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The air in the old Delhi haveli always smelled of jasmine incense and the faint, sweet rot of mangoes left too long on the kitchen counter. It was a proper Indian joint family—three generations crammed under one roof, aunties shouting over the pressure cooker, uncles arguing about cricket, and the constant shuffle of feet on cool marble floors. Rohan was twenty-two that summer, freshly done with his engineering degree, still figuring out what came next. Priya, his paternal cousin—his father's brother's daughter—was nineteen, the youngest of the cousins, with the kind of soft, curvy body that made traditional salwar kameez look dangerously good. Medium bosom, full hips that swayed just a little when she walked down the corridor carrying tea for the elders. Everyone called her the "sweet one." Rohan had started calling her something else in the quiet of his own head. It began with something stupidly small. One humid afternoon he passed her room while she was drying her hair. The door was cracked open, and the warm, floral scent of her shampoo drifted out—coconut and something like vanilla. It hit him low in the gut, a sudden, embarrassing rush of heat. He stood there longer than he should have, breathing it in, feeling his pulse kick up like he'd run stairs. That night he couldn't sleep. The crush had always been there, buried under layers of "she's family," but the smell cracked something open.

Two days later the real crack happened.

The old bathroom at the end of the upstairs corridor had a temperamental latch. Rohan was half-asleep, towel slung over his shoulder, pushing the door open without knocking. Steam billowed out. Priya stood under the shower, naked, head tilted back as water streamed down her skin. Her dark hair clung to her shoulders. Rivulets traced the curve of her breasts, the soft swell of her belly, the flare of her hips. She wasn't the skinny girl he remembered from childhood festivals anymore. She was all woman—lush, glistening, real.

Their eyes locked.

For one frozen second the only sound was water hitting tile. Priya's lips parted. Then she smiled—small, shy, but unmistakably there. Rohan's brain short-circuited. He couldn't look away. Couldn't move. He drank in every detail like a man dying of thirst. She flushed deep pink, crossed her arms over her chest, but the smile stayed. A soft, nervous laugh escaped her.

"Rohan bhaiya..." she whispered, voice barely above the spray.

He finally jerked the door shut, heart hammering so hard he thought the whole house would hear. He stood in the corridor, dripping with second-hand steam, face burning.

That evening the awkwardness was thick enough to chew. They were sent to the terrace to bring down the dried clothes. Priya folded a dupatta with shaking hands. Rohan kept his eyes on the railing.

"I'm sorry," he blurted. "I didn't—I should have knocked. I'm really sorry, Priya."

She was quiet a moment. Then, softly, "Did you... like what you saw?"

His head snapped up. She was biting her lip, eyes on the cloth in her hands.

"Your figure," she said, almost inaudible. "Is it... okay? I mean, I know I'm not like those slim girls in college."

Rohan's throat went dry. "Priya, you're beautiful. Like, stupidly beautiful. I shouldn't have looked, but... yeah. You're perfect."

She glanced up, cheeks burning. Then she stepped closer and pressed a quick, warm kiss to his cheek. "Don't be sorry," she murmured against his skin. "I didn't mind. Not really."

That kiss changed everything.

Over the next few months the house felt smaller, hotter. They found excuses to be near each other. Late-night movies in the living room after everyone slept—her head eventually resting on his shoulder, his arm around her waist. Hugs that lasted longer than cousin hugs should. Tight, breathless hugs where he could feel the soft press of her breasts against his chest and smell that coconut shampoo again. Naughty little conversations whispered in the storeroom while fetching rice: "You ever think about me like that?" "All the time." Eye contact across the dinner table that

made his stomach flip. They never crossed the line. Not in India. But the tension hummed between them like a live wire.

A year later they both left for the US for their master's. Rohan in Boston for computer science, Priya in the same city for business analytics. Their parents rented them apartments ten minutes apart—close enough for “family support,” far enough for privacy. The joint-family rules were an ocean away. They saw each other almost every day. Coffee runs turned into dinners. Dinners turned into weekends on his couch, her legs across his lap, fingers tracing lazy circles on her thigh while some Netflix show played ignored in the background. The hugs became full-body presses. The kisses on the cheek became slow, lingering ones at the corner of her mouth. Still no sex. Not yet. They were both scared of what it would mean.

Then came the friends trip.

A group of six—old college buddies from India now scattered across the East Coast—rented a big cabin near Yellowstone National Park for a week of hiking and “reconnecting with nature.” Priya and Rohan were the only ones related, so no one thought twice when they paired up for trails. The park was unreal. Towering lodgepole pines, meadows glowing gold in the late-summer sun, the distant roar of waterfalls, steam rising from hidden hot springs. At night the sky was so clear it hurt to look at. They hiked the same trails as everyone else during the day. But on the third afternoon they wandered off the main path chasing a deer, laughing, teasing each other the way they did now—half-flirt, half-dare.

They got lost.

Phone signals died. The trail markers vanished. By dusk they were deep in thick forest, the kind that felt like a green cathedral—ancient trees, moss thick underfoot, the air cool and damp with the scent of pine and earth. They found a small clearing by a stream and set up the emergency tent Rohan always carried. One sleeping bag. One foil blanket. The temperature dropped fast. They rationed the two protein bars and half-bottle of water they had left. Friends would look for them, they told each other. Rescue would come.

It didn't. Not for thirty-one days.

The first week was pure survival. They built a fire every evening. Rohan fashioned crude spears from branches and managed to catch a few small fish. Priya foraged berries and edible greens she remembered from some YouTube video. They shared everything—food, warmth, fear. At night they zipped the sleeping bag open and lay pressed together in all their clothes, shivering. Her head on his chest. His arms locked around her waist. The coconut shampoo was long gone, replaced by woodsmoke and sweat, but he still buried his face in her hair and breathed her in.

One night, around day nine, the cold was brutal. Wind howled through the pines. They stripped down to underwear and crawled in naked, skin to skin, just to stop the shaking. Priya's curvy body fit against his like it had been waiting years for this. Her breasts pressed soft and warm to his chest. Her thigh slid between his. They didn't speak for a long time. Just breathed together.

“I'm scared,” she whispered.

“I've got you,” he said, voice rough. “I'll always have you.”

Her hand slid down his back, slow. “Rohan... I've wanted this since that shower. Since before.”

He kissed her then—deep, hungry, months of tension exploding. She moaned into his mouth, fingers digging into his shoulders. They moved together in the tight sleeping bag, slow and desperate. He rolled her onto her back, settled between her thighs, and pushed inside her bare, nothing between them. She was wet, tight, gasping his name. He thrust deep, slow at first, then harder as she wrapped her legs around his waist and urged him on. “Don't stop... please, don't stop.” The sound of skin on skin mixed with the crackle of the dying fire. When she came she clenched around him, crying out into the dark forest. He followed seconds later, spilling inside her with a groan that felt like it came from his soul.

They didn't sleep after that. They made love again, slower this time, exploring. He kissed every inch of her—sucking gently on her nipples until she arched, licking down her soft belly, burying his face between her thighs until she shook and begged. She took him in her mouth later, curious and eager, learning what made him curse and fist her hair. They fell asleep tangled, his release still leaking from her.

The weeks that followed were a strange, beautiful dream. They became a tiny tribe of two. Rohan hunted and built better shelters. Priya cooked, mended clothes, kept the fire alive. They explored the forest together—found a hidden waterfall that poured into a crystal pool, a sun-warmed meadow ringed by aspen trees, a small cave that stayed dry even when it rained. Every new place became theirs.

By the waterfall they had sex standing up, water cascading over their bodies while he held her against the rock and thrust deep, her legs locked around him. In the meadow at noon they went slow and lazy, sunlight painting her curves gold as she rode him, breasts bouncing, head thrown back in pleasure. In the cave one stormy night they got rough—him taking her from behind on a bed of pine needles, hand fisted in her hair, both of them growling and moaning like animals. They tried everything. Oral until one of them sobbed with overstimulation. Her on top, grinding slow while they stared into each other's eyes. Him lifting her against a tree, legs around his waist, pounding up into her until she screamed his name and the birds exploded from the branches. Every night they slept naked in the sleeping bag, skin to skin, his cock usually still inside her or nestled between her thighs. They talked about everything—fears, dreams, the guilt that sometimes crept in. "We're cousins," she'd whisper, tracing his jaw. "But I don't care. You feel like home." He'd kiss her forehead and say, "Then we make our own home. Right here."

They became one. Not just bodies—everything. He learned the exact sound she made when she was about to come. She knew when he needed her to be soft and when she could be filthy. They laughed during sex. Cried sometimes. Held each other after like the world outside had never existed.

On day thirty-two the rescue helicopter found them. They were sitting by the stream, fully dressed, sharing the last of the wild berries. Priya's head was on Rohan's shoulder. The rescuers called it a miracle—thirty-one days lost in Yellowstone with only minor frostbite and weight loss. No one suspected a thing.

Back in Boston they told the family the story a hundred times, leaving out every important part. Their apartments stayed separate on paper. In reality they spent every night together. The secret became their favorite game. Quickies in his car in the parking garage. Slow, filthy mornings in her shower where he'd press her against the tiles and take her from behind while she tried not to moan too loud. Weekend getaways to cheap motels where they'd leave the "Do Not Disturb" sign up for two days straight, exploring every position they'd fantasized about in the forest.

One quiet evening, months later, Priya lay across his chest in his bed, fingers drawing circles on his skin. "Remember the shampoo?" she asked, smiling.

He laughed softly, pulled her closer, and kissed the top of her head. "Yeah. Best accident of my life."

She lifted her face, eyes shining. "We're never telling anyone, right?"

"Never," he promised, already hardening against her thigh. "This is ours."

And it was. Their secret, their love, their fire—burning brighter than any forest they'd ever been lost in.
