

PRIVATE
INTERNATIONAL HEAT
ENCOUNTERS

PASSPORT
to Passion

RYAN MOORE

Private Encounters: International Heat

PASSPORT TO PASSION

by

Ryan Moore

An International Heat Story

When corporate consultant Leo Bennett arrives in Mumbai to salvage a failing division, he expects boardrooms and spreadsheets—not the magnetic pull of Raj Sharma, the enigmatic executive who challenges him at every turn. Their professional tension ignites into something far more dangerous when stolen glances become stolen moments, and business trips blur into forbidden territory.

Raj has spent years perfecting the art of control—over his career, his emotions, and the expectations that bind him to a life he never chose. But Leo's arrival threatens to unravel everything, awakening desires that could destroy the carefully constructed world his family demands.

From Mumbai's chaotic streets to Goa's secluded beaches, their connection burns hotter with each encounter. But when duty collides with desire, and visas have expiration dates, they'll have to decide if what they've found is worth risking everything they've built.

Some passions can't be contained by borders—or expectations.

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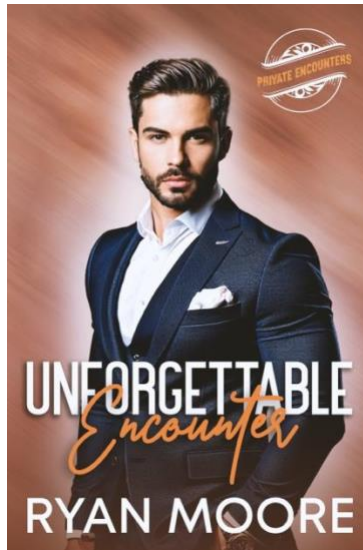
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One night. One dance. One unforgettable encounter.

Grayson Hart wasn't supposed to be at the Westwood masquerade. Crashing an elite gala was a risk, but he never expected Logan Westwood—a powerful billionaire who sees right through him.

A stolen moment turns into a night of passion, but by morning, Grayson is gone. Logan never lets anything slip through his fingers—and this time, he's not letting Grayson go.

Unforgettable Encounter is a seductive MM romance packed with sizzling chemistry, high-stakes tension, and a love that refuses to be forgotten

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Chapter 1: First Contact

Leo's fingers drummed against his knee, his mind filled with endless calculations. He'd started running numbers since before the plane touched down—estimating how bad the division's situation really was, what it would take to fix it, how many hours of his life would be consumed by meetings and strategy sessions. Maybe he should've negotiated a longer stay. Maybe he should've asked for time to breathe before diving into corporate survival mode.

But the project needed him now, and if there was one thing Leo Bennett did well, it was work.

The car took another sharp turn, jolting him from his thoughts. Mumbai blurred past the window, a city of contradictions where gleaming glass towers stood beside crumbling facades in an unusual harmony. Luxury advertisements flashed above street vendors selling colorful scarves, and people were everywhere. The streets couldn't breathe without them. Men in crisp suits walked past women in brightly colored saris, children running barefoot between traffic, their laughter carrying above the chaos.

Before he realized it, the car had stopped.

He blinked, shaking off the dizziness. The driver cleared his throat, signaling their arrival.

The building was sleek, with clean lines and polished stone. It was a stark contrast to the madness just beyond its walls. When Leo entered, his footsteps echoed in the spacious lobby. Citrus air freshener mingled with the scent of fresh coffee, creating a quiet sanctuary that felt almost too calm. Nothing like the pulse of the city outside.

A young woman behind the reception desk greeted him with a sharp nod before ushering him down a hallway. Eventually, he was left standing alone in a conference room, hands clasped, trying not to think about how much he wanted a drink.

The door opened.

"Mr. Bennett." The voice was warm and smooth, yet threaded with something more measured.

Leo raised his eyes and found himself looking up. Way up.

A man stood just inside the room, posture immaculate, expression polite but not exactly welcoming. This must be Raj Sharma, Leo surmised. He wasn't what Leo had expected—too calm, too collected, as if his world wasn't about to be upended by a foreigner who wasn't sure he even wanted to be here.

"Mr. Sharma," Leo said, offering a handshake. Raj's grip was firm, his palm warm—a stark contrast to the coolness Leo had expected from someone with a position as high as this.

The handshake lingered a second too long, and tension began stretching between them like a taut wire. Leo pulled back quickly, but Raj's warmth lingered on his skin.

"Call me Raj." Raj stepped back with a casual nod. "Please, have a seat. I'll get us some coffee."

Something about the way Raj moved—his relaxed confidence, the grace with which he carried himself—caught Leo off guard. This wasn't just another colleague; this was someone who had mastered the art of being in control, not just of the room, but of himself. And Leo wasn't sure whether that made him feel more at ease or on edge.

"Thank you," Leo said, settling into the chair, adjusting his shirt against the humidity. He glanced at the window, at the city view outside.

After filling two mugs, Raj didn't sit immediately, pausing as if considering something. Then, with the slightest smile, he sat across from Leo. Their coffees steamed on the table in front of them.

Neither spoke. The quiet hung between them, thick with unspoken possibilities.

Leo broke the silence first. "So, how's the situation here?"

Raj didn't flinch. "Difficult. But we're managing. We have our challenges, but we're committed to our goals."

"And your team? They're on board?"

Raj's eyes narrowed slightly, something flickering behind them. "Of course. There are always bumps, but we're resilient."

Leo caught the subtle defensiveness, but did not relent. Instead, he pushed forward, testing boundaries. "I'm sure there are things we'll need to change. Processes, systems... But I'm here to help get things back on track."

Raj didn't answer immediately, his eyes thoughtful. "Change isn't always easy. Sometimes, it's necessary."

Leo met his gaze. "And sometimes, it's too much too soon."

Raj's lips curved, barely a smile. He leaned forward, folding his hands. "Let's see what happens."

"Agreed."

"So," Raj hummed. His posture relaxed slightly, as if he were switching to a different persona. "Have you had a chance to explore the city yet?"

Leo kept his surprise masked. He thought Raj seemed like someone to get straight to business, but perhaps he was mistaken. "Unfortunately not. I came here straight from the airport."

"Well, you must go sightseeing sometime." Raj glanced at his watch. "I understand that we have a full agenda waiting for us," he continued, lowering his wrist as he met Leo's gaze, "but there's no harm in taking a short pause. Stretch our legs a little, perhaps?"

Leo tilted his head, trying to will away the soft smile that was making its way to his mouth.
“What would you suggest?”

"I know we have coffee, but what do you say about having some tea?"

Leo's stomach tightened. "Sounds good."

They stood together, and something in the way Raj moved—casual but commanding—left Leo slightly off balance, too aware of their proximity.

Raj led him toward the elevator. There was something magnetic about his walk, the way he held himself—like he was perfectly at ease in his skin, in a world Leo couldn't quite make sense of.

"Just tea," Raj said, his tone lighter, but Leo caught something else beneath it.

Right. Just tea.

Chapter 2: Cultural Immersion

They stepped into Mumbai's noisy streets, the city's pulse reverberating around them—cars honking, people laughing, the scent of street food and spices wafting through the air.

Leo had lost track of time, of his body's complaints, of the jet lag that should have floored him. Instead, he moved almost effortlessly beside Raj as they weaved through narrow alleyways past shops and stalls. The air felt heavy but not unpleasantly so, thick with heat and something less tangible but just as intoxicating.

Raj's voice was steady as he pointed out architectural details—how layers of old stone mixed with newer glass facades, how every inch of the city told a story if you listened closely. His tone suggested a familiarity far from casualness. He wasn't simply showing Leo around—he was bringing him into something intimate, into the world he belonged to.

Leo found himself listening more intently than expected. Maybe it was how Raj moved—always confident, like he knew exactly where he was going, like he never knew what it felt like to be an outsider. Leo felt small, out of place, but surprisingly, he wasn't uncomfortable. More like watching a scene play out into something larger he couldn't quite understand yet.

"So," Leo said, trying to ground himself, "how long have you been doing this? Giving tours, I mean."

Raj glanced at him with amused eyes.

"I'm not a tour guide, Bennett." He chuckled, warmer than expected. "I just know the city. It's home. It's more than dates and events. I understand what's going on underneath."

Leo nodded, uncertain what he meant but sensing it wasn't something to push. Raj's words had a way of slipping past the surface, making Leo feel like he was hearing something deeper.

They rounded a corner into a small, bustling market. The atmosphere shifted, and the air was filled with fresh produce scents, jewelry sparkling from stalls, voices calling out, haggling. It felt more alive here. More raw.

Raj navigated the crowd with an ease Leo couldn't replicate, moving through the market like he knew it better than his own skin, pausing at stalls with familiar commentary that made Leo feel like an intruder in a world where he didn't belong. He almost got lost once, lagging behind Raj as a group of friends cut through the street. For the briefest of moments, the thought of holding Raj's hand crossed Leo's mind. His hand shot out on instinct, wanting to keep hold of Raj, then he scolded himself.

"Hand-painted pottery," Raj said, pointing to a stall selling dishes that caught the sunlight. "Family business. Been around for generations. They still make each piece by hand."

Leo squinted at the colors, the craftsmanship. Even without context, he could tell these weren't like simple tourist trinkets. These were real, personal.

A vendor caught his eye, gesturing at some scarves. The colors were rich reds and oranges, but when Leo started asking about prices—questions that weren't exactly polite, he realized too late—the vendor's expression stiffened.

Raj stepped forward smoothly, voice low, almost apologetic. "You should ask about quality first, Leo, not price. It's about understanding value."

Leo blinked. "Right. Got it."

Raj shot him a look of amused understanding. "You're not used to markets."

Embarrassed, Leo gave a small shrug, but Raj didn't linger on it. He simply moved them along until they arrived at a chai stall—a small, open-air stand with a rickety counter and locals waiting for their orders. Raj ordered in Hindi, slipping into the language so fluidly that Leo couldn't help but notice how effortlessly he charmed the vendor, leaning in with a smile that made the older man chuckle.

Leo stood aside, watching them converse. The whole interaction felt different. Raj was different. Outside his office and boardrooms, he wasn't the corporate figure from that morning. This was a side that felt more human. More genuine.

Raj handed him a small clay cup, the tea inside steaming. The smell was intoxicating—rich, spicy, sweet, with something earthy that reminded him of the city itself. When Leo took the cup, their fingers brushed briefly, sending an electric jolt up his arm.

"Tell me, Leo," Raj said, sipping his own chai, "do you ever feel pulled between what your family expects and how you want to live your life?"

The question hung in the air. It wasn't small talk, wasn't something you threw out casually. Yet Raj had said it like it was a perfectly normal question to ask a man he'd known for only a few hours.

Leo found himself answering before he could stop himself. "Yeah, sometimes. It's definitely hard to balance the two."

Raj's expression flickered briefly before returning to his usual calm. He took another sip, then spoke softly. "Family doesn't pause for globalization. They don't stop just because things are changing."

Strange weight filled his words—like Raj was saying more than he meant. Leo wanted to know more.

"My mother," Raj's voice took on measured deliberation, "she's already lined up a few potential matches." His eyes traced the rim of his cup, not really seeing it.

Leo didn't respond immediately, watching the small twitch at the corner of Raj's mouth, the way his fingers tapped twice against the table before going still. There was a current beneath his words—tension that belonged somewhere between disappointment and amusement.

"They're not your type," Leo said eventually, voice dry.

Raj glanced at him, something unguarded flickering in that look. "You could say that." His smile curved bitterly. "Let's just say she's aiming for 'respectable'. The kind of person you can take to the temple, not the kind I actually want to get stuck talking to every day."

"And what kind would you actually want to get stuck talking to every day?"

Raj didn't answer directly. But his eyes lingered too long, and something in Leo's chest sparked like a struck match.

The conversation shifted. When they finished their tea, Raj led them through narrow streets with easy familiarity, pointing out odd architecture, strange stalls tucked between alleys, shopkeepers who called his name with nods or grins. Leo barely noticed as the sun moved across the sky until hues of pink and orange blended up above them. Only when vendors started turning flashy neon lights on did Leo make a comment.

"Just tea, hm?" he mused.

Raj only smiled.

They wandered without purpose but not without direction, somehow ending up at a small rooftop gathering—a party in the loosest sense. Candles in jars lit the perimeter, soft music curled around evening air, and people drank from mismatched cups while arguing about poetry and politics. Raj knew a few of them. Leo didn't know anyone. It didn't matter.

They drank whatever was offered—something floral and too strong, then something else that tasted like burnt sugar and cloves, and something that Leo was sure was just straight tequila. After that, time slipped sideways.

The night unfolded in pieces, someone handing Leo grilled spiced meat while Raj laughed as he explained the local dance two drunk women were attempting with ritual seriousness. At one point, Raj leaned too close to tell a joke, and Leo didn't remember the punchline, only how he felt about the heat of Raj's breath against his neck.

By the time they stumbled back to the street, the sky was dark, and the streetlights cast long, uncertain shadows in the ground. Leo fumbled with bags they'd collected—small trinkets, crushed incense, tiny clay figures he hadn't meant to buy, warm fried pastries wrapped in paper.

"I can manage," he said, blinking against the ground's sudden tilt.

Raj snorted. "You can barely walk straight." He plucked the heavier bags from Leo's hands. "Come on. I'll make sure you get home without collapsing in the gutter."

The walk back was a blur of laughter, rustling paper bags, and occasionally a distant dog barking. Inside, the air was cooler. Leo's company had set him up at a condo-unit-turned-Airbnb, all clean lines and bland furnishings. The sharp scent of disinfectant hung in the air,

mixing awkwardly with the faint grease of their day's adventures. It felt foreign, like a stage set rather than a home, and Leo suddenly became aware of how empty the space was when Raj stepped in behind him.

Leo dropped onto the sterile couch with a sigh, rubbing his neck. Raj set the bags down carefully, arranging them like they'd be unpacking, though they both knew they wouldn't.

They didn't speak. The silence was different now. Not empty. Charged.

Leo looked up and found Raj already watching him, mouth slightly open like he might say something but couldn't quite bring himself to.

Leo sat forward. "Hey—"

But Raj was already moving.

It happened suddenly, yet not at all. The tension had been there for hours, waiting for the right crack to slip through. Their mouths met clumsily, achingly, hands fumbling, unsure where to land. Leo tasted alcohol and something warmer—something that wasn't just desire but an acknowledgment that this had been coming all along.

Raj pulled away first, breathing hard, fingers still curled lightly against Leo's collar.

His eyes flicked down, then back up. "I can't do this," he said, voice almost too soft to hear.

Then he was gone, the door clicking shut with quiet finality that landed like a bruise.

Chapter 3: Unspoken Truths

Leo's eyes remained fixed on the door Raj had just walked through, as though it might suddenly swing open again. But he knew it wouldn't. Raj was gone.

He couldn't tell if he was supposed to feel relieved or if the gnawing sensation in his stomach meant something else. His fingers flexed involuntarily at his sides. The room's air was still, heavy with silence following Raj's departure, thickening the space around him. His breath was shallow—the moment had made his lungs too tight.

What the hell just happened? Was it really as simple as a meaningless kiss? Or was it everything he didn't want it to be—complicated, unspoken, and yet undeniably real?

The taste of Raj's lips still lingered, a dull ache that wouldn't fade. That damn kiss. But why had Raj left him like that? If Raj hadn't wanted it, hadn't felt something too, he wouldn't have leaned in. He wouldn't have kissed back. Yet the moment Raj muttered those words, silence settled in his chest, heavy and unyielding.

"I can't do this," Raj had said, and those goddamn words made everything worse. What did that mean? He couldn't do what? They hadn't even gotten started.

Leo had opened his mouth, but no sound came. His mind went blank, paralyzed by a sudden, sharp rejection that didn't make sense.

Not when Raj had been looking at him like that. Not when there had been something more than just a fleeting touch or casual brush of lips. The more he thought about it, the worse it got, because he wasn't even sure what he was hoping for anymore. Did he want Raj to come back? Did he want him to admit he'd felt it too, that everything they hadn't said was just as real as what happened in those stolen moments?

The city's sound barely reached Leo's ears, muffled by his thoughts, drowned by the pounding in his chest. There was no relief, no calming peace.

What remained was only the echo of Raj's departure. He wanted to scream, to demand Raj come back and explain. To admit it wasn't just him, that there was something real in this, in them, that they couldn't just walk away from. But Raj hadn't looked back. Raj hadn't said anything. And Leo couldn't bring himself to chase after him.

This was insane. They'd only known each other for a day. Not even twenty-four hours. And yet, there was a numbing sting forming in Leo's chest. It throbbed alongside the pangs of guilt — guilt that he'd blurred the lines, let himself forget that he was here on business, not pleasure. He'd been sent here to help Raj's company, not fall into something messy and personal.

The air pressed against him, suffocating. He needed to breathe, to feel something else.

So he walked to the window, feet heavy against the floor, city lights reflecting against glass. He could barely recognize the figure staring back—distorted by fogged edges, his own face unfamiliar to him. He was a stranger to himself now. A stranger who didn't know what to feel or how to fix what had been broken.

It must have been a few hours before a soft knock broke through Leo's spiraling thoughts. He froze, and his heart skipped a beat.

It couldn't be Raj. Raj had *left*. Raj had said those words. He wouldn't come back. Not now, not after what happened. Not after that look—eyes full of something too complicated for Leo to understand.

His hand hovered over the door handle, body tense, heart racing. He wasn't prepared for this. Wasn't prepared to face whatever came next, whatever waited behind that door. But what else was there to do? He couldn't stand here forever, staring out at the city, unable to breathe.

So he opened the door.

Raj stood in the hallway, eyes dark, face unreadable. His lips pressed into a tight line, body rigid, as though he hadn't quite decided what to do with himself either. Leo's stomach flipped, the knot in his chest tightening.

The same damn man who had just left him standing there, confused and empty. The same man who had kissed him with a hunger that his later words had quietly undone. The same man who now stood before him, distance stretched so far it felt impossible to cross.

"Can we talk?" Raj's voice was low, hesitant, barely above a whisper.

Leo's pulse spiked, skin prickling with sudden heat that flooded his chest. It was the same feeling from before—awareness that made everything around him go hazy. That kiss had done this. Raj had done this. And now here they were, standing at the precipice of something neither was ready for.

Leo didn't trust himself to speak. His throat was tight, words caught between his chest and mouth. Nothing felt right. Nothing could fix this. But Raj was there, asking for something—maybe an explanation, maybe a way forward. And Leo couldn't bring himself to turn away.

He nodded, stepping aside to let Raj in. The door clicked shut softly, but the silence felt deafening. Raj didn't sit. He didn't move. He just stood there, looking like a man who didn't know what to do with the chaos he'd created.

"I don't know what you want from me," Raj finally spoke, words falling like a heavy burden.

Leo's frustration flared. "I don't know what I want either," he muttered, running a hand through his hair. His voice cracked, and it pissed him off. "But I know I can't pretend anymore, Raj. I can't keep pretending this isn't *something*."

Raj's eyes flickered—a quick glance at the floor before meeting Leo's gaze again. There was something there, a deeper reason, but buried under layers of control, walls Raj had built around himself.

"You don't know anything, Leo," Raj whispered, but it hit Leo like a slap.

"I know how you look at me," Leo said, voice raw, fists clenching. "I know how you feel, even if you won't admit it."

Raj's jaw tightened. "You don't understand."

"I do understand," Leo shot back, voice thick with emotion. "You keep saying it's complicated, but maybe that's the point. Maybe it's supposed to be. Maybe it's supposed to make us confront what we've been pretending doesn't exist." His breath caught. "I'm not going to pretend. I can't."

Raj's eyes searched his face, trying to decipher him, figure out if Leo was telling the truth or if he was just as lost. For a moment, it felt like they stood on the same ground, sharing the same uncertainty. But then Raj pulled away, gaze drifting aside.

"Why do you do this?" Leo asked, voice softer but still fierce. "Why do you keep pushing me away?"

"I don't want to hurt you," Raj whispered, so quietly Leo almost didn't hear. But the words stung, cutting deeper than expected.

Leo felt the lump in his throat. "You're not going to hurt me. I'm already in this, Raj. I can't just walk away from it."

"I can't promise you anything," Raj whispered.

"That's okay." Leo stepped forward, gently grabbing Raj's hands in his own. "We can just go with the flow. Have fun, see where things take us. We don't have to be sure right now. We don't have to do anything. Is that okay?"

Raj's eyes fell to their entwined hands. Seconds ticked by as he remained silent. Leo was about to pull away when the man responded.

"Okay."

Chapter 4: Professional Boundaries

Late afternoon light filtered through office windows, casting long shadows across sleek furniture, polished surfaces, rows of files and paperwork. It should have been just another day in the Mumbai office—another typical round of emails and reports. But it wasn't. Not anymore. Not after what had happened between them.

It had been two weeks since their first kiss, and the pair had had many since then, shared in secret, in the comfort of Leo's condo unit late at night. These evenings had all been concluded with the same words, empty but still stinging.

This needs to stop soon. We can't go on like this forever. We should end this eventually.

Leo sat at his desk, eyes scanning the screen, fingers moving mechanically over his keyboard, but his thoughts were elsewhere. They kept drifting back to their earlier conversations, words he hadn't been able to say, words Raj had almost said. He was supposed to be focused—he always was—but today, the task was secondary. Raj occupied his mind, the things unsaid between them buzzing like static, drowning out everything else.

He found himself glancing at Raj more often than he should. Raj, who sat across the room, still holding onto his composure, as if that stoic mask could keep everything else at bay. Raj, who had a way of moving, of speaking, that seemed to have a pull Leo couldn't resist. Every time their eyes met, even for a fraction of a second, it was enough to send a jolt through him. Silent, shared understanding passed between them, tension thickening the air, but neither dared acknowledge it. Not at work. Not yet.

Raj's hand rested on the desk, fingers tapping absently against the surface—a small unconscious gesture just enough to make Leo's pulse race. It wasn't the act itself, but how Raj seemed unaware of it. Or maybe he was aware and didn't care. Whatever it was, it made Leo's chest tighten.

Still, they worked in silence. Emails were answered, phone calls made, but the space between them had shifted in a way neither could ignore. There was a quiet charge in the air, like the seconds before a storm, the feeling that something was about to break.

Leo caught his reflection in the window glass. His face looked calm, composed, but his heartbeat was a constant reminder that outside calmness didn't match inside chaos. And it wasn't just him. Raj's movements, expressions, the way he occasionally glanced at Leo—it was all a mask. Both pretending everything was normal, as though the world outside their office hadn't been changed by a kiss, by words left unsaid.

Raj's voice pulled him back to the present. "Leo, could you send those over to the legal team?"

Leo nodded, pushing thoughts of Raj's proximity aside. "Sure. I'll get to it." His voice came out too sharp, tension seeping into his tone despite efforts to stay neutral.

Raj didn't respond immediately, but the silence between them spoke volumes. Leo could feel the heat of Raj's gaze even without looking up. It wasn't the usual critical or detached look Raj reserved for professional conversations. This was different. Something softer, something uncertain, but no less intense.

Leo's fingers hovered over his keyboard, the task suddenly feeling insignificant. He cleared his throat and turned to face Raj, needing to break the tension somehow. "You're quiet today."

Raj's lips twitched—not quite a smile. "You're distracting."

Leo raised an eyebrow. "Me?"

Raj's gaze flickered briefly, something flashing behind his dark eyes that Leo couldn't quite place. "Yes. You."

A beat passed. Without realizing it, Leo found himself stepping closer to Raj's desk, heart thudding louder with each step. He couldn't help it—something about the way Raj was looking at him, acting, made him feel like he was standing on the edge of something. He was so close now that he could feel heat radiating off Raj's body, could hear the shallow breaths as Raj waited for him to speak.

"Raj," Leo said, voice quieter now, rougher than intended. "We can't keep doing this."

Raj didn't look away. The space between them was charged, heavy with unspoken words. "What do you mean?"

Leo could feel his pulse quickening, thoughts blurring. He wanted to push Raj, to force him to admit whatever was there between them. "This tension," he said, hand brushing the desk edge. "All the hiding. This—whatever this is. We can't just ignore it anymore."

Raj's eyes narrowed slightly, as though trying to decipher what Leo meant, but Leo saw something flicker. Something that almost looked like fear.

"I'm not ignoring anything," Raj replied, voice steady, but the edge was there. "I'm just..." He trailed off, seeming to gather himself before speaking again. "I'm not ready for this. But I don't know if I can walk away from it either."

The words were out there now, in the open, but that only made the silence heavier.

Leo didn't know what would come next. He only knew that whatever it was, it wouldn't be easy.

Before Leo could walk away, Raj spoke suddenly. "Let's get away."

"What?"

"Let's get away," Raj repeated. Leo's confused expression did not disappear from his face. "You're tired of hiding. Let's take a trip. I know a place in Goa that's beautiful this time of year."

Although the unease of their overall situation did not leave Leo's mind, he couldn't help but smile. "Raj Sharma, boardroom executive of a top company in India, inviting a male colleague to a vacation?"

"Well?" Raj couldn't stop the smile tugging at the corner of his lips; Leo's grin was contagious.

"Would you like to come?"

"I would love to."

Chapter 5: Goa Getaway

Leo stepped off the plane, warm, salty Goa air immediately filling his lungs. It was a welcome relief from Mumbai's stifling humidity, but it wasn't just the air that felt different—it was everything.

The chaos of his life, expectations, pressure, all seemed to fall away as soon as his feet hit the tarmac. For the first time in days, he felt like he could breathe again. Goa was the escape they both needed, even if neither had admitted it out loud.

Raj, walking a step behind him, was quieter than usual. He seemed lost in thought, gaze distant as he followed Leo to the waiting car. Something hung in the air between them—thick and unspoken—but neither was willing to address it yet. They had come here to escape, not to confront what had been building between them.

The drive to their villa was quiet. Raj had insisted on separate cars, something about keeping up appearances, but Leo suspected it was more about creating space between them, even if only for a few hours. The villa was a beautiful beachfront property, secluded from usual tourist crowds, perfect for a weekend away from everything. The ocean was just beyond the terrace, waves crashing against shore providing a constant, soothing backdrop to their arrival.

Once inside, Raj immediately went to his room, signaling his retreat for the day. But Leo didn't feel like retreating. He needed air, needed to feel sun on his face and sand between his toes.

Goa was a different world, and for the first time in weeks, he could pretend he was someone else, someone who wasn't carrying a complicated, drawn-out relationship with Raj.

The next day, Leo went for his morning run along the beach, feet pounding against warm sand, rhythmic sound of waves crashing filling his ears. The ocean was everything here—alive and powerful, washing away the heavy thoughts that had been plaguing him. As he ran, he let his mind wander, letting the tension in his body release with each step.

Then he spotted Raj, standing at the water's edge, gazing out at the horizon.

Raj's figure was bathed in early morning light, soft waves lapping at his feet. Dressed in simple beachwear, his usual sharp edges had been softened by Goa's relaxed atmosphere. His hair, usually neatly combed and controlled, was wild in the sea breeze, framing his face in a way that

made him look less like the polished businessman Leo knew and more like someone else—someone more human, more approachable.

Leo slowed, coming to a halt a few feet away. For a moment, neither spoke, but the silence felt different now. There was calmness in the air, a stillness that was unfamiliar but welcome.

"You're running?" Raj finally asked, voice breaking the silence without judgment, only curiosity. "I didn't think you were the type to enjoy morning jogs."

Leo shrugged, wiping sweat from his brow. "I'm not usually. But something about this place..." He trailed off, unsure how to finish. Something about the air, the freedom here, made him want to move, to shake off everything he couldn't seem to let go of.

Raj nodded, gaze moving from the ocean back to Leo, but there was something else in his eyes now—something softer. For a moment, the walls Raj always kept up seemed to fall, just a little. Leo couldn't help but notice.

"I get it," Raj said quietly. "I've always found the ocean calming."

Leo studied Raj for a moment, breath still heavy from the run. He hadn't expected Raj to be so open, so vulnerable in this moment. It was a side he hadn't seen before, and for the first time, he felt like maybe he was seeing the real Raj—the one behind the polished suit and controlled smile.

"Do you come here often?" Leo asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

Raj hesitated, fingers running through his hair, pushing it out of his face. "Not as much as I'd like. But when things get too much, I've learned it's the only place where I can think clearly."

Leo nodded, understanding more than Raj knew. They had both been running from something—Raj from his emotions, and Leo from the ever-growing tension between them. But here, away from their professional constraints, they were both just two men alone in a new place, trying to figure out who they really were.

Later that evening, they found themselves sitting together on the villa's terrace, sun dipping low over the horizon, casting the sky in shades of pink and orange. The sound of waves crashing against the shore was the only noise between them, and it was enough. For the first time in a long while, neither felt the pressure of their roles, expectations, or the world bearing down on them.

Raj reached for his drink, fingers brushing against Leo's arm as he passed it to him. The touch was electric, sending a shiver down Leo's spine. He couldn't help but notice how close they were now, how the space between them had shrunk in ways he hadn't expected. For a moment, he was suddenly conscious of the fact that he was shirtless and Raj was fully clothed.

Leo's breath caught in his throat as Raj turned to face him fully. There was something in his gaze—something searching, something intense. For a moment, Leo thought Raj might say something, but instead, he simply leaned in. It wasn't sudden, but it wasn't slow either. Raj's lips brushed against his, soft at first, tentative, as if testing the waters.

Leo felt his heart race, body responding without hesitation. He kissed Raj back, heat between them flaring up once again. It wasn't gentle, not anymore. The kiss was urgent, filled with desire they had both been holding back for far too long.

But even as Raj kissed him, as he pulled Leo closer, something lingered in the back of his mind—doubts, fears, the realization that this moment couldn't fix everything, couldn't erase the questions still hanging between them. He didn't know where this was headed, or if they were even meant to find a way forward. But for now, there was only this kiss, only the way their bodies seemed to fit together, as if they had always been meant to do this.

And for the first time since Leo had landed in this country, both of them could *breathe*.

The kiss deepened, turning hungry, desperate. Raj's fingers tangled in Leo's hair, pulling him closer as if he feared he might vanish. Leo gasped against his mouth, his own hands sliding down Raj's back, gripping his shirt fabric before impatiently tugging it free from his waistband. He needed skin, needed to feel the heat of him.

Raj broke away just long enough to yank his shirt over his head, tossing it aside, and Leo took the opportunity to drink in the sight—lean muscle of his torso, faint sheen of sweat from Goa humidity, the way his chest rose and fell with ragged breaths. Before Leo could speak, Raj was on him again, mouth hot and demanding, one hand cupping the back of his neck while the other slid down, fingers digging possessively into his hip.

Leo groaned, arching into him, his own arousal pressing insistently against his shorts. Raj smirked against his lips, voice a rough whisper. "You've been thinking about this."

"Fuck yes," Leo admitted, voice breaking as Raj's hand slid between them, palming him through the fabric. His hips jerked forward, seeking friction, and Raj rewarded him with a slow, torturous stroke.

"Tell me," Raj murmured, lips trailing down Leo's jaw to his throat. "Tell me what you want."

Leo's breath hitched as Raj's teeth grazed his collarbone. "You. Like this. No more waiting, no more hiding behind walls."

Raj didn't need to be told twice. He pushed Leo back onto the sun-warmed lounge chair, climbing over him with predatory grace that sent a shiver down Leo's spine. Their bodies aligned, skin against skin, and Leo gasped at the contact—Raj's weight pressing him down, the hard line of his cock against his thigh, the way his hands roamed like he was memorizing every inch of him.

Leo reached between them, fumbling with Raj's waistband, desperate to feel him. Raj let out a low, throaty laugh but helped, shoving his shorts down just enough to free himself. Leo's fingers wrapped around him, stroking slowly, relishing the way Raj's breath stuttered, the way his hips jerked into his touch.

"Fuck, Leo—" Raj's voice was already wrecked, his usual composure shattered.

Leo smirked, tightening his grip, thumb swiping over the head of Raj's cock just to hear him groan. But Raj wasn't one to be outdone. In one fluid motion, he captured Leo's wrists, pinning them above his head as he leaned down to lick a hot stripe up his neck.

"You're going to kill me," Leo gasped.

"Good," Raj growled, biting down on his earlobe before releasing his wrists to yank Leo's shorts down his thighs. The warm coastal air ghosted over Leo's exposed skin, but it was nothing compared to the heat of Raj's mouth as he kissed his way down his chest, his stomach, lower—

"Oh god—" Leo's back arched off the lounge as Raj's tongue flicked over the head of his cock before taking him deep, swallowing him down with sinful ease that had Leo seeing stars. His fingers twisted in Raj's hair, torn between pulling him closer and shoving him away before he came embarrassingly fast.

Raj hummed around him, the vibration sending pleasure straight to Leo's core. His hips bucked helplessly, but Raj held him down, setting a relentless pace—sucking, licking, taking him apart with his mouth until Leo was panting, thighs trembling.

"Raj—I'm close—"

Raj pulled off with a filthy wet sound, crawling back up Leo's body to kiss him again, letting him taste himself on his tongue. "Not yet," he murmured, biting Leo's lower lip. "I want you to come with me inside you."

Leo's breath left him in a rush. "Fuck. Yes."

Raj reached for the bottle of coconut oil left on the terrace table—some half-abandoned afterthought from earlier—and slicked his fingers with it, gaze locked on Leo's as he pressed one inside him. Leo gasped, the stretch unfamiliar but intoxicating, the oil warm from the sun.

"More," he demanded, rocking down onto Raj's fingers.

Raj obliged, adding a second, then a third, scissoring him open with slow, deliberate strokes that had Leo writhing. Every brush against that sweet spot inside him made his vision blur, his cock leaking against his stomach.

"Now," Leo begged, beyond words, beyond patience. "Raj, please—"

Raj didn't make him wait. He slicked himself up, lining his cock up with Leo's entrance, and pushed in with one deep, slow thrust.

Leo cried out, nails digging into Raj's shoulders as he was filled, stretched, claimed. Raj groaned above him, forehead dropping to Leo's as he bottomed out, giving him a moment to adjust.

"You feel—" Raj's voice was raw. "Fuck, Leo, you feel perfect."

Then he moved.

The first thrust was slow, testing, but the second was deeper, harder, and by the third, they'd found a rhythm that had Leo whimpering incoherently. Raj fucked him with a desperate intensity, each snap of his hips driving Leo higher, pushing him toward the edge.

Leo wrapped his legs around Raj's waist, pulling him deeper, meeting every thrust with a gasp, a moan, a broken plea. The lounge creaked beneath them, the sound drowned out by their ragged breathing, the slap of skin on skin, the ocean waves crashing in the distance.

Raj's hand found Leo's cock, stroking him in time with his thrusts, and that was all it took. Leo came with a shout, body seizing as pleasure ripped through him, white-hot and overwhelming. Raj followed him over the edge moments later, burying himself deep as he spilled inside Leo with a groan, hips stuttering through the aftershocks.

They collapsed together, sweat-slick and breathless, limbs tangled. Raj pressed a kiss to Leo's shoulder, breathing still uneven.

"So much for keeping things professional," Leo murmured, voice hoarse.

Raj laughed, low and satisfied. "Fuck professional."

Chapter 6: Reality Check

They journeyed back home beneath a low, colorless sky, thick with the promise of rain. Smog clung to the skyline, heavy and unmoving, soaking into the car like sweat into fabric.

Leo's fingers rested loose on the steering wheel, but that was the only part of him that looked calm. His shoulders were too high, locked in place, his neck stiff. His mouth hadn't moved since they left the beach, and the silence had stretched so far between them that it started to feel normal.

Raj hadn't spoken either, not since the plane ride back. He was turned toward the window, chin propped on one fist, legs crossed at the ankle like he could pretend the distance between them wasn't his doing. The glass gave a vague reflection of him—sharp profile, hair flattened by humidity, his usually pristine collar half-wrinkled. He hadn't shaved. That might've meant something. Or maybe not. Exhaustion, maybe. Or guilt. Or something else entirely.

Leo didn't ask. He didn't want to know if it was guilt.

Leo dropped Raj off, to the latter's request, a street away from his home. Raj gave a clipped thanks, the kind that sounded polite but carried an edge, then slipped out without meeting his eyes. He walked quickly, shoulders hunched, as if even the shadows might be watching. Leo stayed parked until Raj disappeared around the corner, only then letting out a slow breath before turning the car back toward the condo. The drive felt longer than it was, headlights sweeping empty streets, silence heavy enough to press against his chest.

They didn't touch in public, not anymore. Not here. It was like a switch had been flipped within Raj. One moment he was happy in Leo's embrace, enjoying the warmth of their bodies pressed against each other in Goa, but the second they stepped off the plane in Mumbai he withdrew.

Leo tried to understand. Of course they couldn't remain the way they'd been in the villa. Not in a place where someone might see, or worse, recognize. Rules had been there from the beginning, unspoken, but now they were law. What was allowed happened in stolen hours behind closed doors, inside Leo's rented condo, under dim lighting and the constant threat of being found out. That was where the truth lived. That was where their connection belonged.

When Leo finally made it back to his condo, it remained the exact same way he'd left it. The place smelled of stale instant coffee and the shampoo Raj always used—the one with the citrus scent that clung to the pillows. The bed was a mess, never fully made. They never used the table. His laptop, though open, lay sleeping on the desk. The curtains were drawn.

Leo stepped into the space of the living room, dropping his travel bag by the sofa. He pushed the curtains open, and Mumbai's blinking skyline watched him with something that felt too much like disapproval.

The next day, Raj wasn't at the office. No one mentioned his absence; they all carried on with their day, working on their various tasks. Leo had a few meetings presided by Meera Kaul, the company's second-in-command and the next person in the chain after Raj. After the first meeting, Leo approached her.

"Raj?" Meera hummed. "He just told me he had family matters to take care of. He didn't tell you?"

Meera's words stuck with him long after she walked away, her tone brisk, dismissive, like Raj's absence was just another line on the day's agenda. Family matters. That was all she gave him. That was all Raj had given her.

Leo finished the rest of the day on autopilot, shuffling through meetings and presentations, nodding when required. His mind wasn't in any of it. Every hour Raj stayed gone, the weight in his chest pressed harder, until he couldn't tell if it was worry, or anger, or both.

By the time he got back to his place, the silence was heavy enough to choke on. He didn't bother with dinner. Just dropped his bag by the door, loosened his tie, and opened his laptop. The screen glared too bright in the dark room, a new email flashing at the top of his inbox.

Leo's laptop screen, too bright in the dark, blinked a simple sentence he reread until the words blurred. *Visa extension denied*. There were no appeals. He didn't try to make one. He just closed the lid and sat in the dark.

His phone buzzed against the nightstand. Raj.

Can I come over?

Leo stared at the message for too long before replying.

Okay.

Minutes stretched, and then the knock came. When Leo answered, Raj didn't waste time with small talk. He stepped inside, looking worn, his jaw tight.

"I should've told you," he said, not quite meeting Leo's eyes. "At the airport—my mother texted. She didn't say much, only that she wanted me over for dinner. But even before that..."

When Leo kept quiet, waiting for his next words, Raj took a deep breath. "Before you even came here, she already planned something for me. Someone. Someone she hopes I'll... marry."

The words landed between them like a crack splitting glass, sharp and irreversible.

"You knew this wasn't permanent," Raj said when Leo stayed silent, low and even, but Leo heard the tremor under it. His voice was always too steady. Always careful. Like he practiced everything before saying it out loud.

Leo laughed, sharp and dry and not even close to funny. "Yeah, I knew. Doesn't mean it was supposed to mean nothing." He ran a hand through his hair, tugging too hard. It didn't matter. None of it did. He took a step forward. "Or was that the whole point? Goa was just a vacation fuck? Something you could fold up and pack away when real life called?"

Raj didn't answer. Not with words. His hands balled in Leo's shirt, shoving him hard into the nearest wall. The kiss that followed wasn't soft. It wasn't anything but teeth and tongue and too much of everything. Too hard. Too close. Too late. Leo didn't back down. He scraped his nails down Raj's back, pulled him in tighter, ground against him like they could burn it out of their systems if they just went hard enough. They'd never figured out how to talk without ruining something.

Afterward, they were tangled in sheets soaked with sweat and silence. Leo had one arm over his face. Raj sat up, back turned, spine stiff. When he spoke, it was almost quiet enough to pretend Leo hadn't heard it.

"I'm meeting her tomorrow."

Leo didn't move right away. Didn't breathe. Then, "What happens after?"

Raj didn't even look at him, keeping his mouth closed.

"Yeah." Leo sat up, pulled on his jeans without bothering to find his underwear. His hands were shaking. He didn't care if Raj saw. "Roger that. You should leave then."

Raj reached for him, but it was too late. His fingers only brushed Leo's wrist.

"Leo—"

But what was left to say?

Chapter 7: Crossroads

The next morning, Leo was already out of the condo before the sun cracked through the haze above the city.

He hadn't slept. Just packed. Or maybe not even that, not really—he just tossed everything that wasn't nailed down into his suitcase, ignoring the pair of socks Raj had left behind one night, ignoring the trinkets Raj had haggled for him during his first day in Mumbai. He ignored everything that had Raj's fingerprints on it, even though he was pretty sure they were all over him by now in ways he couldn't wash off.

He took a taxi to the first hotel that popped up when he searched on his phone. Check-in was easy, and by breakfast, Leo had already settled in.

By the time Leo stepped into the glass-and-steel chill of the office, he was already halfway out of the country in his head. Email chains. Meetings. Reports. Calls. His calendar filled up fast, and he let it. He stopped checking the time every ten minutes, stopped waiting for the texts that never came.

Raj still wasn't there.

Leo attempted to focus, desperately trying to push any thoughts of the past weekend out of his mind. The visa application had already been rejected. That was real. That was concrete. The rest of it—him and Raj, whatever it had been—was the part that was blurring at the edges now, fraying like the seams on that stupid linen shirt Raj had once called "tragic" before pulling it off with his teeth.

To distract himself, Leo thought of his new hotel room instead. It was cold and sterile and perfect. Nothing smelled like citrus shampoo; it was all lavender. The bed stayed made.

He kept his hands busy. Typing. Scrolling. Holding coffee cups even when they were empty. Anything to keep from letting them shake. Anything to keep *him* off his mind.

Raj sat across from her at the rooftop bar, every one of his senses dulled. The woman, Aisha, was perfectly nice. Polished. Kind. Her voice was low and measured, her earrings glinting under the amber lights. She complimented his curls.

Raj's fingers rose immediately to the silver pendant at his neck, the one Leo tugged on last night, when he came undone beneath him. Raj rolled the edge of it between his fingers, nodded politely. "Thanks."

She smiled. He smiled back. Mechanical. Brief. The drinks came. He barely tasted his.

She leaned forward, made a joke about dating apps and their families being old-fashioned, and Raj nodded again, distracted. Her laugh was bright. Too bright. Not like Leo's. His head throbbed.

When she touched his hand casually in conversation, he flinched. Not visibly, maybe. But inside, something recoiled. He kept thinking about Leo's hands. How they'd never been careful. Always grabbing, grounding, demanding something without asking, like Raj had owed him everything from the start. And Raj had let him. That was the worst part. Raj had *wanted* to owe him, to give him the whole world.

Aisha said something about taking a walk. He agreed automatically, even though his head was still back in Leo's condo, on sheets soaked through with sweat and regret.

He lied to her. Smiled the same way. Said he'd had a long week.

Dinner with Aisha ended the way it had begun: polite, easy, nothing sharp enough to wound but nothing deep enough to hold onto. She was kind, and clever, and deserved more than the half-attention Raj gave her between practiced smiles and sips of water. When it was time to part ways, he walked her to her car, thanked her for the evening, and lied again with the same even tone. He knew she could tell.

The days that followed blurred together. Work filled the daylight hours, endless calls and presentations, and the nights emptied into silence that left too much space for memory. Raj buried himself in routine, but even in meetings, he caught himself drifting—back to a laugh that wasn't here, to hands that still burned on his skin.

Raj worried about having to avoid Leo at work, but he never had the chance to. He never saw the man, and perhaps this worried him even more. By the time the company mixer rolled around, the week had stretched him taut with restraint, every step forward feeling like a performance he hadn't rehearsed well enough.

The company mixer was too loud. Too many bodies pressed too close together, too many eyes scanning the room. Raj always stood out. That wasn't ego. That was just reality. His height, his posture, the way people naturally stepped aside when he walked through a space—it made hiding impossible. It made proximity dangerous.

And Leo was here.

Not just in the room but *here*, in every breath Raj took, in the way his pulse kicked when he spotted that too-familiar profile by the bar, jaw clenched like he was biting back a thought that might destroy him if he let it out.

They didn't talk. Not for the first hour. Raj made rounds, did the expected handshakes, the small talk. Leo kept his distance, kept smiling, but it never reached his eyes. Raj could see it now. How

often he'd missed that before, how much Leo had covered up by keeping his mouth busy and his hands busier.

He found himself drifting closer, even though he told himself not to. Even though the last time they were alone, he'd destroyed what little was left between them. Eventually, when the crowd thinned near the stairwell, they ended up side by side. Not by design, just something that happened. Like gravity.

Raj leaned slightly, like he always did when he wanted to speak just to Leo. It wasn't something he thought about anymore. He lowered his voice, eyes on the floor. "You look—"

"Don't," Leo said, cutting him off without even looking up. He was staring at the wall, eyes fixed on something Raj couldn't see. "Don't do the part where you pretend this can still be a thing in public."

Raj didn't step back. "It's not pretending."

Leo laughed quietly, the sound ugly. "No? You're still going through with it, though, right? The nice girl with the perfect family and the even better hair?"

"Don't do this here."

"I'm not doing anything," Leo said, turning to face him now, smile gone completely. "I'm just asking if it's easier. If she makes it easier to be the man you think you're supposed to be."

Raj's jaw tightened. "That's not fair."

"No," Leo said, voice low, controlled. Almost a whisper. "What's not fair is you looking at me like that and still choosing someone else."

They stood there in silence for too long. Someone passed behind them, laughing, and the moment cracked in half.

Leo stepped away first. His shoulder brushed Raj's, and Raj almost reached for him. Almost.

But he didn't.

And Leo didn't look back.

Chapter 8: Last Chances

Leo didn't expect it. Not at this hour. Not after he'd spent the whole day folding his life into a suitcase (again) and pretending that every zipper pulled shut wasn't cutting off the last of his sanity.

He was already halfway through the bathroom when the text came. Raj.

I stopped by the condo and you weren't there. I wanted to say goodbye before your flight.

Not urgent. Not timid either. Just there.

Before Leo could stop himself, he texted his hotel name and room number. The knock came twenty minutes later.

He didn't move right away. If it truly was goodbye, he wanted a minute to collect himself. And if it wasn't, then it didn't matter. The decision was made. The suitcase by the bed, the folder of papers ready for customs, his phone with the ticket confirmation email glowing on its screen—all of it pointed in the same direction.

Still, when he opened the door and saw Raj standing there, collar undone, pendant hanging just off-center against the open triangle of his shirt, Leo's heart did something stupid.

"Hey," Raj said, not smiling. Just standing there. Shoulders squared, eyes tired. "I didn't expect you to text back."

"I figured it was better than leaving things how they are now," Leo muttered.

Raj didn't flinch. He stepped inside slowly, closing the door behind him. The room was dim except for the yellow glow of the lamps.

"I told them I can't do it," Raj said. "The arrangement. I said no."

Leo blinked. "What?"

"I told them I can't marry someone I don't love," Raj said. His voice wasn't shaking, but it was close. "I should've said it before. I should've told *you* before."

Leo exhaled hard and sat down on the edge of the bed, suddenly too aware of how bare the room looked now that his things were packed. "Why now?"

Raj came closer. "Because I kept thinking this would fade. That if I let you leave, it would hurt for a little while and then go away. But it's not fading. It's the opposite."

Leo didn't speak. Just watched him.

"I'm not saying I figured everything out. I'm not fixed. But I can't lose this before I even give it a real chance."

Leo's throat felt tight. He rubbed the back of his neck and looked at Raj, really looked at him, like maybe this time he'd find the version that didn't make it so hard to breathe. "You're serious."

"I'm here, aren't I?"

They didn't rush into each other's arms. It wasn't dramatic. It was slow, measured. Raj closed the distance and sat beside him. Their shoulders brushed. And then, quietly, without ceremony, their fingers linked.

"I leave tomorrow," Leo said.

"I know."

"But I'll come back. If you want me to."

Raj nodded. "I do."

And somehow, that was enough.

They didn't undress each other in a frenzy this time. Raj's hands were slow as they curled into the fabric of Leo's shirt, lifting it with deliberate care. The brush of cotton against Leo's arms, the way Raj paused to press his lips to the newly exposed skin of his sternum—like he needed to relearn him outside the hushed secrets they'd kept.

Leo shivered as Raj's breath warmed his chest, as fingers traced the dip of his waistband before undoing the button with a quiet snick. No tearing. No urgency. Just Raj's palm sliding beneath fabric, warm and firm against Leo's hip, thumb stroking the sensitive hollow there.

When Raj pulled back to look at him, Leo saw it—the shift. They no longer had the sharp-edged hunger that had defined them before, but something deeper. The realization made his throat tighten.

They moved to the bed without breaking contact, knees bumping, hands wandering. Raj laid him down like something precious, one arm braced beside Leo's head, the other tracing the planes of his torso—ribs, abdomen, the twitch of muscle as Leo arched into the touch. Leo reached up, cradling Raj's face, fingertips memorizing the rough texture of stubble, the curve of his lower lip when it parted under his touch.

"You could've just let me go," Leo murmured.

Raj's exhale was unsteady. He bent, kissing the scar above Leo's eyebrow—once, twice—lips lingering like an apology. "I tried."

Clothes fell away in slow increments. Raj's shirt was discarded with a shrug of broad shoulders. Leo's boxers were pushed down with agonizing patience, Raj's mouth following the path of his hands—sucking a bruise into the inside of Leo's thigh, lapping his tongue over the jut of his hipbone. Leo gasped, fingers twisting in the sheets, then in Raj's hair when he finally took him

into his mouth. Not the rough, frantic heat of before, but slow, wet pulls that had Leo's toes curling, his back bowing off the mattress.

Raj laughed against his skin when Leo raised his hand to grip the pillow behind his head, but knocked the nightstand instead, sending the lamp wobbling. The sound was warm, real, and Leo dragged him up by his shoulders to kiss it from his mouth. They rolled together, limbs tangling, Leo straddling Raj's hips to reciprocate—savoring the taste of him on his tongue, the way Raj's breath fractured when Leo hollowed his cheeks.

When Raj finally pressed into him, it was with both hands braced under Leo's thighs, holding him open, cherishing him. No resistance, just the slow, inexorable slide, their shared groans as Raj bottomed out. Leo wrapped his legs around him, heels digging into the small of Raj's back, pulling him deeper.

They moved like that—foreheads pressed together, breaths mingling, hips rolling in a rhythm that felt less like friction and more like communion. Raj's thrusts were deep, measured, each one drawing a punched-out sound from Leo's throat. He clung to Raj's shoulders, nails biting half-moons into sweat-slick skin, and turned his face into the curve of Raj's neck to whisper, "I don't want anyone else."

Raj kissed him like he was drowning in it, like the words were a lifeline. "You won't have to."

Release came not in a crash but a wave. It was Leo first, back arching, mouth open against Raj's collarbone. Raj followed, shuddering, his groan muffled in the crook of Leo's neck.

After, they stayed tangled. Raj's weight was a welcome anchor, Leo's fingers still carding through his hair. And this time, when the sweat cooled and their breathing evened out, neither of them reached for their clothes.

Morning came too fast.

Leo was already dressed again by the time Raj woke up, standing by the window with a mug of weak instant coffee and a quiet look on his face.

Raj sat up slowly. His voice was hoarse. "You leaving right now?"

"In a couple hours." Leo didn't turn around yet. "I was thinking... there's a way."

Raj frowned, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "What kind of way?"

Leo finally looked at him. "A satellite office. Here in Mumbai. We're growing fast enough. I could make the case to the board easily."

Raj blinked. "You're serious."

"I could split time between Seattle and here," Leo said, stepping closer. "We wouldn't have to figure everything out overnight, but I'd be here more. We could try... really try."

Raj looked at the floor for a long time. "My parents won't be thrilled."

"They don't have to be. Not right away."

"And Seattle?" Raj asked.

"You'll like it. Lots of rain. Stubborn people. Terrible bagels."

Raj smiled for the first time that morning. "Sounds promising."

Leo let his fingers drift to Raj's face, brushing his cheek. "Come visit. Just try it."

Raj nodded. "Okay."

No tearful vows, just two people deciding they weren't done yet.

At the airport, they didn't say much. The line moved fast, the boarding call echoing overhead.

Raj stood by the glass, arms crossed, his thumb rubbing the pendant at his throat like it could ground him. Leo stood close to him. Not touching, but near enough to lean in one last time.

"You'll text when you land?" Raj asked.

Leo nodded. "Yeah. And when I don't hear from you for twelve hours, I'll assume you're ignoring me on purpose."

Raj smirked. "Only if you deserve it."

"I usually do."

The final call came. Leo slung his duffel over his shoulder. "Don't say goodbye."

"I wasn't going to."

They looked at each other for one beat too long. Then Leo turned.

Halfway down the ramp, he glanced over his shoulder. Raj hadn't moved. Still watching.

"See you soon," Leo said.

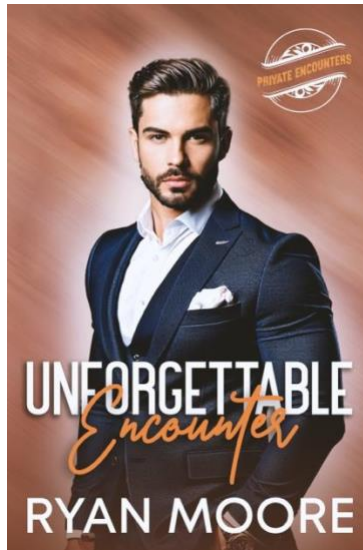
Raj's smile was quiet but real. "Yeah. See you."

And that was enough. For now.

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Public Connections: In the Spotlight

Love-Hate Connection: Hostile Attraction

Bought for Pleasure: Owed & Owned

International Heat: Dust and Desire

Power and Possession: Private Terms

Coming soon:

Fault Lines: After the Protest

About the Author:



Ryan Moore is an emerging voice in M/M erotic romance, known for crafting steamy, emotionally charged stories that explore the complexities of desire and connection. A native of the Pacific Northwest, Ryan grew up with a love for storytelling, finding inspiration in the region's brooding landscapes and vibrant, diverse communities. With a background in literature and a passion for exploring unconventional romances, Ryan has developed a unique style that blends heartfelt emotion with irresistible heat.

When he's not writing, he loves spending time outdoors — kayaking in Seattle's waters, hiking through national parks, and camping under the stars. At home, he enjoys cooking and entertaining friends, drawing inspiration from both his travels and his everyday surroundings to infuse a fresh perspective into the world of M/M romance.

In his new series, *Private Encounters*, Ryan invites readers to lose themselves in a world of hidden desires, intense passions, and the thrilling journey to love. He currently resides in Seattle with his golden retriever, Alex, a well-worn notebook, and an endless coffee supply, ever ready to capture the next story waiting to be told.



You can find me on social media at:



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Ryan Moore

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