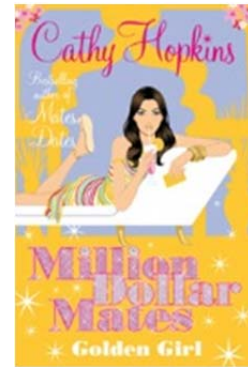


# Million Dollar Mates



Alisha, Alexei and I got off our stools and went to join JJ in the cinema room. Most of the apartments have private cinemas and the Lewises' room is no different. Theirs is dark red with blackout blinds and two enormous soft brown L-shaped leather sofas so that you can sit with your legs out in front of you. Alexei and I flopped back onto one and Alisha took the other.

'Let the show begin!' said Alisha. At the back of the room, JJ pressed a button on his computer and images of a sunny location started to show on the screen. It looked amazing, wherever it was. A lake with a fairytale white palace in the middle. Mountains in the distance. A vast honey-coloured palace on the lakeshore, with balconies looking over the water. Shots of women in saris in bright jewel colours. Carved temples.

'Is it India?' I asked.

'Udaipur in Rajasthan,' said Alexei.

'Right,' said JJ.

'We're going for Easter,' said Alisha.

My heart sank as JJ let a few more photos play across the screen and all my plans for the holidays disappeared into nothing. JJ would be on the other side of the world in the glorious location up on the screen and I'd be chained to my desk surrounded by school books with nothing but a list of places we could have gone to screwed up in the bin. Bummer.

JJ pressed a button for the slides to finish and came to sit on the sofa with me. 'Dad's been shooting some scenes there for his latest movie.'

I didn't want him to see how disappointed I was so I made myself smile. 'It looks beautiful, stunning,' I said. 'You'll have a wonderful time... How long are you going for?'

‘Not long. About six days. The director wants to add another scene into the movie so Dad has to stay longer than he expected. It’ll be an evening shoot then there’ll be a wrap party for the end of filming the next night,’ said JJ.

‘How fabulous,’ I said. It didn’t feel fabulous at all, it felt rotten.

‘So, it’s my birthday next week,’ JJ continued, ‘and I was going to do something here but now that Dad has to stay in India, he wants the family to join him and he said I can celebrate my birthday there.’

I nodded. ‘I hope you have a great time,’ I said. ‘Maybe we can do something when you get back.’ I decided to leave my list of ideas of things to do for his birthday in my pocket. My options seemed so dull in comparison to where he was going.

JJ glanced at Alisha and grinned. He didn’t seem a bit bothered about not spending his birthday with me. In fact, he seemed delighted about the idea. *Maybe we’re not such an item after all*, I thought. *Maybe I’m much more into him than he is into me.*

JJ came and sat next to me and took my hand. ‘When I get back?’ he said, then grinned again. ‘When *we* get back...’ He squeezed my hand when he said ‘we’. ‘I’ve spoken to Mom and Dad and asked if, seeing as it’s my birthday, I can invite you.’

It didn’t sink in for a moment, I was so preoccupied with my disappointment.

‘Did you hear what I just said?’ JJ persisted.

‘Yes, you’re going to India.’

‘He’s asking if you’ll come too,’ Alisha said. ‘Wake up and smell the curry! And no way am I going to be a gooseberry so I’ve asked Mom and Dad if Pia can come too and they’ve said yes.’

This time, it did sink in. I glanced back up at the wall where a photograph of the lake at sunset filled the screen.

‘*Me? Pia? India?*’

JJ nodded. ‘Yeah. What do you say? Just for five or six days? Mom’ll take care of all the arrangements.’

I was stunned. I'd only ever been out of the England a few times and that was to Europe when Mum was still alive. But India? Travelling with the Lewises? Time alone with JJ? It could be amazing.

It *would* be amazing.