

Quarantine is over

OVIYA.R

Author's note

Dear Reader,

You are special, for I am starting to write in the hope that this book will reach someone as special as you. Many thanks for picking up this book and hope you have a good time reading this story.

May the Almighty above us, continue showering His blessings on all of us. My hearty thanks to all who have been my constant source of support and energy; The flowers who have contributed to the garland, “Quarantine is over”. Special thanks to Amma, Mala Athai, Jayashree Maami, Chithu Akka and Betsy for your support and efforts in the editing of this book.

Take few moments of your time to let me know what you felt about the book, so that I can strive harder to make you feel all the more special in my upcoming works. Reach me through oviyarengesh@gmail.com.

DISCLAIMER

This is a work of fiction. Unless otherwise indicated, all the names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

About the book

“The best feeling ever is realizing that you’re not sad anymore over something you were sure you’d never get over with.” Will Jithesh be able to get this feeling in this lifetime? He is struggling with a multitude of emotions, added up with his helplessness and the mistakes he had committed. Replaying that day in his mind again and again, Jithesh’s life is turning out to be horrible.

On the arrival of two intruding neighbours, Jithesh has a tough time trying to keep his secrets away from them. Will he be able to hold back the truth? Or will he seek the truth? Will the self-quarantine with life be finally over?

Little does he know, what fate has planned for him,
Start reading to know what happened...

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Chapter-1

The new entrants

24th March 2020

“There will be nationwide lockdown for 21 days to control the spread of coronavirus”, the news flashed for the 100th time in the last hour thus breaking the uncanny silence in the apartment. Jithish was staring at the screen attentively but it was not rocket science to figure out that he was in his own whirlpool of thoughts. His mind was busy activating several brain cells to his disadvantage and increasing his mental agony but the rudimentary one being that the news on lockdown meant that he will not be able to meet his friends or roam outside to escape his trauma for the next few days and he needs to live in this place of pain and suffer all alone.

For the millionth time in the month he wondered where he went wrong and what else he could have done that day but such thoughts only brought him anger and frustration in return and worse than that, it brought back her memories.....which he dreaded to even think of....The memories he had promised to cherish with her when they grew older, the memories he captured in his heart in crystal clear clarity....the same memories that he dreaded to think of now....

A loud thud was heard outside disturbing his thoughts and Jithesh came back to his senses. Gathering himself up from the sofa he went by the window and peeped out to find a tall light toned lady arguing with a man who must have been the kutty yaanai ¹ driver and the talk was intensifying into an argument. The way the lady was pointing at the huge packed parcel nearby meant that the sound he had heard was due to the drop

¹ A small truck

of package to the ground and evidently the lady was arguing about it.

The driver was being submissive which made the lady blast out further more and when tension was at its peak and the lady was about to lunge forward to hurt the driver, a well-built young man intervened and tried to make peace and he tried to send the driver away by paying him off.

A chubby young boy, probably must be five years old who was playing with his car toy, unbothered about all the chaos going on around him caught his attention. Jithish picturized himself in his place and his mind drifted to his childhood memories. He thought of his amma². He should have been the person she wanted and had he been in her shielding, this separation and pain would not have occurred in the first place or even

² Mother

otherwise she would have been here with him to comfort him.

Realizing the tears welling up in his eyes, he tried to ignore it and turned to check his mobile on an impulse. There was a sense of disappointment as he looked away from his mobile- a disappointment his mind had accepted already but the one his heart refused to accept.

He looked again from the window trying to distract himself (It is always simple to distract others from their pursuit and but the most difficult is to distract oneself on his own) and now the man was arguing with the driver with a 2000 Rs note in his hand and Jithish knew this meant that he does not have change to pay off the driver. At that moment the doorbell rang and Jithish shifted his attention and walked to the door and opened it after few seconds of hesitation.

He was not entirely surprised to find the lady he saw arguing outside at his door and now he could see her face clearly for she was now in front of him. ‘She must be about 27 years old’ he thought and she had a long hair braided in a traditional fashion and she wore a plain kurthi and jeans and simple jewellery complemented her looks.

“Ammaa.....”, the young boy pestered beside her when Jithish completed the essay he was writing about her on his mind and looked at her. She diverted her attention to the child and said “Amal, go and help appa³ with the things, I will come back in a minute” and she did some pampering after which Amal ran towards his father.

Jithish wondered about the unique talent mothers had in pampering their kids to make them do what they

³ Father

wanted but sometimes mothers lose when it comes to the likeness of their children.

“I am Shrishti and we are shifting in here- opposite to your apartment and I need a small help if you don’t mind.....” She hesitated and Jithish was forced to fake a smile and tell “Oh I am Jithish and my pleasure to have you here...what can I do for you?”

She waved the 2000 Rs note and Jithish tried to avoid unnecessary talk further and said “Oh!! you need change to pay the driver? Give me, I have the change”. Thus, he went in and returned with the change to find Shrishti near the door phone and Jithish stiffened when he remembered that he had broken the door phone THAT DAY when he tried to get in by force and he mentally noted that he need to fix it first once the lockdown ends. Shrishti suddenly looked up from the door phone when she saw him coming and managed

“No, I was just wondering how this works...You see we are new to an apartment like this”.

Jithish was already beginning to hate them now, but he tried not to show it out. So he handed over the change and said “Here is your change and regarding the door phone, I think the security guard will guide you through this in your apartment (he particularly stressed on ‘your apartment’)”. Shrishti gave a slight nod and left.

Jithish heaved a sigh of relief when the door flew open and there she was at his door again. Jithish tried to hide his impatience and asked “Anything else?” and she said “Nothing...just thanks for the change”.

“Doesn’t matter, Please carry on” Jithish told and walked his way out along with her and closed the door after ensuring that she had left.

Chapter-2

The escapism

That night, lying on bed, Jithish could not sleep like the other nights in recent times. Her thoughts kept coming back. He kept checking his message in anticipation. No response.

He started to scroll through Facebook to forget the incidents he wanted to, but soon realized that social media can prove to be most understanding when you least expect it for all he could find on his news feed were posts on heartbreak, loneliness etc., and in frustration he put his mobile aside and tried to shift his position towards the window, staring at it.

When he looked at the window all he could picturize was himself standing by the window and all he could hear was his own voice initially shouting and then begging her to stop what she was doing.

The image of Jithesh standing there was not exactly sure whom he was trying to stop or save but he knew he needed to do something....

No, the man lying on the bed staring at the window knew the fact that he did not do it when he needed to and now everything is beyond his control and as a result, he is in this state...Unable to hold on any longer, he grabbed the pillow and held it tight against his face trying to overcome his grief and this continued as the clock tickled and without his own consent, he drifted to sleep.

Jithish woke up with a start when his doorbell rang and he forced himself to his door after a brief glance at the mirror and adjusting his hair.

This time he was at the door with a broad smile “Good morning Jithish, I am Mrithun, we shifted to the opposite flat yesterday. Hope I did not wake you up from your slumber”.

‘Idiot!! What do you know about the turmoil I underwent last night and for a person of my state, sleep is the only mode of happiness, even though, it is temporary happiness’ He wanted to scream but then giving a snort at his own self for being stupid he said “No problem, I was up already, don’t take it harsh on yourself....Hmmm....anything urgent?”

Mrithun handed over his phone and said “May I have your number?” without giving much of a choice to Jithish. After saving his number he expected Mrithun to leave but there was another request “Can you please share the contact details for newspaper, gas, milk etc.,” “Oh sure, will share the contacts with you” Jithesh said, his head bent on his phone, his hands busy sharing the contacts.

“You are so helpful bro.....we will meet up for a small in-house party.....the hospitality is on me...” He went on and Jithesh felt a need to cut him off and gave

a casual look at the clock inside his apartment and said “Are you not late for your office?” Then he realized that he himself had dragged the conversation he wanted to end to the next point and he corrected his statement asking “Sorry where did you say you are working?”

Mrithun grabbed the chance and continued “Oh!!! I did my B.E. computer science in Ooty CSA college of engineering- passed out in 2015 and then I got campus recruitment in New World Technologies which is also in Ooty, as a junior software developer and I worked there for five years, where I met Shrishti and we married...then Amal came into our lives....We somehow felt I needed a career change. So we both applied for role as a Senior Software Developer at Future Minds Global Ltd, Chennai and decided to shift here....but there is lockdown now and we are both

going to work from home only until all this hopefully comes to an end.”

Jithesh stiffened at the mention of the name Ooty.....and he did not hear a word after that of what Mrithun was saying. We all know the world is heavily populated, and the people who we get to meet in our lifetime are not even handful, but even at the mention of a particular place our heart thinks of the person we know, from that place as if they are the only one there and the place becomes a metaphor of that person...the same was happening with Jithesh now.

Mrithun saw Jithesh's attention elsewhere and so he waved his hand in front of him and said,

“Here” He took out an ID from his pocket, “Even my ID has been delivered...want to take a look?”

Jithish could not help have a feeling why he was being just too perfect with his answers as if Jithesh was

interviewing him and had asked ‘Tell me about yourself’...the cringy question anyone attending the interview prepares himself for.

He also had a random thought ‘I mean if you are working from home do you carry your ID in your pocket?’ He asked himself but responded to Mrithun saying “No it is fine..... I think it must be time for you to login and start on with your work.”

“Yes yes.... I don’t want to strike a bad impression when all that my superiors get to see, is my login time. If I need to survive here, I need to leave now.... See you soon” He said and left to his apartment and Jithesh murmured under his breath “Not anytime soon”.

The following morning, Jithesh woke up ready to face another boring day of aimlessness. He extended his hands to the side table and grabbed his phone. The first thing that popped up in the notification bar were text messages from his best friend Shravan about a few job

offers along with a missed voice call. Jithesh immediately swiped it off from his home screen with a sense of disregard.

Pretending to have not read the messages, he lazily scrolled through Instagram and he stopped scrolling when he saw a post on predictions for the day based on zodiac sign.....instinctively, he started swiping until he reached his zodiac sign when simultaneously, his mind refreshed his memories of going to temple with his mother when she always insisted on performing an archana⁴ in his name. There it was !! prediction for his sign, ‘Trying to help others might land you in deep waters⁵’. The doorbell rang as Jithesh completed reading his prediction and Jithesh dropped his phone on the bed and went to attend the doorbell.

⁴ A form of ceremonial worship

⁵ In deep trouble

This time he was not surprised to find Shrishti at the door but he was indeed stunned to find her covering herself with a towel and wearing simple pyjamas for bottom, her hair all messy.....there prevailed this awkward silence until Jithesh decided to break it.

“Any problem?”, he initiated.

“I know it is awful of me to shock you like this in the morning.....actually it is about the tap.....it is overflowing and there is also a blockage. Water gets stagnated in the bathroom...we do not know how to stop the water or to remove the blockage. Mrithun is trying his best but we need some support.... we are not yet done with arranging things and if water keeps flooding in, things would become difficult for us.... If you don't mind, could you lend a hand?”

“Let me see what I can do?” Jithesh sarcastically mimicked a professional plumber as he went in to the opposite apartment to check. He went in to find

Mrithun struggling to stop the flow of water. Jithesh joined him trying to help and kept his hand against the flow of water trying to arrest it but in vain....

Just then he caught a glimpse of the cosmetics lying on dressing table in the bedroom and then he saw the calendar nearby.....it was 31st....they had met exactly six months beforehe could not avoid her thoughts coming back to him.....Their first meet..... Yes, it was everything to do with cosmetics and water.....how could he forget that day?

Chapter-3

Love at first sight

Six months before.....

Jithesh wiped off the droplets of sweat on his forehead as he cleaned his bike with water. Once done, he finally heaved a sigh of relief and bent down picking up the bucket of dirty water nearby and went ahead to throw it away, when he did not notice a stone on the ground until he tripped over.....before he could get himself under control, the bucket of water spilled out entirely and as Jithesh yanked off the bucket, he was face to face with HER.....she was raging in anger as she grabbed the bucket from him and dropped it with a thud.

“All my hours at beauty parlour.....money spent.... you wasted everything in a split second.....Will you appoint me in your multi-national company, you

mister?” She lunged forward grabbing his collar when their eyes met and he saw it in her eyes.... Was it serenity? Was it anger? No, her gaze communicated something different....it was....it was....

The next moment, he felt her head on his chest as she wiped off her face on his shirt and face. He felt the tickling feeling.....for the first time, for the feeling was felt in his heart this time..... “This is what you get for your carelessness.....but what about my interview?.....ANSWER ME!!!!”

He was well aware of her volume rising.....all he wanted to say was S...O...R...R....Y....but he felt as if he was short of breath....he could not bring himself together even for a whisper..... ‘Wait until I gather myself and get relieved from your magic spell, when I will accuse you of stealing.....stealing myself from my heart and taking up a position there’ he thought.

She again caught hold of his collar, when he noticed her moving away from him....no she was being pulled back.....he shifted his gaze to find a girl nearby.....
'Must be her friend', he thought. "Leave him...we have to reach the venue soon for the interview....we will wash off and be on our way" she said... No, she pleaded with her.

"To hell with the interview.....do you expect me to show up like this for an interview as an airhostess.... I will be kicked out.....it is all because of YOU" She screamed pointing at Jithesh.

Jithesh thought, she was going to hit him hard, by the way she plunged forward, when she suddenly paused few millimetres from him... "Wait!! Why the hell do appearances matter for the post of airhostess.....why should I bother about how I look?" She was silent for few seconds and then she turned as if she had some realization and quietly walked away.

Before Jithesh could blink for a second and open his eyes, she was in front of him again. She had come back in jet speed, opposite to the way in which she left. He was quick enough to notice her lips curve into a smirk for a moment.....

He froze as she grabbed his hands and her touch sent up chills across his spine. She tried to pull him along with her and he complied silently. He followed her as exactly as a pet dog would, amazed by the way she funnily changed her mind in seconds as she dragged him to the nearby parlour.

She sat down in the styling chair conveying to the beautician animatedly on what all she needed, the list was going on and on when, Jithesh realized that he had been admiring her in the worst of her looks....at least in her opinion, the worst of her looks. In his personal opinion, Jithesh knew he had already fallen for her.....

The next one hour, Staring at her, Jithesh had only her in his mind.....She was there not only in front of his eyes, but in his heart also.....She was already mixed all over his body.....only she seemed to matter to him in the whole world.

She, Harshitha, on the other hand, was trying out the best of the services offered in the parlour and though she tried to ignore the presence of the man ahead of him, she could not avoid looking at him through the corner of her eyes and she suppressed a quick smile carefully.....it was indeed clear.... he had fallen for her.....

“Yeah!!! Just perfect madam”, the stylist said as she removed the apron and Harshitha got up, went to the reception and spoke something to the girl there. Jithesh, already planning on the dress he would wear for his reception came to his senses, seeing her walk to the reception and he got up and went to join her at the

reception....As he reached the counter, she turned away and started walking to the door. When she turned to leave, that was when Jithesh noticed the kurthi and jean she was wearing and how a simple stud and a small silver chain made her look elegant.

Jithesh started moving towards her begging his brain for an instant idea to address her 'hey girl!!' 'my lady' 'darling'..... 'tak tak'.....he turned back as he saw the girl at the counter tapping the table. "Madam said you will be paying the bill....so is it cash or card?". Jithish swiftly drew out his purse and gave his card and entered the pin.

The swiping machine read 25,000...It did not matter to him anymore. But as he signed the bill, his mind wanted to confess to someone that it was 90% of his monthly salary.

As he crumpled the bill to throw it, he stopped for a second and uncrumpled it again. There it was...finally he knew it now...Her name is HARSHITHA.

He had a faint smile on his face as he moved to the door, his eyes searching for her in the busy road in front of the parlour.

He nearly lost his balance when the door suddenly flew open and about five to six kids came and gave him a sudden hug and showered him with kisses..... and yet all he felt in his cheeks were her soft curvy lips.

Finally, after all the pampering was over, a kid spoke up, “Harshitha akka⁶ told you had sponsored our breakfast at the three-star hotel there...” she pointed to the Dine Galaxy Hotel on the other side of the road. “So, Thank you for that.....”.

⁶ Elder sister

Another kid, giving a dispassionate look, extended a paper saying, “Here is the bill.....the owner is staring at us....come with us and settle the bill”. The kids started to drag Jithesh to the hotel and finally Jithesh settled the bill.

As all the kids turned to leave, the cutest of the lot came back and pulled Jithesh closer to match his height and said, “Come to our Anbu Karangal orphanage when you are free. It is just nearby.” Jithesh’s face glowed as he hugged him tight and said “I will be there for her.... that is for all of you”.

The kids murmured and laughed among themselves and left.

As he received an alert message on his mobile that his account balance was Rs 200, he tried to ignore it with the swipe of his fingers, his mind trying to figure out a reason to talk to her the next time.....

‘You mean, talk to her for the first time? You did not speak anything in this entire encounter, only your credit card cried and lamented in this entire episode’ His mind reminded him.

SPECIAL COPY

Chapter-4

The hide and seek game

‘screeeeeeeeech’

Jithesh’s cupboard door gave a squeaky sound as Shrishti finally managed to get the keys from the drawer and opened it.

In the opposite flat, Jithesh, still busy in his nostalgic memories of their first meet, reduced the pressure in the tap, as water splashed across all over him and he was fully drenched.

The water stopped in an instant as Mrithun came running with a towel saying, “I have fixed it, the main valve is closed and the plumber will be here during the relaxation time of the lockdown.....Thank you for helping to arrest the flow of water.....I am not able to

imagine how we would have managed if water had flooded the apartment....”.

Jithesh avoided getting the towel and said, “It was not a big issue”. Jithesh’s antsy feeling towards these annoying neighbours was momentarily hidden, for the first meet memories had made him gaiety.

Shrishti, on the other hand wasted no time, as she skimmed the contents of the cupboard thoroughly and locked it back the way it was.

She then sneaked a quick look at the contents of the house. She was not exactly sure of what she was looking for. Just then she heard the sound of the main door opening as she mumbled under her breath, “This fool Mrithun is not able to hold that fellow even for few minutes....”

Before she reached the hall, she saw the door open partially and so she made a quick decision and hid behind the curtains nearby....

The door opened and Jithesh entered the apartment. Shrishti peeked through a small gap between the curtains and it looked as if he had been straight from a swimming pool. Jithesh moved two steps forward into the apartment and Shrishti immediately came out of her hiding and rushed to the corridor towards her apartment.

Just a split second after she moved out, Jithesh turned back to close the door when she saw Harshitha in the corridor and he called, "Hello!!! Madam!!!". Shrishti froze as she turned in slow motion with a look of horror....

"Hope you are alright.....The faucet is ready" He extended his hand towards her apartment and bent his head, conveying that it was ready for her to use and

Shrishti gave a feeble smile in return and hurried into her apartment.

Entering his bedroom fully drenched and seeing the mobile on the bed with the prediction of the day, Jithesh smiled for indeed that is what, has happened.

Jithesh then, opened his cupboard and took out his favourite towel: the one she had gifted him, to dry himself. Just when he was about to close the cupboard, he felt a niggling feeling in his feet. He bent down and picked the cloth that had fallen from the cupboard and he was appalled at what he saw. It was her shawl...the shawl she was wearing that day, the blood stains made the pure white shawl look like a patterned red shawl.

For a moment he thanked God that nobody was coming to visit him and he was staying all alone...thanks to the lockdown, or else he would have been in deep trouble by now. Jitesh cursed himself for being careless as he dropped the shawl in the washing

machine and switched it on. The machine was out of action.

Amal came running into the room crying out as Jithesh freaked out, “Uncle...Amma sent me to ask when the power will be back....”. Jithesh took a look at the EB meter and nodded saying, “Yes there is no power.... tell amma that power cut is rare here, there must be some minor repair and power will be back in ten minutes.” Amal did not seem to have got what Jithesh was trying to say as he was busy with his spinning top and Jithesh had to shake him and say, “Did you hear what I was saying?”

Amal gave a slight nod still busy with his toy and Jithesh gave a look of despair. He had neither the mood nor the energy to convince him and send him, back to his house. Moreover, Jithesh needed a refreshing bath now as he felt uneasy being fully

drenched. So, he ignored Amal and walked towards his bathroom.

Amal swung the toy as it flew high and landed into the washing machine. Amal peeped into the machine and retrieved his toy but as fate would have it, the shawl was stuck with the top and it also came along with the toy and Amal did not care about the shawl as he went towards the door.

Jithesh came out from the bathroom realizing that he had not taken his dress to change, to find Amal running out with his toy. No, the silly toy was not important now.... her shawl was moving along with the toy being hooked with it. Jithesh sprang towards Amal before he reached to the door and removed the shawl from the top hiding it behind him.

“This is girls dress, I know and you will look funny in it”, Amal chuckled and before Jithesh could respond saying, “It is my friend’s...” Amal was already out of

the apartment and Jithesh banged himself in the nearby wall in anguish.

Few hours later,

Amal kept banging the spoon on the table as he ate and one stare from Shrishti, he stopped it and only the soft sound of chewing the food, was heard.

“We do not have all the time in the world!! We need to find out as soon as possible” Mrithun yelled.

“We are doing our best.....”

“But we are nowhere till now and I am already sick of being this nosy type of neighbour”

“So you think I am enjoying a vacation here? Do not try to blame me when mistake was on your part”

“What do you mean by, it is my mistake?”

“I need time to find something significant.... you should have held him up longer.”

“Listen, He is not Amal to follow my instructions....I can't hold him longer from his own apartment. Remember, once he gets a doubt we need to hands up and reveal our identity.”

“That doesn't mean you blame me as if I am useless..... I have some information that might prove useful.....His cupboard had sarees and other women attires..... but only he is staying there at the moment as there are no women dresses in the laundry. She must have stayed here recently....I am sure of it.”

“Do you really think this information is a lead in any way?”

“But we do need time....”

“We need to find some smarter ways to find out what happened to her. If we are not able to succeed in that, we have our last weapon..... that is to confront him”

“Yes.....that last option will work for sure.....but we will land in trouble....we should be careful....”

“.....Or else our identity blows up and we will be forced to speak up much revealing shocking truths.....That is why we have it as our last resort”

Shrishti moved closer to Mrithun as she hugged him and said, “I want you to know that our family is important to me, as it is to you and I am in this with you.....I will always be.....”

“I know that and that is the reason I confided everything to you, the moment I realized what I need to do.....I know you...” He said as he gently stroked her hair.

Amal cast a puzzled look at them on what his parents were talking about.

Chapter-5

Haunting memories

Jithesh kept changing the news channels, as he munched the cornflakes. Corona seemed to rule the entire media. In every channel, all he saw was about the virus....

Jithesh had a random thought, 'May be love is also just like a virus...it can happen to anybody...at any time...you cannot see it....and if you are affected, just like corona no medicine can save you', Jithesh smiled thinking of his poetic talent.

The shawl drying nearby, diverted his attention and he kept looking at the shawl for hours together.... thinking about it all over again. The next few days after their first meet, he was roaming around Anbu Karangal orphanage.....Thank God there was a tea shop opposite to it.... A perfect setting for

love.....the credit for uniting several lovers goes to tea shops and flower shops.

That day, he was there, at the tea shop for a longer time than usual. Realizing that he must have been in office half an hour ago, he got up hurriedly, paid for the tea, he had been drinking for an hour or so as an excuse to stay there and turned to go home and get ready to leave for his office.

Just when he was about to start his bike, he took a glimpse at the bike mirror and there she was.... walking towards him. She wore a pink T-shirt and jeans. Her long hair flying in the air made her look like the model in shampoo ad.

He gave a quick thank you signal to God as he got down from his bike. As she approached him, he adjusted his collar and shirt trying to appear humble and innocent.

As she came nearer, he extended his hand blocking her way, but she moved slightly and walked past ignoring him. She paused after a few moments.... she thought if she ignored him, he would come running behind her.... but he is not coming.... 'Shall I turn and have a look?' she asked herself.

'What are you waiting for? Turn....' Her heart shouted....

'He will take it as an advantage if you do so...please don't...' her mind pleaded.

Heart won and finally she turned back slightly to find him busy on his phone and she fumed in anger.

She ran to him and started beating him.... "So, you already have a girlfriend to chat with...then why are you doing it in front of my eyes? Go from here...it took you nearly five days to come here searching for me and still you are busy on the phone.... Then I am

not important...go from here....” she said shoving him to move.

“Hey!!! Wait....” He raised his hand helplessly with a cute chuckle. “I am here at the tea shop daily for you.... I stand here for two to three hours waiting for you and leave when it is time to go to office.... In the evening, I come back here again and wait for you till night.... but I never got the chance to meet you. But today I have found out the time at which you will come out so I am setting an alarm in my phone so that I won’t miss you again.....”

She was staring at him doubtfully and he said, “If you don’t believe me, ask the price of anything at that tea shop, I will be able to tell..... because I have been observing that only all these days.... I can even tell how many cars and autos pass by each hour.....”. She broke into a smile and then started laughing.

“Okay.... I believe you.... but you could have come in to the ashram directly...”

“It would have been awkward for you to introduce me to all...”

“I have nobody to bother about me..... I am also a player in this game of life.....but I play by my own rules all alone.... That’s all”

Before Jithesh could respond, the tea shop owner intervened, “Finally you have come ma.... Sir has been here day and night expecting you.... but no use for me...he would drink a single tea for one hour...I am going to charge a service fee for sitting in my tea shop.....” Having said so, he started attending to the customers.

Harshitha started laughing.....

Jithesh gave an animated look and said, “You laugh.... no problem...I am in this state of not being able to

afford more than a single tea because.....because....an already-attractive, pleasing girl wanted to look more beautiful in my eyes....and so I spent my entire credit card at a parlour...”

She started to laugh again..... but this time shyness also emerged and her cheeks became pink.

Jithesh decided not to speak further and kept staring at her....and she stopped laughing and she also kept staring at him..... This continued until he got a call from Shravan urging him to hurry up to the office.

Chapter-6

Reminiscing childhood

To the present day,

Jithesh was washing the dishes when he heard the creaking sound of a window. He completed washing the coffee mug, he was holding in his hand and placed it upside down to dry. Wiping off his hands in his pants and wiping off his face with his shirt, he walked out to the hall and looked around to find movement near the screen behind the sofa. Looking at the shadow and the size of the creature inside, he knew it could be only one person- the wayward kid from the opposite flat.

Jithesh moved forward and pulled the kid outside from the screen using his T-shirt collar taking him by surprise. But Amal immediately bent down and hid behind the sofa and kept forcing Jithesh also to hide by pulling his hands. The tug-off war between the two,

trying to pull each other towards them continued until Jithesh decided to give up and sat beside Amal.

“What are you doing here?”, Before Jithesh could complete his sentence, Amal held his hands close to Jithesh’s mouth and said “Shh shh shhh!!! If you shout like this, amma will come here straight looking for me and will make me attend online classes.....they are boring.... These are my holidays..... We have named it corona holidays..... just like summer vacation...will anybody study during vacations.....you tell me?”

With tiny eager eyes meeting his eyes for reply, sudden frozen frames from his childhood flickered in-front of his eyes.... the kind of childhood he had, the torments he endured.... everything.

As for his question, Jithesh could not answer him the truth- the truth being, ‘Leave alone vacations, I was never inclined to studies..... Whether you believe it

or not!!! I did not even know that I was being sent to school to study and not for roaming with friends or for having fun until I was at 8th standard.'

He chose to respond by saying, "See, we are all not on vacation. The earth is just taking up a short maintenance work forcing us to stay indoors..... but the world and we, people who rule the world cannot stop and rest, we should keep moving on.....your classes must go on..... Work must go on....."

'Life must go on.....with or without her, everything will move on.....must move on', he told himself on the pretext of convincing Amal.

Shrishti barged into the apartment unmindful of the fact that it was not her apartment. Jithesh immediately glanced around the house looking for signs of danger and heaved a sigh of relief.

“I need another small favour from you, Jithesh.....Can you allow Amal to use your mobile for just three hours??.... he has online classes to attend, but we both have got office work to do.... You know, we cannot manage without our mobile or laptop..... it would be extremely helpful if you could consider this.....”

There was an awkward silence again and Jithesh begged his brain to kindle an idea to escape in vain.....

“Hmmm!!!! actually I am awaiting a call from my friend.... so, I don't think it would be possible to.....” Jithesh stopped midway hoping she would understand.

“Till you get the call, he can attend, right?.....at least for few minutes..... you know we are worried about his education.....” She tried her best to convince him.

Exchange of excuses continued until, as usual, Jithesh decided to give up and he slowly withdrew the mobile from his pocket and handed it over to her in slow motion, hoping something would happen. As she was about to get the phone, Jithesh pulled back the mobile and said, “You may carry on with your work.... I will ensure that he attends the classes.....just send me the meeting link for his classes through whatsapp.”

“Ok fine, take care...and sorry to bother you again and again..... Mrithun has asked his friend, who has a mobile shop for a new mobile for Amal and he would bring it in the evening during the lockdown relaxation time..... just bear with this today alone....”, She said and walked away majestically without waiting for acknowledgment from Jithesh.

Amal came out from behind the sofa with a sullen, downcast face and Jithesh sniggered thinking of him. Jithesh wondered about how Shrishti was unmindful

of Amal hiding nearby in this whole conversation and she did not even glance at him..... maybe she must have known it already or maybe got used to his tantrums and hidings.

For the next ten minutes, Jithesh was busy trying to join in the virtual meeting organized by the school. Finally, he logged in and handed the mobile to Amal. Before, he could explain further, Amal said, “I know how to mute, unmute, switch on video and all” and Jithesh said “Ok carry on.....” and sat beside him.

The teacher had already started the class and she called out Amal and asked, “Amal, why are you late for the class?”

“Traffic, madam”

Jithesh wondered if Amal knew what he was saying.

“But this is an online class, Amal”, the teacher retorted back.

“I meant network traffic, madam”, Amal said and the entire class started laughing and the teacher tried to calm them.

Jithesh also giggled slightly, trying to encourage Amal that he was being fantabulous in managing crisis but Amal glared back at him and gave a look as if Jithesh was invading his privacy and so Jithesh causally got up and moved to the balcony.

As he stretched his hands in a lazy manner, Jithesh replayed the words in his mind, ‘Mrithun has asked his friend for a new mobile for Amal’, that’s what she said. Though it was foolish to do so, Jithesh compared himself with Amal..... the moments Mrithun relished with Amal now.

During the very few encounters he had with his appa⁷ and the very few years, he had the chance to spend

⁷ father

with appa, Jithesh did not remember any such moments like Mrithun has with Amal nor did he remember seeing the happiness in his face, Mrithun has now, tending to Amal.

Jithesh placed his hands over his head in desperation, for he knew the reason why appa always disliked him and over the years, he seemed to have accepted it, as he could not have done anything about it at any point of time.

He knew the reason very well, for amma had repeated it to him every day as she pampered him to sleep consoling him. The reason was simple..... for the second child, Appa wanted a girl child and he loved girl children, but he was born and the result was obvious. Adding fuel to the fire was the josiya⁸'s prediction that another male child would bring him

⁸ Astrologer

bad luck and losses.....and that is what exactly happened.

Jithesh would ask his amma⁹, “Why not expect a girl child for the first child? Why me???”

His mom would reply calmly every time, “Of course, your appa was disappointed when your anna¹⁰ was born..... but when your anna, Neeraj, was about four months old, one day I had gone out and your father was alone with him. Neeraj kept on crying and your father did not bother at first, but when he was crying inconsolably, your father got up from where he was seated and moved near Neeraj to scold him and the next moment, the ceiling fan fell down, right at the place where your father was sitting few seconds ago. According to your father, Neeraj saved his life by crying and making him move...so, from that day, your

⁹ Mother

¹⁰ Elder brother

father started to like him. But he always loved girl children..... he wanted his mother to be born again as his daughter.... He is also blaming me as he is doing to you.....I don't know why he doesn't see the girl in me....”

Mom used to cry and Jithesh used to close his eyes and pretend to be sleeping to avoid giving further sorrow for Amma. After sometime, she used to leave, thinking that he has slept.

After she left, Jithesh would look at the ceiling fan and wonder, ‘why did you not fall when I cried in my childhood, just like you did to my anna?’ as he drifted to sleep.

Jithesh remembered seeing soap operas during his childhood where fathers hated girl child and wanted a male child and relied on the male child. But in his case, the opposite has happened.

Next, there was his elder brother, Neeraj..... he had only one reason to hate him and amma. They both had disposed of his priceless possession he had kept so precious and he just would not forgive them for it.

Jithesh went into the hall striding slowly so as to not disturb Amal's classes and then went into his bedroom. He hesitated for a moment and then opened his closet and took it out, carefully and slowly. Staring at it, he said to himself, 'I have something equivalent to your priced possession in my hands, but I don't have you near me.' He placed it back in his closet and locked it.

The extent of disregard and anger Jithesh had towards his father was always channelised as love and affection towards his mother.....this was not a sudden change. This has been happening for years now.

His amma, the only iron lady, hulk, bigg boss, before his eyes, has toiled years together.....only for

him.....she had endured a lot right from her childhood and even marriage life did not turn out to be a fairy tale for her..... Her only inclination towards life was him and he knew it very well. Despite knowing it, he had not done anything to make her feel proud or happy. He only gave her back pain and sorrow.....including the one he did to her the last time.....one last time.

Jithesh still had one unanswered question in his mind and his amma never answered it, ‘What was the reason for the disagreement that was brewing between mom and dad always? And why did they choose to part ways?’

Finding the answer today was useless. It is like solving a sum after getting back home from the examination hall. All these happened some twenty years back, Jithesh reminded himself as he nodded his head coming back to the present.

Chapter-7

Blooming suspicions

“Better hand over the mobile to me before I call appa.....”, Jithesh heard this voice and went to the hall to find Amal handing over the mobile to Shrishti, his head hung down.

“Sorry Jithesh, his online classes are over but still he is playing games in your mobile”, She said looking at Jithesh.

“Amal, let me deal with you once we go home”, she told Amal and he cleverly avoided her gaze, still counting the tiles on the floor.

Jithesh extended his hand saying, “It’s okay...”, expecting Shrishti to return the phone back but No. Her looks changed when she saw the wallpaper on the phone and she did not hesitate and was straight

forward, “Who is this, in the wallpaper on the home screen of your mobile.....is she your wife? Where is she?”

Jithesh froze for a second but gathered himself and said, “She..... she..... was.... no I mean, she.....is.....my girlfriend. She is in her house....in southern Tamil Nadu....”

“But the photo was taken in this house.... right?” she asked pointing to the walls in the house.

“Yes....it was taken long back.....” ‘If one month can be termed as long back’ he thought and cursed himself under his breath for not changing his wallpaper after his thought to change it that day.

“Hmm..... Nice picture by the way”, She said and returned the mobile and walked out with Amal.

Mrithun, pretending to wipe the window rails on the corridor, gave a look of disapproval as a reaction to

what was happening inside the apartment. He dropped the cloth in anger and went to his apartment.

“I strongly feel you are deviating from what we want”, He began even as Shrishti entered the apartment.

“What do you mean, Mrithun?”, Shrishti asked calmly closing the door behind her.

“What was the fuss about his mobile?”

“It was just a causal conversation....”

“But where does it lead us to. We need to know where she is..... we are not bothered about his wallpaper”

“Yes, we are not bothered about his wallpaper, but we need to rekindle the emotions within him by probing something about him.....then only, he will be forced to reveal the truth even without his knowledge”

“So.....that is it”

“No, there is more.....”

“What??”

“When I entered the apartment, Amal was alone with Jithesh’s mobile, so I grabbed the opportunity and took at a look at his mobile”

“And?”

“I happened to have a look his google search history.....and.....in his recent searches, he has searched for ‘How to apply for death certificate?’”

“This can mean only one thing.....”

“No, we cannot jump to conclusions.....that is why I did not confront him and diverted the topic regarding the wallpaper”

“I am not able to believe this.....”, Mrithun said, his eyes wide with shock.

Two days later,

Shrishti came running with some paper in her hands, closing the door behind.

“First, sanitize your hands and remove your mask.....was it crowded at the bank?”, Mrithun asked, still focussing on his laptop.

Shrishti panted and ignoring his safety measures, said, “We were wrong.....totally wrong.....we are missing something”

“What are we wrong about?”, Mrithun asked looking up from the laptop screen.

“Today, Jithesh was also at the bank.....in front of me in the line..... I could hear what he spoke with the lady at the counter. He.....he came for renewing the fixed deposit in her name.”

“So?”

“The renewal application had the signature of her.....means she is not.....not dead.”

Mrithun appeared to be stunned for a second, after which he answered, “Did you see her alive? Did she come to the bank for renewal?.....come on...then how do you know that Jithesh himself did not sign in the renewal application?”

Shrishti was finally composed as she sat down and started thinking. “Maybe you are right..... or maybe wrong too”

“Time will answer who is right.....”, Mrithun said and got back to his laptop.

On the other side,

Jithesh sat at the dining table and his hands were scribbling random phrases like ‘The worst prison one can never escape from is the prison of his own

thoughts' in the newspaper in front of him. His mind was elsewhere.

Jithesh could not get off the expression he saw in her eyes from his mind.....it would be foolish for anyone to think that he did not notice Shrishti at the bank behind him. But there was something else running in his mind. 'Why did she seem so much interested in his affairs?' 'No it was not about her alone.....the entire family in the opposite apartment was always behind him in one way or the other.'

'And the expression he saw in her eyes at the bank when he turned back, after submitting the renewal application at the counter..... The look in her eyes seemed as if she knew everything about him.....everything including.....including the fact that he himself had signed in the application'

His hands were wet with sweat as a thought suddenly struck him. He dropped the pen and buried his face in his hands.

‘What if? What if they are here in search of her?.....Shrishti was particular about his mobile wallpaper that day.....NO NO NO’, He shouted out assuring himself that he was imagining things.

Jithesh felt like he was becoming mad day by day and, he also felt so lonely and that loneliness again made him think of her.....how she must have felt being lonely her whole life. Maybe she had a justification on her part for what she had done.....No what a son he is to justify what she did to her mother..... he shook his head in despair, but her thoughts came back haunting him.

Chapter-8

Entangled hearts

Three months ago,

“It has been five hours since we came here..... Can you imagine that?”, Jithesh asked as they walked in the corridor of the mall holding each other’s hands.

“When we are with the person we like, time is eternal’, Harshitha replied smiling.

They were laughing and talking for what seemed like eternity in fact, when Harshitha suddenly became silent.

Jithesh acted like searching for something and Harshitha asked, “What are you searching for?”

“Your smile is missing.....so I am searching for it”

Her smile was back again.

“I am experiencing something other than loneliness for the first time since I was born. Do you know how it feels to be lonely?”

“I don’t know.....why don’t you tell me..... or, rather write it down”, Jithesh said handing over a paper and pen to her.

She started to write after some hesitation, tears rolling down her eyes. She completed writing and handed over the paper to Jithesh and he read it out,

“Loneliness is this weird feeling.....

Like surrounded by all varieties of food in a buffet.....but you are not hungry.

Like having a wardrobe full of dresses.....yet none fits you.

Like the entire flight is vacant.....but you don’t have the ticket to travel.

Like having fresh air around you..... yet you are suffocating and on ventilator.

Like being surrounded by a sea of people yet you don't belong with any of them.

Like you don't belong anywhere in this whole world.

By now, Harshitha started crying.

Jithesh stuffed the paper into her bag and consoled her.

“Forget about what you wrote, shopping will cheer you, my lady, come on”, He said and took her to an ethnic jewellery shop.

Harshitha, busy in her shopping, did not notice Jithesh adding a line at the end of the note she had written.

At the bill counter, the lady asked, “Is it a gift? Should we wrap it up?”

“My God-sent gift is near me already. This is a present for my gift”, Jithesh said pointing to Harshitha and the

lady at the counter gave a shy smile with a tinge of confusion and said, “Okay sir.”

As they moved out of the shop, Jithesh started laughing,

“The lady at the counter got confused and the look on her face.....my God!!!!”

“If that was your style of proposing me, it was very bad.....”

Harshitha said smiling shyly and started running to the other side of the road. You may expect the cringy scene of she meeting with an accident, but that did not happen in our case and she ran to the seashore at the opposite side dragging Jithesh also along.

The waves were their guests now, touching their feet gently, sharing their new found love and the breeze showered them with its blessings as both smiled at each other.

“Now take out the letter you wrote and read it again”,
Jithesh said.

“I cannot do it again..... ‘Forget the letter’, you
told me, now you are asking me to read it again, why?
I am happy now.... Let us not spoil it”

Jithesh kept staring at her and Harshitha knew Jithesh
was serious.

She started to read the letter again and as she read the
last sentence added in that letter, her expression
changed. The letter read as follows,

“Loneliness is this weird feeling.....

Like surrounded by all varieties of food in a
buffet.....but you are not hungry,

Like having a wardrobe full of dresses.....yet none
fits you,

Like the entire flight is vacant.....but you don't have
the ticket to travel,

Like having fresh air around you.....yet you are
suffocating and on ventilator,

Like being surrounded by a sea of people yet you don't
belong with any of them,

Like you don't belong anywhere in this whole world.

Yes, you don't belong anywhere in this world because
you are safe in my heart.

She had tears in her eyes again.....but this time they
were tears out of happiness.

“This is my style of proposing”, Jithesh said winking.

Harshitha ran to him, hugged him tight and said, “And
this is my style of responding to it”

The letter was carried away by the sea.....

Chapter-9

The confrontation

To the present- A few days later,

Jithesh entered the apartment corridor carefully, as it was mobbed just now, He had his hands full of grocery bags and adding up to it was his mobile too.

He was struggling to get the keys out of his pocket to open the apartment, when he mumbled within himself about the crowd at the shop. ‘Shops being kept open for only two hours ended up attracting more crowd’, he thought.

Just then, he heard the door of the opposite apartment open and Mrithun came out.

“Let me help you, Jithesh”, Mrithun came voluntarily and took his mobile and groceries from his hand so that

he could open the door. Jithesh was not left with much of a choice.

As they entered the apartment, Mrithun kept the grocery bags on the table and asked, “So why are you living alone here? Where are your parents? And How is your girlfriend doing?”

Jithesh turned, looking at the other side, to avoid revealing his tensed face, as he sanitized his hands.

“Some family problem..... you know.....it is there in all families.....Hmmm...nothing serious”, He said something, to manage.

Then before Mrithun could probe further, he continued, “Could you please excuse me..... I need to take a shower. You never know how this virus spreads.”

“Yeah, carry on. I was on my way to the terrace to bring back the clothes dried up. I saw you struggling

with so many things in hand.....so thought to help”,
Mrithun said looking around the house as if searching
for something.

Jithesh moved towards the door hoping that Mrithun
would follow in vain.

“What is this suitcase doing here in the hall?”, Mrithun
asked pointing at the suitcase in which he had dumped
the things of Harshitha.

Jithesh was getting impatient now..... ‘He could not
tolerate this anymore’, he decided.

Before Mrithun could go near the suitcase, Jithesh
jumped ahead, went and stood in front of the suitcase
and said in a sarcastic tone,

“Mr Mrithun, how does this suitcase concern you.....
or how does my mobile wallpaper bother your wife?”,

“I am sorry, just asked out of curiosity”, Mrithun replied and moved to the door when there was a notification sound.

Jithesh instantly looked for his mobile but saw it in Mrithun’s hands. Mrithun looked at the message and said, “You have a message from Dr. Nithesh.....it says.....”

Jithesh got angry, ran to him and grabbed the mobile from his hand fiercely glaring at him,

“Mobile is something personal to an individual.....it knows an individual much more than even his parents do. You cannot read my messages like that and, listen, I want to warn you and your family to stay away from my affairs and stop this nosy behaviour. My business is none of your business...Next time, you enter my apartment like this uninvited, I will be left with no option but to call the police”, Jithesh said what he wanted to convey without any hesitation.

The message from Dr. Nithesh was the usual update he gave every day, not the miracle, he was hoping for. Jithesh kept reading the message again and again so that he appeared to be busy with the mobile and Mrithun would leave but he could feel from the corner of his eye that he was still standing.

“Wait!!! I am just being friendly”, Mrithun said in an effort to calm him down.

“Out of my apartment now.....”, Jithesh growled and Mrithun walked away silently.

As he showered, Jithesh’s mind was restless. He had lost his patience and thundered at Mrithun. But it was also for good that he spoke like that, he thought. In the current mindset and whirlpool of problems he is in, he cannot reveal about his personal life to them and it would lead him to danger.

His thoughts were not only about that. He was a fool to tell him that he would be calling the police. What if they are actually spies to monitor him? Or there is another possibility, what if they are here to know what happened to Harshitha? Jithesh prayed that, what Harshitha told about being an orphan has to be true.

Meanwhile at the opposite apartment, an argument was brewing,

“How dare he speak with such ego and anger and you come back quietly listening to all his threats?”, Shrishti showed her irritation on Mrithun.

“We do have our own limitations. The fact is that we irritated him profusely. And it is not good for us to reveal our identity yet.”

“But we do have our contacts and influences. Why should we be quiet? We have our own intentions in

mind. We are here only to know about her and we are doing our duty”

After these angry exchanges, both Mrithun and Shrishti sat silently thinking what to do next.

“I know what to do.....I have an idea.....let us put an end to this drama tomorrow”, Shrishti said firmly and went in.

The next morning,

Jithesh sat on the sofa, his hands mechanically scrolling through linkedin for job opportunities but his mind was elsewhere.

He was still pondering and arguing with himself about his response towards Mrithun and on what their next reaction would be.

The more he kept thinking, the more he missed his amma’s presence in the house. She would have her unique way of handling people. If she was here, these

nosy neighbours would have an earful from her or much better, they would run away from her as he was doing from them now.

Jokes apart, his mother was such a beautiful soul.....she loved everyone unconditionally, including dad, ignoring all his mistakes and sins. He failed to understand her relationship with only one person in the world- Harshitha. Things were well when he introduced her to Amma, that too on her own insistence. They both seemed so close to each other, to the extent that they seemed to be mother and daughter and he was an outsider.

But then, Harshitha began to feel insecure about her lonely life. She could not bear the fact that he had his mother with him all these years when she was all alone.

His mind replayed several incidents.

“Don’t you think you should introduce me to your mom?”, She had asked one day.

“But why do you insist?”

“That is because I know how much you love mom and how she is your world.....so I also want to become a part of that world”

Jithesh could not say anything further.

When Jithesh introduced Harshitha to mom, she said, “You are staying here with us....”, and took her hand bag inside symbolizing that she cannot leave the house now.

Mom had accepted Harshitha happily and in fact she seemed to like her that she went to make her signature sweet of Chocolate cake, which she made only when she was extremely happy.

“I am troubling you both unnecessarily”, Harshitha said sadly and Jithesh responded saying, “Yes.....very

much.....by thinking that you are all alone.....we are very happy to have you here and we will be there for you always” as he held her palm in his hands as if assuring her of what he just said.

Things went on well, when Jithesh began to notice minute changes in Harshitha.

To quote a few,

Once, Jithesh hurt his hand accidentally while closing the door and amma got tensed as every mom would and treated his hands. Harshitha, watching all this commented, “I no longer get tears when I get hurt, what is the use of crying, if you have no one to console you or tend to your wounds? It is better to conserve your energy to treat yourself rather than wasting it on crying.”

“That is past, from now let us see how you get hurt when I am around you”, mom said trying to make her

smile in vain. Her expression did not change even a bit.

Another random day at the breakfast table,

Mom had gone to temple, so Harshitha had to cook that day.

Jithesh noticed her silent and sad, eating without interest. So, he casually asked, “I think someone is missing my mom’s food?”

That was enough to make her angry.

“One day you miss your mom’s food, you won’t die. I have not tasted my mother’s food at all”

“Hey!! I was telling about you and not me, I was just kidding, leave it”

Harshitha got up and walked away in anger. He meant something else but she understood it in the worst way possible.

Then one day, Harshitha complained about herself that her dressing sense was poor.

Mom offered to help and said, “I will help you in selecting dresses from now on.....anything would look beautiful on you..... Don’t worry”, She said soothingly but Harshitha was in a different mindset for the day.

“Jithesh has you, doing everything for him in all walks of life but I..... I had to take all decisions in life alone- be it a simple dress or my life partner”

“And you have made the right decision”, Mom would not give up.

“From now, let Jithesh also experience how I felt, you are not doing anything for him.....you are going to help me in everything.....You should prioritize me before him”, She was becoming hysterical now and tears were flowing all over her cheeks.

Jithesh and her mom looked at each other stunned on what she was hinting at. But that was not the time to ask her for further explanation.

“So be it, Harshitha..... You are also my daughter after all.....I will be by your side always”, Mom said and hugged her soothingly.

During these instances, Jithesh could sense that Harshitha was still in her lonely world and she could not bear to see the affection, his mother had towards him, even though it was clear before her eyes that his mother cared for her like a daughter.

She always compared her childhood to the life Jithesh had. This was despite the fact that Jithesh had confided everything to her about his broken family. She just refused to live in the present and was in her own world of sadness and Jithesh tried his best to bring her out of it and make her feel a part of his life.

“Let us ask him directly today and confront him, he cannot avoid answering us. I am sick of this hide and seek game”, Shrishti said and started walking to the opposite apartment and Mrithun followed her from behind knowing that she was right.

Jithesh opened the door at the first ring because he was already coming to the door to pick up the milk packet.

“Morning, Mrithun”, he said struggling to bring a smile on his face and smiled at Shrishti feebly.

Mrithun shoved Jithesh aside slightly and both of them entered the apartment and sat on the sofa voluntarily.

“We want to discuss something with you.....can we talk over a cup of coffee.....”

Jithesh was bewildered at this uncanny behaviour of his neighbours. He silently walked to the kitchen because he also needed time to think.

‘They are here again.....and what do they have to talk with me? Their behaviour cannot be taken as innocent or coincidental...they are spying on me. Wait!!! What if they are some sort of spies trying to find out what happened to Harshitha? I am done for!! Yes, That, must be the case..... but, what answer can I give them?’ he thought.

‘It is better to confront them and ask why they are being too nosy instead of coming to conclusions on own’, he decided.

Mrithun and Shrishti looked at each other planning their next move.

Mrithun’s phone rang and Shrishti peeped into the phone Mrithun was holding as to who the caller was.

“What do we tell him now?”

“Pick up the call and tell him that we are going to confront his dear son and make him spill out the truth”, Shrishti told in a taunting manner.

“No!!.....”, Mrithun said taking the phone beyond her reach. “We will complete our conversation with Jithesh and find out what we need...then let us tell him the matter..... he will expect that only.....”

“Give me the phone, it is better to make things clear with him, now itself”

“This is not the time..... Jithesh might come out from the kitchen any moment now”

Their talk was aggravating into an argument now, both were pulling the phone towards each other.

Unable to bear their tug off war, the phone fell down with a thud and went underneath the sofa.

As Shrishti bent down to pickup the mobile, she saw something scary under the sofa and she stood up with a start.

“What happened?”, Mrithun asked getting up.

“Move the sofa..... Fast !!!!!”, She said in a hurry.

Mrithun and Shrishti moved the sofa aside and stood dumbstruck at what they saw.

The floor underneath the sofa was full of blood stains.

As Jithesh came out of the kitchen, he was in, for a shock.....

The sofa was pushed aside and the strain of blood underneath was clearly visible. Mrithun and Shrishti stood in the centre of the hall staring at him.

Jithesh did not want to waste his energy pleading with them.... He knew he has to retain his composure to share what he wanted to tell.

“May I know who you are?”, Jithesh asked directly
hiding the confusions in his mind.

“You are in the position to answer our questions and
not question us, or else we are calling the police now”

“What do you want to know?”

“Why did you kill her?”

“I did not kill her.....”

“Then, where is she.....call her.....”

“She.....she is not there.....I did not kill her”

Shrishti took out her mobile and Jithesh said,

“No!!!!!!.....”

“Let me tell you everything that happened that
day.....everything, the whole incident that I badly
wanted to share with someone..... Please, hear
me out”, he begged and Mrithun and Shrishti sat down
in desperation.

Chapter-10

The buried truth

That day (Approximately, a month before),

The aroma of the filter coffee tickled his nostrils as Jithesh opened his eyes slowly, removing the blanket from his face. He saw her face brimming with smile as she ruffled his hair and Jithesh pondered over the reason for her sudden jubilant mood.

“You are spoiling me already by giving me bed coffee!!!”

“Taste the coffee and tell me whether I am spoiling you or have I spoiled the coffee?”, Harshitha said smiling.

Jithesh tasted the coffee and kept it aside.

“Did you not like it?”

“Oh!!! That was coffee.....I thought it was nectar”,
Jithesh smiled and took Harshitha’s hands and kissed
it.

Just then Amma entered the room and Jithesh and
Harshitha drifted apart.

“I did not see or hear anything.....Don’t
worry!!! And I am not going to be possessive, because
I, myself am engrossed in the taste of this coffee”,
Amma said and left the room laughing.

After sometime, the ladies of the house were chuckling
at each other. It was the reaction Jithesh got for
announcing that he was going to cook for the day.

“Yes, but don’t think I am going to make an ordinary
meal....it is going to be super cooking from my
side.....first I will go shopping and get some
ingredients”, Jithesh said grabbing his purse and
shoving it into his pocket.

After completing the main ingredients for cooking..... Jithesh was in the beverages section. He was trying to pick a favourite drink for his mother and Harshitha, who were, all that he had in his life. Finally, he took out a coke bottle from the shelf and added it to his shopping cart.

When he returned back, he found the front door locked from inside. 'Unusual!!!', He thought and rang the calling bell.

No response. He waited.

"Move away from me!!! What are you doing? Have you gone mad? I need to get down....."

It was his mother's voice.

"You cannot get down; you would be going up- to God in a few minutes".

It was none other than Harshitha.

Jithesh got tensed. He has to do something immediately. He had a sudden spark. He ran to the other side of the apartment and opened the bedroom window. He could not believe what he saw.

Amma was on the stool trying to take something from the cellar and Harshitha was trying to push her down and make her fall

Amma was struggling against her grip.

“Harshitha!!!! What has happened to you? Let go of amma.....”, Jithesh growled.

“Jithesh!!!! Help me!! something has happened to her..... She is telling stupid things.....she is going to kill me.....”, Amma was clearly afraid and tensed.

“Why is this world unfair? Why am I alone in this world when you are being pampered by your dear mother.....She deserves to die.....she can never see me as her daughter as she claims. She will not let you

live with me.....it should be only you and me in my world, not anyone else..... Your mom is coming between us.....let us send her away”, Harshitha spoke pretending to look somewhere else.

“What are you blabbering about? Everything was fine...What happened in the meantime?.....Let me inside the house and leave amma, we will sort this out”

“I am going to sort things out now.....you stay out there”, Harshitha said increasing the pressure on amma.

There was exchange of angry words and emotions and Jithesh thought, luckily for him, the opposite flat was not occupied.

Amma felt that it was no use speaking with her and decided to take things in her hands. She jumped off the stool and fell but she thrust her entire weight on

Harshitha as she jumped and Harshitha also lost balance.

Jithesh watched helplessly as his mother fell down heavily with a thud and Harshitha also moved backwards and hit hard against the wall.

When Jithesh finally managed to break open the door and get inside, his mother had already lost consciousness. Harshitha stood leaning against the wall staring at him as she slowly dropped to the ground, her expressions fixed.

Jithesh stood transfixed for a few minutes. The two women in his life were lying motionless in front of his eyes.

Then coming to his senses, he immediately ran to his first love on an impulse and touched her face.

She was breathing!!! She was breathing.....but feebly.

As he grabbed his mobile and called the ambulance, he set glance at the other soul of his life. The way she was lying motionless sent chills across his spine and he finally went near her with shaky legs.

‘Some people will stay in our heart forever but not in our lives’, Jithesh told himself, closing her eyes gently, tears rolling down his eyes.

The ambulance arrived in fifteen minutes and the first thing, the ambulance driver and the assistant did, was to take the lady who was breathing feebly to the hospital.

The assistant sat near the next lady, checked her pulse and said, “She is no more.....but we can take her to the hospital and complete the formalities”

‘So.....he was right..... She she is no more.....’, Jithesh thought as he gave a brief nod.

As the assistant and driver took both of them into the ambulance, Jithesh noticed it at his doorstep.... the coke.... The coke had fizzed out from the bottle due to pressure and spilled out, since Jithesh had dropped the items, he bought in a state of shock and tension. Jithesh stopped for a second and thought, “Maybe human emotions are also like coke..... You keep them hidden and suddenly one day it fizzes off as anger and wrath...to the extent of killing someone” as he walked out locking the door behind.

Chapter-11

Knots unravelled

The present day,

“That means she was killed.....”, Mrithun asked appearing to be quivering with sorrow.

“No..... she was not killed.....she died”

Jithesh kept saying the same thing again and again that Mrithun and Shrishti signalled each other to take out the last weapon on hand.

“How dare you tell me that you killed mom and justify it by saying that she died?”, Mrithun lunged forward grabbing Jithesh by his collar.....But Jithesh was quiet and kept staring at him

“You said...I killed mom.....our mom?.....Neeraj anna.....”, Jithesh started crying holding Mrithun’s face in his hands.

Mrithun moved apart and sat in silence. After few minutes, he responded,

“Yes, I am Neeraj, your elder brother.....the pretention and drama is over now”, “Why did you kill amma.....??”

“No.....No.....amma is not dead.....The one who was dead was Harshitha and not amma.....”

“Hey!!!! You told just now that your first love was not dead..... and the other was dead.....do not confuse us.....”, Shrishti intruded.

“Of course!! Amma is my first love always.....” Jithesh said, tears in his eyes.

“So...where the hell is AMMA.....?”, He thundered.

Amma is in a coma state..... From the day of that incident, till today.....I am waiting for her to recover.....to seek forgiveness for everything.

“I want to meet her”

Jithesh told the address of the hospital she was admitted in and before Jithesh could give them the medical emergency pass to visit hospitals during the lockdown, they were already gone.

As Jithesh sat still trying to bring himself together and comprehend the happiness of getting back his brother, another car drew up to the gate and two people barged into the apartment.

There was a man, tall and with fair complexion. He wore a sweatshirt and trackpants. The lady who accompanied him wore a kurthi and leggings with a shawl covering her.....

Jithesh could guess that they had been from some hill station.

“Yes.....tell me”, Jithesh tried to sound causal.

“Where is amma?”, The man asked impatiently.

“Whose amma?” Jithesh was sweating profusely now.

“Our mother Simritha Bhanushree.....”

Jithesh got up and held the man by his collar, “Better tell me who you are.....I am already in the peak of frustration”

“I am Neeraj and she is Anya, my wife”

Jithesh lunged forward trying to push him out.

“You cannot cheat me, Anna and Anni¹¹ were here in the opposite apartment all these days, we know each other now, That man, Aarush Kumar with no right either to call himself, my father or call my mother, his wife, must have sent you after me, you and whomsoever has sent you cannot separate us now, so move out!!!”, Jithesh was confused but he spoke in a feeble yet firm voice.

¹¹ Elder brother's wife

“Hey Jithesh, will you believe anyone who tells he is your brother?.....I am your brother da.... Look at my face.....look at my face and answer me!!!”,
The person said and held Jithesh’s chin up.

Jithesh saw the wound on his forehead and the next moment, he knew, the person standing in front of him was his brother.

Jithesh composed himself trying to figure out what was happening and finally said,

“If you are Neeraj.....then who the hell was he”

“Ok let me clarify things for you, tell me one thing now, why did Harshitha push amma?”

Jithesh stammered wondering how his well-kept secret was out so easily. “She.....she was jealous of the bonding between me and amma.....and....”

“That is how she made you believe.....but it does not seem convincing to qualify as truth....does it? She was sent here by dad.....to KILL our mom”

Jithesh shook his head as if to confirm if he heard right.

“Appa did not hear anything from Harshitha and so he sent those two people Mrithun and Shrishti to find out what happened to Harshitha and then kill amma.....”

“Why?”, Jithesh asked in more of a whisper.

Neeraj was ashamed to tell it out and so he bent is down helplessly. The lady nearby, Anya spoke out in a soft tone, “Appa is in financial trouble now.... he has borrowed excessively and he is in dire need of money..... When, he had no hope of paying back, he remembered the insurance policy he had taken long back in amma’s name..... if at all something happened to her, he will get the insurance money...with that.....”

Jithesh held out his palm conveying that he understood what she meant.

“Amma is in hospital now.....she is in coma”, Jithesh said and told them the details of the hospital, his mind pricking him from inside for his foolishness in telling the address just before few minutes to the wrong people.

As Neeraj and Anya walked out, there was a notification sound and Jithesh cried out, “Wait!!!! There is nothing you can do, going to the hospital. I have received a message from the doctor who has been treating mom, the message reads as follows,

‘Your mom regained consciousness last night, her parameters were normal.....she forbade us from informing you citing that she has an important task to do. So I had to comply.....she got discharged early morning and as far as I know she is headed to Ooty.’”

“Ooty?”, Jithesh repeated what he had heard.

“Mom is going to meet dad.....”, Neeraj said, with a certainty in his voice.

“Look at this first!!!” Anya diverted the attention of the brothers switching on the TV.

The elegant news reader, Rashitha, who has been the heart throb of youngsters recently, read with a deadpan expression on her face, “The well-known business magnet, Mr. Aarush Kumar, has passed away due to heart attack. He was tested corona positive last week following which he was treated at home. He faced breathing problems last night and finally breathed his last. His wife Mrs. Simritha Bhanushree, who was with him during his last moments will be quarantined for fifteen days in a private hospital. Many celebrities have expressed their grievances for his death. He is survived by two children, Neeraj and Jithesh”

All the three became silent and sat immobile for about an hour. There were calls in all of their mobiles but none there wanted to pick it up and the calls turned to missed calls.

Tears came uninvited and this time, Jithesh made no efforts to conceal it. For no reason, images of Mrithun playing with Amal came before his eyes and he felt his heart suddenly heavy.

Neeraj came to him and hugged him trying to comfort him, when he himself was in for a shock.

“We did not expect this, but dad deserves this..... He was always running behind money and this led him to do ruthless actions like this.....we came here looking for mom; to save her. She must also be angry with me and Sorry, Jithesh.....this separation from you and mom and life with dad taught me lessons for a lifetime”, Neeraj said speaking beyond his tears.

“You are a lot different from dad, you had a valid reason to hate us”, Jithesh said and released himself from the hug as he remembered something.

“I..... I will be back..... Stay", Jithesh ran short of breath as he excitedly ran to his room forgetting his tears. He opened his closet and took it out as preciously as possible and from behind the door he cried out, “Anya Anni, please close anna’s eyes when I come in there.....”

“You may come....” Anya replied back after a few seconds. She was also confused seeing the sudden change in the atmosphere.

Jithesh came out of the room holding that priceless possession in his hands and Anya gave a quizzical look as Jithesh signalled her to be quiet and she complied.

Chapter-12

Seeking answers

As he handed over the priceless possession to Neeraj, Anya removed her hands and Neeraj froze seeing what was in his hands.

It was same as the one he lost.....no much better..... A cricket bat with autograph and wishes from Rahul Dravid.

He hugged Jithesh tightly, admiring the bat, “I am sorry.....I prioritized this bat before you....I am a fool.”

“No, you are not, the way you look at the bat with sparkle in your eyes, you were right....me and amma were careless to dispose your old bat off”

“And, you did not tell me all these years that you are an ardent fan of cricket”, Anya patted Neeraj on his back.

“I thought, you might not be interested, if I keep talking about it.....”

“My God!!!! I had been thinking all these years that you are a rare specimen among men, who doesn't care about cricket, just like I am a rare sight among girls since, I am an ardent fan of cricket.....”

“What!!!!.....” Neeraj gasped.

“For a single bat and autograph, you guys had been angry on each other.... You, could have told me, Neeraj. I have about 10 cricket bats signed by famous players and I also have taken pics with some....”, She said and laughed.

As Neeraj looked feebly at the bat in his hands, Anya hugged him and said, “I did not mean to make you feel

bad or inferior. I know how bad you must have felt about losing your bat, if you were angry on Jithesh and mom for all these years and I now know how much this bat means to you seeing your expression change, on holding the bat.”

Jithesh saw their exchanged glances and moved out to the terrace for some fresh air and wiped off the silent tears that made its appearance again.

Jithesh hated to even think of Harshitha and avoided thinking about her.....but her image came before his eyes again and again.... He, could also imagine his dad asking Harshitha to.....to kill.... his mom.

The next three hours, Jithesh and Neeraj were back to their lost childhood, playing cricket exuberantly and Neeraj never let hold of his favourite bat and never gave a chance to Jithesh to bat.....doesn't matter, the moments and not rules were important at the moment. Anya did a brilliant job at umpiring, doing

nothing but admiring the childishness that sneaked up in their faces.

Later that night, Neeraj, Anya and Jithesh sat at the dining table with the stuffs of amma, cleaning it.....

After the day of that incident, Jithesh never gathered up the courage to touch any of her stuff. But today all the three decided to take a look at all of her stuff.

“Here, what is in this box?”, Anya asked as she held a small box in her hand.

Jithesh extended his hand, got the box from her and said, “Amma never let me open it..... she always said that she wanted both me and Neeraj anna to have a look at what was in this box when she and appa were not with us”

“Technically, they are not here with us now, so we can open the box, right?”, Neeraj asked and Jithesh

shrugged and opened the box. Inside was a piece of paper. Jithesh unfolded the paper and read aloud,

“To my sons,

I know both of you must have always wondered why me and your appa got separated, the reason is very simple.

I wanted to live with money but your appa wanted to live for money and that is the point, when we both drifted apart.

Neeraj, I want you to know that, the only reason, I chose to keep Jithesh with me was the well-being of both of you.... if the opposite had happened, neither of you would have been happy. I love both of you equally, like you both love Facebook and Instagram.

With Love,

Amma.

There was a tint of smile in both their faces on reading the letter. Neeraj got emotional and went to the balcony and Anya followed him.

Jithesh sat there looking at the contents of the table.

There were stuffs of Harshitha and Jithesh could not refrain from seeing them once again for one last time. All her memories came back flooding into his mind.

‘Was it all just acting? Being possessive and jealous of the bonding between amma and me was something I could forgive her for.....but pretending to love me for money.....being my appa’s spy.....that pain of betrayal is unbearable’, he thought.

He then took out her diary with shaking hands and read it.

These were the last words written on it,

Dear Jithesh,

I know I have no right to call you 'Dear' anymore....by now you would have known that I came into your life to kill your mother and you would not be able to forgive me.....no.... forgive, yourself for letting me into your life. When I leave your life, I will leave this diary with you because I want you know two things- two very important things.

One is that people say 'money is not everything'.....I agree..... 'Money is not everything' but 'everything in this world needs money.'

Secondly, I want you to know that the letter I wrote about loneliness was true, the way you made me feel was true, your love for me was true.... but I am not worthy of your love.

With regrets,

Harshitha.

Unable to take any further pain or shock for the day,
Jithesh went to his bed and lied down holding the diary
close to him as he tried to seek some way to escape
from this unfair world by way of sleep.

SPECIAL COPY

Chapter-13

Quarantine with life

Fifteen days later.....

Jithesh and Neeraj dressed up in a similar type of dress- their mom always liked it that way.....Anya was dressed in a simple satin saree, matching it with a simple rose gold chain and tiny jhumki earrings. She also braided her hair in a traditional fashion, jasmine flowers adding up to the elegance. She did not care much about makeup and had a little broader layer of kajal alone, as other makeup was a waste since she was wearing a mask anyway. She was nervous about the way she looked, because it was her first meetup with her mother-in-law and she wanted to make it all serene and subtle.

Jithesh was in his own world of thoughts and Anya was consoling an emotional Neeraj who sniffed, the

tears wetting his mask, thinking of his broken family and at the same time happy that he got his mom back.

By the feel of a tap from the back, Jithesh turned to find a young doctor smiling at him. She was tall and fair, wore a simple kurthi and leggings, a small gold chain and studded earrings. Her entire face was not visible, since she was also masked up, but her eyes conveyed more than enough and was full of emotions.

Her smile broadened as she extended her hand for a handshake and Jithesh shook hands. Neeraj and Anya gave looks of recognition by the shake of their heads and the doctor also responded in a similar fashion.

“I was looking after your mom when she was quarantined.... she is such a vibrant and lovely person.... She, made the hospital environment jubilant in these tough times. She spoke about her family and her turmoil but mostly she was speaking about you..... that you were her lighthouse of survival and

you are such a good heart and soul.....so I was.....I was just curious to meet you once”, She said with an awkward smile....

She made a brief glance at her watch and said “Ok!! I am late for my next duty.... I, need to leave.... mom will be here in a few minutes after the formalities.... You may take her home”.

Jithesh gave a micro expression of wonder as he lifted his eye brows. ‘Did she just say mom and not your mom?’

As she turned and walked away, Jithesh called her, “When will you be curious the next time?”. Words escaped from his mouth despite his control to hold back and Neeraj and Anya patted him on his back laughing.

The doctor stopped in her path and without turning back, she said, “I read a quote yesterday....by Garcia Marquez.....want to know what it is?”

Well aware that she was not facing him, Jithesh gave a slight nod, his heart thumping hard....

“Curiosity is one of the many masks of love”She said as she hurried into the hospital smiling.

Jithesh stood still as his mind was trying to process what he had just heard.

“Yeno vaanilai maarudhae,

Mani thuli pogudhae

Maarbin vegam koodudhae

Manamo yetho solla vaarthai thedudhae¹²....”

¹² Lyrics of a famous love song in tamil

Neeraj and Anya sang in chorus teasing Jithesh as he bent his head shyly and smiled.....

Waiting for mom to come out of the hospital after completing her quarantine, all the three, Jithesh, Neeraj and Anya had only one thought in mind 'Our quarantine with life is over.....'

..... THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME.....