in the library. It seemed an odd place for such a man to choose -- Ari was big, broad-shouldered; he looked like the kind of man who would be happiest working in the fields, or on the docks. Not that the son of this house would ever need to take such a job; Ari was set to inherit his father's business, and half the family fortune with it. In the meantime, he was running several ventures of his own, and wore a suit and tie to work, like any proper Indian businessman. He was bent over a financial ledger even now, at almost midnight, and the furrow in his brow said that he was concentrating hard. Suresh thought briefly that concentration probably *was* hard for the man -- and then felt guilty for the uncharitable thought. He had never liked Ari, but he had no good reason for the dislike. Ari was just too much like his father: a blustering bully.

"I didn't do it!" Ari said, as soon as he raised his head. He quickly closed the ledger in front of him, and Suresh felt a sharpening of his professional interest. He hadn't particularly suspected Ari, but now...

"Why would you take the necklace?" Suresh asked, mildly.

"Why should I? My wife has plenty of jewelry -- I could buy a hundred such necklaces for her if she wanted." An exaggeration, surely -- from what Suresh's aunt had told him, that necklace was worth three months of her husband's generous pay.

"Does she like jewelry?"

Ari laughed shortly. "Are you joking, man? What woman doesn't? Vani is happiest when she's decked from head to toe like a maharani. Or a whore."

Suresh carefully ignored the ugliness in that last comment. "Do you buy her a lot of jewelry?"

"Anything Vani wants. If your wife isn't happy, she lets you know it. You know what I mean, don't you, mahaan?" he asked, raising an insolent eyebrow. "I heard what happened with your wife. Sorry." Ari's mocking grin said he wasn't sorry at all.

Suresh fought back a sudden urge to put his fist in the man's face. Of course, the family had known about the divorce. He was sure it had been the subject of hot gossip for weeks. *Why had the nice young couple been splitting up? Didn't you hear? His wife had an affair. Ah, that girl was too beautiful for him -- they'd all said there was going to be trouble.* Suresh knew the sorts of things Indian families said. He had heard the comments from his own, often enough. Most of his family was too tactful to refer to any of that now, since Sarita's sudden death all those years ago. But Ari had never been gifted with an excess of tact.

"Thank you for your condolences," Suresh said, coldly. And then back to the questioning -- you couldn't let a suspect throw you off your game, or you were lost. "So all that jewelry; it must have been expensive."

"No problem for a man like me, mahaan." Ari sounded confident enough, but the surreptitious glance at the ledger was enough to convince Suresh that the truth was less comfortable. Business was not so good; the money wasn't flowing freely. If your wife grew agitated, how tempted would you be to pick up a fortune left lying carelessly around? It wouldn't be that hard to sell the necklace, break it up into smaller pieces, and remake it into jewelry gaudy enough to satisfy the most avaricious of wives. If you could keep your wife happy, was there anything you wouldn't do? If he could have kept Sarita happy -- better not to think about that.

Suresh nodded as if in agreement and left the room; time to ask Priyanka just how recently her sister-in-law had gotten a new piece of jewelry. He was betting it had been quite a while.

As he was about to enter the courtyard, Suresh heard raised voices, and paused in the shelter of a thick banyan trunk. He felt like a small boy playing spy -- hadn't he done that in this very courtyard, decades ago? ,But in this situation, where his usual methods of direct interrogation were unavailable, a little discretion might prove to be a powerful ally.

"Why would *I* take it? That makes no sense." That was Nita, his cousin's bride-to-be. If that was the term.

"You're the one causing all the trouble in this house. Before you came, everything was fine." Vani, it must be, Ari's wife. Her voice was low, but furious.

"If anyone's causing trouble here, it's you." Nita was exasperated now, a little sharp. "I just want to have a nice, peaceful evening, not one filled with screeching."

"Is that directed at me, young lady?" Uncle Ranjit, angry as well. Suresh couldn't blame him for taking offense, since his uncle had been the one to start tonight's noise when he assaulted the servant girl. Nita's comment probably *had* been directed at him.

"Nita, kunju, please." His aunt now. Quite the family reunion -- he couldn't have asked for better. What they wouldn't say to him, perhaps they would say to each other.

"Why don't you go find Priyanka, make some tea."

"Fine," Nita said curtly, and then the barely-heard sound of her slippers crossing the courtyard. A pause, as if the three of them were waiting for her to be out of earshot, and then...

"You always take her side," Vani said. Her voice had calmed -- less angry than sad now, a disappointed child who has found out at last that the world is not fair. Suresh had to lean dangerously far forward to make out her words -- if they turned, they would see him. But the three were close together, intent on each other. Vani looked tiny, next to his rotund aunt and tall uncle, a little doll of a woman who had somehow produced four loud, large children. It was surprisingly hard to imagine her as a mother at all; he wondered if the servant girl was actually raising them. "You don't listen to me anymore," she continued.

"Mahal, don't be foolish." Aunty sounded tired now, the weight of the family fallen on her shoulders. "You should go to bed."

"Yes," Uncle Ranjit said. "Go to bed, and stop behaving like a spoiled child."

There was a small gasp; the words had hit Vani like a slap. Then she said, so softly that Suresh almost couldn't hear the words, "You never liked me anyway." And then she was turning, walking away towards the west wall. His aunt stood there a moment looking after her, as if she wanted to follow the girl -- then she shook her head and headed north instead, towards her own rooms. It was late for her; Suresh hoped she would be able to sleep.

Uncle Ranjit was left alone, and surprisingly, he didn't move. Was he contemplating the shining moon above, the bougainvillea dressing the wall in crimson

flame? Or something darker? Suresh wanted to find out, and skulking in the shadows was unlikely to teach him anything more.

Suresh hadn't taken more than three steps into the courtyard before his uncle accosted him. Uncle Ranjit seemed to have lost any shame he'd briefly felt about being caught beating a servant -- now he was puffed up again like a rooster, and stomped his way across the dirt and stones to stand inches away from Suresh's face, far too close for comfort. It had been a mistake to come here, Suresh now realized -- these people, they had no regard for personal space, for boundaries. He had been safer at home. At work, three months had been long enough that most people had already forgotten about his wife's death; at a police station, there were always fresh tragedies coming in the door. And in his too-empty house -- well, maybe he would get a dog. That was as much company as he thought he could stand.

"Why?" His uncle sputtered at him.

"Why what, uncle?" He tried to make his tone calm, respectful. There was no point in setting the man off further.

"Why must you go sticking your dirty American nose into our family business? You see how stirred up they've all gotten -- you have destroyed the peace of this house! Just get out," he hissed. "Go to a hotel, right now -- I'll pay for it. Go home, and leave us alone."

"I'll miss the wedding," Suresh protested, shocked.

"Wedding? What wedding?" His uncle shook his head. "It is your aunt's idea, all this nonsense, throwing away my money on that ridiculous girl."

"*That girl* is your daughter," Suresh felt compelled to point out. As a detective, he shouldn't get involved in family disputes; he knew better. And yet he couldn't stand by and let Priyanka be maligned. "*And* my cousin."

His uncle crossed his bony arms, frowning at him. "Oh, now you care about family ties? You don't come to see us for thirty years, but *now* it's all cousin-this and daughter-that! Why are you here, Suresh? Why don't you just go back to America?"

Suresh hesitated before answering. "I don't know," he finally said. Honestly. "But I'm here now. And aunty asked me to find her necklace, so I am going to try." It was good to have *something* that he was competent to do. "And I *am* going to Priyanka's wedding." It would be easier, in some ways, to go home. But if his cousin could care about marriage enough to fight her way through all the attendant family and community drama -- well, maybe her marriage was worth attending. Maybe he needed to believe that a marriage could actually be worth something.

Uncle Ranjit threw up his hands in exasperation. "Gods. The girl has made me a laughingstock in my whole community. You should see my blood pressure! Through the damned roof!" But despite the loud words, his uncle seemed to be collapsing before his eyes, shrinking into a small, tired man, bewildered by what his life had become. Suresh could almost feel sorry for him.

"Good night, uncle," Suresh said. And then he turned, and walked away.

He found Priyanka sitting in the living room with Nita, the inevitable cups of tea before them on the rattan coffee table. He hoped Nita wasn't the culprit. The young woman was generally cheerful where his cousin was serious, rounded to her slenderness, dark instead of fair. A study in contrasts, the pair of them, and yet when they sat together on the aged sofa, although they rarely actually touched, their bodies seemed to curve towards each other, each one filling the other's negative space. Two puzzle pieces that would, if slid gently together, make a perfect whole. He and Sarita had done jigsaw puzzles together. She always started with the edges, the easy part. Suresh had preferred to stare at the center pieces, sometimes for ten or twenty minutes at a time, until eventually, he would see the pattern emerging. It had driven his wife crazy.

"Suresh, do you have any ideas yet?" Nita looked up from the newspaper spread out on the table.

"Nothing yet." He would ask them about Ari and the jewelry, but first, more general questions. It didn't do to get too fixated on one line of inquiry early in an investigation -- that was a good way to go off on a false track, miss the bigger picture. "Is there anyone in the family who is angry with Aunty Kaveri? Anyone bearing a grudge?"

Priyanka glanced up from her knitting. She was working with fine yarn on a lacy white blanket. For the baby-to-come, perhaps. Even in this heat, babies must need to be wrapped occasionally. "In the family? You're certain it isn't an outsider?" She sounded distressed.

Suresh shook his head. "Your mother hasn't worn that necklace in the past year, she says, and nothing else was taken, although there were several other jewelry boxes in the drawer. Why your father insisted on keeping that much good jewelry in the house -- "

Priyanka shrugged her shoulders. " -- I know, I know. We kept telling him to take it to the bank, but there are so many functions to go to, and it's a nuisance getting it out again. He doesn't really trust bankers..."

"Well, it seems unlikely that an outsider would think to take that necklace and that one alone. It's not even the most valuable."

"It *is* the prettiest, though," Nita murmured.

"It would have looked lovely on you, *rasa*," Priyanka said softly.

"Lovely on Nita?" Suresh asked.

Priyanka nodded. "It would have come to me, if I'd wanted it, but rubies don't look good on me. My skin is too pale; I do better in diamonds, or plain gold. I'd told Amma years ago that I didn't want that necklace. But when Nita and I became engaged, Amma surprised us. She said she would give it to Nita on our wedding day, to wear in the ceremony, and keep afterwards. Rubies are Nita's birthstone, and my mother is a little superstitious about that sort of thing. But mostly, I think she just wanted to give Nita a real present, something that belonged to the family." She hesitated before saying in a softer, choked voice, "That was how I knew that my mother had truly accepted us."

Nita reached out and silently squeezed Priyanka's hand. "Never mind, dearest. The necklace doesn't make the wedding, and more importantly, the wedding doesn't make the marriage. *We* do that. This? It's just a necklace."

They were sweet, the pair of them; they were almost enough to make Suresh believe in love again. But he was distracted from that softening by a sparking thought. "So, really," Suresh said, "whomever stole the necklace was stealing from Nita, not from Aunty Kaveri?"

Priyanka's eyebrows raised. "I suppose you could look at it that way."

"Well. *That* is interesting," Suresh said, feeling the beginnings of a familiar excitement setting his pulse racing. This was why he did jigsaw puzzles -- the pleasure of watching pieces start to lock into place. "Perhaps I've been asking the wrong questions. Let me start again. Who, in this family, is angry with Nita? Who bears a grudge against her?"

Nita looked down at her puzzle again, her face suddenly still. Priyanka bit her lip, and Suresh could tell -- this was going to be good.

Suresh knocked gently on his cousin's wife's door. It was almost one now, but a light still shone bright from under the sill; she was awake. After a brief pause, the words came through the door: "Come in."

He opened it to the sight of Vani standing by the window, staring out at the moon. Bizarrely, she wore her wedding sari, a resplendence of crimson and gold, and for a moment, Suresh was thrown dizzily back to his own wedding day, Sarita glorious at his side. But then he forced himself back to the present. That day was gone. This girl was the one in the sari, not his dead wife. And was that -- yes. Vani turned slightly to profile, just enough for him to see that there around her neck lay the ruby necklace, a cascade of

gems from throat to breasts. She was, briefly in the moonlight, lovely -- a dream of a bride. And then the light shifted, and the haggard lines in her face jumped into relief.

"Why, Vani?" The mystery was solved, the jewels found. Suresh could simply return them to his aunt and be done with this nonsense, go to bed. But this woman had lived in this house for a decade, had borne and raised four children here; why did Vani feel the need to steal?

"My mother didn't like me," Vani said, still gazing out at the moon. "Did you know that?"

"No." He hadn't known Vani at all before this visit; had met the woman just a few days ago, and they had exchanged only a bare handful of words. She had seemed -- well, not happy. But fine. A typical mother, and not as harried as many, with the cushion of wealth and servants behind her. She had been a lawyer before her marriage, if he remembered right, but she had stopped practicing when the first of her children was born.

Vani said, "She thought I should be more feminine, like my sister. She didn't like it when I continued my education. And she was relieved when Ari asked for me -- she kept saying that no man would want me."

"I'm sorry," Suresh said.

"And then I came here, and it was splendid." She turned to him, finally, and smiled. "While some mothers-in-law would have been jealous of the new wife, Auntie was just happy that there was someone else to share the adoration of her son. She tried to teach me how to cook his favorite curries. She showed me his baby pictures. She treated me like a daughter."

"And the necklace?"

"It was supposed to be mine!" A flash of anger, and now her hands were busy at the back of her neck, frantically undoing the clasp, and then the necklace was off, dripping in her hands, before she hurled it, with one swift motion, at Suresh's head.

He reached up and grabbed it out of the air, the sharp edges of the settings rough against the palm of his hand.

Vani snapped, "Priyanka was a terrible daughter. She rebelled against her parents; from the day I moved into this house, she fought with them. Oh, quietly. She's not the yelling type." Vani was close to yelling herself now, and Suresh suspected that it wouldn't be long before the rest of the household heard them and came to investigate. "But whatever her mother wanted, no matter how reasonable, Priyanka would refuse. *Please, wear a sari for this function*, Aunty would beg. And Priyanka would show up in casual salwar kameez instead. And she wouldn't even try to cook or help her mother with the garden. Just went her own way, doing what she wanted. It isn't Aunty's fault that she grew to love me best. Priyanka didn't *want* to be her daughter, and I did. It was *my* place."

"And then..." he said, softly.

"And then Nita came. She can cook, and she can dance, and she loves wearing saris, and she is cheerful and chattery and she laughs and laughs and laughs. The woman just will not shut up!" Vani was shouting now, her body shaking with the force of it, one arm clutching a bedpost as if that were all that held her up. "And all of that was bad enough, but then that woman wants to pretend to get *married*. She talked Priyanka into it too, and now we're all somehow going along with this idiotic farce, spending more money than anyone can afford on a spectacle for the entire city to watch. I don't *care*

what goddamned nonsense they get up to in the bedroom." She sank down onto the bed now, her voice quieting. "But two women getting married -- they can't even find a priest to perform the ceremony. They're using someone ordained on the *internet* instead. It's fucking *ridiculous*." She leaned forward, putting her head in her hands, so Suresh could barely hear her last words. "Why can't Aunty see that?"

And here was Ari in the doorway with him, and Priyanka and Nita too. They had clearly heard it all -- or enough. Priyanka's face was pale with shock, though Nita didn't look surprised. Aunty Kaveri stood a few steps behind them, and her face was a mix of grief and anger -- but no surprise there either. Which proved, he supposed, that Vani had been wrong -- Aunty must love her, to be so afraid to have Vani's guilt confirmed. Aunty surely loved her still, for all the good it would do. He had learned with his wife that love wasn't enough, wasn't everything. Sometimes, it wasn't anything.

There was no sign of Uncle, and Suresh suspected that there wouldn't be. Uncle Ranjit wouldn't want to talk about this. The servant would be paid off. And in a few days, there would be a wedding, and everyone would behave as if nothing had happened. It was the only way to keep living together.

Suresh turned away, and let Ari move past him into the room to sit down beside Vani on the bed, placing an obligatory arm around her rounded shoulders. He was the one who had to live with her.

Priyanka reached out, her face set, and Suresh placed the sparkling necklace in her hands. She took it, and despite Nita's barely-perceptible shake of her head, Priyanka carefully, slowly, fastened the necklace around Nita's neck, in full view of the open

doorway, and Vani beyond it. And then they turned, the pair of them, and walked away, hand in hand.

Suresh supposed that that was the best ending he could hope for.

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