

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Secrets and Sins

Written by Jaishree Misra

Published by Avon

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

JAISHREE MISRA

Secrets and Sins

AVON

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

AVON

A division of HarperCollinsPublishers
77-85 Fulham Palace Road,
London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2010

1

Copyright © Jaishree Misra 2010

Jaishree Misra asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-1-84756-185-5

Set in Minion by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.



Mixed Sources

Product group from well-managed
forests and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. SW-COC-001806
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

FSC is a non-profit international organisation established
to promote the responsible management of the world's forests.
Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified
to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed
to meet the social, economic and ecological needs
of present and future generations.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

Acknowledgements

I have a deep debt of gratitude to Sharmila Tagore who generously described her experiences of being on the Cannes jury to help me research this book. Any errors that may have occurred in interpretation will be mine.

As before, gargantuan thanks to everyone at my agent's and publishers for such touching faith and treating me like a potential Danielle Steele. Lovely women all: Judith, Kesh, Sammia, Kate, Karthika, Lipika, Ratna, Amrita. And not forgetting the men: that enthusiastic army of sales guys who determinedly flog my books, despite their disapproval of the titles.

And where would I be without my ever-present, never-sagging feather-bed of friends and family, always ready to cushion me when I fall, providing warmth and succour and rest.

Prologue

She gazed up at the cinema screen. He was larger than life, the close-up zooming in on his face causing his sleepy brown eyes to look directly into hers as he smiled into the camera. His hair was still black and shiny, exactly as she remembered it from back then. How many years ago was it? Every so often, she counted . . . ten . . . eleven . . . always surprised that the yearning hadn't gone away . . .

Something indefinable caught at her heart as she saw his face soften. She cast a look around at the rows of faces staring intently at the screen, all of them absorbed in the drama of the tender love scene unfolding before their eyes. He continued to be Bollywood's most popular actor, equally loved in action as well as romantic roles – but undoubtedly it was his romantic persona that carried abiding appeal for his throngs of doting female fans.

As he leant down to kiss the heroine on the nape of her neck, the same thought came to her as it always did when she watched one of his love scenes on screen. She sighed and sank down in her seat and wondered, with the same old feeling in the pit of her stomach, what all these hundreds of people watching the film would do if they knew . . . if they only knew that she, Riva Walia, was the very first girl to whom the iconic and adored Aman Khan had ever made love.

Chapter One

LEEDS, 1994

The Union Bar was more crowded than Aman had ever seen it since joining the university. Unsurprising, he supposed, seeing that the Man U versus Barça match was due to kick off in fifteen minutes. The din was unbearable but everyone else seemed oblivious to it; both the groups of students gathered around the cheek-by-jowl tables and the bar staff who were by now probably all stone deaf. Aman looked around for the only person he was hoping to see, and soon spotted Riva. She was with a gang at the far end of the room, seated around a scuffed circular table near the back door that was sticky with spilt drinks and littered with crumpled crisp wrappers and cigarette butts.

Shouldering his way through the throng, Aman saw the usual crowd surrounding Riva, including a few people whom he knew by face rather than name. Aman had watched Riva acquire at least a hundred new friends in this first year at uni; she was always surrounded by people. Riva's best friend, the chirpy redhead Susan, was the first to spot him. She said something to Ben that made him look up and give Aman what was definitely

an unwelcoming glare. And then Riva spotted him. Her face broke into one of those lovely smiles that did strange things to Aman's insides. She raised her arm and waved enthusiastically at him. He nodded as she pointed to the empty stool next to her, and continued to make his way through the crowd in her direction. Could he really hope that she had kept that seat waiting for him? Ben was still glowering as Aman neared the table but Susan's medical student boyfriend, Joe, was friendlier and moved his bag aside to make room for Aman.

'Hi, can I get anyone a drink?' Aman asked. He licked his lips – his mouth had gone suddenly dry. Everyone had full glasses and so Aman sat down. He would get his orange juice later. It wasn't what he was here for anyway.

'Didn't know you were a football fan,' he said, turning to Riva with a smile.

'Oh, I'm not,' she replied cheerily, taking a long swig from her glass. He watched the golden lager passing through her lips, thinking of how badly he wanted to kiss them. Putting her glass down, she said, 'And I didn't know *you* were a footie fan.'

'I'm not either,' he replied, slipping into the same merry tone of voice she had used.

'Shall we escape this shit then?' she asked. 'Or did you have other plans?'

Incredulous at the unexpected change of fortune and momentarily robbed of speech, Aman nodded dumbly. Then, gathering his wits, he said, 'I was going to make myself something to eat back at the hall, actually. You know, take advantage of everyone being here to get free use of the kitchen.'

'*Make* something? You can cook?'

The truthful answer would have been 'Hmmm, a tiny

bit – toast and scrambled eggs mainly.’ But Aman, his heart surging with bravado, said, ‘Of course I can cook. I’m quite good actually. Why, don’t you believe me?’

He couldn’t help but imagine the peals of laughter his mother would have broken into had she been around to hear his blatant lie. Luckily Mum was as far away as she could possibly be, probably fast asleep in her bed in Bombay and blissfully unaware of her son’s evil machinations.

‘I only ask because Sonalika, my mate back at school, used to say she knew no Indian men who cooked,’ Riva smiled. ‘My dad certainly can’t, but I don’t know too many other Indian men apart from him, so I shouldn’t judge.’

‘Chicken makhani’s my speciality actually,’ Aman said, warming to his theme.

‘Cor!’ Riva looked gratifyingly impressed. ‘Teach me!’ she demanded.

‘Teach you? Now?’

‘Now!’

‘But the match . . .’

‘Stuff the match! We’re neither of us here for the footie anyway. C’mon, let’s escape this hellhole.’ Riva knocked back the last of her lager and picked up her coat and bag from under her chair. Aman, needing no further invitation, got up and looked apologetically around at the others.

‘Hey, guys, Aman and I are off in search of some nosh,’ Riva said casually as she pulled on her jacket. ‘Be back by the end of the game.’

Aman did not miss the renewed glare from Ben, who looked ready to get up and punch him, but none of the others seemed too bothered as it was nearing kick-off and the attention of the whole bar was starting to focus on the screen. Riva was already halfway out of the back door and

lighting up a cigarette by the time Aman caught up with her.

‘Don’t think Ben was too pleased,’ Aman said.

‘Ben? Why, what makes you say that?’ Riva blew a plume of smoke out into the cold air.

‘He is your boyfriend, isn’t he?’

‘Naaah.’ Riva shrugged and asked, ‘Have you got the stuff you need, Aman?’

‘Stuff?’

‘You know, the chicken, onions . . . what else will we need? Rice? Oh, chicken makhani sounds great. I’d love to learn how to cook it.’

‘Er, no, I haven’t got the stuff . . . I was thinking of buying it from the campus shop on my way back.’

‘Okay, we’ll do it together then. And I’ll buy a bottle of wine – that’ll be my contribution to the meal. God, I’m starving! So much nicer to sit down to a proper meal and conversation, rather than spend the evening watching a sport I hate. Overpaid prima donnas who call themselves sportsmen, tribal warfare, loutish crowds . . . I loathe the whole shebang, honestly!’

Aman felt weak at the knees as he walked along beside Riva. He could not tell if it was due to the prospect of a whole evening alone with such a beautiful, clever, sassy girl, or the fact that he had no idea at all how to make chicken makhani. It was his favourite dish at the *dhaba* around the corner from his house in Bombay and, occasionally his mother got the *bai* to cook a version of it at home as well, but the thought of making it himself had never crossed Aman’s mind before.

At the shop, he did his best to look masterful, throwing two onions and a bulb of garlic into his shopping basket, next to a cling-filmed pack of chopped chicken. The shape

of the pieces (long and narrow) didn't look quite right to him but it would have to do. Remembering in the nick of time that he would need a substance to fry everything in, Aman added a block of butter to his shopping. It stood to reason that chicken makhani would bear some relation to 'makhan', which was Hindi for butter. Good idea to use plenty of it, he reckoned.

Riva was waiting at the till with a bottle of red wine and insisted on paying for it, even though Aman tried to persuade her to let him take care of the entire bill. It was only when they walked into his hall fifteen minutes later, stamping their feet to get rid of the snow and mud from the soles of their boots, that Aman realised he had nothing but salt and pepper by way of seasoning. While Riva went to the toilet, Aman frantically opened a few cupboards, hoping to find a stray bottle of spices. He finally stumbled upon a can of mixed herbs and sniffed its contents. It smelt vaguely of pizza. Quite clearly, no Indian masala had been anywhere near this bottle – but it would have to do. Aman rolled up his sleeves and began to yank the peel off the onions before chopping them into large rough chunks. Riva returned and rooted around inside a drawer to unearth a corkscrew and a pair of wine glasses. As she busied herself opening the bottle she had bought, Aman wondered if he ought to confess that, apart from not having a clue how to cook this meal, he did not drink either. He wasn't sure if Riva had already noticed his variety of fruit juices on the few occasions they had been in bars and pubs together, and he was worried that she would think he was a stick-in-the-mud, rather than just an obedient son to Muslim parents.

'Do you mind if I have OJ?' Aman asked as Riva started to pour the wine into two glasses.

‘I’ll let you off for now, seeing as you need to concentrate. That’s a rather delicate operation you’re carrying out there,’ Riva replied, watching nervously as Aman ham-fistedly attempted to light the gas cooker.

Eventually (with some help from Riva), Aman got a weak blue flame going and began piling the pieces of chicken, onions and garlic together into the pan and stuck it on the hob. Riva was halfway through the bottle of wine by this time. Aman stirred the mixture together to form a pale white sludge. He continued to stir it in a determined fashion, willing it to change colour and look more appealing, but the best it could do was deepen to a pale brown as the onions started to burn in their pool of butter. Riva did not appear to notice, however, but sat on a kitchen stool throughout his exertions, chatting about her school and family back in Ealing. Aman wasn’t sure where exactly Ealing was but, from Riva’s few mentions of London, he gathered it was a suburb of the capital. She had questions for Aman about his Bombay upbringing too, carefully referring to the city as Mumbai, even though Aman himself almost always referred to it as Bombay. He kept his answers brief, standing near the stove, terrified that his dish would go up in flames if he did not keep stirring it. It looked terribly pale compared to the chicken makhani that he so enjoyed back at Sardar’s *dhaba*, which was usually bright orange and served up with giant wedges of pillowy soft naans.

‘I don’t have all the spices I need, so it’s a bit colourless I’m afraid,’ he said apologetically to Riva.

She got up and peered into the frying pan. ‘Yes, something’s missing. Could it be . . . hang on, you need tomatoes to make a curry, don’t you? I’m sure I’ve heard my mum say that . . .’

Aman froze. Of course a curry needed bloody tomatoes!

He closed his eyes and slapped his forehead, making Riva throw her head back and laugh.

‘Never mind,’ she said, ‘as long as the chicken’s cooked through, it’ll still be edible. I might have mine on toast. Be a shame to waste all that butter.’

Aman looked at her hopefully. ‘Now? Shall I make you some toast now? I have bread in the fridge . . .’

‘Later. I’m not hungry yet,’ Riva said. ‘Shall we take this somewhere else?’ she asked, picking up the wine bottle. ‘Or we’ll both be stinking of food. You must have a glass too, seeing that it’s my pressie to you.’

‘Good idea, let’s get outta here,’ Aman said, switching off the flame with relief. He washed his hands as Riva poured him a glass. Hopefully, by the time Riva had finished the bottle, she’d be too drunk to remember to eat. Aman took a tentative sip as he followed her down the corridor, the taste making him want to pucker his lips and spit it out forthwith. Aman had never been able to tell why people drank the stuff but it was sure making Riva laugh a lot tonight, her cheeks turning a pretty soft pink as the colour rose in her face. She stepped back for Aman to open his room door and he hoped desperately he’d left it in a reasonable state earlier. Luckily it was neat enough, except for a small pile of discarded clothes that Aman hastily kicked under his bed while Riva wandered around his room looking at the pictures on the wall and table.

For another half hour, they talked, Riva sitting on the bed and Aman at the table. Or rather Riva talked, while Aman gazed at her animated face and shining dark eyes, nursing his glass of wine and pretending every so often to be sipping at it. He thought it incredible that Riva trusted him enough to sit here on his bed, in his room, while

everyone else was down at the Union Bar. Especially when all he could think of was grabbing her and kissing that lovely mouth. But Aman did no such thing, of course, having been brought up to be a gentleman. He hadn't had much practice with being alone with girls before, except for his large band of cousins, who didn't really count. But something told him it wouldn't be wise to use this opportunity to shower Riva with passionate kisses. And yet, when the bottle of wine was finished and Riva got up to leave, Aman felt bereft and stupid, his best chance presented to him on a platter before being snatched from under his nose.

He got up from his chair and asked weakly, 'Do you not want to eat? My chicken . . .'

'Ah, yes, your chicken . . . of course . . . you took such trouble and here I am . . .'

 Riva was slurring slightly. She suddenly swayed alarmingly on her feet. Aman caught her just as she crumpled, stopping her from falling to the floor. For a few stunned seconds, he just stood there, holding an unconscious Riva in his arms, wondering what to do. Then he lifted her up and carried her to his bed, trying to push aside the duvet with one foot. The cheap wine had knocked her out cold and she barely stirred as he pulled off her fleecy boots and covered her with his duvet. Her face wore a slightly anxious expression.

Aman stood next to the bed, unsure of what to do next. He certainly couldn't leave Riva here on his bed, not least because he had nowhere else to go. And now that it was past eleven o'clock, he didn't think he would find Riva's friends down at the bar either. Besides he too was desperate to catch some sleep, the rigours of his hour-long culinary effort having completely exhausted him. He took a pair of sheets out of his cupboard and tried to fashion a bed for himself on the floor, using the small cushion and rug he

had inherited from the previous occupant of this room. It was terribly uncomfortable in comparison with his bed, but he was nevertheless pleased to see Riva sleeping soundly, the earlier worried crease in her forehead having cleared as she fell into a deep slumber.

When Riva opened her eyes the next morning, it was with a strong sense of being somewhere she was not meant to be. It was either getting on for late evening or close to dawn because there was a sliver of light showing around the edges of a drawn curtain. Where the fuck *am* I, Riva wondered, raising her throbbing head, alarmed to see a figure huddled on the floor next to her. The events of the previous night gradually returned as she recognised Aman's sleeping form and remembered his dismal attempts at impressing her with his chicken makhani. He'd made a total hash of it and she had fortunately managed to wriggle out of eating any. But her empty stomach was probably the reason why she had keeled over so unceremoniously after just three glasses of wine . . . or was it four? All Riva could remember now was the room spinning around her as Aman had grabbed her. He must have led her to bed and tucked her in . . . bloody hell, and taken off her boots! She felt about her nether regions in sudden panic, relieved to find she was still wearing her jeans. Overcome with mortification, Riva convinced herself there had been no rumpy-pumpy after she had passed out; surely she would remember if she had had sex with Aman?

God, that would have been just terrible, she thought, laying her head back on the pillow in sudden relief. Perhaps Aman was of the slow 'n' steady school of seduction, rather than a fast mover. Riva had recently confessed to Susan how appealing she found Aman's eager adoration of her, and

Susan had wagered that Aman's good looks were a hugely contributory factor to Riva's inability to tell him to bog off. Susan didn't know, however, how much Riva enjoyed Aman's company. The fascinating insights his background gave her into her own Indian heritage were a large part of his appeal. Above all, it was his gentleness that drew Riva in, a rare quality in the boys she generally met. And now here she was, wrapped snugly in Aman's duvet while the poor bloke lay shivering in a sheet on the floor . . .

Later, Riva would try to understand what prompted her to do what she did next. After all, she had never been particularly promiscuous. But there, in the early hours of that February morning, Riva raised her head and called softly out to Aman before stretching her hand down towards him to touch his arm. He looked startled as he opened his eyes and his confused gaze met hers in the half darkness.

'You must be freezing,' Riva said, whispering for some unfathomable reason. 'Come up here,' she invited, moving the duvet aside. Aman sat up and she saw that he was still wearing his jeans and a T-shirt. 'Take off those bloody jeans,' she said, smiling, as he got up. When he had done so and climbed in to lie next to her on the bed, she rubbed her hands up and down his cold arms to warm them. By now Aman looked wide awake, his dark eyes shining in the diffused moonlight filtering through the curtains. While Riva rubbed his shoulders and then his chest through the thin cotton of his T-shirt, he cupped her face in the palms of his hands. They kissed gently at first, then more passionately. They began to undress each other, Riva sitting up in bed and raising her arms so that Aman could slip off her top before lying down next to him again. As he kissed her again, pressing her down on the bed with the force of his ardour, she lay down and arched her back to tug off her jeans. Finally, when they

were both naked, their bodies shining in the half light, they made love, tentative and fumbling at first. When Riva felt Aman come, she held him close as his body trembled against hers and they stayed like that for a long time.

When they finally drew apart, Aman lay back, his head next to hers on the pillow. Riva could hear him panting slightly. A few minutes later, he spoke, looking at the ceiling rather than at her, his voice shy.

‘You might have guessed, that was my first time.’

‘I didn’t actually,’ Riva replied, but she was being kind. Even though she wasn’t hugely experienced herself, it hadn’t been hard to tell from Aman’s nervousness that he had never had sex before. It also suddenly occurred to Riva that they had not used a condom and she cursed her stupidity for assuming Aman would have had one handy.

Aman’s next words followed a logical thread. ‘Was it the first time for you too?’ he asked quietly, now turning his head to look at her.

His expression was strangely hopeful and Riva wondered momentarily if she should tell him the truth or not. But, honesty being one of her unfailing traits, Riva replied, ‘No, not really.’ Aman continued to look at her questioningly and so she elaborated. ‘There was a boy in high school I was quite mad about. And I sort of thought he loved me too. Well, he said he did and I believed him but, the following week, he went on to say the same to my best friend who slept with him too. So that was that!’

They were too tired to talk much more and soon Riva drifted off into slumber again. In the morning, Aman got up while Riva was still asleep and made two mugs of coffee. She deliberately kept the conversation light and friendly as they sipped their drinks, recognising the faint embarrassment that now lay between them. Riva hoped it would soon

dissipate, for she was keen to stay friends with Aman. He seemed like such a nice lad, and so different from the boys she had met so far. She was held rapt whenever he talked of India, her own memories of the place she had come from now being far-off and fuzzy. There was, however, little chance of her relationship with Aman going any further than friendship – despite his astonishing good looks, they were a bit like creatures from different planets. Besides, it somehow felt wrong to be going out with someone who was even less worldly wise than her! Finally finishing her coffee, Riva got out of bed and pulled on her clothes before going down the corridor to use the bathroom.

Ten minutes later, she popped back into Aman's room to collect her bag and coat. He was sitting on the edge of his rumpled bed, holding his empty coffee mug. Riva felt a rush of sympathy for the little-boy-lost expression on his face. She bent and kissed him on the cheek. 'We must do that curry another time,' she said. Then she grinned, straightening up and waving a forefinger at Aman, 'No, really a *curry*, not using euphemisms now!'

'Shall I walk you back to your hall?' Aman asked.

'Don't be daft, it's broad daylight now so I think I'm perfectly safe. Typically sweet offer, though, Mr Khan. You've obviously been dragged up proper. Not like the boorish lads one usually gets around here . . .'

Nevertheless, Aman did accompany Riva down the corridor of his hall of residence and she kissed him lightly on the lips before stepping out into the morning sunshine.

He stood at the door, unable to take his eyes off her as the black of her duffle coat disappeared around the corner, feeling his body surging with an odd mixture of hope and disappointment.