

PROLOGUE

MALIK

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Jaipur

It's opening night of the Royal Jewel Cinema, which shines as brilliantly as a gemstone. A thousand lights twinkle in the ceiling of the immense lobby. White marble steps leading to the upper balcony reflect the glow of a hundred wall sconces. A thick crimson carpet hushes the sound of thousands of footsteps. And inside the theater: every one of the eleven hundred mohair seats is occupied. Still more people stand, lining the walls of the theater for the premiere.

This is Ravi Singh's big moment. As lead architect on the prestigious project, commissioned by the Maharani Latika of Jaipur, the Royal Jewel Cinema stands as a testament to what modern ingenuity and a Western education can create. Ravi Singh has modeled it after the Pantages Theatre in Hollywood, eight thousand miles away. For this most celebrated of occasions, Ravi has arranged for the cinema house to show *Jewel Thief*, a film that was actually released two years ago. A few weeks ago, Ravi told me he picked the popular film because it reflects the name of the cinema house and features two of the most renowned Indian actors of the day. He knows that Indian audiences, crazy for films, are used to seeing the same movie multiple times; most cinemas only change their offerings every few months. So even if Jaipur residents saw the movie two years ago, they'll come see it again. Ravi also arranged for the film's stars Dev Anand and Vyjayanthimala, as well as one of the younger actresses, Dipti Kapoor, to be present for the grand opening. The press is also in attendance to write about the opening of the Royal Jewel Cinema, report on all of Jaipur high society in their bejeweled finery and gawk at the Bollywood glitterati.

Taking in the modern architecture, the plush red velvet curtains shielding the movie screen, the palpable air of anticipation, I'm impressed with what Ravi's accomplished—even if there are other things about him that make me uneasy.

My hosts, Manu and Kanta Agarwal, have been invited to sit with the Singhs and the Sharmas in the balcony, the most expensive seats in the house. I'm sitting with the Agarwals as their guest (otherwise, I'd be sitting in the cheaper seats down below, closer to the screen; I'm only a lowly apprentice at the Jaipur Palace, after all). Children are allowed up here on the balcony, but Kanta has left her son, Niki, at home with her saas. When I arrived at the Agarwals' earlier this evening to accompany them to the cinema opening, I could see just how devastated Niki was.

“It’s the event of the century! Why can’t I go? All my friends are going.” Niki’s face was flushed with anger. At twelve years old, he’s able to charge his words with a strong sense of injustice.

Manu, ever calm in the face of his son’s and his wife’s explosive personalities, said, “Independence of our country was actually the event of the century, Nikhil.”

“Well, I wasn’t alive then, Papaji. But I’m alive now! And I don’t see why I can’t go.” He looked to his mother for help.

Kanta met her husband’s eyes as if to ask, *How much longer can we keep our son from social events where the Singhs are present?* Niki is getting old enough to question why he’s allowed to attend some social occasions and not others. Kanta glanced at me as if to say, *Malik, what do you think?*

I’m flattered they feel comfortable having these conversations in front of me. I’m not related to them by blood but by the mere fact that my former guardian Lakshmi (or, as I call her, Auntie-Boss) is a close friend. I’ve known the Agarwals since I was a young boy, so I know about Niki’s adoption, even if Niki himself doesn’t. And I know that the moment the Singhs see those blue-green eyes of his—so uncommon in India—they’ll be reminded of their own son’s indiscretions; Auntie-Boss’s sister, Radha, wasn’t the first girl Ravi impregnated before his marriage to Sheela. Being aware of their son’s shortcomings is one thing, but being confronted with it in the flesh would unnerve both Samir and Parvati Singh.

In the end, the Agarwals didn’t need me to help decide the issue, which was a relief. Manu’s mother, busy with her sandalwood rosary, settled the argument. “Because all that dancing and singing in films corrupts people! Come, Niki, help me up. We’re going to my temple.” Nikhil groaned. He was a polite child; an order from his grandmother was not up for debate.

Now, amid deafening applause inside the Royal Jewel Cinema, the Maharani Latika—the third and youngest wife, now widow—of the Maharaja of Jaipur, takes center stage to welcome all the moviegoers. This is the first major project she’s headed since the death of her husband. She is Manu’s boss; none of the other wives of the maharaja wanted to manage the finances. Manu is the director of facilities at the Jaipur Palace, shepherding building projects like these, and I’ve been sent by Auntie-Boss to learn his trade.

“Tonight, we celebrate the grandest movie house Rajasthan has ever known, the Royal Jewel Cinema.” The maharani waits for the applause to die down before continuing. Her ruby-and-diamond earrings and the gold-embroidered *pallu* of her red silk Banarasi sari send a thousand sparkles out into the audience as she scans the packed house, a beatific smile on her face. “It’s an historic occasion for Jaipur, home to world-renowned architecture, dazzling textiles and jewels, and, of course, Rajasthani *dal*

batti!" The crowd erupts into delighted laughter at the mention of the famous local dish.

Her Highness acknowledges Manu's supervision of the project, compliments the fine work of Singh-Sharma architects and finishes her speech by welcoming the actors from the film onto the stage. Anand and Vyjayanthimala are followed by the kohl-eyed Kapoor in a sequined sari amid whistles and shouts of *Waa! Waa!* The audience showers all three with roses, frangipani and *chemali* and gives them a standing ovation. When we were growing up, Auntie-Boss's sister, Radha, was more of a film buff than I was. But tonight, even I'm caught up in the feverish excitement, the thunderous clapping and whistles from the audience.

Finally, the theater curtains part and a hush descends on the crowd as the film certificate and title credits begin rolling on the screen. Even the rickshaw-*wallas* and tailors in the cheap seats of the front rows are coaxed into silence.

Indian movies are long, lasting almost three, sometimes four, hours, broken by an intermission. At the break, we file out of the building—along with the majority of the audience—into the street for refreshments. The street vendors are prepared. They've arranged themselves along both sides of the street in front of the theater. The aroma of roasting chili peanuts, *panipuri*, onion *pakor*as and potato *samosas* is almost too much to resist. I buy small glasses of chai for everyone and pass them around. Samir buys a large plate of *kachori* and *aloo tikki* for our group.

It's May in Jaipur and already sweltering. The theater is air-conditioned, but the air outside is fresher than the odor of a thousand bodies pressed close together inside the theater. Ravi's wife, Sheela, refuses the chai and the food, claiming it's too hot to eat. Her baby daughter has fallen asleep on her shoulder, the warmth of her small body making Sheela squirm. Sheela puffs out her cheeks and walks over to a stall selling *khus-khus* fans. A bead of sweat glides down her throat and disappears into the low neckline of her fuchsia silk blouse. I force myself to look away.

Parvati is proudly showing off her four-year-old granddaughter Rita to the society matrons who have come to say hello. "*Tumara naam batao, bheti.*"

Kanta is chatting gaily with friends. Samir and Manu are being congratulated for their work on the cinema house by the Jaipur elite who have shown up for the gala affair. I look around for Ravi, who was with them earlier, and wonder why he would miss this opportunity to be in the limelight. It's not like him.

As always, I'm watching and listening, something Auntie-Boss taught me to do well. In my next letter to her and Nimmi in Shimla, I'll be able to tell them what the moviegoers thought of the leading lady's hairstyle or the color of her sari (I'll wager Nimmi has never seen a movie in her life!). I'll also be able to tell them that most of the ladies of Jaipur would marry the handsome Dev Anand given half a chance.

I see Sheela coming back to join our group, waving her fan in front of her face. Parvati reaches up to lift damp curls away from the sleeping baby's forehead. Sheela is looking past her mother-in-law. Suddenly, her face hardens. I follow her gaze to the corner of the cinema house. That's when I notice Ravi discreetly escorting the younger actress out the side door of the building. Sheela's eyes narrow as her husband and the starlet disappear in the darkness, away from the throng. I know there's a loading dock there. It's also where the drivers for the maharani and the actors are waiting to whisk them away. Perhaps he's taking her to her car.

We hear the bell announcing that intermission is almost over. The second half of the film is about to begin. I check my watch. It's now 9:30 p.m. Sheela's girls should be in bed, but Ravi had insisted that the family be present and seen by the public at his big moment. I'm sure Sheela fought him on it. She prefers to have the *ayah* look after the girls.

The crowd files back into the lobby and through the open doors of the theater. I hand the empty tea glasses to the *chai-wallas* making their rounds. Banana leaves on which *chaat* was sold litter the ground. A fragrance of food served and eaten—not wholly unpleasant—lingers in the air. I lift up Rita, Ravi's other daughter, whose eyes have started to droop, and hoist her onto my shoulder.

I follow the rest of the group inside the lobby.

Before we make it through the doors, we hear a yawning creak, then a complaining groan, and then suddenly the roar of a thousand pounds of cement, brick, rebar and drywall crashing down. Within seconds, the earsplitting sounds of a building collapsing, screams of agony and howls of pain are coming from inside the theater.