

Excerpt - THE RELUCTANT MATCHMAKER

by Shobhan Bantwal

When Prajay returned to sit beside me, he sat much closer. Although I tried to keep my mind on the sheet of paper, my objectivity was nowhere to be found. His nearness, the warmth radiating from him, and the scent of him were driving me nuts. “What exactly do you want me to do with this, Prajay?”

“In your opinion, who would best suit my personality? Remember I told you appearance is not the most important thing to me? Hobbies, occupation, family, sense of humor, all those things carry much more weight than looks. There’s a lot more to a relationship than good looks.”

“I agree.” God, how I agreed. Looks were the last thing anyone should consider. I’d realized that very recently. At first sight I’d thought he reminded me of a big, graceless giant. And here I was, in love with him—a mere four weeks after meeting him.

An hour after I’d laid eyes on him, I’d looked past the face, the large nose, and the eyebrows that could scare the spots off a cheetah. Now he looked wonderful to me. Right this moment, he was so close that I wanted to throw my arms around his neck and beg him to consider me as the top lady on his idiotic list.

“Excellent! So taking all that into consideration, who do you think I should contact first, lady number one or number two?” He frowned at the paper. “They’re almost tied for first place.”

“I put together an entire database to sort the various pros and cons. That’s how I rated them, and so lady number one is still number one. From what I can see, she’d be . . . perfect for you.” My voice was turning into a tormented whisper. Why couldn’t I have some control over something as simple as my voice? Good thing I hadn’t gone into acting. I’d make a lousy actress.

Prajay offered me a glass of water. “Here, you sound like your throat is dry.”

I took a grateful sip. “I think I should leave now.” I made a big deal about looking at my wristwatch. “It’s late.”

He took the glass from my hand, and our fingers touched. I shook at the surge of power that shot up my arm. Warm blood rushed to my neck and cheeks. Oh no, my face was probably an open book—a woman completely smitten.

He must have felt something, too, because his hand looked a little unsteady as he put the half-finished glass back on the tray. He turned to me, a look of startled discovery replacing the

casual one that had been there a moment ago.

He lifted a hand to touch the side of my face. “You . . . are . . . beautiful, Meena Shenoy.”

I was trembling so much, I couldn’t think straight. “I . . . uh . . . thank you.” Why couldn’t I come up with something intelligent and cool to say? I was sitting there like a bumbling moron when I was getting exactly what I wanted—his undivided attention.

“Beautiful, smart, caring. You’re a very special young lady.” His thumb caressed my cheekbone as he studied my eyes, as if searching for something.

Still tongue-tied, I let my eyelids fall. It was hard to hold his gaze and not throw myself at him. No matter what, I still had to hold on to my dignity. And thrusting myself on him was likely to make him recoil. His other hand slowly came up, and he cupped my face with both hands. His palms felt strong and hard yet tender.

I didn’t know exactly what happened or how—who leaned forward first, but suddenly his lips were on mine, warm, soft, gentle for a big man. Instinctively my mouth opened for his kiss. This was what I’d wanted for the last couple of weeks. I had dressed in one of my most seductive outfits just so I could have this. And yet, I hesitated to touch him. Oh, I wanted to very much, but one wrong move could ruin the fragile moment.

Most Indian men didn’t like aggressive women. So I kept my hands tightly clasped in my lap while his full mouth glided over mine, his teeth nipped at my lower lip, and his tongue played with mine.

A yearning sigh escaped from my mouth. He must have heard it, too, because his hands left my face and his arms locked around me. I was hauled against him in one quick move, taking the breath right out of my lungs.

God, this was good—better than anything I’d ever felt in my whole life.

Although his hold on me felt like a vice grip, I liked it, basked in it. His next kiss was harder, more demanding, that of a hungry male rather than a tender admirer. And all the while my mind sang: *He wants me. He wants me.*

I couldn’t hold back any longer. My hands rested on his shoulders, savoring the tautness of the muscle and the soft feel of his shirt for a moment, and then my arms slid around his neck, clamping his mouth to mine. I never wanted to let go. This was a minor miracle. I’d come here to help him locate a woman who’d make him a suitable wife, and instead I was clasped in his arms, his mouth making scalding, passionate love to mine.

Even in my wildest dreams I hadn't thought it would be this wonderful. His cologne was rousing, his hair ticklish on my fingers, and his chest was hard as a rock against my pliant breasts. This felt so damn right.

Just when I thought this was heaven on earth, he abruptly loosened his hold on me, a puzzled look coming over his face once more. But this time the bafflement was not mixed with wonder and awe. It was more like an unpleasant shock.

I had done it—exactly what I didn't want to do—I'd repulsed him. Why the heck hadn't I behaved like a nice Hindu girl and held myself in check?

He took me by the shoulders and set me away from him. "I'm so sorry. I—I don't know what came over me."