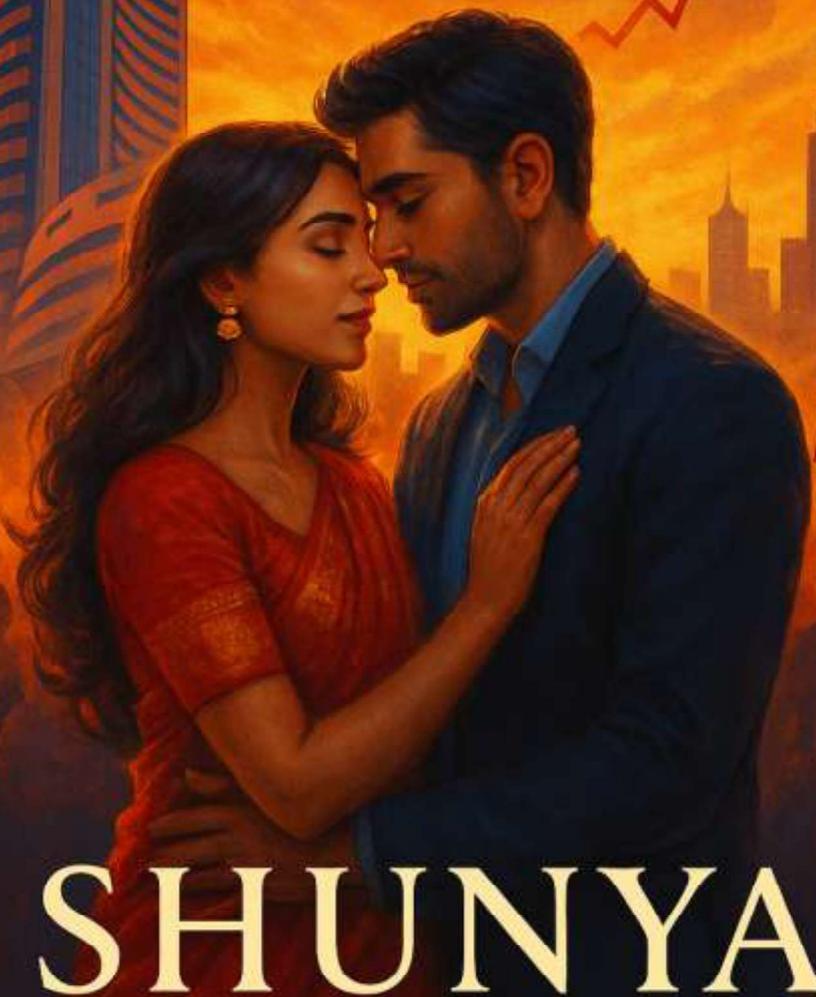


LOVE IN TIME OF DALAL STREET

A ROMANCE OF RUPEES,
RAGE, AND RESISTANCE



SHUNYA

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Dedication

To Neha, Sarah, Zarah, and Nairah—

And to all the girls who learned to raise their voice even when the room only taught them silence.

This story is for every heart that cracked open not to break, but to let the truth out.

Preface

"Some stories are not about who ends up together. They're about who ends up whole."

I didn't write this for the romantics.

I wrote it for the people who love without applause.

For the ones who fight quietly—for art, for integrity, for breath.

This is a story set in glass towers and broken theatres, in trading rooms full of noise and studio apartments filled with silence. It's about two people who believed in opposite things but somehow found the same wound inside themselves.

Love isn't always a crescendo. Sometimes, it's a question that stays unanswered.

And sometimes, it's a memory that stands beside you when everyone else has gone.

If you're reading this, maybe you've known a Raghav. Or maybe you *were* him—afraid to feel without proof.

Maybe you *are* Aaratrika—louder on stage than in your own heart.

This isn't a tragedy.

It's a reckoning.

With love.

With ego.

With the currency of connection.

You won't find a perfect ending here.

But maybe, just maybe, you'll find yourself somewhere in the in-between.

— *Mohammad Amir Khusru Akhtar*

"Not every love becomes a forever. But every love, if it's real, becomes a mirror."

Prologue

"Before you learn how to love, you learn how to lose. Sometimes, you do both at the same time."

The only sound in the room was the soft click of the fan.

Young Raghav sat cross-legged on the floor, elbows on a steel trunk, ear pressed to a radio. His father was asleep on the cot behind him, snoring softly, unaware that his son had stolen twenty minutes of electricity for this.

“...Nifty opens strong at 11,823. Trident’s art fund sees 6% climb...”

It was the voice. The rhythm. The certainty of numbers.

Raghav didn’t understand all the jargon yet. But he understood this: when the market rose, people sat straighter. When it crashed, they whispered. There was power in prediction. In precision.

He clicked open a worn notebook, drew a line through yesterday’s estimate, and wrote the new number beside it in tiny block letters. No decoration. Just data.

Outside, the monsoon tapped against the window, asking for attention.

He didn’t flinch.

The market was moving.

And he wanted to be the kind of man who *knew* before anyone else.

What he didn’t know then—what no number could’ve shown him—was that years later, a woman would look at him during a street protest and say, “*You don’t know how to listen unless the graph is rising.*”

And for the first time in his life, he would believe her.

“This is the story of how he stopped watching the market—and started watching himself.”

ACT I – Setup (Ch 1–4)

"She believed in art. He believed in algorithms. Neither believed in the mess between."

Chapter 1: Opening Bell

"Some people wake up to dreams. Raghav woke up to data."

Raghav's South Bombay flat

The blinds lifted themselves precisely at 5:00 AM. No gentle rustling. No human delay. Just the quiet purr of automation as dawn filtered through floor-to-ceiling glass, painting Raghav Mehta's apartment in a muted silver wash.

His eyes opened in sync. Not groggily. Not with any struggle. Just... opened. Like a system coming online.

Inside the Cuffe Parade flat—cool, metallic, minimal—there were no framed photos, no scattered socks, no evidence of personality. The space felt more like a rendered image than a lived-in home. Every object had purpose, and every purpose served performance.

His bed was made by the time his feet touched the floor.

A voice chimed softly from the speaker embedded in the ceiling. "Good morning, Raghav. Current temperature: 27 degrees Celsius. Asian markets show neutral movement. Nikkei is up by 0.4%."

He didn't respond. He never did.

His morning was a fixed sequence: 40 pushups. One cold shower. A digitally calibrated breakfast—exactly one poached egg, one slice of rye, and 200ml of black coffee, served by a machine that cost more than some people's monthly rent.

The only sound in the apartment came from his smartwatch syncing itself. A soft ping told him his resting heart rate was optimal. Another ping. His cortisol levels were steady.

He stood at the kitchen counter—no bar stools, no clutter—scrolling through five news tickers simultaneously, one eye on Shanghai's pre-open movements, another on his firm's Slack thread, already alive with blinking dots and financial banter.

There was no music. Raghav didn't believe in "background noise." He believed in signal. Everything else was just static.

Dressed in a tailored navy shirt—creased at just the right angles—he adjusted the silver cufflinks on his wrist. His reflection in the mirror didn't smile. It never had a reason to.

By 6:03 AM, he stepped into his private elevator. Alone, always alone. There were no keys. Just a fingerprint scan and a silent descent into the polished, underground parking lot where his graphite BMW awaited like a loyal machine. Engine humming, seat warmed.

He didn't talk to himself. He didn't hum along to FM channels. He didn't *feel* mornings. He processed them.

Outside, Mumbai was waking up in its usual dysfunctional glory—rickshaws honking, tea vendors yelling, the city already sweating before sunrise. But in Raghav's car, it was air-conditioned silence. A bubble of control.

At a red light near Churchgate, he glanced out the window.

A small boy was dancing on the divider—barefoot, limbs sharp and fluid, performing for rupees from halted drivers. Raghav's jaw tightened slightly. Not in pity. In irritation.

He looked away.

The light turned green. He didn't give the boy a second thought.

Inside the elevator at Trident Capital, the silence followed him. Sleek walls. Digital panels showing global indices. Another biometric scan. Another ding.

"Morning, sir," said the receptionist as he passed. She didn't expect a reply, and didn't get one.

The trading floor greeted him like a battlefield in mid-charge. Phones screamed. Screens blinked. Analysts typed like their lives depended on it. Which, in a way, they did.

Raghav walked in like gravity.

Kabir, his junior analyst, trotted beside him, balancing a laptop and a double shot of espresso. "Morning boss! You see the Hong Kong index? Looks like they're prepping for a rate hike."

"I saw it two hours ago," Raghav said, without stopping. "Move our position on HSBC. Hedge against the insurance sector. Quietly."

Kabir blinked. "Got it."

They reached his desk—a command center with six screens, each tuned to a different chaos stream. Raghav tapped a key. Charts flared. Ratios blinked. Currency lines jittered like nervous polygraphs.

"Also," he added, "close our stake in that edtech unicorn. The founder's going through a divorce. The board doesn't know yet."

Kabir looked startled. "How do you—"

"I pay attention."

And with that, he was already gone—mentally, emotionally—into the data.

Every second was priced. Every breath, calculated. Raghav didn't believe in luck. He believed in edge.

At 9:15 AM sharp, the NSE bell rang. The market opened. And Raghav Mehta smiled for the first time that day.

But only for a second.

The morning unfurled like it always did: fast trades, sharp calls, minor victories stacked up like trophies no one celebrated.

He liked it this way.

Control. Precision. No space for chaos. No time for softness.

And yet—

As he took a brief break, walking down to the small balcony overlooking Dalal Street, he noticed something across the road. A crowd. Colorful. Loud. Not the corporate types. These were street artists. Protesters. Students, maybe.

They had drums. Banners. Paint-smeared cheeks. Someone had lit a smoke flare. Yellow and pink.

Raghav frowned.

Of course. Kala Ghoda. That art district always hosted some loud, half-funded rebellion. This one looked theatrical.

He turned to go back inside. But before he did, his eyes paused. Just briefly.

A woman stood on a crate, shouting into a megaphone.

No. Not shouting.

Performing.

She moved with poetry and fire. Words cut the air like knives. Her hair was tied in a messy knot. She wore a faded kurta and combat boots. One hand clutched a mic. The other pointed—to the crowd, to the sky, to some invisible empire.

Raghav couldn't hear her from this distance. But somehow, her voice still reached him.

Something about the way she stood. Defiant. Free. Unapologetically unpolished.

It annoyed him. And intrigued him.

He watched for a beat longer than necessary, then turned away.

Back to his air conditioning. His metrics. His mechanical symphony.

The theatre faded behind him like a half-remembered melody.

But it had already left a note behind in his head.

"He had built a life with no doors. And now, something was knocking."

The Broking Firm, Dalal Street

"Power doesn't shout. It moves in decimal points and silence broken only by the sound of winning."

Raghav Mehta walked into Trident Capital like he owned it—which, in every practical sense, he nearly did.

Dalal Street was still yawning into the day, with vendors half-awake and delivery boys weaving past sleepy-eyed analysts. But inside the tinted glass fortress of the firm, the morning had already burst into full volume.

Phones buzzed like they were caffeinated. Bloomberg screens pulsed like heart monitors. The air vibrated with the stress-scented perfume of ambition.

Raghav, dressed in his ritual navy shirt and grey trousers sharp enough to slice through ego, strode past rows of desks without greeting a soul. His gait was efficient, his expression unreadable. He wasn't a manager. He was a machine operator, and everyone else was gears.

Kabir Vora, his eternally overstimulated junior analyst, fell into step behind him. "Boss! Morning! Japan's holding interest rates steady. That carry trade's looking even tastier."

Raghav didn't break stride. "Cut our yen exposure to 60%. Too many retail traders piling on."

Kabir blinked. "Already? Isn't that a little—"

"Don't think. Execute."

He entered his corner cubicle—glass walls, six screens, ergonomic chair set at a precise 112-degree recline—and tapped the keyboard like a pianist with no time for music. Instantly, his entire world came alive: live tickers, forex charts, FII flows, a dozen browser tabs with predictive models blinking in code.

"Where's the commodities brief?" Raghav asked.

Kabir shoved a folder toward him, panting slightly. "Here. Crude's rebounding. Gold's flat. Copper—"

"I asked for insight, not a weather report."

Kabir winced, but nodded.

Raghav clicked through his dashboards like he was navigating muscle memory. "Dump the ed-tech basket. Reallocate into defense—HAL just got a new government order. Not public yet. Will be in three hours."

Kabir raised an eyebrow. "How do you know that?"

Raghav didn't look up. "Neeraj had dinner with a guy who knows a guy. Use it."

Every word he spoke was short, sharp, calculated to cut the fat from conversation. There was no room for warmth. Warmth melted steel.

On the floor outside, the noise grew into its daily crescendo. Traders shouted across desks. Screens flashed red and green. One guy from Risk was already swearing under his breath. Another was juggling two phones while his third screen displayed a flashing "*MARKET HALT: NSE Technical Error.*"

It was chaos.

But for Raghav, it was music.

"Where's that pharma IPO pitch?" he asked.

Kabir pulled up a deck on his tablet. "Here. Syntrex Labs. Looking for a ₹900 crore valuation. Early signals are solid, but there's chatter about accounting fuzziness."

Raghav's brow tightened by half a millimeter. "Short it. Quietly."

Kabir hesitated. "They're still courting us. You want to burn that bridge?"

Raghav turned, just enough to let his voice cool two degrees.

"I don't walk on bridges I know will collapse."

Kabir scribbled down the order with the faint dread of someone lighting a fire under a silk curtain.

The firm's managing director, Neeraj Sethi, passed by their pod, flanked by two junior partners and a new hire. Silver-haired, absurdly tanned, and always just one laugh away from a threat, Neeraj offered a smirk as he caught Raghav's eye.

"Mehta, burning any villages this morning?" he asked.

"Just building some better ones, sir."

"Good man."

Raghav returned to his screens. He didn't crave praise. Just performance.

Kabir watched him for a second, quietly awed and slightly unnerved. "Do you ever... stop?"

Raghav glanced up. "For what?"

"I don't know. Lunch. Feelings. Mortality?"

"I outsource that to people with yoga mats and trust funds."

Kabir snorted. "Cool. Just wanted to check you weren't secretly human."

Raghav's lips twitched. Almost a smile. Almost.

Then the system beeped.

An alert flashed on screen: "*MIDCAP TECH DIPS 2% – TRADING HALT LOOMS*"

Raghav's fingers moved before Kabir could even read it.

"Move everything out of midcaps. Rotate to banking. It'll rebound on RBI reassurance."

"Won't that trigger—"

"Do it."

Kabir scrambled to keep up, his hands dancing across keys, trying to match the pace of a man who thought in pre-emptive strikes.

The next thirty minutes were a blur—trades executed, calls made, capital moved like water in a storm. Raghav made money look like magic. Like control. Like survival.

By 11:00 AM, the market was tilting. Panicked analysts in other firms flooded Twitter with doom and desperation.

Raghav was calm. His desk was already green.

Kabir looked up from his screen. "We just made 3.6 crores on the morning swing."

Raghav leaned back.

"Then it's a Tuesday."

Later, as the floor dipped into its brief lull between lunch and second wind, Kabir slumped in his chair.

"Hey," he said, rubbing his eyes. "Out of curiosity—what did you do before all this?"

Raghav didn't answer immediately.

Then, quietly: "Built valuation models for toilet paper companies. Same story, different packaging."

“Glamorous.”

“It paid for my mother’s surgery.”

That shut Kabir up.

The silence between them felt different now. Not cold. Just unspoken.

Then Raghav looked at him. Not with mockery. With something almost resembling mentorship.

“This place rewards speed and instinct. But it remembers betrayal longer than success. Keep that in mind.”

Kabir nodded. “I will.”

“And never use the word ‘vibe’ in a meeting again.”

“Fair.”

They went back to their screens.

The firm pulsed on, a beast of numbers and noise. Outside the windows, Mumbai carried on—sweating, honking, gasping its way through capitalism. But here inside, among the terminals and the tickers, Raghav Mehta ruled without raising his voice.

He didn’t need to shout. He just knew more, moved faster, and trusted less.

Which is why, when the screen next to his flashed a muted news segment—something about a protest near Kala Ghoda—he didn’t react.

Not outwardly.

But something inside paused. A flicker of memory.

A woman. On a crate. Pointing into the air like she was tearing it open.

He blinked.

The screen changed.

And Raghav, the man who moved crores with keystrokes and crushed markets with logic, pushed the memory away.

Not because it wasn’t important.

But because it was.

"In a world where profit is king, silence is currency—and the heart is just a volatile stock no one dares invest in."

Kala Ghoda Street Theatre

"Sometimes the first spark isn't love—it's offense, lit by curiosity and fanned by a stranger's voice."

Raghav had never intended to walk through Kala Ghoda that day. It was supposed to be a quick client lunch at a nearby cafe—one of those sterile bistro chains with overpriced water and Wi-Fi passwords longer than their menus. But traffic near Flora Fountain had snarled into a concrete mess, and for once, his driver had suggested walking the last stretch.

He hated walking.

It felt... inefficient.

But Raghav, against his better judgment, had stepped out of the air-conditioned sanctum of his car and into the punishing humidity of a Mumbai afternoon.

And then he heard it.

Drums.

Not the background kind. Not the polite tabla from some cafe speaker. These were thunderclap drums, primal and alive, each beat punching through the city's smog. His eyes followed the sound and landed on the street ahead—blocked off by a throng of people.

Some were sitting cross-legged on the ground. Others stood on milk crates. All eyes were fixed on a makeshift stage, a crude wooden platform ringed by paint cans and protest banners. On the backdrop was a blood-red slogan:

ART IS NOT A LUXURY. IT'S RESISTANCE.

Raghav stopped short. He checked his watch. He had twelve minutes until lunch.

Just enough time to judge whatever this was.

He moved closer, reluctantly, curiosity hidden behind practiced indifference.

On the stage, a group of young performers moved like they were on fire. Their bodies weren't graceful—they were urgent. Dirty kurtas, ripped jeans, smeared eyeliner, bare feet. The air reeked of sweat, paint, and something more electric. Something *alive*.

One girl beat a drum with the rage of a revolution. Another poured red powder into a circle and began tracing it with her palms, whispering into a microphone:

“Who decides value?
Who prints price tags on pain?
Who commodifies the sky,
Then sells us shade?”

The crowd murmured, a ripple of agreement and awe.

Raghav exhaled through his nose. “Spoken word poetry. Of course.”

Beside him, Kabir—who had trailed behind for reasons even he didn’t understand—nudged him.

“I think this is that artist collective. The Naya Kalam lot. I follow them on Twitter.”

Raghav raised an eyebrow. “That explains your performance review.”

Kabir grinned, unfazed. “She’s about to come on. Aaratrika Sen. Their lead performer. She’s kind of a legend.”

Raghav didn’t respond. His eyes were already narrowing at the stage.

Because she had arrived.

And she didn’t walk onto the platform. She *owned* it.

Aaratrika wore a crumpled indigo kurta over combat boots, silver jhumkas swinging like punctuation with each step. Her hair was tied up in a wild bun, curls escaping like they had opinions. She had a mic in one hand and a rolled-up newspaper in the other.

The crowd quieted. The air shifted.

She began without preamble.

“You want a story?” she asked. “Here’s one.”

She unrolled the newspaper, held it up. “Page 9. Business. The markets are rallying. Profits are up. Celebration for shareholders.”

She let the paper fall to the floor. “Page 14. City. A textile worker hangs himself in Sion. His factory shut down. No pension. No statement from the government.”

She looked directly into the crowd. Into Raghav.

“So tell me,” she said, voice rising, “are we expected to clap with one hand? Or mourn with a portfolio?”

Laughter. Applause. Someone whistled.

Raghav's jaw tightened.

"She's not wrong," Kabir muttered.

"She's not right either," Raghav shot back. "She's just loud."

But he couldn't look away.

Aaratrika paced the stage like a general and a goddess, voice turning molten:

"Dear Dalal Street,
You who trade in hopes and headlines,
Tell me—how many zeros make a soul?
Is it tax deductible?"

Another eruption of cheers.

Raghav folded his arms.

"This is theatre now? Screaming into a mic while dressed like a humanities student's anxiety dream?"

But his voice didn't match his words. It was softer, like something was chewing on the edge of his certainty.

Aaratrika's monologue shifted into rhythm, her words folding into a kind of spoken jazz:

"They sell us dreams on EMI,
Promise futures in IPOs,
But never tell us the cost
Of breathing free in a market that
Never once
Believed
In art."

The last line echoed.

And then—suddenly, without warning—her eyes locked with his.

He froze.

It was only for a second. A blink. A casual sweep of the crowd.

But it felt like she had aimed that entire poem like a sniper bullet, and he was the only name on the list.

Raghav turned slightly, adjusting his cufflink like it had somehow tightened on its own.

Kabir noticed.

"She clocked you," he said, amused.

"She clocked *something*," Raghav muttered.

The performance ended in a burst of music and color—chalk thrown in the air, drums rising again, feet stamping the ground like an uprising of rhythm. People stood and clapped. Someone began chanting the collective's name. Others held up phones, recording.

Aaratrika bowed once. Quick. Sharp. Like punctuation. And walked offstage.

Raghav didn't realize he'd been holding his breath.

He exhaled slowly.

"Let's go," he said.

Kabir hesitated. "You okay?"

"Lunch is in five minutes. I'm not going to be late because a street poet decided capitalism is mean."

But as he walked away, the words clanged inside him.

Is it tax deductible?

How many zeros make a soul?

And worse—*her eyes*. That unwavering calm in the middle of chaos.

He hated that he noticed. Hated that she had noticed him back.

The din of the street faded as they moved away.

But the performance stayed in him, like static in a room full of signal.

Aaratrika Sen.

He didn't know her name yet.

But he already knew she would be a problem.

"Sometimes, it's not the words that wound—it's the fact that someone dared to aim them at you."