

Your Name on My Hand

*A Hot Mess Prince* Short Story

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## Author's Note

This story takes place after my first novel, *The Hot Mess Prince*, and features the same characters. It can be enjoyed without too many spoilers of what happens in the book, but if you like Neel and Thibault's story and want to find out how they got together, please check it out!

The movie referenced in this story, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, is currently available on Prime. I highly recommend it if you like Bollywood movies, sweeping scenery, 90s outfits, and dumb teenagers in love. I also recommend the reality TV series *My Big Fat Desi Wedding*, which is available on YouTube and has a lot of fun behind-the-scenes details about planning lavish weddings.

Thank you so much for reading! If you enjoy this and want to see more of my work, please check me out on Amazon or visit my website: [www.emilyspadybooks.com](http://www.emilyspadybooks.com)

The flowers were wrong. Neel had been able to keep his anxiety to a manageable simmer all morning, but the unmistakable scent of peonies flooding the cathedral sent him reeling into full panic.

It wasn't that they looked bad. They were gorgeous, an ethereal complement to the dark lines of the pews, draping the altar like swathes of cumulus. The stained glass windows were just beginning to pick up the rays of the early morning sun, casting little rectangles of syrupy color onto the carpet and over the white and pink blooms, and the whole place was just impossibly beautiful and far nicer than anywhere Neel could have imagined he'd ever be, let alone get married in, but—

“Ranunculus,” he muttered. He could feel his upper lip getting sweaty, and he brushed at it.

“I'm sorry?” His older sister, Saira, gave him a sharp look. Her hair was still wet, falling down her back in a dark sheet, and there were green under-eye hydration patches on her cheeks. She didn't seem fully awake yet.

That was fair. They were all here very early. At least an hour earlier than they needed to be, and Neel felt terrible about dragging his sister, his friend Viola, and the embarrassingly large entourage of PAs and bodyguards and wedding planners out of bed this early, because he knew all too well what it was like to be at the capricious beck and call of some royal prat who needed things done just so.

Which Neel apparently was, now. He hoped he wasn't too awful of one.

He had been awake since about 4 am, tossing and turning so much that Thibault, who usually slept like a lion in a midday pool of sun, had cracked open one eye and made a bleary sound of protest.

“I'm sorry.”

The prince had reached for his hand, kissing the knuckles. “It'll be alright. Don't worry.”

“I have to worry. But I'll get up. Let you sleep in.”

“Mm.” Thibault had squeezed his hand. “You’re right. Go swim, baby. Get some time for yourself.”

“Thibault.” Neel had pressed his face against Thibault’s messy curls, breathing him in. The sweetness of his scalp, and a hint of sandalwood from his shampoo.

“I mean it. I need to get up and get ready soon, anyway. I’m going to be–” he’d yawned loudly, “so extra about this whole thing. Extravagantly, ridiculously extra.”

Despite himself, Neel had smiled. “I’d expect nothing less.”

“The next time I see you–”

“I know,” Neel had said, swallowing.

“Love you, future husband.” And Thibault had gone back to snoring.

Which was very easy for him to do. He was, after all, used to being in the public eye, and had lived most of his life having things taken care of for him, and it wasn’t that Neel was nervous about being married to Thibault—that was the only bit he wasn’t nervous about, really. When it was just the two of them, like it had been that morning in the bedroom, everything seemed to effortlessly fall into place. Their engagement had been long and luxurious, long enough that he’d finally started to feel like Thibault’s partner and not his assistant. Long enough that he’d been able to adjust to the relative fame he now had. At least, as much as was possible for him. Neel still hated seeing his own face on magazine covers and websites, and he *really* hoped that his mum hadn’t developed enough digital literacy to find out that there were pictures out there on the internet of him straddling Prince Thibault on a yacht—fully clothed, thank you, but still. Neel hardly ever went online anymore if he could help it, which was a little bit funny, considering how tied to all of his devices he’d been just a few years ago. But Chloe, the actual royal assistant, was excellent at maintaining their social media presence. And their two wedding planners had been excellent at translating everything Neel’s mum wanted and every one of Thibault’s fits of whimsy into reality.

It was just that this was a royal wedding. A *gay* royal wedding. The first of its kind. And there were so many moving parts. And it would be televised. He’d already been caught on camera coming into the cathedral, and he was sure some clickbait article would be going out—if it hadn’t already—about how eager the royal consort was to get married and how he’d shown up hours early and a disheveled mess. Neel was sure his skin looked terrible, and he’d developed at least ten gray hairs since the date had officially been announced. He wasn’t used to having things taken care of for him, nor did he exactly trust that they’d be taken care of correctly.

Which was why the flowers were causing a thorny mass of unease to tumble around in his stomach.

“Thibault specifically requested ranunculus,” Neel said.

Saira rolled her eyes. “And these are?”

“Peonies.” Neel had gained an almost encyclopedic knowledge of flowers in the past few months.

“Do we need to change them?” asked Oliver, one of the two wedding planners who had been working with Neel, Thibault, and his mum and sister for the past eight months. He pulled out his phone, brandishing it like it held all the power of a mythical orb. “We can make an emergency call.”

Neel blanched. “No, no, it’s—”

“Do you think he’ll even be able to tell the difference?” Saira interrupted. “You know he just chose ranunculus because it sounded funny.”

Neel licked his lips, his mouth feeling dry. “He wouldn’t.”

“Peonies are very similar to ranunculus,” Oliver said generously. “Maybe he was confused.”

“Would and did,” said Viola, searching around in her purse. “Antonia told me at poker night.” She held up a mini-bottle of something green. “Is it too early to start drinking? I’ve always wanted to do shots in a church.”

“Absolutely not.” Saira crossed her arms. “If we let my brother start drinking now, he’s going to be absolutely beside himself by the time the ceremony starts.”

“Nobody said anything about *him*.” Viola uncapped the bottle.

Neel saw Saira suppress a sigh. She and Viola had been making a valiant effort to get along, but there couldn’t be two more different people. Viola, Thibault’s former limousine driver, was a slightly terrifying personality who had somehow become one of Neel’s closest friends here in Ankenbrand. And Saira was Saira: incredibly smart, always busy, and never wrong. Neel had never really imagined himself getting married, had shied away from the idea. But in the few moments he’d allowed himself to dream, it hadn’t been anything like this, standing in a sumptuous cathedral with his two bodyguards, George and Sandra (it was still *so* strange to have bodyguards), an army of assistants, two of the most intimidating women in his life, and garlands and garlands of the wrong flowers. Waiting for a prince to walk down the aisle.

He felt a little dizzy suddenly.

Saira tsked, fussing with his hair, straightening the sweaty collar of his shirt. “You’re beside yourself already, aren’t you. Let’s get you sitting down.”

Taking his arm, she led him past the altar and into the sacristy, where they would be getting ready. The little room had been transformed; it was full of flowers, and plush armchairs had been brought in. Neel's heart flip-flopped as he saw that his suit was hanging up, along with Saira and Viola's dresses. But the real center of attention was the table that had been laid out, a bottle of champagne on it along with plates and plates of whimsical little pastries, almost too pretty to eat. Neel recognized all of his favorites: apple tartlets, and the Ankenbrandian sweet cheese dumplings that he could eat by the bucketful, and—it couldn't be—how had they found medu vada in this tiny Alpine country? The little lentil fritters were authentic: there was a smell in the air that made Neel's eyes prickle, that reminded him of childhood, cooking at his mum's side, her hands covered in chickpea flour.

"What—" he sat down, or rather collapsed, into one of the chairs.

"You need to eat," Saira said, sounding just like their mother.

"Did you set all of this up?" Neel looked at Oliver wonderingly.

"I did," he said, "but it was Thibault's idea. He gave me a list of your favorites. He's left you a note, too." He plucked a piece of paper from beside the champagne bottle. Neel's eyes went misty as soon as he unfolded it, tracing the achingly familiar loops and curls of Thibault's cursive. Had Thibault been keeping track of his favorite breakfast foods this whole time? For a moment, he reached for his glasses, intending to wipe them off, before he remembered that he was wearing contacts.

*I know you don't like surprises, Thibault had written, and I know you're probably losing your mind right now. Take a deep breath, sweetheart. Let yourself enjoy this. Right now, nothing else matters but you and me. I love you, and I can't fucking wait to marry you.*

Neel heard himself let out a little sigh. The message blurred so much that he could hardly make out Thibault's signature, and he leaned his head back, cradling the note in his hands as he would a mug of tea on a chilly day, drawing comfort from it. Thibault was right, after all. (How he would have *hated* to admit that, even a year ago). Neel forced himself to breathe. This was supposed to be the best day of his life, not an exercise in torture.

It became a little easier to believe that as the morning went on. People came and went, estheticians and decorators and consultants. He could hear additional setup going on out in the vestibule of the cathedral, even though Oliver and his sister both wouldn't let him stick his head out and see what was happening, telling him he needed to relax. Neel was poked and prodded and manicured and polished. The makeup artist did something about the dark circles under his eyes and the hairstylist somehow

magically slicked down the wayward curl that always popped up behind his ear, and Saira forced him to eat a few pastries and Viola kept his glass full of champagne, and then his mum arrived and he cried off all the under-eye concealer and had to get it reapplied.

“Oh, my son.” Antara Batra’s voice cracked. Her eyes were full of tears behind her chunky, thick eyeglasses, and when she hugged Neel, she smelled the same as always, like cooking and neem soap and the cheap perfume she’d been wearing since the 80s, even though Neel had tried again and again to buy her something nicer. Her long hair was loose across her back, out of its usual bun. She’d gotten red streaks dyed in it for the wedding, and henna patterns danced across the backs of her hands. “You look bloody magnificent.”

“I don’t,” Neel said against her shoulder. “I’ve been awake since 4am.”

She held him at arm’s length, looking him over. “No one will know. Have you eaten, at least?”

He started to giggle. Maybe it was the champagne, or the lack of sleep.

“I remember when you were born,” his mother said. “How small you were, and how perfect. You had this little frown line between your eyes—”

“*Mum*,” he interrupted, embarrassed. Then, more softly, “Mum. What was it like when you got married? Were you nervous?” Neel hardly ever asked her anything about her life before moving to London, let alone his father, who he’d never met. He searched his mother’s face, hoping for some clue about how he was supposed to be feeling right now.

“Oh, it was nice. Yes. The marriage, not so much, but the wedding was quite lovely.” She squeezed his hand. “But yours will be different. You and Thibault love each other very much, and you’ll see. When he walks down that aisle, nothing else will matter.”

There was more conversation, but Neel couldn’t remember what they talked about. The makeup artist transformed his mum, Saira, and Viola into shimmering, glorious versions of themselves, and Neel sipped champagne and tried not to pick a hole in the upholstery of his chair. His chest felt full of beating wings, his fingers numb. Finally it was time to put on his suit, and for finishing touches, and his mother pinned the boutonniere to his lapel—was *this* ranunculus? He didn’t even remember what flowers were anymore—and kissed him on either cheek and told him he looked absolutely First Class. And then somehow she was walking him down the aisle, his ears ringing.

They had discussed so many different configurations of how this would go with the wedding planners. Who would wait at the altar? Would they walk together? Would they—as Thibault had suggested—arrive at the cathedral on an elephant? (Definitely not. What an animal rights nightmare that would be.) Ultimately, Neel had known that Thibault would love being the one who was the center of attention. But now he felt like everyone was looking at *him*.

Neel stared out over the pews. The faces of the guests were a blur. The ceremony itself was supposed to be small and intimate—or as small as a royal wedding ceremony could be—but it seemed like there were a lot of people here. And there would be more at the reception, hundreds more. Neel could feel a bead of sweat inching down his neck.

Music was playing, the string quartet doing a sleepy, aching instrumental cover of one of the classic rock songs Thibault loved so much. Saira had started to walk down the aisle. Her brown skin was luminous, and the gold fabric of her dress made it look like she was wearing the stars. She hardly even looked like his sister anymore, except for her expression: the scrunched-up, vaguely peeved look she got when she was trying not to cry. Neel wondered if his own face looked the same, wondered if all the wedding pictures were going to capture him looking put-out, or worse, constipated—and then, to his relief, he couldn't help but smile, because Viola, who also looked absolutely incredible, was following after Saira, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively at him and mouthing, *Don't fuck it up*.

She was followed by Thibault's personal trainer and best friend, Antonia, whose gloriously muscular arms put them all, Neel included, to shame in her strapless dress. Harita, Neel's niece, came next, sprinkling flower petals across the carpet with a very serious frown on her face, as if her life depended on it. Simon, Saira's husband, followed with their son, Benji, who clutched the ring box in one hand and a toy truck in the other. Saira nearly dropped the box when Benji handed it off to her. It was rare to see his sister flustered, and Neel felt a swell of affection, wishing he could hug her in that moment.

He felt someone squeeze his arm, and turned to see Queen Eleanor smiling at him. She had insisted on officiating the wedding. Like her grandson, she was all about breaking social norms, and her personality was as colorful as her outfit, an elaborate grass-green velvet gown that reminded Neel of the alps in summer. She mouthed something. Neel nodded, though he wasn't sure what he was agreeing with. And there



was no time to wonder, because the wedding march was playing, and his mum had been right. Nothing else mattered.

And oh, Neel was crying again. Thibault shone so brightly as he came down the aisle that he was nearly blinding, but Neel couldn't look away. His mum and dad were on either side of him. Once estranged, they had become closer in the past year, and Neel was glad that they were part of the wedding. Thibault was wearing a white suit, like Neel. And even though Neel had seen him in—and out—of nearly every outfit on the sun, seen him in elaborate Halloween costumes and ridiculous Coachella getups, the sight of him now was nearly transcendent. His auburn hair was swept back in that way that seemed effortless but actually took hours, and his smile was pure warmth, summer nights and shooting stars.

Neel felt weak for a second, and he worried that maybe his knees had locked and he was going to faint, because he had read about that happening if you stood still too long. But no, it was just Thibault. It had always been Thibault, always been this man, even before he'd known him, seeing his picture in magazines. Even as his assistant, when he'd been so annoyed with him that he could scream, and so obsessed with him that he'd move heaven and earth to make him smile.

"You may be seated," said the queen, as Thibault said goodbye to his parents and approached the altar.

"Hi," he whispered, taking Neel's hand. Neel let out a breath, staring into his eyes. He noticed for the millionth time how very, very blue they were. The edges of the room seemed to fold in on themselves, cocooning the two of them in this moment, and Neel felt his heartbeat slowing down, relief seeping into him.

"Hi."

Thibault wiped at a tear on Neel's cheek, and Neel leaned into the caress before remembering himself. "Oh, you can't," he said. "Concealer."

"Right." Thibault grinned sheepishly. "Me too. And bronzer. And highlighter. And—"

"What's on your hand?" Neel examined it, turning Thibault's hand over to see the mendhi designs drawn across his skin. "Henna? When did you possibly have time?"

"This morning. I got up right after you."

Neel let out a delighted laugh. "You're full of surprises today."

"Last one, I promise." Thibault turned to the queen. "Grandmother? We're ready."

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They were kissing in the limo, hadn't really stopped kissing since that initial kiss at the altar, and Thibault could barely remember the ceremony. All those beautiful, carefully-selected quotes about love that they had spent hours going over with his grandmother had flown right past his ears. Thibault had almost missed his cue to say *I do*; he'd been so lost in Neel's dark eyes, the heavy fan of his eyelashes, even more visible now without his glasses. He'd been so focused on keeping his own hands from shaking as he held onto Neel's, on being strong for him.

It was still strange, to be the one being strong. But it was a sweet strangeness, and one he welcomed. Neel had taken care of Thibault for so many years, and now it felt like a privilege to be able to handle things for him. Of course, Thibault wouldn't have been up to the task a few years ago, and sometimes he doubted that he was up to it now—but he was better than he had been. It turned out that antidepressants worked, when you weren't mixing them with a dozen other substances, and therapy did too, and having a partner who believed in you wasn't too bad, either.

"I still can't believe you got this done." Neel pulled away, looking up at him. There were petals and grains of rice dusting his shoulders and caught in his hair, and his dimples were showing, which always made Thibault's heart do a little squeeze. He flipped Thibault's hand over, tracing the reddish-brown lines on his skin. "You must have started at—"

"Five. The henna lady got there right after you left to go swim."

Neel raised an eyebrow. "Nice of her."

"I tipped generously."

"Well now I know why you were so insistent that I get up and do something."

Neel rolled up his sleeve, and Thibault felt a little shiver as Neel's thumb traveled over his pulse point and up his wrist. "It's lovely. I would never have expected—"

"It was your mum's idea." Thibault kissed his cheek. "The henna lady said she hid your name in there somewhere, too. I haven't looked. Although I really should have just had her write your name on my arse—"

"*Don't*." But Neel was laughing. "And see? It's just here, at the tip of your finger."

So it was: *Neel*, written in tiny, curling script that curved around the bed of his nail. Neel pressed his lips to it, and then to Thibault's palm.

Thibault leaned in and kissed him again, and they fell back onto the seat. Outside, horns were honking and hazard lights were flashing as the royal motorcade

slowly made its way through traffic back to the palace, and Thibault could hear the crowd on either side of the road, the camera shutters and the shouting. It was shaping up to be a hot day, and the paparazzi already seemed especially chaotic.

But all of it grew dim here with Neel's lips against his.

Kissing him was like sinking into a warm bath, or finding that exact right stretch that soothed a sore muscle. And then, when the kiss deepened and Neel's tongue played against his, it was fireflies and constellations dancing behind his eyelids, heat blooming in his groin. They shifted on the seat, Thibault pinning Neel's hands above his head the way he liked, and there was a clatter as Neel's elbow knocked into the champagne bottle that someone had left for them, in its ice bucket.

"Oh." Neel laughed, and Thibault pulled away to look at him. His cheeks were dark, eyes sparkling. "Should—should we open that, do you think?" He must have seen something in Thibault's face, because he added quickly, "We don't have to."

"I just—" Thibault bit his lip, smoothing Neel's hair back from his forehead. It was already impossibly mussed. "I want to remember this. All of this." There were too many things he remembered as a bleary haze, or not at all.

"I understand." Neel stroked the side of his face, his neck, and Thibault pressed into his hand like a cat. "God," he murmured. "You look so good. I can't get over it. I mean, I know you're fit, everyone knows that. But seeing you in that church, it was like—you looked like you belonged in one of the stained glass windows, and not down there with the rest of us."

In all the articles and blog posts and thirsty TikTok edits that had been made about him, no one had ever told Thibault that he belonged in a stained glass window. He swallowed, eyes prickling, and managed to say, "Oh, this is nothing. Wait until you see my other three outfits."

*"Three? Good lord."*

"And you can't give me compliments like that," Thibault said, nuzzling against his ear. "Because now I've got nothing to top it. But you look so good, too, Neel. I'm so incredibly lucky." He wanted to say more, but the words were bottled up in his chest, and he wasn't even sure how to put them together. He'd never really allowed himself to think about getting married, had known it was a requirement of being a prince, but hadn't ever imagined he'd find someone who would fit him. At times, he hadn't even thought he'd live to see thirty, much less his own wedding. "You've given me so much," he managed, before he had to press his face into Neel's hair, his throat working. Neel

had given him a future, but that wasn't the sort of thing you brought up while making out in a limo. It was almost too much to bring up at all.

Breathing him in, Thibault kissed his neck, his cheek, the palm of his hand, before moving back to his mouth.

"How much time do we have?" Neel asked against his lips.

Thibault took in a shuddery breath. The champagne bottle and all that came with it had lodged a little shiver of sadness in his chest, and he forced it away. He was thinking too much, and he didn't want that today. He wanted to be happy, and not fuck things up, even if he had numerous times before. It was a little bit terrifying, choosing to be happy.

"We'll be stuck in traffic for at least half an hour," he said. "But *you* said nothing could ever happen in the limo."

Neel shrugged, and said dryly, "It's a special occasion."

Thibault didn't think he could ever get tired of this, the way Neel's breath quickened as he began to kiss his way down his neck, the musky smell of his skin and the sweet, satisfied sigh he let out as Thibault began to unbutton his fly. He knew he couldn't actually get him out of his suit, not here; it would take too long to get everything put back together, but there was something wonderfully lewd about the way Neel looked laid out on the seat beneath him, his pupils dilated and his chest rising and falling quickly, fully dressed with his trousers undone and his cock beginning to harden in Thibault's hand.

"I love you," he said. And again, against Neel's mouth, and into his shirtfront as he worked his way down his body, and against the crisp hair on his lower belly, scattering kisses there before taking him in his mouth. Giving head had often been a default for Thibault, an almost mindless alternative to actual sex, but it was different with Neel. Different how his heart hung onto every little gasp and sigh Neel made, different how Neel's nails traced patterns against his scalp, making his skin tingle. Different how proud he felt, looking up at him to see his head thrown back and his eyes squeezed shut, completely lost, given over to Thibault and the moment, nothing else on his usually-bustling mind. Thibault loved it, loved that no one else got to see him this way, loved unbuttoning this buttoned-up man, and now Neel's thighs were shaking, and his hands were clenching in Thibault's hair, and he let out a little yelp, and Thibault couldn't help answering with a groan as Neel came in his mouth.

"Oh my God," Neel said a few moments later, his voice dreamy. "Was that thirty minutes?"

Thibault kissed his inner thigh. “Probably more like five.”

“Oh, good.” Neel sat up, grabbing him by the lapels. “Because I need to pay you back.”

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Neel squinted against the sun as they came down the steps of the palace, *dhol* drums playing, petals and confetti flying through the air. They’d set up some kind of colored smoke machine for the grooms’ official entrance, and he could hardly tell what was going on, music and the sound of the crowd filling his ears and camera flashes exploding across his vision. He nearly stumbled, but caught himself as Thibault squeezed his hand. Neel glanced at him, and Thibault smiled, giving him a wink. His auburn hair was already mussed up again, though the stylist had somehow gotten it calmed down after the limo ride. Scraps of metallic paper were caught in it like a crumpled halo. Neel smiled back, his heart swelling with fondness. God, Thibault was good-looking in everything he wore, even if he’d picked a ridiculously blinged-out version of the traditional sherwani.

His mum, who had changed into a bright pink sari, and the Queen, who had also changed and was now wearing saffron yellow, were waiting at the bottom of the stairs. Mum pressed a garland into his hand, and he somehow remembered that he was supposed to put it around Thibault’s neck, even as Thibault put one around his own. It turned playful, each of them trying to see who could get the garland on the other first, and then Thibault’s arm was looped around his waist and Neel’s fingers were on the nape of his neck and they were laughing and manhandling each other in front of all these people—in front of the *Queen*—and there was the sound of drums and the sweet smell of incense and Thibault’s lips against his, the garland heavy around his neck, the blooms releasing their scent as they were crushed between their two bodies.

Neel felt a little drunk, though he hadn’t had any champagne since that morning, and he had to press his forehead against Thibault’s shoulder for a moment before standing up straight and facing the crowd. It was a blur, a colorful collage of outfits both Western and South Asian, of people from all corners of his and Thibault’s life. It had been a nightmare getting security clearances for everyone, and Neel had spent many a sleepless night on calls with his mum, poring over the multiple spreadsheets they’d needed for the guestlist alone. Antara Batra had joked that you had to invite everyone you’d ever met to an Indian wedding, but there were people here

that Neel had never met, or only knew by name. Celebrities, distant cousins, foreign dignitaries, and even his mum's community of friends from the neighborhood he and Saira had grown up in. It made Neel's head spin as they walked down the central pathway of the castle courtyard, toward the pavilion that had been set up for the newlyweds. He had never expected this much support.

"You alright?" Thibault asked as they sat down, red silk cushions at their back.

"Yes." He actually was, to his amazement. The jitters of that morning had turned to something warm and shivery and incandescent, something as vibrant as all the colors around them. The courtyard had been transformed into an over-the-top, shimmering spectacle of opulence, fairy lights and gold and silk and flowers dancing before his eyes, the austere lines of the palace in the background somehow complementing it all. It was a gluttonous feast for the senses, and Neel felt starstruck looking at it. He turned to look at his new husband instead, but that only made the feeling stronger.

"Sanjay and Oliver did an amazing job," he said, for something to say. His mouth was dry, and he traced his fingers over the patterns on Thibault's hand, still having a hard time believing any of this was allowed to be his.

"They did. I knew they would."

"We're—"

"Giving them bonuses, yes. And an all-expenses paid spa vacation." Thibault kissed his forehead. "But thank you for all the work you put in, too. And your mum, and Saira. I know it was you three behind a lot of this. No matter how many times I tried to wrestle you away from your computer." He picked a piece of confetti out of Neel's hair with easy fondness.

"Not true. This part was your idea." He squeezed Thibault's knee. A space had been cleared out in front of the pavilion, and the band was starting to play the familiar opening beat of *Mendhi Laga Ke Rakhna*. Neel saw Thibault's jaw tense as the professional dancers began to filter in, and wondered if he was a little bit nervous, after all.

The problem with marrying a prince was that no extravagance was off the table (well, except the elephant). And Thibault had been so delighted at the idea of incorporating Neel's heritage into the wedding that he hadn't been able to say no. Even though he considered himself a Londoner through-and-through, had never been to India, and had grown up trying to keep that part of himself separate, even buried.

Londoner or not, now they were having a Bollywood-style dance-off at their wedding, to the hit song from his mum's favorite movie.

Neel had worried it would be too self-indulgent, or too on-the-nose, or that social media would plaster Thibault with accusations of cultural appropriation, but as the flirty back-and-forth between the two groups of dancers began, all he could feel was joy. Joy at the pageantry of it, the cheesy earnestness, the spectacle. He was back in his mum's flat, suddenly, on the threadbare couch, watching DDLJ on a fuzzy VHS tape and getting caught up as Raj and Simran pestered and teased and got drunk and declared their love for each other all across the soaring backdrop of Switzerland—which was maybe half the reason he'd found himself in Ankenbrand, after all. He'd dreamt of living in an Alpine country ever since he was young. But Neel hardly had time to unpack that now; the dancers were moving with energy and delight, their physicality astounding. In the film, it was set up as women versus men, but the troupe they'd hired was of all genders, and everyone was taking whichever part they preferred.

He felt Thibault rustling at his side and realized that he was swaying in time to the music, one knee jittering where he sat with his legs crossed. Many of the guests had started to get into it, too, standing up and clapping along with the beat. Neel's face hurt from smiling as he looked at Thibault, sunlight cascading over him, his eyes rapt as he tracked the dancers across the lawn. He was copying their hand gestures, humming along to the song.

"Don't tell me you actually learned this," Neel laughed.

"I did," Thibault said, still bobbing in place. "Even the breakdancing bit, but they wouldn't let me do it. Said it was a threat to national security, or something."

"Well, yes, you can't very well fall and break your head open at our wedding."

"Wouldn't be the worst thing I've done at a party."

Neel opened his mouth to reply, but Thibault was taking his hand, pulling him up. "Besides, no one's stopping us from dancing up here, out of the crowd."

"Oh, no, I don't—you know I don't dance, Thibault—"

But it was infectious, the way the fairy lights sparkled in his eyes, the pure happiness on his face, the flush on his cheeks and the way his hair fell in his eyes as he stomped and twirled. Neel tried to copy him, but—oh God, he was doing it backwards, wasn't he, and the rhythm was all wrong and damn it, he *knew* this bloody movie, had watched it a thousand times—

“Don’t try to get it right,” Thibault whispered in his ear. “Just have fun.” And he was spinning him around, then breaking away to do some kind of ridiculous freestyle of his own. Was that move called the sprinkler? Thibault had definitely been watching Bollywood dance tutorials, because now he was dropping invisible flowers everywhere, and telling the crowd, *no roti for you*, and twerking like a drunk uncle at the end of the night. Many of the guests had joined in with the dance troupe, jumping around with their hands up in the air, a whole sea of bodies moving expertly and inexpertly and everything in-between.

Neel was moving, too, but really he was just watching Thibault. The magnetic motion of his body, the complete abandon with which he tackled every dance move. Sometimes it was hard for Neel to explain why he loved him so much. Not because the feeling itself was flimsy or hard to nail down, but because the obvious things were the least important. It was the moments like this, the way he wasn’t afraid to be unabashedly silly in front of hundreds of people. How he couldn’t seem to use punctuation properly in a single text message but somehow had perfect handwriting, and how he laced his fingers through Neel’s in the morning, before either of them was fully awake. How he gleefully flung his socks onto the carpet at the end of a long day, and how he had the words to all his favorite songs memorized. It was a kaleidoscope of little moments and sideways smiles and quiet comfort, and Neel was laughing, his eyes wet, and letting Thibault fold him into his arms, and then they were both swaying as clumsily as secondary school students in a squeaky-floored gymnasium.

The music changed to *Tujhe Dekha Tòh*, a slow and dreamy song from the same film, and Neel lost himself, staring into Thibault’s eyes, his arms around his neck and Thibault’s hands on his waist, their foreheads touching, as they spun around and flashbulbs popped and the lyrics whispered about how there was no bigger promise than love.

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Prince Thibault’s Big Fat Bollywood Wedding: Inside Details, Exclusive Photos, and More

*Lily Rodriguez, gossipbitches.com*

If you weren’t at one of the many watch parties being held around the world today, or haven’t spent the last ten hours glued to the Royal House of Ankenbrand’s Instagram feed (can’t relate; what does it feel like to have an actual life and responsibilities



outside of being obsessed with #Archimbatra?), you might not know that Prince Thibault got married! Just kidding, of course you know. The Royal Gay Wedding has been one of this year's most anticipated and controversial events, and from what we're hearing, it lived up to all of our wildest dreams. The event was a celebration of both grooms' cultures, with a traditional European ceremony at St. Francis d'Archimbault Cathedral and a lavish, Bollywood-themed reception at the palace. Queen Eleanor officiated the wedding, with a speech that included quotes from Kahlil Ghibran, W. H. Auden, and Ankenbrand's poet laureate, Sheila Toulouse—and that maybe made me cry a lot, even though I'm a hardened bitch who writes about celebrities on the internet. Queen Eleanor, have you ever considered adopting another adult grandchild? Asking for a friend.

Of course, our boys looked absolutely amazing, and there was fashion and eleganza galore from the star-studded guest list as well. Scroll through the photos below to see the outfits, the synchronized dancing (what is this, 2005? I'm kidding—we all love a good flash mob), the special musical guests, the FOOD, and all the wonderful cuteness. Is anyone else's heart exploding into rainbows and glitter, or is it just me?

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“God, it's not even over and they're already bloody writing about it?”

Thibault stuffed his phone into his pocket, cheeks growing hot. He had been hiding out on the balcony of the royal chambers, looking down at the celebration that was still going, late into the night. The clear, hot day had turned close and humid, clouds rushing in as night fell, and there was a tingling in the air that suggested a summer thunderstorm was on its way. He was exhausted, his feet aching. He had only had a few sips of champagne at dinner, still wanting to be careful, still worried about losing control. He had danced, though, danced enough to feel drunk on it, danced until he was no longer stuck in himself and it was just the looseness of his limbs and Neel's warm body against his chest. Thibault's head was full of bubbles, and his thoughts, when they came, were insubstantial, popping and floating away. His face was sore from all the laughing and smiling and crying. So much crying, especially during the after-dinner speeches.

“I always worried about Neel as a child,” Antara Batra had said, face flushed and eyes teary, just tipsy enough to bring up embarrassing stories. “I never worried about Saira, but I did Neel.” (Neel had groaned under his breath at that, and Thibault had

already been weeping openly into his vegetable biriyani, thinking of Neel as a child, and of all the twists and turns and overlaps of fate that had finally brought them here.)

“He was so quiet,” Neel’s mum had continued, “and had such a hard time making friends. But he was also so stubborn, and always wanted to go his own way. He would listen to my advice, and then go off and do exactly what he thought was right. I’ll admit I didn’t always trust his judgment, but I should have.” And she’d raised her glass. “Because now he’s found a wonderful husband, and true happiness here in Ankenbrand. *And* I get to be the mother-in-law of a prince!”

And Queen Eleanor, in her speech, had said she’d never been worried about Thibault, because she had always trusted he would find his way. And hearing that had been its own sweet kind of heartbreak.

Thibault stared down into Neel’s eyes, now. So many emotions had flooded him in the last twenty-four hours that he almost felt washed clean, content. The wedding band on his finger was a comforting weight as he raised his hand to stroke Neel’s cheek. “I know we said no social media.”

“*Saira* said no social media. I didn’t make any promises.” Neel smiled up at him. “I’m glad I found you up here.”

“I am too.”

Neel’s hair was curling in the heat, lines of sweat visible on his neck. His eyes were sleepy and a little liquid, and Thibault felt a helpless wave of affection, wanting to bundle him up and throw him into bed.

“Sorry I disappeared,” he said.

“Oh, me too. I got pulled away by the Queen, and then—” Neel sighed, wrestling with the top button of his jacket. “So many people. I can’t believe how many people wanted to talk to me. Your mum even pulled me aside. Said she was glad we found each other. Sweet, really.”

“That is sweet,” Thibault said, his heart squeezing slightly. It hadn’t been easy to develop a relationship with his parents. It isn’t, when they abdicate when you’re twelve, leaving you to a life full of expectations you can’t possibly be equal to. His therapist had heard all about it. “I um. I talked to my dad, too.”

“Oh, shit,” Neel exclaimed. Then, in a stage-whisper, “Sorry.”

Thibault laughed. “He can’t hear you up here, you know.”

“I know but—how did it go?”

“Good, I think. Awkward. Could have been worse.” Thibault shrugged. He would think about it later, when he had time to figure out how he felt. His dad gruffly saying

he was proud of him. They hadn't hugged, had settled on a stiff handshake. *I don't know why I was so mad at you for so many years*, Thibault had said. And his father had grimaced, and let out something like a laugh.

Off across the mountains, there was a violet flash of lightning. The band was still playing below, and he could hear the clatter of plates and glasses. He'd hardly eaten any of the four-course meal, even though they'd hired some of the best chefs in the world to plan it. His stomach had been tight all day: too much excitement.

Neel must have been thinking the same thing, because he said, "You know, I don't think I even took two bites of dinner. And Viola made me do shots. Oh, and tried to get me to smoke part of a joint. I didn't, don't worry—but I think Saira is going to be very silly for the next few hours. And then the Queen made me drink some pear brandy, and champagne..."

"Oh, you're going to be asleep soon." Thibault hugged Neel to his side, nuzzling his hair. "So much for epic wedding night sex."

"No, no. I'll rally. I'm up for it. Pun intended." He kissed Thibault's neck, fiddling with the front of his vest. "Isn't this only outfit number two? I thought you had three planned."

He had honestly forgotten to change again, with everything going on. But Thibault said calmly, "Oh, the third one is just, like, a glittery harness."

"Really?" Neel pulled back, looking at him.

"No. Do you want it to be? I have my phone right here. I could order one."

Neel tilted his head thoughtfully. "I mean. I'm not *not* intrigued." He narrowed his eyes. "But absolutely not, you can't have something like that shipped to the palace."

"Oh good, you're not that drunk after all."

"I—" Neel sputtered, an adorable little line of frustration appearing between his brows. "Look, just kiss me, okay? I want to kiss my husband."

Thibault leaned in, cupping Neel's face, and did as he asked. Neel's mouth was hot and sweet from the pear brandy, and the alcohol had made him clumsy and insistent in a way that Thibault loved, his fingers knotting in Thibault's hair, their noses bumping. He made a guileless little sound of pleasure against Thibault's lips as the kiss deepened, Thibault pinning him to the marble railing of the balcony.

Something popped behind them, and Thibault felt Neel startle. Raising his head to look at the sky, he saw fireworks blooming in the darkness, a shower of stars.

"Just the fireworks," Thibault said against the rapid beat of Neel's pulse in his neck. He kissed him there, and on his jaw, his cheek, his forehead.

Neel let out a breathless laugh. “I completely forgot we had planned those.”

“Let’s watch them for a bit.” He put his arm around Neel’s shoulder, and Neel leaned into him with a sleepy noise. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and the night prickled with the threat of rain as light exploded across the sky. Purples and pinks, gold flowers and spinning wheels. Thibault’s eyes were wet, and he suddenly felt so *fragile*, as if he, too, were just made up of particles of falling light, and he didn’t know what to do, so he just pressed his face into Neel’s hair. He had never really allowed himself to imagine what it would be like to be happy, and his stomach squeezed with fear, or hope, or possibility. He breathed in the smell of Neel’s scalp, heart pounding.

Neel was fiddling with Thibault’s hand where it rested on the railing, tracing the patterns of the henna and the heavy gold band of his wedding ring. “Well, what did they say, then?” he asked at last. “On the internet?”

Thibault cleared his throat, blinking away the tears in his eyes. “I didn’t really read that much of it. It was good, I think. Mostly. I’m sure there’s some bad, too. But people are celebrating all over the world, not just here.”

“I was so worried. I wanted it to be perfect.”

“I know. It was.”

Neel squeezed his hand. A light rain had started to fall, gentle as a caress. “Sometimes I feel—like everything we do is for other people. And I’m glad, you know. To be an inspiration, or a role model, or whatever, although I hardly feel qualified. But I wonder if there’s anything left that’s just for us.”

Thibault kissed his forehead, peppered with rain. There were gauzy little drops of water stuck in Neel’s lashes, and in his hair, like a veil. He remembered sitting on the veranda below, over a year ago, remembered the intensity in Neel’s eyes as he’d talked about how Thibault could use his platform for good. He squeezed Neel’s hand, still a little bit in awe of how quickly and diligently his new husband had tackled the role of royal consort, and thought that if anyone watching them get married felt more hopeful now than they had before, it was all worth it. All the gossip columns and embarrassing candid photos and even more embarrassing fanfiction, and even the message boards devoted to picking the both of them apart. “There’s this,” he said.

“There’s this,” Neel agreed. And they stayed there as the storm came in, until they were both soaked and curtains of rain obscured the last few sputtering fireworks and all the tents and tables and chairs and decorations in the courtyard below had been cleared away.

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The clock in the cathedral tower was striking quarter 'til four as Thibault carried Neel into the bedroom, both of them giggling helplessly, Thibault's wet shoes sliding on the marble. He had insisted that they go back through the royal chambers and out into the hallway, so that he could officially carry Neel across the threshold. It was a clumsy and ridiculous affair, the two of them dripping rainwater everywhere, Neel's hair plastered across his eyes and his arms locked around Thibault's neck, kissing him between bouts of laughter, kissing him as if he couldn't stop, the meeting of their lips as natural and undeniable as the storm still crackling outside.

He had sobered up some from the rain, and now he let out a little squeal of protest as Thibault stumbled and deposited them both onto the bed in a tangle of limbs and wet fabric.

“Oh no, the sheets—”

Thibault said nothing, but he stood back up, pulling Neel with him, their hips glued together, and he was peeling the sherwani off of him, letting it fall to the floor, and delight rippled across Neel's brain as he remembered the first time they had done this, how Thibault had sent buttons whizzing across this same floor and how Neel had kept finding them in odd corners of the room for weeks afterward, and he was babbling, “Please, this is such a nice shirt, don't ruin the buttons this time, sweetheart, please—”

“Is this better?” Thibault murmured against his hot throat, and he was undoing Neel's shirt with aching slowness, pressing a kiss to each new millimeter of skin he uncovered. Desire pooled in Neel's groin, warm and golden, and he bit his lip, throwing his head back. His nails scrabbled over Thibault's shoulders, pleading.

“I didn't mean it, do whatever you want to the shirt, just bloody hurry up,” he gasped.

Thibault sped up his efforts, still managing somehow to keep all the buttons attached, and he was undoing Neel's trousers, and Neel was undressing him, too, running his hands over Thibault's pale skin and the curls of hair on his chest. He kissed him there, licking a stripe across the spot just between his pecs that always got sweaty and flushed during sex, nuzzling and nipping at his collarbones. Thibault smelled like dusk and humidity from the outdoors, like sweat and traces of cologne and that sweet, undefinable *Thibault* smell that filled Neel's heart with bubbles and smoothed over all the nervous edges of his mind.

They were both naked now, Thibault nearly stumbling as his feet got caught in his sodden trousers. Neel pulled him onto the bed, laughing, and rolled over on top of him, one hand on Thibault's chest. The laughter dried up in his throat as Thibault's gaze caught on his, holding him there. Faint illumination was coming in from the palace grounds, casting the raindrops on the window pane into silvery swirls and shadows that lay across Thibault's skin, making it look like mother-of-pearl. His chest was rising and falling quickly, his eyes glittering, and he was looking up at Neel like he was a painting on a cathedral ceiling, like he was the soaring sky above the alps, or a galaxy of stars.

"I—" Neel's heart stuttered, and he looked away, busying himself with getting the lubricant out of the bedside drawer. Sometimes it was too much, to be loved like this.

He pushed the thought away, his hand wrapping around Thibault's cock with sweet familiarity. Thibault gripped Neel's hips and his teeth grazed Neel's ear and he made some idiotic comment about how he'd been working on his wedding body, as if Thibault's regular body wasn't already wonderful enough—

And Neel scoffed, the little hitch in his chest dissolving, and said something sarcastic back, into Thibault's mouth as it met his. They were moving together, rutting against each other with long, slow strokes, until Neel could hardly bear it and the soles of his feet were tingling, little shivers of pleasure spreading down his thighs. His face was hot, and he tasted sweat and rainwater, and he watched the white dents his nails made in Thibault's shoulder as Thibault's fingers slid across his hip, cupping his arse and then finding their way to his cleft, playing with him, getting him ready.

It went on like that for some time, Thibault's face intent and almost studious, his eyes shining and his fingers doing exactly what Neel needed them to do, teasing at that spot inside of him that made pleasure sing through his body like an electric shock. The room was quiet, the rain pattering at the windows, and every shift of the sheets against his knees, every time the tip of his cock brushed Thibault's belly, sent another trembly cascade of sensation through him. Neel's thoughts were of nothing, of skin and slickness and bright colors, the patterns of the henna blooming across his mind, breaking into bits of gold.

It wasn't enough, and Neel could hear himself begging, over the roar of blood in his ears. Thibault stopped his words with a kiss, sitting up, the two of them face-to-face, and he was sliding into him, hot and leisurely and so, so welcome. It was the same rhythm they'd spent months perfecting, Thibault's hand on Neel's cock, just light enough to keep him from coming immediately, drawing it out, teasing him. He

rolled his hips, and Neel gasped, clinging to him. Their lips met again, tongues melting against each other as they moved slowly, almost sleepily, not lightning and fireworks this time but the languid roll of thunder, because this wasn't just tonight, this was forever, and they had all the time in the world.

Later, rain still ticking against the windows, Neel's head resting on Thibault's shoulder and their hands twined together lightly, the solid band of Thibault's wedding ring digging into Neel's skin, he asked, "Was it really?"

Neel hadn't expected Thibault to still be awake, but the prince yawned, saying, "What?"

"The wedding. Was it really perfect?"

"Absolutely."

"And what about the flowers?"

"Oh, ranunculus?" Thibault rolled over, slinging his arm across Neel and wriggling up closer to him. "They were lovely. Really pretty. But honestly I just picked it because it sounded funny."