

Chapter Eleven

An Unexpected Romance in New Delhi

For the three years I lived in New Delhi, I rented a house, what Americans would recognize as a townhouse, in a fashionable part of the city called Chanaykapuri, or the Diplomatic Enclave. It was a leafy and quiet area not far from the commercial and government center of the city, and, as its name in English suggested, it was the location of most of the city's foreign embassies. The American Embassy was a magnificent compound near the elegant Asoka Hotel, and my house was within walking distance of both places.

Although too expensive for a young journalist, I made financial sacrifices in my monthly budget to afford to live in this upscale neighborhood I had admired from my student days when I occasionally visited the embassy, probably as the crow flies thirty miles from Delhi University. I used to look with longing at the American Club and the tennis courts that were part of the complex, even having a cheeseburger and soft serve ice cream in the dining room on occasion. That's the neighborhood where I lived as a journalist and where I met Rakhi.

Rakhi Seshadri, as alluring a name as was the woman.

I first glimpsed an elderly gentleman walking along Malcha Marg, my residential lane, in the early evening when the temperature cooled somewhat. That was in the autumn of 1978. He routinely took a slow stroll around my crescent and the adjoining one. He was noteworthy because of his formal attire, dark suit, white shirt, and tie. He stood ramrod straight, with a military officer's crop in his hand and folded under his right arm. I thought him a retired army officer, which indeed he was, as I learned later. Once I saw him walking with a younger woman, who moved with an easy grace. Was she his daughter, or perhaps a mistress? No, surely not the latter.

In that winter and early spring of 1979, I saw the two of them frequently. They weren't the only ones walking in the cool evening air, but they were the ones who caught my attention. I admired from a distance that lovely woman at the old man's side and wanted to meet her. One evening, I stepped out as they passed my place and greeted them. They graciously invited me to take the evening air with them.

On a subsequent occasion, I walked with them again. The daughter, Rakhi, was very friendly with a nice gentle manner, a soft voice, and a smile that was heart-stopping. The gentleman, her father as it turned out, was cordial and eventually asked me to join them for tea in their home after the walk. Their home was a stately one at the curve of the crescent on which I lived closer to the main road that ran through the neighborhood. We were joined by the gentleman's wife. The family name was Seshadri. It was a long time before I learned their first names and I never used them in conversation; it was always Mr. and Mrs. Seshadri.

Rakhi came soon to dominate my daydreams. She was perfectly dressed, coiffed, and perfumed, even for an evening stroll, which her father called his constitutional. The mother and father had a nineteenth-century formality about them, although Rakhi was more casual, quick to laugh. To me, she had an allure about which she did not seem aware. A more graceful woman, physically and socially, I had seldom met, and her memory of her then stirs an ache in my heart all these years later.

Rakhi seemed to reciprocate my attraction to her, and occasionally our eyes would meet over chai with her parents. They could see this attraction and seemed a bit amused by it. One evening weeks after we had started walking together more regularly, they invited me to dinner at their home. Rakhi nicely whispered a warning to me that I should wear a coat and tie.

That first dinner at the Seshadri's home is still a vivid memory. Although the table was set with fine china, and we were all formally attired, with candles making the room cozy, we ate with our fingers. I was used to that custom in India from my student days, but I did not expect it in a formal dining room. The vegetarian food was extremely well prepared. Mrs. Seshadri told me she spent a great deal of her time supervising her cook and doing some of the cooking herself. To her, there was nothing more appropriate and civilized than fine food well presented.

Throughout the dinner, of which there would be many subsequently, Rakhi and I exchanged more than an occasional glance as we discussed regional politics and the world scene. Mr. Seshadri was exceptionally well-informed and articulate, as was his wife. I learned that Rakhi was a rising executive at the British bank, Standard Chartered, and had a specialty in foreign exchange. They all inquired pleasantly about my work as a journalist and probed a bit about my family background.

After a month I decided to ask Rakhi to dinner at a nearby restaurant, but because of the family formality, I thought it best to ask her father first for permission.

“It is acceptable, but how are you going to get to the restaurant?” he asked. And then added, “I’ve not seen you drive a car.”

“No, sir, I save money by not having a car, which is not so vital when I spend so much time out of the country.”

“Well, then, my driver will take the two of you to your restaurant.”

We settled into the back seat of Mr. Seshadri’s new, black ambassador, an Indian-made vehicle that was most commonly seen on the streets of New Delhi in those days. In the darkened back seat, Rakhi took my hand gently and enclosed her fingers with mine. When you like someone, such a simple gesture can be electric. It helped immensely that Rakhi favored a rose-based perfume, Tea Rose, that surely must be one of the more erotic perfumes ever created by the hand of man.

We had a short ride to the Oberoi Intercontinental Hotel, which had an elegant Chinese restaurant on its top floor. There was a splendid view of the city lights of the commercial area not too far away. Inside it was dim, cozy, and romantic. In those days, it seemed that most fancy restaurants in New Delhi were Chinese, and the food was as good as the décor and the view. Truth is, I hardly noticed what I was eating. My attention was solely on the beautiful woman next to me, a woman in fact I hardly knew. That would change.

“You work at a British bank?” I asked to break the ice.

“Yes, in one of those lighted buildings we can see in the distance,” she replied. “I got a job there soon after graduating from the Delhi School of Economics.”

“Well, I know that school from years ago when I audited a course in international trade theory. I don’t recall too many female students at the school.”

“No, not too many then but it was good preparation for a career in international banking. I work on trade and foreign exchange matters. Perhaps someday I can have an assignment in the London head office.”

“Don’t tell me you went to Miranda House College before the Delhi School?”

“I did.”

I was at a loss how to move from the mundane to the more personal things I wanted to know about her. But she helped me along.

“I have not met many single American men. How is it you are not married? You must be about 30?”

“Yes, that is my age. Well, I never met the right woman. How about you?”

“I am 29. I did like a fellow some years ago, but my parents did not approve of him. They still intend to arrange a proper marriage for me, although in truth I am getting too old for a good arranged marriage, or maybe any marriage, for that matter. I don’t know what will happen...” Her voice trailed off from what was clearly an uncomfortable topic.

We sat silently for a time, looking out the window. I didn’t know what to say. Rakhi was someone I wanted to get to know well, and nothing should happen on this first date to harm our budding relationship.

She broke the silence.

“I feel completely comfortable with you and want to know all about you.”

In response, I related briefly my life story of growing up in the Midwest in America and wanting to see the world. India had always attracted me, and now I was here. “Getting married was not a priority, or even an interest in the past...”

We settled into a nice conversation that I hardly recall now because I was looking intently into her eyes, not too focused on chitchat. I do remember that she wore a pink silk sari with a sleeveless blouse. The sheer fabric thrown over her shoulder heightened her sensuality.

“I wish the evening would never end,” she said suddenly.

She gently touched my hand, an intimate gesture conveying her desire to know me better. I returned the gesture, putting as much passion as one could into the touching of hands.

We rode back to her home in silence, both feeling that this had been an important night in our lives. I saw her to her door, and then walked over to my nearby flat. I couldn't sleep.