

Extracted from Chapter 1, *The Lost Flamingoes of Bombay*

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(Karan Seth, a rookie photographer is on the beat to photograph Samar Arora, a reclusive pianist, at Gatsby, a buzzing Bombay watering hole)

At little before two am, Karan reached Gatsby, tucked away at the end of sleepy old Mandalik Lane.

Right in front of the portal, under a big rain tree, liveried chauffeurs traded flashes of filthy gossip about their bosses and tipsy memsahibs, smelling of their husband's abandonment, waited for valets to pull up their fancy cars.

No sooner had he stepped in than he was subsumed with unease; in his shabby clothes and with his unshaven sleepy face, he was an obvious impostor; the waiters eyed him with indifference, and the haughty maitre d looked as if he was going to walk right over and ask him to vamoose. Before any such unsavory eviction might occur, Karan slunk through the bubbly horde of painted faces, negotiating a jungle of expensive perfumes, vines of vetiver, marshes of musk. So as to not drown in the swift currents of his anxiety, he focussed all his attentions on his subject.

So, where was the pianoman?

His eyes scanned the throng, but it was impossible not to be led astray. For here was a perma-tanned socialite with angry, silver hair and ivory bangles, narrow rapacious eyes. A pack of icky corporate types, obese and bald, were surrounded by heroin-thin models with sepulchral expressions. Karan recognized a famous film-maker, dressed in a stunning orange sarong, standing regally under the outrageous shield of a green cloth umbrella, his long wrist bent like the spout of a teapot. The music - a canvas for the assembled to perform their bon mots and their neurosis - was electric, possessed with tandava, and now this music drew over Karan, diluting all his worries. He imagined that the people here would never die: they would simply evaporate into the carnal smoke of the music, their loins wrapped around each other, abandoning original self and final sorrow into an intimate, intricate tapestry of communal lust. His eyes coasted from one person to the next before zoning in on a small group under the wooden stairwell at the far end of the bar. Thrilled to see his elusive subject was very much around, he took a deep breath and readied himself for the decisive moment.

Samar Arora, in a berry-black suit, his short hair stylishly mussed up, was talking to Mantra Rai, the controversial columnist and author.

Mantra's hawkish face was framed by a blustery black mane; her first novel, *Remembrance of Bitches Past*, was the talk of the town: a beau monde tell-all-claw-all, which, among its many dirty divulgences, had brought to light the liaison between the city's most respected philanthropist and his fourteen-year-old niece, a fuck-fest all the charity in the world could not hush up.

Leo McCormick, Samar's boyfriend, had just asked Mantra her views on the recent efforts of the right-wing government to rename the city: 'Bombay' would soon be whitewashed into 'Mumbai'.

Within minutes the trio had got worked up over the city's possible rechristening, and another angle was added to their debate as they were joined by Priya Das, a newly elected member of parliament.

'Mumbai is about as appealing a name for a city as Gonorrhoea,' Mantra declared. 'Besides, the change will pollute the collective public memory of "Bombay".'

'But Mumbai was the original name of Bombay,' Priya said stiffly, referring to the fact that the Kolis, one of the earliest communities resident in the city, had named it in honour of the goddess Mumbadevi. 'This is about claiming our past back from the colonists.'

Mantra exhaled loudly. 'Look, Priya, a woman is raped every hour in Bombay. Over half the population lives in slums, twelve-year-olds work as whores, the trains are never on time, and my milk has funny water in it.'

'Your point being?'

'The Brits checked out some forty years ago. The past is important, but the present is crucial. Giving Bombay a new name is not going to make it any safer or cleaner.'

'But this is a resistance to authenticity!' she screeched.

It occurred to Mantra that Priya had the sort of dry, librarian's voice that could only be relieved with a dildo. 'Authenticity?' she said. 'The Kolis called it Mumbadevi in the 1800s. But Bombay goes way back to the twelfth century. If you're looking for authenticity, you'll have to dig much deeper than that.'

The heated debate was interrupted by a loud squeal of delight. 'Well, if it isn't the wonderful Samar Arora!' Editor of a fashion bible, Diya Sen had long, lascivious legs and a giggle as shiny as a penny in the sun; this evening she was all shimmied up in a black shift dress and a string of thick white pearls. 'My favourite pianist!' she burred. 'Darling man, how lucky I am to cross your path.'

'I've been waiting here all my life only so that you might come along,' Samar assured the drunken editor.

'I see your lovely boyfriend has graced our wicked acres . . . Hello there, Mr McCormick. How's the new masterpiece coming along?'

'One page at a time,' Leo replied. 'Slow but steady. How's your husband?'

'Oh, super!' Diya roped her arm around Samar, drawing a quizzical look from Leo. 'Except that he's no longer my husband.'

'Oh, I'm sorry . . . I had no—' Leo blushed.

'Don't apologize, darling! After four years of marriage I discovered that the only thing we had in common was a mutual adoration of myself—but even that wasn't enough to make me stay.' She kissed Samar on his ear, and drawled, 'I have a new man.'

'Wonderful!' Samar said. 'What does he do?'

'The Boyfriend is working on a biography of Bombay.'

'How exciting. Bombay deserves a good memoirist. Have you read any of his work in progress? I enjoy reading the first draft of Leo's work.'

'I gave the fellow a first line for his book; it's bound to be an opus, although right now it's more pus than opus.' She made a face.

'But I'm sure you'll whip it into shape, Diya; your mind could mend any book.'

'I doubt we'll be together that long,' the editor confessed.

'Why toss out a talented writer?' Samar said as he ruffled Leo's hair. 'Writing prowess often extends into the bedroom.'

'Not in the case of The Boyfriend,' Diya asserted. 'But then not every fling comes with a bling quotient, and I was raised to believe that kinds of charity begin in bed.'

'You're not giving your biographer boyfriend enough of a chance.'

'When you date writers, execute your own exit routes,' she said. 'Otherwise, before you know it, you'd be written out of the narrative. I've got too much self-disrespect to be a closed chapter in someone else's book.'

'That's a bit harsh,' Leo said. 'Writers are not calculating; they just understand early on that efficient editing can save a straggling story.'

Diya waved her hand in the air. 'The Boyfriend is not half the fun as what I did last week in Goa; I got my first tattoo! Want to see?'

Priya, ever the insecure politician, not about to be outdone by a fashion journalist, raised her voice. 'I guess the whole Mumbai vs Bombay issue boils down to one thing. It boils down to the Privileged Class vs the Working Class.'

'I'm a writer, and no one gets more "working class" than starving writers,' said Mantra.

'If you're so working class, what're you doing at Gatsby?' Priya asked snidely.

'I had the sense to marry well, Priya. And to divorce better.'

‘Congratulations! With that one sentence you’ve pushed the women’s rights movement back by fifty years!’

Mantra, long immune to such Bombay Brand Bitchery, serenely took another sip of her whiskey. ‘Some of us, Priya, might believe that your birth is one helluvan argument for the contraceptive movement,’ she said, ‘but don’t you go sweating over progressive politics so early in your career.’

Diya, meanwhile, was growing impatient. ‘I want to show you my tattoo. NOW!’

‘Well then . . .’ Samar threw his hands up in the air. ‘What’s stopping you?’

In one quick, smart motion Diya unzipped her black dress and let it fall to her feet, where it gathered in an untidy heap, like a giant’s hanky. Hiking up the succulent left cheek of her butt, pertly encased in pristinely white lacy knickers, she said, ‘It’s Capricorn, my star sign.’

‘Gosh! I thought Capricornians were supposed to be quite old school,’ Samar said. ‘But you’ve made some giant strides from there, doll.’

‘What’s insulting is how the politicians never once asked us.’ Mantra was still at it, though now she was trying hard to peel her eyes away from the booty on show. ‘How dare they take our votes and our money and play with the name of our city without consulting us? This is no democracy! This is a land of right-wing zealots. We chucked out the whites in 1947 but what sort of fiends did we elect in their place? The Hindu People’s Party, that’s what.’

‘That’s because the city’s elite have different things on their minds,’ Priya said. ‘Real Bombay is not here.’ She wondered if the young girl standing there like a besharam chaddi-baby was going to snap her dress back on. ‘And it’s really very reductive of you to write off the Hindu People’s Party as right-wing zealots. You may have forgotten, I am one their representatives.’

‘Oh, puhleez! Save that Real Bombay-Fake Bombay crap. There may be six hundred and fifty million of us who live below the poverty line but there are also three hundred and fifty million of us who’re not doing too badly, thank you very much. Some of us, in fact, even find the time to grab a drink at Gatsby.’ She looked pointedly at the politician. ‘And really, Priya, it’s a bit cheeky to make poverty your party line when you’re at the party.’

While Priya looked stricken for a bit, struggling to make a comeback, Diya jubilantly held court in her lingerie, like an ancient goddess of lust. ‘So, my darling,’ she said to Samar, ‘I heard you tap dance like a dream . . .and that when you do, sirens go off and the lights come on.’

‘Don’t flatter Samar in that department.’ Leo tightened his grip around Samar’s arm. ‘You don’t want to get him going after he’s had a few drinks, and, trust me, he’s been careless with the bellinis tonight.’

‘Show me!’ Diya cried. ‘Let me be the judge.’

‘Here?’ Samar said, his brow creased. ‘It’s so damn crowded, babe; my feet would hardly hear me if I heckled them to kick up a step or two!’

‘The bar top looks kinda free to me,’ Diya giggled.

Samar surveyed the bar top and accepted that the gorgeous gal had a good point; besides, if she could stand in the heart of the party in her knockout knickers and pretty pearls, the least he could do was throw on a stomp fest at her plea.

Pulling free of Leo’s clutch, Samar hoisted himself on to the narrow, gleaming counter. As the pianist shuffled by to an internal accelerando, the guests hastily lifted their drinks to let him pass—and pass he did, in smart chuff and glide. A few gasps, some scowls, two whistles and a lot of hmmm went up around the bar.

Karan thought he was witness to a scene that was as much theater as circus; he half-expected shrieking yellow canaries to burst out of someone’s elaborate coiffure and fireworks to go off in one corner of the room. He felt madly lucky and continued to click away with his little Leica: not only was Samar’s performance spectacular, he also enjoyed an audience that comprised of the film-maker in the orange sarong, the socialite with calf length silver hair, the editor in her hot white knickers: they all made for accidental amazing props, adding to the moment’s overall enchantment.

When finally Samar hit his head against one of the overhead lamps, Leo extended his hand, which Samar took to land neatly on the floor.

Leo smiled; his lover had one thing down to pat: the perfect exit.

On his way out of a swarm of bedazzled admirers, Diya pulled Samar to her side and said, ‘At least now you know that inner beauty is nothing more than smart knickers.’