

From the Bestselling
Author of *If It's Not Forever*

THE PROMISE

Nikita Singh

Nikita Singh, an avid blogger and writer, is the author of three bestselling novels-Love @ Facebook, Accidentally in Love and If It's Not Forever (co-authored with Durjoy Datta). She has also contributed in the books of The Backbenchers series.

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Other Books by Nikita Singh

Love @ Facebook

Accidentally in Love!

If It's Not Forever

The Promise

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To Durjoy Datta and Sachin Garg

*Let's suffice it to say — you're the best (and funniest)
publishers EVER*

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PART I

SHE

In the blink of an eye, everything changes. You meet a person and do not know whether they are going to be your one true love or are you going to look at them bitterly, ten years later, regretting ever getting involved with them.

Life is a lot like a movie whose characters we keep meeting on the way. Their roles as well as the whole plot are unknown, waiting to be discovered as we live, as life unfolds, as surprises unravel.

CHAPTER 1

FIRE AND ICE

True friendship needs conversation-through words, eyes, smiles-to make everything fine between friends. The word 'sorry' holds no significance.

'Come on, you're already ten minutes late,' her friend, Mili, shouted at her over the phone.

'You guys go in. I'll be there in a jiffy!' she breathed out loudly. She had been half-running half-falling all around the place since the last ten minutes and her legs were just about to give up. She knew it would take her at least twenty more minutes to get to PVR, which meant she'd miss the first half an hour of the movie... but she really didn't want to miss the show. In fact, getting there in twenty minutes depended hugely on whether or not she could finally get an auto; she felt like she'd been looking for one since forever. But she still wasn't willing to give up.

'How much is a jiffy?' Mili asked.

'About twenty ...'she began to say just as she saw someone else get into the auto she had managed to summon. She ran after it. 'Hey! Hey, mister-that was my auto. I called it first.'

No one paid her any heed. The man got into the passenger seat and the auto driver drove away. As Shambhavi began cursing under her breath about the manner-less idiots roaming around the world nowadays, Mili's patience broke.'How long?' she asked again.

'What? Oh, the movie. Twenty minutes. Wait, make that thirty. My car's battery is down again. And I just can't seem to find a ride. Where did all the autos go?' Shambhavi started muttering.

'You'll miss forty minutes of the movie. That's half.'

'That's not half. The movie is ninety minutes long. So forty minutes -'

'Stop it. You know what? Forget it. Just don't come,' Mili said.

'Whoa! It's not like I'm not trying.'

'If only you'd tried hard enough.' Mili's tone was sad. It was evident that she was disappointed.

'Arey, I swear I'll be there by-' Shambhavi paused. 'Hello? You there? Mili?'

Darn. It was not the first time that was happening. Recently, all she heard from her friends were long lectures about her carelessness. Less friendly friends never let pass opportunities of sliding snide

remarks about how self-absorbed she was. She had learnt that it was a way of life, and she should not pay any heed to such comments; people just needed someone to bash.

But Mili wasn't just anyone. She was her best friend, and had been so since the last six years. And Shambhavi was really sad about disappointing her once again. In her defence, she had not realized how much time had passed, as she hopped from shop to shop, searching for the exact shade of blue her client had requested.

Not only had she failed to find the shade, she also ended up getting really late for her best friend's boyfriend's farewell celebration. She understood that Mili did have a reason to be furious. Even though technically it was a celebration, for Mili, it was anything but that.

It was Shambhavi who had introduced Vikaas to Mili. He had hired Shambhavi to work on the decoration of his new home, when he shifted to her city-Indore. Right out of college, Shambhavi tried her hand at interior designing and he was one of her first clients. They had gotten to know each other a little and that was how he bumped into Mili, one fine day. Shambhavi had made the introductions and left to complete her work.

Little did she know that the two would decide to fall in love at their first hello and become annoyingly inseparable over a few weeks' time. But that's how love happens-at unexpected places, between unexpected people, during unexpected times. For Mili and Vikaas, when it happened, it happened for real. They remained inseparable for two smooth years, until Vikaas got an opportunity he could not refuse-his company was sending him off to the US for a year, to get an accelerated MBA.

And that's why the farewell party. Even though Mili put on a fake smile and pretended to be a supporting girlfriend, Shambhavi knew that she needed her to be there and keep her sane. She was freaking out about Vikaas' trip. One year is a long time.

Shambhavi cursed herself again, when she spotted yet another cab, only to find out that it was occupied. She finally gave up on getting to the movie. She had another plan.



When Mili and the gang got to their reserved table at Sayaji, Shambhavi was already there. She looked up at Mili and smiled a sweet smile. If Mili was surprised, she hid it well. She tried to act nonchalant, but Shambhavi knew it was only a matter of time till she melted. That is how it always happened.

And sure enough, halfway into the first course of dinner, they were whispering into each other's ears about who wore what and how ridiculous the girl with green hair at the table on their right looked. There were six other people at their table-Vikaas, two of his friends and three of Mili's friends. While the guys were busy talking intelligent stuff like the stock market, the girls nodded in deep understanding at every word they uttered, even though they clearly did not understand any of it.

Shambhavi and Mili, on the other hand, did not even try to listen to the conversation at the table, let alone understand or participate in it. They were busy exchanging glances and trying to understand what the other was feeling without the use of words. They had always been like that.

Although theirs was not a lifelong friendship, since they had met at their initiation session in college, they had gelled with each other within seconds, and had been inseparable since, even though they had nothing in common. Shambhavi was the carefree, sprightly, artistic one, with big almond eyes a deep shade of coffee, a cute heart-shaped face, with a nose that crinkled when she smiled and a spring in her feet. She had no care in the world, was always optimistic-sometimes overtly so-and lived in the 'today'. She was an artistsomeone who painted, wrote poetry and danced, sometimes getting so immersed in her art that she forgot about the rest of the world ...

... While Mili was the perfect example of the girl next door. Her deep set eyes the colour of charcoal, which were almost always wide with worry; she worried too much, about too many things. With her slender figure, midnight black hair, long eyelashes and dimpled cheeks, no one could guess that she was a journalist. And not just a desk one, but the type who needed to go out in the field and interview people. She worked for a magazine's Indore segment, the city where she had grown up and had lived in since childhood.

They were the exact opposite of each other. Fire and ice.

'What's the plan for the night? I mean-the rest of it,' Shambhavi asked Mili and winked. The silent eye-to-eye conversation was getting a bit too much for her to take.

'We're going back together. We have a room,' Mili replied quietly.

'Wow! Nice.'

'Shh. No one knows. And if anyone asks-I slept over at your place. Got it?'

'Got it,' Shambhavi nodded and continued teasing her, redin-the-face friend. 'So, you're going to-'

'No! Can't you speak a little softly? There are other people here.'

'Oh, yes,' Shambhavi whispered, speaking at a volume about ten notches lower. 'I was asking-are you guys going to ... you know ... get some?'

'No, we aren't. You know that.' Mili blushed redder than ever.

'No? Then what exactly are you planning on doing all night?'

'Talking. I don't know when I'll get to talk to him face to face after this ...'

'Don't be such a drama queen-' Shambhavi started to say but stopped, on noticing the tears in her best friend's eyes. Panicking about everything was Mili's forte, but she had never been so sensitive before. Tears had been very occasional guests. She was taking the Vikaas-being-away-for-a-year thing too hard. Since recently, she was always at the brink of tears.

Shambhavi squeezed her arm and Mili cleared her throat and smiled a fake smile. 'Enough about me. Tell me-what's with you? I can't believe I'm seeing you after a whole week. Where have you been?'

'Don't even ask. Things have been real hectic work-wise.'

'Tough project?'

'Very tough. I wish photography had worked out better for me. It's lots of fun, but with Photoshop, anyone can become a photographer. Just like me. Every third person claims to be one,' Shambhavi crinkled her nose. 'It was fun while it lasted. But I really needed something more stable and lucrative.'

'But what you're doing is stable and lucrative, isn't it?'

'Yes, but ... I don't know. Sometimes I feel like I'm trapped. There's so much more I want to do. This is fun, but recently, it has become such a pain. But then, I'm a graduate in English... what kind of options do I have?'

'Yeah, I know. I told you-you should've gone for your Masters,' Mili said. After they graduated together in English two years ago, Mili had immediately joined back college to get her Masters, quickly following it with a job, whereas Shambhavi had gone ahead and tried every art she was good at. It eventually turned out that even though she was good at most of them, she didn't have the kind of drive for any of them that would take her places. She got bored of everything very easily and very quickly.

She tried everything under the sun in the first year after graduating. Starting from interior designing, she tried her hand at painting, dancing, singing, playing the guitar, photographing and many similar stints. She eventually returned to interior designing and had been at it for a year, sincerely and diligently. But still... she felt that she was always struggling to handle it properly. She was good at designing, but somehow, the cash flow was far from satisfactory..

'Yeah, I guess. But it wouldn't have been as much fun then, would it?'

'It's not always about fun. You're twenty-three years old and-'

'Exactly my point. I am just twenty-three. I have all the time in the world to try everything my heart desires,' Shambhavi swiftly turned the game into her favour.

'What else is there left to try? You've tried literally everything. Remember that flower shop you started?'

'Ah, yes. I still miss the smell of fresh lilies.'

'Of course-you loved that smell and the beautiful arrangements so much that you refused to sell half of the flowers. That's your idea of business?'

'That's my idea of passion. Besides, you've never been surrounded with flowers for days in a row. You'll never understand how much a part of my life they had become. How could I just let them go? And just to fill my pockets?' Shambhavi reasoned. There was a nostalgic expression on her face; it was clear that she was remembering the good times she had spent with her beloved flowers. And frankly, the starry-eyed expression made her look a bit loony.

'You are insane. You-'

'And you are too sane. That's your problem. Try to live, man! Just enjoy today, without a worry about tomorrow. Work is not everything.'

'Oh yes? Is that why you have been so busy with work the whole week that you didn't have time to call me even once?' Mili asked.

'But my case is different. My work is fun.'

'Not what you were saying just minutes ago.'

Shambhavi opened her mouth to protest, but closed it again. She nodded slowly. 'I just need a little breathing space. It's been too hectic recently.'

'I understand. It's not as if you're the first person who struggles with work. I did too, when I first joined the magazine. But it has been almost a month and I have settled in well,' Mili preached.

Mili had been after Shambhavi ever since graduation to get her to be serious about life and settle into something. She was the happiest when Shambhavi returned to interior designing after a whole year of fooling around. Since then, Mili had made it her life's agenda to keep Shambhavi from quitting it and going back to her haphazard lifestyle. It had been difficult in the beginning, with Shambhavi trying to give up at every turn. But after a while, she needed less prodding. Shambhavi had become oddly serious about her 'career' (if Mili dared call it that), and worked with unmatched intensity, as if there was an invisible force guiding her. It had been a long time since Mili had heard her complain.

'Hmm. I'm trying,' Shambhavi murmured. There was worry etched on her forehead. Mili's brows furrowed as she studied her best friend. She knew there was something going on with her; she had dark circles under her eyes and looked tensed and fatigued. In fact, it wasn't the first time she was noticing that. But before she could ask, Vikaas turned to Shambhavi.

'Isn't Mili staying over at your place tonight?' Vikaas asked Shambhavi. It seemed like the guys had had enough talk about the stock market and politics.

'What? Ah-right. Yes, she'll stay with me for the night,' Shambhavi replied.

'Cool. I'll drop the girls off at Shambhavi's place and be on my way,' he said, turning to the rest of the group.

They said their goodbyes and Shambhavi smiled sweetly at them all. She had never had much contact with either Vikaas or Mili's friends' circle. If anything, she thought that the guys were too nerdy and the girls too dumb. But she kept her opinion to herself and stayed polite, as sternly instructed by Mili.

'Join me to the Ladies' Room?' Mili turned to Shambhavi.

'Sure.' They asked Vikaas to meet them outside the restaurant and excused themselves. As soon as they closed the washroom door behind them, Mili's eyes brimmed with tears. Shambhavi was baffled. 'What's wrong? Hey, don't cry. Tell me-what happened?'

'I ... Vikaas ...'

'Relax, Mili. It's all right. It is a matter of just a year. He'll come back; he loves you. There's nothing to worry about.'

'I just ... I had this bad dream ...' Mili tried to say something, but failed terribly. Her whole body shook with tears and she kept sniffing. She hid her face in Shambhavi's shoulder and cried. After what seemed like a really long time, she stopped crying enough to explain. 'I had a dream last night-a night-

mare. In my dream, Vikaas said that since we will be away anyway, we should take this time off-like a break-to reconsider things and how we feel. He wanted to leave me...'

'No, Mili. Firstly, it was just a stupid dream. And secondly, I know Vikaas, and I know that he loves you like crazy. He might not show it, but I know.'

'How?'

'He's ... he's happy whenever you are around. It just feels right,' Shambhavi said.

'But that doesn't-'

'Yes, it does. Now, will you just stop crying and wash your face? He's waiting outside.'

'I'm just scared that he will find someone better ...' Mili whispered.

'He will not. Not only is he not that kind of a man, but there's no one else better than you out there. You're the sweetest, and he adores you. Now let's go.'

When they met Vikaas outside the restaurant, Mili was back to her normal self. Vikaas offered to drop Shambhavi to her place, but she refused. She wanted the two lovebirds to spend every moment together. Also, it was just 8 pm and if she was really quick, she could catch up with the dealer her client had recommended.

She hailed an auto and got into it, sighing with relief. She knew Mili had noticed something off with her. It was a good thing that they had been surrounded by too many people to allow unwanted interrogation. She plastered a fake smile on her face like she was used to doing and instructed herself to be more careful from then onwards. She could not let her guard slip, lest anyone saw what was really going on ...

CHAPTER 2

TEARS OF JOY

Sometimes, it is not so much about the things that we say, as it is about the things we do not. For those who try to listen, silence speaks louder than words.

At first, she thought she had imagined the sound that woke her up. But then it happened again. She blinked and got half up on her bed, turning on the bedside lamp as she did so. She thought maybe it was the thirst that woke her up; June 2010 was one of the hottest summers Indore had seen. It took her a moment to realize that it was not the thirst, it was a noise-a wail. An old man's wail, coming from the adjoining room. Dad.

Shambhavi jumped out of her bed and rushed to his room. She flung the door open and fumbled with the switchboard to turn on the light. Her father was sitting up on his bed, groaning. He seemed to be in agony and she ran to his side.

'What's wrong? Dad, where does it hurt?' she asked.

Her father kept groaning.

'Do you need to see a doctor? Are you feeling strong enough to come with me to the hospital? Can you hold on till that long?' she shot a flurry of questions at him. It was not a time to panic, but she could not help herself from doing so. Her mind started working overtime as she started coming up with ways to solve the problem at hand.

He shook his head and let out a yowl.

'Do you need water? Where are your pain meds?' she inquired and poured out water from the jug into a glass.

'I ... don't ...' Mr Sen tried to say something but did not seem to be able to put words together.

'Where did you keep them? Don't you remember? Please, at least try to ...' she paused what she was saying when she saw the look on his face. He seemed to be in more pain than she had first thought. 'I'm calling an ambulance.'



'I'm never going to forgive you. You know that, right?' Shambhavi asked, hands on her hips, staring down angrily at her bedridden father, in his hospital ward.

'Why? What did I do?' he asked, with his best innocent-look on.

'You don't know what you did? What about that little stunt you pulled last night?'

'I didn't do that. It happened to me. Can't you see-I'm the victim here?'

'Cut it out, Dad. I know you were seeking attention from me. You could've just said so, you know? You didn't have to make me drag you to the hospital.' Shambhavi pouted and sat next to him on the bed.

'What can I say? I was desperate. My precious little daughter was so busy with work, she ignored me all month,' he smiled.

'Week, not month. And I was seriously busy with work.'

'That's what I said.'

'Whatever. You keep continuing your drama, and one of these days, I'm going to get you a private room at the hospital. Then I will be able to live my life in peace,' she threatened.

'Hasn't that been your lifelong dream?'

'Hmm,' Shambhavi said and got lost in her thoughts. In the panic of the previous night, she forgot that she had a meeting at the factory that dealer she met had referred her to. Her client would not be happy.

While Shambhavi wore a worried expression and her brain got to work, trying to find a way of rearranging the meeting, her father studied her. She had never been so serious about work and life, in general. Recently, she had been too driven to get everything in place. There was an invisible power pushing her every second.

'So, what's going on with work?' Mr Sen decided to prod.

'Huh?' Shambhavi came out of her trance.

'Work. Weren't you decorating a rich man's new mansion?'

'I was, till yesterday. I'm sure he's going to fire me if I don't deliver even today ...'

'Fire you? That bad, eh?' her father asked.

'Pretty bad. It's not him; it's his wife. The woman just doesn't like anything I show her. I have shown her the catalogues from every single furniture manufacturer and seller in the city. Imported, she won't accept. She doesn't like the pieces some freelancers from around the area had sent over. God knows what she wants.'

'Get her something custom made. These big people-they just want to have everything unique. Give her something no one else has.'

'It's easy to say. I have tracked down some local carpenters, but their work isn't that neat. Those who deliver decent results, take months to develop designs into the final product,' she complained.

'And who's designing these pieces for you?' Mr Sen asked.

'I am.'

'Oh, so this is going to be permanent-interior designing?'

'Yeah, I presume. As permanent a career option as anything can be with me. This is my ... thirteenth project, I guess. And I'm having fun with it. Plus it has a decent pay packet. Thank God I did that first stint at the Vermas' place,' Shambhavi mused. The Vermas were a reputed, rich family in the city and their son, Nakul, was friends with Shambhavi. When they were renovating their townhouse, Nakul was against everything their designer suggested. He did not have a problem with that designer doing anything with the rest of the house; he just didn't want her interfering in his space. So when he heard that Shambhavi was interested in interior designing, he offered her the job to furnish his personal suite a living area, a bedroom, a study, a walk-in closet and a huge washroom-and she grabbed it. He hated his decorator with a passion. 'Anything would be better than that crazy woman's rich and sophisticated choices. Please, do anything with the room ... just don't pick anything elegant and tasteful. That designer mom hired is a lunatic.'

Shambhavi had replaced the refined (read-dull) furniture for vibrant chic designed, picked up pieces from several showrooms across the city and it had turned out to be awesome fun. Everyone had loved it. She felt like she had cheated; it had all been so very easy to achieve. Finally, she figured that art is just overrated. You just need to have an aesthetic sense and an eye for beautiful things and everything else falls into place. Shambhavi had seen it as an opportunity to spend bucketsful of cash on buying really expensive stuff and arranging it beautifully around the mansion and actually getting something more than fun out of the process - an income and reputation as an interior designer. She had no reason to refuse. And that was how her stint with interior designing started.

Truth was that she was really good at it. Interior designing was just a bigger canvas for her to paint on and as she began doing more of it, she eventually fell in love with it. Her most recent job was furnishing Mr and Mrs Ahluwalia's massive mansion, which they wanted to convert into a bed-and-breakfast.

They offered her twenty per cent to help furnish their entire mansion, from their budget of four crore rupees. That was her biggest offer till date. Her growth as a designer showed in her work and she was driven to give her best in every assignment she took up. Her passion had begun to grow, as she began getting better at it. She was excited about the Ahluwalia project.

Although, what she had not foreseen was the amount of trouble Mrs Ahluwalia would cause.

'So, what is the plan now?' Her father's voice brought her back to reality.

'I was supposed to meet Mr Datta this morning. He is the owner of Datta Enterprises.'

'Oh, DE? I've heard of it.'

'Everyone has. It's a national brand. They also export classical Indian pieces abroad, I guess. Anyway, they have a different way of working. Mr Datta started the company all by himself, in a rundown garage a long time ago. He used to do everything himself. It is said that there is no match to the kind of wood carving he does, and so his business began to grow. Now they have this reputation of being

really exclusive and expensive. It's hard to get even one of his pieces; they are all pre-booked since months before they are built. The weird thing is that they still operate from their first, and only, factory here at Indore.'

'Wow. Someone seems to have done her research. How do you know so much?'

'Tutul briefed me yesterday. She does that to me before I meet people,' Shambhavi explained. 'So, the thing is-these people have a different way of operating. Also, their furniture isn't the imitation of modern-day Western style of furnishing. They have the Indian ethnic touch to it, along with the sleekness of state-of-the-art designing.'

'You know what-it's all very impressive, but it sounded rehearsed. Have you by-heartened their brochure?' Mr Sen chuckled.

'You don't get it, Dad. You need to be serious to do serious business and make big bucks.' Shambhavi laughed with him.

'Of course. Who would know that better than you?'

'Exactly. You just wait and see how I build my empire, not slowly and steadily, but aggressively and furiously. Just like this Datta guy. I don't even know his first name, by the way,' she frowned.

'Very serious about work, I see,' her dad poked.

They played around for a bit, which was followed by a silence. They both knew what the other was thinking. They had kept the topic closed, but she really needed to know.

'How are you feeling, Daddy?' she asked slowly. She looked at him, her questioning eyes a little sad, as she waited for his response. He did not reply. He never did.

He just nodded silently.



'Take care of her, okay?' Vikaas asked Shambhavi.

'Yes, yes, I will. She's safe in my hands, I promise,' Shambhavi laughed, pulling a crying Mili to herself. She was amazed that she had found time to meet the lovebirds at the airport. But she was glad she could make it and be there for her friend.

'I need to check-in now. There's no time left,' Vikaas looked at his watch and said.

Shambhavi immediately let go of Mili and turned around on her feet, with her back towards them. 'Kiss and do your gooey stuff quickly. I'm counting to ten. No more than that.'

'Shambhavi!' Mili chided.

'Fine, fine. I'll count up to fifteen.'

'No.'

'Seventeen, then. Final,' Shambhavi declared and started. 'One ... two ... three ...' She ended up cheating-she turned around by the time she counted five; curiosity got the best of her. Also, she feared that they would play a prank on herleaving her there, counting like an idiot, while they chose a spot to hide and laugh at her.

When the couple were done holding each other, Shambhavi hugged Vikaas briefly and they bid him goodbye. As he turned around and pulled his luggage away with him, the girls watched.

'Where's his family?' Shambhavi asked.

'In Delhi. They'll meet him there.' Mili did not take her eyes off his back even for a second. He turned to her and blew her a goodbye kiss. Seconds later, as they watched, he became a tiny spec and eventually disappeared.

'Come,' Shambhavi whispered in Mili's ear and put her arm through hers. It was getting too emotional; she felt like tears were not too far away even for her. The only thing was that she was not allowed to cry; she was supposed to stop her friend from crying. And that was possible if she kept her own tears in check, so she pulled Mili away from the airport. Also, from the amount of tears Mili had shed, she feared that something had gone wrong the previous night, with Vikaas. Maybe what Mili had feared ...

The taxi drivers at the airport started assaulting them for a ride and they brushed them off. They made their way in silence to where Mili's car was parked; once the cabbies got a clue, they left them alone.

'Do you want some ice cream?' Shambhavi blurted.

'What? Are you bribing me?' Mili turned to face her.

'No, I'm just offering you ice cream to make all your troubles go away,' Shambhavi stated matter-of-factly.

'Listen to yourself. I'm not a child who has just been to the doctor for a tetanus injection.'

'I know that. But trust me-ice cream does make it all okay.'

'If you say so,' Mili chuckled at her hopeless friend, who was still just a child at heart.

'At least you laughed. See? The ice cream's working already,' Shambhavi said happily and they got into Mili's tiny red car-a cute little Chevy Spark. It was a gift from her father, which she received a month ago, the same day she joined her first job.

'My car's battery is still down. Sometimes I wonder why I even bother with it,' Shambhavi made a face. She drove an old Esteem, which her father had bought some twenty years ago. The car was almost as old as she was, and it had no life left in it. But since she had no other option, she was bearing with it. Even though she had been working for a while, she had never made more than one lakh on

a single assignment before. She desperately needed to do something about the Ahluwalia's interiors or she might lose her chance to do something really big and really awesome. 'You know what-even I deserve an ice cream. Now we are definitely going.'

'Where to?' Mili smiled.

'Whatever is closest from here? My mouth has already started to water, so I cannot wait much longer.'

'Okay,' Mili said. 'And by the way, you still owe me a big treat.'

'For what, exactly?'

'The Ahluwalia's mansion. This is a huge opportunity. You can even buy a new car after this. I'm so happy for you.'

'I'm not counting my chickens just yet,' Shambhavi made a face.

'What do you mean? Is there a problem?' Mili started fretting almost immediately.

'Things are not going as well as I would have liked them to.'

'Why? What happened? I did think you looked worried last night ...'

'Don't ask. I'm fed up of it. Let's change the topic,' Shambhavi quickly changed tracks and rubbed her palms together excitedly to distract Mili. 'How was last night? What all happened? I want details, quick!'

'Nothing happened. I told you - we were just spending some time together. Generally talking-'

'Talking, huh? Liar. TELL ME.'

'Fine. We maybe, perhaps, kissed a little. Just a little,' Mili winked.

'Aha! AND?'

'And-nothing. A little kissing, a lot of talking. That's all.'

'You think you can fool me, eh? If you just kissed a little, then why do you have that stupid grin plastered on your face?' Shambhavi inquired.

'The stupid grin is not because we did something; it's because he's the sweetest guy ever and he loves me for real.'

'What do you mean? What did he do?'

'Proposed,' Mili said in a barely audible voice.

'WHAT? NO WAY. YOU'RE KIDDING.'

'No kidding. Check the inner pocket of my wallet. It's in my handbag,' Mili said, pointing to the dashboard of her car and continued speaking fondly of her beau. 'Out of nowhere, he just went down on one knee and told me he wants to keep me forever. We'll marry as soon as he gets back. So that's one year. We're going to have a long engagement. Now I feel so -I'dsilly been thinking that he would leave me once he went away and he did the exact opposite of that. He made a solid commitment.'

'Oh my goodness. This looks expensive!' Shambhavi exhaled as soon as she found the ring. 'I'm so happy for you. You're so lucky.' She bent over and half-hugged Mili excitedly, until she feared ending up causing an accident by distracting her friend.

'You know, I was thinking-since you are always so pumped about trying out new things, why don't you try love? Get yourself someone who adores you. I tell you-it's the best feeling in the world.'

'I can imagine. And I would love to try, but the thing is that love isn't really a one-player game. I will need a partner, and sadly, Ranbir Kapoor is already taken.'

'Ah! So that's why you've always been single?' Mili played along.

'Yep. Now you understand,' Shambhavi joked, even though she was secretly wishing for someone like Vikaas to come along and make her life perfect. Someone she could shed tears of happiness and (sometimes) sadness for.

CHAPTER 3

THE DARK AND THE MYSTERIOUS

Meeting someone for the first time ... it sometimes feels like we have known each other forever, like there is a deeper connection somewhere. There is no rational explanation-it is a matter of the heart.

2 pm today-final,' Tutul told her over phone.

'Are you for real? How did you do it?' Shambhavi questioned, almost shocked that her subordinate had been able to fix another meeting with Mr Datta, after she missed the first meeting the previous day, and even forgot to inform him about it in the panic of her father's health condition.

'I just got off the phone with his assistant. Apparently, 'he understands your situation and sends his best wishes for your father's health' or something of the same implication. Sounds like a good man.'

'Oh, Tutul! You are god-sent,' Shambhavi exhaled. DE had been her last hope and she needed to meet Mr Datta at the soonest. It was a good thing that he turned out to be a marshmallow at heart and understood where she was coming from. Old men always are like that-they put families and relationships before work. But she realized that if not for Tutul's persistence, his assistant would not have reconsidered the meeting herself in the first place, let alone ask Mr Datta about it. She wondered what she would do without Tutul.

Shambhavi had first met her about two years ago, when she was doing the interiors for Nakul Verma's suite. Tutul-a young, sharply dressed girl with a tight ponytail and nerdy specs -was a part of the firm doing the interiors of the Vermas' place. Since Shambhavi was working on the interiors of Nakul's suite, Tutul offered her assistance. Mrs Verma wanted Tutul to deal with the budget and other details of Nakul's suite too, as she was doing with the rest of the house. So, while Shambhavi handled the aesthetic front of designing, Tutul took care of the technical point of view-Nakul's suite was ready in two weeks' time.

As soon as Shambhavi got offered to do the Ahluwalia's mansion, the first thing she did was ring Tutul for help. Shambhavi had worked on the eleven projects in between, alone. That was how she had managed to come out with literally empty pockets, even though her assignments went through beautifully. Because her expertise was only in designing and not in the technicalities that go with it, she had never known how to make the most of her chances. Her quotes were always accurate, leaving no room for commissions. She left no room in the given budget for damage, and sometimes, she even had to pay from her own pocket to make up for the loss.

All in all, after working on eleven projects on her own, she still did not have anything worth showing in her pocket, and therefore, she called in Tutul for help. Tutul brought with her two juniors to help them through the job. Shambhavi figured that the job would pay her enough to take care of three people working under her, especially when the two others were just students working to gain some practical experience. Plus she knew that designing the entire mansion alone was an impossible job; she needed people who knew about these things to help her out.

'Yeah, yeah,' Tutul said. 'Listen-I'll meet you outside their factory at 1:45 pm, okay?'

'I dread those fifteen minutes before the meeting with you.'

'You should.'

'But I already know so many things about this man and his company,' Shambhavi groaned. She hated it when Tutul filled her up with technical details and other specifications of the company they were dealing with, before every meeting. But she grudgingly admitted to herself that those short sessions were necessary, if she did not want to make a complete fool of herself in front of other people. It is okay for customers to enter a plywood furniture store and ask for teak. But an interior decorator is expected to know such things.

'I decide whether or not you know enough,' Tutul said smugly.

'It's not in your job profile.'

'I know. And that's why you don't need to pay me for it. But I've made it my job to educate you. Not just because it is so much fun to find out how little you know, but also because I can see you being a serious success as an interior decorator, if only you knew a bit more about the details.'

'I have you to take care of details; you don't have to get all emotional,' Shambhavi laughed.

'You think everything is a joke? I'm not kidding. I've studied this subject all these years and have never seen anyone who has such an amazing aesthetic eye. You have no idea how many designers would kill to just get to assist you in this assignment.'

'Why are you getting so serious?'

'Because you are not serious enough,' Tutul exclaimed. 'You'll never take anything seriously. I have to think for both of us.'

'Okay, enough now. What is wrong? Why are you so worked up?' Shambhavi asked. She had never seen Tutul like that. Tutul was supposed to be a carefree child-just out of college, with a decent job and financial independence for the first time in life. She was supposed to go crazy shopping, not be a workaholic.

'It's nothing; Tutul mumbled.

'Tell me anyway.'

'Nothing is technically wrong, but it's just that ... I was thinking about where my life is going, and I realized that I do not have much of an issue with my day job, but in the long run, I do not want to be working in this company. Or any company.'

'So you don't like working for a company but you like working with me?' Shambhavi asked, wondering if it was what she thought it was.

'Most of all, I like not having to answer to anyone, you know? So, yes, I like working with you.'

'And that's why you've been trying to push me into getting all serious. Aha! Now I get your plan, you conniving businesswoman.'

'It's not like that,' Tutul said.

'It is. And you know what? From now on, I am going to make you work hard and when you fail to, you will have to answer to me. I think I've kept too loose a leash till now, eh?' Shambhavi said smugly.

'Oh, you won't do that. You need me.'

'That I do,' Shambhavi smiled, as she hung up.



They stood outside the factory of Datta Enterprises. Shambhavi found it weird that Mr Datta didn't have an office somewhere in the city; just one at his factory, in the outskirts of Indore. But then she found out that ever since he started working a long time ago, he had expanded his workplace from a small rundown garage to a full-blown factory on the exact same spot. Even though their business had flourished with a formidable reputation around the country as well as abroad, they still had just the one factory.

Shambhavi found that odd, but then she assumed it was Mr Datta's way of keeping stability. People usually do not like change. And maybe, over the years, he had developed some sort of extreme attachment to the place where he first started wood carving. It made sense.

She was excited to meet the man she had heard so much about. She was an artist, all right, but she was not particularly blessed in the writing area, otherwise she definitely would have liked to write a biography of the man.

'All set?' Tutul asked.

'As set as I will ever be. I just hope he lets me complete my idea and doesn't think of us as a waste of his time,' Shambhavi replied.

'Actually, that is a probability. They get much bigger orders-hotels, offices, resorts. We have a budget of just four crore rupees.'

'Exactly. Plus we need something customized ...'

'Is it still worth giving a go?' Tutul mused.

'We don't have anything to lose.'

They shared a brief look and got into the building, which had an office section in front and manufacturing behind it. It was almost like they had entered another world. The environment inside was completely different from the one outside. As the cool, conditioned air hit their faces, they looked around themselves and ogled at the world-class furnishing. Whoever had done the interiors of this place must have been the best there was. They let every detail sink in, taking mental notes and learning. The building stood tall-easily over twenty stories-and that was when the ceilings were about fifteen feet high. The plush red carpet complemented the pale yellow furniture perfectly. There was a hint of gold at the edges, which gave the place an exquisite look. The warm lighting falling over the room from the ceiling and lamps brightened up the room, the glass reflecting it around, giving it a luminous glow. It looked like a royal palace, far different from the monotonous beige and grey furnishing they saw in every office around town. They felt like they could stay there and stare forever.

When they realized that they were going to get late, they finally made their way to the receptionist's desk. They asked the hyperactive receptionist for directions and minutes later, found themselves outside Mr Datta's office, face to face with his secretary.

'May I help you?' the secretary asked.

'We have a 2 o'clock appointment with Mr Datta?' Tutul said to the secretary, who-Shambhavi was amazed to find out-was a male. She had assumed that all rich people have hot female secretaries. Whom would he have an illicit affair with? she wondered briefly.

'Name, please?'

'Shambhavi Sen and Tutul Jain,' Tutul replied.

'I'm sorry-there's just one name registered with us-Shambhavi Sen.'

'So, what do we need to do to get her in?' Shambhavi asked, pointing towards Tutul. She was alarmed; she would not be able to handle it without Tutul's help.

'I'm afraid you would need to get another appointment,' the assistant said, with a fake-apologetic expression on his face.

'And how soon can we get that?'

'Well, I'm not sure how much you know about the way Mr Datta operates, but he does not agree to many personal meetings.'

'But we-' Tutul began, but Shambhavi stopped her.

'It's okay,' she whispered in her ear. 'We don't have much hope anyway. Let me see if I can convince him, but I don't think he is going to be that flexible.' She turned to the assistant, 'When can I go in?'

He spoke over the intercom briefly and showed her the way to his boss's office. As soon as she got inside the office and the assistant closed the door behind him, Shambhavi got confused. She was

standing right in front of a man-a well-built one, slightly older to her in age and with a glum look on his face. She turned to look at the door she'd come in from and then back at the man.

'Ms Shambhavi Sen?' the man asked.

'Yes,' she smiled nervously. She had no reason to be nervous around a man she did not even know, but for some weird reason, she was. She wished Tutul was inside with her. 'Hi. You must be ... Mr Datta's ... son?'

'Technically, yes.'

'Oh, hello. It's a pleasure to meet you. Umm ... Where is your father? I have a meeting with him.'

'He died when I was seventeen,' the man replied curtly.

'What? I mean-I'm sorry ... for your loss.' She was shaking in her shoes. How had Tutul missed to fill her in about Mr Datta Senior's death and Mr Datta junior's succession?

'Don't be. It was a long time ago. Been twelve years.'

'Umm ... okay. So, I should discuss my proposal with ... you, right?' she asked.

'Yes. Sit.'

She looked around and sat down on one of the royal looking sofas placed across from where Mr Datta sat down. There was no revolving armchair and no teak desk with a glass top. The room looked like a king's living space, with green and silver curtains, complementing the silver carpet and bottle green furniture. She felt like she had entered a time machine and come right through to the eighteenth century, into a king's manor.

But she had no time to gawk at her surroundings, starryeyed. She looked at the man sitting in front of her and wondered if he always spoke so sternly and shortly. She calculated him to be twenty-nine years old. And if he was seventeen when his father died, then Mr Datta Senior could have been something around forty years old. That's an early death. She thought that maybe that's why Mr Datta Junior had reconsidered meeting her when he got to know about her own father's medical condition. But it still did not make sense- he did not seem to be the kind of marshmallow-ish person she had pictured. There was something off. All the small snippets of information she had gathered did not fit together to form a big, clear picture. She would have to wait for a while and ask Tutul about it when she got out.

'So?' Mr Datta asked.

Shambhavi put her business mode on. 'I have a clientowners of a mansion here at Indore, which we want to convert into a bed-and-breakfast. I need to get customized furniture for them. I have done my research-I know the quality, cost, kind of goods your company manufactures. And I am interested in offering you the sole contract for the interiors of the mansion in question. I will be giving you details about the kind of furnishing I have in mind and consider your suggestions, if any. If this was any other company, I would simply have talked to the employees working under you to get this done. But I have been told that at DE, you build the first sample of every design yourself and it is put into manufactur-

ing phase at the factory only after that. So I wanted to meet you and talk to you personally about the possibility of us working together on this assignment. '

After she completed her monologue, she breathed out. That was it. It would be either a yes or a no. She also continuously kicked herself for telling him about how his own company works. What was she thinking?

'I see,' Mr Datta said slowly. 'And you are saying you will be designing the furniture yourself?'

'Yes. I mean-I and my team, which consists of one subordinate and two students who have signed up with us for training,' she blabbered.

'Well, I will have to take a look at the designs you have in mind to confirm.'

'Or maybe you would consider looking at some other work I have done before?'

'And why would I want to do that?' Mr Datta raised an eyebrow unkindly.

'Umm ... you know-as a sample? To see the kind of work I do?' she said and pushed her portfolio onto the low centre table between them.

'Is this a joke, Ms Sen?'

She decided to stay shut, not knowing what she had done to anger him.

'I do not have time to look at pictures of pieces of furniture I do not have anything to do with. Show me what you want from me and I'll decide whether or not I want to do it. I do not want to look at samples. Understood?'

'Yes,' she murmured, but it did not come out loud enough to reach his ears. She repeated. 'Yes. But doing all the designs will take time. I'll get back to you in-'

'I do not mind looking at the samples of work you want me to do. I just have a problem looking at the work you have previously done and has nothing to do with me. You can show me a preview of your vision for this mansion in question.'

'Sure. I'll get back to you in a couple of days with a sample of my idea for the mansion. Thank you,' she looked up and smiled at him, wanting some of the tension in the room to evaporate. Now that the worry of getting him to listen to her plans was off her shoulder, she observed him closely for the first time. The broad, muscular frame-no doubt built from all the wood carving and furniture-building-covered by his crisp light blue shirt looked vast and very inviting. What? Did she just think 'inviting'? Where did that come up from?

His eyes were deep set, jet-black, with eyebrows that looked stern, but in a half-good half-bad way. A long, straight nose, over the thin, perfect lips and a strong chin. Dark complexion and hair which made her want to run her fingers through it. A square jawline and high cheekbones, which made him look like a ramp model.

She was astonished that she had not noticed all of that in the first glance. Maybe she had been too nervous about her proposal, and he had done nothing to make her feel comfortable. In fact, he had

done everything to make her feel unwelcome and anxious. But when the apprehension faded somewhat, she finally did notice the killer looks and could not take her eyes away from him. She had never been beautiful. If she dressed up and put on a right amount of make-up, she agreed she would look pretty, but she could still not use the word beautiful. She just wasn't born to look good.

And when she saw him, she almost felt jealous of his good looks. Some people just have it all. He was born as Mr Datta Senior's son, that too looking like Adonis. What more can anyone ask for? Though, she agreed that it was a good thing he had decided to keep the legacy going and build every design himself before sending it to the manufacturing department. The kind of muscles one makes from physical labour is unmatched.

'Anything else?' Mr Datta asked, looking at her expectantly, a little annoyed by her presence, she thought.

'Oh ...? No. No, no. I'm good. I should ... I should take my leave now,' Shambhavi stammered.

'Let me know when you are done with the designs. Here's my card.'

'Thanks,' she said and got up. She contemplated picking up her portfolio, but decided against it, not risking infuriating the man further. 'Just one thing -do you want me to get in touch with you directly?' she pointed to his visiting card and asked.

'Yes. Is that a problem?' he held her eyes with his and asked.

'No, of course not. Just that-your assistant and secretary said you were pretty much booked for life, so ...'

'Call me, Ms Sen. I'll remember you.'

She almost fainted when she felt the touch of his hand on hers. A handshake had never felt so heavenly.

CHAPTER 4

IT CAME ALONG

It is amazing how a person's talent surfaces, when properly motivated. The drive to impress often yields unmatched outputs.

'Mili, you won't believe this,' Shambhavi shrieked, as soon as she saw her friend, partially hidden by the stained glass partition in her office. She walked happily towards her friend, who looked like she could faint any second.

'Shambhavi? What are you doing here?' Mili whispered loudly in return.

'As of now-walking towards you. Duh.'

'But why?'

'Because it would not be appropriate if I keep shouting from the other end of your office, would it?' Shambhavi replied. She looked around herself and motioned to the employees at their desks, in tiny cubicles and said, 'People are working here. I don't want to disturb anyone.'

'Shut up. You know what I mean. Why are you here?' Mili asked.

'I had something exciting to tell you.'

'Can't it wait till I get out of office? It's just a few hours.'

'Why do you worry so much? Your boss will not eat you up and swallow you whole if she found you talking to me for a few minutes, you know?' Shambhavi teased. She knew Mili took her work seriously-a bit too seriously-and she enjoyed having fun at her expense.

'She might; you don't know her. Now tell me quickly what it is and leave.'

'Never mind. It's not important. It can wait.'

'No. Tell me,' Mili exclaimed, and held Shambhavi's arm to stop her from leaving. The fact that Shambhavi came to her office to tell her something 'exciting' had definitely piqued her interest in the whole thing, even though she was still worried about her boss.

'Okay,' Shambhavi jumped back on the horse immediately. 'Get this-I went to Datta Enterprises today to meet Mr Datta. And guess what I found out?'

'No idea.'

'Mr Datta is not an old man. He's twenty-nine, and totally gorgeous. I first thought that he was the son of the man who started the company. But I was wrong. Tutul told me later that he started the company, not his father. It has been just twelve years, and by everything I heard about DE, I had assumed that it must have taken them several decades to get there. But nope. Just twelve years. The man is a total legend.'

'Wait-I'm confused-are you gushing about this Datta guy as an entrepreneur or a man?' Mili interrupted.

'Both. More as a man, though. You should see him-he's so ... perfect. Though, he looks older than he is. Mature. Maybe because he has seen so much in his life-death of his parents as a teenager, poverty, starvation, betrayal. I think that's why he's so ruthless.'

'Betrayal? What do you mean?'

'I don't know much, but I heard a girl broke his heart. She was there when he first started out; they were close. And she left him for someone else, or something like that,' Shambhavi said. 'But whatever. The point is that ... he is something out of this world. Nothing like anything I have ever seen before.'

'Aah! Shambhavi Sen has fallen for a guy. This should be interesting to see.'

'Shut up. I have not fallen for him or anything. I just ... like him.'

'That's the first step. Wow. I can't believe this. Finally,' Mili said, grinning from ear to ear.

'It is going to be a one-sided attraction, Mili. He did not even look at me properly, you know? Why would he? I look like a toad in front of him. He's handsome. I'm ugly'

'You're not ugly.'

'Compared to him, I am,' Shambhavi said sadly.

'Really? I would like to see,' Mili said and they both rushed to Google images of the man. 'What's his first name?'

'I don't know,' Shambhavi said.

Mili rolled her eyes and typed 'mr Datta owner Datta enterprises' in Google search bar. The name immediately popped up. Arjun Datta. Mili went on to search for his images, while Shambhavi murmured the name over and over again. She rolled it over her tongue; it felt oddly nice.

'Wow. He really is stunning,' Mili breathed.

But Shambhavi was not listening to her. She had her eyes fixed on one of Mr Datta's pictures in the search results, and his name on her lips.

'What?' Mili shook her.

'I ... like his name,' Shambhavi replied softly.



Shambhavi had never worked as much in her entire life as she did in the next two days. She woke up nights and worked tirelessly on the designs for the interiors of the Ahluwalia mansion. She had never before been so driven. But she had good reason to be so now.

Arjun Datta. The man had practically ruled every second she was awake-and asleep, for that matter-ever since she had come out of that meeting. She was a woman on a mission. A mission to impress. She worked and worked and worked on the design, and once done, she glanced through them. She knew the kind of wood carving Mr Datta did and the kind of designs he was particularly fond of. He was the only designer in his company. She had done her research, and she knew he was going to like her designs.

There had never been an occasion on which Shambhavi had given her hundred per cent to something and it hadn't turned out to be anything less than perfect. And there was no reason for her not to give her hundred per cent on the designs; she accepted that after the first few times Mrs Ahluwalia shot down her suggestions, Shambhavi had started to show her all the bad ones, just to get on her nerves. It was too risky for her to pull such a trick, but it had been so much fun. That was who Shambhavi was-reckless, independent, instinctive. And passionate-when it was about something she really loved.

And she was really loving designing and a certain Mr Datta at the moment.

'Go to the crazy woman and make her love my designs,' she told Tutul.

'How can I make her do that?'

'Well, hit her on the head if you need to,' Shambhavi said and perched on the kitchen counter and bit into a green apple. Tutul had been considerate enough to bring for Shambhavi's recovering-from-sickness father.

Tutul opened the folder and started flipping through the pages. By the time she reached the last sheet of paper, roughly but still beautifully sketched, she was in awe of Shambhavi. She had suspected some real talent underneath the rash demeanour that Shambhavi exhibited, but even she had never imagined her to be capable of what Tutul then held in her hands.

'What?' Shambhavi asked, studying the look on Tutul's face.

'How ...? When ...? Where did you steal these from?' Tutul managed to ask. She seemed to be in shock and was trying to find out ways to justify what she was seeing. It just didn't make sense.

'I drew those myself.'

'Yes, you put it on paper, but from where did you copy the designs?'

'Why? Aren't they good?' Shambhavi asked, taking her folder back and browsing the pages to look at her designs.

'They are. I didn't know you were so good at this. I can see a lot of change since Nakul Verma's suite, and even that was pretty remarkable work you'd done.'

'Oh. I guess experience does account for something. I've worked on several projects since Nakul's, mostly since the last one year. I'll show you my portfolio, someday. Now, tell me-do you like it? I drew all of them myself. Had seen some of Mr Datta's pieces that day and designed these to fit Mrs Ahluwalia's needs and also to get the most of Mr Datta's talent. I hope he likes them. I mean-she. I hope she likes them. What do you think?'

'I think he will like it.'

'You mean she.'

'I mean he, Tutul said, tongue-in-cheek.'Ooooh! Someone likes someone.'

'Whatever. I don't want to know about those two someones. Just tell me what you really think of the designs.'

'I like them. They're good. Really good.'

'Really good as per my standards? Have I just superseded myself or do I stand somewhere in the real market, too?' Shambhavi asked, almost panicking.

'Whoa! For someone who once used to be so carefree and careless, you, girl, are awfully insecure.'

'Cut it, Tutul. Just tell me. You know about these things. Tell me what you really think of them.'

'I think,' Tutul began, sounding sincere this time, 'that you have not only overtaken your own good work, you have done an amazing job as compared to the professionals in the area, too. It's a good thing you don't have a degree in this-it basically ruins originality in thought. And that's your forte.'

Shambhavi nodded thoughtfully and asked, 'Do you think he will like it?'

'I'm sure he will.'



As soon as Tutul left to meet with the Ahluwalias and get the designs approved, Shambhavi felt sleep tugging at her rather fiercely. She picked up the basket of assorted fruits Tutul had brought for her father and made her way to his room. He had just been discharged from the hospital that morning and was resting in his bed.

'Dad?' she whispered softly to check if he was up.

'Mmmm?' he answered in a coarse voice.

'Oh. Go back to sleep. I'm keeping this fruit basket here. Tutul got it for you.'

'Are there oranges in there?'

'Yes.'

'Do you think they are sour?'

Shambhavi peeked at the oranges. They were yellowish. 'I guess.'

'Perfect,' her father smiled in his half-sleep.

'Wait. Don't go back to sleep yet. I forgot your afternoon medicine. Which one is it?'

'I've taken it.'

'Have you really? Or are you just fooling me again? Because if you are-be warned-next time you need me to call you an ambulance, I won't,' Shambhavi threatened.

'Got it.'

'Good. Now I'm going to sleep in my room. Buzz me if you need me,' she slid the remote of the intercom under his pillow, kissed him softly on the cheek and made her way to her room. She had been spending her nights at the hospital with her father ever since he was admitted there. That, along with the hard work on the designs, was taking its toll on her. She knew she had only a couple of hours before she needed to head to DE to show Mr Datta her designs. By that time, the designs would be approved by the Ahluwalias and Tutul would bring them over to DE with her.

She was excited about the Ahluwalias and Mr Datta seeing her designs. She was excited about meeting Mr Datta. But most of all-she was tired and just wanted to sleep. She went into her dreamland as soon as her head hit the pillow.

CHAPTER 5

THE FIRST SPARKS

Jealousy is sometimes the first indication of love brewing between two people. Envy might be one of the seven deadly sins, but it's also one beautiful emotion to see.

This time when the girls met the secretary at Datta Enterprises, they were both invited inside Mr Datta's office. Shambhavi was grateful about that. No matter how excited she was at the prospect of being face to face again with the man who ruled her dreams, and to show him her designs, she was not sure she could face him again without Tutul. 'Terrified' was the word that most perfectly put across what she was really feeling.

Till that point, things had turned out considerably smooth. Mr Ahluwalia had loved the designs and even Mrs Ahluwalia had grudgingly approved of them. (Tutul said she knew that Mrs Ahluwalia had another designer in mind-one who furnished some movie star's place-and that's why she shot down everything Shambhavi proposed. But this time, her designs were too good to be rejected and poor Mrs Ahluwalia had no other option.) Tutul had corrected some technical flaws in the designs and some concerning the dimensions. So they were officially set to meet Mr Datta and blow his mind, that's how Tutul put it.

But the problem was that Shambhavi realized that he was not the kind of man who was blown away so easily. What if he hated her designs? The thought crossed her head more than once. For all the confidence she had in her work, she was almost shaking out of fear, as they made their way to his office. The secretary knocked on the door twice and pushed it open.

There he was.

Once she set her eyes on him, she could not look away. She was stumped. She had prepared herself for the man dressed in a sharp suit and crisp shirt waiting for her, but his casual demeanour gave her a pause, big time. He was dressed in a worn out grey tee, which was faded and scuffed at the edges and collar, with a barely visible label printed on his left chest. His jeans were dull, spoiled and cut at places. At first glance, she thought they were bought in that condition, but it slowly dawned upon her that they had become so over time. Those were obviously his work outfit; he seemed to have been building something.

'Hi,' Shambhavi whispered, when she found her power of speech back. She looked around the office to see what he had been working on, but there was nothing. He must have been working elsewhere, and had returned to the office to meet them.

He looked up at her.

'Hi. Tutul Jain. It's a pleasure to meet you,' Tutul introduced herself swiftly and held out her hand for him to shake.

'Hello,' he drawled.

As soon as he let go of Tutul's hand, Shambhavi put hers forward. She did not want to miss any chance to get closer to him than normal.

'Didn't I ask you to call me?' he shot at Shambhavi.

'What? Oh, I thought talking to your secretary about an appointment first seemed more appropriate,' she replied. Her breath was erratic, for some reason. Maybe because of the slightly dangerous sounding tone of his voice.

'Did you?' he raised his eyebrow. She kept silent, not knowing how to respond to that. He continued, 'So, are you done with the sample designs?' he asked once they took their seats.

'Yes, we are. The living space, one bedroom and the hallway. Since it's a bed-and-breakfast, all the rooms will be more or less of the same design. Take a look.' Shambhavi immediately took the folder from Tutul's grip and shoved it towards him. She was getting impatient and was really, really nervous. Her fingers shook, when his hand moved forward to take the folder from her. As soon as he gripped it, she shoved her hands into her pockets; she did not want to let her fear show through.

'Let me see,' he mumbled, more to himself, as he opened the folder and took in the first page. He poured over the designs half- curiously and half-surprised-he clearly had not expected what he was getting. In a good way, though. He turned page after page, carefully scrutinizing the designs she had been so confident about, when she had first drawn them. But when she saw him inspecting them, she did not feel a single shred of that confidence from before.

There was a long, scary silence, during which time Shambhavi's heart jumped up to her throat and threatened to choke her. She could barely breathe. Everything depended on what Mr Datta thought of her designs. If he hated them, she did not know where she would be able to find another firm with artists who could do that level of carving. She needed a certain gracefulness and perfection that she had seen in Arjun Datta's work. She wanted no one else working on turning her designs from paper to wood. But that was not the only reason why she was so nervous.

For some indecipherable reason, that man had an unexplained impact on her. She cared about the Ahluwalia mansion assignment, but not more than she cared about what Mr Datta thought of her designs. She did not even want to think of the reason why. It was silly to use the word 'love' so prematurely. After all, she barely knew him. She had met him just once, and love-at-first-sight did not really work in real life. This was hardly a Bollywood movie.

She tried to gauge his expression, but his face was oddly impassive. It made her realize that she had not seen his face give away any emotion the last time she met him either. Maybe he was always like that-expressionless, blank. She felt like shaking him and asking him to come back to life.

After what seemed like two lifetimes, he finally looked up. He met her eyes and ... just that. He did not say anything.

What the heck? Does that look mean he wants me to get out of here? she shouted in her head, but maintained her outward calm. She met his eyes and stared right back at him, equally coolly.

Finally, he said, 'When can I get the complete set?'

'Does that mean you like these?' Shambhavi asked slowly, letting her hopes soar. Her heart did a backflip and she already started to feel excited about working with him, even though he still hadn't said any such thing. But the implication that he would like to see the rest of her idea was enough to put her back at ease. She was herself again.

'They are interesting,' he replied shortly.

'Interesting, eh?'

'Very.'

'Great. So what's the game plan from here on?' Shambhavi asked, failing to hide her excitement.

'Game plan? Interesting choice of words, Ms Sen, but this is not a game. Now, if we can get back to business-since we have reached the conclusion that I approve of your sample, I will need you to get back to me when you have completed your designs,' Mr Datta said curtly.

'I can complete them in about three weeks, but I think I have a better game pl-I mean-suggestion.'

'And what might that be?'

'Let's take a look at the Mansion together. We'll get an estimate of dimensions and a mental picture of what we want where. Then, we can browse through the prototypes of your previously created designs and find pieces that will fit the mental picture. Meanwhile, I can start working on the remaining pieces-the pieces we'll need you to build-and you can start working on the items I've already designed for you to build,' Shambhavi concluded with a flourish, pointing to the folder he still held in his hands. Even though the man's behaviour was barely social, she could not help but feel excited about working on that assignment. Everything was finally falling into place.

'Well, that sounds like a good plan,' Mr Datta nodded thoughtfully.

'And if we make you build every bit of furniture that'll go into the Mansion, we'll need a year to get it done, anyway. And I don't know about you, but I do not have that kind of time. No offence, of course.'

'None taken.'

'So let's meet tomorrow at the Mansion and take a look around,' Shambhavi said and jumped out of the super-soft sofa she had almost sunk in. If Mr Datta was shocked by her behaviour, he did not let it show. She did not care about it either. There was just so much extent to which she could stay composed and business-like, after which the instinct to turn back into herself overtook her. 'I'll text you the address, you can text me the time. Ciao!'



'Dad, I'm leaving,' Shambhavi shouted from her room, pinning up her curls on her head, so they wouldn't fall all over her face. And then, taking some strands out of the clips expertly so that they fell perfectly over her face. Carefully careless.

'Okay. I'll just stay here till you come back,' her father's voice said over the intercom. He sounded weak.

As soon as she was done with her hair, she took a brief look at herself in the mirror, picked up her handbag, stuffed her cell phone into her pant pocket and walked out of her room. She filled up a pitcher with water and took it over to her dad's room.

'How are you this morning?' she asked.

'Great. Couldn't be better,' he replied cheerfully. She saw right through it.

'Listen-no getting up from the bed and walking to the other room, okay? You have a TV here and I'm sure something is on. Call me whenever you need me. Don't try to be a hero and do everything by yourself. I'll just be gone a couple of hours. You have your phone with you.'

'Look who's acting all grown up and responsible.'

'Well, someone has to. And since you decided to get sick, it's my job,' she replied.

'I get it. Go work,' he said and bid her goodbye.

As she locked the front door behind her, she wondered why he never asked her to stop working so hard. She had never seen her father ask her not to push herself too hard when he had seen her killing herself working. Maybe that was just the way he was, she shrugged and made her way to her ancient car. She was expected at the Ahluwalia mansion in forty minutes and she really did not want to be late.

The bad news was that when Mrs Ahluwalia got to know that they were deciding the final layout of her mansion, she decided to tag along with them. And the even worse bad news was that since Tutul was stuck with a project they were working upon in her office, she could not accompany Shambhavi to what would surely turn out to be an awkward encounter between Mr Datta and Mrs Ahluwalia. Shambhavi wondered what his reactions would be like if she said she did not like his ideas or work.

The thought brought a smile to her face. She wondered how some people managed to live without smiling at all. Take Mr Datta for example. He's all business, all the time. Shambhavi decided that her crush on him had ended and she just thought of him as a deeply scarred mysterious man who didn't laugh or interact casually with other people. Not everyone liked to be social.

'Where is the carpenter?' Mrs Ahluwalia asked Shambhavi, when she pulled in at the Mansion.

'Where's who? Did you just say what I thought you just said?' Shambhavi was shocked.

'Depends on what you thought I said, doesn't it?'

'Did you just call Mr Arjun Datta a carpenter?'

'That's what he is, right? You said he will build what you ask him to,' Mrs Ahluwalia said stupidly.

'He does build furniture. But that's just his way of working. After he builds a piece, tonnes of similarly designed pieces flood the market. He just likes building the first prototype himself, of all new designs. Other furniture designers ape his style and designs. All his designs are made into thousands of copies. He's a trendsetter.'

'So, he's a designer who likes to build?'

'Plus the owner of Datta Enterprises,' Shambhavi added, exasperated. She gave up trying to make Mrs Ahluwalia see sense. After explaining so much about him, she still pictured Mr Datta to be some kind of a small time carpenter who built some designs he liked and had a few labourers working under him.

That explained the look on her face when she finally saw Mr Datta get out of his BMW X5, a silver beast which must have cost somewhere around seven million rupees. Shambhavi wished she could buy something like that one day. And once she laid her eyes on the man who got out of the car, she decided that her crush on him was back. She had no hope of getting together with him someday, so she decided she would be just one of his fans and love him eternally from a distance, just like she loved Tom Cruise. He looked like a movie star-all six feet of him in his glory, walking towards them, slightly distracted, observing the building he was entering.

'Hello, Mr Datta,' Shambhavi went ahead and greeted. She wondered if she should add that she was his biggest fan and would love an autograph, but composed herself just in time.

He turned his face towards her for a micro second and nodded, turning back to his observation. All business, all the freaking time.

'Meet Mrs Ahluwalia. She's the owner of this mansion,' Shambhavi said, rather stiffly, turning all business herself. 'Mrs Ahluwalia, this is Mr Arjun Datta, of Datta Enterprises.'

'Nice to meet you,' Mr Datta said coolly.

Mrs Ahluwalia seemed to find it difficult to speak. It was justified; she had been expecting a stocky, dark man with dirty clothes and a dirtier motorcycle. Maybe stinking of pan masala and tobacco. Seeing Mr Datta would understandably stupefy anyone in her place.

'Hi, I'm Faisal Khan, personal assistant to Mr Datta,' a lanky man of around twenty-five moved forward to introduce himself. His smile brightened up the space. Shambhavi felt relieved that he was there, that she was not alone in the company of two people whose default facial expression was a scowl. Such people only brought depression all around them.

'Hi, Faisal. Let's start with the work then?' she proposed and there were nods all around. She started walking towards the foyer and everyone followed. Once inside, she turned her work-mode on full time. She walked from room to room, speaking aloud what she had in mind for where, looking mostly towards Faisal, as she figured that the other two weren't people who liked conversation. She kept shoot-

ing ideas around and everyone listened. She had been there before the previous day and explained it to Tutul, so she knew she had the technicalities covered. That gave her confidence an extra boost.

Mr Datta pointed out some flaws and put forward some suggestions, all of which Shambhavi agreed with. The man really was a genius. She got even more excited about the successful completion of the assignment, which she could easily picture happening in the next couple of months. The best thing was that Mrs Ahluwalia did not seem to have regained her power of speech as of yet. That let Shambhavi concentrate on the task at hand, without having to think of immediate alternatives for the options Mrs Ahluwalia generally would not have approved of. But the poor lady kept a nervous smile on her face and nodded her approval at everything.

'So, what do you suggest would be better?' she turned to Mr Datta and asked when they reached the porch. 'Three sides of lawn chairs and recliners and one with a swing? Or all four sides of chairs?'

'Two sides of chairs, here,' Mr Datta motioned with his arms. 'The third a swing. Let's keep the opposite end of the swing open, shall we? It has a great view of the garden downstairs?'

Shambhavi nodded thoughtfully. 'Yeah, that makes sense. Plus we do not want a terrace garden; we have a huge lawn downstairs, so there's no need. I was thinking, maybe cover this porch with half a shed, leaving the front part open for sunlight? The shed will also add to the beauty of the place. It'll be a nice spot for people to relax.'

They kept on like that for the next one hour-throwing around suggestions, agreeing, thinking of alternatives and planning a final layout. Faisal recorded the entire conversation, to sort later and generate a list of the pieces of furniture they would require. They were going to look through the catalogues of all the designs DE had built in the past and select the ones they wanted for the mansion. (Upon choosing from there, they would put the workers at DE on the job of replicating the designs, since the company did not have anything in the inventory.) The rest of the articles would need to be designed and built, later.

By the time they reached the second and the last floor of the building, Mrs Ahluwalia took her leave, muttering something about an appointment at a spa. Shambhavi happily bid her a goodbye.

Since the second floor was built in only one fourth of the total space, they were done in less than fifteen minutes. Faisal reminded Mr Datta about his meeting with some associate and they made their way outside, finalizing their own meeting for the next day.

'Why is 10 am not working for you?' Mr Datta asked Shambhavi, as if it was a crime to ask for a meeting at 12:30 pm.

'I have some personal obligations to deal with,' she replied shortly.

'What kind of personal obligations?'

She wanted to tell him that it was none of his business, but stopped herself at the last moment. Maybe he is just asking because 12:30 doesn't work for him. He is not checking to see if I am in a relationship with someone. Why would he? He clearly has no interest in me. I do not have any in him either.

'I think we can make 12:30 pm work, Mr Datta. We have cancelled your meeting for that slot since the last shipment has not gone through quality check yet,' Faisal intervened, sensing the tensed air between the two.

'Is that so?' Mr Datta glared at his assistant, who looked away and nodded silently. He turned to Shambhavi and said, 'See you at 12:30 then, Ms Sen.'

Shambhavi and Faisal watched as Arjun Datta walked away, towards his car. After exchanging a he's-crazy look, they followed closely behind.

'So, where are you headed from here?' Faisal asked Shambhavi, who was busy staring at the way Mr Datta's hair fell slightly over his shirt collar from behind. She tore her gaze away.

'I don't know. To grab a bite to eat, maybe? What time is it?'

'2:30 pm,' Faisal replied, checking his watch.

'No wonder I'm so starved. My internal alarm clock has been ticking since the last one and a half hours now.'

'What do you say we go somewhere together? Crown Palace is nearby?'

Shambhavi looked at him. He looked younger up close and maybe it also had something to do with the nervousness in his expression. He liked her. The realization struck her suddenly. All signs suggested that. She had been blind about the way he had been trying to get her attention and kept smiling at her. A small smile stole onto her face, too. She was flattered. Faisal was sweet and she did not see any harm in having lunch together.

'Sure,' Shambhavi said.

'Great. We'll let Mr Datta leave for the office and let's go to the restaurant?' Faisal smiled a genuine smile.

'I'll get my car,' she said, moving towards her dying Esteem.

'I'll get mine,' he said and turned towards his car.

'Faisal,' Mr Datta called him just then.

'Yes, Mr Datta?' Faisal rushed towards his boss-who was sitting in the back seat of his car-and bent down to speak at eye level to him.

'Go straight to the office, right now, and create the list of articles we'll need,' Mr Datta said curtly.

'I'll get to the office in an hour. I have to-'

'Did you not hear what I said?'

'I did, sir. But I haven't had lunch. I'll grab something quickly and get to the office as soon as I can. I assure you the list will be ready shortly,' Faisal said.

'Now, Faisal. Now. What is it in that word that you don't understand?' Mr Datta seethed.

'Okay, sir.' Faisal moved away from his boss' car and mouthed a sorry to Shambhavi, who had been watching the interaction. She nodded to let him know that it was okay. She felt sorry for him, as she watched him rush to his car and drive away, his ears red with embarrassment.

She knew she should have let it go, but she could not. She marched towards him. She saw his driver get out of the car and hold the door for Mr Datta, who got out, seeing her charge.

'You know that you are a monster, don't you, Mr Datta?' she asked, her jaw clenched.

'I do have an idea, yes.'

'Oh, you do? Well, I just wanted to make sure, in case no one else told you, seeing as you seem to own everything around you, living or non.'

'What do you mean, Ms Sen?' he cocked his eyebrow.

'I mean that just because the people around you have their paycheck depending upon you, they do not tell you what a jerk you are. I thought I should do the honours.'

'Thank you. That's very considerate. Now-get in the car.'

'Excuse me?' She was stunned.

'You heard it right. Get in.'

'What? But ... why?'

'The same reason why I asked Faisal to leave. And the same reason why I will leave my driver here-I want you all to myself.'

PART II

HE

Is it a life well-lived, if it's a life lived without risks?

The battle against one's own heart, to prevent making the same mistake again, is the toughest battle to win. The desire to let go, to try, to play with fire—knowing the demerits, concentrating on the virtues—is not easily quenched. Being burned again is a hazard one takes; not knowing 'what could have been' can only result in regrets. What is love, if not throwing oneself unabashed into a whirlwind of emotions?

CHAPTER 6

THE RELUCTANT STRANGER

When we fight our hearts, to prevent ourselves from falling in love, the conflict is inevitably lost. The heart is already lost, long before the realization strikes.

Arjun stole a look at Shambhavi, sitting in the passenger seat of his car. Even though he was the one who practically forced her to come with him, he still wished that she had refused. He knew she would not have; just the way he could feel that she was excited, sitting in the car, next to him. It almost oozed out of her, like a physical presence. Darn.

Ever since he had first met her, he had been trying to fight the instant attraction he felt towards her. He was not a man who believed in love, or more importantly, trusted it. He did not think he was even capable of loving. If they kept meeting, their professional relationship would eventually develop into something more. They would reach a point where he would have no idea how to control things from getting out of hand. And he did not want that to happen.

For his sake. And hers.

'Where are we going?' Shambhavi asked, just as he was crossing Palasia Square.

'Radisson,' Arjun replied shortly.

'Oh. We're having lunch?'

'Yes. Didn't I hear you say that you were hungry?'

'Kind of, yes. But I didn't know you were listening. Were you eavesdropping, Mr Datta?' she cocked her head to a side and asked.

'No, I wasn't. It was you who was not speaking very softly,' Arjun said stiffly.

'I was. I was whispering into Faisal's ear. We were going to go on a date ... why would I shout?'

'Date, Ms Sen? You met that man just once, and you were already going on a date with him?'

'How does that concern you?' Shambhavi prodded, grinning widely. 'I know-you're jealous! You are jealous of Faisal. You could not stand that I was going to go out with him. So you sent him away and kidnapped me.'

'I kidnapped no one.'

'Yeah, right. You should have seen the look on your face. You didn't even need a gun to scare me into getting into the car. Even your driver was scared.'

'I just asked, and you agreed. And my driver wasn't scared. He left because I asked him to. That's in his job profile,' Arjun tried to convince Shambhavi.

'Of course, of course. Whatever you say,' she just rolled her eyes.

There was a silence in the car for some time. Arjun thought that it was a little awkward, but Shambhavi did not seem to mind. She was looking outside the window and smiling to herself like a lunatic.

'What's so funny?' he asked.

She turned to face him, grinning from ear to ear. He did not understand why she smiled so much. No matter what was happening around her, her default state was-being happy.

'What's funny is-you. You're the strangest person I have ever seen. All this time, you kept giving me a cold shoulder, when I was all starry-eyed about you. And when I gave up on getting through your sad, dark exterior, I find that you secretly like me.' She flashed him a dazzling smile, which made her eyes light up and her nose turn slightly pink.

'Starry-eyed about me? Do you think it's a good idea to start giving away such information just yet?' Arjun tried to act cool, but what she said had made his heart skip a beat. He did not like that feeling. He wanted no one to get in through the walls he had knowingly and rightly created around his heart.

'How does it matter? We're already going on a date, and knowing myself as I do, I'm sure you won't be able to let me go, ever.'

'That we will see. It seems like you assume too much. Likewe are going on a date and I secretly like you.'

'I'm not assuming, Arjun. I know. I can see,' Shambhavi said and blushed furiously, as if just realizing what she had been saying.

'Arjun? What happened to Mr Datta?'

'That was changed recently. It'll be so odd to call you Mr Datta now, with us dating and all, don't you think? And you can call me Shambhavi.'

By that time, they had reached Radisson. As the valet pulled the door open for her and she climbed out of his car, he scolded himself for the millionth time, for doing what he was doing. He had been doing a good job of being aloof and staying away from her, and he should have stuck to it. But seconds later, he found himself getting out of the car and handing over the keys to the valet.

'Shall we?' he asked, placing his hand softly at the small of her back.

'We shall!'

'Why are you so happy?'

'Why are you so irritable?' she questioned back.

'It's my way of living. Answer me, I want to know,' he asked, curious.

'Well, because being sad is not a good feeling. And looking sad will let others know that I am weak. I hate it. So I have made happiness my way of living.'

'Is there a reason why you should be sad?'

'Is that the kind of question you ask a girl on your first date with her?' she swiftly changed the topic, but he noticed.

'Fair enough. So, okay-tell me all about yourself,' he asked. He was not good at making small talk, so it was a good thing that he was genuinely interested in her and the question came to him naturally.

She rubbed her hands together and started, 'Well, I am an extrovert. I do not keep things to myself. I express what I feel in several forms of art. Except singing; I'm really bad at that. I write poetry, but don't show it to others. I write blog posts, but no one reads them, except this guy by the alias taciturnaficionada. I think he stalks me, but I do not mind. I have never had any follower my entire life. I love painting and dream of a day when I would have to do nothing in life except paint.'

'So you want to make a living out of painting?' Arjun asked.

'I just want to paint. And since making a living out of something is an obligation in order to place food on the table, I won't mind doing it through painting. Though, I do not know how that is going to work; I never sell my paintings.'

'And why is that?'

'I just don't. While painting them, I form a certain connection and cannot see them part from me.' She made a face. 'That's how interior designing comes in-to earn. I agree that it is fun too, and I have grown to love it, but for me it's still basically about a pay packet,' she explained.

'Why is money so important?' he asked. He fought against it, but his lips still formed a thin line of disapproval.

'Because I want to go to Paris,' she stated simply.

'Paris? Why?' He was confused.

'Because Paris is awesome, why else? Anyway, where's the waiter? I am starved. Will you think of me as gawaar if I order Indian food? I really do not want anything to do with Italian or Thai right now.'

'I'll have the same,' Arjun said, silently appreciating her for choosing Indian food.

They summoned the waiter and placed their orders. Surprisingly, his hunger had disappeared as soon as the topic of money had come up. He knew it was his problem, not hers, but he still could not make himself understand that this girl was different.

'Now, your turn-tell me about yourself,' Shambhavi asked. 'And not the stuff that is already on Google, because I know all of that already'

'You Googled me?'

'Yep. Didn't you Google me back? You would not have found much, but still. People do that nowadays, to find other people on social networks and places like that,' she explained. She looked surprised at the fact that he did not already know about all that she said.

'No, I did not search you on Google,' he replied.

'Never mind. I told you about me anyway. So tell me-all good hidden things about you. Something that no one else knows.'

'I do not know how to do this. I am just a regular person. There is nothing extraordinary about me, nothing to tell.'

'Oh, don't kid me. There is nothing regular about you, okay? When I first met you, I thought you had a red room of pain hidden somewhere,' Shambhavi said and winked at Arjun. The humour was lost on him. He stared at her with a blank expression.

'What?' he asked.

'Arey, like Christian Grey, from the Fifty Shades trilogy!' When the look on his face still did not change, she explained, 'He was into BDSM, and had a room for that. I compared you to him because you have kind of a dark air around you, too, like there is something you are hiding, under that gorgeous exterior of yours.'

'There's something dark about me?' Arjun asked, as the food was served.

'I used to feel so, but I don't know. You seem okay from up close.'

They started eating and for the next few minutes, there was silence at the table except for the rhythmic clinking of cutlery. From the look on her face, she was satisfied with the food, and so was he.

'I'm sorry. It must be such a turn off to see a girl hogging down food like this, but my lunch was overdue, and I had not had breakfast this morning,' she explained him between bites.

'I do not mind. In fact-it's quite the opposite. Watching you eat is better than seeing you play around with food on your plate and eventually wasting it.'

'Why would I do that?'

'I don't know. Girls do that. They order things and do not eat. Ultimately, the hotel throws it away,' Arjun said.

'Not all girls are constantly dieting, you know?' Shambhavi said and turned her attention back to her food.

'Point taken.'

'We need to come here again. Now that I have tasted this, I cannot live without it for long,' she said, pointing to the chocolate tart they had ordered for dessert. 'Oh, I have an idea. Let's go out tomorrow night? I know the perfect place they have the best Chinese food in the city. You'll love it. My treat.'

And that is how she asked herself out on a second date, as Arjun sat there, partly shocked, partly oddly excited.



It was 1 am and sleep was nowhere in sight. He reprimanded himself for getting weak and letting her get under his skin. He should never have asked her out for lunch. She'd thought it was a date, and they had another date set for the next night. As he lay in his bed that night, he still did not know how it had happened. How could he let it happen?

He had been trying to hold back and not get close to her. That was what was best for both of them, but he failed. He let her believe that they were dating, and she was bound to get hopeful about their future together. That is how the female brain functions. The female brain also senses wealth and can do anything to have it. That is how it is with women. What's in a man's pocket is more important to them than love.

He considered the chance of Shambhavi being different, but he could not take the risk. Money was too important to her. And he had too much of it in his bank accounts.

He knew that he needed to end it. He could not give her false hopes; that would not be fair to her. But he also knew that if he pulled back once again, he might lose her forever. She would not stand by him and wait for him to come around forever. She was attracted to him because of the mystery around him. Sooner or later, the charm would be lost and she would no longer feel the magic she seemed to feel between them.

Or maybe she was in it for his wealth, in which case, the charm would never fade. Not until the money did, anyway.

He hated himself for thinking like that about Shambhavi. But the lessons life had taught him had made him cynical. He could not just accept things without thinking about them first and finding flaws in them. Some things were too perfect to be true.

He tried and failed to sleep that night. Finally, a few hours of result-less efforts later, he got out of bed and made his way to the kitchen. He put on some coffee to brew in the coffeemaker and sat at the kitchen table, waiting. Once it was done, he filled a mugful of the hot liquid and took it with him to his bedroom.

He turned on the television. After surfing for a while, he found that a rerun of some crime show was on. He stared at the TV screen to ward off uninvited thoughts. When the show was over, he flipped through the channels again but failed to find anything remotely interesting. He wished he had someone

he could call, if only to be able to fight the fierce feeling of loneliness. But he had no one. He had cut all ties with human beings a long time ago. His life was his work. The person closest to him was probably his assistant, and he could hardly call Faisal to have a chat at 5 am, without coming across as a madcap.

And then, his thoughts came back to her. Shambhavi. Ever since he had first met her, the direction of his life seemed to have changed. That scared him to a large extent-to think that a girl could have so much power over him, in so little a time span. And he tried with all his might, but was unable to block her out. Her sweet face and huge smile broke through all the defences he had built up.

He thought long and hard about it, and decided that she needed to be put down. He would have to cancel his next date with her and let her know that whatever they were to have from then onwards needed to be strictly professional. That was how it was going to be.

With the decision finally made, his restlessness was put to a state of comparative ease. He fell into a dreamless, uncomfortable sleep.

CHAPTER 7

FROM THEN TO NOW

All it takes is one turn of events, to change lives forever. Some consequences remain irreversible for a lifetime.

Arjun was seventeen, living on the outskirts of Indore, in a place called Dewas, when his parents decided to take him to the city so that he could get proper higher education. He had just taken his XII Boards and harboured dreams of becoming an architect. His father owned a furniture store, which brought in decent amount of income home. His mother used to teach in a government school, and did her part in providing for the family. He also had a sister, ten years younger to him.

Even though they never had a shortage of money, they never had an excess of it either. They had been happy. His parents worked hard and as he grew up, he wanted to do his part to help the family. He had always been good at studies. Studying in a simple convent school all his life, he was excellent at English, driven by courtesy, and curious to learn. He also made sure his sister knew everything in her textbooks by heart. Everything went smoothly till he passed out of school.

Then one day, the time came for him to go to college. He was working hard enough to get a scholarship, but they still needed a student loan, like all middle-class families do. Arjun was hell-bent on paying back the money to the bank himself, once he passed out of college and started working. With that thought in mind, he joined college, excited about studying architecture, the subject he was going to graduate in.

The first semester went by, and everything was smooth. Arjun found his subjects engaging and interesting and big plans for the future started to take form in his head. One weekend, his father was coming to Indore for some work and his mother and sister had decided to tag along to meet Arjun. He showed them around the city and they ate out in the heart of the city-Rajwada. He promised his sister to take her to Chappan Dukaan-Indore's food destination, a set of lots and lots of small outlets serving anything from hot dogs to Bengali sweets to pani puri-when she came to the city next.

That never happened. On their way back to Dewas, the minibus they were travelling in got hit by a loaded truck, coming from the opposite direction. It being a highway, both the vehicles were moving at high speeds and the collision was powerful. Too powerful for people inside the vehicles to survive.

As soon as Arjun got to know about the accident, which was a good twelve hours after it happened, he rushed to the filthy government hospital his family was taken into. Once there, he found his father missing a limb and bleeding profusely, but still breathing. His mother and sister were not as lucky.

Arjun had no means of getting his father transferred to a better hospital, a private one. He cursed the day he let his parents put their entire life's savings into his college tuition, in order to get that student loan. He felt helpless. The amount left with them was too meagre a sum to be of much help.

He managed to get his father transferred to a private hospital and get better treatment, but the hospital was not much better than the government one. Arjun was seventeen, too young and too panicked to deal with it all by himself. And he did not get a chance to ask anybody for help.

He saw his father bleed to death, right in front of his eyes.



Arjun was twenty-three when Prehal came into his life. It had been six years since his family passed away, and by that time, he had picked up the pieces of his scattered life, and was in the process of putting them together. When his family had died, he had nothing left. He swore against emotional attachments to people; it hurt too much to lose them.

He had just one aim in life-to make big bucks. He blamed his family's death on money, or the lack of it. Had they been rich, they would have gotten immediate medical attention and would not have died so untimely. They would not even have been in that minibus in the first place. It was just unfair.

Arjun had dropped out of college. He had gone back home and tried to take his father's business forward from there, unsuccessfully. Too many things at home reminded him too much of the family he had lost. So he sold his father's furniture store and took up the only thing he knew how to do-build. He went to Indore again, and worked day and night, endlessly to make something of himself. After a couple of years of constant struggling, he owned the small lodge he had rented and had three employees working under him. Two more years of more struggling, he owned a big factory.

In those four years' time, he had drowned himself in work, the wound of his family's untimely departure had numbed. And thus, when Prehal walked into his life, he did not hesitate to let himself fall in love. He dealt with his fear of emotional attachment and decided to give himself, and her, a chance. He had lots of money by then, not in liquid form, but still more than he had ever had before. And he knew his business was on a superfast lane.

By then, his business had started to flourish enough to get noticed by the local newspapers and magazines. After the first four years of depriving himself of everything and just working, he started enjoying the interest the world was showing in him. The attention was humbling and drove him to work even harder. For the next two years, his business grew exponentially and people's interest kept pouring on him.

But eventually, he realized that it was not he, as a person, that the world was interested in, it was what he was. No one really cared about him, just his work and what he had made of himself. The female attention was only a means of securing a wealthy husband, not a good man. The realization was a sharp blow, and he began to shy away from media and social gatherings and move back into his shell.

Prehal was a sight to sore eyes and a cure to his wounded heart. She helped him open up once again, and showed him how much fun life was, if only he tried to live it fully. For the first time in a long, long time, Arjun had felt alive. Prehal slowly became more than just a friend and a confidant to him, and he lost his heart to her.

That was when life took away the ground from under his feet for the second time. When the smile on Arjun's face started to return, it was clear to those around him that he and Prehal were going around. That was when one of his employees made him aware of a secret he knew-Prehal was double-crossing him. Arjun saw no reason to believe him and the poor man got fired.

It was only later that he found out the truth for himself Prehal was indeed having an affair with two men at the same time. It was only after he did his digging and got to know the whole story that he decided to confront her, just to see how honest she was with him. She broke down.

'It was not my idea. Utkarsh asked me to do this,' she cried.

'Utkarsh?' Arjun questioned.

'Yes. He's my husband. We love each other. We were together when I met you. Seeing that you liked me, Utkarsh had this crazy idea ...'

'What idea?'

'He said I could tell you that I was pregnant with your baby, and you would have to marry me,' Prehal said, clearly embarrassed.

'But you are already married. How could I have married you?' Arjun thundered.

'We married in a temple. We're not legally married.'

'And what would have happened if I had not married you? That's not how it works in real life, you know? Men don't just marry women who tell them they are pregnant with their babies.'

'We had considered that. But then your other option would have been to pay me off. We were okay with that,' she murmured.

'So ... it was about ... money, all this while? Right from the beginning?' Arjun could not believe what was happening. How could he have been so blind?

'Not when I first met you. It was a month later, when Utkarsh got to know that we were good friends, he found out all about you and thought of ways to get money out of you. I was against it, but eventually, I had to agree. I did not want to lose him and we needed money. I love him.'

Arjun said nothing. He just shook his head in disgust. He was still wrapping his head around the fact that the girl he had allowed to pass through all his defences, had betrayed him. She was married, for God's sake. How could he not see that she had never had real feelings for him? She had been a darn good actress. He was sickened by the way she had played with him, his heart. He turned away from her. She followed him.

'I am pregnant, Arjun. I have a baby on the way-his baby. I had no other option but to do what he asked me to,' Prehal sobbed.

'I know that. How can you be so blind? Don't you see that he got you pregnant for a reason? He wanted money, and just that. When you refused to cooperate, he accidentally got you pregnant so that you would have to do whatever he said.' Arjun ran his fingers through his hair, frustrated.

'How do you know that?'

'The same way I know that you were trying to find a way to get ... intimate with me, so that you could later tell me that it was my baby.'

'If it means anything to you-I was not going to do that. I have known you for the last four months, and it was somehow more than enough time to understand you. I could never betray you like that,' Prehal said.

'Then why did you tell Utkarsh that you were going to do it?' Seeing Prehal look up at him in surprise, Arjun continued, 'Yes, I met him before coming here. I know everything.'

She nodded, before saying, 'I told him that, to see if he would make me stop. I am bearing his child, but he still wants me to sleep with another man just for some cash. That opened my eyes. I know what kind of a man he is and that's when I decided to leave him. I would prefer raising my child alone, than living with that man.'

'Why do I not believe you?'

'Because I broke your trust. I know you will never believe me again.'

That was the last time he met Prehal. He told her what he found out about Utkarsh, just to save her the torture of finding it out herself-as soon as Arjun had confronted him, Utkarsh knew that his plan did not have any chance of working anymore. He had already decided not to have anything to do with Prehal after that; she had nothing to offer him-no money. He was planning on getting rid of the unborn baby anyway, once he got the cash. And if Prehal refused to get an abortion, just like she had refused everything else, he would have taken the cash and left.

Prehal told Arjun that she had suspected that. She looked sad and even though Arjun still found it extremely difficult to believe anything she said, he pitied the situation she was stuck in.

'How could you have been so stupid? So blind?' he murmured, frustration seeping out of his tone.

'I was in love,' she said softly.

Arjun could not take any more of it. He gave her a cheque with a sum he thought appropriate to help her get through the pregnancy and take care of the child. And then, he asked her to leave. It did not come to him as a surprise when she took the cheque with her and left.



Six years later, when he was twenty-nine, Shambhavi came into his life. Over the years, he had turned from a newbie to someone who excelled in his field, and along with it, came the polish his personality needed to fit into the posh businessclass society he was now rightfully a part of. No one who met him could guess where he came from and what he had gone through. No one made fun of his accent behind his back, like the women who would flirt with him in those tedious dinners he used to attend when he first started getting recognition ... although he never posed to be someone he wasn't. He could do

without the pretences the high-class life brought with it. He wore what he felt like wearing, ate what he felt like eating and built what he felt like building. No one had a say in anything he did.

It was only when he met Shambhavi that he started to wonder what the world saw him as, after so many years. From the moment he first saw her, he had been trying to stop himself from falling in love for the second time. The lessons life had taught him were not forgotten. The death of his family taught him to not get attached to people and so he had built a wall around his heart and had not let anyone in since. He had also learnt that being rich mattered more than anything else in life, and that was how money had become his life, his obsession. He had begun to learn it, and Prehal had been the last nail in the coffin.

After he had failed to keep Prehal out of the defences he had built and allowed her to come close, he learnt not to get attached to people ... ever again. And the meaning of money had changed in his life once again. He had always been driven to make it-especially so after his family's death-but after Prehal's painful betrayal, he had started hating money as much as he loved making it.

He was devastated by what Prehal had done to him. His heart had shattered into a thousand tiny pieces and scattered on the floor. To deal with the ache it caused him, he had used anger. He had refused to let pain be the most prominent feeling, to let it drown him in helplessness and sadness. Fury superseded every other emotion.

He had a lot of baggage to carry, for one person. The only way he had been able to survive was by blocking everything out and concentrating only on work. That is how his business had grown.

People said his way of working was unconventional. He had no reply to that. He just worked in the only way he knew how to work. He had seen his father build furniture and he had adapted his style and way of working. He worked endlessly for days on end and if the final product was up to the standard he had set for himself, he sent the piece over for replication and production on a large scale.

For each of his designs, they would make exactly two hundred replicas, when their factory grew to allow such a scale. In due course of time, it became a pattern. Even after his business grew several times over the years, the pattern had not changed. They still produced a mere two hundred facsimiles for every one of his designs, each of which Arjun approved himself after inspecting. The craze for his work grew to such an extent that pre-orders were made for his next product even before he designed it. All two hundred copies of each new product sold out before he completed building the first of them.

Over time, the demand for his original work spiked beyond imagination, which resulted in his company becoming extremely exclusive and the products extremely expensive. DE was known to be artistic, not huge. The supply always fell short of the demand. He refused having too many showrooms across the country, but even if he did, he wondered what he would showcase; all his work was instantly sold out, as soon as it was built. They never had anything in stock.

He had heard that after every new design was launched by their company, the market flooded with cheap imitations of the same. He had become some sort of a trendsetter, someone everyone followed. He hardly cared about such things; without caring about what others were doing, he only cared about doing well in what he was doing.

Carving wood brought peace to him. He liked to work alone, in silence, not caring about whatever was happening in the world around him. His line of business made it obligatory for him to meet people

sometimes, but he shunned it as much as he could. Just like Mrs Ahluwalia. She was not someone he had enjoyed meeting, but he needed to, in order to get through with the furnishing of her mansion, to be turned into a bedand-breakfast. So he had.

And after getting back to the office, he realized that the meeting had not ended well. Not with respect to Mrs Ahluwalia, but with Ms Sen, the woman who insisted he called her by her first name. Shambhavi.

He regretted taking her to lunch. It was the first time in years that he had had company, other than professional, of a girl for lunch. He grudgingly admitted that he had liked it. It was something he could easily get used to. But he did not wish to. He had learnt all his lessons the hard way, and he did not cherish the thought of learning them again.

He felt something different about Shambhavi. She was twenty-three and had achieved more than an average girl her age does, especially given her laidback attitude towards everything. She was carefree, followed her dreams and did whatever she felt like, with no pressure of the world. But when she was working, she got absorbed in it completely and an extraordinary spark shone in her eyes. He felt drawn to her. They connected at a deeper level-a bond that was shared because of their mutual love for art. He was a very observant person, always the one for details, but he had not got to know so much about her from sheer observation. Google had helped, just like she had told him it does. But most of it was still an observation.

CHAPTER 8

ALL ABOUT BUSINESS

Love is like a fresh breeze, to the stifled. No wonder he found it impossible to resist.

What was that?' Shambhavi questioned, a bewildered look on her face and her hair looking equally wild. It only added colour to her cheeks and made her look more adorable. Arjun guessed it was because she travelled in her car, with the windows pulled down, in the hot summer day; it was the middle of July. He knew her car's air conditioner was not working; he remembered her ranting about it on their way back, after lunch the previous day.

'I'm sorry? Can I help you?' he asked, trying to put as less emotion as possible in his tone.

'What is this all about?' Shambhavi repeated, this time, shoving a small card in his face, which read,

Yesterday's lunch was a mistake.

No more dates, including tonight's.

Strictly professional from now onwards.

Regards, A

Arjun read the note and asked, 'I believe that was the note attached to the flowers I sent you?'

'What do you mean you believe? You sent them, right? Don't you know?' Shambhavi's tone started getting more and more animated.

'Technically ... Faisal sent them, from me,' Arjun dared.

'Don't you get into all that, mister. Do you not know that sending a girl flowers raises expectations? Especially if it is after a first date? How could you do that to me? If you did not want to continue, fair and good, you should have just told me. Why the huge bouquet of flowers? And the box of chocolates?'

'I just thought it was a decent thing to do.'

'Really? That was your idea of putting me down easy? Guess what-it's your loss. I'll get thousands like you, you won't get a girl like me,' Shambhavi said, and with that, she turned to leave. 'I have left the flowers and the chocolates at the reception, you can have this card,' she threw it in the paper basket by his door.

'Shambhavi-' Arjun tried to stop her, but she cut him off.

'Yes, Mr Datta?'

'Nothing,' he said, noticing that they were no longer on first name terms.

'Good. Let's meet at 12:30 pm like planned, then?'

'Sure.'

As she walked out of his office, he glanced at his watch. 12:30 pm was exactly eight minutes away. She did not need to be so overtly theatrical about it. But that was who she was, gregarious drama and all. He was just relieved that it was over.



When Arjun made it to the factory's east end-which was where they kept the first Arjun-made prototypes of all the pieces he had ever made-he saw that Shambhavi and her colleague Tutul were already there, along with Faisal.

To his great relief, Shambhavi did not mention their interaction, or the date the previous day or anything personal at all during the entire time they took to tour the area and select items from it. In fact, she acted like nothing was off, as if nothing out of ordinary had happened. It felt like she had already moved on, like it had not affected her in the least.

For some reason, Arjun did not like the feeling. Maybe because he was still a little disturbed inside, and she seemed to have forgotten all about it. And it had been just eight minutes.

'This is it, I guess?' Shambhavi asked, turning to Faisal.

'Actually, no. This is just one floor; there are three more floors of this,' Arjun replied, before Faisal could say anything.

'I know that, Mr Datta. Faisal here told me about that. But I just wanted to see these pieces in person. I have seen the catalogue of the rest of your pieces,' Shambhavi said.

'Yes, Mr Datta. These are the newest of your designs. We do not have them on the catalogue yet,' Faisal added.

'So, you have already selected whatever you needed?' Arjun asked Shambhavi, ignoring Faisal.

'More or less. I have marked them in the catalogue. We have a few confusions, which we would like to clear with you. Other than that, we are done here.'

'Good. What kind of confusions?'

'I'll have Tutul send them over to you?' Shambhavi asked.

'Sure.'

'Great,' she said and turned to Tutul. 'Add the model numbers of the pieces we selected from here on this list. We'll go through it and finalise the final list tonight, okay?'

'Okay. And Shambhavi, I think I should check out the selected articles in person once?' Tutul suggested.

'Yes, good idea. Go with Faisal and take a look? Fill me in later?'

'Yes, I will. You go now. Take care of him, okay?'

'Of course,' Shambhavi said and turned to the men and bid them goodbye. 'Gentlemen, I will see you later.'

'Later,' Faisal said cheerfully.

Arjun nodded. He wondered whom Tutul was referring to when she asked Shambhavi to take care of him. He shook his head to clear his thoughts. It was none of his business.

As soon as Shambhavi left, Faisal and Tutul also took their leave for the first floor, leaving him standing there alone. For some reason, he felt lost, even though he was standing at the one place which was truly his own-his factory, his office, his home.



The next five weeks went by at an unrealistic pace, or at least that was how Arjun felt. Working with Shambhavi was an overwhelming experience. Even though he had always been good at what he did, he had never been so enthusiastic about his work. That was probably because the money had always mattered more to him than the work he was doing. But with Shambhavi, it was different. Just seeing her work was an experience.

He had gone through her portfolio, the one she had left behind in his office after their first meeting. He had grudgingly admitted to himself that he was impressed by her work. That was partly the reason why he had even looked at the sample designs she prepared for the Ahluwalia mansion. Otherwise, he had planned to brush her off directly, when she called on the personal number he gave her on his visiting card. But her work had not let him do that. On working together, he got to witness the process through which such impeccable designs came into existence.

She got engrossed in whatever she was doing, be it something as important as detailing her designs or as insignificant as taking printouts. She put her heart into everything. He also realized that she had not been faking aloofness and pretending to have got over his decision of not having anything personal between them. She had genuinely forgiven him and moved on. She was not the kind of person to hold grudges. Like a child, she was easy to please and could never stay mad for long. Not once, in the whole time he had worked with her, did he feel like she held something against him. She was back to calling him Arjun and behaving normally around him.

He was grateful to her for that.

That night, they had a housewarming party at the Ahluwalias' mansion to attend. Arjun was against the idea of going there, but changed his mind, when he found out that Shambhavi would be there.

It was probably his last legitimate chance to meet her and he was in no mood to miss it. Over the weeks they had spent working together, she had slowly grown on him. If nothing else, he was just used to having her around. Her laughter, her chirps, her bright eyes and her ... sheer presence had become a part of his routine. He had no idea how she had managed to get under his skin so quickly, but she had. There was no denying that.

'Where are you?' Arjun asked Faisal over phone.

'At my place, sir,' a slightly anxious Faisal replied.

'I'll be getting to the Ahluwalia mansion in an hour. Be there.'

'But, sir ... I was going to go to a movie with friends. The show starts in forty minutes.'

'Then you will just have to miss it, won't you?' Arjun snapped.

'Yes, sir. I will be there,' Faisal changed tracks immediately.

Arjun hung up and turned to the mirror. He was wearing a deep violet shirt under a charcoal suit. He played with a few ties and decided not to bother with any of them. He unbuttoned the first few buttons of his shirt and flicked his fingers through his hair. He needed a haircut, and his stubble was getting out of hand, too, but he didn't have time for that. Trying to manage his hair to make it look presentable, he grabbed his car keys and walked out of his bedroom.

By the time Arjun got to the mansion, his heart was beating rapidly in his chest. He wished he had made some friends over the years, if only to have been able to ask for their help in the situation he was in. He was like a teenager in love, only with a whole lot of baggage and reservations. His mind was in complete chaos. He did not know what to do.

He could not let Shambhavi go. But making her stay was not something he was prepared for either; that would mean commitment and he was not ready for that yet.

But when he saw her that night, all his hesitations and uncertainties vanished. And not just because she was looking resplendent in the bottle green saree she wore. It was because of the expression she wore.

She stood only a few feet away from him, but was still far away. She had a drink in her hand, which remained untouched. Her physical presence was the only proof of her being there; her mind was elsewhere. There was something going on in her head, something bothering her. She looked weak and distraught. For the first time since he had met her, she felt older than sixteen to him. And that told him that she was much more mature than he had first thought.

She was staring at a distance, alone in the crowd surrounding her. Her eyes were fixed on something he could not see, something visible only to her. Her shoulders were hunched, as if in defeat, as if she had lost a battle. She looked small and fragile, and Arjun immediately felt an urge to rush to her and protect her.

He tried to catch her attention, but she was not looking at him, even though her eyes were turned towards him. She continued gazing unseeingly at something, lost in her thoughts.

'Hi,' he went to her and said, inspecting her eyes to find a sheen of wetness in them. He was right; something was up.

'Hey,' she replied shortly, coming out of her reverie abruptly. Her smile did not stretch her lips for more than two millimetres.

'Something wrong?'

'What? Oh. No, no. Nothing's wrong. I am all right.'

'You are?' he cocked his eyebrow. He never asked her if she was okay. Something was definitely up.

'Yes. Anyway,' Shambhavi looked around, clearly searching for something to help her change the topic, 'where is Faisal? Is he not coming?'

'He is. Must be getting here any moment.'

'Tutul is not. She's down with fever-viral. I tell you, it's the worst thing ever. You have to get all kinds of stupid blood tests done over and over again and nothing comes out positive. So the doctors just prescribe every kind of medicine there is in the world, which only makes things worse. Plus it leaves a bitter taste in the mouth-you can't even enjoy eating. Imagine that.'

'Agreed. So, is that why you look sad? Because you are worried about your friend?' Arjun asked. He was not going to let go, until he got to know what was bothering her. Her nonsensical rant was a failed attempt at distracting him.

'A little. I thought you guys were not coming. And Tutul can't either. I felt like I was going to have dinner alone tonight, in the midst of so many strangers,' she said. 'Oh, look. There's Faisal.'

Soon after, Faisal joined them and they did not get a chance to spend any time alone. Arjun just kept feeling like Shambhavi was extremely sad inside. He tried to get it out of her, but with Faisal around, he could not prod. Also, he feared that she would tell him that he had no right to know ... no right over her. So he kept shut. He regretted having forced Faisal to come. He would have preferred his assistant watching a movie with his friends' circle, after all.

He wanted to ask Faisal to give them privacy, but he could not do that without giving Shambhavi the wrong idea. He had done that before, and it had not ended well. He knew better than doing that again.

So he just kept stealing glances at Shambhavi, trying to figure out her problem. Every time she found him staring at her, she smiled politely and turned away, resuming her dinner. She chatted fake-happily with Faisal, about everything under the sun, while Arjun's heart sank lower and lower, as he realized that it was probably the last time he was seeing her.



Three months had passed since he had last seen her. There had not been a single day when he had not thought of her and missed her, in his own convoluted way. He had decided what needed to be done. He wanted her back. He wanted to give themselves-and any relationship which could ensue between them-a chance.

Other than that, there was another reason why he was willing to take a leap of faith-had she been a gold-digger, she would not have gone out of his life so easily and completely. She would have done something to have another shot at him. But she had not. Not once in the three months had she tried to contact him in any way. That gave him a little something to build some faith on.

He promised himself that he would be careful. He knew she probably was not after his wealth. But she was in need of money ... that much he was sure about. She had been working tirelessly on the Ahluwalias' assignment for the paychecks she admitted that herself. She liked to paint; interior design-ing was to make a living.

After telling himself for the hundredth time to tread carefully, he picked up his phone and called her number. He got a busy tone. He tried again, with the same outcome.

It was in the evening, when he was engaged in polishing his latest article of furniture-a teak wood dresser-that his phone rang. His thoughts went to her immediately. And sure enough, it was Shambhavi's cell number, which was displayed on his phone's screen.

'Hello?' he answered the call.

'Hi. Arjun?' she asked.

'Yes, Shambhavi. How are you?'

'I'm good. How are you? Long time. It's the craziest thing ever-I was just thinking about you. And I check my phone and find your missed calls.'

'Is that so? And why would you be thinking about me?' Arjun asked, pleasantly surprised.

'I was just in one of your showrooms and saw a few new designs. That maple wood chest, I tell you, it was beautiful. So ... perfect. I mean, the texture, the design, the detailing everything.'

'Thank you. I am glad you liked it.'

'Liked it? Loved it. I told the salesman that I personally know you and have worked with you, but I don't think he believed me. He just eyed me from head to toe and shrugged,' Shambhavi said. Arjun could almost imagine her making a face and crinkling her nose at the other end of the phone. He had really missed that, he suddenly realized.

'There might have been some other reason for that, you know-the eyeing from head to toe,' he said, tongue-in-cheek. It was tough to be with Shambhavi and not get into the same light mood as hers. She was almost contagious.

'Ahh! I see your humour has developed over the last, what, two months? Three?'

'Three.'

'Phew. Long time, really. I thought you must have forgotten me, seeing as you do not make friends, just business acquaintances,' Shambhavi said. 'I must say-your call came as a surprise.'

'I had expected it to be so.'

'Hmm. So, what is going on?'

'I called you just to ... see if we could catch up sometime, maybe?' He was suddenly nervous.

'Sure. Dinner tomorrow?'

'Sounds great.'

'But may I ask why the sudden interest in me?' Shambhavi asked.

'No reason.' Actually, I have wanted to get back in touch since a long time, but was not sure whether or not it would be appropriate. Because the last time, I ended it abruptly after the first date ... so I was worried you would not be willing to give me a second chance after that kind of behaviour from me. Also, I was making sure you weren't after my wealth, so I stayed away from you to find out whether you would try to get in touch. Now the test is over and you have passed. He felt slightly disgusted at himself for having those kinds of thoughts.

'Okay. Never mind. See you tomorrow then?'

'Yes. Tomorrow,' Arjun replied shortly.

'Text me the address; I will be there.'

'No. You don't have to come. I mean-I'll come to pick you up from your place.'

'You do know that that would make it a date, don't you?' Shambhavi asked, surprise evident in her tone.

'I do. It was intentional.'

'Oh.'

After they hung up, Arjun got back to his polishing. He appraised his most recent creations-a rocking chair and the dresser he had been working on. He wondered what Shambhavi would have to say about it. Maybe she would like the dresser. But maybe not the rocking chair; the colour was a bit too dark for her taste. He had come to know these things about her over the weeks they had worked together.

Suddenly, he was hit by another idea-to build a similar armchair, in a slightly smaller size and a lighter shade. He might even keep the carving a little delicate. The two chairs together would complement each other beautifully-the dark and the fair, together. Perfect. That, he was sure, she would love. He looked forward to showing them to her, casually, and asking for her opinion.

He was already excited about it. Her excitement was definitely contagious.

He immediately got to work.

CHAPTER 9

A LEAP OF FAITH

Life doesn't give too many options. One is to trust, to try, despite one's reservations. The other is to never know what could've been.

Yellow suited her, he thought, as soon as he laid his eyes on her. Standing at her door, one hand holding the door open for him and the other putting back an escaped curl behind her ear, she was a sight. However, he did not let her know that.

'Ready?' he asked, instead.

'Yes, just let me get my handbag,' Shambhavi said, and rushed to her room. When she got back, he noticed that her lipstick was a shade darker. 'I like your jacket,' she said.

'Thank you. Shall we?'

'Yeah. Do you have a place in mind?'

'Why? What is wrong with Radisson?' Arjun asked, a little surprised that she would want to go someplace else.

'Everything. I feel old there. Everyone is so silent and sombre, sitting under the high ceilings and expensive chandeliers. It's like being rich drained all the fun out of them. No offence.'

'A little taken.'

'Sorry,' Shambhavi grinned sheepishly.

'So, where do you suggest we go?'

'To a movie? Have you seen Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi? All my friends have watched it. And I'm still waiting for someone to give me company ... Mili is not fun anymore. Ever since her boyfriend left for the US, she has stopped going out and stuff. She says this is her chance to relax and laze around at home and look ugly, since Vikaas-that's her guy's name-isn't here to see and she has no one to impress.'

'Umm ... so you want to see a movie with me?' Arjun asked. Shambhavi always tended to give him too much information, and often got off track, which confused him.

'Not necessarily you, but since Mili is not going out anymore and Tutul is always so busy with her stupid work and all my other friends have seen the movie, I think I'll have to do with your company...' she said, half- lost in her thoughts.

'Well, it was not I who suggested a movie. I'm not forcing you to. There's no pressure.'

'Oh, right. I forgot. This is not about whom I want to see RNBDJ with; it's about where to go to-night.'

'Right. So?' Arjun asked.

'So let's go. What time is it?'

'8:15 pm.'

'Let's catch whatever show is available. We'll have to grab something to eat there; I haven't eaten since lunch,' Shambhavi declared and they finally started moving towards his car. 'Can I drive?'

Arjun paused in his tracks, looked at his car and turned back to stare at Shambhavi. He said nothing.

'What? I want to! I've never driven a BMW before. And anyway, I heard you have so many more cars. How does it matter if I drive one of them just once?'

'This one is my favourite.'

'I'm not going to bump it anywhere. I promise, I'll be careful. And you will be right there with me, so what's the big deal?' she demanded.

One look at her determined expression and he was taken. The brightness in her eyes worked too. She had decided that she had to drive and he was no one to stop her. He relented, 'Very well, then. But careful, okay?'

'Yes, yes.'

Once they got into the car, she took the keys and a crash course on the functions of the car from him and rubbed her palms together in excitement. 'Wow! I can't believe I am actually doing this. Mili will be so jealous.'

'Who is this Mili, again?'

'Oh, didn't I tell you? Mili's my best friend. The one whose boyfriend is away? You haven't met her, but then you've not met any of my friends. Just Tutul, but that was because of business, so ...'

'All right, I get it. Do you ever shut up?' Arjun asked, in awe of her ability to keep saying things.

'Rarely. But that's why I am so awesome, I'm told,' she said smugly and turned the key in the ignition. 'Whoa!' she shouted as she zipped through the traffic easily. After having driven her old Esteem for so many years, she had learnt how to control a car. And driving the BMW was comparatively way easier, although a little scary. If she accidentally hit it somewhere, she would probably not even have enough funds to cover the damage. But then she figured that the car must be insured and stopped worrying.

Sadly, the ride was over in less than fifteen minutes, when they reached C-21. She parked the car safely and they got out.

'Amazing. One day, I tell you, I am going to be so rich. I want these toys, man. I could easily get used to this,' she ranted happily.

Arjun instinctively pulled back from her. Maybe she was just a dreamy young girl, with a thousand dreams in her eyes. Or maybe she was a conniving businesswoman, with a moneymaking scheme in her head-Arjun. He wanted to go with the first option, but he could never be too careful.

'What's wrong?' Shambhavi asked suddenly, and Arjun realized that she was studying his face.

'Nothing.'

'Then why the scary expression? You scare me sometimes, you know? Anyway, there is a show in fifteen minutes, are you game? Or shall we just eat somewhere and go back?'

'Whatever you want,' Arjun replied shortly.

'Movie then. Just one more thing ...'

'What?'

'Are you one of those people who talk so much during a movie that you don't let others concentrate on the film?' she asked seriously.

'What do you think?'

'I think you're not. You don't talk much anyway.'

'What if I am?' Arjun questioned.

'Then that would be a problem. Because I am usually that annoying person who talks too much during the movie. You have to be the ear,' she said cheerfully and they made their way to the ticket counter.

For all the big talk, once inside the theatre, Shambhavi did not take her eyes off the screen even once. She was a big SRK fan and swore once the movie ended that it was going to be her very favourite for life. Arjun was seeing a movie after roughly ten years, and he was amazed at how much fun it was to go out with someone, keep work away from the head and just relax. Shambhavi was making him feel things he had forgotten he had an ability to feel. And it was only the second time they had gone out for a non-professional concern.

He looked forward to where time would take them, with hope, a trace of fear and a lot of uncertainty.



The two weeks after the movie had been busy for both of them. Arjun had always been a workaholic and this was no different. Shambhavi, on the other, hand, told him that she was caught up in a few

small assignments she had to take care of. So they did not meet after that movie-date even once. And he was not used to calling people for no reason just to check up with them, so he didn't call her.

Though, Shambhavi did call him up a few times to ask what was going on and tell him how the auto driver almost got her killed by a bus and how her heel broke in the middle of the market-random stuff like that. Once she was done pouring out whatever had happened in the course of her day, she hung up, wishing him goodnight. For some reason, he found himself wishing it would happen more often. Four times in two weeks was not enough; he wished it happened every night. Her voice was a good last-thing-to-hear before he went to sleep. Her energy made him energetic, her mood decided his. He cursed her nails for being so brittle and chipping, just because she complained about it sadly to him once. He also hated that the woman next door to her was mean to her.

He was getting used to her. And he liked the feeling.

She had not called him for five continuous nights; the last time they had talked was on the 1st of January ... the year 2011 had begun. And he hated to admit it, but-he had missed her. He finalized his plan in his head for one last time and then gave her a call.

'Hi, Arjun,' Shambhavi shouted.

'How soon can I see you?' Arjun asked, getting straight to the point.

'Hello? Arjun? Hello?' she yelled. There was a loud thumping noise behind her and the pitch of her voice was unusually high too.

'Hello? Shambhavi? Where are you?'

'Wait a second. I'll have to come out. Just hold on,' she screamed over the noise. She got back on the phone a few seconds later, and this time there was a lot less noise in the background. 'Hi, what's up?'

'Wanted to talk to you about something, so gave you a ring. Where are you?'

'On the Rocks. It's a Saturday night; friends insisted. Where are you?'

'At home,' Arjun said.

'Of course. Relax a little, man. Hey, I have an idea-why don't you come over?'

'To a bar? I'll pass.'

'Don't tell me you don't drink,' Shambhavi said.

'I don't.'

'Really? No way! I always thought you were one of the types who knew all about drinks and the proportions of mixing them and how to handle them and all of that. Never mind. I don't drink either.'

'Then what are you doing there?' Arjun questioned.

'Dancing. Care to join me? I need a partner anyway; all my friends have brought dates, so I feel kind of lonely in this crowd.'

'No thank you. I just wanted to discuss something with you, but this doesn't seem to be the right time, so ...'

'No, no. I'm not kidding. Really. Come over. I won't make you stay. We'll leave after a while, promise. I can't bear the atmosphere once the alcohol starts to show its effects,' she said seriously.

'All right. Will be there in twenty. And we won't stay for more than ten minutes, okay?'

'Deal.'



'Where to?' Arjun asked, looking at Shambhavi, who was sitting peacefully in the passenger's seat of his car. Thankfully, she did not want to try driving his car this time. He had gone to the club she was in, met her drunk friends, seen her dance madly and had taken her back to his car. She looked really tired; almost on the verge of falling asleep.

'I don't know. What was it you wanted to discuss?' she asked, yawning behind her palm.

'Not like this. We need to sit and talk.'

'We're sitting. Let's talk. It's 11 in the night, we have both eaten, we don't drink and I have danced enough. A long drive would be nice, but I'm afraid I would just fall asleep. So let's just talk right now.'

'Let's go back to my office,' Arjun suggested.

'Why would we want to do that? Did you not hear me? It's almost midnight. This is no time to be at the office.'

'Okay, fine. Let's stay at the parking lot, then.'

'Good boy,' Shambhavi said and pulled one of his cheeks. She shifted towards him and laying her head lazily on his shoulder, she closed her eyes and murmured, 'So, what's up?'

Arjun felt like she would fall asleep any second. He could feel her breathing get heavier. Also, he was nervous about what he was trying to say. He had thought and thought and thought very hard of a way of keeping her close, without letting her and himself become too deeply involved romantically. He wanted to keep dating her, but not do something insane-like fall in love. Not yet. He wanted to take things slow and give them a chance at a relationship.

He had found a solution. But he was anxious about her take on it.

'Arjun?' she whispered.

'Yes?'

'Say something?'

He took a deep breath and started. 'I was thinking that, after we worked on the Ahluwalias' mansion together and it turned out so beautifully, why don't we ... work together again?' On receiving silence from her end, he rushed to explain. 'It's just a thought. Till now, I have designed and built everything myself, except for those designs you drew. And honestly, I liked working on them. So I thought you might be interested in doing that again sometime?'

'Great.' She dug deeper into his chest and nuzzled.

'Shambhavi?' he asked. He was almost sure that the woman was sleeping, right when he was telling her what was probably the sweetest plan he was capable of knitting, all just to keep her close to him.

'Mmmm?'

'You're sleeping.'

'You smell good,' she said, incoherently,

'Thank you. I'm dropping you back home. We can send someone over to get your car from here tomorrow morning, okay?'

There was no response.

'Shambhavi?'

No response again. He carefully shifted her back and adjusted her on the passenger seat. He then pulled her seat belt in place and put his on, too. Shifting the gear stick, he drove swiftly towards her place. After stressing his memory for a good ten minutes, whether to take a right or left from Navlakha, he turned around and made his way to his own place instead.

For some reason, he did not want to wake her up and ask for directions. Maybe because he did not want her to leave just yet.

When he braked in front of the double gates, she stirred. He got out of the car, walked towards her side of the door and pulled it open for her. 'Let's go,' he said softly, helping her with his hands.

'Why are we at your factory?' she asked, rubbing her eyes. 'Oh, darn. The eyeliner,' she then muttered.

'This is where I live.'

'For real? You're saying this place is your factory, your office and your home?'

'Used to be the warehouse too. But then the sales picked up and we don't need one anymore,' Arjun smiled at the expression on her face. She was completely awake by then.

'Are you serious? How do you live here? With all the noise of building furniture or whatever? And-did I see you smile just now?'

'I live on the top floor. It's soundproof. Even if it wasn't, I get to my office before anyone comes and leave after everyone, so I am between the noise all the time anyway. And yes-you saw me smile just now.'

'It was nice. You should do that more often,' she said, looked up at the building, and added, 'I would like to see your place.'

'There is nothing to see. All I do is sleep there. My office is more of a home for me.'

'But I want to see.'

He did not argue. They got into the elevator and got off at the top floor. His penthouse consisted of the entire top floor, leaving one-fourth of the space for the terrace. And it was grand. He had refused to hire a professional to do the interiors of his place and the end result had been good. If he had enough taste to build every article of furniture in his home, he also had enough aesthetic sense to put together all the pieces in a beautiful manner.

He saw Shambhavi's mouth form a huge 'O' in awe. There was not even a single speck of sleep in her eyes anymore. She went from room to room, noticing every detail. After a while, when he could not take any more, he said, 'You should go to sleep now. The guest bedroom is-'

'I know where it is! I can relate every single detail of this place now. You have an amazing talent, Mr Datta,' she said.

'Thank you, Ms Sen. Now, it's really-'

'Hey, about what you were saying back in the car-I think it's a good idea.'

'I didn't know you were listening,' Arjun said, surprised.

'I was, but then it got boring and I fell asleep. So tell me-do we have an assignment to work together on?'

'Actually, yes. There is a hotel that needs to be refurbished. It'll be an easy task, since most of the furniture in a hotel looks alike. So we have to get just a few designs ready. But other than that, there is a lot of work to do. Almost from scratch, since the owner wants the hotel to look new in all aspects.'

'Sounds interesting. Who's the owner?' Shambhavi asked, all business.

'I am,' Arjun stated simply.

'What?'

'You heard it right.'

'You bought a hotel? Whoa! When? Why?' she shrieked.

'Just signed the registration papers today. You are the first to know.'

'Wow!'

'What do you mean?' Arjun could sense a lot more behind her one wow. He could tell by the look on her face that her brain was working furiously, putting together pieces.

She asked slowly, 'Does this have anything to do with ... me?'

'I could deny that.'

'You could. But would you?'

'No,' he said, looking into her eyes, which were wide, like a child's.

'So ... you bought a hotel just so we can have something to work together on?'

'In a way. But more than anything, it was a means of investment. In a city like Indore, a good hotel will always do good business. I had been thinking about investing in this area for a long time.'

She just nodded.

'So, would you like to work with me on it? It's no pressure, really. I just thought you might be interested, so I am letting you know before anyone else.'

She did not reply to his question. She just stood up on the balls of her feet and kissed him softly near his lips, on the cheek. 'This is sweet, Arjun. I know you won't accept it, but I also know why you are doing this. All this while, I have been thinking that there might be a chance that you would let me into your personal bubble and not push me away like you do everyone else. But I had not expected it to happen so soon. Now that it is happening, it makes me happy.'

Arjun did not know how to respond. He had not expected her to be so honest. Nor had he ever thought that he could fall in love that easily. All his doubts and uncertainties went away in a fraction of a second. Those bright, wide eyes could never lie. He trusted her.

'I do not know what happened to make you the way you are-hiding in your private hole, keeping everyone out, no human attachment-but I'm glad that you're coming out of it. And I'll be with you, by your side, on every step of your journey, whenever you need me,' she said and kissed him again, at the exact same place.

He pulled her closer to him and stared into her eyes for what seemed like an eternity. They stood there, still as statues, as time froze around them. Nothing seemed to matter. There were tears in her eyes, and there were tears in his. They were happy, they were sad, they were in love.

He had never imagined that love would come back into his life. What he had had with Prehal, what his heart had once felt so strongly about that woman, paled mightily in comparison. He had not known Shambhavi for long, but he knew they were meant to be. Sometimes in love, there is no rational explanation to it, you just know. And with every beat of his heart, it just became clearer to him.

Right then, staring into her eyes, he promised himself that he wouldn't let the skeletons from his past get in their way.

He promised himself that he would trust her, have faith in her and see where love took them.

He promised to love her with no reservations.

'I love you,' he whispered, still looking deeply into her eyes. He ran his thumb lightly over her lower lip.

'I know,' she whispered back. 'But I love you more.'

He could not hold back any longer. And he did not find a reason why he should. He pulled her closer to him and touched her lips softly with his. They stayed like that for a while, met each other's eyes and tightened the embrace. He kissed her, softly at first and hurriedly when she responded.

The kiss felt like heaven, and if left up to him, he would never have let it end. But soon, they were out of breath. Shambhavi pulled back to draw air, and as she hurriedly gasped the oxygen in, Arjun moved to her neck, leaving a trail of kisses there in his wake.

He moved his thumb and traced her collarbone. He had not seen much of her, but he thought her collarbone was her most appealing feature. He had wanted to touch it ever since he had seen her in that noodle-strap yellow dress she had worn to their movie-date.

He pushed the strap of her dress an inch and it fell off her shoulder. She moaned, when Arjun bit her softly on her shoulder. He licked the bite and sucked on it. That would leave a mark. She threw her head back and moaned again. Her hands moved from around his neck to his chest, and he felt his heart beat rapidly under her palms. She looked up at him and smiled. He kissed her smile, picked her up, and carried her to his bedroom.

CHAPTER 10

BEHIND THE MASK

There is a side to every man, which he lets come out in the open only before the woman he truly loves.

'W ow. This is just so beautiful,' Shambhavi breathed. They were working on the interiors of his hotel, like they had been doing since the last two months and it was turning out beautifully, just like their relationship. They met every day, working together on designs and throwing around ideas, for hours in a row. They met each other the first thing in the morning, worked together all day, had every meal together and bid each other goodnight and went to their respective homes. It could not have been any better. 'I think mahogany really works better with the background, don't you think?' she tilted her head to her side and gazed up at him.

'I have to agree,' he smiled. He was used to her enthusiasm. It had become a way of life for him.

'But I still think that your smile is more beautiful. You should do it more often.'

'Ha-ha-ha. Now, if you're done, let's go have something to eat. It's already very late.'

'Actually, you go ahead. I have to head back home for something,' Shambhavi made an apologetic face.

'What is something?' Arjun asked.

'Just ... have to check up on my dad. He wasn't feeling well this morning again, so...'

'Okay, then. Take care.' He kissed her forehead and asked her to meet for dinner. She hugged him tightly for a second then ran to her car. She was always like that—runningshoutings-jumping when a regular person would just walk—exclaim—smile instead. He loved her for her dynamism and vivacity. Her animation was just one of the many things he had gotten addicted to.

Ever since she had come into his life, she had changed its meaning. In the beginning, he had struggled to let go, owing to his reservations. But once he had decided to let go, a whole new world had opened up to him. From behind the mask of a calm sophisticated businessman, the real Arjun had emerged. His earnings had brought him satisfaction, but he had never felt peaceful. Shambhavi brought him peace.

'So, mahogany, then, sir?' Faisal asked, notepad in hands, and a smile on his face. Arjun knew that Faisal liked Shambhavi; he could sense it. But ever since Arjun started to see her, Faisal had stepped back happily. Way too happily, Arjun mused. Maybe because he had feared his boss would die alone and was relieved he had finally found a lady. Or maybe he just wanted to keep his job.

'Of course,' Arjun nodded. 'And is Tutul still here?'

'Yes, I am,' Tutul stepped ahead, a notepad in her hands, too.

'Could you come with me for a second? We need to discuss the dimensions of the reception hall. I think we need to get rid of the north wall to extend the area ...'

'That's a good idea. But if I can suggest something-I feel we should keep a separate waiting area, if we are keeping a big reception hall. Not completely partitioned, just to this height,' she motioned with her arms.

'Hmm. Let me think about it and run it through Shambhavi once. Meanwhile, show me the kitchen designs again?' Arjun said.

They started to discuss detailed plans about the kitchen space and Arjun found himself losing his concentration over and over again. He kept wondering what Shambhavi would think of the idea, what she would suggest. In a very short time, he had become excessively dependent on her. He liked the feeling of sharing responsibilities, ideas, thoughts and love with another person. She was his first friend in a long time. She was his one true love.



'Arjun?' Shambhavi asked over the phone. She sounded panicked. Arjun instantly got alert.

'Yes? What's wrong?'

'Arjun ...Her voice trailed away. She was clearly crying.

'Where are you? What's wrong?'

'Arjun ...she repeated.

'Shambhavi? Where are you? Tell me, I'm coming,' Arjun panicked.

'At ... home ...'

'Your place? I'll be there. Just five minutes, baby.'

'Arjun ...' she whispered again. That was all she was saying-his name, over and over again.

Arjun tried to ask her what was wrong again, but she didn't say anything. Frustrated, freaked and worried, he hung up and rushed to his car. He had never thought he would see Shambhavi bothered about something. He had never seen her so worried or panicked or sad. She was always the cheerful, annoyingly happy one. The light of his life.

He could not bear to see her cry. So even though he was driving wildly towards her place, he wanted to run away from her at the same time. He could not handle tears. They somehow signified death to

him. They reminded him of the unlimited tears he had shed when his family had died in that horrible accident. That was the only time of his life when he had cried. And every time he saw someone cry, he was instantly reminded of that dark, painful phase of his life.

He wanted to run away, but he could not. Shambhavi needed him. He had to be there for her. Whatever the problem was, they would go through it together. She will have him by her side.

It took him seventeen agonizing minutes to get to Shambhavi's house. He braked harshly and jumped out of the car. The front door was open; he entered.

'Shambhavi!' he called, moving around the house to find her. 'Shambhavi? Where are you?'

There was a muffled moan from the washroom on his right. He rushed to it and flung open the door, to find her sitting on the floor, sobbing. Her eyes were red and cheeks wet from all the tears she had shed. It was worse than he had expected. Tears were bad enough for him already, but seeing Shambhavi cry was too much for him to take.

Those lovely eyes, looking scared and gloomy, that sweet face, crumpled up and covered with tears-it was not a sight he could handle. He noticed that her upper lip had swollen due to crying. Her hair was rough and tangled, it was clear that she had been pulling it in worry. Her nails were halfbitten in anxiety.

As soon as she saw him, she whispered his name again, 'Arjun ...'

'Yes, baby. I'm here. What is wrong? Tell me ...he held her hands and pulled her up, into his embrace. He hugged her tightly and told her it was all going to be okay, even though he did not even know what had happened.

She pulled back, trying to say something, but he pulled her close to him again.

'Come here,' he said. 'It's okay. I'm right here, with you, baby.'

'Arjun ...'

'Yes, Shambhavi, what is it?' he asked again.

'I'm ... I'm ... pregnant; she said.

'What?' he froze on his spot instantaneously.

Of all the things he had imagined, this was the most improbable one. He pulled back in a micro-second, as his brain processed what was happening. It didn't take him long to figure that out. Once again, the ground slid from beneath his feet.

'I had not been feeling too well recently, but I thought it must be because of the hard work, so I ignored it. Today ... today I was at the pharmacy for something ... I just happened to glance at this ... home pregnancy testing kit ... and I realized that maybe I am sick because of ...'

Arjun did not say anything. Shambhavi continued speaking.

'I bought a kit, just to be sure ... because I remembered we did not use protection that night we were ... together ... So I picked up a set, and it showed ... positive...'

He could not believe that Shambhavi was doing this to him. He thought he knew her, understood her. He thought she was different, not after money and money only. But it turned out that there was nothing unique about her after all. She was a part of the same old gold-digging female community that uses men.

He dared to contemplate the chance that she might be telling the truth, but it was just too hard to believe. They had been together sexually once, just once, and that had been about two months ago. If she really was pregnant, why did she not get to know about it earlier? Why wait till she had a stronger bond with Arjun before announcing it? It was too cleverly woven a plan, not to be a setup.

His world came crashing down around his feet. All the talk about buying a big car and going to Paris and getting used to the high-class lifestyle ... she had been plotting all of this right from the beginning. It had all been a part of her evil moneymaking strategy.

He had taken a leap of faith, had trusted her, had believed that she was different ... But he was proved incorrect once again. She must be thinking what a fool he was, how easily he was trapped. He hated himself for falling into a woman's sweet trap again. He thought he had learnt his lesson the first time around. Turned out-he hadn't.

He would never trust a woman again. Let alone love.

PART III

SHE

There is silence before every storm. A perfect life is accompanied by a constant fear of it coming to an end. Some things are too good to be true, and inevitably, all good things come to an end.

Some people become a part of us such that we are forced to wonder how we were alive before they entered our lives. That happens only once they leave, never to come back.

CHAPTER 12

ALL TOO SOON

A broken heart can be mended. Broken trust can never be fixed. The crack remains forever.

W

hose baby is it?' Arjun asked, pushing her out of his embrace.

'What?' Shambhavi asked. The question hadn't registered in her head. Her brain was clouded in her own worries and fears; his words had not seeped in. Her reaction was just a reflection of the bafflement she felt on being unceremoniously shoved out of his arms.

'You heard me. I don't have time to play any games, so just answer me-whose child is it?' he asked again, this time in an even harsher tone.

Shambhavi was shocked. One moment, he was holding her lovingly in his arms and telling her that everything would be okay, and the next-he was accusing her of ... What exactly was he accusing her of?

She was mad beyond any extent.

'Are you crazy? Do you realize what you're saying?' she shrieked.

'Shut up, Shambhavi. Just tell me what you want from me. Why did you do this-for marriage? Money? WHAT?'

'ARJUN. Stop it!' Shambhavi held his arms and tried to shake him out of this madness. She did not know what had gotten into him. He was suddenly a stranger to her. He had a closed expression on his face again, the same he used to have when they had first met. It scared her. She knew she had lost him.

'ANSWER ME,' he thundered.

She automatically took a step back from him. 'It's yours. Who else could it...? I was a...a virgin before that night. And have never been with anyone since we ...' she sobbed, desperately trying to make him believe.

'I can't believe I fell into this trap again,' she heard his mutter, behind his clenched teeth.

'What? What are you saying?'

'Don't act so innocent, okay? The show is over. I know what you are up to; I know this was a setup. Now just tell me what you want and get lost.'

'Arjun, what is wrong with you? Have you totally lost it? It's me-Shambhavi.' She shook him frantically again.

He pulled back roughly. 'What I don't understand is that if all you needed was my money, why did you need to drag a baby into this? Don't you have a heart? What does an innocent child have to do with this?'

There was silence. No one said anything, no one looked at each other. Shambhavi struggled with grasping what was going on. When she had first met him, he had been aloof, closed from everyone else. All he cared about was his work, nothing else. Slowly, she had started working with him and gotten to know him better. She had sensed his struggle, a battle going on inside him. She had felt him trying to keep himself away from her, but finally giving in. And when everything finally fell into place, he had suddenly gone back to square one, leaving her alone-madly in love, heartbroken, defeated ...

'You have known me, on and off, since the last nine months, Arjun. Are you telling me that this is what you have thought of me since ... always?' Shambhavi asked softly, not meeting his eye. She was furious, and was controlling the anger she felt towards him.

'Oh, I wish I had known. I would not have let it come to this if I had, I swear,' Arjun seethed.

'This is the last time I am going to try to explain this to you; after this, I'll give up. I called you the second I got to know about the pregnancy. I had not planned on it, I had not known it would happen. It was an accident. And you know-it wasn't my fault alone. Take some responsibility. No girl gets pregnant on her own.'

'Agreed. She needs a man. And you used me-to get pregnant, to get to my money.'

'I need money, yes, but I earn my own bread, Mr Datta. I do it by my own competence. You might have a lot of dough, but I do not need a man to provide for me,' Shambhavi said bluntly.

'Not for yourself, but for your baby, I'm sure? Is this how we are going to go about it? That's where the baby comes into the picture, doesn't it?'

'The baby came in, when you put it in.'

'Of course. This has to be my fault. That is how you're going to make me pay for it. In cash, I'm sure?' Arjun asked curtly.

'Arjun-for the last time-this was no calculated trick. It was an accident. I have enough troubles in my life without consciously adding more complications to it.'

'But all those troubles can be solved by money, can't they? My money. You-'

'If that is really what you think, I think you should leave,' she said calmly, cutting him off before he could say anything else. There was excessive use of the term money in their exchange and frankly, she was getting sick of it. The storm raging inside her was cleverly concealed under the mask of detachment she wore.

Arjun stared at her for a moment, and finally said, 'Very well, then. I will send over the cheque with Faisal. If you were looking for marriage, you are in for a disappointment.'

'Get out,' she said, jaws clenched.

'Oh, stop the drama-'

'ARJUN DATTA, DON'T MAKE ME SAY THAT AGAIN. GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE.'

'You don't want to create a scene-' he began to say. It seemed like he still did not believe that she was telling the truth, which only made her more furious.

'YOU DON'T KNOW SHIT ABOUT WHAT I WANT AND WHAT I DON'T. SO, DO NOT MAKE ASSUMPTIONS.'

'Raising your voice does not make you right and me wrong.'

'YES, BUT TRUTH DOES. Now, GET OUT,' she tried to calm herself down but failed horribly. Her life was in pieces. The man who ruled it had no idea how much he was hurting her and she just wanted it all to end. She wanted peace. 'I don't need you, Arjun. For anything. I can manage on my own. I can handle a child without your help. I do not need your wealth, your time, your presence, your fake love, ANYTHING. Just GO.'

He gave her one final stare, which told her that he was disgusted by her and left. She fell to the washroom floor once again. Only, this time, she knew there would be no Arjun who would come to her, hold her and make it all go away. She had nothing to look forward to-no one to look after her.



Hours passed, and she went on with her day, living like nothing was wrong with her. She was sure her face betrayed what she was feeling, but there was no one who would notice the change. From her home, she had gone straight to the hospital, where her father had been admitted since the last four months. He was not conscious to register her mood from her facial expressions.

She knew her father was not getting better, only worse, and that broke her heart.

It all started almost exactly a year ago, in March 2010, with dizziness, double vision and impaired hearing. When she had taken him to a doctor, they had gotten the news of the tumour in his brain-a pituitary tumour, clinically termed-Pituitary Adenoma. It is basically a non-cancerous tumour, but lethal still. The one her father had was large in size and needed immediate surgery.

Her father was her only family, after her mother had passed away when she was four. She panicked. The surgery medically known as 'craniotomy'-required opening of the skull to operate. Even the thought was scary, but they had no option. There was no room for delay; his tumour was in the second stage, which meant it was of a size larger than one centimetre and if untreated, would have extended above the sella, which is a depression on the upper surface of the sphenoid bone.

He was operated upon the next week, after pooling together all his resources to pay for the surgery. Fortunately, the surgery had been a success. Or so they had thought. There were still a few nights when he had woken up with searing pain, but the doctors brushed it away as routine.

It was only after five months, in September 2010-a little after Shambhavi had completed the Ahluwalia assignment that during a routine check-up, the doctors had discovered that the tumour had not been in the second stage, but in the third when he was operated. There was not just a threat of expansion to the sella, but the invasion had already occurred.

Due to neglect of the condition and lack of medical care at the needed site, his tumour had swiftly gone to the fourth and the final-stage by the time the real problem was detected.

All Shambhavi's savings to take her father to Paris, the one place he wanted to visit before his disease killed him, had gone in his treatment. After weeks and weeks of radiotherapy, slowly and steadily, the truth had seeped in-he did not have long to live. He had accepted that; so had Shambhavi.

There was no sense in being sad, so they had taken on the challenge cheerfully. She knew he had no funds left. She had never let it show, but she had known it all along. His surgery had had a great impact on both their lives. For the first time in her life, she had thought seriously about her future and had taken work seriously.

When they had first detected the tumour, Mr Sen had gotten quite a scare, understandably. After all his assets went into the surgery that followed, he had told Shambhavi sadly that his only regret was not visiting Paris before he died. That night, Shambhavi had promised her father that she would take him there. She had devoted herself to the Ahluwalia's Mansion and had worked sincerely on it to earn the amount her hard work deserved.

But once again, she had not expected what was coming next. As soon as the assignment ended, she had gotten the news of his tumour being in the fourth stage. This time, a surgery was not possible, because of the unfavourable location of the tumour. Also, they did not have the means to pay for a surgery. They chose the second option-radiation therapy.

That is where her Paris-savings went. Since then, she had bounced back to her feet and had been taking up and working nights on any job she was offered. The Ahluwalia's mansion and a few good ones before it had let her form a decent reputation. Although no assignment she took up was as lucrative as that, she was slowly and steadily working her way to taking her father to Paris. Just that this time around, she did not have much time to waste; Mr Sen's condition was deteriorating by the second and the psychiatric symptoms were beginning to show-depression, emotional instability and anxiety.

Initially, her aim had been to earn enough just to be able to take him to Paris. But after the detection of the real state of her father's ailment, she realized that she needed the money soon. There was not much time left. There was not much progress in her savings, since all her income went into getting him a private ward at the hospital and keeping him there. She had blamed the progress of his tumour on improper and inadequate medical attention, so she did not want to take that risk again and therefore, to make sure his condition got proper attention, she had shifted him to the hospital, under twentyfour hour surveillance. But maintaining a place at the hospital was costlier than she had initially anticipated. Paris seemed like a distant dream. Going to Paris won't cost too much, but with all her earnings going into his medical care, she did not have significant savings left.

On top of it all, pregnancy was not something she could handle. That, apart from the shock, was the reason she had broken down and called Arjun. Slowly, she had begun to depend on him. He had become her escape from the world of gloom-seeing her father in misery, struggling with the expense of keeping him in a hospital, saving for Paris and finding a stable source of income.

She was the type of person who shared her happiness, but not her sadness. Her friends didn't know about her father's condition. They just thought that she was too busy making big bucks to have time for them. The only friends she had left were Mili and Tutul. Mili understood her, and supported her no matter what. Tutul was with her almost all the time due to working together, and had no reason to complain. Other than that, she had practically stopped going out, started forgetting birthdays and stopped calling her friends up. Eventually, they had forgotten her, too.

She did not mind. She was too involved with her work; she had priorities and responsibilities to take care of. And anyway, she had Arjun; he was all she needed. All her free time was spent with him. He was there with her and was a perfect stress buster, even though it might seem the other way round.

She had been pleasantly shocked when he told her about the hotel he had bought so that they could spend more time together, working. He did not know it, but that had been a boon to her in more ways than one. They could not have had a functional relationship had they not been working together; she would have been too busy on other jobs. By working together, they had time with each other and her source of income was taken care of, too.

But all that changed that day. The news of her pregnancy was just a shock to her initially. But once she told Arjun about it, his reaction more or less told her that she was on her own. Her life lay in pieces all around her-she did not have the one man she loved with her anymore, and on top of that, she had an unborn child growing inside her. She was already on the verge of breaking, taking care of her father, she could not handle a child too. On top of that, with the unpleasant exchange with Arjun, she could not work with him again. So she would have to quit the hotel assignment, leaving it in an unfinished state to fish for another job.

Of all the things going wrong in her life, what really pained her was losing Arjun. She loved him, even after all the caustic remarks he had made that day. He did not trust her. She was sure he had a good reason for having his reservations, and she hoped that he would realize that soon and come back to her. Because at the end of the day, despite the anger she had seen in his eyes, she knew that he loved her.

CHAPTER 12

PARIS OR NOT

It is only when we truly need support that we realize who our real friends are. Those who make our enemies their own are the truest of all.

G

ood morning, Dad,' she greeted cheerfully, when she saw him open his eyes.

'Morning,' he mumbled gruffly.

'How are you feeling this morning?'

'I feel a sharp throbbing in my ears. Could you try and stop shouting? That might help.'

'Oops, sorry,' she crinkled her face and went over to kiss his forehead. 'Now seriously, how are you?'

'Fine,' Mr Sen nodded. 'I was going to ask you that question.'

'Who, me? What can happen to me?' Shambhavi said loudly, the pitch of her voice extra high.

'Shambhavi?'

'Yes, Dad?'

'I'm your father,' he said shortly.

The smile on her face disappeared in one second. She had fooled the world that everything was okay, but not her father. She knew that as soon as he gained consciousness, he would know something was off, and she was right. He had seen right through her facade. Suddenly, tears threatened to attack her. She felt the first prickling at the back of her eyes and blinked rapidly to prevent tears from flowing.

That was when Mr Sen motioned her towards him. She crashed on his chest and burst into tears. It was nice to have him take care of her, after it being the other way round for so long ... actually since she had grown up enough to realize that her father was just a lost child. It was a miracle he had managed to sail through the time his wife died, leaving a four-year-old daughter behind for him to take care of. He looked after her for six years, after which she turned ten and realized that her father was the one who needed to be looked after. Since then, she had been the grown-up and he the child.

As she sobbed in his arms, she realized how difficult it must be for him to see her like that. She knew he hated being bedbound and helpless and she tried her best not to make him feel like he was burdening her.

'Tell me about it?' he whispered.

'Promise you won't be mad?'

'What did you do, Shambhavi?'

'Promise you won't be mad?' she repeated.

'I can never be mad at you. You are the perfect daughter and the sweetest girl. You can never do anything wrong.'

'But I did. I know you will be mad at me. Hell, even I am mad at me.'

'Enough with the suspense. Out with it,' Mr Sen prodded. He was clearly getting anxious.

'Dad ... I'm pregnant,' Shambhavi whispered and closed her eyes. She was telling her father that his unmarried daughter was carrying a baby. She did not want to think about what kind of thoughts it must have triggered in her father's head. He would see her in a different light. She wanted to tell him that she was not that type of a girl, that she had been with a man just once, and that she truly loved him, but she was too ashamed to mention even that.

'Okay ...her father said slowly.

'There's more. The father of the baby is no longer in my life. He left me when he got to know. I'm ... I'm alone in this,' she broke down once again.

There was a long pause, in which she thought about everything that had gone wrong in her life in the previous year, ever since she had found out about her dad's sickness. She expected her father to be mad at her; any father would be, and rightly so. But anger was one expression missing on Mr Sen's face. Instead, he smiled warmly at her and said, 'No, you're not. I do not know how much longer I have to live, but one thing I do know is that as long as I'm here, you'll never be alone in anything.'

'But Dad ...? You are not angry?'

'No, I'm not. I'm sure there is a perfectly reasonable explanation behind how it happened.'

'There is not. I was just so stupidly in love,' Shambhavi replied, feeling frustrated.

'Ah. There it is. Love. That is reason enough for every evil,' he father smiled.

'But Dad, how come you are not angry with me? I am unmarried and pregnant. You are my father. Aren't you worried about what people will say? This just does not make any sense.'

'What people will say has ceased to matter to me. You probably do not want to hear this, but I have seen death from too close, too many times. When something like that happens, a person tends to see things the way he should have, all his life. What society thinks or says doesn't matter, Shambhavi. Not one bit.'

It seemed like her father had grown philosophical due to the sickness. Maybe that was what he did, lying on the bed all day. Maybe he should write a self-help book, she mused.

'But it does to me. Can you even imagine what my friends are going to say? They will laugh at me. I'm going to have a baby. First, I am way too young for that. And second, I do not have a husband, not even a boyfriend. I'll be the mother of a child whose father no one will have any idea about,' Shambhavi panicked.

'Listen to me, kiddo. If they laugh at you when you're going through this, they are not your friends. And frankly, they should not matter to you at all.'

Shambhavi nodded in understanding. She knew Mili and Tutul wouldn't laugh. That was enough for her.

'And another thing-you said you are going to have the baby?'

'Isn't that obvious? A woman gets pregnant-she gives birth to a baby'

'Not necessarily. There are other ... options too,' Mr Sen said.

'You mean, like ... an abortion?' Shambhavi asked slowly.

'Yes.'

'Do you ... want me to?'

Her father sighed. 'It depends on you, doesn't it? It is your baby, after all. You are the one who should have the right to decide.'

'That's a different thing. Answer my question. Do you want me to get an abortion?'

'I would suggest so, yes. My life might end any day. No one knows how much time I have left to live. But you have your whole life in front of you. I would like you to find a man, make a home and live happily.'

'But, Dad, it's not like I have an option. The baby is already there-in me. It's a life. I cannot kill it. It is my child, my blood, your blood. How can you even think of ...? You want to murder your own grandchild even before it is born? How can you even think like that?' Shambhavi cried. She was upset, confused, shattered. It showed.

'I just want you to have a good life,' Mr Sen said.

'I will have a good life. I have you. I have my baby. What else do I need?' she said and cradled her belly protectively, reflexively.

'I will die any day. And a child is a lot more than just cuteness and soft skin. It's a lot of responsibility. I have seen you kill yourself working hard to keep me alive. I cannot consciously ask you to take up the responsibility of another life too.'

'I don't know, neither do I care to know, about any of that. I'm just ... not killing my baby.'

There was silence. She hoped her father would never say anything about killing her child again. She was not going to do it. She could not. She studied his weary, sick face. He looked exhausted; al-

most as if he had had enough of waking moments. He looked like he wanted to go to sleep. That scared her. One would think that after a year of getting to know about his brain tumour, Shambhavi would be prepared for his life to end any moment. But she was not. Nowhere even close.

Surprisingly, Mr Sen did not ask her to get rid of the child again. Instead, he smiled. And said, 'I'm proud of you.' The expression on his face reflected his words. She could not help but smile.



For the next few days, she ran around the city, made calls all over the place and pulled every string to find work. Being a freelancer had its own disadvantages. Left up to her, she would have picked painting as a career, but since interior designing was more lucrative and she was in desperate need of income, she did not have a choice.

She was successful in avoiding the topic of Arjun Datta from coming up in the exchange with her father. She knew he was curious to know about the man his daughter had fallen in love with, who had broken her heart and left her with a baby to take care of. But he did not ask. Maybe he figured that she was too sore to talk about him just yet. Maybe he realized she was trying to forget all about him.

Truth was-he was all she thought about every second. She was hoping he would get back to his senses and would come back to her. She was mad at him, yes. Furious. But contrary to what people thought of her, she was not as shallow as she came across. She was angry with him, but she knew he must have had a good reason for his actions. Nothing he could tell her, no reason would be enough to justify his behaviour, but she still could not help but wish that he would at least try.

Little by little, she lost all hope. He was not coming back. If he had to, he would have, a long time ago. Five days also means one hundred and twenty hours. It might not be a very long time, but it was time enough for a man to realize his mistake and that he could not live without his girl. It was a lot of time to miss a person. When you truly miss someone, a few minutes seem like an eternity. The desperation to meet, to talk...anything is too much to handle. It is sheer torture. If he had not realized it till then, there was almost no chance he would realize this ever.

That night, defeated, she went to Mili's place to dissolve into tears and tell her all about her problems. They were getting too much for her to handle alone. Even if Mili could not help in any other way than just listening, she would take that. She needed her best friend.

She had not told Mili about her father's sickness before because Mili tended to worry too much anyway, she had not wanted to load her with even more things to worry about. When she did tell her about it, and everything else that had happened, Mili cried with her. That was her way of lending support.

'Why did you not tell me before? All this time...? I was right here, and you hid something of this magnitude from me?' Mili cried.

'You could not have done anything about it, Mili. The best doctors are working on it, and even they cannot help his case ...' Shambhavi sobbed.

'But I would have been there with you. That is what friends are for. To support each other, to help.'

'But you were there with me, always. You were my sunshine. I did not want to sadden you with my problems. And with you not knowing, I could pretend that everything was normal. It was a welcome change.'

'But, Shambhavi ... I can't believe you had to go through all of this alone. Well, at least you told me now ... I know I should be stronger than this, I know I should be telling you that it will all be okay, but ... how? What are we going to do now?' Mili's tears were flowing continuously.

'I don't know, Mili. If only I had enough savings to sail me through this ... I have an assignment to work on this week. But it doesn't pay much. It will cover Dad's hospital expenses for just about a week, at best ...'

'After that ...?'

Shambhavi shrugged her shoulders.

'I'll give you whatever I have in my account. It is not much, but it will help you for a little while, at least,' Mili said.

'Not just yet. I will come to you if I feel the need. For now, at this moment, we are covered.'

'Come on. If you need anything, please don't hesitate to ask. You know I am just happy to help.'

'I do. I'll keep that in mind.'

'All right, whenever you need anything, I'm here, okay? Oh God. Why did you not tell me before? What about the ... child?'

'What about it?' Shambhavi asked, suddenly on the defensive.

'You are going to have it, right?'

'Of course I would. Why would you even think otherwise?'

'Relax, Shambhavi. I was just asking,' Mili said. 'So, how far is it along? I mean, when is the expected delivery date?'

'I haven't been to the doctor yet. But I guess somewhere around the 5th of October ... We had been ... together on the 5th of January, so I did my Math.'

'Wow. So you are nine weeks along? That's ... kind of exciting, you know? I mean, I know you are unmarried and pregnant, and your father is sick and your boyfriend just went away, and you do not have any means of taking care of your father and your baby ... I know all of that, but still ... a baby ... the thought is sort of exciting, isn't it?'

'I do not know about that. I am thinking of the way you put my life in a nutshell. It sounded really sad -sadder than I had thought it was-like a typical Indian television series. Sick dad, dumped, pregnant and no money-' Shambhavi said, before Mili cut her off.

'Oh, I did not mean it that way, Shambhavi. I'm so sorry. I did not realize it ... it just came out all wrong.' Mili rushed to apologize. Shambhavi shrugged her apology away.

'It's all right, Mili. You did not mean it, but you did not say anything wrong either. Now relax. It will all be okay.'

'It will?'

'Yes,' Shambhavi consoled her friend, who was still very much drowning herself in tears.

'I should be the one comforting you. But even now, when you are the one in problems, you are the one taking care of me. Tell me-what happened?'

'Nothing happened. It was just meant to be like this. You were supposed to cry about anything and everything and I was supposed to ask you to relax and chill. God's plans.'

They hugged each other for a while, lost in their respective thoughts. Shambhavi felt relieved, having told Mili about everything. It felt a lot easier, once she realized she had people who cared about her, with her, to help her through the bad times. She was also glad that she would have someone to talk to about her dad's sickness and her constantly empty wallet; it had been killing her, handling it all alone for a year. The excuses of being busy with work and passing off her visits to the hospital as routine check-ups for her father were getting old. She did not need to lie to her best friend about anything anymore.

CHAPTER 13

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

In the darkest of times, the only consolation is the light at the end of the tunnel. The worst will pass, yes, but till it does, we have no option but to endure.

The next morning, Shambhavi woke up with a sharp ache in her head. She tried to open her eyes, but it hurt too much. So she rested for a few more minutes, clutching her head; it didn't help. When she tried to get up from the bed, she felt dizzy and almost fell to the floor. Taking support of the wall, she slowly sat down on the bed again. It could not be happening; the timing was not working for her. She could not be sick. She did not have time to be sick.

She was supposed to check out dining room furniture for her client. It needed to be done by the time the day was over, because she had other plans for the next day-a new project. Once the dining room was decorated, her job would be over and she could start her next project. The rest of her client's home decor was done; the dining room took that much time because the owner wanted an exact replica of a dining set they had seen at a party at a friend's place. It was especially difficult for Shambhavi to guess, since the client did not have even a picture of the dining set they wanted. Shambhavi had to understand what they wanted, using just her imagination. She had figured that she could come up with a set good enough to wipe the image of that dining set from their heads, but her luck was playing hardball with her. There was nothing she liked. She wished Arjun was there with her. She could have designed something beautiful and he could have built itproblem solved.

She shrugged his thoughts away once again and struggled to get up from the bed. She slowly walked to the washroom and took the support of the washbasin.

'Maybe Mili was right,' Shambhavi thought, looking at herself at the washroom mirror. 'It really is time I saw a doctor.'

Once she had some tetra-packed fruit juice and toast, she had enough energy to go out and continue her work. She did not have time to look across the city to find a better set of dining room furniture. Instead, she decided to just go to her client, ask them to show her the set they wanted and probably ask the owners where they had got it from. If she could not get it from the original manufacturers, she would just get it made somewhere. Maybe infringe some copyrights while she was at it, but at least the assignment would be over and done with, and her client would have what they wanted.

She postponed her meeting-the-doctor plans to the next day. She would need to get an appointment, but she was too involved with her work to find out time for that just yet.

She went to the hospital to check in on her father and after giving him the peaches he so loved, rushed out to her client's office to discuss how to go about the darned dining room furniture.



'Hello?' Shambhavi picked her phone and said. It was late afternoon. She had met with her client, had gone to take a look at the dining table they wanted, asked the owners where they had got it and was in the furniture store when she got the call.

'Hi, Shambhavi?' a man's voice said from the other end.

'Yes. Who's this?'

'Faisal Khan, Datta Enterprises. I just finished drawing up the documents for your work with DE for the hotel, now named - The Green Meadow. I would need to meet you to hand over the cheque for your services. When is a good time?'

'Faisal, why are you acting so weird? So formal?' Shambhavi asked.

'I would prefer getting it done by today. Can you tell me where I can meet you?' Faisal continued in his starched tone.

'Let me guess-is your boss there?'

'Yes.'

'Makes sense. Anyway, can you meet me near Vijay Nagar in an hour? I'm at Mehidpurwala's right now. I have some business to finish. Will wrap it up in an hour and meet you?' Shambhavi suggested.

'Sure. Let's meet at Nafees?'

'Yeah, cool.'

'I will see you then,' Faisal said and hung up.

As soon as he hung up the call, Shambhavi felt sadness overwhelm her. Arjun wanted to end any connection they had, at the earliest. And he did not want to do it himself either. She felt miserable, but it slowly got converted into anger. Why was she sad? Why was she waiting for him to come back, when he clearly did not care? It was he who had ended it ... he who had ruined the good thing they had. He had accused her of horrible things, was awfully mean to her, and left her in this situation. If anything, she should be furious at him, instead of just feeling wretched and heartbroken.

He did not deserve her time, or to be in her thoughts. He deserved to be pushed to the back of her head, and heart, and to be forgotten forever. Her head stayed on him, while she finished her work at the furniture store.

She checked the time on her watch and walked out of the place, making her way to the restaurant.

'Shambhavi! How are you,' Tutul called from nearby. She smiled and ran towards her as soon as Shambhavi got her attention.

'Tutul?' Shambhavi was surprised to find Tutul accompanying Faisal.

'Hey,' Faisal smiled, looking like his old self, now that his boss was not around.

'Hi guys! How have you been, both of you? And Tutul- how come you are here?' Shambhavi asked.

'I am sorry, Shambhavi. I know you probably don't want me to, but you know I quit my day job to work on The Green Meadow. When you left, I could not. I have nothing else to work on. I did not have-' Tutul rushed to explain.

'Relax. It's all right. Of course I did not want you to quit just because things did not work out personally between Arjun and me. Why would I be mad at you?' Shambhavi laughed.

'Oh, thank God. I didn't know how to have this conversation with you. Really, I'm so sorry,' Tutul repeated.

'Easy. It's okay.'

'Let's sit?' Faisal asked, motioning to the chairs at the restaurant.

Once they took their seats and ordered some snacks, Faisal began to explain to her how they were going to go about the whole thing.

'Since seventy per cent of the furnishing of The Green Meadow is completed, we were planning on paying you seventy per cent of the decided amount. But then Tutul insisted that your work was almost complete. We have not executed them yet, but you have completed your designs. So we do not need to hire another designer to complete the work you were doing for us. So that payment goes to you too. Here's the cheque, your services paid in full. You will need to sign here,' Faisal said and pushed a sealed envelope with the cheque towards her.

She slid it in her handbag without opening it and took out a pen to sign the document Faisal had passed to her. 'Here?'

'Yes, and here. These are just the invoices, and your signature means you have received the payment,' he explained.

She signed both pieces of paper and capped her pen shut. She took a deep breath and faked a big smile before looking up. 'So, that's done,' she sighed.

Tutul smiled back warmly at her. Faisal looked uncomfortable.

'What's with you?' Shambhavi asked him.

'Me? Uh, nothing. I'm just ... sorry,' he muttered, looking everywhere but her.

'Don't be. It is all right. Things did not work out between me and him and we ended it. We found it difficult to work together after that and we ended that too. This is life, shit happens.'

'Yes, still...'

'Relax. You had nothing to do with it and you do not have to be sorry.'

He nodded, but still looked uncomfortable. He took his leave even before his coffee was served, saying something had come up. The girls were not fooled, but they played along. They were happy to have some personal time anyway; he was just making it awkward. As soon as he left, Tutul turned to look at Shambhavi seriously.

'How are you?' she asked.

Suddenly, Shambhavi had to check tears threatening to flow out. She blinked rapidly and sniffed back tears. Every time she thought about Arjun, there was a twinge in her chest. There was a void he had left behind when he left, a hole that would never be sealed. Even thinking about him constricted her throat and made it difficult for her to breathe. The sting of missing him-and what they once had together-had become physical in its manifestation. She was suffocating.

'Try to relax, Shambhavi. Don't you dare start crying now,' Tutul threatened. Unlike Mili, Tutul was not the kind of friend who would have cried with Shambhavi to share her sorrow. Instead, she would curse the people who caused her pain and probably start knitting revenge strategies. Smashing car windshields and throwing acrylic paint on his furniture were going to be her top plans.

'I'm not going to cry,' Shambhavi laughed. She was getting really good at faking happiness; a year of practice was showing good results.

'Good. Now tell me everything-from the beginning to the end. It was embarrassing when I got to know about you quitting the assignment from Faisal. You are my friend. You were supposed to tell me.'

'I know. I was going to. But in all the mess ... I was so ... it totally slipped my mind.'

'It's okay. Tell me now. What did the bastard do? I have always thought there was something off about the man. But once I started to get to know him, I began to think that he was okay. Apparently not,' Tutul said angrily.

'It is not totally his fault. I should have been careful ...' Shambhavi did not know why she automatically started defending Arjun. She hated herself for being so weak when it came to him.

'Bullshit. Don't give me that. Grow a spine, and tell me what did he do?'

'We fell in love. And then, we ... I don't know what I was thinking, I was just blind. I didn't care. It was ... it felt right. We slept together, once ... nine weeks ago, without ... protection ...'

'Oh my God, no. Are you ...? Don't tell me you are... Tutul panicked.

'I am,' Shambhavi said softly.

'And he ...? He left you like this? In this condition? What kind of a man is he?'

Shambhavi just shook her head. And then, when she narrated the story to Tutul, she realized what Arjun had really done to her. Saying it aloud sounded worse than what she had felt till then. That was the exact moment she stopped loving him, even the tiniest bit.

'What was his excuse? Did he not want to settle down? Is there someone else? Gosh, did he ask you to abort?' Tutul questioned.

'He told me that he knew it was my plan all along-to get knocked up and ask for marriage or cash. He accused me of being a gold-digger.'

'That son of a bitch.'

'And oh, the best part-he asked me who the father of the baby was,' Shambhavi laughed sarcastically. 'That was the funniest bit. Considering he was the man I lost my virginity to, and have never been with anyone, even him, since that one time. There is something really hilarious about a man accusing you of being a slut when he is the only man you have ever slept with, you know? Ask me.'

'Oh, Shambhavi,' Tutul said, her anger for the man who hurt her friend etched clearly on her face.

'It's okay, Tutul. I'm okay,' Shambhavi lied and once again, faked a smile.



The next morning, Shambhavi found herself at Bombay Hospital, waiting for her appointment. She had woken up to Mili's incessant banging on her door. She informed her about the doctor's appointment she had made, because she knew Shambhavi was too careless when it came to taking care of herself.

'I can't believe you can act so irresponsibly,' Mili muttered, sitting next to Shambhavi at the waiting area.

'What? I was about to make an appointment myself,' Shambhavi defended herself.

'Oh yeah? When exactly was that going to happen?'

'Today I have to go to Anand Bazaar for a new assignment. So tomorrow. Or maybe day after ...'

'See? This is exactly the kind of behaviour I am talking about. How can you be so negligent?' Mili scolded her friend. 'You know this is no longer just about you, don't you? You have a baby to take care of ...'

'I know,' Shambhavi nodded. How could she not know that? The baby was what had kept her up night after night, wound up with worry. She had tried not to think about it, but had failed. It was a life, growing inside her. Something that had ruined her relationship with the man she loved. She had mixed feelings about the baby. She did not hate it, but she could not make herself love it either. She just did not want to think about it. To shut it out and pretend it was not there.

But it would still be there. No matter what.

Soon after, they were called in. The gynaecologist, Dr Mishra, was a woman in her fifties, and one of the most reputed doctors in the city. She smiled warmly at Shambhavi and Mili, and invited them to

sit. On getting to know the details of Shambhavi's pregnancy -especially the part about her patient being an unmarried pregnant girl who wanted to keep her baby, despite the father of the baby abandoning them both she didn't blink an eye. She was an expert, with years of experience, and it showed.

She just kept asking questions, nodding and noting down something in her notepad, before sending Shambhavi for standard tests. The report would not be out before the next day, but once her check-up was done, the doctor went through Shambhavi's basic health status.

'Twenty-three years old ...she murmured to herself.

'Actually, almost twenty-four, Doctor. My birthday's in two months' time,' Shambhavi said nervously. There was something about getting examined-all your personal details open for another person to see. She was embarrassed.

'Okay, twenty-four then. Five-feet-five, and you weigh just fifty kilograms? That's not healthy,' Dr Mishra mused.

'Are you kidding? I'm perfect,' Shambhavi said, before realising what she did. She muttered, 'I mean, I don't want to gain weight and get fat. I thought fifty was perfect-not overweight or underweight, you know? Just optimum.'

'Of course, for a girl. But now you need to take care of your diet, for the baby. There will be all kinds of hormonal changes in your body, you'll gain weight too. Which is obvious, since you have a baby growing inside of you. You have to be prepared for all these things.'

'Yes, Doctor,' Shambhavi nodded. She had seen this in the movies, but up till now, she had not started to understand the complete impact of it. She was like a pregnant teenager, and the doctor seemed to have realized that her patient was lost too.

Dr Mishra had a confused expression. 'Is there an adult I can talk to? Your parents?' she asked gently. She turned to Mili. 'Who are you to her ...?'

'Mili Khandelwal. I'm her friend, Doctor. But you can treat me like her mother. I will be taking care of her through this,' Mili said, smiling.

'Great. So, Mili, I'll give you a list of some books you should read and a diet chart that the mother-to-be should follow,' Dr Mishra said cheerfully.

'Sure. I'll take care she does both. Anything else we need to know?'

'Just be careful. The pregnancy is in its tenth week. We will get to know more once the reports come out. Till then, just take care of her. And also, there is a list of drugs the mother should not take. Are you on any kind of medication, Shambhavi?'

'No, Doctor. I'm not,' Shambhavi replied.

'Good. Ask for the list at the reception anyway, just in case. But I would recommend you do not self-prescribe at all. Understood?'

The girls nodded.

'One last thing, Doctor,' Mili said.

'Yes?'

'When can we see the sonogram?'

'Right now, if you wish,' Dr Mishra smiled.

'Wow,' Mili said, her smile spreading as she turned to Shambhavi. 'Let's see the baby!'

'Actually, Mili, let's do it tomorrow? We'll come to pick up the report anyway. So ...' Shambhavi said, not meeting her friend's eyes. 'I have to go somewhere now ...'

Mili nodded, even though her face clearly displayed her disappointment.

They left the doctor's office and walked out of the hospital, not exchanging a word. Shambhavi was grateful to Mili, who had asked no questions. If she had asked anything, Shambhavi would not have had any answers. Everything was royally messed up in her head. She did not know what to make of what. She needed time to figure things out. Slowly, one by one. All of it together became too overwhelming.

CHAPTER 14

HER STRUGGLE

Better put on a happy face than a gloomy one, if we have to go through it anyway. Attitude is what defines our journey through the bumpiest of roads.

Four months had passed since she had first gone to the doctor's office. Since then, she had visited Dr Mishra every other week. A lot of things had changed. It was in the twelfth week of her pregnancy that she had first seen the sonogram of her baby inside her. She had fallen in love with it instantaneously. Till then, she had always thought of the baby as something that would happen to her nine months later, but when she saw it in her body, she realized that it was there, then, at that moment. She was already a mother.

She had worked very hard to earn and save for her baby. Four months had gone by, drowned in hard work, and she had maintained a perfect balance of taking care of her father, her unborn child and the funds they both needed. Mili had been there by her side throughout the time, mostly concentrating on feeding Shambhavi so that the baby remained healthy. It was a tough job; she never seemed to have enough time for food.

She had worked very hard, and it had taken its toll on her health. She had grown weaker. She felt guilty about not eating and resting enough, which was causing harm to the baby, but she planned to make it all up with the rest she was going to get in the last two months of her pregnancy. She was in the seventh month of her pregnancy and had saved enough to last her through her delivery. But she needed to earn more for taking care of the baby and her father when she wouldn't be able to get up and work, right after the baby was born.

For that, she had a plan-with the help of Mili and Tutul, she had set up an exhibition of her paintings. The date was set-10th August 2011-which was two days from then. It was also her father's fifty-fifth birthday and she could not find a better date for the occasion. Considering the wretched condition she was in, things were comparatively better by then and the future was looking up.

Her father's condition was in no way better, but due to continuous shots of radiation therapy, he was stable. Shambhavi had been shocked when he refused to go to Paris with her, saying he knew she needed all the income she could get, for the baby. He said she was spending all her money on his treatment and medical expenses anyway, so he could not accept anything else from her. It was the least he could do for his grandchild.

Shambhavi was touched. But she still really wanted him to go to Paris. She pursued the matter for a while, but eventually realized that she did not have time to take a vacation, not with a baby on the way.

That day, she made one of the toughest decisions of her life. Although, considering the things she had gone through recently, it had not hurt her as much as she had expected it to. She decided to sell her paintings. Painting was her best talent, her true love, her passion. She had been painting ever since she had learnt to walk. The crayons her mother had put in her hands when she was a toddler slowly graduated to oil pastels and charcoal pencils. When she had had her fill of sketching, she picked up the paintbrush, at the age of fifteen.

She had nine years of paintings with her, some carefully wrapped in butter paper, others framed lovingly and put up on various walls of her home. It was only after she had gained experience that her painting got mature and refined. All her paintings were a reminder of her carefree life, before a brain tumour stole the innocence away, swiftly followed by a certain Mr Datta, who left her with his child growing inside her.

Ever since she had recognized her responsibilities, her art had also developed. Her paintings were more meaningful, darker, with a profound impact. Sadly, her collection of such pieces was limited. All her time had been consumed by things that brought her the much-needed money and her art was eventually left forgotten, inside carefully wrapped sheets of butter paper, in the basement, where she no longer went.

When she decided to have an exhibition, she had not planned on selling her paintings. Not the already painted ones, that is. She had just thought of showing off her art and creating a demand in the market. She would take up orders and complete them in the last two months of her pregnancy, when she would no longer be able to work outdoors.

But when she thought about it, she realized that it was an extremely selfish thing to do. Her love for her paintings was not as great as her love for her father and her child. She had funds right then, just barely enough to sail them through her delivery, but she could never be too sure. They might need more anytime. There could be any kind of complication in her father's condition, or her baby's ... maybe several.

It would be just pure selfishness to have all those paintings with her, when she could easily sell them for some dough. She picked up her phone and called Tutul to tell her about her decision.



The turn up at the exhibition was huger than they had anticipated. It was almost three times the number they had estimated. It turned out Shambhavi had made a lot of contacts, rich contacts, while decorating wealthy people's townhouses and mansions, and men who were loaded had wives who had nothing better to do than to be present at such dos of the city. They especially loved painting exhibitions, where they could fake fine taste and throw around dough to buy pieces of artwork they did not need.

Shambhavi was not complaining, as long as it worked in her favour. Mili's contacts at work and Tutul's amateur attempt at advertising had worked too. Even Vikaas-Mili's boyfriend, who was back in India by then-had pulled whatever strings he could to be of help. It had all worked out fairly well. They were happy with the outcome. They were taking rounds in the hall, greeting people and socialising, when Mr Sen was wheeled in by the hospital staff.

'Dad,' Shambhavi exclaimed and rushed to him to take over the wheelchair from the compounder, smiling at him broadly. 'I'm so happy you could come.'

'How could I not? It's my daughter's big day, after all,' her father beamed at her.

She bent over and kissed him on the cheek. 'You're the sweetest-the best daddy on the planet. Come, I'll show you my paintings, which you have already seen a zillion times, by the way.'

'But I sure do want to see them again. How many are therethirty?'

'Thirty-six. Mostly painted in the last three years. We had more, from earlier, but we thought these recent ones have more consumer appeal.'

'And why is that?' Mr Sen asked.

'Well, they are considerably more sophisticated than my older paintings and we have arranged them in a unique way too. You see, out of thirty-six, twenty-six were painted in the years 2008 and 2009. I was younger, carefree and so my paintings were colourful and, you know ... pretty? The remaining ten were painted in 2010, after I ... we got to know about your disease. They have a different, mature, angle to them. Use of darker colours too ...'

'Hmm.'

They kept silent, as she wheeled him from painting to painting, the colourful ones-the ones he had already seen. After they were done, she took him to the newer ones, the ones he had not seen before. She was a little nervous-she wanted him to like them. She hid her nervousness with words, and started blabbering about whatever was going on in her head when she was painting every painting.

When they got to the last painting of the exhibition, the tenth of the ten dark paintings, the last painting she had painted before more pressing worries stole her paintbrush away, she sighed and said, 'I still do not feel okay about selling these paintings, any of these thirty-six. I feel like they are a part of me.'

'I can understand what you mean. If you see these paintings through my eyes, you would see the change in you, as a person. Not just the big change from the twenty-six bright to the ten dark, but also the small changes, your growth as a person, as my child.' Mr Sen had tears in his eyes.

Shambhavi nodded. She knew what he meant. She was close to tears herself. She choked when she said, 'These paintings were never made to be sold. They were for me... one thing I truly loved doing...'

'You'll paint many more ...her father tried to console her.

'Many more, yes. And I will try not to get attached to them. I will learn to take it professionally. And it will be easier; I will know I am painting to sell. This just ... it breaks my heart to see these go...'

'Mine too. More than you will ever know.'

'But at least I will have my best piece with me always, hung on the study room wall,' Shambhavi smiled at the thought.

'Which one would that be?'

'Let me show you. It's here, but no one had any interest in buying it.'

'That's not possible. Your best piece and no takers? I do not believe it,' Mr Sen said. The pride he felt for his daughter's achievements made Shambhavi's heart swell in delight.

'You'd better believe it,' she wheeled him to the right corner of the hall, the one partially hidden by a makeshift partition. 'Because you really are not as handsome as you think you are. No one has any interest in buying a painting with your head on it.'

By that time, she had reached the partition. She wheeled him inside and turned him towards a portrait of him. It was a portrait painted roughly a year ago, a little after he was diagnosed with brain tumour. Behind his faint smile, it portrayed his worries, everything he had hidden behind a mask, and had not known that Shambhavi had seen. The man's worries, his fears, his strength and his crushing anguish-all of it was visible in the painting. The tears her father had been trying hard to hold back finally started to flow.

Shambhavi was right there with him-crying with him and wiping his tears at the same time. 'Happy birthday,' she whispered in his ears.

'If only ... I could put into words ... how proud you make me feel...'

That was all Shambhavi needed to hear. Months of hard work, to pay for his healthcare, juggling with the baby's care and her work, it all seemed worth it, in that one moment. The tears they had held back since he got diagnosed broke through. All the bottled-up frustration came out. The release felt good. Shambhavi was grateful to Mili, for partitioning the private area; they did not need to keep their emotions in check.



The exhibition had become a success for Shambhavi as soon as she had felt her father's approval, but the real figures were, more than anything, shocking. All her paintings were sold and she had orders for more than she could paint in three years' time. Some people were eager enough to offer to pay up the entire sum in advance, to get her to paint for them first.

Tutul suggested they organize another exhibition, for the rest of Shambhavi's pieces, but Shambhavi was not up for it. She did not want to be greedy. People had seen her best work and liked it. She was content. She did not want to take the chance of showing her lesser work and risking her newly formed reputation. People would expect better paintings from her than the random pieces she had painted as a teenager.

Fortunately, everything had gone well till then and her life was as back on track as it could get. She had the money issue taken care of, at least. She planned to get a private nurse for her father at the earliest and shift him back home. All his medical support would need to be shifted too, and the overall cost would be more than what she paid to keep him at the hospital. Even though he did not say it, she

knew he wanted to come back home. Nobody wants to die in a hospital. And what he had been doing was waiting for death in a hospital.

They knew he was not getting better, that he would not be okay and come back home to a normal life. And Shambhavi understood his desire to be come back home. After the success of the exhibition, she had the resources to make that happen. She wanted it done at the earliest.

That night, she found it difficult to fall asleep. She was excited about breaking the good news to her dad the next day. She was thrilled about living under the same roof with him again. It was going to be perfect-she would not need to rush to and fro from the hospital to home three times every day. She looked forward to having two relaxed, blissful months of painting, with her dad next to her, living in the same home. They would be a proper family again. And once the baby arrives, the family would become larger.

She ran her palms lovingly over her belly, caressing the baby underneath the skin there. She could not wait for it to be born. She saw its images in the form of sonograms every week. She did not know how much longer her father would survive. Sooner or later, the tumour was going to take his life. The future did not look very bright. Her baby was the only thing she had to look forward to, when she thought of her future.

CHAPTER 15

THE “BRIGHT” FUTURE

Getting back on your feet, it has a limit, after which we can't take it anymore and your knees buckle up for one final time.

She woke up in cold sweat. He had left her. She kept shouting, calling his name, trying to make him stop, to come back to her, but he did not turn around. He kept walking away from her ... She followed him, but could not keep up with his speed. The tall muscular frame kept getting further from her. She breathed heavily, struggling to reach him, but she could not. She had a baby inside her, a baby that grew by the second and kept getting bigger ... a baby he had put inside her. She shrieked, panicking, as she saw him get further away, turn into a small speck and disappear. No amount of screaming brought him back.

She sat up on her bed and tried to calm her spooked nerves. She did not understand why she still dreamt of him, after all this time. She massaged her stomach, whispering to the disturbed child. She had scared the baby, who was now twirling and kicking.

'Shh ... it's okay. Mumma's here. Everything is okay ...'

The baby kept kicking.

'I'm so sorry ... Mumma's sorry. She didn't mean to wake you up ... Go back to sleep ... It's okay...'

She kept cooing, running a soothing palm over her belly all the while. She could feel the distress of her baby, who kept moving. She murmured assurances and tried to calm herself as well as the child. After sometime, the baby went back to sleep, but Shambhavi kept running her palm over her stomach.

'Why did you have to go, Arjun?' she whispered sadly, in the dark night, where there was no one to listen to her. Those were the moments she chose to cry-in the death of the nights. That way, she kept her friends and father from worrying about her and let out her emotions at the same time.

She had been doing this ever since he had left. Slowly, the frequency had decreased, but the nightmares which used to haunt her dreams were still there, changing forms, but very much there. She wished they would end. But a part of her hoped they would not. The distressing nightmares were the only times she felt close to Arjun, and felt like she could still stop him from leaving. He never stopped, but she tried every time. It gave her some kind of a false assurance that he was still there in her life.

She hated him. But she also loved him. She did not know which one she did more.

Tutul used to keep Shambhavi updated about what was going on with Arjun. The information was not useful-it was always the same. He was never seen around the factory, and they told her that he was

out of the country for some business. She got to hear rumours about Arjun shifting his head office to Mumbai and getting wasted drinking, but after a while, even such fictional, invented stories stopped.

Eventually, Tutul completed her job at The Green Meadow and had no contact with anyone at DE from then onwards. Shambhavi missed the imaginary stories about Arjun. They were lies, but at least people were talking about him; he still existed for the world. But once even that stopped, she felt a crushing helplessness. Some nights, she just could not push herself to sleep; she became so restless for him. Had she not been pregnant, she would have taken sleeping pills. But then, had she not been pregnant, he would not have left her, in the first place.

She sometimes wished she had just aborted the baby and not told Arjun about it ever. Or the baby had not entered their lives at all. She wondered where they would have been, had that happened. But every time such thoughts came in, she felt guilty; she felt like she was betraying her child.

She often had open-eyed fantasies about him coming back. That they met somewhere and sorted out their differences and everything went back to normal. But it never actually happened.

Once again, she found herself hating herself for still being in love with that man. After what he had done to her, still loving him was a betrayal of her self-respect. But she could not help it. Love was not under her control.

In the depth of the night, she wept herself to sleep, wishing he was lying there next to her, holding her, whispering dreams about their future, their baby. She wished they were his palms caressing their baby. But she knew what the harsh reality was-he did not want the baby and he did not want her. He had made himself clear. She understood that. It was just her stupid heart that did not.



'This is going to be perfect,' Mili breathed.

'I know. But don't jinx it!' Shambhavi exclaimed.

They were readying her father's bedroom, to welcome him there that evening. Mili was dusting the room and placing fresh bed sheets, table covers and curtains. Shambhavi had taken the liberty of sitting lazily on her father's rocking chair and ordering her best friend around to get things done. She was thirty weeks pregnant and the huge bump that was her baby was excuse enough for not having to work.

'Oh, yes. Touch wood,' Mili said. 'So, you have everything finalized? Since when have you been planning this? And why am I getting to know about it only now?'

'Yes, I have everything finalized. I have been talking to Dad's doctors about this ever since we first shifted him to the hospital. I never wanted to send him there, but we did not have an option-he needed medical attention and we did not have any means to bring it all home. You did not know about it before because I got the idea only last night, when I realized I finally have that sort of money,' Shambhavi answered. 'Phew. You ask so many questions. I wonder how Vikaas manages to bear with you.'

'That he does because I'm so hot,' Mili winked.

'Yeah, yeah.'

'No, seriously. I can show you his text messages-written proof. Just today morning during text-sex, he told me that I am absolutely, the hottest chick on the planet. And that he wanted to do dirty things-'

'Okay, enough!' Shambhavi shouted to stop her friend. 'Do you really think I need to know the details of your sex life? What is text-sex, anyway?'

'See? I knew you would be interested.'

'All right, I am. Now, tell me.'

'It's just like phone sex, only written, through text messages. And much, much better. I tell you-' Just as Mili started to get into the dirty details, Shambhavi's phone rang. It was Dr Mishra.

'Good morning, Doctor,' Shambhavi greeted her cheerfully.

'Someone's in a good mood today,' Dr Mishra commented. Over time, they had grown fond of each other.

'I sure am; I'm bringing my dad back home. And no more interior designing for a while. Just my one true love-painting.'

'That sounds nice. When are you coming for your check up?'

'The appointment is tomorrow; I fixed it up with your secretary,' Shambhavi informed. 'Why? Is everything okay? The baby...'

'Oh, yes. The baby is just fine. I would still suggest you to rest more, but I know you won't listen, so I'll save my breath. I contacted you for something else-it is my son's housewarming next weekend and I was wondering if I could buy one of those beautiful paintings the whole town seems to be talking about.'

'Oh, that. I'm sorry, but you are late. The exhibition was yesterday and all the pieces were sold out. All I have left is a bunch of older paintings, unrefined and probably childish.'

'Can I still take a look?' the doctor insisted. 'I could not make it to the exhibition and I really do not want to miss out.'

'Sure. I do not think that will be an issue,' Shambhavi said. She still did not want to sell her already-painted-old-paintings, but Dr Mishra was no stranger. Shambhavi did not mind the doctor's son having one of her paintings.

She was grateful to God for the few caring people he had sent to her, when she was in need. She could not have imagined going through it all alone. Mili, Tutul, Vikaas and Dr Mishra were the only people with her, apart from her father. They were more than enough; they were all she needed.

Once Mili left for her office, after arranging the room and magically making it look welcoming, Shambhavi went to her basement. She wanted to paint. She set up a canvas in her bedroom and went back to the basement for colours. The rickety wooden staircase creaked under her weight, as she made her way back up to the ground floor carefully.



Living with her father again gave her a pseudo feeling of normalcy. It felt as if everything was back to normal. Her father's nurse had just gone out for a short while, to take care of some personal business. Shambhavi had checked up on him just seconds ago to find him fast asleep and then made her way back to her room, which was on the opposite end of the house. She wanted to shift to the guest room, which was closer to her father's, but then it did not really matter. The intercom took care of the distance.

She was sitting on her bed, with the framed canvas pulled close. The mattress on the bed was way more comfortable than her stiff painter's stool. Maybe she would get one of those cushy ones later, but right then, she was okay with sitting on the bed. She was avoiding all unnecessary expenses. She preferred getting a pram for her child than spending money on a stool she did not need.

She thought she heard her father's voice, and paused her paintbrush. She looked at the intercom. It was silent. She continued her work. It was only after she heard his voice from closer by that she realized that he really was calling her. He must not be in his room; she would have heard him over the intercom otherwise. She called out to let him know she was coming. She pushed her canvas frame away from the bed and got up slowly. Her back hurt from all the weight she was carrying in her tummy. She put a hand there for support, stood up and walked out of her room.

'Dad? Where are you?' she called.

'Shambhavi?'

'Yes, Dad. Why are you out of your bedroom?'

'I came out for a stroll. Now come here and help me out of this...!' Mr Sen said. He sounded panicked.

Shambhavi rushed towards him, following his voice to the top of the basement staircase. 'What are you doing here?' she asked, out of breath.

'I came to find you. But I got trapped in this staircase,' he explained.

'First, I no longer paint in the basement. And second, you are never supposed to bring your wheelchair near staircases. It's dangerous. How can you act so reckless?'

She saw that one of the wheels of his wheelchair was stuck in the broken wood at the top of the stairs. His wheelchair was facing the stairs and he had his back towards her. 'Stop! Don't do anything. Let me help you out of the chair and take you to your room. I'll get the chair later.' It would be tricky to get him out of the chair, but it was their best option. The wheelchair was bent dangerously downwards.

'There's no need. Just pull a little towards yourself, it'll come free.'

'NO!'

Before Shambhavi could stop him, he put his feet down and started pushing backwards. After the first push, his foot lost balance and he fell forwards, facedown towards the stairs.

'DAD!' Shambhavi panicked and left her hold on the back of the wheelchair and rushed towards her father. In the terror she felt, her foot got caught in one of the wheels of the chair and she was thrown forward too.

'AARGHHHH,' she yelled when her stomach hit the wheelchair.

'SHAMBHAVI,' she heard her father call out.

She tried to hold the chair for balance, but her bump had pulled it free of the stair and it rolled down the stairs, pulling Shambhavi with it.

'NOOOOO,' she shouted. The scene unfolded in front of her in all its horrifying pieces. Everything was happening way too quickly to make any sense.

'AAARRGGHHHHH; her father shouted out. He was in pain; she had to do something about it.

But she could not; she herself was in free fall. She saw her body falling down, right behind the wheelchair. She tried to halt her fall by clutching at something, but the staircase had no raised edge, or boundary of any kind.

Her father was lying at the bottom of the staircase. She could see blood, but did not know where it was coming from. All she concentrated on was stopping the wheelchair and her own body from falling over her father. She held tightly onto the wheelchair, managing to change its direction.

She did it. The wheelchair did not roll over onto her father and neither did she. Instead, they fell sideways, from the middle of the staircase, from a height of five feet, to the floor. By some miracle, she did not fall on the wheelchair, else she would have died on the spot. It had all happened in a matter of seconds.

'SHAMBHAVI? SHAMBHAVI? SHAMBHAVI!' her father's voice broke through her semi-consciousness.

She opened her eyes. He was lying on his stomach face down on the floor, a few feet away from her, clearly unable to get up.

'Dad ... Dad ...' she managed to murmur.

'GET UP. GET UP, SHAMBHAVI,' her father shouted. It seemed like he was in unbearable suffering. But he did not care about himself. Just her.

'Dad ...'

'Call the doctor ...'

'Dad...!' Shambhavi cried again, unable to move a muscle.

'The ... doctor ... Shambhavi ... the baby ...'

He kept saying things, but she could not make any sense of it. She heard his voice, through a dense cloud of pain surrounding her. She attempted to open her eyes, but her eyelids kept dropping. She struggled not to get unconscious; her dad's voice kept her from drifting off. But she could not muster strength to speak. She kept groaning, till her father's voice slowly drowned and eventually stopped.

It was only when the silence hurt her ears that she opened her eyes wide, despite the involuntary tears overflowing them.

'Dad ...?'

There was no response.

'Dad? Dad ...?'

There was no response again.

She strived to get up, but could not. She looked at her dad, who was lying lifeless, a few feet away from her. She strained to crawl towards him, but none of her limbs responded. The agony was blinding. She barely managed to fish her cell phone out of her maternity top. She dialled the last dialled number.

'Hello?' Dr Mishra answered cheerfully after two rings.

'Doctor ...' Shambhavi could not speak. The ache was too much to take. She could not even pinpoint the source of the pain; it hurt so much, everywhere.

'Shambhavi? Hello?'

'Doctor ... the basement...'

'What are you saying, Shambhavi? Where are you? Are you okay?' Dr Mishra asked in alarm.

'My dad ... my baby...'

That was all she could say before she saw the pool of blood she was lying in and fainted. She thought of her father, she thought of Arjun, she thought of her baby, before her eyes closed.

PART IV

HE

Smiling for the world, living despite grief, bouncing back every time life tries to pull one down-if only it were as easily done as said. The most painful is to see those give up, who had never let anything pull them down before, no matter what they are faced with.

Sometimes, for finding the sunlight, we need to go through the densest and darkest of the forests. Sometimes, we seek sunshine, not for ourselves, but only for the ones we love.

CHAPTER 16

HE WISHED

Running away from our responsibilities only makes it more difficult to handle when we eventually decide to come back.

I do not want to listen to anything you have to say. Why is that so difficult to understand?' Arjun thundered over phone. It was not the first time Faisal had called him to talk about Shambhavi. He regretted his decision of letting him know where he was going and how to contact him. But he had thought that if he had to disappear, at least his assistant needed to know where he was, in case there was an emergency at work.

His regret began from the very first call he received from Faisal, telling him there was something urgent he needed to know about Shambhavi-the woman he was trying so hard to forget.

He had told Faisal that he did not want to know anything at all and hung up. Since then, Faisal had called twice. It was really infuriating and he was about to lose his lid.

'But sir, this is important. I assure you it is,' he tried again desperately.

'It sure must be. But I just want to be left alone. Could you not just give me a little peace?' he said, teeth clenched in fury.

'Sure, sir. But first you need to listen to -'

'I DO NOT WANT TO. I've told you this a zillion times, and I am not about to tell you again. One more time you call me for this, and you are fired.'

'Then fired I will get, happily. BUT YOU HAVE TO LISTEN TO ME,' Faisal suddenly shouted. It made Arjun pause. It was the first time he had heard Faisal raise his voice with him. 'I cannot let this happen, when I can see it in front of my eyeshow unfair this is. You might think that we, your employees, are blind, but we really are not. We see things and we hear things.'

'What is that supposed to mean?'

'That means that I have heard from the older employees what happened between you and that girl-Prehal. And then I saw what happened between you and Shambhavi.'

'How does any of this concern you? Do you realize how close you are to getting fired?' Arjun snapped angrily.

'I am considering myself fired already. So I have nothing to lose. Just listen-you remember the cheque you had me hand over to her? I gave it to her, but Shambhavi never took the money. That is what I have been trying to tell you all along.'

'What bullshit? I have the document with her signature on it, which says she received the cheque. I know she got it.'

'Yes, she took the cheque from me and she signed the documents along with The Green Meadow invoice,' Faisal tried to explain desperately. 'But she never cashed it. I found out last week, while going through the company's expenses, and called you to ask what I should do, but you didn't listen to me.'

Arjun was no longer listening to him even then. A thought took birth in his brain. Shambhavi.

All this while, he had thought that she had accepted his cheque, just as he had expected. But it turned out that she had never taken his money. And she had never tried to contact him either. That meant she was not after his wealth, after all. He felt strangely elated. As if a heavy burden had been lifted off his shoulder. He was seeing Shambhavi in a new light. She was not the woman he had accused her of being. She was different. She had loved him truly with no pretence and definitely not for money.

And then he was hit by the horrible things he had said to her before leaving her, abandoning her, with a child on the way

It had been-he mentally calculated-over four months. That meant that their baby was in the seventh month. Thirty weeks, he estimated, from the day the baby was conceived- 5th January 2011. The thought took him back to the time he had asked Shambhavi who the father of her unborn child was.

He felt terrible. He had accused her of horrible things and had abandoned her at a time she needed him the most. He cursed himself over and over again for being so blind ... for not recognizing love when it stared him in the face. Maybe it was too late to go back ...

Maybe she would not want to see him. It would be justified. He did not deserve to be allowed within twenty feet of her, but he had to try. He had to go back to her and try to explain to her about what had made him do what he did. He would try to tell her that, and then he would accept whatever decision she took.

'Sir? Are you there? Hello?' Faisal's voice pierced through his thought-cloud.

'Yes, yes, I am listening,' Arjun lied.

'I was saying-I could not let you continue doing this. I had to tell you. I am sorry for being so out of line. But you have to understand that I could not live with knowing so much and doing nothing about it.'

'It's okay, Faisal. I am grateful to you for forcing it on me,' Arjun said. He added thoughtfully, 'Actually, do you have any idea where I might find Shambhavi?'

'Yes, I do. They are at Aurobindo Hospital.'

'What? Why?'

'Weren't you listening? There has been an accident. That is why I had to make a last-ditch effort to inform you, even though you told me you didn't want to hear a word about Shambhavi,' Faisal said.

'What the ... What kind of accident? What are you talking about?' Arjun freaked out instantaneously.

'She fell from the stairs last night. Apparently, she was trying to save her father. Her father did not make it; passed away on the way to the hospital ...'

'And Shambhavi? The baby?'

'I do not know much, the doctors aren't telling yet. Tutul told me about it just this morning and I called you immediately, hoping you would listen to me for once,' Faisal explained.

'But they are ... they are ... alive, aren't they?'

'Yes, critical, both of them, but alive.'

'Oh, thank God,' Arjun exhaled. 'How critical?'

'Very critical. She was in the seventh month of her pregnancy. They fell from a height, so the impact was hard. And I don't think whether I should say this or not, but Tutul said that a baby delivered in its seventh month rarely survives.'

Arjun stopped listening at that point. His brain was numb; his mind frozen. He could not believe all of this was happening. To think that such horrific things had happened to Shambhavi ... and their baby ... and he had been too late. He had never given her a chance to explain; now he might never get a chance to explain.

He had run away from his responsibility and abandoned her to die. She might actually do that. He felt short of breath, as he tried desperately to gather his thoughts together. Worrying about the future was pointless. He needed to do something about the present. He needed to get to the hospital she was in and be of any kind of help he could provide. He knew she would not want to talk to him, if and when she gained consciousness. She would want him out of his life, because he was an animal. He had not thought of her even once. He had not stopped to think what she must have been going through before pushing her out of his life. Not once had he thought about her and their baby, and how they were doing without him.

His biggest regret was not being there with her to prevent the fall. He should have been there to take care of her, since she was pregnant, and he was the father of the child. He should have been there every step along the way and pampered her silly. She should not have needed to do anything on her own. She should not have needed to go near the stairs at all. He should have been there to do everything for her.

But he had not been.



He rushed out of his personal hellhole-the underground cabin beneath the factory, where he had been hiding since the last four months -and rushed towards the hospital they were admitted in. He asked about her at the reception and reached the floor she was being operated in. As soon as he got out of the elevator, he saw Tutul -and one other girl who he assumed was Mili-there. They did not spare him a second glance. He did not mind. He did not need second glances. All he needed was to find Shambhavi and take care of her. To tell her what a terrible mistake he had made and how miserable he was, knowing what had happened behind his back. He wanted to apologize for being absent, in the most crucial time of her life.

He had expected her to be lying unconscious in the hospital bed, too hurt to move. But he was in for a surprise. She was up and walking. As he made his way to the ward the receptionist had directed him to, he saw her coming out of it.

He would never be able to erase the image from his head.

Shambhavi, dressed in the light green hospital gown which reached her knees, rushing out of the ward. She looked frail underneath the gown, her bones were sticking out. It seemed like she had lost a lot of weight since he had last seen her. Wasn't it supposed to be the other way round, during pregnancy? Her stomach looked caved in, where the baby should have been. She had bandages covering a lot of her forehead, right arm and right leg. There were little wounds all over her body, dressed up with gauze. Her right arm was in a cast.

There was no muscle on her body-just skin on bones. Her eyes looked sunk in, her cheeks were hollow. There was no twinkle in those once-bright eyes. Instead, they were surrounded by dark circles. Her skin was an unhealthy shade of yellow, very pale. But the fire inside her was still burning-she was shouting at the hospital attendants, forcing them to let her go.

'DON'T TOUCH ME. Stay away. AWAY,' she yelled, as one of the nurses tried to take her back to the ward.

Mili and Tutul got up and ran towards Shambhavi. Arjun stood where he was. Frozen.

'Shambhavi ...' Mili said. 'Relax. Come back to bed. You need to rest ...'

'I will NOT rest. My child needs me; Pari needs me. I have to GO,' Shambhavi shrieked again.

'But you are in no condition to be out of bed. Please come back,' Mili pleaded and Tutul held Shambhavi from the other side.

'LET ME GO. STOP IT. DON'T YOU SEE? MY BABY NEEDS ME.'

'You cannot do anything to help her. The doctors are trying their best ... Tutul said.

'You don't understand ... I need to be with her ... Pari ...'

Mili nodded, tears overflowing her eyes as she hugged Shambhavi tight. 'I understand ...'

'You don't ... she's my only family ...'

'We're here with you, Shambhavi ... please don't be like this ... Tutul said, also crying.

'Tutul ... Please let me go to my baby ... I want to see her ... She is ... dying ...' Shambhavi started sobbing. 'She's dying. Just like Dad. I want to die too. There is nothing left to live for...'

'Nothing is going to happen to her ... she will be okay...'

'You don't know that. You're just saying that to fool me. But you cannot fool me ... I am not a child. I have seen a lot more of the world, than you give me credit for. I know she is not going to be okay ... and I know I am never going to be okay...'

'Don't say that. Shambhavi, you have to be positive about this,' Mili tried to explain.

'I would have-had there been anything remotely positive about this whole situation ...' that was all Shambhavi said, before she broke down into tears again and her knees gave out. Mili and Tutul held her up and tried to guide her back to the ward, supporting her. But she was still not letting them.

'My baby ... Pari ...' Shambhavi kept repeating the same, begging her friends to not take her back to the ward. She looked helpless. By the way her teeth were clenched and she held herself up awkwardly, it was clear that she was in a lot of suffering. But she was not complaining about that. All she cared about was her baby. She joined her hands in plea and cried, 'Please let me go to her ... Please ... I know she does not have long to live ... I know she is going to ... leave me. I just want to see her, hold her close to me ... Please don't take this away from me...'

'Shambhavi, no. Pari is going to be okay ...' Tutul said, trying to be strong, but her tears kept flowing endlessly. Her body shook, as she sniffed, not looking at Shambhavi's face. It seemed like she was struggling to be strong outside, when she was breaking inside.

Mili could not even pretend to be so strong. She broke down and fell to her knees. She sobbed uncontrollably, her body heaving as her breathing got rattled. Tutul was by her side immediately, trying to pull her up, but Mili did not get up. She pulled her knees up to her face and wailed. 'This is ... so ... unfair...' she stammered to let the words out. She looked up at Shambhavi, her face crumpled up. She closed her eyes and said, 'This should never ... have happened ...'

Somehow, Mili's tears seemed to have given Shambhavi some strength. She tried to stoop down to pull her friend up, but the cast in her leg made it impossible for her to bend. 'Aargh,' she let out, as the pain hit her again. She doubled down in agony and clutched her stomach tightly.

'Are you okay?' Mili was back to her feet in a microsecond. 'Where does it hurt, Shambhavi?'

'Everywhere,' Shambhavi said and threw herself in Mili's arms. The three girls stood there, in the middle of the hospital corridor, crying profusely. Their wails were heart wrenching. They supported each other, wiped each other's tears, when their own kept flowing down their cheeks ceaselessly.

Arjun still stood rooted at his spot, and watched the scene unfold. Seeing Shambhavi break down like that was even more painful to see than the last time he had seen her crying. She was beyond herself, the anguish of their baby's health grappling her. She did not notice him standing there, just about six feet away from her. She did not care about anything other than Pari at the moment.

He should have been there. He knew he would never be able to forgive himself for causing Shambhavi such angst. He knew he was a horrible person. He knew it was all his fault, and he would

have agreed to die a million deaths to spare Shambhavi the sorrow she felt right then. But it does not work like that.

You cannot undo what's already done.

He wished he could. He wished he had given Shambhavi a chance to explain-that he had not suspected her in the first place-that he had not been such a heartless monster. He wished he could take away all her woes and make them his. He wished their child-Pari, he had heard Shambhavi call her-would be all right. He wished Shambhavi would forgive him.

He wished ... but wishes rarely come true.

CHAPTER 17

EVERY STONE TURNED

Making-up to someone might seem simple in theory, but it is really not that smooth a sail. Dues inexorably have to be paid.

Eventually, the girls calmed down and Mili and Tutul took Shambhavi back to her ward. Arjun stayed where he was and waited for Shambhavi's friends to come out. He wanted to ask them what the doctors were saying about Shambhavi's and Paris condition and which doctor was working on their cases and every other possible detail about the treatment.

He could not just stand there and do nothing, watching the mother of his child push herself into depression. He needed to do something. To make something happen.

Finally, he saw Mili come out. He went to her.

'Go away,' she said and turned away from him.

'You must be Mili,' Arjun said. I have heard a lot about you.'

'You must be Arjun. I have heard a lot about you too. Mostly horrible things,' Mili glared at him.

He nodded, accepting the insult he deserved. 'How is she?'

'Did you not see? Were you not there?'

'Please Mili. You can ridicule me all you want. But first, please just tell me what I need to know.'

Something in his expression must have stirred something inside her, because she relented. 'Not well at all. Dr Awasthi, he is the one operating her, said she needs bed rest for at least two months. She lost a lot of blood. We had to infuse three bottles last night ...'

Arjun inhaled sharply.

'There are fractures in her right arm and her right leg is badly hurt. A concussion in her head. That, along with the blood loss and the weight she had gradually lost ... it doesn't seem good. She has no energy. Physically, she will need a while to recover ...'

'But she will be okay, right? There is no long-term damage?'

Mili laughed sarcastically. The tears in her eyes started to flow again, as she clenched her teeth furiously and muttered, 'You think there is no long-term damage? Her father died right in front of her. Her baby is going to ... How do you expect her to come out of that unscarred?'

Arjun had nothing to say. He processed all the information he had just been given and his heart sank lower. Just then, Tutul came out of the ward too. She looked at him and the anger returned on her face.

'What are you doing here? Haven't you done enough damage?' she snarled.

He did not respond to that. He knew he deserved all the curses being hurled at him. He did not defend himself.

'How is the baby?' he asked instead. Even if there was no reason left to try, it was worth trying any and everything he could. For their child, he would leave no stone unturned.

'Dying,' Tutul said curtly.

Arjun flinched.

'It's the truth. Pari is dying. It is as simple as that. She was delivered after just six and a half months of gestation period. That too, after Shambhavi got hit by the edge of a wheelchair. I don't know if you have seen the child, but when you do, the bruise on her shoulder caused by that bump is unmistakable.'

'Stop it Tutul,' Mili said. 'Don't be so mean to him.'

'Why not? Why the hell not? He was the one who left Shambhavi after getting her pregnant. He was the one responsible for Shambhavi throwing herself into work to save for Pari. He was the reason why she had to do it all singlehandedly, that too when her father was already in the hospital and his expenses were already something she could barely manage. He is the one who did this to Shambhavi and Pari,' Tutul exploded. She turned to Arjun and sneered, 'Why did you come back now? There is nothing left to be saved.'

'I just want to be of any help I can. You have reasons to hate me, and that's okay. But now is not the time. Please tell me everything there is to know about anything I can do to help. Please,' Arjun begged.

'Money cannot buy everything, Mr Datta,' Mili said stiffly.

'I know that. But it surely can pay for medical expenses.'

'Shambhavi would never accept any help from you.'

'Shambhavi does not need to know. I just want to do my best to ensure that she and Pari get the best medical attention possible. And money can make that happen. I do not know how much you know about me, Tutul. But this was the reason why I became obsessed with earning money-because I did not have any to pay for medical care for my family and they died because of that. It would be nice if you cooperate with me, and even if you don't -I am not going to let money come in the way of my family's life again.'



He stood outside the glass door, watching silently. There was no one around, except a nurse, who looked bored, sitting there, doing nothing other than staring at the frail, sick baby. Arjun had requested personal attention for the baby, but since they needed to do it without raising Shambhavi's suspicion, they could not get Pari transferred to another hospital. It was all right, though; the hospital they were in was one of the best in the city, and the baby was not strong enough to be transferred to a bigger city.

They were doing their best for her. Seven paediatricians, from five different hospitals of the city were working on Paris case. Two specialists had flown in from Delhi to help. They had decided to operate on the baby. Pari was not strong enough to withstand an operation. But she was only getting weaker by the second. The panel of doctors decided against waiting. The operation was to be conducted in ten minutes' time and the doctors had left Pari under the supervision of the nurse, to prepare for the operation.

But Arjun was not thinking about any of that. All he had in mind was Pari. He stared at her, unblinkingly. She was his daughter, his blood. She was the one thing he shared with Shambhavi, even though she would never let him close to her. Pari was their daughter, even though Shambhavi would not give him the right to be her father.

She was very tiny, with tiny fingers and toes. Her eyes were closed and he craved to find out what colour they were. Her lips were a bright shade of pink, as was her entire body. Her legs were folded and almost touched her chest. Her hands were also doubled up in a way that made her look like a ball. All her limbs crumpled close to her body, she looked like she must have looked inside her mother's womb. She was not used to having so much space around her, so she had not spread her arms and legs; she just stayed the way she had since the time she got life inside her mother.

Tutul was right-the wound on Pari's shoulder was unmistakable. It was like a physical ache to Arjun, seeing his daughter in such a state. But he could not tear his eyes away from her either. He imagined what his life would have been like, in that moment, if only he had not abandoned Shambhavi. They would have been a family. A beautiful family-with two angels in it. But it was not to be.

Pari was kept in an incubator-which gave the child a false feeling of being in its mother's womb. The environment she was kept in was expertly controlled to be the same as what it is inside for an unborn child in its mother's body.

Arjun stood there and stared at his daughter for as long as he could get. He wished he could hold her, but the nurse had refused, when he had asked. He had agreed. Paris safety before everything else.

'I'm so, so sorry,' he whispered.

And then, just as he stood there watching, he saw the best sight ever-Pari struggled with breathing, and her mouth opened slightly and her chest heaved as she drew a deep breath in. She released it, and her chest inflated. And right after that, her lips spread into a big smile.

The sight of it was breathtaking. She kept smiling, her lips stayed stretched. It was as if she had stilled the smile, for her daddy to see and cherish. But even then, it lasted for far too less time for him. He had not had his fill; he never would.

She was his angel. Looking at her smile for five seconds was not enough. He knew it would not have been enough even if it had lasted for decades. She had been in his life for all of ten minutes, and in those ten minutes, she had become a part of him. He could not imagine a life without her anymore.



He stood outside the operation theatre, praying for his daughter to be okay. He walked in circles, flustered. It had been half an hour since the doctors had gone in and Arjun was getting impatient.

So was she, apparently.

He saw her coming towards him. She was in a wheelchair, which Mili was wheeling towards the operation theatre. Mili had told Arjun about how Shambhavi had refused to use the wheelchair, because it reminded her of the night of the accident. Maybe she was getting desperate, and had no other option but to give in, eventually. She was too badly hurt to even use a walking stick. But maybe she could not stay put, in her ward, with Pari in the operation theatre. He saw her getting closer. She looked even weaker than before, if that was possible. Her head rested back and her eyes were blank. She looked like someone who had no hope. Maybe she had really become that someone.

And then he saw her look right at him. And he saw the recognition register.

'You?' she muttered.

He wanted to run away. He wanted to turn invisible at that moment. He had known all along that Shambhavi must hate him, but when he actually saw the hatred in her eyes, he realized that he had not been prepared to face it. He instinctively took a step back.

'What are you doing here?' she asked, when she was close enough.

'I heard what happened and I...' he could not seem to find words. Her face told him so many things at the same time. There was worry in her face, and fear. There was anger and hurt. There was insecurity and uncertainty. Her expression told a million stories all at once. But most of all, it told him that she loathed him, with all her heart.

He was crushed.

He could not talk to her. He could not face her. Not yet, not ever. He wanted to run away and never come back. But he had run away once and it had been the worst decision of his life, something he would regret till his last breath. He was not about to take that chance again. So he stood there, right in front of her, and let her shower him with insults. He let her vent out all her pent up emotions at him. He deserved all of it ... and more.

'And? You heard what happened and you came to gloat? Is that it? Did you want to show that I got what I deserved, for trapping you into sleeping with me and getting pregnant on purpose?'

'No, Shambhavi. I just wanted to help ...'

'Oh, you did? Did you buy a heart from somewhere? Or is it just that you rich people love pitying us poor people and you could not bear to let this chance go?'

He said nothing.

'Well, you know what, Mr Datta? I do not need your help. For anything at all.'

He nodded.

'I do not need your love. I don't need your money.'

He nodded again.

She looked as if she had something more to say, but she turned back towards the operation theatre without saying anymore. Maybe she decided she had more pressing issues than making him feel like shit. She was too worried about the operation to care about his return into her life. Her daughter was being operated upon and her fate was going to be decided in a matter of a little bit of time. Pari's fate would also determine her mother's future.

Shambhavi determinedly looked away from Arjun. He watched her. Her chest was heaving, she was breathing so heavily. It killed him to see the magnitude of hatred she felt for him. She was blinking rapidly, trying to hold back tears.

He looked away. He could not bear to see her cry. Not again.

They stayed there in silence; no one uttered a word. He met Mili's eyes once and she had a semi-apologetic expression on her face. He knew she no longer hated him. He was grateful that at least someone on the earth did not loathe him completely. He nodded at her, expressing his unspoken gratitude.

She leaned into the chest of a man next to her, probably her boyfriend. He faintly remembered Shambhavi telling him something about Mili's boyfriend. He did not stress his mind too much. It was somewhere else, anyway.

Arjun turned back to face the operation theatre. The red light was still on. He desperately wanted Pari to be okay. If Shambhavi wanted, he would stay away from both of them for life. He just wanted them to be okay. He remembered his angel's smile and he prayed for her. He longed to see that smile again.

He had never put much of a belief in God, but when he felt his heart sinking, he had nothing to hold on to, but faith in a higher power. They say when medicines do not work, prayers do. So, he prayed silently for a miracle to happen, and save his daughter.

His heart beat out of his chest, when an hour later, he saw the red light turning off, over the door of the operation theatre. He dared to look at Shambhavi, who was struggling out of her wheelchair upon seeing the doctors come out. He dived towards them, in a mad rush to find out if his prayers had been answered.

They hadn't.

The operation was unsuccessful. Pari was no more.

CHAPTER 18

IN THE AFTERMATH

The best distraction from our own misery is to try and make the grief and sufferings of our loved ones go away.

He did not want Shambhavi to be there, at the funeral. He did not want her to see it-the dead bodies of her father and her daughter. But he had no say over anything she did. And right then, all she was doing was staring into nothingness, floating in some other world.

Her father and her baby had died less than twenty-four hours apart. Her dad ... at 10 pm at night, and her daughter ... at 5 pm, the next evening. It was no surprise that she was broken. She was not talking to anyone, just sitting silently, tears flowing down her cheeks ceaselessly. She did not bother to wipe them away. It was of no use, anyway.

They were at the funeral. Her father's body was about to be burned and their daughter's body buried. It was not going to be pleasant and Arjun had tried to convince Mili and Tutul to stop Shambhavi from coming. But she had come. She sat in her wheelchair, not talking to anyone, not even looking ... just sobbing silently. Her sadness killed something inside him. He missed her bright eyes, which used to sparkle whenever she talked about SRK and his movies.

They were surrounded by people. Arjun did not notice who they were, neither did he care. He just kept looking at Shambhavi. She looked as if she was about to faint.

It went on like that, till the time the bodies were brought in. Then, everything changed in a matter of seconds.

As soon as Shambhavi saw her father's body, she broke down worse than ever. It was as if a dam had broken inside her, causing the tears to flow out endlessly. She cried out loud and her breath got caught several times. She found it difficult to breathe. Her entire body was shaking and she fell to the floor, hugging her father's corpse. Arjun could not bear the sight of it.

'Dad ...' she kept crying over and over again.

At that moment, she looked like a child. He wanted to go to her, and hold her close to him. He wanted to protect her from all that hurt. She looked way younger than she was, as her face crumpled up and her eyes turned red with the constant presence of tears. She sobbed loudly, saying things that were heart breaking to hear.

'Why ...? Why did you have to go, Dad? Why now ...? Everything was getting ... better ...' she moaned. She sniffed and tried to get her breathing back to normal before saying, 'I was ... I thought we would be a family again ... you were back home ... I was so happy...'

Convulsions shot through her and all the remaining energy seeped out of her, leaving her tired to the bone. Arjun wanted to rush to her side, to keep her from fainting, but knew she would not accept any kind of help from him.

'You never even got to see Pari ... she is ... she was ... so cute...' she sniffed. 'And you know ... they did not even let me ... hold her ... touch her ... I just saw her ... once ... She left me, my child, my hope...'

That was all she could say before breaking down completely in front of her father's body. She buried her face into his chest and cried. It felt like she never wanted to get up, as if she wanted to stay there forever. She did not want her father to be taken away.

'Why did you go ...?' she kept asking. 'Now I have nothing left...'

Tutul was holding her and crying with her. Mili was hiding in her boyfriend's arms. Everyone around them was crying; it was so painful to see Shambhavi cry.

But it was nothing compared to what happened when Paris body was brought in. It was put in a small, closed casket. Arjun's heart stopped at seeing the size of the casket itself. She should not have died. She should have been in his arms, smiling ...

He did not have the strength to look at the closed casket anymore. It was just too painful to bear. But when he turned to Shambhavi, he realized what pain really was. She had gotten up from the floor, no longer holding her father's body.

She walked like a zombie towards the casket, which was kept at a height. All around it, flowers were decorated. She did not see the flowers. She just saw the casket. She started to open it.

'No, Shambhavi!' Arjun rushed to her side immediately.

She did not listen to what he said. She did not even look at him. There was no sign that she had even heard what he said. Her hand moved forward to undo the latch.

'Please, Shambhavi. Please don't.' Arjun said again.

This time, she responded. She still did not look at him. Her eyes never leaving the casket, she said, 'It's my baby. I deserve to ... hold her ... just once ...'

Arjun did not have anything to say. He wanted to move back. He did not have enough courage to look at Paris dead body. He just wanted to always remember her smiling face. That was the memory of his daughter he wanted to keep. He took a step back, but he could not move further away. He could not leave Shambhavi alone. Not again, not like this. He stayed there, right behind her, trying not to look inside the casket.

Just then, Shambhavi undid the latch and bent forward. She suddenly gave a yelp, looking at the dead body. Arjun looked away, he blocked his vision, but he could not block sound.

'Shambhavi ...he whispered, still trying to stop her.

'I want to hold her ...' Shambhavi murmured. 'But I ... can't...'

'It's okay, baby ... Don't.'

'Help me.'

He turned to look at her. And then he realized what she was saying. She wanted to hold Pari, but she could not, not because it was too painful, but because of her broken arm. She could not lift her child. And she had just asked him for help.

Once again, the desire to run away hit him, this time with double the force. He did not want to expose Shambhavi and himself to more torment. He just wanted to shut the casket close and not look at their dead daughter's body ever.

'Please ...' Shambhavi said and turned to look at him for the first time since he had been standing there. Her eyes begged him. There was distress in those eyes. He looked away. 'Please...'

He nodded. He wanted to ask Mili or Tutul to do it, but he did not want to subject them to the suffering either. He moved forward. The sight of his baby made him pause. She looked the same. There was no change in her from when he had seen her the previous day. The only difference was the very tiny cotton balls plugged in her very tiny nostrils.

Her skin was still pink, almost translucent. The veins were visible underneath. Her face looked still the same. The wrinkles were still there, so was the wound on her shoulder, visible slightly, above the white cloth she was wrapped in. Her eyes were still closed. And would never open.

He walked close to the casket and very slowly, moved his hands forward. He slid them under her gently and lifted her up, extremely carefully. She was very light, her weight felt like feather in his arms. He was holding her, with one hand under her neck and the other under her hip, cradling her tenderly, as if she was still alive. He looked at her from up close. He could not look away.

Up close, she looked much weaker. It was not that she did not look weak from a distance. She did, very much so; it was not a pleasant sight. He moved his finger from under her neck and caressed her skin. It was his first skin-to-skin touch with his daughter. He wished he could have felt good about it. He was about to break down. He bent forward and kissed her lovingly on her one cheek and then the other.

He straightened up and looked at her once more, before he positioned Pari into Shambhavi's arms. Shambhavi held her behind the neck, but Arjun still kept his hand at her hip, since Shambhavi could not lift weight with her right arm due to the fracture. He stayed there, closer to her than he had been since a long time and they held the baby between them, together.

They were a family. A broken one, but a family.

Shambhavi started speaking to the baby. Loud enough just for Pari to hear. But unfortunately, Arjun was there too. But he didn't think that she even registered the fact that he was there while she talked to the baby ... their baby.

'I'm so sorry ... Pari ... Mumma's sorry ... I didn't mean to hurt you ... I just wanted to help your grandpa ... he was hurt ... he was bleeding ... did you hear him shout?'

Shambhavi's face crumpled and her tears fell on Paris cheek. Arjun raised his other hand and wiped them away.

'My baby ... my Pari ... I am so sorry ... just know that mumma loves you, okay? Have loved you ever since you became a part of me ... Pari, I am so sorry I could not take care of you ... I ... I could not ... I'm just so sorry ... I wanted to ... create a good world for you to take birth in ... I had saved for you ... was going to start decorating your room ... I had so many plans for you ... so many dreams...'

Arjun could not look at Shambhavi. He kept looking down, at Pari, instead, which in no way was less painful.

'I had dreamed about ... everything ... You were supposed to be my world ... You were my future ... now I do not have anything ... to live for ... Mumma wants to come to you, Pari ... I want to die...'

Arjun inhaled alarmingly. A chill ran down his spine.

'Shambhavi ... don't say that ...he whispered.

She did not listen to him. She just kept looking at her Pari. 'You were ... you were ... You were supposed to have cute pigtails and a collection of Barbie dolls. You were supposed to grow up to love the Twilight books. To have a crush on a rash guy I would've hated ... to make my life hell as a teenager ... to hide greeting cards under your mattress ... to ... But you ... You never even ... opened your eyes ...' Shambhavi struggled to say something more, but could not.

Before she could inflict any more torture to herself, Arjun gently put his hand underneath Paris head and pulled her away from Shambhavi. He turned around towards the casket and placed her there gently. He delicately removed his hands from under her.

Shambhavi came forward and stooped down to kiss Paris forehead. She touched her cheek with a finger and closed her eyes. Once she moved back, Arjun closed the casket carefully and stepped back. Shambhavi looked at him and started crying. She did not look strong enough to be standing. Arjun held her and surprisingly, she did not protest.

She felt warm in his embrace. She should have been resting; she had fever. Her body was burning up, her eyes were red and breathing ragged. But she refused to rest.

She stayed in his arms silently. She cried, but her sobs were muted. She did not say anything. She just shook in his arms, with her head burrowed into his chest. They stood there for a long time, crying with each other, sharing their sorrow. He knew she had not forgiven him. She probably just did not realize who she was with right then.

But he wanted to make the most of it. He might never have Shambhavi in his arms again. And after the distress he had felt since so long, he needed to hug her. So he did. He did not say anything, lest it reminded her who he was. He just kept holding her, close to him, and drew solace in her closeness.

Eventually, Pari was taken away, in her casket, to be buried underground. But Shambhavi did not move. Arjun kept her in his embrace when she protested Pari being taken away. She hid her face in him and did not see her baby being buried.

'I want to ... die...' she mumbled.

'No. Don't say that. Never say that. You have to live,' he breathed back.

She shook her head in his chest furiously to protest.

He held her still, confined her in his arms and she clung to him for support. Her entire body shook in convulsions. Her knees gave out and he was the only thing keeping her up. He transferred all her weight onto himself and held her in place.

'Let's go?' he asked when he saw Mr Sen's body being put on the pier to be burned.

She shook her head again.

He nodded reluctantly. They stood there till the rest of the ceremony. She looked up occasionally to see what was being done to her father and Pari. Then she hid herself back into his arms.

If he thought his own family's death was the most painful thing he had gone through, that changed when he saw Shambhavi in this state. He could have given anything to save Pari, not for himself, but for Shambhavi. And he had done everything; the doctors had tried every treatment known to man. But it had not worked. Nothing had.

Arjun had been too late. He should have been there right from the beginning, right from the time he got to know about Paris existence. He should have been with Shambhavi all the while, should have averted the accident. Should have prevented Shambhavi from turning into a living zombie.

CHAPTER 19

THE LIVING DEAD

No matter how hard we try, some wounds never heal. Time might make them fainter, but the agony stays, never leaving.

A month had passed and there was still no life in Shambhavi. She had not shed a single tear ever since the funeral. She had depleted her stock of a lifetime of tears in that one day. She had gotten sick because of all the emotional stress, combined with the physical state she was in.

She had been taken back to the hospital immediately. Her body was in searing pain, as was her heart. The accident had resulted in multiple injuries all over her body. The pre-mature delivery had depleted her of energy and her mental state had taken a toll on her. The doctors ordered her bed rest for three weeks, out of which two weeks had passed, with no change in her mental condition.

Physically, she was getting better. The fracture in her arm was healing and the other bruises were healing even faster than that. Her spine had received a shock due to her fall, but it was not major ... nothing a little physiotherapy could not take care of. She had been under constant medical supervision for some reason or the other.

But her physical condition was not what Arjun was worried about. Despite the setback, she was recovering quickly. Her health was better than they had any right to expect. He did not worry about that. What he worried about was her mental health.

She was deeply depressed and that was not showing any signs of permanent recovery. Her depression had its phases, but one thing was common all the time-she was always aloof, indifferent, detached. It was like nothing mattered to her. Which was probably true. There was nothing worth mattering left in her life. She must have expected her father's death sooner or later. He was sick; he was going to pass away, she had known. But Paris death was what had crushed her. She had seen her whole future in her unborn baby. She had attached herself too much to her child. With her gone, she did not have a reason to live.

Arjun still remembered the things she had said. They still came back to haunt him in the depth of the night. He had no control over them. He wished he had never heard her say those words. He was breaking. The nightmares were slowly draining all the life out of him.

I had saved for you ... was going to start decorating your room...I had so many plans for you...so many dreams ...

You were supposed to be my world ... You were my future...now I do not have anything...to live for...Mumma wants to come to you, Pari ...

I want to ... die ...

He remembered every word she had said, with painful precision. He wished he did not. She had not shown any sign of remembering being in each other's embrace when it all happened. It was as if she had not realized that it was he who had held her through the pain.

Ever since that day, he had been with Shambhavi every second. He had never left her side. He knew she did not want him there. But she did not say anything. And that was the problem-she was not saying anything ... anything at all, to anyone. Not her friends, not anyone at the hospital, and especially not him. She was not even looking at anything. Her eyes were always open, blinking very rarely. Her gaze saw through everything. Her eyes did not rest on anything.

And nothing was making it better. The hospital was concentrating on her physical wellbeing. For the emotional, they had referred her to a psychiatrist. The shrink could not get Shambhavi to even listen, let alone speak. The hospital was doing everything in its power; she was being given all kinds of medication. But nothing was working on her. She stayed in her cocoon. She did not want to come out.

Arjun was scared. He could not see Shambhavi like this. If she wanted him out of her life, fair and good; he would go gladly. But he wanted her to at least say that to him. To shout, to be furious, to insult him-anything. But he could not ... would not ... go unless she asked him to. He knew she needed him. Maybe even she did not know that, but he did. She was not going to get better staying in the hospital. He could not wait for her treatment to finally start showing results.

He was desperate. He wanted to do something. He feared that if she was left in such a state for long, it would eventually become her constant state. He could not let that happen. He had to do something.



'How is she?' Arjun asked. He was at Mili's office, an uninvited guest. But he had no other option. No one was taking his calls. No one was calling him back. And he could not live with that. He had to know.

'Still the same. Why did you come here? I told you not to,' Mili said softly, motioning him to sit. He was drawing unwanted attention; her co-workers were staring from their cubicles.

'Because you weren't answering my calls.'

'Because I had nothing to tell. If there is a change in her condition, I will tell you. Right now, there isn't any.'

'For how long are we going to wait? Her condition won't change itself. I have been at the hospital all these days too, watching from a distance, because Tutul doesn't let me into the ward. I know that she is not going to get better like this. We will have to do something, for that to happen,' Arjun said.

'What can we do? She knows we are there with her. She is taking all her medications on time. There is nothing else that can be done.'

'We need to take her out of the hospital. That is where all the depression is coming from. She is constantly in contact with patients and doctors and nurses. There is sadness all around. She feels like a patient. She will never get normal again if she does not get out of there.'

'You have a point, but she is not strong enough to live alone. Accept it or not, she is a patient. She needs supervision,' Mili said, sadly.

'I will be there with her. I won't leave her side for even a second. I will make sure she is okay.'

'Are you kidding? She will never agree to that.'

'We don't need her permission. We just need Tutul on our team,' he said.

'Tutul hates you, Arjun. You know that.'

'And that's where you come in. It is your job to convince her. Convince her to let us do this, not for me, but for Shambhavi. She won't say no to that.'

'I can try. But, I don't know ... Mili seemed to think it over in her head. She reached a conclusion and said. 'Okay. Consider it done. What do we do?'

'I have a plan.'



He was happy with the progress already. When they had told Shambhavi that they were getting her discharged from the hospital and bringing her back home, she had not blinked an eyelid. It was almost as if she had not even heard them. But when she was asked to sign the documents and she found out that Arjun was paying for all the expenses, a spark of fire had returned into her eyes.

'I would happily sell myself before I accept that man's money,' she had said furiously.

She was angry, but it was an emotion. For Arjun, it was progress.

As Tutul helped Shambhavi walk and they got into her house, Arjun felt a stipple of hope. They brought her inside her bedroom and made her sit on her bed. Arjun had been there before, with Mili, to stash away anything that could remind her of Pari. The toys Shambhavi had already started to buy were carefully concealed, away from sight.

Shambhavi sat down on her bed and did nothing. She did not even change her posture or make herself comfortable. There was no recognition in her eyes. Arjun doubted she even knew that she was back home. Her eyes were blank.

Tutul motioned Arjun to come out; she wanted to talk to him in private. He wasn't sure it was a good sign.

'What now?' she hissed, as soon as they were in the dining room, out of Shambhavi's hearing range.

'As planned. The room will be ready in three days, right?' Arjun asked.

'Yes. Three days, if everything goes right. What do we do till then?'

'Just wait, I guess.'

'What kind of a stupid plan is this? Even if I believe that your plan will work and she will snap out of her trance as soon as she enters the room, what are we going to do till the room is ready? We need to get a nurse to take care of her. She cannot be alone. And I really, really want to be with her, but I have just gotten my job back after so much begging...I cannot be unemployed again... Tutul panicked. She had given up her job to work on the interiors of his hotel-The Green Meadowbut since the hotel never actually opened up, the project did not do the wonders to her career that she had been hoping for. Arjun knew she held that against him too. But not for long. Now that he was back, he was planning to do something about inaugurating the hotel soon.

'Relax. You do not have to be here all the time. Your visits would be enough,' Arjun said.

'But then who will stay here fulltime? I know Mili does not have that kind of time either ... Maybe she would be able to do it, but her office ...'

'Mili does not have to be here either. I will stay with Shambhavi.'

'What? You? Do you think you can trap me into this? I'll never leave you alone with Shambhavi,' Tutul snarled.

'What do you think I would do? Take advantage of her? In this condition? I know you hate me Tutul, but even you know that I care about her. I would never cause her any harm ... again.'

'But she will not let you live with her. Don't you get it? She hates you.'

'And that is a good thing. It would be some emotion ... any emotion. That is the best way to push her out of her condition. She will protest. If not right away, maybe tomorrow, when she sees me here still. Or the day after that ... She will do something to push me away ... but at least she won't be a statue anymore,' Arjun said.

After a minute of thought, in which Tutul looked up at him suspiciously and mentally evaluated the situation, she nodded.

'I hope this works,' she murmured, more to herself than him.

'I hope so too.'

'And Arjun, you have to promise me you won't hurt her. I know you won't ... but I still cannot trust you ... after everything.'

'I promise. I will never hurt her,' Arjun swore.

They went back to Shambhavi's bedroom to find her sitting in the exact same place, in the exact same way. There wasn't any change at all. It scared Arjun. He could feel her going away, retreating into some far corner of her head, where she wanted no one to enter. He needed to get her out of it quickly, or he would lose her forever.

He gestured to Tutul and she nodded. She went to Shambhavi casually and said, 'Better now? I bet it feels awesome to be back home.'

There was no response. They hadn't expected any.

'You know what? Mili and Vikaas are getting engaged. They have told their parents about their relationship and surprisingly, no one created a scene or anything. They agreed -both families. Imagine that,' Tutul blabbered.

No response from Shambhavi.

'Oh gosh. Look at the time. It's 9 PM already. I really need to go home. I'm twenty-two, but my parents still treat me like a child.'

No response.

'So ... umm ... I'll go then? If there is anything you need, just give me a call, okay?'

No response.

'And oh-Arjun will be here. He'll take care of you. We couldn't get a nurse, so he agreed to stay with you till you are okay.'

Shambhavi blinked. Arjun and Tutul met each other's eyes. They were ecstatic inside. They could not believe their plan was working already.

'That's okay, right?' Tutul prodded.

Shambhavi's gaze zeroed in on Tutul for a brief second, shifted to Arjun for even shorter and that was it. Her eyes were blank again.

'Is there a problem?' Tutul tried again.

No response.

'You're okay with Arjun staying here with you? You don't mind?'

No response.

Tutul looked at Arjun again, disheartened. Arjun nodded to let her know that it was going to be okay. They needed patience. Shambhavi would come back.

Tutul nodded back. She kissed Shambhavi on her cheek and excused herself.

Arjun and Shambhavi were left alone in the house.



All his hopes went down the drain over the next few days, as he saw Shambhavi retreat even further away from the world. He tried everything. He tried to evoke emotions in her, of any kind. He tried to make her angry, by telling her what to do. She did not respond. She just got up and went to the wash-room when he told her it was time for a shower. Fifteen minutes later, she came out, bathed.

She did not object to anything he did. She opened her mouth to take the medicines whenever he asked her to. She sipped the fruit juice when he put a glass against her lips. She brushed her hair mechanically when he handed her a comb. She let him wipe her face after meals. She let him cook for her. She woke up when he asked her to. She went to sleep when he turned off the lights.

She did not show any kind of emotion, no matter how hard he tried to infuriate her.

Love did not seem to work either. He talked to her about how he knew it must be so difficult for her. How he regretted everything. How he would always be with her whenever she needed him. He even held her tight sometimes, hoping she would hug him back. Or at least try to pull away. She did nothing. She just stayed like a statue. Seeing nothing, hearing nothing, saying nothing.

Arjun would have given up, had he not had so much confidence in his plan. There was a slight unavoidable setback, due to unforeseen reasons, but he knew that once it was complete, he would get Shambhavi out of her personal, mental darkness. But he was getting impatient. The five days he had been trying to evoke some kind of a response from her seemed like five decades.

It was painful to see her like that. And to feel that she might never come out of it ...

But he had not lost hope. Not yet.

CHAPTER 20

HOPE AND HOPELESSNESS

When nothing seems to be working, one is forced to resort to desperate measures, to grasp the last chance at redemption.

Arjun had gotten anxious and told Tutul that the plan needed to be executed in its present state. The room was as good as they could get it done. They had to make do with it. There was no scope for waiting anymore.

So they had decided to go ahead.

This time, he wanted to be alone with Shambhavi when he did it. He knew it would work. Maybe she won't miraculously snap out of her depressed, hollow state in a microsecond. But there will be something-there will be a start.

He did one last check of the room, to assure himself that everything was in place and went to her room. She was sitting near the window, staring out. Her sweet face was devoid of any emotion, her eyes were blank. Even though she had been eating food and taking her medicines properly-he had been taking care of that-she was still weak. Sitting there, she looked fragile. A little force could break her slender arms like twigs.

He went to where she was sitting and stood next to her. He tried to make sense of what she was seeing, but it was basically nothing. The road outside the wrought iron gates was empty. There was no human being or animal there. Maybe she did not need things to stare at; she just needed emptiness.

'Come with me,' he ordered.

She did not listen.

'Shambhavi, come with me.'

This time, she got up and turned to him. She did not meet his eyes and her expressions showed no change. He walked out of her bedroom and proceeded towards the guest room. She followed him.

He was strangely excited. It felt like showing your first sketch to a teacher at school. You know you have given your best and just want the teacher to approve. Only, here there was a lot more at stake. This was no child's play. It was about Shambhavi's life and how it was going to be, in the future.

He opened the door and stepped back. He motioned her to enter. She walked in like a zombie.

The room was empty; there was nothing on the floor. It was the walls that were beautifully decorated; there were thirtyone of the thirty-six paintings she had sold at the exhibitions. Arjun had bought them back-some at as much as five times the original rates-from the owners and brought them back to her. She had once told him that she did not paint to sell. He knew she had done it out of desperation for money. Money was not a problem anymore. He wanted to give her back the three years of her life, painted lovingly, passionately.

Tutul had tried her best, but the remaining five paintings could still not be located. They were gifts, and the actual owners could not be tracked. But they would be, soon. He would turn hell and earth upside down to find them.

He studied Shambhavi's expressions. There were reactions.

As soon as she saw the collection of paintings she had once so fondly painted, her eyes became alive. She looked around to see what else was there. There were almost all the paintings she had sold at the exhibition, arranged in a congested manner, due to lack of space in the room. Her eyes travelled from one painting to the next, staying there, welcoming them back, telling them she had missed them ... It was like she was talking to the paintings; her eyes were doing the speaking.

But as soon as she was done with all the paintings, she stepped back. She looked at the room at a glance. Her face showed disinterest. It was like she was happy and maybe even shocked to see her paintings back, but once that initial feeling had passed, she went back into her shell. As if she did not care whether the paintings stayed or went away again.

She was still detached. She did not utter a single word. It was as if she was scared of getting attached to even something as inanimate as a painting, after losing her family. She did not say anything; her eyes did not say anything anymore either. She did not look at Arjun before going out of the guest room, back to her own bedroom.

Arjun did not follow her. He stayed where he was, and looked at the set of paintings. Even he was astonished by their beauty. How could she, the creator of the paintings, not be excited about having them back? Especially when she had once loved them so much and had not wanted to lose them?

Maybe because the loss of her paintings seemed insignificant compared to the loss of the lives of her father and her daughter-her only family. What had he been thinking?

He went to her room and gave it one more shot. He could not give up so easily. He could not afford to give up so easily. But he had no better plan. He had tried love, anger, shock ... everything. Nothing touched anything inside her.

He felt disheartened, but he had to try. He was the one responsible for pushing her into this condition; he would be the one pulling her back.

'We bought all your paintings back... most of them, that is. We tracked down all the buyers and got all of them back. Tutul said we will be able to get the other five soon, too ...he said, sitting next to Shambhavi on the bed.

She showed no signs of having heard him.

'You know what-one of the owners was so reluctant to sell his painting back to us, that he did not accept our offer even when we quoted ten times the sum he had paid to buy it.'

She did not ask him what he did to get that painting back. He told her anyway.

'We had to tell him about ... what had happened. He gave us the painting back at the same amount he had paid to buy it. He sends his best wishes to you. Good man,' Arjun smiled at the memory. 'I have to say-you are making some fans out there, Ms Sen.'

She did not laugh with him.

'Say something,' he prodded softly.

She didn't.

'Shambhavi, tell me you're listening. Nod. Shake your head. Anything. I know you're in there. You're listening. Tell me you are.'

No reaction.

'SAY SOMETHING, DAMMIT. TELL ME YOU ARE THERE. COME BACK,' he suddenly thundered, standing up right in front of her.

She glanced at him, shocked at the sudden outrage. But still did not say anything. She just looked at him and kept looking.

'TELL ME THAT I AM AN ARROGANT SON OF A BITCH. TELL ME THAT MY MONEY CAN BUY BACK YOUR PAINTINGS BUT CANNOT BUY BACK YOUR HAPPINESS. TELL ME YOU DON'T WANT THE PAINTINGS. TELL ME TO GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE AND NEVER COME BACK. TELL ME YOU NEVER WANT TO SEE MY UGLY FACE AGAIN. JUST SAY SOMETHING. ANYTHING.'

She kept staring at him. He felt she might finally respond. He pushed, shouting louder than ever.

'YOU KNOW WHAT-IF YOU DO NOT WANT ME HERE, I WILL JUST GO. I AM JUST WASTING SO MUCH OF MY PRECIOUS TIME ON YOU, LIKE AN IDIOT. DO YOU KNOW WHAT KIND OF LOSSES I AM FACING IN MY BUSINESS? ALL FOR WHAT? YOU? HA!'

Something in her eyes stirred.

'NOT ANYMORE. I'M LEAVING. AND I'M NEVER COMING BACK,' he said and turned to leave.

She did not stop him.

He got out of the room and with a bam, shut the door behind him. Immediately, he knelt down and looked at her through the key hole. She was staring at the closed door, her eyes filled with angry tears. He kept looking at her, but there was no change in her. She kept staring at the door, her eyes were filled with tears, but her tears did not fall.

There was a silent turmoil going on inside her. He could feel that. But she still did not let it out. Maybe she had expected him to leave, sooner or later. She was not shocked when he told her he was going.

Maybe she would be shocked if he went back. With that thought in his head, he straightened up and swung the door open.

She looked up at him. Yes, there was shock in her eyes. Arjun was ecstatic. He went to sit next to her and took her hand in his.

'You know what-I thought if you wanted me to leave, you would have asked me to. With words, actions, signs ... But you didn't. So you don't want me to go, after all,' he whispered, smiling warmly at her.

She was watching him.

He rubbed his finger against her palm and continued,'Baby, I will never leave you. Not again. Not unless you ask me to.'

She kept looking at him, but there was a certain emptiness back in her eyes. He felt scared. She was going back. NO! He could not let her do that. He had tried everything, and this was the furthest he had gotten by far, to bring her back. He could not afford to lose that. He might never come this far along again.

'I am going to kiss you now,' he said suddenly. I know you want me to. I can see it in your eyes.'

He bent towards her. Her eyes widened for a second, as if she realized what he was about to do. She was listening, he knew that much. Because she was doing everything he had been asking her to do. From brushing her teeth and taking her showers to following her exercising regime, as the physio-therapist had asked-she was doing everything he was asking her to. She was listening.

She was agreeing because she did not want to protest. She did not have enough fire in her to protest. He wanted to bring back that fire. He needed to do something outlandish to achieve that.

He held her neck from behind and pulled her face closer to his. Their lips were so close they were almost touching. His eyes were open; he was observing her closely. Her eyes were open too, staring into his, but not seeing. It was as if she was seeing right through him. There was no light in her eyes, no animation. Just stillness, nothingness, blankness.

A shiver ran through Arjun's spine. Her condition scared him more than ever.

'Shambhavi ... baby ...he murmured. 'Don't do this ... Please come back...'

She did not respond. They were inches away from each other, he was holding her head in place, their lips were almost touching, he was running the fingers of his other hand against her cheeks ... Still, there was no reaction from her. He had no option.

He leaned into her and their lips touched. He stayed there, not moving, his eyes staring into hers. They stayed like that for a long while. Nothing.

'Open up,' he said hoarsely. He started moving his lips slowly. He pulled her closer to him, taking all her weight on himself. His lips moved rhythmically around hers. She did not respond. She did not retreat.

'Baby ... come back to me...' he whispered.

He kept kissing her softly. Prodding her to open up. Her lips stayed still. Nothing mattered to her.

'Please ... please baby ...he wanted her to respond. He was kissing her and he wanted her to kiss him back. Somewhere inside him, it also hurt his male ego. Men are like that.

She did not respond; there was no reaction at all. She was as still as a statue. He was kissing a girl who was not in her right senses. She probably did not even realize what he was doing to her. And he was using the kiss as a way of getting through to her. Suddenly, he felt like he was molesting her, taking advantage of her condition. He felt like an abuser. He was disgusted at himself.

A teardrop escaped his eye and he pulled back from her. He unlocked his lips from hers and took his hand out of her hair. He moved back and took his other hand off her cheek. No part of his body was touching hers. Something broke inside him. He could not do this. He did not have enough strength to withstand this.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered before he got up from her bed and left the room. He was broken. He had no hope left. He went to the room with her paintings and sat down on the floor, against the wall. Just like he had been doing ever since he had brought Shambhavi to her house.

He did not remember the last time he had slept for more than an hour. Every night, he kept sitting on the settee by Shambhavi's bed, always alert. He had sworn he would never let anything happen to her. He could not leave her alone in the depths of the night. So he sat there, while she shook and convulsed in her dreams. Every time that happened, he went closer to her and held her hand protectively. She would sense his presence and her nightmares would stop.

That was the only thing he was helping her with. That, too, when she was not coherently aware that he was there. He had thought things would get better. He had hoped against hope, every time he looked at her blank face, that the emotions would come back.

She used to be so animated-loud, energetic, happy-that he could not deal with the utter lack of colour in her. He had seen her in so many moods. Focused in work, enthusiastic when she talked about her designs, passionate as she talked about Paris, happy when he asked her out, furious when he sent her that bouquet with the note, laughing when he said something she found funny, nervous when he kissed her for the first time, hopeful when she thought he was letting her into his heart, panicked when she found out that she was expecting his baby, confused when he accused her of trapping him, shattered when she found out about her father's and Paris death ... all her emotions had always been extreme. When she was happy, she was immensely happy, when she was sad, she was immensely sad.

Arjun could not deal with the blank slate her face had become. She was just a shell, with her dead heart inside her. She did not feel anything. She was almost as dead as Pari was. He could not bear to think that it was all because of him ... how easily he could have prevented that from happening ...

They would have been a family. If only he had trusted her. He would have gotten her father the best medical care possible, without her having to kill herself trying to earn. He would have taken good care of her, never let her do even the smallest of things. She would have spent all her time, resting, maybe doing what she was passionate about, what she was best at painting. She would not have had a single care in the world. He would have taken all her worries upon himself.

Their baby would have been healthy. Shambhavi would have had a normal delivery. Pari would have been a healthy child. She would have stretched her tiny pink lips in a smile for more than just once ... she would not have been in that casket, surrounded with flowers. She would have been in a pram, surrounded by stuffed toys. She would not have had people crying all around her, she would have had people happy to see her ...

He stared at the sheet of paper in his hand. He crushed it and threw it away. It was the only thing in the empty room. Arjun stared at it. He wished he could go back in time and set everything right ... never having let the accident happen. No one would have died. Mr Sen, Pari, Shambhavi ...

PART V

THEY

Sometimes, we get so blinded by our grief that we do not see the pain others are going through. Sometimes, we get so blinded by the grief others are feeling that we do not see our own pain.

The latter is something only someone who loves truly and completely is capable of. That is the purest form of love.

CHAPTER 21

OPEN EYES, OPEN SOUL

There is so much more happening right in front of our eyes, if only we really try to see.

Something stirred inside her. As Shambhavi saw Arjun leave her bedroom, she struggled with a question—was he crying? Was that really a tear that rolled out of his eye?

She stared at the door he had closed behind him. For the first time in what seemed like ages, she felt like getting up. She wanted to follow him to wherever he went. But she felt drained inside. She did not have any energy to get up and move. She wondered why that was. She had been eating and taking her medicines on time, but she still never felt alive anymore. She was always dull, always tired.

It was not like she needed energy anyway. She had nothing to live for. She did not even need to get out of bed in the morning. If left up to her, she would just turn over and die.

She heard the things people around her said, but she just mentally blocked all of that out. It was tiring to listen to what everyone kept saying and making sense out of it. Emptiness was better. There was nothing to worry about, nothing worth caring.

She liked being alone, doing nothing. It was relaxing. And it kept her away from feeling. Feelings hurt. Feelings wreck your world and turn it upside down. They hurt you beyond the amount you can endure. It becomes a blood bath in your head. So many emotions, so many sentiments -all of them storming your head, trying to drown you in grief.

She needed blankness to keep away from all of that ... thinking, remembering. That was what kept her alive—keeping an empty head. It was easy when she was conscious; she could control her thoughts, block the feelings and the associated torture out and just exist.

It was the nights that were really painful. Every time she drifted into sleep, the memories crowded back. Grotesque images of the night of the accident ... of seeing her father fall off the stairs, his voice as he shouted out her name, again and again, to make her get up and call for help ... He knew he was not going to make it. He had been worried about her, and her unborn baby ... He had shouted and shouted and shouted, till he had nothing left in him ... he had died there. Her father ... her only family.

When she had regained consciousness, he was no more. And she could feel warmth seeping out of her womb ... That was the most horrific scene she had ever seen. Her child ...

She did not remember much of what happened after that. She was mostly unconscious, drifting in and out. But she remembered feeling pain. Everything ached. She did not know whether it was the physical agony or the mental that hurt her more. It just hurt.

When Dr Mishra had told Shambhavi the next morning that she had given birth to a baby girl, she had instantly named her Pari. She was her angel. After the terrifying night, it was her baby's birth that had brought her relief. She had not expected the baby to be alive; she had seen the blood that had drained out of her. It was by a miracle that her baby was living.

The happiness did not last long.

Dr Mishra fed her with information. She told her about the complications, Paris condition, what needed to be done, what kind of hope they had ... Shambhavi had stopped listening after a while. She just knew that there was not much time left ... she wanted to be with her daughter. But no one let her be close to Pari. They said Shambhavi needed to rest. What they did not know was that she did not care about herself. Just her baby.

Finally, what she feared happened. Pari was no more. The first time she got to touch her child, to hold her was after she was dead. She had stopped caring after that. She had felt the sting of feeling things, and she had realized she was not strong enough to handle it. So she had created a shell around herself and retreated inside it.

She had felt people trying to get to her, to make her respond, but she did not want to. So she just blocked everything out for her mental peace. The only time she felt pain was during the nights. Whenever the memories, the nightmares haunted her, she found Arjun there. He would shake her and wake her up to push the nightmares away. Every time she woke up, she found Arjun sitting at the exact same place - on the settee near her bed. She did not tell him that, but she was grateful to him for helping her chase the nightmares away.

Whenever she started shaking in her dreams, Arjun would wake her up and hold her close to him. He would rub her back and whisper things in her ear. She never listened to what he said; she just mentally thanked his warmth in the cold centre of the nights.

He was the only one who was succeeding in breaking the walls around her and entering. She had been trying to block him out, but he had been persuasive.

As she stared at the door he had closed behind him, she wondered why he was doing what he was doing. She could understand that he wanted to pay for their medical expenses out of guilt of abandoning them, she could also understand that he was trying to help her through all this because he felt pity for her condition, but what she didn't understand was his tears.

She had not expected him to stick around for so long and continue trying to help her. Guilt could have brought him back, pity could have made him buy back all her paintings, but they won't make a man cry, will they?

Did that mean that he really cared?

The thought made her pause. She had to find out. She got up from her bed and slowly walked towards the dining room the one place of her house from where she could see the entrance of all the rooms. She knew that the guest room was empty, except for her paintings hanging on the wall. She peeked into the living room and the kitchen-he was not there. She went on to check the washrooms-same result. That left her father's bedroom and the basement.

The basement was locked from the outside, which spared her the need to go in and check. She knew she could never enter the basement again without the horrific images from that night attacking her.

She went to check for Arjun in her father's room. That was where he must be sleeping at nights, she realized. To think of it, she had never once since they brought her back home, thought where Arjun slept. Every time she woke up during the nights, she found him in her room, sitting in the corner. She entered her father's room-it was empty. It seemed like no one had entered the room since that night about three weeks ago.

She went to the guest room-it was empty as expected. Where was he? Her heart started racing, as she wondered if he had gotten fed up of her and left for real. There was no reason for him to stay, anyway.

Just then, her eyes fell to the floor of the guest bedroom, where she saw a crumpled piece of paper lying. She went to it and knelt down carefully to pick it up. Her knee hurt, so did her arm. She uncurled the sheet of paper. It was a handwritten note. It had three words, 'TO RUN AWAY' scribbled on it, several times. Below it, there was a long paragraph. She read the first few lines and realized that it was a poem.

I want to run away, from all the pain around me ...

The pain that I have caused.

I don't want to see her anymore, not like this ...

Not what she has become.

The ache, the guilt, the shame is too much ...

I am the reason this happened.

I should never have left, leaving her alone ...

Leaving my baby alone.

I should have been there, with her, for her ...

I should never have let this happen.

Seeing her cry, broken in my arms, shaking ...

I wanted to run away.

Seeing Pari smile, for her father, for me ...

I felt proudest.

But it ended, way too soon, way too painfully ...

With her, a piece of me died.

And all I am left with is guilt, of being too late ...

For her, for her mother.

The mother, who went away where I can't find her ...

I tried and tried and tried.

The passion, the laughter, the twinkle, it's all gone ...

To never come back.

I'm left to die each second, seeing her so colourless ...

I want to run away.

The sad thing is—I can't. I can't run away ...

Not again. Not ever.

I have done it before, can't do it again ...

I love her, even the shell she is now.

The sting is searing, unmanageable, unbearable ...

But I have to endure.

Every day, every minute, every second ...

It never goes away.

By the time she finished reading the poem, she was breathing heavily. All this time, she had been so absorbed in her grief, that she had closed her eyes to the world. She had not seen Arjun dealing with his own misery, teamed with this magnitude of guilt and helping her through it too, all at once.

She ran around the house, looking for him. She checked the balconies and the lawn. She went to the back door and peeked out. He was not in the house. Where had he gone? The sudden desperation to have him close to her was overwhelming. What if he has left? For real? For always? she panicked.

But something told her that he would come back. She knew he would never run away again, not unless she asked him to go ... his poem told her that.

Before she could do anything else, there was a sound of the door opening and her heart skipped. She saw Mili enter through the front door.

'Hey there,' Mili said, cheerfully.

Shambhavi did not say anything. She wanted Arjun. No one else.

'Arjun called me and said he won't be able to stay here tonight. So I thought I would spend the night with you. It'll give us some girl time too. With Arjun around all the time, it becomes impossible for me to catch you alone nowadays.'

Arjun was not coming back for the night. Her heart felt heavy with guilt-of what she had been making him go through, of misunderstanding him and never giving him a chance to explain.

'I got some Chinese food on the way. I'm so fed up of my own cooking,' Mili blabbered away.

Ever since Shambhavi had stopped listening to people, she had found that people around her talked more than before. Mili kept feeding her all kinds of useless information, but once again, Shambhavi was not listening. She felt awful. She needed to talk to Arjun.

Mili served the food and they sat down to eat. No matter how hard Shambhavi tried to shove the contents of the fork inside her mouth, she could not.

'Eat, Shambhavi,' Mili said softly. She put her own fork down.

Shambhavi shook her head. She saw the surprise in Mili's eyes on seeing her respond. Through action, but response still.

'Why? You will only get weaker. We need you to regain your strength. Dr Mishra said it's important. We need you healthy,' Mili pleaded.

Shambhavi did not care.

'Please. You need to recover. This is important. If you ever want to ... be a mother again...' Mili said.

Shambhavi's eyes shot towards her friend's.

Mili nodded.

Shambhavi silently picked up her fork and started cramming food into her mouth. She had let people trick her into eating once again. But this time, she felt Mili was serious. Mili did not know how to lie anyway. She finished the rest of her food and waited for Mili to finish hers.

'Do you want to watch some TV? Should I put on an episode of something?' Mili asked. 'Come with me. I'll put on an episode of the good old Simpsons.'

Shambhavi followed Mili to the bedroom and sat down on the bed when she instructed her to. Mili fiddled with her DVD collection and the remote and after playing something on the TV, went to the dining room to clear away the plates.

Shambhavi stared at the television. It might as well have been switched off; she did not see anything. She kept thinking about Arjun, wishing he would come back soon. She wanted to ask Mili about him, but she had become too used to not speaking; it felt weird to use words.

That night, she did not sleep. Mili was in the bed, next to her, in deep sleep. Shambhavi knew that if she slept, she would wake up in cold sweat and Mili would panic. Besides, she did not want Mili to be the one chasing her nightmares away. She wanted Arjun. Only Arjun.

Every time she closed her eyes, the nightmare came back to haunt her. She spent the night up, not even closing her eyes, dreading the nightmares. She realized how much she really needed Arjun in her life, how much his presence meant to her. She wondered how she would be able to live, if he never came back.



'How are the ladies doing this morning?' he asked cheerfully.

When she saw him enter her bedroom the next morning, she paused chewing. Mili had served French toast in bed and was forcing it down her throat, along with milk. She gulped and stared at him. She could not believe he was there for real. Despite the poetry, she had thought he would leave her, like he had before ...

'Oh, Arjun, you're here,' Mili said. She was dressed in her office shirt and a pencil skirt. 'I was just about to call you. I need to run.'

Arjun did not look at Mili. His eyes were locked with Shambhavi's ever since he had entered the room. He was paused at the door, just as Shambhavi was paused on the bed. She held his eyes-not blinking even once-in the fear that he would disappear.

'Arjun,' a gasp escaped her lips and she suddenly got to her feet and rushed into his arms.

CHAPTER 22

A PROMISE TO KEEP

The world seems a better place, with that one person by our side.

Arjun could not believe it was actually happening. He had lost all hope and had gone away, not to leave her but to tell himself to be strong, and be by her side ... somehow ... no matter what. And when he came back, it was as if Shambhavi had come back too. He had seen her expression change from blankness to surprise, from surprise to belief, from belief to happiness ... Should he dare to believe that his eyes were not fooling him?

He had seen her face crumple up almost instantly, tears rushing from her eyes. She had called his name. His name, he thought happily. And she had run towards him, and thrown herself into his arms.

'Arjun ...she said again, holding him tightly to herself.

He looked at Mili, whose face had the exact same shocked expression as his. He raised his eyebrows as if to ask what was going on. She shrugged at him and buried her face in his chest.

'Shambhavi?' he asked, looking at the top of her head. That was all he could see of her. She had dug the rest of her face too deeply in his embrace. 'Is everything okay?'

'Arjun,' she repeated in a muffled voice, still hiding in his chest.

'Yes, Shambhavi. I'm here. Tell me -what's wrong?'

'Everything. Just ... everything ...'

'Nothing is. It's all getting better, can't you see? You are getting better,' Arjun said. He saw Mili sneak out of the room.

'It's not. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry,' Shambhavi broke down completely.

'Sorry? Why are you saying sorry? It is I who ruined everything ... who caused all of this. If anything, I should be the one apologizing...'

'No, you should not. You did nothing,' Shambhavi protested.

'Exactly. I did nothing, when I should have been taking care of you. I doubted you. I didn't trust you, when I should have. I am not making excuses or defending myself, but trust me, Shambhavi-I had reasons to be doubtful. I have been caught in this trap once ... I could not take the risk ...'

'You should have given me a chance.'

'Yes. I should have. But I did not. I left you alone. I am such a horrible person,' he said, disgusted by himself.

'Don't say that. That's not true. You are a good man. Or you would not have stuck with me all this time, trying so hard to help me get through this ...'

'I was just trying to right my wrong. That's the least I can do.'

'Arjun ...' Shambhavi held his face in her hands and looked up at him. 'Please don't say that. It was not your fault. What happened to my dad and Pari-it was an accident.'

'An accident, which would not have happened had I been there with you, to take care of you.'

'Don't beat yourself up, Arjun. Just don't. I cannot see you like this. I'm so sorry. I was so blind; I did not see how much pain you were going through. I did not see how shattered you were by Paris ...'

Shambhavi's voice broke and Arjun shook his head to make her stop speaking. And she did. So did he. They slipped to the floor where they were standing and sat down, holding each other with all their might. They talked to each other. Arjun told her about everything he had felt, had gone through and regretted and Shambhavi told him about everything she had felt. They lost track of time. They just kept on talking. It was as if they would never stop. There were so many things to talk about. So many things he wanted to tell her.

His fear, his torment ... he told her about every single feeling he had felt ever since he had gone out of her life, locking himself away under his factory building. He explained to her why he had doubted her, desperately trying to make her see why he had done what he had. He told her about his parents, he told her about Prehal ... he told her everything.

'I can't believe ... there is so much you have gone through ... so much ache... Shambhavi stammered. She seemed unable to speak properly.

'Everything has gone so badly awry in my life ... when you came, a flicker of hope, I was too afraid to let myself go. But I took a leap of faith ... I let myself fall for you ... and then you told me about the baby ...'

Shambhavi nodded.

'It was not like I did not want to trust you, but I just could not take the risk. And after I left that day, I sent you the cheque I said I would. And until recently, I was under the notion that you cashed it. That made me feel that you really were after my wealth ...'

'That cheque? I didn't even know about it until I got home and opened the envelope. And I never cashed -'

'I know. I know,' Arjun said, trying to calm her down. He had found out about her need to earn her keep recently. She did not accept help from anyone easily. She was one of those people who did it all on their own. He respected that. 'Faisal told me.'

'Oh,' Shambhavi said.

Arjun explained to her how he had found out about everything from Faisal and had rushed back to her. But he had been too late. Shambhavi listened to him patiently, snuggling closer.

Then, out of nowhere, she started crying again.

'No, no. Please don't. Shambhavi,' Arjun tried desperately to stop her. 'It's getting better. Let it. Don't think about it.'

But she kept on sobbing. It felt to Arjun as if he had been taken back to the day of the funeral. She dug into him and cried her heart out. He did not want to let her, because it hurt him too much. But then he decided it was probably for the best. She needed to vent the pain out; she had been keeping it all bottled up for too long.

He let her cry. She kept crying. A flood of tears broke inside her and it kept on flowing for hours. He held her and shook her lovingly, whispering sweet nothings into her ears, telling her it would all be okay.

She spoke aloud. All her fears, all the nightmares that haunted her-she told him about everything. She told him that he was the one who had kept the nightmares away. She told him that she needed him.

Then, she started talking about Pari. She told him how Pari used to kick her, how she felt from over her belly when she rubbed her palm against it. She told him about all the toys she had started buying for her baby. About how she had been terrified upon seeing the blood.

He kept listening to her, stroking her hair, kissing her forehead, telling her it was okay. After they had both retched out whatever they had been going through, they sat silently, in each other's embrace. They sat together on the floor. Arjun was holding her from behind, as she rested the back of her head against his chest.

'Arjun,' Shambhavi whispered after a while. She still had tears in her eyes. After everything they had shared, she still looked extremely sad.

'Yes?' Arjun asked.

'I read your poem.'

It felt as if someone had thrown him into icy water.

So, that was why Shambhavi was being good to him? His poem was not supposed to be read. He had just scribbled away his feelings, looking for a way to vent it out. His ears turned red in embarrassment, knowing that she knew about his deepest fears. And then he sighed deeply. Did it really matter? Did he really mind? It had made her come out of her shell and that was ... fine ... absolutely fine by him.

'And I want you to know,' Shambhavi continued, 'that it is not your fault. You have nothing to feel guilty about.'

Arjun nodded.

'And, also ...' Shambhavi tried to say something, but paused.

'And ...? What?' Arjun prodded.

'And, I just ... there is no obligation. It was not your fault, none of it was, and I forgive you for what you did to me. You ... you wrote you wanted to run away ... I am just saying that you do not have to feel obliged to stay with me ...'

'Are you asking me to... leave?' Arjun asked, his heart sinking already.

'No. I am just telling you that you can, if you want to ...'

'What if I tell you that I never want to leave? Would you let me stay?'

For the first time since ages, Arjun saw Shambhavi smile widely, from ear to ear. She had come back to him, she had opened up to him ... but she had not smiled. Not till that moment. But when she did, it lit up his world. Her smile was dazzling. It could stop traffic. But Arjun's heart was reacting exactly to the opposite effect. His heart was racing.

'Forever,' Shambhavi said.

'Then marry me,' Arjun said reflexively.

'What?' Shambhavi turned around, studying his face in shock.

'I'm serious. I have loved you for a very long time, Shambhavi. I have fought my feelings, given in and pulled back, only to return. I do not want to do that anymore. I want you. With me. Now. For always.'

'But ... but ...'

'I don't have any family. You don't have any family. Let's be each other's family?' Arjun suggested. 'It will be perfect. It was always meant to be.'

'This is ... just so sudden ...' Shambhavi struggled to find words. It made Arjun smile.

'Then let's do it. I do not see any point in waiting. I want to keep you for life. This is the way to go about it. I will not have it any other way.'

Shambhavi stared at him for a complete minute, not blinking. Arjun could almost see her mentally replaying everything that had happened between them since she had met him.

'Is there any other man you love, Ms Sen?' he kidded.

'Only you, Mr Datta.' Her smile was back.

'Then what seems to be the problem?'

'I was just wondering ... whether this is the final, official proposal or will I get the on-one-knee, diamond ring thing later?' she said, tongue-in-cheek. 'And red roses, of course.'

'Girls these days, I tell you, they are so shallow,' Arjun shook his head in fake-disgust.

'I know. But what can we do? It is what it is. And another thing-if I marry you, be warned-I'll be doing it for your immense wealth.'

'Oh, I've known that since the very beginning!'

They laughed together. It was as if everything between them was back to where they had left off-perfect. As soon as they stopped laughing, silence fell between them. There were so many things going on through their heads. He knew she was thinking about the proposal. The proposal they had both shrugged off as a joke; a proposal they both knew he was serious about.

'Say yes,' he whispered in her ear.

She closed her eyes. He knew she was considering his proposal. This was his chance to turn her decision into his favour.

'I will keep you happy, Shambhavi, I promise. I will be by your side, forever. You will never feel alone, be it night or day,' he murmured. 'You know we will be perfect together. You know I love you.'

'I love you too.'

'I know. But I love you more,' he repeated what she had told him the last (and the first) time they had professed their love for each other.

She smiled. 'Agree to disagree.'

He turned her face to him, holding her chin to make her look into his eyes. He held her eyes for a second before he moved forward and kissed her lightly on the lips. He pulled back. Her eyes were still closed.

He had once promised himself that he would love Shambhavi without reservations and would not let anything come in the way of their love. He had broken that promise. It had been the biggest mistake of his life; there was nothing he regretted more. This time, when he made that promise, he knew it was to be kept.

'I will make it all go away, Shambhavi. I will help you through this. I know how bad the pain is; I feel it too. I know you need me to drive it away. And I need you. You will never know how badly I need you to be with me. I cannot bear the thought of not being with you. I know I have hurt you, I know I have broken your trust. But I promise that it'll not happen again, that I'll always have faith in you, always trust you. I love you. Life is not worth living without you by my side. Gosh, I so need you,' he exclaimed suddenly.

She opened her eyes and looked at him.

'I cannot live without you. Not now, not ever. Be mine. Please.'

She just nodded.

EPILOGUE

Ten months have passed since that morning Arjun proposed marriage to Shambhavi and she accepted. Since then, everything has been as perfect as it can be.

Sometimes even now, Shambhavi wakes up in the middle of the night, her body convulsing with nightmares. But she always has Arjun by her side. He is always there to hold her close to him and whisper soothing things to her to make her go back to sleep. When there are no nightmares, she snuggles up to him anyway.

Mili and Vikaas are still engaged. They are planning to get married as soon as they can get a date at the Court. Their wedding had gotten delayed in their indecision of where they would live after they married. Vikaas wanted to shift to the US, but Mili did not want to go so far away from home. However, once she heard the package his company in Seattle was offering him, she packed her bags to fly away in a jiffy.

Tutul does not hate Arjun anymore. When The Green Meadow finally opened, it opened huge. Tutul's career took a leap higher than she had expected. Arjun's slate was wiped clean. Plus he got bonus points for treating Shambhavi so lovingly.

Arjun has kept his promise to her and is in no mood to ever break it. Being with her comes to him naturally; she brings out a side of him even he did not know existed. She completes him.

Arjun and Shambhavi are at Dr Mishra's office. They had gotten the routine tests done on both of them and are waiting anxiously for the reports to come out. Two weeks ago, Arjun had raised the topic of trying for a baby again. Shambhavi thought about it, but she was too scared to try. Arjun made all her fears go away and convinced her.

Now, she is excited about the plan. The only thing coming in their way is whether or not she is physically ready for successfully carrying another child. Arjun had gotten the routine tests run on him just to give Shambhavi company. She smiles at the thought.

Dr Mishra greets them with a smile. Their heartbeats rise.

They ask whether the results are out.

Dr Mishra smiles wider.

Shambhavi looks at Arjun; he looks back at her. Their eyes do the talking. He holds her hand tightly under the desk. She squeezes it back.

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The cheering and clapping ...

All fell silent.

Just the thumping of their hearts remained and a question - were they going to lose him?

Thanks to the makeover by her sister's friends, the nerdy Niharika entered college more confident, more attractive. She met the sweet, shy Tanmay, and the spoilt but lovely Pia and they became the best of friends. And when she began dating Akshat again, Niharika felt her life was finally falling in place.

Except that it wasn't ...

Tanmay's success in college football team had begun to change him in ways that they found difficult to stop. Akshat's perfection seemed like a front to something dark and sinister. And Karthik? His repulsive, rogue demeanour harboured a past that made him the way he was.

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