

# THE SARI SHOP WIDOW

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An Excerpt

## Chapter 1

For the second time in ten years her life was beginning to come apart. Anjali Kapadia stood still for a minute, trying to absorb the news. Could it possibly be a mistake? But it wasn't; she'd heard it clearly. Despite her best efforts to curb it, the initial shock wave refused to ebb. The seemingly harmless bit of information was all it had taken to shatter the image of a satisfying lifestyle and career.

Her mind in overdrive, she started to pace the length of the tasteful and elegant boutique. Her boutique—her baby—her artistic and inventive skills put to optimum use in creating a fairytale store worthy of movie stars, models, and beauty queens.

Technically the business belonged to her and her parents as equal partners, but it was Anjali's creativity and vision that had turned it into a classy and successful enterprise—at least until recently. It stood apart like a *maharani*, a queen amongst the ordinary, plain-vanilla sari and clothing shops of New Jersey's "Little India."

The area known as Little India, located in Edison, was crammed with sari shops, jewelry stores, restaurants, grocery markets and souvenir shops. It was a small slice of India buried in central New Jersey, a quaint neighborhood that smelled of pungent curry, fried onions, ripe mangoes, incense, and *masala chai*. Strong tea laced with spices and oodles of thick, creamy milk.

Even the store's name was Anjali's brainstorm. Overrun with ho-hum and even dumpy names and ugly storefronts, Little India was badly in need of some class. So she'd called her store *Silk & Sapphires*. It had a nice ring to it, and according to Hindu astrology, a sapphire supposedly dispelled the destructive influence of the fiery planet *Shanee*. Saturn. The store's window displayed the most elegant mannequins and rare jewelry to give it a boutique flavor rather than just a sari-cum-bauble shop.

The interior was done in soft cream and shimmering blue to fit the name. Tear-drop crystal chandeliers hung from a vaulted ceiling. Strategically placed recessed lights highlighted the

displays, mirrored walls created the illusion of space and light, and dense cream carpeting covered the sales floor and fitting rooms. No harsh music with screeching falsetto voices was allowed to tarnish the store's atmosphere either. Only soft instrumental pieces by both Indian and other masters were piped in through the sound system.

Shopping at *Silk & Sapphires* was meant to be a unique and indulgent experience.

The boutique also carried jewelry—one-of-a-kind creations of precious and semi precious gems fit for an empress or a blushing bride. It was all custom-made in India by her uncles, Anjali's mom's brothers, two of whom were in the jewelry business in the state of Gujarat in northwestern India.

Nearly every piece of clothing the store sold was designed by Anjali, each outfit envisioned, then meticulously planned, cut, sewn, and embellished to her demanding specifications. She took pride in finding the right fabrics, trimmings, and tailors to make her designs evolve from an idea swirling in her brain to divine ensembles. Granted, her clothes and accessories were far more expensive than some, but they were worth the money. Every design was exclusive. Many of them were award winners in fashion shows and competitions.

She glanced at them and exhaled a long sigh. The colorful silks, the clingy chiffons, and the gossamer tissue-crepes were draped in an exquisite array on their pretty satin hangers—row upon row of lush, costly clothes. The pearls, the rainbow of beads, and the jewel-tone sequins lovingly sewn into the borders, sleeves, necklines, and bodices of the sleek garments sparkled and winked at her as she strode up and down the aisles, again and again.

What had gone wrong? How? When?

Could she be kissing her dress design business and her beloved store goodbye? If so, how soon? Catching her reflection in the mirrored wall behind the row of clothes, she realized her eyes were filled with resentment and frustration. Darn it! She rarely let bitterness prevail over her, and she wouldn't do so now. She was a woman who liked to laugh, although there hadn't been much to laugh about in the last decade—not since she'd cremated Vikram.

How could her parents have concealed such a significant problem from her for so long? And how could they even dream up something so preposterous to address the problem? How could they jeopardize her career as well as theirs with one phone call?

She wouldn't stand for it. She couldn't. She'd get a loan from a bank to bail them out of their financial mess, or even beg and borrow from friends and acquaintances before she'd give in

to her parents' harebrained plan.

Turning on the narrow heel of her tan sandals, she trudged back to the long glass display counter behind which her parents stood. They'd been mutely watching her pace like a caged panther all this time. Now the mildly optimistic look on their faces told her they hoped her dark mood had passed, or at least diminished to some degree.

Well, no such luck. The distress was still spiraling inside her like a mad January blizzard. She raised her troubled eyes to them. "Why didn't you guys tell me about the problem sooner?"

Her father, Mohan Kapadia, a wiry man with glasses and a heavy mop of graying hair, gave a helpless shrug. "We didn't want to upset you. And I honestly thought your mother and I could handle it by now."

"But we're equal partners in this. I'm not a child who needs to be protected from bad news." She took a deep breath to steady her tremulous voice. "I know I nearly lost my mind some years ago, but I don't need coddling anymore."

"I know that, Anju, but I'm upset at myself for not being a better businessman." He sent Anjali a rueful look. "I suppose I didn't want to believe it myself at first. It's not easy admitting to one's daughter that one is . . . uh . . . a failure."

She immediately regretted her outburst. "I'm sorry, Dad. You're not a failure. It's not all your fault. We're all in this together."

"But still . . ."

"I'm just as much to blame," she said. "I should have kept an eye on our finances a bit more. What I can't believe is why you went to Jeevan of all people for help."

"Jeevan is my eldest brother. Who else could I go to when we're in financial trouble?" He combed his long, skinny fingers through his hair for the fourth time since Anjali had walked into the store minutes ago. His nervous raking was making his hair stand up in stiff peaks, making him look like one of those troll dolls sold in novelty stores. His starched blue shirt and gray slacks paired with sensible black shoes did little to improve the troll image.

"You could have gone to that old man, the Indian capitalist with three wives . . . what's his name . . . Harikishan."

Usha Kapadia, Anjali's mother, gave a derisive, unladylike snort. "After killing off his first two wives, old Harikishan has met his match. His third wife is young and pretty and smart. She keeps him . . . um . . . occupied," she remarked, clearing her throat. "He's not interested in

pursuing the financing business anymore.”

“How about Naren-kaka?” Naren Kapadia was her father’s youngest brother.

Her father shook his head. “Naren has a large debt on his motel. You know that.”

“Then why not go to a legitimate bank?” Anjali suggested. “Instead, you called your other brother Jeevan, in India?” She still couldn’t make sense out of her parents’ wacky decision.

“Your uncle’s got the best business brain in the world,” her father argued.

“But Jeevan’s a dictator.”

Her mother, trim and elegant in a shell-pink chiffon sari, and tiny pearls at her throat and ears, threw her a scorching look. “Anju, Jeevan is your oldest uncle. Show your elders some respect. And stop referring to him as Jeevan. To you he’s Jeevan-kaka, just like he’s Jeevan-bhai to your father and me.”

“I’m sorry.” Anjali sighed. From her mother’s tone one would think Anjali was a teenager or young adult at most. Their family business, essentially their livelihood, was headed for ruin, and her mother was lecturing her, a grown woman, on the old-fashioned Gujarati way of talking about one’s uncle. “You know as well as I that Jeevan-kaka is bad news, Mom.” He was a short, tubby, beady-eyed scoundrel who sat atop a mountain of money. He was rich and mean and sly and unscrupulous—a lethal combination.

Jeevan was the oldest of three brothers and two sisters, and never let his siblings forget it. In his eyes, he was only one small step below God. At the mention of his name, the family trembled with fear. With a simple phone call he could reduce some of them to tears. Most often, when someone in the family mentioned Jeevan’s name, it was preceded by “Oh, God,” and rightfully so.

Mohan shook his head. “Jeevan-bhai is a little bit on the strict side. That doesn’t mean he’s unkind.”

“*Little* bit strict?” Anjali groaned. Was her father living on the same planet as she? She looked at him. The shape and deep brown tint of their eyes were similar, and the thick black lashes were definitely something she’d inherited from him. In fact, most of her sharp features were her father’s, but her complexion and straight black hair were genetic traits from her mother’s side of the family. “After the beating you took from him as the middle brother, you still choose to defend him, Dad?”

This time Mohan’s eyes glinted with irritation. “You of all people, with your fancy college

degrees, should realize we have major financial problems. We need some serious help and advice. Who better than your uncle to give it? Everything your uncle touches turns to gold.”

Her mom gave another scornful snort. “That’s why they call him *Bada saheb*.” Big boss. Despite admonishing Anjali about her lack of respect for Jeevan, her mom had plenty of contempt for her eldest and most feared brother-in-law. But then Usha always had a different set of rules for herself. And they changed frequently according to her convenience and mood.

Having expressed her sentiments, her mother turned around to cast a quick glance in the mirrored wall and patted her hair, which was swept back into a simple but elegant chignon. Then she went back to arranging the new shipment of jewelry in the display case—earrings, bracelets, and finger rings made of rare yellow diamonds.

Anjali watched her mom’s dainty fingers gently lift each piece and arrange it over the sapphire-blue velvet spread. Having grown up in a family of jewelers, Usha knew her gems well. And at 59 she looked wonderful—much younger than her age.

“Whatever my brother’s faults, he has the knowledge and money to help us,” said Mohan, picking up his calculator and gathering up the day’s receipts. “And his advice is free.”

Anjali mulled over the issue for a minute. There had to be another, less drastic solution than the insufferable Jeevan. “Can’t you call him again and tell him you were wrong?”

“No.” Her father shook his head emphatically.

“Say you made an error in judgment and that everything’s just fine?”

Mohan gave her a bland look. “I can’t. He’s arriving here next week.”