

SHATTERED

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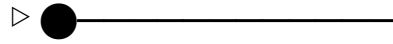
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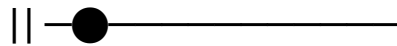
Editor: Joyeeta Mazumder

*To all the bizarre beings who've ever felt
like they have done too much for nothing*



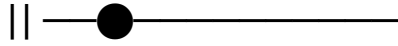
"The road to hell was paved with good intentions."

—Proverb



Jess had been hiding this from *everyone* for a year now. Even her mother has stopped talking to her because of this. But can she ever let her pain out considering she can't find the right outlet to do so? Does her mother really *hate* her?

Chapter 1



The hallway of Room No. 147 was being paced by a 20-year old lean, bronze-skinned, wavy-haired girl, aka *me*. I've been pacing the hallway outside my dorm room for the last 25 minutes with my phone pressed against my ear. It rang over and over again as I held my breath, synchronously wishing that she would answer and that she wouldn't. This was how it was whenever I tried to call her now. I sighed as it turned me over to her voicemail. After the beep, indicating I should start my message, I had to take a few breaths before I could get my voice to work. "Hi.. mom," I said, almost unsure of the last word. Those two simple words, however, sent my heart racing.

Dammit, just continue talking.

"It's Jess, and I uh..," my mouth went dry and I couldn't think of words. I took another breath and forced myself to keep going. "Well, I just wanted to say that I miss... yo-t-th-them.. A-And I miss you too." I paused, trying my best to not start crying in the middle of a phone call, especially when my entire soul is levelling its best up to talk straight to that one woman in the world who had the power to bring me to my knees with the mere mention of her name.

I wish you would answer this, mom..

"It's okay if you don't want to talk to me, but if you get this, please just let me know you're alright. I... I can't lose anyone else." As soon as I said the last sentence, I regretted it. I was supposed to be calling just to check on her, but I always found myself spilling all my inner thoughts to her. I was bad at lying and I always had been, which was one of the things I found most annoying about myself.

I dismissed the mail and tucked my phone into the pocket of my jacket and headed back into my room. I needed to be around Keya and Lia now. Somehow, they always managed to distract me, even though they didn't know about all my family drama.

Lia was a year older than me, and Keya was a year older than her. We'd done track together for a few years when we were younger, and it was pure chance that we'd ended up in a dorm together. Traditionally,

roommates were all in the same semester, but since Keya and Lia were sisters, they'd been allowed to be together, and then I'd come mid-year and there'd been no other dorm available.

Our dorm room was really big, like the rest of Broadway Heights. There were two different small bedrooms- each made for two people- that connected to a kitchen and common area, and we even had our own bathrooms. Keya and Lia shared one room, while I had the other. Our common space was decorated with colourful art on the walls and fluffy pillows on the couch, all credits to the sisters. I had no contribution to the decorations at all, and while I did feel guilty about it at times, I couldn't help the fact that I was bad with it. And even less interested. Heck, even my room was bare with just a stack of books on a shelf and plain grey sheets on the bed. I like to call myself a minimalist but somehow, I know that even minimalists have much better outlooks than I do.

Walking back to my disastrously plain room, I grabbed my textbooks and sat at the table in the common room to work on my homework, desperate for a distraction from the latest drama event in my life.



"Hey, you okay?" Keya asked, putting her phone away and shifting herself on the couch to look at me.

I shook my head, trying to brush my disappointment away, and smiled.

"Yeah, thanks."

"Do you want to come sit with us?" Lia asked, standing behind me and looking at the math laid out in front of me. "We're about to watch Hamilton for the twentieth time. And I made popcorn too," she held out the bowl to me, offering me some.

"Tempting," I laughed, taking a few pieces. "But this is due tomorrow."

"Ah, okay. Well, the offer remains when you need a break. No insults, but Mathematics was created when God was smoking weed."

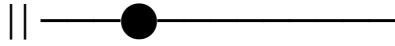
My left eyebrow spiked up in amusement. Coming from a super religious person like Lia, this was really something.

Well, the rest of the story goes by the fact that I did end up joining them after an hour of real frustrating math. I didn't even know how many times I'd already seen the movie, but the familiarity of it was comforting.

And it got my mind off my mother for the night too, so I was able to sleep well.



Chapter 2



The rest of the week dragged on. I went to my classes, but couldn't pay attention. I forced food down even though I never felt hungry. And in the evenings I did homework, not really caring if I got the answers right. It wasn't like calling my mom had been any different this time. She hadn't answered any of my calls or texts for almost a year now, and yet every single time I tried again, I convinced myself that this time there'd be a different result. So whenever she didn't, my hope was crushed and I fell into a zombie-like state for a few days before I could convince myself it didn't matter and move on.

But then, even though I knew what would happen, I would try again the next month. That was my unspoken rule; I would only try to call or text my mom once a month. I didn't want to seem desperate to her, even though I really was. I missed my family, and although I'd made friends here, especially Keya and Lia, it didn't fill the void of my family.

Sometimes, when the loneliness hit me harder than usual, I would break my once-a-month policy and reach out to her again.

I didn't know if Keya and Lia noticed my pattern of sadness each month, but the fact that I was terrible at pretending probably didn't help. I'd never told them about my family or what had happened between us, and they never asked. They were too kind to force me to share things that I obviously didn't want to.

Sleep enveloped me as my mind raced through the memory lanes I'd never want to delve deeper into. Somehow, Lia and Keya had managed to keep me away from the lanes without even knowing it themselves, and I was so grateful to them for it.



The next morning, however, as I headed down to the food court for breakfast, I saw a familiar car parked outside.

ASo12938. Paid in full. Dated 24-04-2022.

I blinked twice as tears from faint memories of happy times clogged my eyesight. I went closer to make sure I saw right. Black and shiny, just like she always liked it. Sure enough, it was my mother's car. She had imported it from her hometown in India two years ago and had never stopped loving it ever since.

I wish I could have been that car, mother.

My breath caught in my throat and I stood frozen where I was, unable to process it. I squinted to see the licence plate, worried my mind was playing tricks on me.

ASo12938.

If that didn't give away the fact that Jyotika Adamsons was in her daughter's college campus, I do not know what else did.

While my brain raced through all the possible scenarios of why my mother might be here, I forgot that I was still standing right in front of the doors to the main building. "Jess?" said a voice from behind me.

It was Lia.

I didn't bother trying to compose my features as I turned to face her; it wouldn't do me any good. Standing next to her was Keya, as usual. They were the kind of sisters who liked to spend all their time together. "Hey girls," my squeaky, uneven voice greeted them.

"Everything good?" Keya questioned, giving me a confused look.

"Yeah, sorry," I said, "Something... caught me off guard. I'll umm..." I glanced back over to my mom's car and realised what I would have to do. "I'll catch up to you later."

They glanced at each other quickly, but it was enough for me to tell they were concerned. After all, I'd been acting strangely for the past few days, stumbling through excuses and unable to concentrate on anything. And then they find me one morning, standing outside and staring distantly at the half-filled parking lot in front of the school. I was almost shocked that one worried glance was all my strange behaviour had gotten. I watched my friends walk away, and then I took a deep breath before making my way over to the black car my mother cared for more than her own daughter. As I was walking, the driver's door opened and mom stepped out.

She was leaning against the car with her back to me, typing out a text. I almost expected my phone to buzz in my pocket with a message from her, saying something like, "Hi honey, I heard your message and decided to come visit. I'm standing outside now!" But when I pulled it out to

check, there was no new text. My heart sank and I reloaded it for once as well.

New messages(o)

Just keep going, dammit.

I was just a few feet away from her now, and I still hadn't said anything. I didn't know what to say. I didn't even know why she was here. None of my other messages had convinced her to come, so what made this one different? But I didn't want her to turn around and see me standing there awkwardly, so I decided to speak first.

"Hi... mom"

She turned around and I blinked to avoid tears as I stood in front of 5 feet and 9 inches of the well-groomed as always, Jyotika Adamsons.

"Oh, hello dear," she responded in a tone that didn't sound dear at all. It was nothing like the reunion scenes I'd spend countless nights imagining. Where I would say hello and she would run over and hug me, something she hadn't done in many years. Or she would see me and smile fondly, saying that I looked so grown up and beautiful. Maybe before I even had a chance to speak, she would apologise over and over again for what'd happened, and say that she wanted to make it up to me. But instead of anything like that, she looked me up and down disdainfully, glanced at the big building behind me, and said, "Horrible looking college, is this really where you wanted to finish your education?" I was taken aback by her question. "Umm, yes. I really like it here." She sniffed dismissively. "Well, it certainly isn't a place I'd want to hang around at."

"Did you just come here to tell me that the college I picked isn't up to your standards?"

"No," she said, and I felt my face brighten in hope.

This was it!

This would finally be the time where she'd tell me she came to say sorry and fix our relationship. I smiled slightly, waiting for what she would say next. I was prepared to tell her that everything was okay now and that we could go back to how things were before. I could visit her, and she could visit me. I'd tell her about my studies, and my friends, and we'd fix things between us. I knew it would be slow, and I knew we'd have bumps along the way, but I wanted my mother to get to know me again, after a year without contact.

But instead, she said simply, “I came because it was less expensive than mailing a package.”

I was stunned. “Umm, what?”

She opened the backseat and showed me a large cardboard box. Picking it up, she said, “I’m taking a vacation and I happened to change planes here. This box is filled with the clutter that you left behind when you came here. It was taking up space in the house, and I was going to mail it, but that is so expensive. Figured I might as well drop it off since I’m here.”

And just like that, she simply shoved the box into my hands.

I couldn’t even come up with a good answer to that.

“Oh... I didn’t realise I had to take all my stuff when I left.”

“Well you won’t be coming back, will you?” she *said* rather than asked, like this was something we’d already agreed on.

I swallowed, trying to force the emotion back down. “I won’t?”

Ignoring my question, she glanced at her watch and then said, “I need to get going, I have a spa appointment booked in an hour, and then I need to get checked into my hotel before I leave in the morning.”

She turned to go, but before she could leave, I blurted, “Wait!”

I knew it was a bad idea. I should just let her disappear from my life; after all, that seemed to be what she wanted. But I had so many unanswered questions, and I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to finally get them answered. Like why had she never answered my desperate texts or phone calls? Was I really not ever going to be allowed back home? And how did she seem so... ok after everything that had happened?

“Can you meet me for dinner or something tonight?” I asked. “We haven’t talked in so long and...” I trailed off to blink back the tears that were forming in my eyes. “..please don’t disappear like Dad and Sam.”

The last sentence was almost impossible for me to say. I hadn’t spoken aloud my brother’s name since I’d left for college, not even in those bathroom sessions when I’d spend hours thinking about him and crying. Tears were already flowing down my face now, regardless of my attempts to stop them. Somehow, despite how hard it was for me to say that, my mother was completely unaffected. In fact, she almost seemed annoyed by my request. Like I was wasting her time. “If you want to, I suppose.” I tried to brush it off and keep my cool, telling myself that I just had to get through this conversation, and then I could cry as much as I needed to. “Six then? I’ll meet you here and we can go out somewhere?”

“Sure,” she said with a sigh. “If that’s all, I’ll be on my way.”

“Bye,” I croaked, as she shut her door and sped away.

And all I could do was sit on my knees in the parking space that she’d just left, with my arms wrapped around my stomach, trying to hold myself together.

Chapter 3



I stayed like that for a while, trying to decide what to do. The aftershock of the apocalypse she'd brought about sank into my body, making me shiver even though it was warm and sunny outside. "Come on, Jess," I told myself, "You have classes to go to. Besides, what she said doesn't matter. I don't need her support."

But the truth was, *I did*.

That conversation had stung more than I wanted to admit. And I couldn't even lie to myself, so convincing myself that everything was okay turned out to be a fruitless attempt.

"Alright," I tried again. "Maybe it does matter. But I still need to get up." So I stood up and walked slowly to my first class. The campus was empty as everyone else was already inside. It was nice to be alone for the short walk, so I used the extra minutes to force the conversation with my mom into the back of my mind. I couldn't bear to think about it right now, so I did what I always did. I forced the painful memories somewhere where they wouldn't distract me. I could think about it later, but not right now.



After a long day of boring lectures, I was ready to collapse in bed. I had had to haul the box from my mom around to each of my classes, which earned me strange looks from professors and peers. Yet, I didn't dare look inside it, afraid of the memories that would resurface.

Ones I probably didn't want to revisit.

So when I got back to my dorm room, I shoved the box under my bed and sincerely prayed to the universe that I would forget about it. Then I sat on my bed, trying to decide what to do next.

I could crawl under the blankets and pretend nothing existed just under that bed.

I could tackle my stack of homework for the week.

Or I could make a bowl of ramen and watch an episode of my favorite show while I ate it.

But when I heard two pairs of footsteps heading to the door of our room, I jumped out of bed quickly and ran to the bathroom, knowing that I wasn't ready to face Keya and Lia's concerned looks and questions yet. I locked the door and turned the faucet to the warmest setting. I always liked my showers extremely hot, but today I needed water so scalding that it wouldn't let me think about anything else. I washed and brushed through my tangled hair. I took my time shaving my legs, making sure each hair was cut down. And I scrubbed my face, to be sure there would be no reason for my roommates to suspect I'd just been crying.

When I got out, the mirror was so steamy I couldn't see anything in it. I used my hand to wipe away the tiny water droplets and inspected my face. It was still red, although maybe that was from the heat of the water, but it didn't look like I'd been crying. I practised the smile I would show Keya and Lia when they asked what had happened earlier and then I practised the one I would show to my mom when I met her for dinner tonight. Neither of them looked convincing. With a sigh, I got dressed and exited the bathroom.

I found Lia in the kitchen and saw Keya in her room.

"There you are, Jess!" Lia said, giddy as ever. "I was about to make tea, you want any?"

"Sure," I said, sitting down while Lia started boiling water in the kettle. She and Keya joined me a minute later and I knew what they were about to ask. I fidgeted nervously with my wet hair, and sure enough, Keya said, "You don't have to tell us if you don't want to, but we're worried, Jess. What happened this morning?" I was almost too embarrassed to make eye contact, but when I looked up, her brown eyes were genuine and concerned. Lia offered me a slight smile, her expression similar to her sister's.

"It was- umm..." I had practised what I was going to say in my head, but now I wasn't sure I could pull off that lie. So I decided to go with as much of the truth as I could muster. It probably didn't shake the worries that they had, but it was enough.

"My mom came to visit me. And... we haven't talked in a while. We're going to meet for dinner tonight, and I'm just worried."

"Awww, I'm sorry," Lia said.

I shook my head and bit my bottom lip, determined not to cry again.

"No, it's okay. Dinner will be good. And I'm sure we'll get everything sorted out."

I was almost proud of how steady my voice was.

“I’m sure you will,” Keya's soothing voice almost travelled to my soul.

I hope you're right, Keya. I so badly hope that you're right.



Chapter 4



Ten minutes before six, I changed my clothes, brushed my hair for the fourth time that evening, and went outside. My mom wasn't there yet, but I told myself it didn't mean anything. I was early; it made sense that she wouldn't be here yet.

But the seconds turned into minutes.

And the minutes turned into hours.

And I waited.

And waited.

And waited.

But she never came.

It started raining, so I sat on the top stair that was sheltered by the eaves of the building. I checked my watch for the hundredth time that evening and sighed at another ticking second. The hope I had somehow managed to restore slowly faded away.

It was 8:03 pm now and I knew she wouldn't be coming, yet I stayed for another hour. The rain picked up and the sky darkened, but her car never pulled up.

I checked my phone for a text or missed call, but there was nothing.

As always.



After another hour, I found myself sighing and walking back up to my dorm. I hadn't even noticed the tears falling down my cheeks until Lia saw me and asked, "Oh no, have you been crying?"

I wiped the tears away and shook my head. "Must be the rain," I mumbled. Somehow pushing past the sisters, I went into my room and shut the door behind me. I knew they were worried, and that this would only elevate that concern, but it was the only thing I could do. I climbed into bed, still fully dressed, and folded my arms across my torso, just like I'd done when my mom had left me alone in the parking lot. It felt like

my world was crumbling, like I was crumbling, and all I could do was sob and hug myself to keep me from falling apart.

For the past year, I've been living a fragile life. Every day my goal was to make it to bed without having flashbacks of the past I wanted to forget and reverse so badly. Then I had to survive a night filled with my bad dreams and restlessness. Each day I fought back the urge to try yet again to contact my mom, fighting myself to stick to my once-a-month rule. I distracted myself with classes and friends, and that sure helped, but it is one thing to help something, it is another to fix it. No one here knew about how my life had changed a year ago. Keya and Lia were the closest I had to family, and I hadn't even told them about it. It wasn't that I was afraid of how they'd react. In fact, I was sure that whoever I told would be kind and supportive about it, I was just afraid that saying it out loud- something I hadn't been able to do for a year now- would make it real. And I *really* didn't want it to be real.

But after I'd cried every tear I seemed to have in me, I lay in bed listening to whatever sounds happened to be in the building. I always needed something to distract me. Distractions were probably the only reason I'd been able to function lately. So I listened for the faint tapping of rain hitting the roof and the hum of the air conditioning. But the most interesting thing to listen to was the voices of Keya and Lia.

"What do you think happened?" Keya asked.

"I don't know..." Lia said. "But I feel so bad."

"I do too. But what should we do?"

Silence.

And then, "I'm gonna go check on her. Not that she has to tell us anything, but just to see if she's okay."

"Alright, let me heat up leftovers from our dinner tonight, in case she's hungry."

I smiled. Knowing that they cared about me seemed to make some of the sorrow fade.

But then Lia's approaching footsteps were also heard by my over attentive ears and I realised that I must be looking like a disaster. I swiped more tears away and pushed the blanket off just as she knocked on the door.

"Jess, can I please come in?"

"Okay," I squeaked, my voice heavy with the sadness I wished would go away.

The doorknob turned and I looked away, not ready to see her sympathetic expression. I stared at my blank walls that were painted a rosy tan colour. They'd been like that ever since I came, and although Keya had offered to help me repaint them, I'd kept the colour. Lia sat down on my bed beside me, silent for a minute before gently asking, "Do you want to tell me what happened?" She emphasised the 'want' to make it clear that it was my choice.

"No," I said. "It's not a big deal." I knew she didn't believe it, but she let it go.

"Are you hungry?" Keya asked, peeking in through the door. "We have leftover spaghetti."

"Yeah," I admitted, following her to the kitchen. "Thanks."

They sat at the table with me as I ate, but didn't ask more questions which I appreciated. It was nice to have someone there with me, even if they didn't know what was going on. It felt less like I was falling into a void of sadness when my friends were sitting right next to me. And although I still didn't sleep well that night, it would have been so much worse without the comforting presence of Lia and Keya in my life.



I woke up the next morning, knowing what I was going to do. It was a Saturday, so there would be no classes. I woke up early, got dressed, and headed to the court. I found Keya and Lia already there, each sitting with a different group of friends. I went over to Keya.

"Good morning, Keya," I said with a slight smile.

"Morning, Jess!" she replied. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I was just wondering if I could borrow your car?" The sisters shared Keya's car, but I didn't have my own, so I had to call Uber or borrow a friend's when I needed to leave campus. "I need to go... somewhere. I should be back in an hour or two, but it's cool if you were planning to go somewhere."

"No, no, it's all yours!" she told me, digging around in her bag for keys.

"Thank you so much," I said gratefully when she handed them to me. She smiled and turned back to her friends as I walked away. I found her white Toyota parked a few rows back and climbed into the driver's seat. I was terrified of what I was about to do, and I wondered if I was even

making the right choice, but I knew that if I didn't go through with this, I'd regret it.

And so, I revived the engine and rushed the car to the airport, hoping I'd make it before my mom left.



Chapter 5



When I got there though, I realised just how hard it was going to be to find her. Airports were huge and I didn't even know what flight she would be on, or where she was going. So after twenty minutes of wandering around aimlessly, I was beginning to think my whole plan was stupid.

As if by miracle, I suddenly spotted a stack of three suitcases, a duffel bag, and a large designer purse, which I quickly recognized as being her stuff. My family wasn't exactly rich, but we had enough money for higher-end purchases, which delighted my mother. She was a very materialistic person, and her stuff was far more valuable to her than other things, AND people. She overpacked for every single trip we'd ever gone on and loved to buy from luxury or expensive brands. And she was the kind of person who paid thousands of dollars to have her car flown across the country with her, which explained why she'd had it here in the first place.

My mom was sitting next to her large pile of luggage, waiting to board the plane and I watched her for a moment, waiting to see if she'd notice me.

She didn't.

Not like it's the first time, is it?

So before I could change my mind, I gathered up my courage and walked over to her.

"Mom," I said, trying to make my voice sound assertive.

"Hello, dear," she told me distractedly, not bothering to bring her gaze away from her phone. "I didn't think I'd see you again."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Well, after I missed dinner, I figured you wouldn't want to talk to me again."

Maybe I was imagining but I thought I heard her mumble something else under her breath. Something which sure enough sounded like, "Which would be a relief." I hadn't been expecting her to say anything like that so it took a moment for me to think of a reply.

“You missed dinner on purpose?”

“Not exactly on purpose, no,” she said slowly, finally looking up from her phone. “I just didn’t feel up to it, after all.”

“You didn’t feel up to talking to your daughter?” I questioned.

“Mm, yes, I suppose that’s one way of looking at it.”

“And why didn’t you tell me you wouldn’t be coming?” I demanded, angry now. She sighed as if annoyed with me, but I continued before she could answer. “I waited for you, mom! I was sitting outside in the rain for hours! And you didn’t care enough to inform me that it was for nothing? I had to track you down to the airport?”

“It’s not my fault if you were ignorant enough about your health and stuff to go through all that trouble.”

I didn’t know what to say now. I’d spent the last year thinking that my mom was just too wounded from what had happened to answer my calls or texts, but I was beginning to realise that she’d done it on purpose. Everything she’d done that had hurt me had been on purpose. And the realisation made me dizzy.

“I can’t believe you,” I scoffed.

“Me?” she asked, feigning confusion. “You’re the one who left your grieving mother alone in the house.”

“I didn’t leave you!” I shouted. “You kicked me out, dammit,” I felt tears on my cheeks now. “You told me that you couldn’t bear to have me around the house, so you sent me away to college without so much as a goodbye. Didn’t it ever occur to you that I was grieving too? That maybe I needed my mom?” I was sobbing hard now, but still shouting at my mom, who hardly seemed bothered.

A security guard even came over with a worried look on his face.

“Everything okay over here, ma’am?” he asked, looking back and forth between mom and me.

“Fine,” I mumbled, taking a step closer to my mother and waiting for him to leave again.

“Do you care at all?” I asked her, forcing myself to lower my voice. “Do you care that I’ve tried to contact you for over a year and you haven’t answered me once? Not even to let me know you’re alright? I was worried about you, Mom. And now you’re telling me you never thought about me at all.”

“Well I brought you a whole box of your stuff and you didn’t even thank me.”

“Oh, right,” I said sarcastically. “You brought me a box that was apparently cluttering up your house, the house that I guess I’m never allowed back into, and you told me that it was less expensive for you to give it to me in person than to mail it. Mother of the year, of course.” When I said it out loud though, her whole story didn’t even make sense to me. She wasn’t the type of person who cared much about expenses, as long as it was easier for her, and driving all the way to my college didn’t seem easier, even if she did happen to have a flight here. My mom hardly responded to what I’d said, instead telling me, “If you’re done bothering me, I have a plane to board.” There wasn’t even a line to board the plane yet, but I knew she was trying to dismiss me, and I was done talking to her anyway. So I began walking away, but then stopped and said over my shoulder, “I don’t know if I’ll see you again, but just so you know, I love you.” She didn’t answer as I turned away again and walked slowly back through the airport. Maybe it was because I finally realised it didn’t help. Maybe it was because I’d already worn myself out last night. Maybe it was because I wanted to be composed when I saw Keya and Lia soon. But for whatever reason, I didn’t cry. I wasn’t okay by any means, but instead of being a sad or angry mess, I was more of an emotionless zombie. I drove calmly, going exactly by the speed limit. I parked and locked the car, then took steady and deliberate steps as I went to return the keys to Keya.



It was around 12:30 now, and I hadn’t had breakfast. So I went to my favourite on-campus restaurant. It was a Japanese place, and I ordered the same noodle dish that I always did. I ate it alone at a table while I let my mind process everything that had happened. My mom had come to my college to give me a box filled with stuff that I realised was still tucked under my bed, ignored and left alone...

..like me.

Focus.

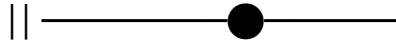
But she said that had been because it had saved her money. I’d asked her to meet me for dinner, and she’d agreed, but then never showed. I’d managed to find her at the airport and she’d said that she hadn’t come to

dinner on purpose. She also hadn't shown much emotion no matter what I said to her. I was still upset, but more than that, I was confused now. My mom had never been the nicest person to me, but she'd never been outright mean. My dad had told Sam and I that her occasional coldness to us had been because she'd never really wanted kids. But these past few days she had been more than cold. She'd been icy and cruel. I didn't know mom very well, even after living with her for 19 years, but it almost seemed like she'd had a different reason for coming here. And it was something that was making her upset. Because while her anger had been directed at me, I couldn't think of anything she could actually be angry at me for, despite her accusations.

I was still sitting at the table long after I had finished my food, just trying to figure my mess out. But each time I replayed the conversations in my head, it felt like a slap to my face, and soon I was crying again. I cursed under my breath; I had preferred being emotionless. But once the tears came, they wouldn't stop, so I decided to go back to my dorm room and find a distraction instead of continuing to think about it.



Chapter 6



Three hours later, when Keya came through the door to our shared dorm room, I was on my 5th episode of *The Office*. I'd never loved that show, but it was a comedy and I desperately needed to laugh. The humorous show didn't fix my problems, but at least it helped cheer me up temporarily, which was all I needed.

I paused it to say hi to Keya.

"Hey," she said in return. "How was your day?"

"Not the best," I said truthfully since I knew I couldn't lie. "But it's okay."

Then I quickly flipped the subject. "How was yours?"

"Good!" she answered. "I did some shopping and got some new decorations for the dorm and stuff.."

"Oh," was all I could muster. "I feel bad, I'm making you do all the decorating."

"Nah, I don't mind," she laughed. "But here, look what I got for you!"

She walked over to the kitchen table and I followed her.

"You didn't have to-" I began, but she cut me off.

"Shh, just look!"

Then she pulled a clear, square-shaped plastic bag from her shopping basket. Inside it was a folded quilt that was decorated with little ferns and flowers with leaves. It was made up of pastel colours, and the flowers were a light, dusted rose colour that was almost exactly like...

"This matches the paint on my walls," I said.

She smiled. "I figured you needed something warmer for winter this year. Do you like it?"

"It's perfect," I said appreciatively. "Thank you."

It was just a blanket, but for some reason, it made my heart soar. It had been so long since my drab dorm room had gotten any decorations, and even just the floral quilt made me smile. I took it to my room and replaced the faded grey blanket that had been on my bed since I'd moved in. Keya was right, it really was getting colder, and my thin blanket hadn't been doing a good job of keeping me warm at night.

Somehow, just the one simple change in my room made a big difference. It still didn't look very lived in. The walls were bare except for the paint colour and my bookshelf had only textbooks because even though I kept telling myself I would go to the bookstore soon, I never did. My desk had a few pencils and notebooks stacked up, but I had neglected to even find a desk light to put on it. This wasn't a big deal though, as I preferred to do my homework at our kitchen table, or in the college library. But now that the blanket wasn't just a dull gray, the room seemed more like a place I'd want to spend time in.

After I folded up my old blanket and stored it in a box in my closet, I went back out to the kitchen. Keya was adding new pots and utensils to our kitchenware collection.

"Can I give you some money to help pay for all that?" I asked her, wondering how much everything had cost.

"Don't you dare," she told me. "I've got it covered."

I sighed. "Okay, but at least let me help you put it away."

I opened a package of new glasses and then carefully arranged them in the cupboard while Keya took a few things to the room she shared with Lia. When we were done we sat together at the kitchen table. "Lia should be here soon," Keya told me. "She went to pick up a pizza for dinner." I glanced at the clock, not realising that it had gotten so late.

"Sounds good"

I was grateful that I shared a dorm with Keya and Lia for many reasons. Most importantly, they were sweet and kind, and they felt like family to me, but they also shared with me when they didn't have to, such as getting dinner for all of us or refusing to let me help pay for things we'd all use.

They also acknowledged that something was going on with me and that I was frequently too upset to even speak to anyone, especially recently, but they never pushed me to tell them what I didn't want to.

They were the kind of people who were silently there for you.

Who would never judge you for crying and not ever telling them why.

Who would lend you their car without knowing where you were going and would sit at the table with you just so you wouldn't be alone.

And I was the kind of person who couldn't even hold myself together enough to repay them for any of it.

So I made that a priority for the next few weeks.

I knew there was no point in thinking about my family, because my mom had already made it more than clear that she wanted nothing to do with me.

I told myself that was fine.

That it would actually be easier if I didn't have to think about her anymore.

So whenever I found my mind straying to her, or dad or my brother, I shoved the thoughts to the back of my mind so I could focus on other things.

I studied and did my homework, putting more thought and effort into it than usual.

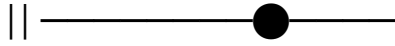
And I especially worked harder on being a better friend and roommate.

Lia and Keya were my closest friends, but I'd met others since I came to college too. So I made sure I hung out with them.

I went to a bookstore and bought plenty of novels to fill my shelves, and I also got a cookbook and started cooking dinners occasionally. They were never that good, but I hoped I'd get better with practice. When I wasn't doing homework or attending classes, I forced myself to spend time with people, instead of sitting alone in the dorm. And while this was hard at first, it got easier. For a short time anyway.



Chapter 7



The day had started off well. I had made pancakes for breakfast and Lia and Keya seemed to like them, even though they flattened out more than they were supposed to. I had English class first, which was my favourite, and it was followed by some other classes I had fun at.

As a bonus, none of the professors assigned any homework.

I was walking away from the building of my Math class and pulled out my phone to text a friend and ask if he wanted to meet up later. But before I could, I noticed today's date.

I felt my breath catch in my throat and I froze mid-step. Over the past year, I've gotten really good at keeping a schedule. Without having set an alarm, I always knew that it had been exactly a month since I'd tried contacting my mom. And today was a month from my most recent routine call to her.

I walked back to my dorm quickly as I thought about this. I didn't want to be caught standing in the middle of the path gazing at my phone with a faraway look on my face. When I got back I paced around the kitchen and living room space, trying to convince myself not to do anything.

"You ended things with her," I reminded myself out loud.

"There's no need to keep calling her every month. That will only make things worse."

I sounded sure of it when I said it aloud, but in truth, my emotions were totally convincing me otherwise.

I knew it wouldn't do any good; it would probably do the opposite, but the routine had been going on for a whole year. I didn't know how to stop myself from continuing it.

"Maybe I could just send a text..." I said slowly. "That's not the same thing as calling. Maybe it's not as desperate."

"No, no, no. I should just delete her number."

I took out my phone and clicked on the three dots on the top-right corner of the screen. But instead of clicking on the Delete Contact button, I went to our message history.

And this turned out to be a very, very bad idea.

Seeing it just made my steps quicker and the tears heavier.
There was message after message, all with dates that were spaced apart
by at least four weeks. None of them had gotten an answer.

Mom, I miss you. Are you okay?

*I'm sorry about everything, can we please just go back to the way
things were before?*

It's Jess again. I know you're busy, but I want to talk to you.

I just want you to know I'm thinking about you. And Dad and Sam.

I have Autumn break soon. Could I please come visit you?

"Agh," I said, running a hand through my long, messy hair. "This is a
very very bad idea."

I put my phone down on the counter and continued pacing, talking to
myself as I walked back and forth.

"You can't text her again."

"She's done with you, so you're done with her too."

"Dammit, your mother simply doesn't want you in her life, Adamsons!"

I almost screamed the last sentence as my rage and sadness bubbled
over. My knees wobbled and I had to put a hand on the wall to steady
myself as silent tears streamed down my face.

I hadn't even noticed my roommates come in until Lia asked quietly,
"Jess?"

I spun around to look at them, my lips pressed tightly together. When I
saw their anxious looks, the tears fell faster and I pressed a hand over my
mouth. I saw Lia glance at the screen of my phone, looking at the string
of unanswered texts to my mother.

"I-"

My head spun, desperately trying to think of an explanation as to why in
the name of heaven was I talking and yelling at evidently nobody in the
middle of our kitchen, but my legs shook and my lips quivered and the
world blurred out of focus until I felt a hand on my back, dragging me
back to reality.

"Jess," Keya's voice said, "it's okay. You're fine. You're okay."

I shook my head as a disobedient sob escaped my lips.

"Hey, it's okay, you're alright," Lia told me, taking my hand and leading
me towards the couch. I collapsed into the soft cushions and my hands
toyed with a loose strand of the stitching as I tried to come up with
something to say that would make sense.

"I- umm..." I began. "How much did you hear?"

“How much did you say?” Lia countered, her voice gentle but serious.

“Well... I... don’t know.”

Keya was sitting next to me on the sofa and Lia was on the floor, looking up at my tear-streaked face, trying to determine if I was alright.

I squeezed my eyes shut, unable to meet her gaze.

Mom. I mi-

Don't go there.

“Please tell us what’s going on,” Keya begged, “I know it’s hard for you, but we really, really want to help.”

“I know,” I said, taking a deep breath and forcing my voice to be steady,

“It’s not that, definitely not that,” I opened my eyes again. “It’s umm.. It’s a long story.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Lia told me, giving me a quick, tentative smile.

“I’m really okay, guys,” I made one last sad attempt to dispel their doubts.

“You don’t have to be,” Lia said.

"Now shut those doubts up and spill, Jess."

I leaned forward and put my face in my hands. “I haven’t told anyone this in a year.”

“A year?” Keya asked. I noticed the sympathetic surprise in her voice and I couldn’t answer.

So I just nodded.

“Why not?”

“It was just too hard,” I croaked.

“What was?” Lia pressed.

“My real name is not even Jess. It’s Jessica; Jess was just a nickname given by my elder brother. My dad and elder brother died last year,” I blurted out before I could stop myself.

They both let out a quiet gasp and then we sat in silence for a minute.

“I’m so sorry,” Keya said.

“I can’t even imagine,” Lia agreed. “Why didn’t you tell us sooner?”

I sighed. “Because that’s not the whole story. My mom was never the greatest mother to Samuel-my brother, and me. Dad said it was because she hadn’t wanted to have kids in the first place. But Sam and I were close. He was the best brother ever and we did everything together.”

I was already crying again, yet I also smiled thinking about my memories with my brother.

Now that I was already talking, it was hard to stop. “Dad and Sam had a car accident. My mom and I were at home, and when we got the call we rushed to the hospital, but when we reached there, Dad was already...” I swallowed hard, pushing the sadness down. “Already gone.”

I felt Keya's comforting hand on my leg, which helped me continue.

“And Sam was badly injured. The doctors didn't know if he would make it. And we thought he was getting better, but then he died too one night. I mean, at least I got to say goodbye but...” I choked back another sob, struggling to breathe.

“Anyway, my mom was devastated, especially from losing Dad. She told me it was too painful to have me around, so she sent me to college. Most of my stuff reminded me of my family, so that's why I don't have much. I gave most of it away and tried to stop thinking about them. But I missed my mom, so I kept trying to contact her and she never answered.

Eventually, I stopped reaching out so much and forced myself to only call or text her once a month. But then she came here out of nowhere. I saw her car in the parking lot; that's what I was staring at when you saw me there. We talked and.. she said she had only come to give me a box of stuff I'd left behind and that she pretty much didn't want to see me again.”

I had stopped talking, so Lia asked, “What was in the box?”

“Oh, I don't know. It's under my bed, I never looked inside. Sorry.”

“Don't apologise,” she said. “I wouldn't have either if I were you.”

Her words made me feel better, so I kept going.

“But before she left I asked if we could meet for dinner, and she agreed, but then never came. That's why I was so upset that night, and why I borrowed your car the next morning. I went to the airport to ask her why she didn't show. But, well, let's just say that that was probably the last time I ever saw her.”

I shuddered at the memory of my last conversation with her.

“Jess... I'm so, so, so sorry.”

“That's horrible,” Lia sympathised.

“I do have one last question though,” Keya said. “But I understand if you're done with this conversation. It must be a lot for you.”

I nodded but said, “It's okay. What is it?”

“What were you doing when we came in just now?”

I frowned, realising my answer would sound stupid. "I was trying to convince myself not to text my mom again. It's been a month since last time, and I haven't missed a month yet.."

"I understand," she said, and I wondered if she actually did.

"Thank you both," I told them, after a moment of silence.

"We didn't do anything," Lia responded.

I shook my head. "No. You've done more for me than you know." They both smiled at me, but it was a smile filled with sympathy and sadness. I did my best to smile back and then I stood up.

"Where are you going?" Lia said.

"It's time to see what's in that box," I said determinedly. I had put it off for a month, hoping that I would just forget about it. But it had been hard to sleep knowing that it was still tucked away under my bed.

It wasn't that I was curious about what was in it.

It just felt like the memories tucked away inside it were trying to escape.

"Are you sure?" Keya asked. "We don't want to force you to do anything."

"I'm sure," I promised. "I want to."

Then I dragged the box out from its hiding spot and took it back to the couch where my roommates were waiting for me.

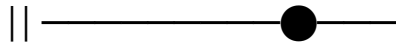
"We can go if you want us to.." Lia offered but I cut her mid-sentence, "No!"

"I want you guys here, if that's okay.."

"We're right here," Keya assured me.

And so I opened the box.

Chapter 8



Each item I found made me feel like I was ten again and playing around with my brother. It wasn't filled with stuff I'd left behind like mom had told me. Instead, it seemed to contain every special memory I'd shared with Sam.

There was my favourite stuffed animal, a dolphin named Kelpie, and his, a Walrus named Splash. Tears welled in my eyes as I remembered all the nights when I couldn't sleep and Sam had made up stories with them, giving each of them a cute squeaky voice, until I finally ended up dozing off.

And there was the iPod filled with all of our favourite songs. The playlists that we'd danced around the house to and crashed into things. One time we'd even broken mom's favourite vase and she'd forbidden music in the house for a month, so we'd had to sneak outside.

The box had our favourite book that we'd read too many times to count. There was the jar of seashells we'd collected over years of beach trips. I turned the jar over in my hands, studying each shell and sand dollar, and remembering the times when we'd found them.

Me holding one in my hand and running over to my brother, shouting "Sam, Sam, look what I found!!" with a huge grin on my face.

"It's beautiful, Jess," he'd say, getting down on one knee so we'd be at the same level. "Why don't you add it to our jar?"

The box had a red frisbee that was beat up and scratched, and so old that the logo had faded away, but we'd loved it. We took it whenever we'd go camping with Dad, and tossed it back and forth at the park forever, or even just in our backyard. We kept a record of how many passes we could do in a row without dropping it, and had almost gotten up to 600. Tears ran down my face as I realised we'd never get past that record.

The next thing I pulled out of the box was a small cloth bag filled with rocks. I was confused for a moment before I remembered that when we were really young and our parents hadn't let us get any real pets, we'd drawn little animals on rocks and pretended they were real. I dumped the contents of the bag onto my lap and looked over each rock.

Nellie the hamster

Kevin the turtle

Whiskers the cat

Rufus the dog

And so so many others.

I held each one for a minute, before dropping them one by one back into the bag.

Then I picked up the photo book that was at the bottom of the box and started flipping through the pages more slowly than I'd intended to, lingering on each picture.

The one of us at the beach, me burying Sam with sand.

The one of all of us on a boat that a friendly fisherman had taken. Our fishing pole had fallen in the water and Dad and Sam were leaning over the edge, trying to get it back while I cried about how they were going to fall in and drown. Mom was sitting off the side of the boat, looking like simply being outside was making her sick.

The one of me riding on Sam's shoulders as he ran around the yard, pretending he was an aeroplane.

I cried even harder when I saw the last photo in the book. I was wearing my high school graduation uniform and hat. Sam was standing next to me, with his arm wrapped around my shoulders. I was grinning and he looked so proud. Like it was him who had just graduated, not his little sister. I remembered that it had been taken only a few weeks before the accident.

After I closed the photo book I had to pause for a minute to wipe the tears away from my face with the back of my hand.

Then I reached into the bottom of the box and took out the last object in it.

A letter with an envelope so crisp and white it looked like it had been written in the last year.

Which, it turned out, it had been. I unfolded it slowly and glanced at my roommates who were sitting silently on the couch with me.

January 14

Dear Jess,

I'm so sorry this all had to happen. If I could go back in time I never would have gotten into that car. I would do anything to bring Dad back. And I would do anything to have more time with you. But I know I won't make it much longer. I can feel the weakness taking over me each day and I can't go on like this.

I'm so incredibly grateful to have had you as a sister. Every day that I spent with you was a day well spent. All of the late nights and early mornings. All of the mid-mornings and afternoons and evenings. Every second was worth it and every second meant something. I could never have asked for a better sister than you. Even when you annoyed me with your TV show obsessions and depressing music, I would never change any of it. I would never want to change you. Because you are talented and kind and amazing. And you are worth it.

I know I wasn't always the best brother. My greatest regrets in life won't be the tests I bombed or the friends I yelled at. They will be the times I wasn't there for you when you needed it. And I know there will be so many more of those moments when I'm gone. I'm sorry.

Please remember that I love you. I will always be with you in spirit. No matter how long it's been. No matter where you are. No matter what's happened. And my only hope for you now is that you'll find people who care about you just as much as I did. Mom doesn't always show it, but I know she loves you too. Everyone you've ever met has loved you because that's just the kind of person you are. You spread kindness wherever you go, and you make people happy just by being there. I know this because you did it for me.

I'm giving this letter to mom and telling her to take it to you when you need it most. I have no idea how long that will be and what will have changed for you by then. But whenever you get this, I just hope you're okay. The letter will be with a box filled with all of our special memories. These are all things that fill me with joy. Remember, you don't always have to be happy, because life doesn't work like that. But you should seek out for things that make you smile. So wherever you are right now, please promise me that you'll never forget to smile.

Love,

Sam

“I promise,” I whispered, looking up from the letter. The tears glistening in my eyes weren’t sad tears now. They weren’t happy either, but I knew I was crying out of gratitude.

It felt like no emotion could properly explain why I was crying. I knew that Keya and Lia were still sitting with me, probably wondering what the letter had said, and what I was thinking about right now. But I was done trying to hide my emotions from them. Sam had told me to find people who cared about me, and I had. The sisters felt more like family to me than even mom did right now.

“I promise,” I said again, making sure each syllable sounded like how I was feeling.

Grateful, heartbroken, and yet hopeful.

My mind slowly put the pieces together. My mom hadn’t brought this box to me because my stuff had been taking up space in the house. She hadn’t just happened to change planes here. She had actually come here for me. She had come here to give me this box because it was my brother’s last wish. And this revelation filled me with so much emotion I couldn’t do anything but sit on the couch with my roommates and cry.

I knew one day I would be okay, just like Sam had hoped.

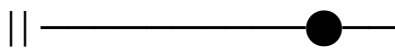
I knew one day I would put each of the things from the box onto my shelves and smile fondly whenever I looked at them.

But right now I wasn’t okay.

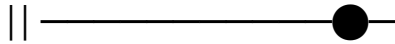
Right now I couldn’t do that.

Right now I was struggling to put words to my feelings and identify my complicated emotions.

Because right now I was ***shattered***.



Her words



Shattered happened because of my obsession for and with platonic love. I am a huge romantic myself, and a hopeless one too perhaps, but what's always fascinated me was the overall complexity of the different aspects of love. The love that I'll have for my significant other will in no way be the same as the love I share with my best friend and even less so as the love I hold for my father. The first is romantic, the second platonic, and the third, universal-yet they are all aspects of the same binding connection that makes us human, love.

I've noticed how a lot of teens and even adults often react obliviously to the topic of love, as if it's taboo. Most people tend to its romantic aspect, often forgetting how beautiful love really is, even if the romantic parts are spared.

A cousin of mine, then studying in 1st standard, once came home and told me how a classmate of hers had written an 'I love you' note to the class teacher and anonymously kept it on the desk. When the teacher came, she had asked about the writer of the note and quite naturally, the students pointed out the guy who did. The class teacher, however, not only yelled at the 6-year-old for the rest of the period for a comparatively void reason, but also destroyed his concept of the term 'love' for the rest of his life, should he remember the incident for a while.

This was what motivated me to present to you Shattered as it is now. I had started writing the content back when I was in 3rd standard and once done, I wanted my someone(alias) to proofread it for me. She didn't. She dumped it saying that my only focus should be on my academics. I did excel in my academics, yes, and even ended up with a 95% in my AISSE, but somehow, when my cousin told me that story, I couldn't help but reopen my digital manuscripts and start editing the old texts to bring to you the current version of Shattered.

I hope you enjoyed reading it just as much as I enjoyed authoring it.

Last, but by far not the least,

This book is a dedication to years of receiving love, universal, romantic, and PLATONIC.

This book is a dedication to those people who dare to love before even knowing its real definition, like my cousin's classmate.

This book is a sheer dedication to all those people who view love only as a road to hell,

because hey,

the road to hell was paved with good intentions.

If you've made it till the end, please be kind enough to drop me a review in my DMs(preferable) or e-mail. You'll find my mail and instagram from the same website where you downloaded this e-book from

<https://thehustlerscult.com/shattered/>

Email>> nobodycalledjoyeeta@gmail.com

Instagram>> @herloudsilence__

I'll be waiting for you.

Thanks in advance!

—xoxo

Joyeeta Mazumder

Author

Hey you! Yes, you. You're my favourite notification.

