

BHARAT KRISHNAN

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A WP DUOLOGY

SKINGRAFTERS

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For Monali, the Sadiya to my Maadhini

“Love is its own reward.” – Mario Puzo

Acknowledgments

Before I thank my wife, editor, and my cover artist, a big thanks to you, dear reader. What a blessing it's been to have written a 30,000-word novella four years ago and yet, thanks to the support of my readers, 30,000 words has become 200,000+, and I can tell you now, for the first time, that more is on the way (you'll have to read the Afterword for more details on that).

Of course, my acknowledgements wouldn't be complete without thanking some others as well:

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And finally, to the aunts: There are so many of you that to list you all would be ridiculous. You are my "second moms" who raised me to believe that strong women will save the world.

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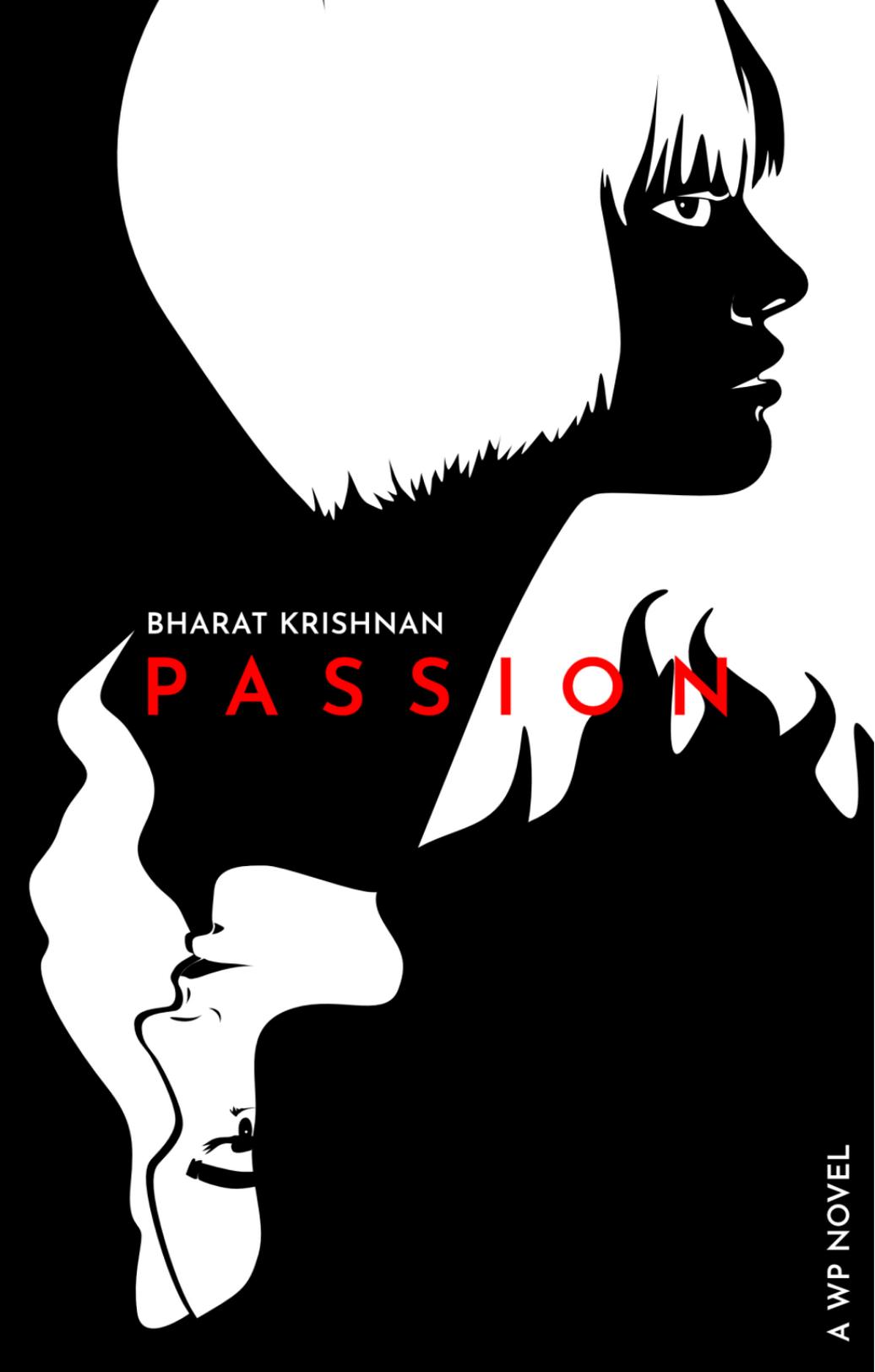
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BHARAT KRISHNAN

PASSION

A WP NOVEL

Chapter One

Even now, a year after Maadhini had left India for New York City, she still couldn't sleep without playing the phone recording she'd made of Bangalore traffic. NYC called itself the city that never slept, but the noises outside her shared studio apartment paled in comparison to those she'd grown up with. Honking was India's national pastime, and the shouting of street vendors and drunken frat boys outside her window here just didn't measure up.

After the first few weeks of their freshman year, Sadiya had insisted on buying Maadhini wireless headphones for listening to what they both affectionately called "the allure of home."

Sadiya could do without it.

Now sophomore year started tomorrow. Maadhini needed a good night's rest. Turning over, she saw her roommate tightly bound in a pink faux fur comforter, fast asleep. Truthfully, she was just as happy to have the headphones as Sadiya had been to give them. She'd never tell, but Sadiya was a loud snorer.

Look how peaceful she is, perfectly comfortable with herself. They were best friends, had been since primary school in Bangalore, but now Maadhini sometimes felt a chasm between them as deep as Chicago pizza. *I still haven't even told her I prefer it to this New York shit.*

Sadiya hadn't had any trouble fitting into NYU, making friends in her Urban Design and Architecture Studies program, even dating. For Maadhini's part, she'd taken Bharatanatyam

dance classes last year, thinking she'd make some other friends and maybe even meet a boy, but all she'd gotten was a twisted ankle. Their apartment complex had a dance studio in the basement, but she doubted she'd ever go back to what was once a passion of hers dating back to their preteen years.

I might stay a virgin forever. When they'd first moved to New York, she'd hoped it'd be like their favorite show growing up, *Friends*. But if her life did resemble the sitcom, it was only because she was Fat Monica and Sadiya was glamorous Rachel.

Maadhini sighed. She wanted to ask Sadiya what a penis looked like. If they'd still been in high school, she might've been brave enough to ask whether Sadiya had lost her virginity yet. Here, though, things had changed. Blowing her lips in frustration, she shoved her bangs out of her eyes and reminded herself she needed a haircut soon. *I'll have to check my social calendar, first. Might have too many engagements to do it this weekend.*

Laughing to herself to keep from crying, she closed her eyes and begged for sleep to take her away from this place.



Maadhini woke several minutes before her alarm went off. It wasn't even eight a.m., but she could tell Sadiya was up. The curtains were open to let in the sun, and her roommate's day planner sat on their kitchen table.

Getting up, Maadhini walked toward the table to find a half-empty cup of chai and a big circle drawn around an event happening on Saturday night: "DDD." *Some weird bra thing?* Looking down at her own full chest, her heart raced as she wondered if Sadiya was considering a boob job. *Is this what Hema Auntie meant when she said to make sure her daughter didn't do anything "too American?"* She was saved from her thoughts by a flush and the smell of vanilla-scented soap as Sadiya emerged from the bathroom.

"I made chai," Sadiya said. She retrieved a mug from their cabinet and handed it to Maadhini before sitting down and

taking out a pen to start marking up her day planner.

Leaving her friend to her work, Maadhini took a long sip of her drink before muttering her thanks and taking out her flip phone. Her parents had many rules, and one was that there was no need to waste money on a smart phone when, in her *appa's* words, "a dumb phone is perfectly fine." The other rule was to call each morning. She could speak with her *amma* anytime she liked, but Vir Kedilaya, graduate of the elite Indian Institute of Technology, now attended Mercer County Community College each morning in pursuit of his Associate of Applied Science, since America wouldn't recognize his engineering degree. Consequently, she could only speak to him before he left for classes and his job at the local Indian grocer, Patel Brothers.

A pang of guilt hit her stomach, like the spicy tacos she and Sadiya devoured on Taco Tuesdays. Her *appa* hadn't wanted to leave India, but there had been no stopping her *amma* from moving to America once Maadhini had decided to attend NYU. The family had settled in Iselin, New Jersey.

"You better eat something," Sadiya said, interrupting her thoughts. "I can't be late on the first day. Grab a bagel because you know I will leave you."

"In a minute." Maadhini didn't bother suppressing her grin. Sadiya wouldn't tolerate being late on any day, be it the first or the final. Warming up a bagel and taking a swig of her chai, she called home.

"Vir! Stop this nonsense!"

Maadhini could barely hear her mother over the sound of a lawnmower.

"Huh?" Her *appa's* shout came over the line as the machine stopped. "What are you saying?"

Maadhini had the phone pressed to her ear, but moved it away to avoid the booming voices of Vir and Tanvi. *Is an immigrant household truly happy if there hasn't been a fight by eight a.m.?*

"Vir! Get over here!"

"Don't shout, woman. It's like I say when you call India; you don't even need the phone. Open your mouth and all the world

can hear!"

"You are one to talk! You can't run the lawnmower at this hour! Our neighbors will hate us!"

"Our neighbors already hate us! At least this way I can get some work done before leaving."

"Ah yes, leave." Sarcasm dripped from her *amma's* side of the conversation (*can you call this a conversation?* Maadhini supposed so, even if she wasn't part of it). "While you're gone, I get to endure passive-aggressive taunts from the other housewives about how something loud woke them up."

Passive-aggressive? Endure? Maadhini raised an eyebrow. She'd have to compliment her *amma* on her English when this was over.

"You want to trade places?" Vir asked. "Come, go to Patel Brothers after hours of schooling. See if you can impress Mr. Pandya at the shop."

Seeing Sadiya tap her foot and point to a clock hanging across from their fridge, Maadhini tried to end her parents' bickering. "Guys..."

"*Sharm karo!*"

Though she couldn't see her *amma*, she knew the woman was out of steam when she uttered that phrase. A look of resignation no doubt colored her face.

"I have plenty of shame." Her dad's voice dropped several octaves as he said his final piece on the matter of *Suburban Mornings with a Lawnmower*. She'd heard this particular play a number of times; it was substantially more embarrassing to witness in person.

Her *amma's* voice softened like nothing had happened, as if Tanvi Kedilaya had just picked up the phone. "Hi, *beta*. Did you sleep well?"

"*Amma?*"

"Yes?"

"What was all that?"

A loud sigh passed through the line, long enough to strangle them both. "Your *appa* is getting worse. The grass, the snow, the idiots in his classes, the idiots in the store. You know"—she dropped her voice to a whisper—"white people have started

coming to the store.”

“That’s not a crime.” Maadhini laughed. “I mean, who can resist Maggi Hot & Sweet?”

“Some of these white people, they live in our neighborhood. They see your *appa* in school. They make their snide comments when they think we can’t hear, about the ‘brownie’ who smells bad and works at a grocery store.”

Snide? “Your English really has improved so much.” Changing the subject was the only thing to do in these cases. Vir refused to talk about his challenges, leaving Tanvi to voice them and Maadhini to internalize the guilt of uprooting her family until it devoured her soul and left nothing but a husk for her parents to marry off one day.

The circle of life. She made a note to herself that this year she’d save up enough money to see that show. She loved *The Lion King*.

Sadiya opened the door to their apartment, which Maadhini took as an opportunity to end the conversation.

“*Amma*, I’ve got class.”

“Okay, *kanne*.” Tanvi only used that term of endearment when she was disappointed in Maadhini, wielding kind words like daggers as only an immigrant mom could. “Will you come home this weekend?”

“I’m not sure.” She threw on some faded white sneakers as she stepped out of the door with her best friend.

“Okay, *kanne*.” A pause filled the silence, long enough to connect them back to Bangalore, India.

“*Amma*, I gotta run. I can’t be late on our first day. I’ll call you tonight.”

“*Thik hai. Thik hai.*”

She could picture her *amma* waving her off, her head bobbing in satisfaction. Two calls a day wasn’t sustainable for the long term, but it would keep the peace today. Maadhini hung up just as the elevator doors whisked shut.

“They shouldn’t guilt you like that,” Sadiya said.

Maadhini sighed. The four narrow walls surrounding a toilet or an elevator shaft that could plunge them to their premature deaths provided her only refuge from the

obligations of living.

“They shouldn’t,” she agreed. “But since when has that mattered?”