



I

MOST EXPECTANT MOTHERS TALK TO THEIR UNBORN BABY.

HEAR

BUT WHAT IF THE BABY STARTS TO RESPOND?

YOU

NIDHI
UPADHYAY

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THAT NIGHT*



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I HEAR YOU

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but what if the Baby starts to respond?*



PENGUIN BOOKS

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I HEAR YOU

Nidhi Upadhyay is the bestselling author of *That Night*. She is an engineer, a headhunter and a consumer of black coffee and dark chocolates. But her greatest interests are her children, her husband, who is disillusioned that her writing career is his retirement plan, and a puppy, who thinks he owns her. She is often found hiding her current search history from her boys. If not busy researching a way to kill, drown or dispose of bodies, Nidhi can be found reading thrillers or screaming at her boys.

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Vipin, thank you for sowing the seeds of a dream that doesn't let me sleep while you blissfully snore beside me. My dedication might change for each book, but you will always be the reason for all of them.

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Prologue

‘I know you feel trapped—just like me. But we both must learn to live in this captivity. Your confinement, however, will be very short-lived. Because nothing stays for long in your mother’s womb,’ she said.

A little shock ran over me.

I wasn’t living near her. I was living within her.

And the dark cocoon spun around me wasn’t bondage. It was a womb. Her womb.

But weren’t the lives in wombs supposed to be oblivious to their surroundings? And was this woman aware that her unborn child was hearing and comprehending things he wasn’t supposed to?

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Chapter 1

Week Seven

This week your baby is about the size of a small blueberry—around 0.3 inches long. The lenses in the baby's eyes have begun to form, and the colour of the iris is visible. His limbs are sprouting, though at this stage they look more like little paddles than the cute hands and feet you'll love holding in seven months.

Thirty-three weeks to go!

* * *

February 16, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

It started with darkness. Not the kind that shades everything into grey, but the kind that robs you of your senses and instils a paralysing fear—a black-out spell that turns everything non-existent.

Initially, I thought it was a power outage. But then the darkness lingered, enough to indicate something was wrong. With me. It was my eyelids; they were shut like clams. I tried to peel apart the blindfold if there was any, but my hands ignored all the neurological signals my mind sent. I strained to listen, to catch a drift of this place, but the silence around me hinted that my auditory senses were also compromised. I struggled to break free from the spell that had left me powerless and disoriented, but my physical faculties were undermined by a force unseen. Nevertheless, my brain was working fine, overcompensating, pumping fear and panic into every fibre of my being.

Was I paralysed? Had someone trapped me in this black hole? How the hell had I ended up someplace so dark and morbid?

I had no freaking idea how or why I'd ended up here. The memories that could lead me to my past were wiped clean, leaving me in the dark.

For days, I'd been floating in this darkness like an astronomical object orbiting in space, untethered to beginnings and endings. Yet, there must've been a beginning. Unless this was the beginning.

Shivam Rathod

February 16, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

The bedside alarm clanged at 6 a.m. In bed, Mahika stirred and fell back to sleep, pulling the satin sheet over her face but not before Shivam caught a glimpse of her glowing face. The colour on her cheeks was returning, growing with light. Shivam studied how precisely the satin sheet outlined her new angular thinness. Before the unbearable thrill of touching her could subliminate his other fears, Mahika began to gently snore.

His aching body was demanding sleep, too. But expecting Mahika to wake up and resume normalcy was like pushing water up a hill.

Unwillingly, Shivam dragged his fatigued body out of bed to prepare the meals, scrub the kitchen counter and load the dishwasher. An hour later, he placed a cheese sandwich, a serving of pasta, a tea sachet and a hot kettle on Mahika's nightstand before going to shower.

Mahika was still asleep when Shivam left the bedroom, wilfully keeping his gaze away from the scattered pillows and unkempt bed. The spick-and-span downstairs—the kitchen, dining and living room—was a welcome sight for his sore eyes. Shivam placed his lunch in his work bag and accomplished the last task on his newly curated to-do list: check all the doors and windows. The new number-lock panel on the main door still had a plastic sheet on it. He fought the compulsive urge to peel it off and punched the numbers into the panel.

A three-digit code was all it took to lock his wife in.

Shivam drove to work, beginning his day yet again by counting down the minutes. The same old editing of the genes at the university lab had stopped challenging him. He had to spend another morning in a blur of lab readings, impatiently waiting for the clock to strike noon.

‘Looks like your wife is feeling better now?’ Professor Chua, the head of the department, asked. It was lunchtime, and Shivam had strategically placed his lunch bag on his desk. *I brought my lunch* was the politest way to decline the lunch invites that his team frequently extended to him. Today, Professor Chua noticed the tiny sandwich box that had replaced his usual lunch bag. A plain cheese sandwich was no match for the condiment-loaded meal Mahika would’ve packed. However, it had served its purpose. Shivam had more important things to do than discuss politics and sports over a meal at the food court.

He speedily finished the sandwich and drove to the clinic, his attention shifting between the rear-view mirror and the road ahead. The only thing driving along with him was the feeling of being followed. This suspicion has been gnawing at him for a couple of weeks now, making him turn his head back now and then. If it continued any longer, this neck movement would be permanently coded in his DNA as an extra gene.

Shivam steered the car into the clinic’s basement. The relatively uncrowded car park brought a trickle of relief. He parked his vehicle closest to the stairway door and waited for the only people in the car park—the pregnant woman and her husband—to walk back to their car. He beelined to the stairway door, hastily unlocked it, rushed in and hissed out a slow, steady stream of breath. But walking down the dust-laden staircase felt as dangerous as being spotted in the carpark. Keep walking, he told himself.

The excitement Shivam had felt the entire morning reached its peak as he unlocked the expansive steel door at the stairway’s landing. But then the eerie silence in the lab made his heart flip.

Shivam pushed away his sense of foreboding, put on his scrubs and lathered his hands with an alcohol rub. The minor knife cuts on his fingers came to life with the sting of the astringent, making him edgier.

The infant in the cage looked like a lifeless stuffed animal. Shivam slid his hand between the bars and checked the infant's pulse. Nothing. His heartbeat was absent too. Shivam studied the log sheet clipped to the cage. He had been fed two hours ago, and his vitals had been recorded an hour ago. What had gone wrong?

'I've put him to sleep. His inane blabbering was too loud,' Dr Steven said as he walked in. Dr Steven pulled the infant chimp from its cage and dumped it into an orange biological waste bag. He placed the bag near the bin and asked, 'How's your wife doing?'

His pager started beeping.

'I've got to go. I'll clear the cage later. We need more counter space for the new incubators.' Dr Steven flashed a smile that accentuated his blue eyes and rushed out of the lab. Shivam stayed back in the lab to grieve for the chimp, but his mind yet again steered to places it shouldn't have gone to.

What if Dr Steven decided to view every sample through the same lens?

Shivam rushed out before the lab's silence could drag him further down. He peered through the narrow opening in the stairway door, quickly stepped out and locked the door behind him. He took a moment to catch his breath, as no one was in the car park. But then he saw his car trunk partially open, which punched all the air out of his lungs.

Shivam examined the boot. Someone had meddled with the order of his cleaning supplies in the caddy tucked in a corner. He restored their order and checked his glove compartment. Someone had meddled with his tissue packets and wet wipes. He was about to check the car papers tucked under the shotgun seat when a tattered piece of paper stuck to the dashboard caught his attention. He peeled it off, reading the note scribbled on it.

Hide and seek part 1: I found your lab.

Mahika Rathod

February 16, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Mahika opened her eyes, and a tear rolled down her cheek. It had been trapped behind her eyelid like a bee accidentally trapped in a flower for a night, waiting for the first ray of light to free it. She brushed away the tear and drummed up her courage to start afresh. The receding sound of Shivam's footsteps and the gentle thud of the washroom door had been a signal for Mahika to open her eyes. But in her bed, under this duvet, was her safe haven. Safer than her husband's embrace, which she had rarely received in the last couple of years.

While Shivam cooked and cleaned, Mahika pretended to sleep until sleep did overcome her, monopolizing all her aches, yet again blurring the boundaries of day and night. Hours later, Mahika woke up to her stomach rumbling, and she wolfed down the meticulously packed meals on her nightstand. The fluorescent pink Post-its that labelled them as breakfast and lunch bore no significance to her. Although now that she'd devoured them as a single meal, a strong wave of queasiness threatened to bring everything up. And with that, she began her quest to survive another day.

Mahika detested household chores, and her recent nausea had given her a free pass from all the scrubbing and cleaning. Keeping Shivam happy had become as easy as swallowing her meals. Also, not throwing up earned her as many brownie points as running a lint remover over the freshly vacuumed carpet. This week, sitting up and sucking a ginger candy had helped a great deal, but she knew that things would get difficult from here on. Shivam knew it too, which was why he'd topped off the candy jar with a new brand of organic ginger candies.

Mahika took one from the jar and sat by the bay window. She'd promised herself she'd not cry, but the tricolour hibiscus had melted her resolve, and a sob heaved from her chest. Over the years, Mahika had worked to fall in love with the unnaturally coloured flowers Shivam nurtured in the garden. But since her last trip to the clinic, Mahika had begun to hate the colour-coordinated flower beds, the way she hated everything else in her life, including herself.

She looked away from the garden and scraped her memories in the way one scrapes the roll of tape to find its end. But the moment that could

unravel the entire tapestry of hatred was still embedded in the bittersweet memories of falling in love with Shivam, getting married to him and leaving her father to start a new life. This new life had turned out to be all about keeping Shivam happy. And Mahika wasn't sure whether she could continue paying the price for Shivam's happiness.

She kept thinking her repressed rage would take over and she'd end this marriage, but her courage disappeared every time Shivam's car entered the driveway. This evening, yet again, Mahika ducked under the duvet before her husband stepped into the bedroom.

'Did you eat?' Shivam asked, gently lifting the Tupperware lid. She'd been married to Shivam long enough to know how hostile he felt towards the mountain of candy wrappers on the bay window and the damp towel by the bedside. She held her breath, waiting for him to say something, but today, again, he took the dirty dishes and walked out of the bedroom, saying nothing.

The tightness in Mahika's chest disappeared. Temporarily.

Twenty minutes later, the beep of the microwave announced the beginning of her last battle for the day—to consume an entire meal without breaking into a sob.

'Mahi, I got your favourite chicken rice for dinner tonight,' Shivam said and woke her by gently patting her shoulder. In a rehearsed way, she rubbed her eyes, sat up and dismissively downed the chicken rice that tasted like cough syrup. He hovered around her like the parent of a fussy eater.

A feeling of triumph swelled in Mahika's chest as she spooned the last bite from her plate. After five long years, finally, there was something Mahika could do better than her perfectionist husband.

She could feed the life growing in her stomach—a task her genius geneticist husband couldn't have accomplished without her help.



Chapter 2

Week Eight

Things are revving up now. Your baby has graduated from embryo to foetus, and now he's the size of a raspberry. By the eighth week, your baby looks more and more like the newborn you'll bring home from the hospital. His body has sprouted tiny arms and legs, fingers and toes, bones and muscles. Though you can't feel it yet, your little one is also constantly moving. Imagine a kidney bean jumping around inside your uterus.

Thirty-two weeks to go!

* * *

February 23, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

The drums of time rolled and ceased, but I was still trapped in this dark cocoon, like a life recycling within a chrysalis. However, at times, my missing heartbeat and my numb limbs made me question my existence.

You could be trapped six feet under, said the voice in my head.

But I found no way to support or reject my millions of speculations. I needed a sign of being alive and that, ironically enough, came in the form of a sob. A loud squawking cry startled me as if someone accidentally rolled over the TV remote in the middle of the night, disabling the mute function on a show that had been silently playing.

Well, in your case, it would be a radio show, because you're still as blind as a bat.

I ignored the commentary playing in my head and strained to hear beyond the muffled cry. A wave of sound barged into my silent world like

the kernels of popcorn popping all at once: the chirp of the bird, the drone of the car engine, the thud of a door. Although the sounds were muffled, I could still differentiate the hum of a machine from the whirl of a fan.

How come your memory is functioning well enough to identify the sounds associated with objects, but you can't remember your name?

The devil's advocate in my head was ruining my joy, compelling me not to settle for anything less than the entire truth. I hungrily listened, hoping the sounds would act as a catalyst for my memory. But nothing came back.

The sobs that should have ideally shattered my courage to break free instilled in me hope that I wasn't alone, that someone else was living the same life I was.

And that together we would break free.

However, after listening to my companion's incessant cries for days, I couldn't tell who the real captive was: me or her. She sounded more miserable and helpless than I felt. And with that realization, the timid hope that my companion could free me diminished.

Mahika Rathod

February 23, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Another week had passed but Mahika's feelings were still dormant, like lava churning in an abyss, the surface calm and the depths rumbling. She was waiting for her anger to boil over and shatter the facade of normalcy. But something in Mahika was clinging to a tiny hope that whatever she'd witnessed in the clinic two weeks ago was a figment of her imagination; this nightmare would shatter, and she could revert to her life before she'd gone for her pregnancy test.

Mahika had felt pregnant before the pregnancy test could confirm it. Although the raw ache of her three miscarriages had kept a tight leash on her happiness, a robust heartbeat reverberating in the dark scan room faded her sorrows instantly.

‘This is the sac. And let’s hear the heartbeat now,’ the technician had said when they had gone to the clinic two weeks ago. Shivam had reminded Mahika not to celebrate too soon, but happiness in her world was so scarce that she’d held on to her baby’s loud heartbeat without bothering to worry if it would last.

Sorrow, however, found her again. As she’d been wiping away the ultrasound gel, someone had slid an envelope under the clinic’s bathroom door.

The envelope was addressed to her, but the note made no sense.

Do you think the life within you is a creation of God, Mahi? Think again. Shivam, the ~~perfect~~ perfectionist can’t leave anything for the almighty to decide, can he? Not really. He has used his genius mind to create a perfection now breathing in your womb. If you don’t ~~believe~~ believe me, walk into your doctor’s cabin now.

The hurried longhand, peppered with spelling errors, felt almost comical in contrast to its tall allegation. Mahika rushed out of the washroom to show the note to Shivam. He could be many things, but he wouldn’t play with his flesh and blood. But her husband wasn’t where she had left him. She walked to Dr Cynthia’s cabin, hoping to unravel this mystery.

The door to the doctor’s cabin was partially open. Mahika spotted Shivam in his lucky white button-down shirt. But before she could barge in and show him the note, the door shut. She was about to knock when she heard someone say her name.

‘Treat Mahika like an incubator and the life within her like a project. Or else the loss will feel devastating.’

Mahika’s heart flipped. She could never, ever imagine Shivam at the receiving end of such cold condescension, not even with his superiors at work. Moreover, in the last four years, Shivam had ached for a baby as much as Mahika.

‘I don’t need reminding. You have the first right to the baby,’ Shivam said, knocking her world down like a house of cards.

But this was her baby, and no one would touch her.

Mahika rushed out of the clinic, away from Shivam and the man trying to claim his rights to her unborn child. The roar of the car engines and the pneumatic sigh of the bus by the roadside failed to break the conversation repeating in her head. She blocked her ears with her palms, but Shivam's voice was still there, as constant as the traffic on the road. Mahika raced farther away from the clinic, hoping to find a haven for her baby, but Shivam spotted her on the footpath.

'I was in the washroom. You should have waited.' Shivam clenched his teeth to display his anger. He never used public washrooms, which meant he'd just lied, reminding her of the allegation in the note. She realized she'd lost the note in her attempt to run away from Shivam. That note could've put Shivam on the spot.

'What are you looking for? I've put your handbag in the car. You left it in the washroom. Why did you rush out, Mahi? What was on fire that you couldn't wait? Answer me. What was the emergency?' Shivam asked.

'My baby, is she okay?' Mahika asked, voicing the fear that had knocked the air out of her lungs.

'It's too early, Mahika, and you know that. Now, let me drop you home. I have a reading due at 3 p.m.'

Shivam brought her back to the house as if nothing had happened, and Mahika spent the rest of the day on the Internet, trying to find a connection between Shivam's lab work and the baby growing in her womb, but she had discovered nothing beyond what she already knew: Shivam was still leading the innovative engineering and life sciences research team at the University of Singapore. It was a high-profile role that had lured Shivam to relocate from New Jersey to Singapore two years ago. Mahika read the title of all the research articles published by his team. They were all about editing and splicing the genes for defects in plants. She was relieved to know that genetically modifying humans was still beyond the scope of his work, legally and ethically.

Maybe she'd misunderstood everything.

Mahika decided she'd confront Shivam and just hoped he'd refute all her allegations. However, by evening, Mahika had exhausted herself by

thinking and overthinking, and the hormone shot she'd been given to support her pregnancy was creating in her a volcanic mix of anger, sadness and enervating nausea. So instead of confronting Shivam, Mahika endlessly asked herself the same questions: Was the claim the note writer had made even possible? And if it were true, where would she go with the baby? How would she raise this kid without any help? And above all, did she really think she could keep the baby for a full term in her dysfunctional womb?

Since then, with each passing day, living in denial felt easier than dealing with her fear.

Mahika had decided to spend another day toggling between courage and weakness, when something moved inside her. Like a butterfly's wings scraping the inside of its chrysalis. At first, she mistook it for hunger, but then the tiny life growing inside her moved again. She'd never made it to the sixteenth week in her previous pregnancies, so she'd never felt the quickening, but she knew: it was her baby's movements. But wasn't it too early? She lifted her nightgown and pressed her palm against her belly. Nothing. The movement that had been so profound a minute ago had disappeared.

'Was it you?' Mahika asked in a slow, uncertain whisper. Then she heard a loud ding. It took her a moment to place the chime of the doorbell. She'd long forgotten how it sounded. Shivam had his own set of keys, and they rarely had visitors, except for a Filipina cleaner who came every Saturday.

Mahika ignored the doorbell and sat there in anticipation; her hands pressed into her belly. But the doorbell rang again. This time twice, indicating impatience. Maybe Shivam had locked himself out.

She rushed to the ground floor and hastily unlocked the door while peeping through the eyehole. The deadbolt gave away, but the door was still clamped shut by the new chrome digital lock mounted above the old one. Mahika studied the silicone number pad and pressed the unlock button on it. Nothing moved.

She needed a passcode to unlock the door, which she didn't have. She pushed away the rabbit-trapped-in-a-snare feeling and peered through the eyehole once again. No one was at the door. She walked to the living room

window to spot the visitor at the main gate. No one was there either. Mahika was about to return to the main door when she realized the key usually on the window grill's sliding lock was missing. She paced from one room to another, but the universal key that could slide open the grills was nowhere. Shivam had secured all the grills by their respective locks. She was about to punch her anniversary date into the new digital lock panel when a white envelope on the floor caught her attention.

Had Mahika missed it earlier or had the envelope just appeared? She tore open the envelope.

Do you remember how I used to monitor a ~~genetically~~ genetically altered sapling, Mahi? The growth of the first shoot, the first leaf and the first flower: everything was recorded and closely monitored. But have you ever wondered what fate the samples in a lab meet if the experiment goes wrong? Well, you will know soon if you don't start acting now.

The new digital lock on the door means you procrastinated again, like always. Wake up, Mahi. Else it will be too late for your son. You have already missed the golden opportunity to escape, so now, you need to be extra careful. I am warning you: no one should find out you know about this research, not until you have discovered a means to escape. Or else, they might hold you captive. This baby is nothing more than a sample for Shivam and his team. But Rudra is your son, Mahi. And you need to protect him.

Mahika stabilized her shaking hands and read the note again. It was addressed to 'Mahi' not 'Mahika'.

Her father and Shivam were the only people to call her by that name, and her father was no longer alive. But why would Shivam slip her a note condemning himself?

Also, the untidy longhand, the spelling errors and the paper's torn edges could trigger Shivam's obsessive-compulsive disorder. She read the note again. The writer of the note did draw references from the past and the longhand wasn't any neater than her father's. Fear churned in her stomach.

Someone was messing with her head.

She swallowed the bitter taste in her mouth, but bile swirled up her throat. She rushed to the washroom to throw up when the life within her announced his presence once again. Loud and clear.

Mahika walked to the study, thumbed the pages of the pregnancy book and skipped to the sixteenth week. She was right. The baby growing in her womb had kicked her eight weeks early.

Mahika's heart broke. The unborn's premature kicks were the first confirmation that her husband's fetish for perfection had marked its territory in her womb.

Mahika jumped a mile when the phone on the desk rang.

'You, okay?' Shivam asked in a preoccupied voice.

'Yes,' she replied, glancing at the clock purely out of habit. It was 11 a.m.—time for Shivam's call. He called Mahika with clockwork precision, twice a day, at 11 a.m. and 3 p.m., to check on her. She'd mistaken it as her husband's love. With that thought, the anger Mahika had buried deep within her found its way to her throat, constricting it. Mahika walked to the kitchen to get a glass of water, thinking it would calm her. But the kitchen's gleaming countertop did the opposite, and the stacked-up bowls and size-sorted spoons in the drawers added more fire to her rage. Her kitchen wasn't hers either. It looked like a kitchen of an open house, spotless and untouched. Mahika went to the wall-mounted dish rack and gently knocked over the stacked IKEA ceramic bowls. They tumbled down and slipped over each other. She lifted a few serving spoons from the stainless-steel cutlery stand and dumped them in the adjacent stand meant for the tablespoons.

She went back upstairs to their bedroom. This was enough to throw Shivam off balance. For now.

It had channelled her rage, too. Temporarily.

February 23, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

I was still waiting for my crying companion to come and free me when a low buzzing thrum of a locust's wing monopolized the darkness around me. It soon grew into a loud storm-like roar—the kind of storm that could level even the mightiest of trees. The panic within me grew as the thudding

became unbearable, threatening to shatter my eardrums. I peered through the darkness and spotted a silhouette. It had popped up from nowhere, like a memory that elbows its way into one's mind.

The silhouette inched towards me, and a sensation rose in my legs and made them alive, as if the fear had unlocked my limbs from a spell of numbness. I wriggled in pure panic, and to my surprise, my faulty nervous system followed my command and triggered movement in my entire body. I kicked again, and this time, I felt power flowing through my legs. But before the euphoria of getting control over my body could sweep me away, I felt a touch. My crying companion had managed to find me in this dark.

‘Was it you?’ she asked.

The movement of my limbs had announced my presence in her world.

I wriggled again to test my hypothesis, but a loud trill broke the spell and her attention drifted away from me. Her single touch had broken the dam of numbness. It flooded my heart with overwhelming emotions. It was a feeling I'd never felt before. Or, if I had, someone had erased the experience for me to create new memories with her.

Don't get too excited. For all you know, she might be your captor.

Ignoring the voice in my head, I anxiously waited for her to come to free me. But her muffled voice killed my hope.

‘I know you feel trapped—just like me. But we both must learn to live in this captivity. Your confinement however will be very short-lived. Because nothing stays for long in your mother's womb,’ she said.

A little shock ran over me.

I wasn't living near her. I was living within her.

And the dark cocoon spun around me wasn't bondage. It was a womb. Her womb.

But weren't the lives in wombs supposed to be oblivious to their surroundings? And was this woman aware that her unborn was hearing and comprehending things he wasn't supposed to?

Mahika Rathod

February 23, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Do you remember how I used to monitor a genetically altered sapling, Mahi?

It was ridiculous of Mahika to think that the letter in her hands was written by her deceased father, but her father's lab was the only lab where she had seen the genetically altered saplings. And the writing looked like her father's hasty longhand too. She had to rule out the possibility no matter how absurd it felt.

Mahika pulled the box down. Her father's letters were neatly stacked and arranged in chronological order. Her anger came to a rolling boil again. Shivam had read the letters written to her, and then he had filed them in the order he liked, treating her treasure like his research papers.

Mahika's father had written to her every week since the day she landed in New Jersey. She didn't want to leave him alone to start a new life with Shivam. But her father's promise to write to her kept her going. His letters arrived weekly, filling her with all the unnecessary details of his life that couldn't be covered on a short international call.

Mahika pulled the very last letter he had written to her. It had turned pale yellow, and the ink on it had faded too. But the 'i' and the 't' in the letters had a striking similarity to the one in the anonymous note.

Her skin lined up with goosebumps.

In the last two weeks, Mahika's world had taken on a whispering unreality: Shivam tailoring their unborn, the baby kicking too early, and the mind-bending anonymous notes that made her feel absurd and hopeful at the same time.

Shivam's car entered the driveway before Mahika could go through the entire stack. She hastily slid the anonymous note into the pile of her father's old letters and dumped the pile under her mattress. She was tempted to hide under the duvet too, but her hair was dripping wet. So, she turned her back to the bedroom door and stood by the bay window, studying the unnatural blue shade of the roses and petunias in the garden.

Would the designer baby in her womb look that unnatural too?

She was on the verge of falling apart. However, the warning in the anonymous note—Shivam should not find out that you know—helped her keep a tight clutch on her emotions. Mahika hastily swallowed the tears threatening to roll down her cheeks and waited for Shivam to fuss about the wet towel tossed on his side of the bed or the tampered arrangement of spoons in the kitchen. But instead of fretting over the mess, Shivam walked towards her.

Mahika's insides fluttered with a familiar panic—something between hatred and love—as she spotted his reflection in the window. Before Mahika could react, Shivam wrapped his arms around her, placing his chin on her left shoulder. She was tempted to cherish this moment, but the life within her stirred and dragged her back to reality. Shivam's words again crowded her head: You have the first right to the baby.

Mahika pushed Shivam away and rushed to the washroom before her rage could spill over. She leant over the toilet and waited for her stomach to empty itself, but nothing was left in it. So, Mahika inserted a finger into her throat and waited for the food, the rage and the tears she was holding back to come out. But everything was still in there, causing a volcanic stir.

She emerged from the bathroom only when Shivam had retreated to the kitchen. She prepared herself for a takeaway Indian dinner, as it was a Monday and her husband was a creature of routine. But the leftover chicken soup and toasted bread meant Shivam had deviated from his routine.

'We're not cooking much at home, so I didn't go to Little India for groceries,' Shivam explained, handing her the food tray, trying to read her eyes. But when Mahika looked away, he said, 'Please eat this. I will change and come.'

The soup's tangy fragrance caused a fresh wave of nausea, killing her appetite. Yet Mahika dipped the bread in the soup and swallowed tiny bites while Shivam put the bathroom back in order: the towels folded and stacked neatly, the tissue roll's end tucked, and the droplets of water wiped away from the slab and the mirror.

By the time Shivam had finished, Mahika had already switched off the lights, turning the room pitch dark. Another encounter with Shivam would

break Mahika. The anonymous note and the unborn's constant kicks were red flags, but the love Shivam displayed also felt equally dangerous. His gentle and loving touch had tugged at her heartstrings, reminding her of how he'd charmed her five years ago.

Living in the present felt unbearable, so Mahika closed her eyes and travelled to her past, where love and happiness had felt concordant.

#

Then

January 1998

Botanical Research Institute

Lucknow, India

'Mahi, it must be Shivam, my new RA. Can you please hand him the keys on the table?' Mahika's father had shouted from the bathroom that morning. Mahika had rushed to see the man whose arrival in her father's lab had made him happy once again.

Mahika lost her mother to cancer when she was in the second year of her graduation. And since then, she'd failed to free her chatty, fun-loving father from the clutches of his colossal grief. But when Shivam Rathod had joined her father's lab as a senior research associate, her father had finally stopped frowning.

Mahika wanted to thank this gentleman for dragging her father out of his grief.

She had imagined her father's new senior research associate to be a middle-aged man with large-framed glasses. But the man staring at her with his light-brown eyes was too young to be a senior research associate. The loose white button-down shirt with blue baggy trousers was his attempt to hide his age, perhaps, but the camouflage was failing miserably.

'Hey there. Is this Professor Mishra's house? He asked me to collect the lab keys,' Shivam said.

Shivam saying ‘Hey there’ instead of ‘Namaste’ confirmed her hypothesis. So he was a genius working with a team of colleagues who were almost double his age.

Her father showed up at the door. ‘This is how you want to make sure I come home early—by scaring away my genius RA and implying I live with ghosts. But Shivam isn’t scared of ghosts. Are you, Shivam? Or have you started reading Hanuman Chalisa already?’ Mahika’s father teased her in his usual sing-song voice.

‘Shivam, this is my daughter, Mahi, and this isn’t her usual get-up. So, it’s safe to collect the keys until I get approval for you to possess your own set,’ Mahika’s father said. He then lovingly wiped away the streaks of white flour from Mahika’s cheeks.

‘Sir, I’ll see you in the lab soon,’ Shivam said in a preoccupied voice. He didn’t even say hello to her. However, Shivam’s gaze paused on Mahika’s face and that pause was powerful enough to cause a flip in Mahika’s chest. Shivam showed up again the next day to collect the keys, and she felt the same unexplainable pull towards him. Mahika thought she was drawn to Shivam probably because her father kept singing his praises. But soon Shivam’s coffee-brown eyes started following her everywhere, and her cheeks would burn in anticipation of the doorbell in the mornings. Mahika knew Shivam had his own set of keys now, yet every day she craved a glimpse of him. But all Mahika got was the dinner-table discussions about Shivam and his genius mind. Mahika’s father was handing her pieces of information about Shivam like a jigsaw puzzle, and she was solving it slowly and steadily. For weeks nothing happened, and Mahika assumed the fire burning in her chest was a one-sided attraction. Until Shivam showed up unannounced in her college library.

She had read stories about the kind of love that tore you in half but experiencing it in the college corridor was different from reading about it in books.

‘I need to borrow this book, ma’am, but I’m not a student,’ Shivam said and looked at Mahika. He was soaking her up from head to toe with his eyes, like a sponge.

As expected, the librarian refused to entertain his request, and Shivam waited in anticipation for Mahika to offer her library card. But Mahika was still studying him. He looked younger in his white polo shirt and blue jeans, and his eyes looked a shade lighter than she remembered.

‘Can I borrow your card, Mahi?’ Shivam asked and broke her trance.

‘Mahika . . .’ Kirti, her friend, elbowed her, and on cue, Mahika fished her card from her bag and handed it to him.

‘Funny, I thought your name was Mahi,’ Shivam said, passing her card to the librarian. His unrestrained, disarming smile made her go weak in her knees. Mahika wanted to say something, anything, to keep the conversation going, but there was nothing she could say to impress him. She was in awe of him—her father had seen to that.

‘I’ll return it in a week. Hope that’s okay?’ Shivam asked.

Mahika nodded, her eyes now trained on the floor. She didn’t want her eyes to give away the storm brewing in her heart.

‘You can talk, right?’ Shivam asked. And Mahika nodded again, which made Shivam break into a laugh.

‘I don’t know what to—’

But before Mahika could complete her sentence, Kirti lifted her chin. ‘He’s gone. Why are you blushing like a newly-wed? Who is this guy?’ Mahika looked around. Kirti was right. Shivam had disappeared, leaving a dreamy texture behind.

Mahika spent the entire next week waiting for Shivam to show up in the library. As promised, Shivam returned on the seventh day with the book. She’d found him waiting in the corridor, with his arms folded across his chest.

‘I’ve returned the book. But I wanted to extend my thanks to you for helping me.’ Mahika flashed a nervous smile, mentally kicking herself for acting dumb. Shivam walked a step closer and tilted his head a little more. ‘You don’t like to talk or you don’t know how to talk?’

‘I don’t know what to say.’ Mahika tucked her hair behind her ear.

Shivam followed the movement of her hand with his eyes. ‘Walk me out if you’re free.’

Mahika walked with him, saying nothing. Kirti stayed where she was, but Mahika felt her best friend's eyes burning into her back like a laser beam.

She'd have a lot of explaining to do.

'Did you wait for me?' Shivam asked and started walking closer to her.

Say yes, you idiot, but her tongue had turned liquid, and her heart was beating in her mouth.

'Miss Mahika Mishra, I don't know how you felt, but I was beating myself up for saying I'd return the book in a week. But I couldn't have returned it the very next day, as it was meant to look like a genuine request, right, Mahi?' Shivam stopped, turning towards her.

He was sizing her up, and his eyes felt like hands running over every inch of her body. His stare was stirring up things inside her, but before her eyes could reveal her feelings she looked away. She'd lifted her hand to tuck her hair back, but Shivam's hand had already pinned her hair behind her right ear. His touch caused a hot swift current to run through her.

'I could do this all day,' Shivam said and freed her hair from behind her ear, then tucked it back again, this time running the back of his hand gently along her cheek.

'I haven't slept for days, Mahi. If you don't talk to me right now, I'll go tell your father you're keeping me awake at night, and that's why I can't focus in the lab,' Shivam said, coming a step closer.

'No, please don't do that,' Mahika begged.

'Well, only if you agree to meet me tomorrow in the library,' Shivam said and walked away with a promise to see her. Kirti appeared out of nowhere and shot her a questioning glance.

'Start from the start,' she ordered. And Mahika shared every tiny detail about her handful of interactions with Shivam, which were in contrast to the feelings running riot in her heart.

'Why am I falling for him?' Mahika asked Kirti.

'My dear friend, you don't find logic in love. In Shakespeare's words: Love is blind.' Kirti teased her, tucking her hair behind her ear as Shivam had done a moment ago.

#

Now

Love is blind, Mahika whispered.

The love that robbed you blind and now you are left with nothing.

The life within her kicked her. Mahika placed her palm on her stomach and felt a surging tide of warmth and courage. She wasn't alone any more.

She had someone to call her own.

The baby in her womb.

Shivam Rathod

February 23, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Shivam once again opened the drawer, pulled out the note hidden under a stack of files and read the message, hoping to find some new clues.

Hide and seek part 1: I found your lab.

The words hit him as hard as the vacant cage kept aside in the lab. Until now, Shivam had treated all the model animals as lab samples. But this one time, Shivam felt differently. Especially after the baby chimp had started making the 'b' sound by pressing its lips together.

It had been a breakthrough.

However, it hadn't been enough for Dr Steven. Because the chimp had failed to produce sounds from the back of its throat, the animal had failed the experiment aimed to genetically tailor primates so they could talk like humans. Shivam would've waited a little longer, but Dr Steven hadn't consulted him. And in doing so, Dr Steven Ng, the world-renowned in-vitro geneticist, had once again shown Shivam Rathod his place in the lab and Steven's life, too.

Unable to focus on the research, Shivam left the lab, closing the door behind him. No one was in the car park, yet Shivam couldn't wash away the

feeling of being watched—not after receiving the anonymous note. He was about to unlock the car and leave when he noticed a white envelope stuck to the windshield wiper of his car. He looked around. The carpark was still empty. But someone had seen him in here. Someone who knew his name. The envelope tucked under the wiper had his name on it.

He hastily put the envelope on the passenger seat, calmed his thudding heart and drove out of the basement, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. But the anxiety of being watched still ruled his heart. Shivam looked about to spot the stalker, but no one was there. He steered the car to the nearby HDB parking, turned off the engine and opened the envelope. The note's untidy scribble felt as childish as the content.

Hide and seek part 2: I found you. And you ~~thought~~ thought you were better at playing hide and seek.

Shivam turned over the page. It was blank. He studied the note, the messy longhand had childlike strokes. He examined the paper closely. Someone had nicked the corner multiple times, nipping an uneven half-moon in every pinch, as if the author had fiddled with the paper while writing this one line. He read the note again. Hide and seek had been Shivam's favourite game as a kid, but that was decades ago. And no one from his past could have found him in his new life.

The note must be referring to the lab. He should inform Dr Steven. But Dr Steven had not come to the lab since the day he'd put the chimp to sleep. Shivam decided to call him after dinner and drove back home, thinking that a scrumptious meal waiting at the dinner table would calm his nerves. But the house still smelt of the citrus room freshener he'd sprayed in the morning. The missing aroma of freshly cooked roti meant Mahika was still suffering from morning sickness.

Shivam performed an unenthusiastic check of the living, dining and spare bedroom, then walked to the backyard door. The door latch was still pointing up, yet he opened the makeshift temple door and inhaled the still air. The musty stale air spreading in the shed slowly overcame the

permanent fragrance of the sandalwood incense sticks. The Shivling on the altar table, usually loaded with fresh jasmine flowers and vermillion, was bare. Mahika's raging hormones had kept her away from her kitchen and her Shiv for almost two weeks. And for a change, Shivam was glad for it.

In the kitchen, he took leftover chicken soup from the fridge, dumped it in a pot on the slow burner and walked up to the bedroom.

Mahika had just come out of the shower, yet she was still wearing one of her old, faded cotton nightgowns. Today she'd chosen the one Shivam hated the most. The batik prints on it looked like ink splotches. The curly ends of her hair were still shedding a few droplets. Before the tiny puddle on the floor could trigger Shivam's irritation, the tilt of Mahika's head shifted his mood. She was admiring his garden downstairs, which was a riot of rainbow colours. He was particularly proud of his genetically modified blue petunias. Shivam walked to the window, and the waft of Mahika's rose-scented body soap generated a surge of desire in him, and the need to feel her skin against Shivam's blurred his fear of germs considerably.

Shivam had expected Mahika's body to melt in his arms, but she gently pushed him away. A knot twisted in his stomach. Their relationship had changed a lot in the last five years, from Mahika waiting at the doorsteps for Shivam's return to welcoming him from the aroma-filled kitchen, to ignoring his arrival. Shivam had seen the gap widening between them. But pushing him away was a new low in their relationship. Was it the pregnancy hormones, or did she know something she wasn't supposed to?

Before his doubt could grow more, Mahika began to retch. Shivam scooped Mahika's damp towel, neatly folded the unevenly bundled-up duvet and arranged the pillows on the bed three times. It calmed his mind. He walked down to the kitchen to serve the leftover chicken soup, as this was the only time when Mahika would agree to eat. Mondays were supposed to be Indian takeaway dinners, a ritual Mahika had started by going to the temple every Monday evening. But the arrival of that anonymous note had meddled with his routine trip to Little India. Thinking of the note brought his simmering worry to a boil, unlike the soup, which was still too cold to be edible. Shivam gave the soup a long stir as he pulled

the note from his pocket and read it again. The longhand was as unreadable as a doctor's prescription, but the childish grammatical errors made him think this was the work of a kindergartener. However, the tiny circle on every 'I' reminded him of Mahika's father. Prof. Mishra, Mahika's father, used to dot his i's in a similar fashion.

The soup boiled over and spilt around the gas stove, bringing his attention back to the task at hand. He poured the rest of the soup into a bowl, toasted the bread and walked up the stairs, once again remembering the hatred with which Mahika had pushed him away. Mahika had started acting in a very strange way ever since her last visit to the clinic.

What was she hiding?

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Chapter 3

Week Nine

Your baby is now about three-fourth of an inch long—about the size of a grape or an olive. It's an exciting time for your baby: major organs continue developing; arms are growing; elbows can bend. Tiny toes develop, and the ears and eyelids that began emerging a week ago continue to form. Your baby is becoming more active, although it's too soon for you to feel the motion. It may be possible for the heartbeat to be detected on a handheld Doppler ultrasound.

Thirty-one weeks to go!

Shivam Rathod

March 2, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Shivam had destroyed the anonymous notes, but a week later, they still ran in his mind like a hamster endlessly spinning a wheel. He'd woken up to his alarm clock, but before the desire to sleep more could take over, the silence in the bedroom sent a jolt of panic through him.

Mahika wasn't there.

He rushed to the bathroom and found the door ajar. Before the tightening in his chest could grow, the microwave's beep made him sigh with relief. Mahika was in the kitchen. Cooking. She had nowhere to go.

Shivam mentally kicked himself for letting his fear take over; it was becoming a fixation. He made the bed, arranging the pillows. Generally, it calmed him—arranging the pillows three times—but not today. He inhaled and exhaled the waft of roasted semolina. The thought of Mahika prepping for upma, his favourite breakfast, should've calmed his nerves. But it did

the opposite. The mess in the kitchen, the tiny granules of semolina sparkling on the black granite kitchen counter bothered him. The cellphone on his nightstand vibrated, and his anxiety shifted as the green screen lit up.

Coast clr. Appt at 3 pm tdy. Skp ur lnc visit.

Shivam was still staring at the text when he heard something in the kitchen fall. Mahika had dropped a jar. Nothing unusual. But today his agitation swelled to an unprecedented magnitude. With another ping on the phone, the second problem multiplied as well.

I dn't wnt ny scare ths time. Keep her on a shrt leash.

Shivam's anxiety spread like fire in his chest and throat. He walked to the bathroom, locked the door behind him and calmed his ragged breathing. But the finger stain on the vanity cabinet mirror added to his agitation. He ignored the stain, opening the cabinet to get his medicine, but the disturbed order of the medicine bottles acted like a match to gunpowder. He'd rearranged them from tallest to shortest last night. But Mahika had disturbed their arrangement when taking her medicine. Shivam popped a pill and shut the cabinet before his anger could spill. The chaos in the medicine cabinet disappeared. But he saw the spare hand towels unevenly folded. Mahika had yet again pulled the lowest towel from the stack.

He could handle this.

Shivam splashed cold water on his face and waited for the medicine to work, but the ugly sight of Mahika's comb filled with loose hairs was too much to ignore. He pulled out a set of disposable gloves from the cabinet beneath the sink and cleaned the comb. But the hairs were still there. A strand on the bathroom counter, two on the floor and many resting on the drain in the shower. He had to get rid of those before he choked. Shivam frantically wiped the vanity cabinet's shelves, and soon the need to vigorously scrub every nook and corner of the bathroom took over.

Over the years, Shivam had learnt to tame his meltdowns. But today he was fully under their spell. The mantra *you-will-scare-Mahika-and-the-*

baby didn't work either.

To his surprise, Mahika stayed away from him and the room while Shivam's compulsive need to clean shifted from the bathroom to the bedroom.

Shivam came downstairs only when his medicine had complete control over his nerves, leaving the bathroom and bedroom sparkling clean in his wake. He had expected Mahika to be in the shed, which would let him escape, but she was in the kitchen, packing his lunch. Before he could find the right words to apologize, Mahika rushed to the washroom with her left hand covering her mouth. A feeling of relief immediately replaced his remorse. Today, his meltdown had killed two birds with one stone: it had released his anxiety and also helped him dodge a conversation about the door's new lock.

Shivam lifted the lid, anticipating upma but was startled to see halwa instead. He pushed away the casserole and lathered two slices of bread with butter, put them in a LocknLock, and rushed out of the house before Mahika could return from the washroom and ask for the lock's password. He could come up with an excuse for the lock later, but first, he had to find out what was going on with Mahika. The alarm in his mind had started ringing again.

Mahika Rathod

March 2, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Mahika woke up with debilitating nausea, rushed to the washroom and emptied the contents of her stomach into the toilet, but her stomach still felt as heavy as a boulder. Shivam's betrayal hid in the pit of her stomach, keeping her unborn mutant company. Yes, that's what it was—a mutant that had jumped the growth chart, kicking her eight weeks too early.

And thanks to the evil concoction of her raging emotions and hormones, she'd done nothing about the lock. She didn't have the energy to worry about the lock, the baby trapped in her womb or the writer of the note

calling her a procrastinator. She could barely manage to reach the washroom to throw up.

Mahika had been diagnosed with hyperemesis gravidarum, a medical term for severe nausea and vomiting, during her first pregnancy, and it had come back with a vengeance in every pregnancy since, incapacitating her. But this time the anti-vomiting medicine her obstetrician had prescribed wasn't helping, and the hormones injected into her, to stabilize her pregnancy, were making it worse.

Mahika had been about to nibble on a cracker when the craving to eat halwa—the one her mother cooked—gripped her hard. She pushed away the image of roasted semolina swelled in ghee, but the craving multiplied with every breath. Mahika had not felt like eating anything for weeks. She caved, going down to the kitchen to roast the semolina, waiting for its fragrance to kill her appetite. However, the fragrance teased her hunger instead. She was about to crush the cardamom in when the pestle slipped from her hand and dropped to the floor, making a loud thudding noise. The baby in her womb kicked almost instantly as if also startled by the thud. But before Mahika could discount it as a coincidence, Shivam had started throwing things upstairs, announcing his meltdown.

Welcome back to your life, she thought.

Mahika walked to the kitchen sink and ran the faucet, trying to drown out the little voices in her head, at least, if not the non-stop thudding coming from the bedroom. But her stomach was still a rolling boil—growing, with the increasing noise upstairs. She blocked her ears and waited for the moment to pass, but something within her couldn't calm down.

The baby.

Mahika placed her hands on her belly and was startled by the powerful kicks. The life within her was throwing his legs and hands in panic, responding to the sounds coming from upstairs.

It had taken a week for Mahika to come to terms with her unborn baby kicking eight weeks early. And now the baby was startled by these sounds. They were loud and annoying, but were they loud enough to penetrate her womb?

‘Calm down, kiddo.’ But her touch and her command held no weight. She picked up the pregnancy guidebook, flipping to the ninth week’s milestones. Nothing. Mahika then jumped to the sixteenth week’s milestones and then to the seventeenth week. Nothing.

She read the growth benchmark of an eighteen-week-old foetus. *The structures inside the baby’s ear develop around week eighteen. Your baby can hear your stomach gurgle and air whoosh in and out of your lungs. Not until weeks twenty-seven to thirty would your baby start reacting to voices and noises filtering into the womb.*

But she was in her ninth week. How could the life within her register all those thuds upstairs?

Another loud thud came from upstairs, followed by another kick in her womb. Mahika’s heart ached in an unfamiliar way. Instead of playing Mozart for his unborn, Shivam was hurling insults, screaming and shouting like an animal.

The very thought of her unborn tormented by this pandemonium stirred in her a volcanic mix of anger, sadness, betrayal—and an ounce of courage, too.

She had to end this all. If not for herself, for him.

Mahika let the wave of courage subside, as she always did. She could barely stand straight without throwing up. How would she plan her escape? She pulled out the tattered spiral notebook from her recipe books. It still smelt of her mother. Mahika folded the notebook into a hug and stayed there. The sounds coming from upstairs became bearable, but only for her. The life within her was still kicking with the same intensity.

‘You and me, we have no place to go. This is all we have. The sooner you accept that, the better it will be for you,’ she said.

Was it her imagination or did the kicking stop? She waited for another thud to startle the baby, but the house had also fallen silent, suggesting the end of Shivam’s meltdown. As she crushed the cardamom, Mahika rehearsed her words to casually inquire about the new lock on the door. However, nothing today was going as planned. The overwhelming fragrance of freshly crushed cardamom—always bringing with it memories

—triggered her nausea. This let Shivam escape. The charade of normality and the ready lunch bag, neither had inspired Shivam to share the password. He left for work, locking the door behind him.

An image of a canary bird flashed in her mind. A bright-yellow bird singing the sweetest melody, locked in a cage.

Rudra would be his next canary bird. The name ‘Rudra’, suggested in the anonymous note, had appeared on her lips from nowhere. ‘Rudra,’ she said, fighting tears. Mahika summoned him again and patted her belly. But there was no movement in her womb. She’d imagined it all. He couldn’t hear. But she didn’t care. The thought of him being there was comforting enough.

Shivam had warned her not to get attached to the baby until she had crossed the twelve-week milestone in her pregnancy, but how could she ignore the little flutter in her womb? In Shivam’s eyes, it might not be a baby, but in her heart, the baby became real from the moment she conceived. And like every mother-to-be, Mahika had hoped and dreamt for her unborn in every pregnancy. Her last three pregnancies terminated too soon, and the stream of blood between her legs left behind grief, guilt and emptiness. With every miscarriage, Mahika lost trust in her body, in herself and her future. However, in this pregnancy, Rudra’s powerful kicks had rekindled her hope.

Mahika patted once again, and this time he kicked back as if reciprocating the love Mahika had begun feeling for him.

‘Hey, little one. Let us call you Rudra for now,’ she said and paused to weigh the word ‘now’, calculating how long this happiness might last. Twelve weeks. Or sixteen? That’s how far she’d gotten with her previous pregnancies.

But the baby’s powerful kick again pushed away her negativity, and Mahika blissfully indulged herself in this one-sided conversation.

‘Hello again, little one. I’m your mommy, and my name is Mahika. But I guess that’s not the kind of introduction we should have. You will first know me by my fragrance, my voice and then by my name. But let’s cross the bridge when it comes. For now, be assured these meltdowns and these loud noises aren’t a regular feature. Don’t worry, these incidents happen

when your father is anxious. There must be something very important going on at work. Your father is a genius, Rudra. However, nature has balanced his perfections by giving him a temper. Ironically enough, his fetish for perfection is what makes him imperfect. Because all his mood swings and obsessions circle back to his desire for perfection.’ Mahika spooned a bite of halwa. She thoroughly enjoyed her son’s company while she ate breakfast.

‘I was also scared when it happened the first time. We were in New Jersey back then. It was a month shy of our first wedding anniversary. Your father had an important work meeting that morning. I can’t remember what it was, but it was important. He’d requested that I iron his white button-down shirt again. I couldn’t spot the invisible wrinkles, but to calm his nerves I ironed it again. But in ironing it again, I’d left a pale-yellow iron stain. A moment later, an ear-splitting scream startled me. The way it probably startled you today. Thankfully, you’re spared from seeing the mayhem upstairs. But that day, I saw it for the first time: the wreckage his anger had left behind. All his colour-coordinated shirts, his neatly folded T-shirts and boxers—which he fussed over every day—were on the floor. Amid this chaos, he radiated a rage I’d never experienced before. I approached him to shake him out of his rage and to offer some help cleaning the mess on the floor, but then he twisted my arm and spat an insult at me. *The food you eat comes from the money I earn. And that requires going to work in a clean shirt. Can you make sure of that at least?*’

Mahika swallowed the lump in her throat. The lump that had stayed there since Shivam’s first meltdown. Today, for the first time, she felt this lump easing. As if telling this story was the mechanism to dissolve it. She’d been holding in her pain for so long that her words had started flowing like a broken dam.

‘Rudra, that day, soon after his meltdown, I called my father, but the line went dead right when I needed him the most. I waited for an entire morning for the dial tone to return while I rehearsed my lines. I didn’t know where to start, as I’d never told my father about Shivam’s obsession with cleanliness and the number of household chores I had to do to keep him happy. I’d tried

talking to my father several times, but he was living all alone in India and giving him another thing to worry about seemed too selfish. But that day, I couldn't dismiss Shivam's meltdown, because the bruise on my wrist was a red flag of physical and mental abuse. And, for the first time, I wasn't blaming my carelessness for his outburst. Nothing I could've done would've warranted Shivam's crossing that line. But he had crossed that line, Rudra. And I had accepted it. I should've walked out of the house that very day, but instead, I waited for the phone to work. I wrote an email to my father, but then I deleted it. The warmth of my father's voice would've helped me gather the courage I needed to walk out of my marriage or confront Shivam, but the dead phone line left me lonely and shattered. By evening, I'd packed my bag, determined to go back to my father. But the white lilies in Shivam's hands and his remorse-filled face melted my heart. Dinner in a nice restaurant, a list of universities to apply to a course in architecture and a promise to never lose his temper again were all it took for me to forgive his first meltdown. Rudra, the idiot I am, it took me two meltdowns to deduce the pattern. Shivam's outburst, his stinging comments and the faulty phone line. A gift and a dinner at a fine dining restaurant. These were Shivam's means to absolve himself from his abusive meltdowns. But by then, my father had succumbed to a heart attack, and I had nowhere to go. My grandmother, aunts and uncles would never accept my decision to walk out of a marriage, as to them, my failed marriage would mean social failure and a burden on them. And seeking support from Kirti, my best friend from college, wasn't possible. She was living in a joint family, fighting her own battles. I had nowhere to go, and I learnt to swallow every insult, fooling myself that this was his last abuse.'

Mahika suddenly had to rush to throw up the halwa that she'd devoured. She held her head in her hands, reliving Shivam's every meltdown and the scars they'd left behind.

'But you're not an orphan, Rudra. And I'll do whatever it takes to shield you from his anger.' Mahika stood up from the bathroom floor. Before her courage could fizzle out, she rushed to the emergency cabinet mounted in the entry hallway. The torchlight, the camping bag, the Swiss army knife

and the emergency bars were all neatly stacked on the shelves. The red fireproof bag holding important documents was there too. But her passport wasn't in it. And the traveller's cheque her father had given her five years ago to facilitate her first international travel from India to New Jersey was also missing. Shivam had never removed the passports from the red bag except when they were travelling, and the bag was always somewhere accessible in the house. In case of a fire or any other emergency, he'd explained to Mahika. The idea of storing all the important documents in a fireproof bag had felt extreme—until now.

Where was her passport?

The image of the canary bird again flashed in her mind. Shivam had not only caged her, but he had also clipped her wings.

Mahika spent the next hour searching the house for her passport. She wanted to rummage through every drawer and rearrange things later. But placing Shivam's things back in the same meticulous order he preferred was a Herculean task that Mahika had yet to master. She thought of that second note, telling her not to alert Shivam. So, she searched one stack at a time, which took excruciatingly long.

Thankfully, Mahika had an entire day at her disposal, or so she'd assumed. She heard Shivam's approaching footsteps, ceased her search and ducked under the duvet just in time. Shivam came in and opened the same closet door Mahika had just searched.

Had Shivam been watching her? A shiver went down her spine.

Rudra

March 2, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

I wasn't sure what left me more perplexed—my father's screaming or my mother's resignation.

'You and me, we have no place to go. This is all we have. The sooner you accept this, the better it will be for you,' my mother said, killing the tiny tendrils of hope sprouting in my heart.

So, this is how she lives. And you're soon going to end up with her. I think you're better here. What do you say?

I was wishing for an exit from this exile, and the exile that would soon follow when my mother christened me. I had a name now—Rudra. A name that marked the beginning of my existence in her world. A name that broke the dam of her silence and brought along stories of pain and loneliness. But instead of sympathizing with her, I wanted to shake her, to coax her to end all this.

I didn't yet know that nothing can throw you on the path of disaster more than love.

'I'm looking for my passport in case we need it. I have no one in this country who would come to our rescue. Not that going back to India would be any better. We'll have no one to support us. At least we can hide from Shivam and his team, but only if I can keep you in my womb for that long.'

'Only if I can keep you in my womb.' And with her words, my hope disappeared like the glow of a firefly.

You might die before being born.

The voice in my head delivered this like a joke.

My soon-to-be-mother, unaware of the fear she'd instilled in me, was moving things, picking them up and putting them down with a thud. I couldn't see her. I couldn't help her, but I knew how it felt: locked in darkness.

She spent hours pacing, and I stirred within her. Helpless. Her desire to break free triggered a storm within me.

You might not live, but she can.

The need to help her tightened its grip on me. There was a word to describe how it felt, but I couldn't recall it—not until my mother's words came back to me. 'Your father gets driven by his obsessions.' Yes, she'd used the word 'obsession' to justify my father's actions this morning.

So, you have taken after your father.

According to the letter my mother had received, my genius father had designed me hoping for a perfect baby. But this untenable feeling running riot within me wasn't a sign of perfection.

Didn't she say that nothing could ever miss his sharp eyes?

But he'd missed the compulsiveness that silently sneaked through his DNA.

What else did he miss?

Mahika Rathod

March 2, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

'Mahika, we have an appointment with your doc.' Shivam gently prodded her shoulder. The knot in her chest opened a bit. He was there to take her to the clinic. That explained his meltdown. He was nervous about the baby.

Mahika got ready and went downstairs. Shivam was waiting at the main door, his back hiding the new lock.

'You go and sit in the car. I'll lock up,' Shivam said.

Mahika walked to the car while he hastily punched in the passcode. She was tempted to turn back and ask about the lock, but then his body language suggested she shouldn't.

Maybe she could run away from the clinic. But where would she go?

She watched Shivam turn the doorknob once. Twice. And before he could check the third time, Mahika looked away.

Was it always that easy to predict his next move?

The long ride to the clinic generated a fresh wave of nausea. As with everything else, Shivam had anticipated this. He handed her some air sickness bags and pointed to the disposal bag next to her feet.

'Remind me to talk to the doctor about changing your anti-vomit medicines, Mahi. You've lost a lot of weight, and it's not good for the baby. And listen, don't wander around in the clinic this time. I don't want to involve the entire clinic in finding you. I was so embarrassed the last time around. Okay?' Shivam said and suggested she take a sip from the ice-filled tumbler he must've filled while she was getting ready. Mahika noticed the sachets of ginger candies on the dashboard, and his silent care made Mahika doubt her feelings again. Shivam cared for her and loved her too. But his

love was different. Unusual. And it disappeared as quickly as it appeared. He was passionate and loving in one moment and cold and indifferent in another. Shivam was raised by his uncle, and the absence of his mother's unconditional love and his father's protection had perhaps twisted Shivam's feelings. Mahika always had an excuse for Shivam's love and abuse. Until now.

Shivam drove to the HDB car park near the clinic. Today she was newly alert to her surroundings like a blind person seeing the world for the first time. Shivam had again avoided the clinic's car park. His stiff shoulders and his roving eyes meant that he was scared. Mahika slowed her steps, and he regulated his pace, not giving her a moment alone.

Shivam was scared of someone.

Secretly and illegally designing a genetically modified baby must've required an army of people, and maybe Shivam had rubbed someone in the clinic the wrong way.

'Madam Rathod,' the nurse said and ushered them into the doctor's cabin. Mahika had to exercise all her self-control to not let the memories of her last visit determine her actions.

'How are you feeling today?' Dr Cynthia, her obstetrician, asked with a smile, beckoning Mahika to lie flat on the examination bench. The doctor did a quick pelvic examination and referred to Mahika's reports. 'You've lost a considerable amount of weight in the last two weeks. I'm increasing the dosage of your anti-vomiting pill. You need to force yourself to eat or else you'll become dehydrated.' To Shivam, she said, 'You need to take better care of your wife.' She flashed a genuine smile and handed their file to the nurse standing by her side. Either Dr Cynthia wasn't part of this charade, or she was a seasoned player too, because Mahika felt nothing off-kilter.

'Maybe I'll go to Mustafa tonight to pick some Indian snacks for you,' Shivam said. They waited outside for the nurse to dispense the pills prescribed by the doctor.

'The doctor has requested an ultrasound scan as you have a history of miscarriages.' The nurse ushered them to the scan room before Mahika

could get herself together. The news of an unscheduled ultrasound fell on Mahika like an unexpected blizzard. She'd deliberately not mentioned the premature quickening to Shivam. However, the technician's probe was about to spill the beans, bringing an end to her lies and Shivam's too.

'Let's hear the heartbeat first, Mrs Rathod,' the technician said. A shiver went down her spine. It was the same cold voice that had warned Shivam to treat this pregnancy like a project. The man's eyes were too blue to go unnoticed and they stood in contrast to his Chinese features.

'This gel might feel a little cold,' he said and gently spread it over Mahika's belly. The hairs at the back of her neck stood up as the technician moved the probe across her stomach.

'There it is. Your baby with a head, a torso and tiny limbs,' the technician said.

You have the first right to the baby. Shivam's words came unbidden and stirred in her more pain. Mahika held back her tears and waited for the technician to figure out the extraordinary length of the foetus's legs, but the blue-eyed man didn't give away anything.

The scan couldn't miss the size of the baby's limbs. Could it? Or were the baby's limbs growing normally, and she was imagining things?

Mahika walked to the washroom, and this time Shivam followed, staying suffocatingly close. Mahika felt an urge to break free. She curbed her impulse, however, and stayed in the cubical, shedding silent tears of fear and anger. She didn't know anyone in Singapore who could help her, and going to the police meant exposing Rudra. Her high-risk pregnancy needed close monitoring—more so because the baby was genetically modified.

She was once again finding excuses instead of taking action. She needed to find a way to fight back instead of living in denial. Did she need a stranger to write a note and coax her to protect her flesh and blood?

It was as if the thought of that note had conjured another envelope. Mahika picked up the envelope that had just been slid into the bathroom cubical. She read the note, feeling the thud of her heart in her cheeks.

It's not too late, Mahi. You can start afresh. All you must do is believe in yourself. I always wanted you to stand on your feet. I think it's time to act and fight back. You always needed a push. So here is where you can start. But remember to be careful.

'All you have to do is believe in yourself' was her father's favourite phrase. Mahika had grown up hearing it, especially when her courage to take up a task had fallen short. All her long-distance phone conversations with her father had been about gaining financial independence.

Someone was messing with her, making her believe that the notes were written by her father. Could it be part of Shivam's plan?

But why would Shivam reveal his plan? Unless he wanted a way out? Or was she reading too much into this?

Mahika was about to stuff the note back into the envelope when two ten-dollar bills and a tiny piece of paper in the envelope caught her attention. An address was scribbled on the paper, and below the address was a note that looked like an afterthought.

Money is for the taxi. In case you are deprived of that too.

But how was she supposed to leave the hospital?

'Hello, Mommy. Hope you're doing okay. Your hubby seems worried,' a woman said.

'Yes,' Mahika called loudly enough for Shivam to hear her. The woman sounded American.

Maybe she was another pregnant mother. Or her mysterious helper?

Mahika hastily put the envelope and notes in her bag and rushed out to chase the woman. But no one else was in the restroom. Just a faint fragrance of perfume. She wanted to rush out, but Shivam was waiting for her outside. Mahika splashed water on her face, hoping to achieve the fake calmness that Shivam could wear with such ease. But the notes and the ten-dollar bills resting in her bag had revved up her heartbeat. And Shivam guarding the door made her breath echo in her ears.

If Shivam was waiting outside the washroom, how did someone manage to slip the envelope into the cubical?

Because her anonymous messiah was here to beat Shivam at his own game. Or was this all part of Shivam's game?

Shivam Rathod

Clementi Fertility Clinic, Singapore

March 2, 2003

The tiny pea pod in Mahika's womb had shot legs and hands in the last three weeks, and Shivam's perfect creation had officially transformed into a foetus. Yet he didn't allow himself to relish this success.

A premature celebration often left too much ache to endure.

Shivam's heart kicked as Dr Steven placed the calliper's ends to measure the unborn's crown-to-rump length. Dr Steven had decided to mitigate the risk of being exposed by keeping the ultrasound technician out. Consequently, Shivam had to memorize data points to compensate for the ease with which the numbers would come to a technician. Shivam compared the numbers stored in his head to the ones reflected on the screen. The numbers were three and a half times more than his baby's gestational age. The measurements for the head, the abdominal circumferences and the femur bone were off the charts too. The ten-week-old foetus in Mahika's womb showed the growth of a sixteen-week-old foetus. However, Mahika's flat belly defied these numbers.

That was why Shivam had been against Dr Steven doing the scan by himself.

Shivam, then, noticed movement on the screen. The midget had lifted his hand and put it to his mouth. Another milestone that wasn't age-appropriate.

Dr Steven said, 'You can wipe off the gel. I'll send the report to your doctor.'

Shivam followed Mahika to the washroom and paced outside, worrying about the baby.

Was Mahika taking unusually long or was time moving too slowly?

Shivam impatiently waited for her return when he noticed someone watching him from a half-opened door. He brushed it away, but the feeling of being watched was too profound to ignore.

The blackmailer.

Shivam rushed to catch the blackmailer, but no one was in the room. He checked under the table, behind the curtains and in a tall storage unit mounted on one wall. Nothing. The silhouette he'd spotted a moment ago had disappeared into thin air. Shivam was about to leave when he saw an envelope on the table with his name on it. He slid open the envelope and read the note:

Hide and seek part 3: I have found your wife. Now let's see if I can help her find the perfect baby hiding within her, and the real Shivam, too.

The paper looked almost identical to the paper the previous notes had been written on. The longhand was also similar. The notes were written by the same person, using the same resources: an old notepad and an old ballpoint pen that had erratically spat ink.

'Can I help you?' A lady in blue scrubs asked him, which made him realize his mistake. He'd left Mahika alone in the washroom.

Shivam put the note in his pocket and ran to the washroom. He requested the Caucasian woman emerging from the washroom to check on his wife. Mahika's robust voice brought a sigh of relief.

Shivam resumed his pacing and gathered courage to inform Dr Steven about the blackmailer. He was scared of the consequences since the last visit had triggered panic in Dr Steven, who had then twisted Shivam's arm to keep Mahika behind closed doors.

Maybe Dr Steven was receiving these notes too. And that's why he'd wanted to imprison Mahika. How was he going to explain that to Mahika? She had seen the new lock.

Before Shivam could find answers to the problems closing down on him at a neck-breaking speed, Mahika came out of the washroom clutching her

bag too close to her chest. Her face was white as chalk powder and her eyes were streaked with red.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked.

‘I can’t stop throwing up,’ she said.

‘Take this. Hopefully, the increased dose will help,’ Shivam said, handing her the ginger candy sachet. He looked away from Mahika’s gaunt face. She’d aged considerably in one week. But the raging hormones were happy news for the baby, which he told Mahika, also reassuring her that the increased dosage of the anti-vomit pill would bring her some relief. As he drove Mahika home, his thoughts were running miles a minute, and by the time they reached Goodman Road, Shivam had found a solution for the lock problem.

A little planning went a long way.

‘Mahika, I’m not sure if you noticed the new digital lock. I wanted to ask you before accepting the owner’s request to change the lock, but you were in a miserable state. Don’t worry about remembering the passcode. We’ll figure out a way to help you remember it. Because we don’t want to repeat the New Port Mall fiasco, right?’ Shivam said as they approached the house.

At the doorstep, Shivam shared the PIN code for Mahika to punch into the silicone pad, displaying the same level of patience he’d shown while teaching her to operate an ATM in New Jersey. However, the impetuous Mahika had paused before punching in 1, 9 and 2. Shivam noticed the slight bounce in her step as she unlocked the door.

She’d known about the lock and had been waiting for him to share the passcode. Whatever rocked her boat. Momentarily.

Hours later, Shivam punched in the same passcode three times to make sure it no longer worked. He could play this game of cat and mouse for at least a few more days.

Or maybe he’d get lucky the way he had got lucky with the ATM passcode.

Shivam retreated to the bedroom, feeling accomplished. This problem was sorted, for now, bringing his attention back to the unborn’s erratic

growth pattern. But the slight shift in his neat arrangement of clothes in the wardrobe consumed all his mental space. The hangers holding his button-down shirts and trousers were slightly askew, as if they'd been pushed to one side and then moved back. But he'd rearranged his wardrobe this morning during his meltdown.

He was imagining things.

But suspicion had already started tightening its noose around him. Shivam pulled open his briefs drawer and spotted the tilt in the drawer's liner. His things had been tampered with. He sat on the bench in the walk-in wardrobe and replayed the morning in his head. There hadn't been much time between his meltdown and Mahika's nap for her to meddle with his things.

Unless she hadn't been sleeping when she said she had been. Or had someone broken in when they'd been at the clinic?

He decided to check on Mahika. At the clinic, he'd dismissed Mahika's flushed cheeks as an after-effect of throwing up—the way he'd discounted her clenching her handbag too tight as her fear of losing it. But now his disturbed clothes steered his thoughts in a different direction.

She was hiding something. Maybe in her bag.

Mahika Rathod

March 2, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Mahika closed her eyes tight at the sound of his footsteps. Shivam was tiptoeing into their bedroom, and before she could make sense of this, he'd left.

With her handbag.

Once again, the urge to confront him gripped her, but she stayed glued to the bed. Something in the wardrobe had made him suspicious. Maybe she'd screwed up in keeping his things in the right order. Nothing missed his sharp eyes.

She heard his footsteps receding into silence and imagined the scene: Shivam emptying her bag on a newspaper and his gloved hands wiping the bag's contents before replacing them. The old half-used tissue packets and biscuit sachets with broken cookies would finally meet their fate tonight. But Shivam wouldn't find what he might have if Mahika's instincts hadn't guided her.

She slid her hand under her pillow and felt the envelope she'd just put there. Betrayal had sharpened her instincts. Or were these her motherly instincts, which had begun to grow alongside her baby?

But why was Shivam searching her bag? To find the note? How could he know about it?

Because he was the one writing them. Trapping her in a new lie.

The hasty writing and the paper's torn edges were just distractions. He was probably planning to lock her away somewhere where no one could ever find her.

He'd given the door's passcode, using it as bait.

Rudra

March 2, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

'Inhale and exhale. One more time. Now focus all your attention on your breathing.' An unfamiliar voice startled me.

Is he asking you, dude? But your lungs are still under construction.

'Now follow the sensation of your breath as it goes in and out. Your attention will leave the rhythm of your breath and wander, but bring it back to the inhale and exhale.'

My mother inhaled and exhaled. The instructions were for her. But where were we? And who was this man giving orders?

'Be gentle to your wandering mind yet train it to come back. It's like training to ride a horse: slow and steady. And once your mind is focused on your breath, tilt your chin up and bring your attention to the spot between

your eyes. Inhale and exhale, and centre all your attention between your eyebrows now.'

My mother again followed the command. Her heart, which had not normalized since her return from the clinic, resumed its pace.

'Come on, you can try too,' the voice said as if inviting me to join the party.

Inhale and exhale without lungs, a must-try.

I ignored the voice in my head and brought my attention to my mother's inhale and exhale. It felt therapeutic.

'Now imagine a tiny sun glowing on your forehead, right between your eyes. Breathe in and breathe out, channelling all your thoughts and energies to create that golden dot. Sit still and visualize seeing nothing but this light.'

Do you want to like switch positions? You can't see anything, and our friend here wants everything around him to disappear. The grass is always greener on the other side, boss.

'Don't try hard. Let it come to you.' His calm voice overrode the little voice in my head. This voice had a hypnotic charm to it, like a witch casting a slow spell. I was under the spell, just as my mother was. I focused my energy on my mother's breath and waited for the golden dot. But before I could spot the sun glowing between my eyebrows, it disappeared, flooding my mind with endless thoughts.

'Let your thoughts run their course.' The voice read my mind.

I tried again. But my thoughts were still running riot in my brain. The more I tried, the worse it got. And then, when I was about to give up, the world around me turned stony silent. The spot between my eyebrows lit up. I could see a round ball of light growing in diameter, consuming me. I did what I was told. I became one with this giant ball of heat. A sudden surge of energy filled my veins as if the power of an unbroken current had found a path through my cells.

I had awakened in a new way.



Chapter 4

Tenth Week

It's time for your baby's first graduation. He is no longer an embryo. Say hello to the foetus.

Your baby is the size of a lime now, and he's becoming more human in appearance as his webbed toes and fingers begin to separate and form individual digits, his eyelids begin to close and his facial features become more distinct.

This is one of the most important weeks, as all the vital organs form, especially the brain, which continues the neural organization process. His cerebral cortex and different lobes are becoming more sophisticated. His brain is getting ready to take on the world.

Thirty weeks to go!

* * *

Shivam Rathod

March 3, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Shivam was in the university lab researching the possible reasons for his son's exceptional growth when he received a text.

'Can you see me in fifteen?'

He had been anticipating this message since the scan yesterday afternoon, but Dr Steven had taken his own sweet time to summon him. Shivam had dropped his play-it-cool facade and left the university lab in a blink of an eye. Although driving to the clinic would've been faster, he waited for a cab, as the feeling of being watched still lingered in his mind. Last night,

he'd found nothing suspicious in Mahika's bag or anywhere in the house, yet something haunted him like an old, forgotten memory resurfacing.

He entered the lab without attracting any attention. Or so he assumed.

Dr Steven welcomed him with a frown. 'I summoned you because the baby's body is growing abnormally. The stats are all off, and there isn't a pattern to his gestational age, either.' The sea-blue colour of Dr Steven's tie accentuated his blue eyes—or was it his anxiety?

'The crown-to-rump length is for a sixteen-week-old foetus. Some mutation triggered his growth rate, perhaps. Can I see the report once more?' Shivam asked. 'I don't need the growth chart.' Shivam was ready with the standard numbers in his head. He noted down the biparietal diameter, head circumference and abdominal circumference from the stats Dr Steven had measured yesterday and matched the right gestation ages to the corresponding numbers. His mind reeled at the findings. The baby inside Mahika was breaking all the laws of nature. His organs were growing at a different pace—some fast and some super-fast.

'How do you remember all the stats correctly?' Dr Steven asked.

'Because I memorized them.' Shivam swallowed his agitation.

'Then you must've figured out a pattern in this erratic growth chart by now?' Dr Steven said. His question felt more like a jab than appreciation.

He could have figured out if he had not spent the entire night worrying about an intruder in the house or doubting Mahika.

'Do you have thoughts on why his organs are growing differently? Is it a mutant disorder?' Dr Steven asked again. Dr Steven's limited intellect had often made Shivam wonder if he'd lost his sharpness with age or if he'd simply gotten lucky achieving the laurels he possessed.

Must be the self-corrective DNA, Shivam had almost uttered, swallowing his words back just in time. Although Dr Steven had gone through the final blueprint of the baby's edited DNA, there was a part of editing that Dr Steven had missed in the pre-implantation genetic diagnosis. And Shivam's son was about to benefit from Dr Steven's lack of attention. Because Shivam had done more than sliding in the beneficial genes and editing away the bad ones using a newly discovered genome-editing tool that could alter

DNA strands to create a perfect baby. Shivam had modified his unborn child's brain cells, giving his brain the unique ability to send and receive signals to formulate proteins that could generate new enzymes. Consequently, a new, self-corrective DNA could formulate in his son's body within hours, making him more perfect than before. All his son had to do to become more powerful or more intelligent was to desire it. The baby's powerful brain was designed to splice, edit and find the matching sequence of DNA.

But that was not supposed to kick in until after the little one had developed an awareness of the world, his surroundings and himself. Then what caused his son's brain and limbs to develop at a different pace than his other body parts?

'Shivam? Can you focus? That's why I warned you not to get attached to the sample in your wife's womb,' Dr Steven said.

'There's something more pressing than the sample's erratic growth. How are we going to predict Mahika's due date, and how will you manage to hide this all from her gynaecologist?' Shivam asked, diverting Dr Steven's attention.

Dr Steven's brow puckered familiarly, indicating he was reflecting. His eyes jumped from one reading to another, comparing them against the expected milestones. He was taking much longer than Shivam had expected.

'I'm surprised your wife can't feel his kicks given this femur length.'

Shivam looked at the stat Dr Steven had just highlighted using a fluorescent marker. The green colour reminded Shivam of the jarring neon lights blinking on highways.

'Are you sure your wife knows nothing about this?' Dr Steven asked again.

The tampered arrangement in the cupboard.

Blink of another neon light.

The dirty kitchen. Blink.

Her pretending to sleep. Blinking brighter than the other two.

Did Mahika know more than she was letting on?

No, she was too innocent for all this. As he'd thought Dr Steven was until the man had trapped him into editing his baby.

'I think it's time for you to install the CCTV camera you mentioned. Just one on the main gate would do,' Shivam said. Dr Steven had been pushing him to put up a surveillance camera since the day Mahika had gone missing from the clinic, but Shivam had brushed away the idea. Until now.

Dr Steven looked at him in surprise and then flashed an accomplished smile as if a fisherman had managed to grab a big catch. Shivam had yet again become trapped in Dr Steven's net. This time knowingly.

Rudra

March 3, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

I'd spent the entire night, impatient and agitated, chasing the state of nothingness that had touched me and then disappeared. This morning, I was still chasing the same state of nothingness by imagining the sun glowing between my eyes. My mother's voice dragged me out of my chase. 'All you must do is believe in yourself. I always wanted you to stand on your feet and fight back. I think it's time to act on it. You always needed a push. So here is where you can start. But remember to be careful,' she said. The flutter of the paper indicated she was reading these lines.

'How would my going to this address—which according to the Internet is Singapore's indoor stadium—help me fight back?' she asked.

This one is for you, buddy! Do you want to take it?

The voice in my head had developed a sense of humour these last few days.

'Is this some kind of a trap?' my mother asked.

Congratulations, Rudra! Your neighbour's cable TV managed to switch channels. Welcome to today's quiz show.

Treating the sounds coming from her world as an entertainment channel playing in a neighbour's house was my idea, but the voice in my head was having too much fun at my expense. But I wasn't in the mood to complain,

because something was different in my mother's voice. This flavour of optimism was completely new to me.

But it vanished as quickly as it had come.

'Shit! I forgot the code. How can I be that stupid?' She said.

Then I heard a knock on the door.

This isn't a knock, dear. She's hitting her hand on the door.

'Damn it. You fool, Mahika.'

The helplessness in her voice gripped me hard.

'I hope it allows more than three attempts,' my mother said to herself.

Her heartbeat went up, and soon a loud rejection beep announced her failure.

'You deserve this, stupid woman.'

I felt a pang in my heart as her words trailed into a sob. The compulsive desire to help her was back again. A part of me knew I had no control over the outer world, yet my desire to help her overruled my rationale. And to my surprise, the devil's advocate inside my head was leaning towards my obsession too.

You might not live, but she can. Free her.

I was clueless about the number code my mother wanted so desperately. Yet I replayed yesterday's events. The trip to the clinic, the arrival and the departure of that dark shadow, and then the trip back home.

When you decided to sleep.

I realized my mistake. The trip to the hospital had felt like visiting a bar on a Friday night. All the sounds had overwhelmed my senses, pushing my brain towards exhaustion and sleep.

'I need to get out. For Rudra,' my mother said.

She's doing all this for you, mister.

The desire to reciprocate her love multiplied in my veins. But before my mind could explode with the need to help, his calm voice came to my rescue.

'Focus your energies on your breath. Imagine the spot between your eyes, and focus all your thoughts on that one spot.'

I appreciated my mother's efforts to replace her grunts and sighs with something more meaningful.

No, dude, she has given up.

The voice in my head was soon overshadowed by the calm voice echoing in my dark world. And before I knew it, my desire to break free—and the compulsive pull to help her—disappeared.

'It's not helping. I can't calm my mind,' she said and broke my trance.

'It worked for me, mom. Try harder,' I screamed, but my voice got swallowed by the vacuum around me.

'It's a three-digit code. How the bloody hell could I have forgotten it? Calm down and think again.'

Her deep inhale and exhale brought my attention back to the spot between my brows. I waited for the glowing dot to consume everything, push me to the state of nothingness and swallow my worries. Then the dot changed shape, reshaping itself into a digit.

The number 2.

The number changed again. A 1 replaced the 2.

Now the digit again changed shape and turned into a 5. I waited for another number to appear in the series when the number 2 was back again, followed by a 1 and a 5. The numbers were blinking and changing fast now, repeating the same pattern. 215.

'Stupid woman, you'll disable the lock by keying in the wrong code. All you had to do was remember the three digits.'

You have the numbers she's looking for.

And the numbers blinking brightly in my vision made sense. I'd somehow conjured the three digits she wanted.

Maybe it's the outcome of the meditation technique you were practising. But how are you going to communicate the numbers to her?

The realization felt like a gut punch. Hard and deep. I had the numbers, but no means to communicate them.

'Last attempt.' She sighed. The same loud beep soon followed her efforts. 'I'm sorry, Rudra,' she said and touched her belly. The warmth of her touch yet again melted my heart.

She just expressed her love for you using her touch.

So?

You can do the same.

I jumped into action. Two kicks. Pause. A single kick. Pause. And five kicks. But her hand had moved away before I could repeat the sequence.

Try again. A little harder this time.

I kicked her with all my might. And her hand travelled back to her abdomen, almost instantly. This time without wasting a moment, I kicked her in the same sequence. But my mother was trapped in her head.

Are you sure you are doing it right, man?

‘I couldn’t have forgotten all three numbers unless he changed the code,’ she said, her hand still comforting me.

I had the numbers she needed so desperately. But I had no other means to tell her. So, I kicked her again in the same sequence. Nothing. Her hand started patting me in a rhythm instead of deciphering my rhythm.

This isn’t going to work, mate.

Mahika Rathod

March 3, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

This wasn’t the first time Mahika had gotten the numbers wrong. She’d done it twice with her ATM PIN. And Shivam’s reaction had scarred her.

And last night, Shivam had not missed the opportunity to refresh Mahika’s memory.

‘If you want to write it down, please do. I don’t want another ATM-passcode scenario here. This isn’t my bank account, it’s the owner’s property. Imagine the embarrassment it will bring. I wanted to refuse to change the lock considering your history with PIN codes and passwords. But then I thought, let’s give you another chance.’

Shivam had asked Mahika to punch the numbers 1, 9 and 2 on the number pad. A gentle twist and the lock had given way, filling Mahika’s

heart with hope and love. Maybe changing the lock had been a genuine request from the landlord.

‘Now try locking it. But remember to try only once, okay? Or else you might lock yourself in or out,’ Shivam had said, using all his charm and patience. He’d then pushed the door close for Mahika to try. She’d opened the door without fumbling, feeling light with relief.

Last night she’d concluded the PIN code was a bait to lure her into some dark place. But it seemed Shivam knew Mahika better. He’d given her the passcode because he knew she’d forget it. Just as she’d forgotten the ATM PIN code in the New Port shopping mall in New Jersey. Not once but twice.

#

Then

March, 1999

New Port Mall

New Jersey, USA

Shivam dropped off Mahika at the New Port shopping mall with a to-do list—withdraw cash, finish the grocery shopping and call him. Mahika was excited that Shivam had taken her feedback seriously regarding making friends in New Jersey. He’d invited his colleagues for dinner that night, which was why she’d come to the mall to shop for groceries. Unlike Shivam, Mahika loved going out, meeting people and making new friends. She was looking forward to socializing with Shivam’s colleagues and their families. But a fiasco at the ATM had ruined everything. Mahika had punched the wrong passcode at the ATM. Thrice, freezing the account.

‘Let’s go and get this sorted at the bank. But first I need to call my colleagues to cancel the dinner. You couldn’t have chosen a better day and a better way to embarrass me. As it is, my colleagues wonder what you do at home the entire day. What was the hurry that you punched the same numbers, especially when the machine rejected it the first two times? You could have called me, no? This is probably why you get rejected in every

interview, Mahi. You rush the answers rather than think and respond,’ Shivam said.

Shivam was right. What was so difficult about remembering the four-digit PIN? And why hadn’t she called him to reconfirm before punching the digits in the very last attempt?

Mahika’s impetuosity had yet again caused him embarrassment. And Shivam’s perfections were so glaring that everything dimmed in their glare. Her inability to find a job had further diminished her confidence.

#

Now

Today, by forgetting the passcode, Mahika had proved Shivam right. Even though she was sure the code was 192.

Maybe she’d punched the numbers wrong. She got control of herself and tried the code again. Nothing. She inhaled and exhaled, but her heart was still beating with the same anguish. Mahika was in no position to make mistakes, not when Rudra’s existence depended on her.

She needed to calm down.

Mahika walked to the study and hit play on the old stereo player that had travelled with her from India to New Jersey, and then to Singapore. The stereo played a cassette of her father speaking. She’d accidentally found the cassette while looking for the letters her father had written her, buried in a stash of things she had brought with her after her father’s death.

Mahika’s father started learning meditation after her mother’s death. But what had started as a journey to find inner peace had soon become his passion. He conducted free sessions for his students, who’d been keen to learn. Mahika had recorded one such session—‘Let’s Talk Meditation’—at the campus hall as a keepsake.

Hearing her father’s voice felt as close to being with him. She followed her father’s instructions and inhaled and exhaled as he directed. It worked temporarily, calming her. She returned to the door to try again, but the rejecting beep dumped cold water on her courage. Mahika sat on the couch,

ready to give up when the life within her kicked. Hard and intense. She placed her palms on her belly and waited for Rudra to calm down. But he kicked with more rigour, sending a jolt into her womb. Mahika hugged herself, bracing for the impact. The baby showed no mercy. He was kicking hard, not letting her breathe. And then Mahika noticed the pattern in his kicks. She brushed away the thought, but then he kicked again. Twice. Paused. Kicked again. And then five strong kicks. Mahika pressed her hand on her belly. He was kicking in a pattern. Was Rudra talking to her in numbers?

She was surely out of her mind.

But her womb was still pulsating. She was looking for numbers, and he was kicking her in numbers.

You are going mad. Totally mad.

Mahika went to the panel and punched in the numbers to prove herself wrong. But the lock gave away. Mahika dropped to her knees. Her husband of five years had changed the passcode to keep her locked in—and her ten-week-old foetus had somehow deciphered the code to free her.

What had Shivam created? How did the life within her know she was struggling with the lock? How in the world had he deciphered the code?

Her breath echoed in her ears.

‘Do you understand me? If yes, kick me,’ Mahika said uncertainly.

This had to be a dream. She’d wake up soon.

Mahika remained on the floor, her hand on her belly, waiting for her dream to end. But Rudra kicked her, confirming his cognizance. Mahika blinked away her tears. ‘Do you understand that I’m your mother? Kick me if you do.’

Rudra kicked.

‘And you also know that Shivam is your father?’

He kicked again.

But she hadn’t asked the baby to kick this time.

‘How do you know the passcode, Rudra?’ Mahika asked in a slow whisper. She was still waiting for her trance to shatter.

This time no kicks rocked her womb. She realized her mistake and reframed the question. ‘Did you know I was looking for a code to open the lock?’

He kicked again.

‘Can you see me?’ she asked, with a fear of the unnatural crawling into the nook and crannies of her brain.

Nothing.

‘Can you see me? Kick me if you can.’

Nothing.

If he couldn’t see through, how had he guessed what was going on?

‘Can you see the door? Kick if yes.’

Silence.

Mahika’s mind reeled in shock. The life in her womb could know what was happening in the outside world without seeing. She shook her head. ‘Do you know you are in my womb?’

Another kick and Mahika felt a shiver run down her spine. Surely this couldn’t be happening. Mahika closed the door and went to the study. Her search for information on genetically modified babies got no concrete results. She searched ‘hallucinations during pregnancy’ and found various articles supporting her thoughts. She felt relief thinking her mind was simply at fault. Then an article about demonic possession during pregnancy steered her in a different direction. She thought again about how the anonymous notes sounded like her father. Mahika had heard stories of rebirth and lost souls finding ways to get closure on their past lives.

Before she could decide which theory to go with, Rudra kicked her again, and this time Mahika jumped out of her skin.

She was scared of the life within her—more scared than she was of her husband who had created it.

Rudra

March 3, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

So, there was a way to communicate with my mother, and I had nailed it.

I could use kicks to communicate with the outside world.

Now, who would've thought?

And what was better, my mother had understood. She was talking to me, asking questions and waiting for my responses.

Nobel Prize this year goes to Rudra for inventing a new mode of communication: the kick code.

I was still high on my unusual achievement when the spell-casting voice returned. My mother was playing the audio recording again.

‘Stay in the moment, and let all your thoughts come and go. Don’t push them away. Let them flow. Get present to your worry and your happiness.’

My mother was following these instructions, breathing in and out. She seemed calm but I wasn’t. This morning, this gentleman’s techniques helped me conjure those numbers from nowhere. What was my mother’s agenda now?

You came up with those numbers on your own. The voice is just asking you to relax. Maybe you heard the passcode on the way back from the clinic and all it took was a calm mind to recall them.

I ignored my inner voice and followed the instructions, but my mind was agitated, and the anticipation of spotting something besides that glowing dot was ruining things. I was about to give up when I felt a force sinking between my eyebrows. A moment of nothingness. Then a sudden surge of energy flew through my body, and the power of an unbroken current gushed through my cells.

My mind unfurled, taking me away from the world I was in to a new one, where I could see everything. Colours were running riot in my imaginary world. I was in an oddly familiar courtyard. Then I heard someone writhing in pain.

A boy in a white button-down shirt and electric-blue shorts was tumbling down the stairs. His fall was excruciatingly slow as if I was pulling one frame at a time from my memory. I was somewhere between a trance and a recall. Still, the boy’s scream formed a hard ball of pain in my stomach.

‘Sorry, Papa. It won’t happen again,’ the boy pleaded as he landed at the foot of the stairs. Seeing his bruised purple skin caused a burning sensation in my skin.

You’re imagining it.

The boy stood and looked up at the man at the top of the stairs. But those light-brown eyes were fixed on me. The man’s burning gaze was setting me ablaze. I felt a jolt of pain in my forehead right where the boy had been cut during the fall. A gush of warm liquid trickled down. I wiped the blood from my eyebrow and spotted the boy doing the same.

Was he copying my actions, or was I imitating his movements?

I touched my forehead to feel the wound and the boy did the same. However, my forehead was unscathed.

Reliving a memory can sometimes be as traumatizing as living it, my friend.

My world turned dark again. The rhythm of my mother’s heartbeat meant my trance had shattered. But every part of my body still ached as if I’d just survived a fall.

It’s nothing but the lingering taste of a nightmare.

And that assumption was my first mistake.

Mahika Rathod

March 4, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

‘You compared me to this nature’s joke. You’re free to go wherever you want,’ Shivam said and pushed Mahika. Shivam’s anger had again manifested into physical violence. But this time it wasn’t as subtle as twisting her wrist. In his rage, he’d pushed her down the stairs, and he stood watching her tumble as if studying the course of the rock he’d tossed down a hill.

A stream of blood between her legs meant the baby was gone.

Mahika woke up soaked in sweat and felt the loss all over again.

Shivam was sleeping like a baby, with his hands tucked under his right cheek and his knees folded into his stomach. He looked so innocent. But a man who had locked his wife and tailored his flesh and blood was far from innocent.

He was dangerous.

Mahika wanted to run away, but a safe escape wasn't possible without her passport. With Rudra's growing powers, taking him away from Shivam wasn't a challenge, hiding him was.

Yesterday morning, she'd meant to go to the location mentioned in the anonymous note. But after Rudra deciphered the passcode, she'd spent the entire afternoon testing the life growing within her, trying to decide how much was real and how much was her imagination.

Mahika had started with the simplest question. 'What colour is the sky? Kick one for green, two for brown and three for blue.' Rudra had kicked her three times. By evening, Mahika had understood the range and scope of Rudra's abilities. But how on earth Shivam had managed to break the laws of nature was a question still unanswered.

How could he trap a fully evolved mind in an undeveloped body? Was this baby a demon, just like in horror movies? But demons don't help with passcodes. Is the soul trapped in her womb her father's?

Mahika was still trying to make sense of Rudra's unusual powers when the first rays of sunlight snuck through the blinds. Shivam was still sleeping like a log, thanks to his sleeping pills. Maybe the pills helped put his conscience to sleep too. He'd started taking them soon after her first miscarriage.

Had he designed that baby too? Was the first baby's Down syndrome because of Shivam? Was he the reason for all her miscarriages?

That Shivam might've messed up her previous pregnancies too added more colour to her rage. Mahika walked out of the bedroom, bolted the study's door behind her and woke the computer up. She typed the words with her shaking hands: Down syndrome and genetic modification. Her heart shattered into pieces as Mahika spotted Shivam's name in some

research papers available online. But these research papers were written a year after her miscarriage.

‘And we’d conceived that baby naturally.’

Mahika’s voice woke Rudra up. She patted her stomach and said, ‘Hey, there. Did I wake you up? Go back to sleep, my baby. It’s too early.’ But Rudra was wide awake, tossing and turning. She was gripped with an untameable urge to hold Rudra in her arms. Mahika placed one hand on her belly and scrolled from one web page to another to find more about Shivam’s research.

She couldn’t understand all the jargon-loaded research papers. However, Mahika could conclude that Shivam’s proposed method to silence the extra gene had laid the foundation for new clinical trials to treat Down syndrome.

But it was three years too late for her first baby.

The ache in her heart again grew, and today the pain felt too weighty to bear alone, so she shared it with Rudra, hoping to gain some respite.

‘It was my first Christmas in New Jersey, Rudra. And I was still learning to live with your father’s mood swings. He was joyful one moment, and the next moment, something as tiny as a strand of hair on a pillow cover would leave him agitated. That morning, a kitchen towel left on a dining chair had upset him. He stormed out, saying nothing. His silent temper made me feel such guilt. I still remember vividly how I was sitting on the stoop of our walk-up apartment, missing my father, when the phone rang. Before I could say I was missing him, my father started apologizing for making a mistake. He kept saying he’d made a blunder and had to correct it. Before I could ask what was troubling him, he asked about Shivam. He asked me if I was happy and whether Shivam loved me or not. I had the same questions, but the fact that I had to ask them gave me my answers. I didn’t, however, want to add more fuel to my father’s worries. He didn’t wait for my reply, anyway. He said he wanted to tell me something. My father paused the way he’d paused when he’d told me about my mother’s cancer. I wanted to be with him, to help him with whatever he was struggling with. Then he said he’d come and talk to me; he needed to have this conversation face to face. But before he could explain what he was talking about, his voice trailed off.

There was a loud thud and then silence, which ripped my heart apart. Something had happened to my father, and I had no means to help him. I heard him writhing in pain, but by the time I sought his neighbour's help, it was too late. My father had died of a cardiac arrest while talking to me, and I could do nothing, Rudra. Nothing.'

Mahika wiped her nose with the sleeve of her nightgown. She felt queasy. But Rudra kicked again as if demanding her to continue.

She should be careful about how much she told him. She didn't know who was living in her womb and what he'd think of her.

But Mahika ignored the warning in her head.

'The year-end travel rush took away my chance to bid a proper farewell to my dead father. We missed his cremation and reached home just in time to scatter his ashes. My father was gone, but the house still smelt of him. His clothes, his books and his temple, everything had traces of his presence, creating the illusion he was alive. For days, I tricked myself into believing that my father's sudden death was a nightmare, that my father would soon return to finish packing his half-packed suitcase still resting on my mother's side of the bed, and that he'd come to visit us in New Jersey. We found a ticket to New York on his desk. He'd been planning to travel to New York two days hence, but something had stopped his heart, ruining everything. I told Shivam my father regretted making a mistake, and Shivam went to my father's office to ask around, but the research at my father's lab was going on smoothly. We both hunted for clues that could explain the reason for his sudden cardiac arrest, but nothing was unusual in the house. According to Bua, my father had been found on the floor with the phone's receiver next to him and the Bhagavad Gita in his hand. My grandmother speculated that my father had seen his death coming, and that's why in his final moments he'd been reading the Gita. But his ticket to New Jersey, his phone call and his regret made no sense. I couldn't find closure. Whatever had bothered my father that night was gone with him.'

The ache buried in Mahika's heart had resurfaced. But sharing her past with Rudra felt therapeutic. She wanted to let the burden off her chest.

‘I’d planned to stay for a while with my widowed grandmother and my aunt, but I found I was pregnant. My grandmother was thrilled at the news because the timing was such that she thought her son’s soul was back in my womb. The idea that my father’s soul had returned felt illogical yet comforting. I was desperate to keep any piece of my father. Unfortunately, the news of my pregnancy aborted my plan to stay back in India. The morning sickness gripped me hard, and consequently, Shivam had to extend his leave to help me take care of my father’s house. My father had gone from a person to an idea and the only reality left in my life was Shivam. He drove my father’s car, sat in his armchair and read the newspaper still being delivered to my father. I could do nothing to bring him back but the regret of leaving him alone still lives in my bones. Shivam helped me pack up and brought me back to New Jersey to start afresh. To my surprise, my pregnancy had changed him. He had stopped fussing about the order of the spice jars or the folded towels. And when my morning sickness was at its worst, Shivam stayed by my side for days, cooking for me and feeding me, without bothering about the lab. His unconditional love and the pregnancy had helped me heal, but before my aches could fade, the twelve-week ultrasound revealed extra fluid at the back of our baby’s neck. It was the first indicator of Down syndrome, and the [amniocentesis](#) test that followed broke all hell loose. The procedure was risky. It could trigger a miscarriage, but Shivam decided to go for it. Shivam’s mood and temperament switched like a flipped coin as soon as the test confirmed that our baby was a Down syndrome baby. The baby he’d loved so much a few days ago had turned into a burden. He pushed me to sign the abortion paper. But I couldn’t do it, Rudra. I couldn’t bring myself to end a life. The baby in my womb was the only thing holding me together. But your father gave me no choice.’

Mahika stifled a sob and resumed, ‘We were about to go to the clinic for the abortion when I requested him to not take away my reason to live. I was shattered after my father’s death, Rudra. And I was clinging to the baby. But one thing led to another, and I slipped down the stairs. I lost my first baby before Down syndrome or your father could take her from me. It was my biggest mistake.’

Rudra

March 4, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Hey, is there a correlation between the boy in your dream falling down the stairs and your mother's fall?

Last night, I'd discounted my vision as a trance, but now, hearing of my mother falling down the stairs, I felt my thinking shift.

That's why you felt pain. Was the man you saw at the top of the stairs your father? Is the trance somehow related to you?

I had to return to the boy's world to find the connection. So, I left my mother with her grief as I strove to find the connection between my visions and her past. With my mother's erratic breathing, I found it difficult to turn on the light between my brows. But with some effort, the sense of calmness returned, and I geared myself to meet the boy who'd survived the fall in my last nightmare. Instead, I was greeted by a thunderclap. It startled me as it surprised the man sitting in the chair. He walked to the window to shut it. The gentle swaying of the curtains stopped, but the rain began to batter the roof. The man sat back down and toyed with his desk lamp, tilting it repeatedly to create a dance of shadows on the wall. Once the light was sufficient for him to read, he picked up a book from the table, removed its jacket and pulled out a paper. The man narrowed his eyes as he read the note. The paper looked old and tattered, and the ink was faded. I went to steal a glance at the note, but the man fell with a loud thud. He clenched his hand to his chest, screaming for help. I wanted to help, but a shooting pain went through my heart. The man's forehead was beaded with sweat, just like mine. I also gasped for breath.

He's dying, and what you're experiencing is a near-death experience. Run away before it's too late.

I willed myself out of the trance, leaving the man alone to die. It's just a dream, I assured myself.

Or did you just visualize your grandfather's death?

But my mother hadn't mentioned any paper. She'd said my grandfather had died while talking to her on the phone. The man in my dream had died because of that note.

He pulled it from a book, and your mother did mention your grandfather had been reading the Bhagavad Gita just before his death.

She'd never mentioned any note. So where had I conjured it from? What did it say to cause the old man's death?

Maybe you're meant to help your mother get closure for her father's death. Maybe the vision you had about the boy yesterday is connected to your grandfather's death in some way.

Shivam Rathod

March 4, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Shivam woke up with a bitter taste in his mouth. His sleeping pill had coated his mouth with a metallic taste. But he could live with it, because, thanks to his medicine, the loop of suspicion running in his mind had temporarily paused. The aroma of roasted cumin seeds lifted his spirits. Things were getting back to routine with Mahika's fading nausea.

Shivam closed his eyes and recalled the baby's growth chart, which he'd studied last night to discover the anomalies and the variations. He'd plotted a graph—the most inconsistent he'd ever created. Shivam hoped that in the coming weeks the baby's growth would reveal a pattern, as he'd found no cause for the baby's unusual growth. Moreover, to formulate the self-corrective DNA, the baby's brain had to acknowledge the limitations of his body, which he couldn't do—not from the womb and not with his underdeveloped brain.

He'd be able to do it once Shivam taught him.

But only if he survived.

Shivam felt guilt washing over him. How far was he willing to go to get a perfect baby? He'd already robbed Mahika's womb thrice. Well, technically twice. The third time had been Dr Steven's fault. However, Mahika had no

right to blame him for the first two miscarriages too. Because it was Mahika who'd caused Shivam to embark on this path toward perfection.

#

Then

January, 2000

New Jersey, USA

'You're a genetic engineer. Please do something,' Mahika said, holding the report that indicated a soft marker of Down syndrome. While Mahika lived in denial, Shivam geared himself for the inevitable, waiting for the outcome of the amniocentesis test in two weeks. Shivam wanted to save the baby too, but taming the extra chromosome was beyond Shivam's abilities.

But she'd never taken interest in his research, so how would she know?

'Can't you do something about it? Can't you ask someone to help us? I can't endure one more loss, Shivam. I will die with the baby.' Mahika had cried for hours when Shivam broached the topic of abortion. Shivam knew she was impractical, but this had proved that Mahika was dumb too.

She was expecting him to help her. How could a woman not know what her father loved the most and what her husband did for a living?

Yet, he'd shown patience.

'Mahika, I can edit genomes to correct genetic defects, but my knowledge and the scope of my work are limited to plants. I can't mute this extra chromosome in a human body. As far as I know, this isn't even possible yet.' He'd swallowed the insult that he'd wanted to hurl at her for not knowing what he did at work. However, Mahika had set the gears in Shivam's head into motion when she'd requested him to be her knight in shining armour.

He figured there might be a way to mute this extra chromosome. Maybe he could use nature's mechanism of chopping up and destroying a foreign invader's DNA on the trisomy gene.

The idea had grown into a full-blown research map in Shivam's mind. He needed someone to figure out a way to supply the DNA template of his choosing, thereby correcting a mutation.

Shivam began exploring the feasibility of this idea. Although the amniocentesis test results were due, at this point, in a week, Shivam would sign up Mahika for a clinical trial if a specialist in in-vitro gene editing could help him save the baby Mahika wanted so desperately. Like a maniac, Shivam began his search for an in-vitro genome-editing expert. After screening a list of prenatal gene-therapy specialists, Shivam found someone trained enough to inject the DNA template directly into foetal tissue. Dr Steven Ng, a visiting professor at NYU, was an award-winning prenatal gene therapist. His research paper on injecting genetically altered DNA into the brains of foetal humans caught Shivam's attention. Shivam called Dr Steven Ng, hoping he could splice the DNA and trigger the cell's natural repair mechanisms. But Dr Steven had dashed his hope.

'Editing at that stage would pass on any changes to every cell, including the ones that would go on to make sperms or eggs in the baby's body. Moreover, this kind of editing is illegal in the United States. In the process of curing a child, this technique could potentially expose [the mother](#) to risks, including dangerous immune reactions. Because the editing is taking place inside her reproductive tract, some wayward DNA components might wind their way up to her fallopian tubes and into her ovaries, potentially making changes to other unfertilized eggs.'

Shivam had not got discouraged. He read all the papers on germline editing and utero gene editing, but it led to nothing. A call from Mahika's clinic confirming Down syndrome baby made him pause his research. He had bigger fish to fry—convincing Mahika to get rid of this baby. But Mahika was hell-bent on keeping her first baby at any cost, arguing with him like a child throwing tantrums.

'Please, Shivam, I love the baby as much as I love you. I know the baby won't be perfect, but she'll be ours. And just as we love each other with all our imperfections, you'll fall in love with the baby too,' Mahika said.

‘You compare me to this nature’s joke? You think you’re with me because you love me? Stop fooling yourself, Mahika. You’re with me because you don’t have an option. No one in your extended family was ready to stay with you after your father’s death, even after knowing you were pregnant. But I do have an option here, and I’m going to exercise it because it will be me who will foot the medical bills. Why don’t you call one of your relatives and ask if they’ll help you raise a Down syndrome baby?’ Shivam said and walked to the door, threatening to leave the house.

‘Shivam, you misunderstood me. I love you the way you are. But I’ve fallen in love with this little one too.’ Mahika went to Shivam, tugging on his sleeve, begging him not to force her to have an abortion.

‘Are you coming with me? Or shall I drop you at the airport?’ Shivam asked.

‘Please, Shivam. Don’t do this to me.’ Mahika tried to hug him. Shivam pushed her away, so her tears wouldn’t smear his work shirt. He’d meant the push to be gentle, but Mahika lost her balance and fell down the stairs. Pushing her had been impulsive, but not helping her wasn’t a result of him purely freezing in shock—not when the fall had made the unwanted baby disappear.

Mahika Rathod

March 4, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

‘Thank you for being there for me, Rudra. Talking to you has sobered me up a notch.’ Mahika let out the breath she’d held deep inside her chest for so long. All the talking had unburdened her, and it had given her a sense of direction and purpose— she wouldn’t lose Rudra at any cost.

In the kitchen, Mahika prepared Shivam’s favourite breakfast and lunch and waited for him to come downstairs. She replaced the tears in her eyes and the grief in her heart with a smile of determination.

‘The house smells so good. What’s for breakfast? I’ve missed your cooking so much in the last few days,’ Shivam said, rubbing his palms

together in excitement.

‘Your favourite, poha.’ Mahika served him. She smiled too.

‘Thanks for keeping the noise levels down and not dropping anything while cooking. I slept well. This is yummy. Some new recipe?’ Shivam asked, spooning another bite.

‘Yeah, I don’t like the smell of turmeric these days, so I made the poha like Mexican rice,’ Mahika said.

‘I love it.’ Shivam spooned another bite. ‘Last night I forgot to tell you that someone will come to install a camera between 3–5 p.m. today. There’ve been a few incidents on this road, so the landlord wants to be safe. The camera is only for the main gate.’ Shivam was trying to read her expression, but Mahika turned to get him a glass of water.

As if locking the door wasn’t enough—he was going to monitor her movements too.

Mahika felt the noose tightening around her.

‘I forgot to ask; did you try the new lock?’ Shivam asked, taking another bite.

‘No, I can barely make it downstairs. But I do remember the passcode, 193,’ she said, trapping Shivam in his own game.

‘Mahi, it’s 192. Not 193,’ Shivam said casually.

Mahika felt the nascent tears burning at the back of her eyes. Shivam was such a smooth liar, and a manipulator too. It had taken her so long to figure that out.

Mahika was right. She had not forgotten the ATM PIN code in New Jersey either. Shivam had been playing games with her since the beginning, tricking her into believing things he wanted to. A wave of familiar seething anger started inside her, but she smiled a nervous smile.

‘Sorry, I can’t remember a number. I’d better write down the code.’

‘Yeah. Good idea. I’ll see you this evening. The installation crew won’t bother you, as I’ve already told the owner you aren’t well.’ Shivam spun another lie and walked out, leaving Mahika alone with an anonymous note, an address and two ten-dollar bills.

She hadn't made up her mind. However, if they were installing the camera this afternoon, Mahika only had the morning to take this adventure. Her impetuosity took over again. She changed into jeans and a T-shirt to head to 2 Stadium Road. She'd run a quick search on the address. The anonymous note had pointed her to the Singapore Indoor Stadium. There wasn't much around that place—no mall and no office buildings.

Maybe it was the address to Shivam's secret lab.

Mahika punched the code, 215, and left the house, inhaling and exhaling the air of freedom. She flagged down a taxi at the road's end and let the adrenaline pumping in her veins diminish her fear of heading to an unfamiliar place.

'Seat belt, please,' the driver said and pressed his foot on the accelerator. She felt her heart beating in her throat as the driver steered the car in an unfamiliar direction.

What if this was a trap? She should've thought about it before jumping into the taxi.

But the magnificent grey cone-shaped building appearing on the horizon indicated it was too late to double back. She studied the terrain. This place wasn't secluded; there was a bus stop and an outdoor car park. Mahika quickly glanced at the cars. Shivam's car wasn't there.

'Seven dollars and twenty cents. You need a receipt?' the driver asked. Mahika paid him using one of the two ten-dollar bills.

'It's 2 Stadium Road?' she asked.

'There, mah,' the driver said and pointed to the shophouses nestled under the building. She walked to the billboard displaying all the shophouses on 2 Stadium Road. Several eateries were lined up under the indoor stadium. Mahika pulled out the note from her pocket. It didn't mention a unit. However, the name 'Rajasi Rasoi' caught her attention. She walked around and spotted the Indian restaurant in one corner under the stadium. This could be where the note writer wanted to meet her.

Or the restaurant's exteriors were just a facade?

The white-and-red 'Sorry, we're closed' placard hanging on the door suggested the latter. While the neighbouring restaurants were gearing up to

welcome patrons for lunch, the Indian restaurant had no activity. Mahika looked around. The dark-brown stained wood gazebos with sliding pastel-coloured curtains were evenly placed in the open space by the riverside, and the elegant outdoor cane furniture in the gazebos was spruced up with multicolour weatherproof seats and cushions. The sunlight was shining on the Turkish light fixtures hanging in the gazebos, creating a prismatic effect on the glass tabletops. This was a fine-dining restaurant by the riverside. But how was it linked to the baby in her womb?

Mahika cupped her hands on the restaurant's glass door and peered inside. She saw a long dining hall and a bar with glasses hanging above the counter.

'Do you need anything?' a man asked, startling Mahika. He wore a blue button-down shirt and a red tie. An old man standing next to him shared a striking resemblance to him.

Before Mahika could come up with an excuse for peering in, the old man said, 'We're closed for a few days.'

'No worries,' Mahika said and walked away. She felt a wave of nausea come over her. She swallowed hard the bile in her throat and turned to head back home when a clanking sound caught her attention. The man in the red tie had unlocked the glass door. The *We are hiring* board made her connect the dots.

It's time for you to stand on your feet and fight back.

So, this is what it was about. A job. Shivam had definitely not written the notes. The note writer was clueless about the havoc her hormones created in the first twelve weeks of her pregnancy.

All you must do is believe in yourself. The words from the anonymous note had come back to haunt her.

But believing in herself wasn't enough, and the urge to empty her stomach was announcing that loud and clear.

'Are you okay, beti?' the old man asked.

'Uncle, is there a washroom nearby?'

Mahika rushed to the restroom a few steps away. She threw up the two spoons of poha she'd managed to eat that morning.

And you were thinking about working here?

She stared at her reflection in the restroom mirror. Her eyes had receded further into her sockets, and her hair had lost its lustre. She looked sicker than she felt. Mahika walked out and found the man in the red tie standing there.

‘Are you okay, ma’am? My father sent me to check on you,’ he explained.

‘Something I ate,’ Mahika said.

‘Cold water will help. If you can follow me.’ He beckoned her to the restaurant’s back door.

This was her chance to see the restaurant.

This could be a trap too.

‘Ma’am?’

‘Thanks. A glass of cold water will help,’ she said and followed him. She gazed again at the vacancy placard. Her declining nausea had instilled in her some hope.

Maybe she could make it happen.

The old man beckoned for her to sit.

‘This will help,’ the man in the red tie said and handed her a mini mineral water bottle from the chiller. Mahika gulped the entire bottle in one breath and asked, ‘When will the restaurant reopen, uncleji?’

The little raise of his bushy eyebrows meant that the old man was startled by her abrupt question.

‘Soon. Our main chef had to go back to India. So, we’re facing some staffing issues, beti. We will resolve them soon. You like the food here?’

‘But we’re only open from eleven thirty to three thirty. How come you showed up at nine thirty?’ the man in the red tie asked before she could reply to the old man’s question.

Mahika’s cheeks burnt with shame, as if she was caught with her hand in a cookie jar. ‘I came here looking for a job,’ she said and felt like kicking herself for blurting that out.

‘Do you have any work experience?’ the man in the red tie asked.

The question that had shattered Mahika in every interview, big or small, was back. But she couldn't be wrong this time.

'Not really. But I love to cook. And I can follow any recipe,' Mahika said with wavering confidence.

She was taking it too far.

'The job requires long hours and standing all day, so we prefer a male cook,' the old man said.

Beads of sweat lined her forehead. Her nausea had grown too. The man in the red tie read her anxiety. He offered her another mineral water bottle and a serviette too. She gulped the water in one go, still thinking of a reply.

'Let's hear her out, Papa. Something will be better than nothing. If she can join as early as tomorrow then maybe we won't need to close the restaurant for business,' he said. His warm smile encouraged her to pitch her case.

'I can start today . . . I need this job,' Mahika said. A tear rolled down her cheek, startling her audience. The man in the red tie recovered first.

'Are you okay? Why do you need a job so urgently?' The concern in his voice melted Mahika's guard. She again acted on impulse. Pure impulse.

'I'm trapped in an abusive marriage, and my husband won't let me go back to India. I need to earn money to buy a ticket to India, but my architecture degree is not accredited in Singapore. I can cook well, uncleji. Please help me. Please. I want to go home.' Mahika swallowed back her tears, but more droplets trickled down her cheek.

'What about your parents? Siblings?' the old man asked.

'I have no one. My father died three years ago, and my mother lost her life to cancer years ago.' Mahika felt the ache of losing them all over again as she uttered those words.

'You can call this women's hotline. The organization is called AWARE. I can connect you to the woman who is part of this NGO,' the man in the red tie offered. Before Mahika could react to it, he had fished his phone out of his trousers' pocket and was scrolling through the contact list.

You are so stupid. This will put Rudra in danger. Run.

Mahika stood up with a jerk and said, 'Thanks, but I can't do that. Sorry to bother you. I think I should go home now.' She walked to the door, crushing her courage and hope beneath her feet. She was a fool to think that she could get a job. No one had ever found her fit for any job that she'd applied to. The tears in her eyes had started falling unrestrained.

'What all can you cook?' the man in the red tie asked and stopped Mahika in her tracks. She wiped the tears with the back of her hand, turned and said, 'Almost anything.'

'Anything?' the old man challenged.

'I can follow any recipe, uncleji,' she replied, swallowing the sob in her voice.

'Okay. Let's test that.' The old man gave her a scrutinizing glance and then beckoned her to follow him to the kitchen. There, he pulled a tattered recipe book from a shelf.

'Have you eaten this? Can you cook this?' he asked and handed her the recipe book.

The old man wanted her to cook ghevar instead of the standard dishes offered in any north Indian restaurant's menu. The restaurant's owner had given her the most difficult test he could, as ghevar was one of the most difficult and complicated Indian desserts.

He wasn't keen on giving her the job.

But Mahika wasn't willing to give up so easily. She had cooked ghevar for her father a couple of times. It was her father's favourite dessert. Mahika had surprised him by making it on his birthday after her mother's death.

'Can you cook this?' he asked.

Mahika ran through the ingredients. The recipe was similar to the one she had used.

Too much of a coincidence.

She remembered her father's words. 'I don't know how good you'll be at designing the houses, but this makes me think that you can be the next Sanjeev Kapoor or Tarla Dalal,' he'd complimented her after tasting the ghevar she'd made for the very first time.

Why was everything pointing back to her father?

‘Murli will help you with the ingredients,’ the old man said. And, on cue, a tall, lanky man with tanned skin came in. Mahika acknowledged his presence with a nervous smile. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. Or was it her growing nausea?

How would she cook this without throwing up?

‘Do you like it with rabri, uncleji?’ Mahika asked.

It was how her father used to eat it.

‘You can serve it the way you want. We’re closed today, so you have all the time you need,’ he said and walked out.

‘I’ll only need an hour,’ Mahika announced.

‘What all do you need?’ Murli asked and handed Mahika an apron and a disposable cap. Mahika had never felt so confident and lacking in confidence in a single moment. Shivam’s derogatory remarks had made her doubt everything about herself over the last five years.

The only thing as consistent as Shivam’s perfections were her imperfections.

Mahika pushed away the thought, popped a ginger candy in her mouth and jumped into action. By the time the sugar syrup had started bubbling into a thick, viscous liquid, Mahika had finished her last ginger candy. Mahika stirred the milk boiling on the back burner and then swiftly moved to the third stove to fry the batter. She dropped a pinch in the simmering oil to test the temperature, and the waft of oil nauseated her.

‘Give her the grill gloves,’ the man in the red tie said as he entered the kitchen.

‘You’re not going to work today, Neil Bhaiya?’ Murli asked and handed the gloves to Mahika.

‘I will go after lunch.’ He walked over to her.

‘Uncle is watching the match again?’ Murli asked.

‘It’s worth all his money. You should have seen him doing his typical dance when India won against Pakistan,’ he said.

‘There is a cricket World Cup going on?’ Mahika asked.

‘Yes, there was a match last Saturday. We won against Pakistan. Papa is watching it for the third time,’ he said and rolled his eyes.

Mahika felt a shiver run down her spine. The anonymous notes had sounded like her father, and then she had been asked to cook his favourite sweet, and now the man sitting in the dining hall was watching the repeat telecast of the India–Pakistan match like her father. She brushed away the illogical thoughts, stirred the sugar syrup and waited for the oil to cool down a bit.

‘Are you okay?’ Neil asked.

‘Yes,’ Mahika said and recalled the right height to drop in the batter. It came back like rote learning. She poured the batter into the piping-hot oil. It sizzled and spread immediately, forming an intricate web. She breathed a sigh of relief, as she’d cleared the most difficult hurdle. She poured another batch of batter into the sizzling oil, simultaneously pushing away the first batch with a chopstick. The first time she’d done this, it had taken her several attempts to get it right.

Hopefully, she wouldn’t need a second try today.

The kitchen had turned hot, and her nausea had begun to linger at the back of her throat. The cricket commentary running outside was interfering with her ability to concentrate.

‘Tendulkar on his way, in spanking fashion. The timing is exquisite,’ the commentator said. Mahika had to use every bit of self-control to pull away from the match. Sachin Tendulkar was Mahika and her father’s favourite player. The memories of the 1999 World Cup came unbidden. She had an urge to turn off the gas and rush to see him play. The India–Pakistan match was her father’s favourite match of all. Hers too. But Mahika held herself back and skilfully lifted the crisp golden-brown ghevar from the pan and placed it in the sugar syrup.

‘Lovely way to get off the mark. The placement was spot-on. That’s the reason why he is a star.’ The fervour in the commentator’s voice had again pulled Mahika to the commentary.

‘How many runs did Tendulkar score?’ Mahika asked, keeping a close check on her enthusiasm.

‘Ninety-eight off seventy-five balls. Are you sure you want to make another sugar syrup? It will make the ghevar too sweet,’ Murli said and pulled her back to the kitchen.

‘It’s for the plating,’ Mahika said. While the sugar syrup thickened, Mahika recalled the method to spin a caramelized sugar ring. She shaped the sugar caramel into a bangle and waited for it to solidify.

‘He is out. Shoaib Akhtar had come back in the attack. It was a very quick delivery. He was dismissed. What a dramatic end to a magnificent performance by Sachin Tendulkar.’

This was the point in the match when her father would sit on the edge of his seat and curse the entire Indian team for completely relying on Tendulkar.

‘Is the ghevar ready, Didi? Shall I call Uncle and Bhaiya?’ Murli asked. It was showtime.

In under one hour, Mahika had plated the golden ghevar ring on a black platter with a splash of rabri. Her chest swelling with pride; she’d placed the sugar ring vertically in the centre of the ghevar. The sudden silence in the dining hall, followed by the footsteps, meant they were heading towards the kitchen. Mahika’s heart raced in her chest, ready to burst out.

‘I can’t bring myself to spoil this beauty,’ the old man said and paused to stare at the plating. He took a tiny bite, and his face broke into a smile. Mahika had passed this test with flying colours.

‘As sweet as India’s win,’ he said and handed the plate to Neil.

‘Mmmm . . . it’s mind-blowing, and it tastes very close to what Ma used to make. Right, Papa?’ Neil said and spooned another bite.

‘You cook really well and quick too,’ the old man said and passed the plate and a fresh spoon to Murli.

‘Very tasty. She reminds me of her too. Look how Didi has cleaned the kitchen on the go just like Maaji.’ Murli had also voted for her.

Mahika had yet to taste the ghevar, but the sweetness of their words had begun melting in her mouth. She’d long forgotten the taste of praise and self-worth. In Shivam’s eyes, everything about Mahika was imperfect—the way she dressed, the way she interacted with others and the way she

cleaned the house. Shivam had never missed a chance to highlight her faults—sometimes in public and sometimes at home. But today, someone was praising her, and it felt different. Happy different.

‘Do you bake as well?’ Neil asked and took another bite. His eyes stayed on her face.

‘I took a few baking courses when I lived in New Jersey but purely as a hobby.’ They were about to hire her, but Shivam would never agree to this. And how would she cook in her condition? Sneaking out for a day was different from sneaking out daily. She should’ve thought about this before jumping in. Before cooking this ghevar.

Not to forget, a surveillance camera is waiting for you.

‘Although I am tempted, I don’t want to rush into any hiring decisions. This restaurant is my dead wife’s baby. We lost her last year to a stroke, and since then, we’ve been failing to keep our heads above water. All my hiring choices are proving wrong. We’ve lost a lot of patrons,’ the old man said.

Mahika felt relief. She was in no state to take a job this demanding. And how would she convince Shivam?

‘I also need some time to think because I definitely can’t do the long hours. I am already exhausted in cooking this,’ Mahika said and removed the apron and the cap.

She was about to walk away from the first job she’d ever been offered.

This is what happens when you act on impulse. Shivam’s words had dragged her across the coals again.

‘I have a solution to your problem,’ Neil said. ‘What if we can hire you to train our support staff to cook while my father keeps looking for the right chef? As my father shared with you, my mother was the driving force for this place. She planned the menu, standardized the new dishes and so forth. She also trained all the kitchen crew to cook and plate. Perhaps you can help us with that too. And to keep the load light, we’d only open the restaurant during lunch hours until we find a full-time chef. Does that make sense, Papa?’ he asked.

The old man took a moment before giving his approval.

Run away. This all feels too contrived. No one hires without checking references.

‘I need to think about it.’ Her unsure, timid voice was back.

All these years, Mahika had desperately searched for work that could let her stand on her feet, and when she was this close to getting it, she couldn’t accept it. Mahika was about to leave when Neil said, ‘I can drop you off at the MRT station. I’m leaving for office.’ But Mahika politely declined and waited for her taxi to arrive. Neil said, ‘This is our number. You can call us if you have any other questions. It will be a great help if you can work for a few days till we can arrange for a full-time cook. Closing the restaurant for business isn’t the ideal choice, and you turning up at our doorstep felt godsent.’

‘I will think about it,’ Mahika said and waited for her taxi to arrive. Neil walked to his car and fiddled with the seat and the glove compartment, watching her from the corner of his eyes. His scrutinizing gaze had made Mahika regret her impulsive decision to come here. This was likely a trap.

She couldn’t put Rudra in danger.

Mahika boarded the taxi with fear somersaulting in her heart. The taxi had already exited Stadium Road, but it felt as if Neil’s eyes were still following her. She peered through the car’s rear-view mirror; Neil’s car wasn’t there. But Mahika’s skin was lined with goosebumps at the thought of being followed. Was she overanalysing, or had she unknowingly walked into another trap?

‘Which house?’ the driver asked and broke her chain of thoughts.

‘The next one,’ Mahika said.

‘You’re Indian? From Delhi?’ the driver asked, trying to strike up a conversation. But Mahika was in no mental space to keep up the facade of normality.

She nodded and handed him the \$10 bill.

‘Nice property. But must be expensive lah.’ The driver handed her the change.

Mahika smiled and walked away. She was used to this question, as the surroundings reeked of wealth. But Shivam had been offered the same expat

package as the previous person in this position.

Or this was what Shivam had told her.

She was about to unlock the door when she heard footsteps. But there was no one in the driveway. The taxi had left, too. She had forgotten to latch the gate. She walked back to the gate and shut it close this time, catching a glimpse of a silhouette hiding behind the tree by the roadside. The fear of getting caught made her rush back to the house. The loud ring of the phone startled her.

‘Why are you panting?’ Shivam asked. Mahika took a moment to respond.

‘I’ve been vomiting all morning. Then I fell asleep, so I rushed to answer this call.’

‘Did you take your morning dose? The technician is on his way to install the camera, so please stay at home,’ Shivam said.

By changing the passcode, you made sure I stayed behind the doors, Mahika wanted to say, but she said ‘yes’ instead and waited for Shivam to end the call.

Swallowing Shivam’s betrayals tasted like the bitter medicine that her mother used to force down her throat.

Mahika rushed to the bathroom, leant over the bowl and emptied the contents of her stomach. However, instead of cursing herself for being so weak, for the first time in the last five years, Mahika felt good about herself. The trip to the restaurant had transformed something in her. She was willing to return to the restaurant despite the risk involved. Because finding work wasn’t about earning money any more. It was about finding herself, and she had just found a piece of her.

Rudra

March 4, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

My mother’s trip to the restaurant felt like embarking on a roller-coaster ride. I’d expected her to rush out of the house and never return. But the

beep of the lock meant she'd returned, this time locking herself in with the passcode meant to chain her.

And probably to lock you in, too.

I was still trying to understand what was happening when my mother patted and signalled to me that a story was coming my way.

'It took me months to understand the American accent, Rudra. My English wasn't that fluent either. But instead of helping me, your father mocked me. He's a genius who rarely makes a mistake, and I'm an ordinary girl, Rudra. But your father never understood that. He wanted me to be perfect like him, and he never missed a chance to correct me, irrespective of where we were. My confidence started to shatter. I was willing to work in a dollar shop, but this was too menial a job for him. The jobs I got weren't good for me, and the ones he liked were way out of my reach, as my architecture degree wasn't accredited in the States. So, I spent years doing nothing,' she said.

The wobble in her voice made me cry. Something about my mother made me love her and hate her at once.

Now you know how she loves and hates your father at once. This is how love works, defying all logical explanations.

'For the first time in the longest period, I feel worthy of something, Rudra. Today, I found a job and if I can find it once, I can find it again. Anywhere. And that means I can take care of you on my own. I promise you, Rudra, that I will not let you suffer. I'll do whatever it takes to keep you safe.'

This is an interesting crash course on love, my friend. Did you notice that the conversation feels like a game-plan huddle before a cricket game? By the way, have you picked your team?

But there wasn't a choice. I knew she was naive and weak, but the strong surge of love for her had overshadowed my reasoning. Her love was like delicate threads around my heart. Each tug would make it beat harder than before, as if I was the puppet in this story and my mother was the puppeteer, pulling my threads to make me dance.

But someone else is the puppeteer, my friend.



Chapter 5

Eleventh Week

Your baby is now as big as a lime! And his ears have migrated closer to their final destination on either side of his cute little head. His eyes are completely closed and won't open again until week twenty-six.

If you could see your baby's hand, you'd notice they have teeny, delicate fingernails. Also, like all the other organs, his brain and nervous system have almost finished developing.

Twenty-nine weeks to go!

* * *

Rudra

March 12, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Our first trip to the restaurant last week was like signing up for an annual membership of an adventure park, and all thanks to my dear mother, we were maximizing the use of our premium membership by embarking on this endless roller-coaster ride five days a week.

My mornings began with a lurch in my stomach as she would punch the code, stand by the door side and leap out of the house, timing it all right. The entry back home late afternoon was equally thrilling. It was like watching an action-packed domestic thriller, the hold-your-breath kind.

Now, who is comparing life outside the womb to a TV show?

Although my mother was timing her exit and entry by the clock, she was susceptible to mistakes, especially under my genius father's supervision. It wasn't whether she would get caught, it was when. However, I had no

intention to stop her because working in the restaurant had stitched back her shattered self-confidence. I could still feel the cracks, the cracks that widened around my father, but beggars cannot be choosers. So, while my mother toggled between self-doubt and confidence, I swayed between the real and unreal, incessantly solving the jigsaw puzzle of my dreams.

I doubt you can put together this puzzle, my friend. The pieces seem to be coming from different boxes.

The voice in my head had got it right again. My visions were perhaps blurring the boundaries of reality and imagination, and adding more flavour to the mix were my mother's stories.

Late afternoons were my favourite time of the day, when I got her undivided attention. The wait for repeated touches, the softness of her voice and the stories of her past kept me going through the days filled with loud and unexpected noises, the clatter of the pots and pans, the churn of the mixer and the pneumatic hiss of the bus she boarded.

A tenant has no choice but to get used to the owner's new surround system. And it looks like your mother just bought an extra-powerful subwoofer by signing up for work in a restaurant. All the best, mate. All the very . . .

But my inner voice was put on temporary mute with the scratch of her throat and the softness of her touch. It was that time of the day again when my mother spun a story with her words.

'You know how in the battle of Mahabharata, Sanjay, Dhritarashtra's charioteer, gave a blow-by-blow account to the blind king? Sometimes I feel like I'm Sanjay—or maybe I'm the Subhadra in your life. But I don't want you to be Abhimanyu. I don't want you to die in the maze, no clue how to exit,' my mother said and patted her stomach.

She then narrated the story of Abhimanyu and his role in the most epic war of all time. But before I could start comparing myself to Abhimanyu of the great Mahabharata and the fate he met, the voice in my head took over.

Hey, man, look on the bright side. Abhimanyu lived for sixteen years.

But my mother wasn't thinking that far ahead. She wasn't thinking beyond twelve weeks, and I was just aiming to survive the next twenty-nine

weeks. In moments like this, I cursed my father for robbing me of my bliss and oblivion.

You should be thankful. He gave your life-in-a-womb a purpose. And thrill too! Imagine living in this dark world for nine months without knowing where you are and when this exile will end. Count your blessings, my friend. Now, please tuck your hands and legs in, and don't move because the woman you call your mother is about to fall asleep after standing for hours in the restaurant's kitchen.

A gentle snore confirmed the same. My mother had again used her father's voice as a lullaby. But today she'd not rewind the meditation discourse tape from the start. Instead, she'd started playing it from where she'd paused it yesterday, leaving me alone with my grandfather.

His voice. He's dead, mate.

'Today let's try visualization meditation. I know the combination of visualization and meditation sounds counterintuitive, because all we've done in the last few weeks is talk about letting thoughts come and go rather than consciously directing them. However, today we'll learn how to use this technique to visualize positive scenes and images to replace negative memories.'

Here it is! You wanted to erase the nightmare of the boy falling down the staircase. Seems like our man has the solution.

'Close your eyes and begin slowing your breath, creating a calming, relaxing rhythm. Now let's evoke a memory that's been bothering you and replace the surroundings with feelings of contentment and calm. Use your five senses to add detail to your images.'

Five senses. This one is not for you. You can't touch. You can't see. And you can't smell.

But the fragrance of freshly mowed green grass assaulted my nostrils and pushed me on to the threshold of a parallel universe.

Not his world, please. I'm not sure about you, but I don't want to go to that boy's world again.

'Are you warm or cool? Can you feel the air on your skin? Is the sky bright? Is it dark and stormy? Is it full of stars?'

Wherever my vision had taken me was hot and humid, and I felt sweat running down my spine.

‘Continue breathing slowly as you look around the scene that you’ve created, fully experiencing it with all of your senses. With each inhale, imagine peace and harmony entering your body. And now visualize exhaustion, tension and stress leaving your body as you exhale. It doesn’t come easily to everyone, and it might feel a little awkward at first. But with consistent practice, it’ll start to feel more natural.’

I followed his commands, and soon my mother’s rhythmic snore was replaced by giggles. I spotted the boy. He was smiling ear to ear.

The trick of visual meditation had worked on my very first attempt.

The boy was in the same white button-down shirt with a circular logo on the pocket.

That’s a school uniform. By the way, have you ever wondered what you’ll do in school? Because it looks like you already know everything.

I ignored the pessimistic voice and studied the boy’s forehead. The wound had faded. Perhaps this was how positive visualization worked.

‘Can I play?’ the boy in the school uniform asked, rubbing his fingers on the seam of the ball.

The kids huddled together to come to a decision, while the boy in the school uniform tossed the ball up in the air and caught it. Once again, the feelings in his heart had in some way possessed my body. I caught myself waiting in anticipation, too.

‘Are you the same boy who won the game yesterday?’ someone from the group asked. He nodded; the two groups broke into an argument over him.

‘He is our opening batsman because I recognized him first,’ the boy who’d initiated the conversation said, winning the argument. The joy in the boy’s heart revved up my heartbeat. I felt it in every fibre of my being as he walked to the pitch. Although he held the bat, it felt as if I was about to hit a shot.

‘Go to the gully. He’s a left-handed batsman,’ the bowler screamed. The fielders around him shifted, standing by the slips, gully, short leg and silly

points. The technical names of the cricket field positions appeared in my mind from nowhere, startling me.

See, that's what I was talking about. Now imagine yourself in a school, learning the basics again!

But this one left-handed batsman gave no room for anyone to imagine anything as the ball touched his bat and went flying out of their reach. Everyone watched the ball, but my gaze was fixated on the boy. He touched the grip of the bat, and an aching need to hold the bat gripped me hard.

'Tomorrow you'll have to bring a replacement ball,' someone shouted, and the game resumed with a new ball. The boy in the uniform hit another shot. This time the ball jumped just above the fielder's head. And once again, I became one with this boy, feeling the happiness in his heart, the headiness of his success and the breathlessness of his exertion.

My grandfather's technique helped me manifest a happy world for the boy. The visual meditation had worked.

Or the events from your mother's world again manifested into your imagination? Your mother was watching the highlights of the India versus Sri Lanka match last night, no?

Mahika Rathod

March 12, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Mahika punched the numbers into the silicone pad. Its beep startled her, and she fed the numbers again, but the lock still held. The passcode Rudra had communicated last week, using his kicks, had worked until now.

So, Shivam changed the passcode every Friday. But would Rudra be able to decipher the password every week?

She couldn't rely on him forever. But she could rely on him today.

'Rudra, do you know the new passcode?' Mahika asked and placed her hand on her belly. Rudra kicked, giving her a new pattern. Three kicks followed by a pause, three more kicks, a pause, and then a powerful series of eight kicks. Mahika had to request Rudra to kick thrice before she got the

numbers right—338. She punched it in, and the door opened. Before she could worry about this creature living within her again, the camera staring at the main door moved away. Mahika bolted out, closed the door behind her and keyed in the same code on the outside panel. The camera was still screening the garden and front yard when Mahika left, latching the iron gate behind her.

She walked to the bus stop, tiny goosebumps lining her skin. She had been sneaking out of the house for a week now but the fear of being followed was as unsettled in her heart as the fear of getting caught. Yet she boarded the bus with the need to protect Rudra overpowering every other feeling.

Last week, the newly installed camera had dumped cold water on her plans to work at the restaurant. Before Mahika could find a way out, Shivam had handed her the golden key—not calling her at eleven. Instead, he'd remotely rotated the camera around the house, pausing for a moment at the flower beds. It took longer than a minute for the camera to return to its position, guarding the main gate. And that's when Mahika connected the dots. Shivam had found a more efficient way to check on Mahika, his genetically modified son and his genetically modified flowers too. Mahika took only a day to decipher his monitoring routine, as Shivam had simply changed his call-Mahika-timeslot to check-on-Mahika-timeslot. Thankfully enough, there wasn't a camera inside the house, monitoring her every move. Only the gate was being monitored, and if she timed her exit and entry well, she could pull this off, at least for a couple of weeks.

That evening, the three scheduled alarms on Shivam's phone confirmed her findings. Shivam was logging in at eleven, three and five to run a check on the main gate, front yard and garden. Mahika had three time slots of one minute to plan her exit and entry into the house. She had planned to leave at eleven and be back by three, and if she missed the 3 p.m. slot, she could get into the house at five.

Mahika had called Mr Mehta, the owner of the restaurant, before her wave of courage could pass and leave her limp and timid. She'd proposed to work for three hours a day so she could be back by 3 p.m., leaving the 5

p.m. slot as her safety net. Mr Mehta had initially hesitated, worried she could only work on weekdays, but then he'd agreed to see her. An anonymous note steering her to the restaurant and the surveillance camera with limited vigilance felt orchestrated. Shivam could be behind all this, trapping her in a bigger web of deceit. But for once she had decided to fight before going down.

On the very first day at work, Mahika had managed to rush out of the house, fear doing jumping jacks inside her. The thrill of deceiving Shivam and leaving the house had felt oddly satisfying to her rage-filled heart. However, the petty money Mr Mehta had offered made her doubt her decision; she would only be working for \$10 an hour, an amount too little for the job she was undertaking, but she couldn't turn down the one chance she had at freedom. She had started work the very same day, training Murli and Salim, and the support crew, to follow some basic recipes so the restaurant could reopen. And while doing so, Mahika had lined the restaurant's fridge with ready-to-use gravies and dry mixes. She had managed the first three hours by sucking ice and ginger candy. However, instead of going slow and steady (as she'd planned), Mahika went overboard, delivering more than expected, exhausting herself completely. Her entry back into the house that afternoon had felt like boarding a long-haul train from her hometown, where the trains would only stop for less than a minute, leaving her mother and father anxious about pushing through the crowd, loading the luggage and boarding the train.

The next day, Mahika had felt a little more courageous in deceiving the camera and, therefore, Shivam. And since then, the overhaul of the restaurant's kitchen and Mahika's confidence began concurrently.

Today again, Mahika boarded the bus, fished a fifty-cent coin from her bag and fed it to the ticket machine. She still had a few days of travel money left from the two ten-dollar bills that had come with the note. Her anonymous messiah—if this person was a messiah—had planned everything to the finest detail, taking into consideration the money she'd need to commute. And that meant the note writer knew Shivam was a control freak.

Shivam had always kept tight control over the money spent on groceries, taxis, clothes and calling cards. His Sunday mornings were spent cataloguing the weekly expenses. But he had never bothered to look at the contents of her jewellery box or assess its financial value, and now that entire box was missing from her dresser. Her jewellery, her father's will and the sales deed of her father's ancestral house could have been used as her rainy-day funds. Her father had issued some traveller's cheques in her name intending to give her financial backing in a new country, but she had given them to Shivam to keep it safe. But the gigantic, legendary fireproof bag that was meant to store all the important documents was missing from the house. The relocation to Singapore, followed by her miscarriage, had left her in a daze. Mahika had not bothered about anything since then.

Only if she had not been so gullible and naive. Foolish was the right word.

Mahika had phrased and rephrased her sentences that were aimed at inquiring about the missing jewellery box, but there was no way to ask Shivam without raising a red flag. She had considered seeking financial help from her aunts, uncles and cousins, but that would mean leaving breadcrumbs for Shivam to find her. She couldn't afford the risk, not after discovering Rudra's unnatural powers.

Rudra's psychic powers were definitely a manifestation of his genetic modification and if this truth got out, Rudra would turn into a specimen for scientists across the world. Moreover, the germline editing of human eggs and sperm was illegal in Singapore and India. Mahika couldn't imagine a place where she could avoid getting roasted by the press. The only way to keep her pregnancy and Rudra safe was to live an anonymous life and for that, she needed enough cash to survive the first few months.

The pneumatic hiss of the bus brought Mahika out of her planning spree, and she was once again puzzled by how skilfully her messiah had planned everything—finding a secluded restaurant so close to her house, for instance.

Mr Mehta was lighting an incense stick on a wall altar. The tiny black Shivling kept on his altar table was a miniature form of the one in her shed

—her father’s Shivling. Before her mind started spinning again in the same loop, she went to the kitchen.

Today they had reopened for the public, hoping to get some walk-in customers, giving Mahika and her team of two the experience of a dry run. The flyers announcing the reopening were still getting printed, but a few patrons showed up, keeping everyone busy. Neil, Mehta’s son, had taken a day off to help wait tables to ease the stress. His screening eyes had kept Mahika on edge.

‘Thanks for accepting my request to work here, Mahika. Papa can’t stop smiling. The group of diners who had requested Jain food just left a review in the feedback register. According to them this is the best Jain food they have ever eaten. Also, I handed some discount vouchers to a couple of colleagues and the rasmalai trifle is an official hit in my office. See the number of requests coming in. I think the idea of keeping it mildly sweet was a brilliant move. It hit the right spot for my non-Indian colleagues. See another request,’ Neil said. He handed her the phone and flashed a contagious smile.

This was a dream world where she was as good as the others, better than some. Valued and loved, too. Tears had again found their way into her eyes.

‘Did I hurt you in some way, Mahika? I am so sorry.’ Neil came rushing to her with a tissue box. Salim passed a glass of water while Murli stood there helplessly shifting his body weight from one foot to another. She should have stopped and resumed work. But she let her tears fall uninhibited. For once, Mahika’s happiness was melting into tears, washing away a few scars.

‘Didi, you will get late,’ Murli said and pointed to the clock. It was half past two.

‘I’ll see you tomorrow,’ Mahika said grabbing her bag to leave like Cinderella rushing to reach home before midnight.

‘Tomorrow is Saturday already. Take this. Your weekly salary and a bonus for all your hard work,’ Mr Mehta handed her an envelope as she was about to step out.

Mahika felt the envelope's weight; that weight grew exponentially when she realized she was holding her first-ever salary. The tears that she had just swallowed back coursed down her cheek, and before she could stop herself, Mahika bent down to touch Mr Mehta's feet. Her brain was wired to touch her parents' feet on every special occasion, and today her muscle memory had taken over.

'God bless you,' he said. 'You have no one who can help you, beti? A friend maybe?'

Mahika shook her head, battling an unbearable ache of loneliness. She rushed out on the pretext of missing her bus. She thought Mr Mehta was going to suggest some support group. However, Mahika's problem was more than the fact that she was a pregnant woman in an abusive marriage. She had to hide and protect the unethically created mutant growing within her.

'Mahika, come, I will drop you to the Kallang MRT or Aljunied,' Neil said. He had followed her.

'The bus is here, Neil. Thanks.'

He stood there as she boarded the bus with a chill travelling down her spine. Was Neil following her? Was this all part of Shivam's plan? On the bus, Mahika counted her pay. Mr Mehta had given her \$50 extra. She slid the money into her bag and wondered if there was a faster way to earn money.

And what about her passport?

The bus brought her home before she could solve any of her problems. The feeling of being watched caused frissons of warped energy and the blinding sunlight made the short walk down the road unbearable. Mahika dragged her tired body, stood behind a tree at the side of the road and waited for the camera to move away. She was about to go in when she noticed an envelope on the gate's latch.

Another note.

Mahika hastily put the note in her bag and sped into the house before the camera could resume its position. A week of practice had made her faster. However, today she'd lost a few seconds in getting the envelope from the

gate. The camera was turning back and she was still at the gate. She kept control of her nerves, ran to the patio and hastily punched the passcode into the panel before the camera could resume its position and catch her. Inside, she breathed a sigh of relief. But only for a moment.

She was an idiot. She'd forgotten to bolt the main gate.

Mahika rushed to the living room window and spotted the partially open gate. But going back to latch it wasn't an option any more. Mahika's heart was racing in a panic now.

It would be her last day of work.

She paced, then decided to calm her ragged breath.

You aren't caught until you are caught.

Mahika hastily transferred the food she'd brought from the restaurant into pots and rehearsed her lines, 'I had a craving for biryani and mirchi ka salan.' This was the first day that she'd brought food from the restaurant, as cooking twice, first at the restaurant and then at home, was draining her.

This was also the best way to avoid cooking and then cleaning the kitchen.

Who was she fooling? She still cared about what he liked. Hyderabad dum biryani and mirchi ka salan was one of Shivam's favourite meals. Mahika ferried the pan from one room to another, diffusing the aroma of spices in the air. The dinner was ready, and the kitchen was clean. Everything had worked out the way she'd planned, except for the ajar gate.

The National University was a thirty-minute drive from their house, and she still had time for a quick shower. Mahika waited for Shivam to knock on the bathroom door, but there was no sign of him. An hour went by, but the gate was still in the same position and Shivam had not shown up. Maybe the camera was meant for his genetically modified flowers.

She had to stop fooling herself.

Mahika was fighting this conflict within her when the camera swirled twice out of turn. She waited for Shivam to show up soon, but there was no movement in the driveway. She'd been on edge for the entire week, but at that moment the fear of getting caught hit her like never before. Her single mistake could end it all.

All because of that note.

The fear of getting caught had made her forget about the note in her bag. She ripped open the envelope, anticipating a handwritten note, but it was a photo. A shot of a dead chimpanzee. The floor beneath her turned liquid as she read the note scribbled on the back.

Mahi, I am so happy that you took the first courageous step. But you need to find your passport and escape as soon as possible. Because this is the fate Shivam's last ~~ambitious~~ ambitious experiment met. I am worried about you, Gudiya. Please be careful at every step.

Gudiya was Mahika's pet name. At her request, her parents had stopped using it. But sometimes, 'Mahi' and 'Mahika' were subconsciously replaced by 'Gudiya', especially when her father was charged with emotions. Shivam would have heard it.

Shivam was playing games with her, emulating her father's tone. But why would Shivam unravel his sins? And why would he make her believe that these notes were written by her father? Was Shivam planning to drive her mad and declare her an unfit parent? Mahika's mind was again running miles a minute, leaving her directionless.

Her nausea that had faded a little in the last few days came back with a vengeance, and before Mahika could reach the washroom, she'd thrown up on the floor in the master bedroom, unaware that Shivam had come home. His footsteps on the wooden staircase announced his arrival.

Shivam Rathod

March 12, 2003

National University, Singapore

It was just mid-afternoon, and Shivam was already wishing to return home. The house had started smelling of fresh coriander and Mahika—more of Mahika. Shivam had been burning for her since the day he'd returned home to find her standing by the bay window, just out of the shower, wearing nothing but a see-through cotton nightgown. Her glowing skin and

returning curves had rekindled a fire in Shivam, and this time he was determined to make sure it didn't go out.

His alarm bell rang. He put his weekend to-do list in his bag and walked to the auditorium for a session on silencing faulty genes. The genetic engineering world was still impressed by his past achievements, clueless to what was brewing in Mahika's womb.

Shivam detoured to the car park to get his necktie when the partially open passenger door caught his attention.

This time Shivam didn't look for anything missing. He was expecting another threatening note, but he found a pink file instead. Shivam picked up the file from the passenger seat and peeled off the note stuck to it. The torn edges and dirty scrawl made him cringe.

Hide and seek part 4: I found your ~~deceit~~ deceit. Now it's time to show it to Mahika and Prof. Chua, too. Are you going to show it or shall I do the ~~honours~~ honours of telling them about your secret little hideout in the clinic's basement?

Shivam hastily locked himself in the car and flipped through the file. It was Mahika's medical report. Someone had managed to get access to Dr Steven's cabin and his computer, a privilege Shivam had yet to get.

This was what he'd been looking for. He had it now. What would he do about it?

Before Shivam could argue with his conscience, his phone rang.

'Did you go home for lunch today?' Dr Steven asked.

'No. I was at the university; I have a session this afternoon. I was preparing for it. Why? What happened?' The momentary pause on the other side made Shivam's nerves tingle.

'I spotted a visitor at the house gate on the surveillance camera's recording. Somewhere around noon. Although the silhouette disappeared in the blink of an eye, I think he or she left an envelope at the door. At least it looked like an envelope. But it's gone now. All I can see is a partially open gate. Were you expecting a delivery? Is it possible Mahika opened the gate to take the package?' Dr Steven asked in a single breath.

Shivam paused to calm his revved-up heartbeat.

A package. Could it be a copy of this file? Had the blackmailer sent it?

‘I don’t think Mahika can go out. I change the code weekly. Moreover, I checked at 3 p.m. and everything looked fine. I might’ve missed out on the main gate. Can you not zoom in and see the man?’ Shivam asked, gaining control of his voice.

‘I tried. But I can’t see the face. I can only spot a silhouette in a bright red T-shirt. He made a deliberate attempt to hide his face, but his gait gave away his age. He was around sixty–seventy years old or so. You have some relative or friend in Singapore?’

‘We don’t have any friends or family in Singapore. He could be a courier, Dr Steven. Let me get back to you after the session. I need to go now.’

The calm in Shivam’s voice was contrary to the chaos in his chest.

What if someone gave that file to Mahika?

He needed to not panic.

Shivam was already late for his session. He threw the file in the boot and rushed to the auditorium. A part of him wanted to go back home, but he took a deep breath.

He had to treat this problem like an unnecessary application running in the background.

The mantra worked for the next forty-five minutes. However, Dr Steven’s fear started gnawing at Shivam as soon as he left the stage. He left Professor Chua’s session midway and drove back home. A little press on the gas pedal would’ve reduced his misery, but driving above the speed limit wasn’t Shivam’s thing. He took the same amount of time to drive back home as he took every day. However, the silence in the house made him regret driving slowly. Shivam ran to the bedroom and found Mahika sitting on the floor next to a puddle of her vomit.

‘What the hell! You are worse than an animal. You have a bucket under the bed, don’t you?’

Shivam rushed to the bathroom to get his cleaning caddy and felt some of the weight lift from his chest.

Mahika could pretend to be innocent, but she couldn’t throw up at will. The aroma of spices downstairs and the stench of vomiting upstairs

confirmed that Mahika had done nothing other than cook the food she was craving and then throw it up, leaving the dirty job of cleaning for him.

He called Dr Steven after cleaning the mess. 'There's no package at home. And she's battling severe nausea. Let's have a look at the video tomorrow morning.'

The outstanding Hyderabad biryani lifted his spirits. But the stench lingering in the bedroom dominated every other fragrance Shivam had sprayed in the room. He moved their blankets and pillows to the spare bedroom downstairs and waited for Mahika's snores.

As he expected, Mahika fell asleep in the blink of an eye. Shivam tiptoed to the driveway and returned to the house carrying a portable, grey steel vault. Dr Steven had given him the vault a couple of months ago to store cash, valuables and Mahika's passport. Dr Steven believed in physical chains, but Shivam knew a better way to keep someone chained. He had found a safer place to store these things rather than hiding them in a vault. Today, however, he was left with no choice but to hide the file in it. He needed some time to go through the papers before destroying all the evidence against him.

Shivam climbed the stairs to the attic. The portable safe had felt extremely light at the start of the flight, but now his shoulder muscles were burning. Part of him wanted to place the vault on the first shelf of the storage unit and rest his aching arms, but Shivam wasn't trained to do a half-hearted job. He placed the vault on the floor and went down to get the ladder from the backyard. Mahika was still asleep. He returned to the attic, closing the door behind him. It creaked, but today Mahika would sleep through it. The sleeping pill he'd put in her milk would keep her out of his hair.

'If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.'

Shivam shook away his father's cold voice, which had resurfaced from nowhere, and stretched his neck. His back had started hurting too. But resting wasn't an option, not until he'd hidden the vault. Shivam climbed up the aluminium ladder, carrying the vault. Doing this reminded him of the tightrope-walking show he'd loved to watch as a kid.

He pushed the vault to the topmost shelf, massaged his shoulders and neck once again and then punched in the numbers to unlock the vault. Mahika was going to sleep through the night, and by morning he'd have sorted his sins and destroyed them too. He pulled the file out. The pages fell from the folder.

Shivam hated clumsiness and his blackmailer was nothing but that. He climbed down the ladder, collected the scattered papers and filed them in chronological order out of pure habit, organizing a record of years that hadn't gone the way he'd planned. Mahika's NT scan report from her first pregnancy was the first. The harbinger of everything good and bad in his life. Shivam was about to pick the next report when he heard footsteps on the staircase. He could not risk Mahika coming up here with this ticking bomb in his hands, so he hastily climbed up the ladder and put the file in the vault.

No one could see the vault from the floor, yet he placed a box of old bills in front of it before returning to the guestroom. Mahika was asleep. But he had heard footsteps. Or had he imagined them?

Mahika Rathod

March 12, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

The picture of the dead chimp's head popping out of a yellow biohazard waste bag had caused a rolling boil in Mahika's stomach. She could've pulled through, but Shivam's approaching footsteps and the fear of getting caught made it worse. Mahika had emptied her stomach just in time for Shivam to see the mess. He'd rushed into the washroom to get his cleaning caddy, giving Mahika a moment to tuck the photo in her bra. By the time Shivam had returned with a mask and his cleaning accessories, Mahika had gone downstairs under the pretext of using the washroom on the ground floor, taking her bag and the photo along. In the guestroom, she'd hastily stored the bag in the divan storage unit and gone to eat dinner. But no amount of distraction had been able to wipe clean the tone of that note and

the image of the dead chimpanzee, the way no amount of cleaning had been able to eradicate the stench of her vomit from their bedroom.

‘Let’s sleep downstairs,’ Mahika had proposed, hoping Shivam would agree.

Sleeping in the guest bedroom would mean he couldn’t go through the things in the dewan. Mahika had fallen asleep almost instantly. However, moments later, she woke up with debilitating nausea that got better only after she threw up the milk Shivam had forced her to drink. Mahika came out of the washroom and was jolted by the light in the driveway. She walked to the window at the thud of the car door. Shivam held a box and was heading to the main gate. Before she could make sense of this, a loud, nails-on-the-chalkboard creak of the attic door made her cover her ears. Shivam must’ve waited for her to fall asleep so he could carry on with whatever was keeping him awake. But what had made Shivam think she’d sleep through this loud screeching sound? Since Shivam wasn’t being discreet, Mahika decided to go see what he was up to. But the attic door was bolted from inside and the noises had faded into silence. Mahika doubled back to the guestroom at the realization. Moments later she heard the attic door screech.

Shivam was coming back.

‘She’s out like a light,’ Shivam mumbled as he stood by her side of the bed. It took all her will to keep her breathing deep and relaxed. How could Shivam have been sure she’d sleep through the loud creaking door?

Unless he’d drugged her.

Mahika replayed the evening. Shivam had cleaned the bedroom, and they’d eaten dinner. Then he’d given her a glass of milk. It was the only unusual thing about her evening. Did he add something to her milk to knock her out? If so, why didn’t it work? She had thrown up much before the tranquillizer could enter her system. Shivam had not calculated this for sure. Mahika tiptoed to the kitchen. The glass was washed and neatly placed on the dish mat. Shivam had covered his tracks or so he thought. The bottle of his prescribed sleeping pills on the kitchen counter was his first mistake.

Rudra

March 12, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

I had this compulsive desire to play cricket, to feel the grip of the bat, and the only way to ease this restlessness was by swinging the bat in the air.

In your mother's womb, like, really?

But there was another way to play, and all it took was an inhale and an exhale.

It took me a few attempts at visual meditation before my dark world lit up with colours. I spotted the boy, and almost instantly the energy bursting in his veins started running in my veins. He tiptoed, stretched his hand and reached the edge of a wall. But before he could jump it, I found myself on the other side. We walked alongside each other, hunting for another street where he could play. Another field where no one would recognize him. From schoolboys to college students, he was good enough to play with them all. Better than them, too.

Today he'd snuck out of his art class to play cricket. His frustration at his inability to colour between the lines was as clear to me as his desire to play cricket. He played a shot, and I felt the happiness spreading in my veins as if I'd played the remarkable shot. His intense pain and joy had blurred the boundaries of this trance, tricking me into believing that I was the one living it all.

We need to find out whether this old man is teaching meditation or time travel. Because from the look of it, you seem to be seeing your future.

A figure racing towards him was perhaps my answer. The man who'd pushed the boy down the stairs was now dragging him off the field. I rushed to save him, but nothing moved. Then a stinging sensation on my skin stopped me. A lash had touched his bare back, causing a burning sensation on my back too. One stroke after another, the pain jolting his body skyrocketed under my skin. I screamed, but the boy said nothing. There were old marks under the fresh bruises, which meant this wasn't new. The boy stood there, taking one lash after another, staring at a woman who

watched them from a distance. The boy's tearful eyes pleaded with her to end this abuse, but she didn't move a muscle, not even to save her son.

My mind recoiled at the realization. My mother rarely opened her mouth in my father's presence, and his meltdown had left nothing to imagine. The similarities were uncanny. And there was nothing I could do about it. Not from the womb.

Or so you think.

Moments later, the man left the room, folding the cane the way a policeman places a gun back in its holster. His light-brown eyes still burnt with anger.

'Give him something to eat. Also, he'll need a pain killer,' he said and walked away. The woman rushed in holding a plate. Her eyes brimmed with tears.

'I'd warned you not to skip any classes. Why did you do it again?' she asked and fed him a bite. The feeling of love overpowering his heart swamped mine, too.

'I did nothing,' the boy said and looked her in the eye. She frowned; she was trying to pick sides, but decided not to and fed him a bite of roti, displaying a silent yet powerful love. A surge of emotion gripped me hard.

Your mother's touch evokes similar emotions in you. Is this you? Are you seeing your future?

'He saw someone else and mistook him for me,' the boy clarified.

He'd blatantly denied jumping over the wall, hunting for kids to play cricket with during school hours and finally playing cricket.

But why?

His mother wondered the same. A tear fell from her eye. 'Turn over. I'll apply turmeric,' she said. Her eyes were gleaming with tears, but she softly dabbed his wounds. My back tingled as she layered the boy's back with a thick paste of turmeric.

'The paper is on your table. You know what you need to do to win him over,' she said and left. He nodded and walked to the table, excruciating pain jolting his body. To my surprise, the paper's questions felt as familiar as the sting of a cane. The quadratic-equation problem had pulled me in,

exactly the way cricket had. And in no time, I'd solved the maths problem, much before he did. We walked together to his father's study, the sense of accomplishment giving a bounce to my step too.

'Papa, I managed to solve last year's grade-ten maths paper,' he said. But his father's face was still hidden behind the newspaper. He was refusing to acknowledge his eighth-grader son's achievements.

I could never make Shivam happy. No matter how much I tried. That's what your mother said, right?

So, this wasn't a manifestation of my fears. It was a glimpse of my future.

You've learnt to travel in time and see your future. Now, find a way to change it.

From that moment, changing my future became my priority. Because relying on my meek and helpless mother wasn't an option.

In my future, she'd failed me.

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Chapter 6

Week Twelve

It's hard to believe—especially from the outside since you're barely visible at this point—but your baby has more than doubled in size during the past three weeks and is about the size of a plum. He's now fully formed, with all of his organs, muscles, limbs and bones in place.

The coming trimester is the most active period of neuron growth, as about 2,50,000 neurons will be created every minute in your baby's brain, and soon these neurons will begin to migrate to different regions of your developing baby's brain, where they will take on specific roles, such as interpreting sounds, storing memories and forming connections with other neurons.

The baby's developing ears will allow your unborn child to detect (though not interpret) sounds. In the latter part of the pregnancy, your unborn child is likely to respond to sounds outside the womb, such as music or your voice, by kicking or moving around. With each kick and movement, certain neurons are exercised, which encourages them to form even more connections.

Mahika Rathod

March 19, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Mahika had torn up the photo of the dead chimpanzee that night, but a week later, it still occupied her mind.

If Shivam could kill a chimp, he could kill Rudra too.

The note on the photo had cemented her decision to escape. However, her plan was missing all the key ingredients—her passport, the money she

needed to survive and the courage to walk away from the only family she had.

Mahika had spent another week training the restaurant's staff and searching for her passport. And since Shivam had spiked her milk with sleeping pills, Mahika was convinced her passport was in the attic. She'd spent her evenings going through the meticulously organized cardboard boxes on the steel shelving unit in the attic. However, she'd still not touched the top shelves, as the kitchen stool she'd carried to the attic was too short and getting the aluminium ladder up three floors was a task.

Mahika moved the stool closer to the shelving unit and pulled the first box down. It was a box full of memories. She'd planned to rush through the contents, but the photo of Shivam and her father posing during a Diwali dinner made her travel back in time.

#

Then

January 1998

Botanical Research Institute

Lucknow, India

Her father's Diwali team dinners were all about her mother's extraordinary culinary skills and her father's jokes. But her mother's cancer had robbed the tradition of so much of its joy. However, as her father's smile returned, Mahika decided to bring back the tradition by throwing a surprise Diwali dinner for her father's team. Shivam had volunteered to help with the invitations and running errands, and Mahika had happily agreed, as it gave her a chance to meet him more often. While the other party guests networked and discussed office politics at the party, Shivam skilfully toggled between the living room and the kitchen.

'Can I help you?' Shivam asked and took a tray full of snacks from Mahika.

‘Thanks. You can please put this on the dining table, and then go and enjoy it with your team. I’ve got this,’ Mahika said, keeping a tight check on her wildly beating heart.

‘They’re talking about their kids, and I’m not sure how to contribute. In case you haven’t noticed, the only person close to my age here is you. And I’m thoroughly enjoying your company.’ Shivam’s lopsided smile created a slight dimple on his cheek that made Mahika catch her breath. Although falling for her father’s research associate sounded as ridiculous as it felt, she could do nothing to stop Shivam from invading her heart. Mahika had fallen in love for the first time, and she’d fallen hard. And tonight, Shivam’s every action was like a bright dart of warmth to her heart.

She’d just garnished the daal bukhara for the main course when Shivam came close to her. ‘How can someone look so beautiful with traces of coriander in her hair?’ Shivam then plucked the coriander leaves, tucking loose hair behind her ear. Shivam’s touch felt as hot as a branding iron.

‘I could do this all day. I told you this, right?’ Shivam leant towards her. But before Mahika could remind him they were in her kitchen, her father came in. He had caught Shivam playing with Mahika’s hair but said nothing. The next morning, however, he’d sat them both down and before Mahika or her father could say a word, Shivam had asked for Mahika’s hand for marriage, leaving the father and daughter flabbergasted. Mahika and Shivam got engaged in the coming weeks. Her father wasn’t in a rush to get her married, but Shivam didn’t want to wait. He requested a low-key marriage, as he had no family or friends to celebrate this occasion with. His parents had died in a car accident, and the uncle who’d raised him had died too. Mahika suggested inviting his cousins, extended family or childhood friends but Shivam had deliberately distanced himself from his past as it was loaded with the painful memories of his parents’ car accident. She had found it as strange as she had found Shivam’s habit of wiping the clean cutlery in the restaurant and continuously arranging his spoon and the food on his plate whenever they went on a date. But her father had taken it lightly, teasing her that their house will shine like his lab. However,

Mahika's subtle doubts had turned into a full-blown alarm on the wedding night.

'Sorry, I wasn't aware I had such a strong aversion to henna. If you don't mind, can I sleep on the floor until this smell and colour are gone?' Shivam said.

They'd spent the wedding night meant to dissolve their physical differences sleeping apart. The henna meant to mark the beginning of her marital life had become a wall between them. Before the fragrance and the henna could fade, Shivam came home with an acceptance letter from the University of New Jersey, digging a new pit between them.

'I wish you'd told me that you wanted to settle abroad. I want to live in India with my father. He is all alone, Shivam,' Mahika said when Shivam showed her the appointment letter. The neck-breaking speed at which they got married had left very little time for them to get to know each other. Mahika had not regretted it, not until Shivam revealed his plans to settle abroad.

'Mishra Sir himself suggested I apply for it. He wrote a recommendation to Dr Sharma. He knew about it all along,' Shivam replied. Mahika would never have married Shivam if she'd understood doing so meant picking between the love of her life and her father. But it had been too late. Shivam and her father were so excited at the acceptance that Mahika had to put her sadness on the back burner. And the tonnes of paperwork that came with moving to New Jersey meant their love life also had to be set on the back burner. It had been two months since their wedding night, and Shivam was yet to make love to Mahika. The thought of leaving her father alone had ruined everything for her, the way her hennaed hands had ruined things for Shivam. Back then, Mahika had blamed this on bad timing because she had yet to discover her husband's fetish for planning and cleanliness.

Shivam had meticulously planned love-making the way he'd planned every other thing in his life. Because just like love, love-making wasn't going to come naturally to him. And the only way Mahika could've known was to have lived that moment with him.

#

Now

The alarm was trilling in the kitchen. It was time to wrap up her search for today and spend some time with Rudra.

Every evening, Mahika was spending time with Rudra, training him to harness his mind's extraordinary powers.

'Rudra, my father used to say if you possess a weapon, you'd better learn how to use it—more for your safety than for your benefit. Our minds are our most powerful weapons, and if we sit quietly, pay close attention to our minds and practise meditation consistently, we can achieve anything we want; we can be anyone we want. Ancient yogis of India would attain these powers, or siddhis, through hours of meditation. One such siddhi includes reading minds and seeing the future. In your case, it might be a by-product of mutation, or your father has designed you to achieve the unachievable. While I can't redo your creation and hope for you to live a normal life, I can help you channel your powers better,' Mahika said and patted gently. In response, Rudra kicked at her navel, confirming his attention.

She read an article to Rudra on the eight siddhis and was about to read another article when Shivam's car entered the driveway. Mahika erased the search history on the computer and started noting down a recipe from Sanjeev Kapoor's website to explain her presence in Shivam's study.

Mahika was getting better at pretending, all thanks to Shivam.

She was about to step out when the cricket commentary running on an unattended window on the computer made her double back. It was India's seventh win in a row and Mr Mehta's excitement for the semi-final was contagious. It had rekindled Mahika's lost love for cricket. Mr Mehta was happy he had found a new cricket buddy in Mahika. Every day, he stood by the kitchen partition door and discussed the game techniques and India's chances of winning or losing the game, just the way her father used to.

Mahika deleted the search history of the New Zealand versus India match before Shivam could set his foot in the study. Playing and following sports

was a waste of time for Shivam, but Mahika wanted to watch the semi-final live. However, the match was scheduled to start at 8.30 p.m. in Singapore and there was no way she could have watched it with Shivam around.

Mr Mehta had promised to record the match for her.

If only she could keep winning in the game of hide and seek for the next few days.

Rudra

March 19, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

First, she'd compared me to Abhimanyu, and now my mother thought that I possessed the siddhis Lord Hanuman had attained.

And don't forget that she thinks the author of those anonymous notes is her deceased father.

My mother was losing it, but I couldn't blame her. I was probably the size of a lemon, but my brain was flitting from past to present, and now to the future.

And you deciphered the door's passcode. You can't blame her, mate.

'According to Hindu scripture, the eight astonishing powers of our mind are Anima, Mahima, Garima, Laghima, Prapti, Prakamya, Istiva and Vastiva. You develop them by consistent meditation, spiritual maturity, yoga sadhana and also as a birth gift,' my mother said. She was reading something to me, but I was drawn to the cricket commentary playing in the background.

The meditation techniques taught by my grandfather yet again drowned out every other sound, teleporting me to the boy's world.

Today the first thing I noticed was a bulge in his shirt. Something sharp pierced my ribs as if I was hiding a pointed object under my shirt. The boy pulled out a speaker and almost instantly, my hands blocked my ears.

A loud static filled the room.

Not fair at all. You should have warned me, my ears are hurting.

The boy fiddled with the frequency knob until the sounds stabilized.

*Is this the same device your mother plays the meditation discourse on?
Are you going to use the same in the future?*

While I came here to soak up this boy's life, the logical part of my brain was constantly searching for differences between these two worlds. But all I found were similarities. The static on the device turned to cricket commentary. Before I could listen to the commentator, my mother's voice dragged me back to her world.

'Rudra, my father used to say that everything comes from nothing and returns to nothing. That the cosmos's fundamental property is nothingness, and this vast space is Shiva. Lord Shiva has everything within him, yet he is imperfect. And everything he loves is as imperfect as he is. But despite his imperfections, he's content, and he loves us all with all our imperfections. Rudra is the name of Shiva's fearsome form, and I'm getting a sense of why our anonymous messiah has named you Rudra—the unpredictable and destructive form of Shiva. However, I can't chase away the thought that Shiva was my father's favourite deity and . . .'

No, no, no! She's back on the same track, my friend.

Before my mother could again begin her illogical loop of blaming everything but the genetic modification for my powers, I left her world. I didn't need to learn more about Shiva. I wanted to know more about the boy in my visions.

This time I found him at his desk, solving a trigonometric equation. The numbers and symbols started dancing before my eyes. The solutions to the problem came to me with as much ease as cricket terminology did. I had solved the problem before the boy had.

He pushed the maths test away to make space for a notebook and placed the speaker on the table. He started taking notes and biting his nails.

India is about to win by five wickets.

The match had yet to start, but my mind had somehow figured out the outcome.

Premonition.

Yes, that was the word my mother had used when I'd deciphered the code for her the second time. But the game's recall felt less like a premonition

and more like a forgotten memory. The boy still had the pleasure of hearing the game moment by moment, relishing the anxiety and outcome of each ball. He turned the volume knob down when the commentator announced the lunch break. He hastily finished the last question and rushed to his father's room. I wanted to stop him, as I'd spotted a mistake in one of the trigonometry problems. But approaching footsteps had frozen me in place.

She's about to find the speaker he stowed under the pillow.

My heart leapt in my chest thinking of his father's cane biting into the boy's flesh. His mother barged in, finding things in his room. The look on her face sent a shiver down my spine. I was hoping for her to scream, shout and stop him. But she left the room, saying nothing. Doing nothing.

I wanted to break the trance and go back to my world, but then the boy barged in and kicked the door behind him. He pulled out the speaker and held it close to his ear; the vertical lines on the box's surface marked his cheek and ear.

'What a shame. India got all out at 216. The Indian team lost a crucial match in the World Cup,' the commentator announced.

This is a different match, mate. An entirely different day. Did the boy skip three days of his life? Or you accidentally entered the wrong time frame?

The anger building in the boy's veins meant it was the latter. He'd witnessed India's loss. He tossed the speaker on to the bed before the commentator could wrap up. Dread wormed its way to my heart, which I misunderstood as his disappointment. Only when the door flew open did I connect the dots.

You knew it was coming.

'We had decided no cricket, right? So where did you get this?' his father asked. His light-brown eyes were burning in anger.

I waited for the boy to confess to the theft. The boy had tiptoed into his neighbour's backyard, waiting patiently for the neighbour, an old man, to doze off. Then, in less than a minute, he'd slid the speaker under his shirt.

You imagined and filled the gap of this theft or pulled it out from your memory tape?

'Where did you get this?' his father asked again.

But the boy said nothing. My feeling of déjà vu snatched the ground beneath my feet. He'd done it before. The refusal. And it had caused a problem more catastrophic than this.

I wanted to remember, but the more I tried to chase the memory, the farther it receded, breaking my state of meditation.

I came back to my mother's world and found her reading the same article.

'One of the greatest siddhis, Isitva, enables crossing over the laws of nature. This siddhi is the ability of your mind to lead and see the future. The last siddhi, Vasitva, is the ability to have anything under control, especially the physical manifestation of the five elements.'

I shook my head in disbelief. Crossing over the laws of nature and physically manifesting the five elements only happened in stories.

Yeah, right! Like an emotionally aware foetus talking to his mother through kicks really happens. Wake up, mate.

Shivam Rathod

March 19, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

After procrastinating for a week, Shivam used the sleeping pills again. An Internet search had assured him that the pills were safe in pregnancy if taken in recommended doses. This time the pills worked almost instantly, pushing Mahika into the realm of dreams. Shivam was tempted to switch off the meditation discourse Mahika had lately started using as her lullaby, but left it running to add another layer of security. In the attic, he took the file out from the vault and spread his sins on the floor to organize them chronologically.

The other night, one cursory look at the file had convinced Shivam that the blackmailer managed to get into Dr Steven's computer just the way the blackmailer had managed to break into Shivam's house and car.

He retrieved Dr Steven's first email to him—a welcome lunch invitation that marked the beginning of Dr Steven's deceit.

#

Then

March, 2001

University Auditorium, Singapore

Shivam had been in Singapore for a week when Dr Steven invited him to a ‘welcome to Singapore lunch’. By the end of the meal, Shivam was taking a tour of Dr Steven’s state-of-the-art lab. Shivam felt honoured that a world-renowned geneticist was showering so much attention on him. Of course, Shivam’s breakthrough research paper on treating Down syndrome had placed him on a pedestal, but having Dr Steven’s undivided attention felt like another feather in the cap.

During lunch, Shivam wondered if Dr Steven remembered the SOS call Shivam had made to him a few years ago to save his first baby. But Dr Steven had been single-minded in getting Shivam to the concealed lab in the basement of a fertility clinic. An expansive lab hidden behind the inconspicuous basement door was the first red flag. However, the highly advanced DNA sequencers, the NMR machines and the high-resolution inverted microscopes conveniently put Shivam’s conscience to bed, at least temporarily.

‘I haven’t seen any of these machines in any catalogues. Is this lab part of some research facility?’ Shivam asked, feigning ignorance. He was suspicious and excited, but his calm voice didn’t give away anything.

‘This is a hobby, my friend. The way space enthusiasts invest in professional telescopes for stargazing, I’ve invested in these beauties. Try the inverted microscope. It’s one of a kind. I bet you won’t be able to find something like this on the market for the next five years, at least,’ Dr Steven said, looking smug. But Shivam wasn’t tempted enough. Not yet.

‘Come, I’ll show you something else,’ Dr Steven said and led Shivam to a computer. ‘This is a genetic blueprint of a chimp with all its functional sequences and gene expressions. And this is the list of the chimp’s functional and non-functional DNA. While I’ve been able to differentiate

the functional and non-functional DNA, the functions of a particular sequence within the genome are still a work in progress.'

For a minute Shivam thought Dr Steven had given him access to the Human Genome Project, an international database that was aimed at publicly sharing the sequences of almost all the genetic content of the human gene. But Dr Steven's research was beyond the Human Genome Project. Dr Steven had identified and annotated the coding and non-coding DNA of the human gene, filtering the DNA sequence that could encode for protein from that which couldn't.

'The next page has a list of functional DNA segments that are part of the non-coding DNA. These here are listed based on a genetic approach, relying on sequence alterations to establish the biological relevance of a DNA segment, and the next two pages take into account the evolutionary approach and biochemical approach.' Dr Steven's chest was swollen with pride.

Shivam looked at the quantitative relationships in data from all the different approaches. It could help him find the nature, identity and extent of functional elements in the human genome, consequently helping him decode any disease-causing mutations. Dr Steven was sitting on gold, and he was offering Shivam a share too.

'Impressive isn't it, Mr Rathod?'

'This is astronomical, Dr Steven. Your research could lead to many breakthroughs—'

'It can. But I haven't announced it to the world as the research is still in a very nascent stage. Perhaps you can help me reach the announcement stage sooner,' Dr Steven proposed, putting his computer to sleep. But Shivam's instincts warned him to run away. He politely declined Dr Steven's unethical proposal to work in the lab, using the house hunt in this new country as his pretext. However, the next morning, working in the university lab had felt like studying the universe with a toy telescope. And why would he do that if he had access to a Hubble telescope?

Shivam spent an entire day compulsively searching for the inverted microscope he'd seen in Dr Steven's lab. He wanted it more than anything

else in the world. However, it was some patented technology, yet to be launched commercially. A quick Internet search also confirmed that Dr Steven was rolling in money and power that he'd brought with him from Hong Kong. According to one article, Dr Steven Ng had migrated to Singapore in the wake of a personal tragedy, the death of his son, and had started a new life with his doctor wife.

So, the feminine fragrance Shivam had picked in the lab was Dr Cynthia's perfume.

Dr Steven had also recently been in the news for the launch of Singapore's first-ever pregenetic counselling centre, which offered a spectrum of in-vitro genetic editing to alter the gene in the human embryo using the latest gene editing technology.

Then why hide the devices in the basement? And why not hire Shivam officially?

Shivam knew there was nothing official about the research and that the lab reeked of money, power and illegally procured equipment. He wasn't keen to get involved in any unethical research.

He had yet to discover that Dr Steven was his match in persuasion and deceit.

Dr Steven soon invited Shivam for a panel discussion. Shivam wanted to decline, but Professor Chua, his head of department at the university, convinced him to not burn bridges.

'It's good to stay on his radar. He's very resourceful, and it's good he has your back. I was told that he recommended you to the board for this position,' Professor Chua said. His boss's gentle nudge was enough for Shivam. By the end of the panel discussion, Dr Steven managed to convince Shivam to work in his lab for two hours a day in return for a handsome sum.

They'd been in Singapore for over a month, and Shivam had yet to find a house of his liking. He wasn't used to living in tiny apartments. He hated the idea of using public buses and taxis, which were loaded with germs. Agreeing with Dr Steven meant he could afford a car and a bigger house in Singapore, which wasn't possible otherwise on his salary. Shivam was still

wondering whether to strike a deal with the devil when at home Mahika announced she had missed her period.

The copious amount of planning and work required for relocating to Singapore had consumed his libido, and to his best recall, he couldn't remember making love to Mahika the last couple of months. Hence the news of Mahika's pregnancy had altered the direction of his thoughts and sparked a slow-burning suspicion. His mind started going to places dark and dangerous. Was Mahika's pastry instructor, the French guy with blue eyes, the father of her baby? He was Mahika's favourite teacher in the baking course that she had taken in New Jersey.

Shivam had ignored Mahika's half-written farewell note that he had found in her recipe books while packing for Singapore. But now, in the light of an unexplained pregnancy, Mahika's farewell note that talked about ending their relationship had begun to make sense. He wanted to confront Mahika, but his assumptions were still lacking any form of evidence. He had to plan and get the truth out in an organized way. But he was too hurt to plan, and Dr Steven's lab became his safe haven from the trouble brewing in Mahika's womb. He poured himself into the research, to run away from Mahika and her pregnancy. But Shivam's mind had found another man who could be Mahika's lover. The Indian gentleman who lived in the neighbourhood. Mahika had hitched a ride back home with him from the Indian grocer a couple of times. He was a bachelor, just like the French pastry chef. This fresh loop of suspicion again gripped him hard, running in his mind for days. Until Mahika gave his dark mind another dangerous territory to venture into.

'I am already eight-plus weeks pregnant, Shivam. We need to see a doctor soon. Please ask your colleagues at work and get a recommendation.'

Shivam's mind back-calculated the possible dates on which Mahika might have conceived the baby.

'Who was the guy you were talking to during our farewell dinner at Dr Sharma's?'

‘I don’t remember. Dr Sharma had invited so many people that day. But what has it to do with booking an appointment with a doctor?’

‘The lanky guy, your father’s ex-student? He had mentioned that he lived in Singapore. We can ask him.’

‘I didn’t get a chance to ask his name. You guys started talking about Papa.’

Shivam did his maths a couple of times and concluded that Mahika most likely conceived the baby on the night of their farewell dinner at Dr Sharma’s. But he could barely recall anything about that night, other than the havoc Mrs Sharma had created that night by suggesting that Mahika had not grieved properly for her father’s death and the loss of her first pregnancy. According to her, returning to India, to her extended family would help her grieve and heal. Shivam had agreed to the idea of Mahika going to India during the party. However, in his heart he knew that Mahika wouldn’t return, and buying the ticket for India was a sure-shot recipe to end it all. After the party, Mahika requested to buy a ticket for her, and he had taken his sweet time finding the cheapest ticket. They had slept soon after. That was when his memory of the night ended.

‘Wish you had gone to India before coming to Singapore. Now you will be stuck with the baby. I wish you had not changed your mind that night, Mahi,’ Shivam said to prod further about that night.

‘You changed my mind in the very moment you placed your head in my lap and started crying, Shivam. You cried for the baby we’d lost and then you cried for Papa’s death too. That evening, I realized my mistake. I was so engrossed in my sorrows that I hadn’t given you a chance to grieve. But thanks to whatever drink you’d had at Dr Sharma’s house, the knots in your heart had loosened enough to show me your softer side for the first time. I started loving you more than ever after that night, Shivam.’

The honesty in Mahika’s voice had made him doubt his recall. But something was still not fitting well. While the strategy to keep Mahika away from her extended family was very typical of Shivam, the idea that he’d had a glass of wine at the party was ridiculous. Shivam wasn’t allowed any alcohol, as it interacted with his meds, and he clearly remembered

dumping that glass of wine in Dr Sharma's kitchen sink. However, after much effort, Shivam recalled taking an extra anxiety pill, given the stress of their impending move. But he still couldn't remember making love to Mahika that night or any time soon after that. The stress of packing and unpacking had overpowered his mind and that meant only one thing—Mahika wasn't telling the entire truth about the baby.

A simple DIY paternity test could have solved this puzzle but he'd subconsciously procrastinated, driven by the fear of discovering something he didn't want to. Hence accepting Dr Steven's proposal and working in his lab became a temporary means of running away from his pregnant wife and an unwanted baby.

A week later, Shivam was still finding more men who could be the father of Mahika's baby when Dr Steven gave him a bigger cause for concern.

'I highly recommend you go through genetic counselling before planning your next baby, considering the Down syndrome history. You know your wife is at a higher risk already,' Dr Steven said in passing while going through Shivam's findings of the day. It felt like being slapped.

Shivam had been so engrossed in doubting Mahika that he'd forgotten about the bigger beast.

'All well, son? Did I upset you? Sorry it wasn't the intention, mah,' Dr Steven had read his flushed face.

'My wife is already nine weeks pregnant.'

'Congratulations! Which doctor are you seeing? Are you taking her to NUH? And why are you spending so much time in the lab?'

'I just got to know. A few days ago. I didn't get a chance to go through genetic counselling. This isn't a planned pregnancy—'

'Don't worry. Lightning never strikes twice, and if it does, this time you're covered for Down syndrome, at least, as the research is already reaching the clinical-trial stage.'

But Shivam wasn't willing to run any clinical trials on his baby. However, the data on the Internet confirmed Mahika only had a 1 per cent chance of carrying a Down syndrome baby again.

Shivam let his thoughts simmer, and a day later he'd gone back to Dr Steven, requesting a few doses of misoprostol. He didn't even wish to risk a 1 per cent chance of a Down syndrome baby. Dr Steven had given him the abortion pills without asking any questions.

'When her bleeding starts you can bring her here. I'll handle it,' Dr Steven said.

Shivam cleaned the canvas with Dr Steven's help, and this time Mahika had not fought to keep the baby. Because it had melted between her legs in the middle of the night, she pinned the blame on her Shiva for the spontaneous miscarriage.

The prescription had helped him settle the score with Mahika. A sin for a sin. An eye for an eye. However, the second miscarriage had shattered Mahika more than he had anticipated. It had robbed Mahika of her will to live, bringing his life to a standstill, and Shivam had no clue how to drag her out of this grief.

'How is she?' Dr Steven asked one afternoon.

'I've tried everything with no luck. She's very depressed. I think I shouldn't have given her the abortion pill.' Shivam shared his regret with Dr Steven in a moment of desperation.

'I know how you feel. But speaking from experience, this guilt is better than crying for a lifetime. I am not sure if I told you about my son. He was born with a congenital heart problem. He died when he was seven. I don't remember one single day of his short life when we didn't cry. Cynthia still cries. But a little less. The move to Singapore helped Cynthia overcome the loss of our son. Everything in Hong Kong used to remind us of him, so we decided to relocate.'

'I am so sorry for your loss, Dr Steven. Do you have kids?'

'She miscarried a few times and then we stopped trying. We have found our joy in helping others conceive a healthy baby. Anyway, to bring the point home. A change of place will help your wife move on. In fact, why don't you move into one of my properties? We can adjust the rent to your budget, which will save me the hassle of paying you for research in cash

and potentially getting noticed. Win-win situation lah. And the place is big enough to keep your wife busy.'

And with that proposition, Dr Steven gave Shivam a tour of his house that very evening. The bungalow, with ample space to garden, had felt as precious as the inverted microscope.

'Feel free to use the gardens for your modified plants,' Dr Steven said, following his eyes. That offer had worked like a charm. Because all this while, Shivam had been hunting for a house that gave him some land to experiment with his plants. But the ground floor apartments were way beyond his budget, and now, as luck would have it, he'd stumbled upon a mansion for no cost.

But nothing was free in Dr Steven's world.

Dr Steven soon started pushing Shivam to splice and edit the non-viable human embryos he had in abundance from the fertility clinic upstairs. However, Shivam had no such aspirations. His research was aimed at eradicating diseases caused by genetic mutations—far from Dr Steven's dream of making designer babies. Moreover, as planned, Shivam's time in Dr Steven's high-tech lab was bringing Shivam closer to his own goals.

The new gene editor he'd tailored at the university lab had enabled the editing of several genetic mutations, theoretically fixing many incurable genetic diseases. While Professor Chua, his department head at the university, had begun the paperwork for clinical trials, Dr Steven jumped the gun and ordered a chimp set of eggs and sperms.

'I know you're hesitant to work with human eggs and sperms, so I arranged these. It cost me an arm and a leg. I hope this inspires you,' Dr Steven said.

Shivam was well prepared for the proposition. In the last few weeks, he'd seen it coming, as the genetic blueprint of the chimp's DNA was almost deciphered.

'Let me clear my head and begin this soon. Right now, I've got too many things on my mind. At work, as you know, my project is already in the clinical-trial stage. And I have no respite at home. Half of the time my wife

cries about being an orphan, and the rest of the time she's lamenting the two babies she lost in the last two years.'

Shivam had chosen his words carefully. He had rehearsed them, as this was his last attempt to dissuade Dr Steven from pushing him to begin the actual splicing and editing of chimp eggs. Shivam thought this was a heinous crime as compared to the harmless act of studying a chimp's DNA in some hidden lab. He planned to sever his ties with Dr Steven if need be.

Shivam had yet to discover that Dr Steven was a seasoned player, and he'd set a bigger trap than Shivam could've imagined.

'I'm glad you brought up your wife. When she was here after you'd got rid of the unwanted baby, I had some tests done. And it seems your abortion pill didn't cause her miscarriage. Her reports indicated chromosomal abnormalities—Trisomy 16. It is the most common trisomy leading to multiple miscarriages in a woman. I wanted to check whether your wife lost the Down syndrome baby to a spontaneous miscarriage as well or you got it aborted?'

'She met with an accident. Had a fall.'

Dr Steven gave him a suspicious look. He rummaged through his drawer and referred to a file. 'By the looks of it, she might need genetic editing and IVF. I can only arrange for one or two free attempts. If you need more, I'll ensure that you're charged as per the staff rate in our clinic. After all, you're family now,' Dr Steven said.

The cost of Shivam's conscience was definitely less than the pregnancy packages private hospitals in Singapore quoted. And Dr Steven had added IVF to the mix, making the offer even better.

All Shivam had to do was get his hands dirty editing chimp eggs and sperm.

Yet he procrastinated for weeks until he accidentally stumbled upon a theoretical recipe to create a super mouse while working in the university lab. He wanted to jump-start the editing to verify his findings but every experiment in the university lab was bound by approvals and ethical limits. Professor Chua was thrilled at the findings, but he had to take approval to order the model mouse for the experiment. However, Dr Steven gave him

whatever he wanted in the blink of an eye. Shivam was getting a chance to learn editing and splicing from the best in the market. The thrill of these experiments soon buried the kernels of guilt sprouting in his heart. Shivam was happier than before, and it helped Mahika recover too.

On his suggestion, she'd started sprucing up the shed in the backyard, converting it into a temple. Mahika's life slowly gained its rhythm. She started navigating on her own, going to the wet market, Little India, and Mustafa superstore by herself. And her returning smile had relieved Shivam of the lingering guilt.

'You should plan a baby soon,' Dr Steven suggested while editing the mouse's sperms. It was the fourth attempt at creating a super mouse. All the previous pregnancies of the edited embryos had resulted in miscarriages. But this had not dampened their spirits.

'It's on my mind. But I don't want a distraction right now. I want to give my wife some time to settle. I don't think our marriage can survive another miscarriage.'

'My team in the clinic will take care of everything. Don't worry. Okay, let's implant this one. Fingers crossed,' Dr Steven said and pulled out a catheter to implant a fertilized egg in the model mouse waiting in the cage.

'Bring your wife to the clinic tomorrow. I will inform Cynthia.'

'Not sure if I should bring her here. Perhaps you can write down the test needed, and I will get it done at National University Hospital?'

'The genetic testing there is a very basic one. Here she will get all the attention she needs. And no one will connect the dots if you use the HDB parking down the road. Can?'

Shivam had requested for some time to think but in the weeks to come Mahika had requested to see a doctor. She wanted to try for a baby again and Shivam had taken it as a good omen. He brought her to Dr Steven's lab to run all the tests and procedures prescribed by Dr Steven and his gynaecologist wife. While Dr Steven's crew was processing her test results in the clinic, in the secret lab under the clinic, he tailored the first set of mouse eggs and sperms independently.

‘Still prgnnt.’ Dr Steven texted Shivam every morning. His attempt at independent editing worked. Three weeks later, the pregnant mouse delivered healthy mice with razor-sharp teeth. Dr Steven put the infant mice to sleep before they could bite the iron cage and free themselves.

The lab in the basement was blooming with life, but Mahika’s womb was still empty. The egg retrieval had failed once and the test tube fertilization had not resulted in a healthy embryo the next time. But before Dr Steven’s cash register could start ringing, Shivam had found the means to get an unlimited attempt at IVF.

He agreed to tailor the chimp’s embryo in an exchange for a few more free cycles of IVF added to Mahika’s package, to which Dr Steven happily agreed.

The day Dr Steven’s team had summoned Mahika for implantation was the day Shivam had tailored the sperms of a chimp for the first time.

In the clinic, Mahika’s face lit up as Dr Cynthia showed her the robust embryo stuck to her uterus wall. But at that moment Shivam spotted a blue mark on the cell culture dish that had just been used for embryo transfer. Shivam moved closer; it was the same petri dish he’d scratched to get rid of a tiny blue ink mark in Dr Steven’s lab.

‘Where did you get the sample from? Did Dr Steven give you the sample?’ Shivam asked in a panic.

‘Dr Steven? How do you know him? He’s not handling your case. But we have a wonderful team to take care of your wife and the baby,’ Dr Cynthia explained.

That wasn’t the assurance Shivam wanted. However, he was trained better than to lose his calm in a crisis. Once Mahika was settled at home, Shivam returned to the basement to confirm his suspicion. The batch of chimp embryos that Dr Steven had rejected that morning, deeming them unfit, were still there, except for one. Shivam felt a shiver in his spine. Dr Steven had switched the culture dishes to implant a chimp embryo into Mahika’s womb.

Or he had swapped the chimp egg to trick him into editing a human embryo?

That day, Shivam had got trapped like the genetically altered zygote in Mahika's womb.

#

Now

Shivam picked up Mahika's genetic counselling reports from the attic floor and filed them in the folder. There was a duplicate copy of the report he'd just filed. The reports looked identical, yet the results were different. Mahika was healthy and fertile in one, while the other indicated a chromosomal abnormality. It took him a moment to find the reason. He picked her blood-work report dated the same day. One indicated poor egg quality, while the other declared her fit to conceive naturally. The extent of Dr Steven's deceit floored him. All this time, Shivam had thought he'd fallen prey to Dr Steven's ambitions because of Mahika's infertility. But according to this report, Mahika was perfectly fit to conceive.

Shivam's blackmailer had given him evidence against Dr Steven. But the problem was that the same evidence could be used against Shivam too.

The file displayed proof of Shivam's breakthrough splicing, which had generated extraordinary muscle power in the test rat suffering from muscle dystrophy. He wanted to destroy this proof immediately, but he had to wait. Shivam would feed the reports to an industrial shredder in Dr Steven's lab.

He picked the report of Mahika's third miscarriage. There wasn't a duplicate report attached to it. Mahika had miscarried the baby conceived using a tailored egg. Shivam thought he'd been alleviating Mahika's misery.

Rudra

March 19, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

My mother had again slept listening to her father's voice. Today the tape had run further into the session, leading me to a Q&A. I'd expected my mother to wake up to her father's hearty laugh, but she was still asleep, and

even my father wasn't here to hit the stop button and replace the session with his snores. So, I hungrily devoured the jingle of my grandfather's voice, which contrasted with his deep-throated instructions that meant only business during the meditation discourse.

'Do you think meditation can help us develop psychic powers and telepathy?' someone asked.

He laughed. 'This reminds me of an old joke. A yogi enters the room and says, who here is psychic? Raise my hand!'

Everyone laughed. I felt myself smile. He had not dodged the question as I thought.

'It is surely possible. Haven't we all used the phrase "You read my mind"? Sometimes, when we're in heightened states, we can receive and interpret the brain signals the person sitting across the room transmits. I'd like to believe that some can read brain waves, but their minds need to be powerful enough to receive the signals. Meditate and you might be the next psychic of India. If not, you might at least get better marks on the quiz by reading what's on your professor's mind. All you have to do is believe in yourself.'

And his hearty laughs again ignited my dark and depressing world with sparks of happiness.

I like this guy, mate. Like, really like him.

'So, you're saying we can bend a spoon by looking at it?' the same voice asked.

'Ah! So that's what you were trying instead of practising meditation today. How about we learn numbers before solving calculus problems, friend?'

Another hearty laugh melted my heart. My grandfather's one-liners had a familiar texture. His sense of humour was like the voice within me, and that made me stop in my tracks.

Was my mother right about my grandfather being reborn as me?

'Telekinesis is the ability to move objects by mental power or other non-physical means. I don't know how many years of meditation you need to bend a spoon using the power of your mind, but I believe the visualization

meditation we practise every second Sunday of the month is the first step towards it. According to the science behind telekinesis, to move an object with your mind, you need to become one with the object, feel it and make it a part of you. Once you reach that heightened state of awareness in which the pen on the table becomes a part of your body, then all it might take from there is to flick it as you would your arm. Now try this by lifting yourself and walking out of the hall, as we need to vacate the class for the madam waiting there.'

And loud laughter yet again filled the room followed by a click. I'd finally reached the end of my grandfather's meditation discourse, but I wanted more of it. I wanted him to teach me how to read minds and how to move things without touching them. I wanted to use these powers to interfere in my world of visions. I wanted to change the course of my future.

I fell asleep wishing to achieve mind over matter only to wake up in the late morning.

My mother had managed to reach the restaurant on time, but I worried more than ever about her getting caught.

It's only in your head. She seems to be okay.

The voice in my head was right. She was talking to the man everyone called Neil Bhaiya. My mother was confidently suggesting the ingenious lunch buffet idea that she'd discussed with me at length over the last few days.

It's not called discussion. It's called a monologue. You just hear her.

But today this sarcasm hadn't moved the needle of my mood, because the sound of my mother's voice had a texture of hope. This woman talking to people around her wasn't scared. She didn't sound like the timid mother of the boy of my dreams, and that gave me hope I wasn't the boy in the dream.

But the man in the dream is definitely your father. Maybe she'll run away, but he'll find her. That's your mother's worst fear, right?

I ignored this pessimism and strained to hear my mother's voice, loaded with confidence and joy today. But this time I heard my father's voice.

‘Mahika, where are you? Mahi, are you in the shed? We’re late for the clinic.’ I waited for my mother to respond, only to belatedly realize my mistake.

My mother was in the restaurant, and my father was looking for her in the house.

Once again, I had seen something that wasn’t happening in the vicinity.

But you are a little late. The game of cat and mouse is over for your mother.

Mahika Rathod

March 19, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

‘What are you thinking, Didi?’ Murli asked, interrupting her thoughts.

‘Nothing, just about the restaurant,’ she said and stirred the gravy.

Mahika had deliberately kept her distance from everyone in the restaurant, as sharing one feeling would unravel her entire yarn of emotions.

‘What about the restaurant?’ Neil asked. He’d just walked into the kitchen with a bag full of vegetables.

‘Nothing much.’

‘Let’s hear out what you were thinking,’ Neil said and walked to her. His eyes were mapping her face again. His gaze paused for longer than usual, causing discomfort. Mahika had caught Neil watching her a couple of times in the last few days. He had looked away but the light flush on his cheeks had raised an alarm. Was he the face behind the anonymous notes? Was he part of Shivam’s team?

‘Come on. Tell us. The changes you suggested in the kitchen and the pantry are impressive. Do share your inputs, please.’ His smile wasn’t sarcastic like Shivam’s. It was gentle and encouraging.

‘That if we plan a lunch theme buffet once a week, with a spread of different regional food, it might give us an edge over other restaurants. And it can become our USP.’

‘Okay. And what kind of regional food are you talking about? Sorry, I am not very good at this,’ Neil said and folded his hands across his chest, displaying interest and enthusiasm. The warmth in his voice put her to ease.

‘Like, we can have all the Rajasthani delicacies one day and Sindhi delicacies on another. People in Singapore must be missing the food back home. Traditional food like daal-baati-churma and sindhi kadhi can be an instant hit.’

Mahika’s ideas had broken the dam and were flowing untamed. The smile on Neil’s face grew bigger with every new idea. He moved to the kitchen island, pulled out a pen and paper from the drawer and started taking notes.

‘My mother’s cupboards are loaded with sarees. I can get them tomorrow itself. We might have a few silk bedsheets too. Are you sure you want to cut and mend it at home? We can hire a seamstress. You should not tire yourself. We cannot afford to lose you.’

He had not ridiculed Mahika’s idea of using old sarees and colourful bedsheets as table runners; rather he had called her resourceful and imaginative. Neil was saying all the right things but a silent undercurrent of emotions was making Mahika nervous. Or was she just worried about getting judged?

‘One more thing. If it appeals to you. We can create more dining space by rearranging tables and chairs. You can also discuss this with your father and consider creating a play area off to the side of the dining hall. The cafés with play areas are very popular in New York.’

Neil had stopped taking notes.

‘That’s a brilliant idea, Mahika. I have seen parents struggling to eat with their toddlers. We should have thought about it. Where were you all these years? I mean . . . the restaurant would have not suffered—’

‘I can help with sewing the runners. My mother was a tailor.’ Salim had cut Neil mid-sentence. Murli jumped in as well, ‘I will take care of the kitchen and can help you hang the curtains later.’

The kitchen was palpating with excitement and enthusiasm. Mahika felt happiness steal over her as she stirred the gravy while talking to Neil, Murli

and Salim. She was anxious to see Mr Mehta's reaction. But a forceful kick in her womb washed away her happiness. Rudra started hitting her with strong and violent kicks as if about to pop out of her womb. The unbearable pain made her rush to the washroom with her hand clenching her stomach.

'What happened?' Murli asked.

Neil rushed to follow her to the washroom.

'Are you okay, Mahika?' he asked, standing by the door. Mahika wasn't okay. The baby was about to pop out from her womb if not stopped. She ran the faucet, pulled her T-shirt up and pressed her palm into her skin. 'Are you okay, Rudra?'

But the kicks rocking her womb were too violent to be categorized as a yes or a no.

Something was wrong.

Mahika waited for Rudra to settle, but the storm in her womb was nowhere near settling. He was kicking her on the opening of her cervix. Mahika felt contractions, and her heart sank.

She was about to miscarry.

'I need to go home. My stomach . . . the cramps are unbearable.' Neil immediately jumped into action.

'Come, I will drop you at home.' Neil walked with her to the car park. Another fierce kick jolted her womb, and Mahika dropped to her knees in the middle of the road. Neil pulled her up and walked her to the car, holding her. His hold was soft and gentle, displaying care that touched her heart.

'Thank you.' It was all she could say before Rudra threw another impactful kick and robbed her lungs of air.

How could she help Rudra? What was wrong with him? Was he leaving her, like the other babies?

Mahika had begun crying silently, which alarmed Neil.

'What kind of a cramp is it, Mahika? Do you want me to take you to the accident and emergency? It could be your appendix or hernia.'

'No. Just drive me to Goodman Road, please,' Mahika managed to say between fractured sobs.

How would she explain these kicks to the doctor in accident and emergency?

‘Turn here,’ she said, and Neil followed her directions.

‘You live here?’ he asked when Mahika asked him to stop at the front gate.

She nodded, not bothering to worry about the questions coming her way. But Neil had shifted his attention back to her, no longer wondering why a woman living in an independent bungalow was working a \$10/hour job.

‘Let me walk you to the house and call your husband,’ Neil said.

‘No, please. He doesn’t know that I work at the restaurant,’ Mahika said, panicking.

‘Okay. In that case, let me walk you in and help you settle down.’

Before Mahika could answer, Rudra kicked again. She said, ‘I’ll manage.’ She barged into the house, pain now spreading to her legs, while Neil stood at the gate. Seeing the digital lock made her realize her mistake. The camera had caught her walking into the house, and it might’ve caught Neil too. But the pain in her abdomen had suspended her thinking.

Mahika walked upstairs and dropped on the bed. She placed her hand on her belly, and the kicking stopped. Her stomach was sore, but Rudra had stopped knocking her cervix.

‘Are you okay, Rudra?’ she asked. A gentle kick was Rudra’s reply. Mahika sat there perplexed.

Had it been a false alarm?

‘Is something wrong, Rudra?’ she asked. He kicked in confirmation.

‘With you? Kick if yes.’ But Rudra didn’t kick.

‘Something is wrong with me?’ Mahika asked.

But before Rudra could kick she heard the car entering the driveway.

Shivam was home early.

She rushed to the washroom. She was still wearing the apron with the restaurant’s logo on it, and her clothes reeked of laborious cooking. But the clean kitchen would tell a different story. Mahika undressed and rolled her clothes into a ball, shoving them to the bottom of the laundry bag.

She was going to get caught today.

She stepped into the shower, fighting the tremble in her legs. The sound of the running faucet had swallowed Shivam's footsteps. She waited for the knock on the door, but then she realized her mistake. She'd forgotten to bolt the door and hadn't taken her clothes. Mahika wrapped the towel around her wet body and rushed out to get her clothes, but she was a moment too late.

Shivam was standing at the door, staring at her half-naked body. The shine in his eyes reflected his desire. It caused a flip in her stomach.

He walked over to her, gently threaded his fingers into hers and pulled her towards him. The touch of his lips was gentle yet firm, and Mahika felt something exquisite and tender blossom within her as he kissed her. Shivam tucked her wet hair behind her ear and gently unhooked the towel's edge but before he could go any further, something on the ground floor dropped and shattered.

'Is someone here?' Shivam asked and bolted out of the room.

Mahika's heart jumped to her throat. Neil had left, hadn't he?

Shivam Rathod

March 19, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Shivam rushed out of the bedroom to find the intruder. But no one was in the kitchen or anywhere else in the house. Shivam checked the backyard and the shed too. However, he'd heard a thud. Mahika had heard it too. She'd startled, and fear had turned her face as white as the day curtain fluttering behind her. He took another round of the house and found a shattered coffee mug near the stairs.

Mahika must've kept it on the stairs while sipping ginger tea from it.

She had a habit of sitting on the stairs with a book and a cup of morning tea. Several times, Shivam had reminded Mahika to put away the empty cup she'd leave on the side of the stairs. He knew one day it would shatter, and the cup had chosen to fall on the day when he'd been about to devour her.

But how had it fallen?

He studied the stairs where Mahika usually sat. A dark ring stain was on the edge of the parquet stairs. She'd left her cup this morning too.

It might have slid in the pool of its condensation.

Shivam cleaned up the debris, but something still stuck in his mind, hurting like a pebble in a shoe. The cup's stain was far from the edge of the staircase. It wasn't physically possible for the cup to glide that far and shatter unless someone had accidentally knocked it.

He again searched the house but found no one.

The broken cup and the faint feminine scent lingering in the house, however, told a different story.

Rudra

March 19, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

You can relax now.

The voice in my head announced as we reached home on time. But just when the adrenaline started to drain from my body, my mother's heart started beating like a jackhammer. I'd saved her in the nick of time, but she was still scared. Why? I strained to listen and heard my father's footsteps.

Ask her to relax, man.

Her heartbeat was causing mayhem in my dark world, and my compulsive desire to come to her rescue took over every other feeling.

She's scared of him. Is he going to twist her arm again?

My mind raced as I looked for the means to stop my father from coming near her. I wanted to move him away.

To move an object with your mind, you need to become one with the object, feel it and make it a part of you. And once you reach that heightened state of awareness, where a pen on a table becomes a part of your body, then all it takes is a flick, just as you would move your arm.

I cursed the voice in my head for giving me nonsensical ideas in my moment of need.

You said you wanted to move him away. I was showing you a way to do it.

My mother's heartbeat had gone up another notch, and I felt a strange sense of discomfort as my father's footsteps grew louder. He was coming near my mother. He was about to hurt her. Or hurt me?

Stop him. Now.

But how?

My father took another step closer, and I felt his presence grow larger and my mother's beating heart grew louder too. I wanted to focus on her inhale and exhale to calm my mind, but her lungs had forgotten to breathe.

Save her.

I felt the need to break this moment. Shatter it apart. But there was nothing I could do.

If something in the kitchen could fall and take him away from her.

I closed my eyes and prayed for someone to come to our rescue.

Mind over matter, mate. Maybe you can drop something in the kitchen.

But how could I move a thing I had not seen?

Just imagine it. Feel it and make it a part of you. That's what your grandfather said.

I closed my eyes and waited for the glow between my eyebrows to come to my rescue, and a deep-blue ceramic cup filled my dark world.

See, this is the right use of visualization meditation. Stop loitering in that boy's world.

The noises around me faded as the current flew through my body. I attempted to move the cup. The muscles in my brain radiated pain as I used my mind to shift the cup. But the cup was still where I'd imagined it.

Don't give up. Don't. He might push her down the stairs again.

A loud thud and my concentration shattered. As if someone had pushed open a jammed door.

Or you managed to drop the cup, dude. Congratulations! Your telekinesis worked.

Shivam Rathod

March 19, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Mahika's carelessness had again ruined the moment for Shivam. After checking the house a third time, he drove Mahika to the clinic. The unfamiliar scent he'd smelt had disappeared from the house.

He'd imagined it.

A text from Dr Steven to 'reach soon' had replaced all the other worries running through his head. The twelve-week scan was the most crucial scan for the baby, but these ridiculous hide-and-seek notes, and now the intruder, had placed Shivam's anxiety on the back burner. In all this chaos, he'd had no time to calm his mind or plan for any contingencies.

He'd forgotten his anxiety pill too.

As expected, the baby's brain size, the nuchal fluid in his neck, the kidney size and the crown-to-rump length were all off the charts. But the heartbeat of seventy beats per minute shattered all pretence of calm. Dr Steven measured the foetal heartbeat multiple times, but the numbers refused to budge. However, it was the lack of movement in Mahika's womb that sent a jolt of fear through Shivam's body.

He gathered himself to embrace another miscarriage. But, oblivious to the undercurrent of fear running through the room, Mahika was staring at the screen, admiring the life within her.

'Have you felt the baby's movement yet?' Dr Steven asked, keeping a check on his tone.

'I don't feel anything. Isn't it too early?'

Mahika didn't sense the tension.

How stupid could one be?

Dr Steven dropped the steel pen-stand from the table to startle the unborn, but the life within her remained unperturbed. His baby had been tailored to pick up the sounds inaudible to the human ear, but the unborn wasn't reacting to even audible noises.

Something was wrong with his unborn son.

Shivam waited for Dr Steven to drop a bomb or schedule a consult with Dr Cynthia, but instead, Dr Steven handed Mahika a printout of a twelve-week-old fetus, as if it was the actual scan of their baby. Shivam wanted to

forget all the protocols and ask about his baby, and discuss his weak heart, but Dr Steven's stern look sealed Shivam's lips.

He would have to wait.

On the ride back home, Mahika asked, 'Is the baby okay?'

She'd broken his chain of thoughts. 'Why didn't you ask in the scan room? Now, can I drive peacefully, please?'

She turned away from him, staring at the changing scenery outside, perhaps crying too. But he had bigger problems to deal with.

The baby's heart.

Once home, Shivam rushed to the study room. A quick search confirmed his speculation. His baby's heart was beating at an average range of fifty-five to eighty-five beats per minute—which was ideal for a twelve-year-old.

He raced back to the clinic to share this finding with Dr Steven. But the frown on Dr Steven's face made him doubt his assumption.

'I consulted a neonatal cardiologist at the KK Hospital. He thinks the baby's heartbeat will either normalize and the foetal movement will resume, or Mahika will miscarry,' Dr Steven informed.

'Did you share with him the details of the genetic modification of my baby—'

'Shivam, I suggest that you still treat this pregnancy as a project, at least for the next twenty-eight weeks. You know what I mean, son. I'm just trying to protect you.'

He took a deep breath and centred himself.

Life in Mahika's womb was indeed a project, at least for the time being. But unlike always, today, his heart pounded with conflicting emotions. However, this wasn't the right time to negotiate with Dr Steven.

'Could it be that the baby's heart is fully developed? Because it's matching the bpm range of a twelve-year-old,' Shivam said.

Dr Steven's eyes lit up at the explanation, and he patted Shivam's back with childlike excitement.

'Now that's why I say no one can match you. My repeated request to treat this pregnancy as a project is more to protect you than anything,' Dr Steven said in a sugar-coated voice laced more with deception than care.

But Shivam wasn't the kind who could be fooled twice. Once was enough, since it had trapped him forever.

And now he had proof too, waiting in the vault hidden in the attic.

Mahika Rathod

March 19, 2003

Clementi Fertility Clinic, Singapore

'Today is the twelve-week scan. We'll know more about our baby,' Shivam had said in an intimate voice, planting a kiss on her lips. The need to disappear in his arms and forget everything else had gripped her hard. But the loud thud had shattered the moment. Mahika's mistake had yet again consumed the magical moment of love, leaving her both unsatiated and relieved.

Mahika got ready for her appointment, battling the love that had lit itself deep inside her, stirring long-forgotten emotions and desires. She was still savouring the taste of his lips on hers, wishing for things to get back to normal, when Shivam's cold voice dragged her back.

'You open the door. I take it you haven't tried the new lock after that day,' Shivam said.

The sweet taste of his love disappeared. The code she'd punched in to get into the house minutes ago wasn't the code Shivam had shared. He'd changed it several times since then.

Was this a test?

'It's one, nine, two, right?' she asked, and Shivam nodded as if nothing had happened. Mahika couldn't believe Shivam was so deceitful. He had changed the code just before entering the house to make her believe that 1, 9, and 2 were still the numbers. Mahika walked out of the house, feeling more betrayed than ever. Shivam's head turned to the surveillance camera.

Damn, her entry must've got caught on the camera. Was he testing her?

Neil's car was nowhere to be seen. But Shivam might've spotted him in the camera footage or on the road.

Mahika once again cursed herself for her impulsiveness. Rudra's painful kicks had made her forget about the camera. She had reacted impulsively, but now the baby within her was as silent as dead. Mahika connected the dots. Rudra must've seen Shivam coming home early. He stopped kicking once they were home.

You are going mad.

But there wasn't any other explanation.

Shivam pulled the seatbelt over Mahika, tucked her wet hair behind her ear and said, 'The cup saved you today.'

But this time Mahika's heart didn't flip. It was filled with hatred instead. She wanted to end this charade and walk out on him. But Rudra's newly discovered powers and her mutant embryo's ability to manifest her world and her future had left her too dumbfounded to think beyond the trip to the clinic.

The trip to the clinic was rocky. Dr Cynthia, her official obstetrician, was on leave, and Dr Grace, a new doctor, examined her, probably playing her part in this charade.

'Mommy, you have the NT scan today?' Dr Grace said, pushing her blonde hair behind her ear. Dr Grace was a big woman with broad shoulders, but her bedside manners were better than those of her colleagues. She finished the examination and directed Mahika and Shivam to the scan room.

Earlier, at home and then in the clinic's washroom, Mahika had instructed Rudra to stay still during the scan. She'd hoped that his limbs, if unusual, wouldn't wave around and invite trouble. But the look on Shivam's face meant the green-eyed Chinese technician or whoever he was had read more than she'd expected him to read from the scan.

Something was wrong with Rudra.

The bitter memories of the first NT scan came unbidden as Shivam drove her back home. His dragging feet and burdened shoulders made her heart cleave into two again. And when Shivam refused to tell her anything about the baby, Mahika decided to ask his son.

‘Rudra, are you okay?’ Mahika asked as soon as Shivam had locked himself in his study. Rudra kicked, but it didn’t calm her. When her baby’s kick couldn’t assure her, Mahika went into the shed hoping to rekindle her faith, but her past tagged along.

She shouldn’t ask about the baby’s well-being. She knew what had happened when she’d asked Him about her baby’s well-being.

Mahika didn’t place the scan report on the altar today. The ritual of seeking Shiva’s blessings by placing the scan report next to the God hadn’t ended well those other times. She placed the scan sheet in her lap and waited for faith to find its way back to her heart. Her mother’s battle with cancer and her painful death had steered Mahika’s father to spirituality. Mahika had found comfort in watching her father’s daily rituals, which gradually became part of her morning routine after her father’s death. However, Shivam’s betrayal shattered her faith in God. And in moments like these, when she had no one to call her own, the need to find comfort in Him grew more profound. Mahika picked up her father’s Shivling and held it in her palm, trying to draw some strength from the stone that had not come to her rescue the last three times. But holding the Shivling didn’t move the needle of her faith. She was about to put the Shivling back when something dropped in her lap. It was a plastic bag. Mahika opened it and found a bundle of notes. It was Indian currency rolled into a cylinder and tied with a thread. She untied the knot and a gold chain dropped into her lap. Her mother’s *mangal sutra*.

It had been in there all these years.

Mahika’s parents had a habit of placing some cash in the temple for emergencies, but they usually kept it in the slot under the vermilion box, and she’d emptied that stash while cleaning out her father’s house. However, the hollow tube of the Shivling appeared to be another of her father’s secret hideouts. Mahika hastily counted the money. It was a drop in the ocean, but it would be significant if she could bring herself to sell the gold chain.

She heard footsteps. She inserted the money and the chain back into the hollow tube and placed the Shivling on the altar table.

‘I’m going to get groceries. Please don’t exert yourself, and no need to cook anything elaborate. And don’t sit on the floor please.’ Shivam’s hurried words stirred a fresh wave of worry in her. But before she could ask anything, Shivam was gone.

Mahika lifted the Shivling again, and fished out the money and the chain. Her father had once again announced his presence by giving her the avenues needed to escape.

Maybe Bua had been right. He was still in purgatory, trying to help her.

Now all she needed was her passport and she would be free.

Reading this as a sign, she rushed to the attic to finish searching the last two shelves. But the top two shelves were out of her reach. She needed time to haul the ladder up the stairs and then replace it. For that, she’d have to wait until tomorrow.

She returned to her room, and her towel, still on the bed, brought back bittersweet memories of Shivam’s intense kiss. Recalling that kiss was enough to make Mahika crave the warmth of his body. She hugged herself, yearning for his touch. Shivam hadn’t touched her for months and definitely not in the way he’d touched her today. She closed her eyes to once again seek comfort from her past.

#

Then

February 1999

New Jersey, USA

It was her first morning in New Jersey. The jet lag and the anticipation of starting a new life with Shivam and leaving her father behind were creating a deadly concoction of emotions. She’d just stepped out of the shower when Shivam asked, ‘What shall we have first, you or breakfast?’

Mahika felt Shivam’s gaze trickle down her skin. Her breath had halted as his fingers traced her collar bone.

‘Tell me, Mrs Rathod. What should we have first?’ he whispered.

‘Whatever is more tempting,’ Mahika replied in a slow whisper. And Shivam gently guided her to the bed, undoing her clothes with the calmness of a saint. Her heart beat a thousand beats in a second as Shivam ran his fingers over her bare skin, reading the response of his every touch as if she were a sample under his microscope.

‘Do you like this? And this?’ Shivam asked mapping her body with his lips now. Mahika couldn’t believe Shivam had managed to stay away from her for all this time when the passion burning in him felt so intense at this moment. Unlike the dreadful stories of the first night she’d heard from her cousins, her first intimate moment with Shivam had felt like a touch of heaven—until Shivam stood up soon after making love and walked into the bathroom. Mahika waited for him to come back but heard him vigorously gargling and running the faucet. She felt perplexed.

‘I’ll heat the bagels. You take a shower, and then we can have breakfast together,’ Shivam said, avoiding her gaze. Mahika found the bathroom had resumed its pristine order—the edge of the toilet paper was folded into a triangle, the wet towel was stowed in the laundry, and the sink was clean and dry. That’s when it hit her.

She’d got it all wrong.

Back in India, soon after their marriage, Shivam hadn’t been shy or taking things slowly. He’d been waiting for an attached bathroom to clean up. In weeks to come, Mahika became used to Shivam’s methodical routine of washing away whatever part of her had stayed with him after making love. As if she was dirt Shivam had to wash off, a stain he needed to scrub off, a wrinkle he had to smooth from a sheet.

#

Now

‘Mahi,’ Shivam said and woke Mahika up from her nap. ‘I picked some pizza from Pizza Hut. Let’s eat.’

Mahika woke up disoriented. A lot had happened in one day for Mahika’s exhausted brain to process. She started to remember: Rudra displaying

clairvoyance by bringing her back home from the restaurant before Shivam could catch her; the sweat-filled restaurant apron in the laundry that Mahika had yet to hide; her getting caught on the camera; Shivam's kiss; and the scan. Mahika noticed how Shivam shifted his weight from one foot to another.

He was bringing her some bad news.

'Mahi . . . mmm, I just got a call from the clinic. The scan from today . . . I mean, the baby is showing an early sign of foetal stress. According to the scan, the heart seems to be a normal size, but the heartbeat isn't normal. The doctors at the clinic have predicted two scenarios: either the heartbeat will normalize, or you might miscarry . . . I'm just preparing you for the worst, Mahi,' Shivam said and took a probe from a black canvas bag.

A vicious twist of unease went through her as Shivam placed the probe on her stomach. The silence in the room felt like a whispered threat.

Lighting had struck again. For the fourth time.

A tear dropped from Mahika's eye as she looked up at Shivam. He was smiling, the kind of smile that travelled to his eyes.

'Looks like it was a false alarm. But let's err on the side of caution and keep a close watch on our baby's heart rate. You can catalogue it here. I'll show you how to measure it,' Shivam said and taught Mahika how to use the foetal heartbeat monitor.

She didn't need a machine to measure the thud in her baby's heart. Her heart would stop beating with Rudra's heart. Mahika packed the device back in the bag and went to the washroom. She had to hide the apron before Shivam could decide to empty the laundry bag. She hid the apron under her shirt and left the bedroom. Shivam was in the study, talking to someone on the phone.

'The heartbeat has normalized. I was thinking the heart's growth might be compromised by the extraordinary brain development.' Shivam paused. 'Yes, you're right. Let's cross the bridge when we come to it. Goodnight.'

Mahika walked down the stairs and into the shed before Shivam could catch her eavesdropping.

She folded the apron and stuffed it in a half-painted basil pot—an ambitious project she couldn't complete because Shivam hated the smell of paints; and now she was using this half-painted ceramic pot to store her things. She went into the kitchen to find Shivam had already served the food. Shivam poured extra chilli flakes on his pizza and took a bite, beating his anxiety with spicy food. The constant thud in her belly made Mahika relish her pizza. She took another slice and ate this one for Rudra.

'I'm too tired to clean up,' Shivam said and went upstairs.

Mahika patted her stomach and Rudra kicked back. His kicks were louder than the thud on the Doppler. She wanted to wipe away the frown on Shivam's face but decided not to. An act of sweet revenge. An eye for an eye. A sleepless night for a sleepless night.

Rudra

March 19, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

'Rudra, are you okay?' my mother asked. As if that was a question she should be asking, especially after throwing the same question to my genius father and getting the response that she got.

But you prefer a cricket match over your scan, right? What timing!

However, I wasn't to be blamed today. I was just following my mother's instructions to stay still during our trip to the clinic.

'Don't move. Don't think. Don't respond to my voice or anyone's voice, Rudra,' she'd reminded me in the washroom before the scan. And because the best way to stay still was to meditate, I focused on her breath, which had become a sure-fire recipe to enter the boy's world.

In our last episode, you saw that the future Rudra was caught by his father for following a cricket match. Today we'll learn what happened. Stay tuned.

My inner voice's recap had made me smile. But only for a second before I was back into the boy's gloomy world.

‘I’m asking you something. Where did you get this? Did you steal it from someone?’ the father asked, and the sting of a slap on the boy’s cheek made my face tingle. I closed my eyes and reopened them. The bruise of the slap on the boy’s cheek had faded. I’d skipped a couple of days again.

Good! I hope he has learnt his lesson by now.

However, his love for cricket hadn’t faded at all. The boy was sitting on the floor, putting together the pieces of the broken device that his father had thrown the other day. I stepped closer to look at his bruises when a smile spread across his swollen lips. The device had come to life, bringing back the buzz of the cricket field. He’d fixed a broken radio using a circuit diagram.

‘India has lost one more player. Is there any hope left?’ the commentator said. The rhetorical question broke his heart, and I felt the ache. I waited for the memories of the match to come flooding back to me, but I’d lost the thread of this memory. Hence, I felt anxious to know the outcome of this match as well. The boy lifted the speaker and walked to the bathroom. He turned the faucet on and came out to check if the commentary coming from the speaker could be heard from his room. His accomplished smile meant he’d figured out the perfect spot for the perfect reception and the perfect way to drown out the sounds. He was a genius.

You are a narcissist!

‘This is unbelievable. This young cricketer is on the verge of breaking an existing record . . .’ But before the commentator could finish, the boy got up and emptied the pail, adding the loud noise of water falling in the empty vessel to the mix of the pitch’s excitement.

‘And he has done it. India has won this historical match. The young man has broken the world record in this do-or-die match.’

While my father’s accomplice tried waking me up in the scan room, I was deeply immersed in my trance. I couldn’t hear the pen-stand drop because the boy’s heartbeat was pulsating in my throat as he danced with joy. The boy hid the speaker in the bathroom and walked back to his room. He picked up a trophy from the shelf above his desk and ran his hands along the ‘Man of the Match’ embossed on the trophy’s steel cup.

‘I will play for India in the next World Cup.’

The ground beneath my feet had turned liquid at the thought of him playing cricket again. But his eyes were filled with untouchable joy, determination and passion.

Not even his father’s cane is powerful enough to stop him.

My concentration was shattered for a moment, and I returned to him in a different time frame while my mother and father had come home from the clinic and worried about me.

He was in an examination hall, writing an English composition, which, unlike maths, was completely out of his league. At that moment, I wanted to attain the siddhi my mother had mentioned and the state of meditation my grandfather had talked about in his discourse—the power to move an object without any physical means. Everything could change, if only I could control the pen he held and write the essay for him. Instead, I stood there and waited for the boy to fail.

He struggled for a bit, then tore the sheet, crumpled it into a ball and tossed it out of the window. His smirk and the fire in his eyes made my stomach burn. Nothing could stop him.

Maybe you can. Try moving that pen using the trick you learnt from your grandpa.

I was tempted. I imagined his pen being a part of me. It had taken me several attempts to become one with this object that didn’t even exist in my present. I tried moving the pen as if it were my tiny finger. Nothing. My energies were drained, but the pen had not moved.

Let’s go to his world and try again now. Your parents are asleep. You have all the calmness you need.

I focused my energies on her breath and soon returned to the boy’s world, where I had left him in the examination hall. The pen was still where I had left it. I tried moving the pen. The muscles in my brain had started hurting and then a thud broke my concentration. Something had dropped in my mother’s world, waking my mother and father. They were awake, yet the room was coated with a mind-numbing silence. My mother was crying silently, and my father was worried about me with the same intensity.

They think you're going to die. All thanks to your untimely meditation and your stillness during the scan this afternoon.

But I'd been following her orders.

In that case, note to self: it's a universal rule not to do what your parents say. For starters, your mother sleeps at the first sound of her father's voice. So, use your discretion, my friend.

Mahika and Shivam

March 20, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Mahika

Mahika was in the kitchen when Shivam took the knife and ripped open her stomach to bring Rudra out.

She would've wandered in the dream, but her hand touched the nightstand, and a pen fell from the table. The gentle thud made Shivam shift. He wasn't sleeping either. But the room was pitch dark, Shivam liked the room this dark, as if the darkness within him wasn't enough. Mahika wiped beads of sweat from her forehead. The fear of losing Rudra had again manifested in a dream. She placed her hand on her belly and was startled by the lack of movement. Mahika patted her stomach once more. Her womb was as still as the air in the room. She thought of her dream, which caused despair that bordered between a nightmare and a hunch.

The heartbeat monitor was causing this fear.

Mahika pressed her hands deep into her belly, trying to pick the movement, but Rudra wasn't moving. The fear she'd just brushed away was back full steam, and the silence around her was filled with doubts and misgivings.

He must be sleeping. Don't panic.

But what if by then it was too late?

Mahika heard a faint cry as if a baby was crying somewhere. She looked around—there was no one—and the crying subsided too.

She was still dreaming.

Mahika gulped all the water from the bottle she kept on her nightstand, but the taste of this nightmare still melted in her mouth. She tapped on her belly, but there was no movement. Mahika pulled the handheld device from its bag and switched it on. The numbers blinked on the screen and turned stable. Shivam woke up with a start and waited for the device to indicate the reading.

‘Forty. It can’t be,’ he said and restarted the machine.

His trembling fingers created a fresh knot of panic in Mahika’s stomach and lodged itself in her throat like a needle.

The screen again displayed the same number. Forty.

‘Change. Let’s go to the clinic. They’ll help us find out if the baby is okay by doing the non-stress test,’ he said.

Grief exploded in her as she relived every miscarriage. Her fall down the stairs with the Down syndrome baby; her second baby who went away silently because her womb wasn’t strong enough; and the spontaneous miscarriage that had been marked as an IVF failure. Each loss had left a scar. She’d waited for her heart to heal, but the loss was so profound that the sight of a mother loving a baby sent her into a bout of depression. Every time.

You are not fit to be a mother. He’d go away too. Because nothing can stop the baby from melting away. You shouldn’t have worked in the restaurant. The exertion must have caused it.

Shivam drove her to the clinic with the calmness that felt so mismatched to the moment that it seemed he was accustomed to such loss. Could she ever become accustomed to this kind of loss?

Shivam turned into the car park of the clinic. The green-eyed man was waiting in the basement with a wheelchair aid. Mahika was ferried to the scan room and the feeling of déjà vu gripped her hard.

She always returned home empty-handed from trips like these.

The needle in her throat pierced a little more sharply now.

Shivam

On the examination table, Mahika was as still as the baby within her. He remembered being twelve and entering the morgue to identify his mother and father. The bangle on her burnt hand and the Titan watch on his father's wrist had been the only things familiar about their charred bodies. Shivam shook away the image and stared at Mahika's expressionless face.

A tear leaked from her eye, giving the first sign of life.

Dread wormed its way into his heart. Shivam looked at Dr Grace with pleading eyes. She was running a sound test and her frown caused his stomach to flip. She cranked up the sound sent to the womb, but the baby was dead, like a brick sitting in Mahika's womb.

'The baby is fighting. But I'm not sure for how long. It's a matter of time. I'm sorry for your loss,' Dr Grace said. Shivam looked at Mahika. She was still. Dead. The last sign of life, the tears streaming down her face, was gone too.

Dr Grace said she was sorry for his loss. But was she talking about the baby or Mahika? Was she offering sympathy for the dead baby or his dead wife?

'I will inform the staff to prepare the DNC, Dr Steven. Just in case . . . I need you to sign these papers, Mr Rathod,' Dr Grace said. Shivam nodded. He went to Mahika, to prepare her, as she still stared at the ceiling without blinking. Before he could shake her out of her stupor, a loud thud filled the room. The baby's heartbeat on the monitor had gone from a slow murmur to a loud thud. And that's when Shivam realized that some form of monitor was still hooked to Mahika.

A smile spread across his lips, and it contaminated everything around him. All eyes went to the screen as Dr Grace moved the probe across Mahika's belly. An image of a somersaulting foetus filled the screen. His limbs started moving, and his heartbeat was close to 120.

Shivam's baby was alive.

'False alarm, Mommy. Don't worry. The baby is fine,' Dr Grace said. But Mahika was still staring at the screen.

'Mahi?' Shivam said and shook her. Mahika pushed his hand away and shot him a wounded-tiger look. 'Don't you dare touch me or my baby.'

Shivam's heart shattered like dropped glass.

The baby was safe for now. But the look on Mahika's face had made his heart skip a beat. Shivam was familiar with this look that lingered between hatred and rejection. He might have saved his son for now. But his marriage was over.

Mahika

Sorrow had found her again, or perhaps it had never left her alone. But there was hope. The room came to life with that robust heartbeat and brought her back to life too.

She placed her hands over her belly and kept them there. Nobody would dare touch Rudra.

'Let's monitor the baby for a bit longer,' Dr Grace said. But Mahika was beyond consolation. She gave a final glance at the screen, unplugged the machine from her stomach and stood.

Rudra was not meant to be with these devils. It was time to take him away.

Her eyes stung with fresh tears—tears of resolution. She looked into Shivam's eyes and declared war.

The game of cat and mouse was over.

When Mahika walked into the house, she went upstairs, grabbed her pillow and blanket, and left their bedroom. She couldn't sleep with the man who'd just agreed to kill the baby alive within her.

Rudra wasn't safe anywhere near him.

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Chapter 7

Week Twenty-Four

Warning: You have accidentally landed on the wrong page. According to the last menstrual period date you fed, you are twelve weeks pregnant. So, you should be reading your baby's development at week twelve!

New and exciting changes are happening for your baby at week twenty-four! Your baby is the size of a rock melon and is considered 'viable' now, which means your baby can survive outside your womb, if given proper support.

His nervous system is developed enough to detect loud noises. A clap of thunder can startle him now. He can also identify the sound of your voice, and may turn his head towards a sound from you or your partner.

He's experiencing sleep cycles, including REM sleep, where dreams occur.

Sixteen weeks to go!

Mahika Rathod

March 20, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Shivam was gone by the time Mahika woke up. The kitchen was clean—Shivam-clean. She checked the bedroom, which was as clean as the entire house. Shivam had had a meltdown. A silent one.

Or had she slept through it because he'd again added sleeping pills to her milk?

Mahika felt rage building up in her. She got the ladder from the backyard and was about to go upstairs when the phone rang. She let it ring and

brought the ladder in, but then it rang again, startling Rudra. She lifted the phone from its cradle and answered it, expecting it to be Shivam.

‘Mahika, Neil here. Are you okay? I had no way to contact you, so I got your number from the *Yellow Pages*. Sorry if I crossed a line calling you like this, but I was worried.’

Mahika was shocked, but she was relieved, too.

At least someone would care if she died or went missing.

‘Are you feeling okay now? Did you see a doctor? What did he say?’

‘Must be some gastric issue. Thanks for thinking of me—’

Neil had stopped her mid-sentence. His voice bubbled with excitement.

‘Can I come and pick you up? I need to talk to you.’ She heard his breathing as if he was waiting in anticipation.

Mahika looked at the ladder. ‘I can’t come to work today, Neil.’

‘Oh. Why? Are you not feeling well? Can I show you to the doctor? You take rest. I reached out to you because it’s Papa’s birthday today and I wanted to throw a surprise birthday party. I thought you could help with your special touch, but you take rest,’ he said.

The sadness in his voice got caught in Mahika’s throat, and she felt herself wavering.

‘I was hoping you could help me surprise him by making his favourite dish my mother used to make for him on his birthday. But you rest. I will manage.’

Mahika wanted to get over with her search for the passport. But it could wait one more day. Mr Mehta had done so much for her.

‘I’ll be there at eleven,’ she said.

‘I’ll come and get you. I’ll wait at the end of the road,’ Neil said cheerfully.

‘Can you wait on the opposite road instead?’

Mahika didn’t want to put Neil in danger. The further he stayed, the better. Mahika then returned the ladder to the yard, walked to the shed, retrieved the apron and shoved it into her bag. She fished the Indian currency and the gold chain from their hiding place in the Shivling and put those in her bag too.

Hopefully, Neil would loan her some money against it.

Mahika left the house, tracing the camera's movement, and found Neil waiting at the end of the road, next to the abandoned bungalow. She was about to get in when she heard a kid's faint scream. It was the same scream that had startled her out of the dream last night. She heard another scream and was convinced it wasn't in her head. Some kid was having a meltdown in that abandoned house. She sat in the car and glanced at the house. A shadow appeared and disappeared from a window. Someone was watching Mahika.

'How are your cramps now?' Neil asked, starting to drive.

'Better. Thanks for looking out for me, Neil. It means a lot,' she said. They had already left the road, but she could still sense a pair of eyes following her.

'Was it something you ate?' he asked.

'Yeah, maybe.'

It was my son announcing his clairvoyance.

'I've planned an impromptu surprise birthday party for Papa's seventieth. It's just his friends and ex-colleagues. I also need your help buying the party décor. If you're feeling okay, can we take a quick detour?' Neil looked at Mahika. His eyes were reading her face.

'Okay. But I need to be home by three.' He nodded and flashed a smile that travelled to his eyes.

A loving smile she had seen for the first time.

'Here is something for you. An audio recording of the Australia versus Sri Lanka match. You missed it, right?'

'How do you know that I missed the match?' The suspicion that Neil was part of Shivam's team reappeared.

'Papa mentioned your husband doesn't like cricket. So, I assumed that he wouldn't have subscribed to the channel for you. I hope you have a cassette player at home. Else you can borrow my Walkman.'

Shivam's deceit had made her cynical. Or her instincts were guiding her.

And you agreed to go with him to this unknown place!

The fear of losing Rudra made her touch her womb.

‘Are you sure you’re okay? Because we have a nice Indian doctor in the clinic in this building.’ Neil drove into a car park.

Had he brought her to a doctor?

‘This is my office building, by the way,’ Neil said.

As they walked to the elevator, Mahika asked, ‘Neil, is there a pawn shop nearby? I need some cash to buy—’ The elevator opened and two men in office attire walked out.

‘How much money do you need?’ Neil asked in a whisper.

I have no clue how much I need to raise Rudra.

‘For now, just enough to buy a ticket to India.’ Mahika regretted saying this, but the ship had sailed.

‘What happened?’ Neil asked as they exited the lift.

‘I want to go back to India. I want to end my marriage.’ The hatred for Shivam spilled in her words. Neil paused, reading her rage-filled face. She belatedly realized her mistake and diverted his attention. ‘This place is so vibrant. So many shops for party supplies. Do you have any colour theme in mind?’

‘Colour theme for his party? Isn’t that a thing for a kid’s party? I wasn’t buying balloons but Murli insisted.’

She looked at the birthday candle display shelf with the white and red number candles arranged in ascending order and wondered where she and Rudra would be when Rudra turned one.

If he lived through all this.

‘Shall we get this?’ Neil showed her a birthday banner.

‘We can ask if they have banners and balloons specific to seventieth birthdays,’ Mahika said. The shop lady jumped into action. Mahika waited for Neil to choose from the banners the shopkeeper was displaying. Her eyes travelled back to a first birthday candle.

‘This banner and this colour balloon?’ Neil asked.

Mahika looked at the golden banner and silver balloon. ‘Do you have the banner in silver or a balloon in gold?’

‘Your wife so clever,’ the lady said.

‘She is my colleague, aunty. Can I pay by cash?’ Neil said.

The old lady apologized, and her eyes mapped the bulge of Mahika's stomach. Neil went to pay but Mahika stayed back, staring at all the baby toys, wondering if she'd ever be able to throw a birthday party for Rudra. She was naive planning his first birthday when outliving each day felt difficult. Shivam would have signed the abortion paper last night. She looked away to swallow the tears in her eyes and spotted a shadow across the corridor.

Someone was watching her. The feeling of being followed gripped her hard again. Mahika turned in haste and banged into a display shelf, knocking it over. The tiny toys and goodies meant for goody bags all fell to the floor. The old lady rushed to her and picked up the feeding-bottle-shaped candy boxes. Some of them had cracked.

'Alamak. Who pay for this one now?' Her face had turned red with anger.

Mahika swallowed hard but the tears had started falling unchecked. There were at least ten such cracked bottles.

Can you do anything properly? Shivam's words came unbidden.

'Sorry, Auntie. Our mistake lah. She never see. I pay for this.' Neil had switched his accent, adding a local flavour to it. He sorted the shattered ones and arranged the intact ones back on the shelf. His jaw wasn't clenched, and his voice had not turned cold either. Still, Mahika was unable to move, waiting for an outburst. She walked to the cashier, ready to pay for the loss. A blue-and-yellow rattle ball and a red ball trapped in it rolled over creating a melodious jingle. Rudra kicked from within and announced his presence. He was either startled or liked the jingle. But Shivam would never let Rudra play with a rattle. He had never let her ring the bell in the temple.

Neil and the old lady were looking at her, perhaps discussing her too. Because the conversation stopped as soon as she set foot in the shop.

'I will take this one too.' Neil's request broke her train of thought.

'Did I break this one too?'

'No. Let's gift this to Papa.' Neil winked and handed the toy rattle to the shop lady.

Mahika had expected Neil to be upset and angry about the mess she had created, but Mahika's mistake had not irritated him.

'I'm so sorry, Neil. You brought me along to help you, and I caused you trouble,' she said.

'That's how you look at it? Who helped me pick the colour-coordinated party décor? If not for you, I would've picked one of those childish birthday banners. Moreover, what happened was an accident, Mahika. It happens.'

She'd forgotten how it felt to make a mistake and forget about it. It never happened in Shivam's world. No mistake was okay with him. He would've scolded her in front of that woman, and then he would've waited for her to pick up all the things, calling it her mess.

'Will it be okay if we pick the cake from the bakery nearby?' Neil handed her the rattle and flashed a sympathetic smile. Had he read her mind, or had he given her the rattle to hold it for a while?

'When is your due date, Mahika?'

Panic shot through her.

So, he was a part of all this. She was an idiot. She trusted everyone around her.

'You've been vomiting off and on. Then the cramps yesterday, and today your hand keeps going to your belly. I didn't connect the dots until the aunty in the shop didn't charge for the damaged goods. She said it's normal to get startled in the state of pregnancy. I hope she hasn't got it wrong.' Neil's confidence wavered at the end. Mahika was too exhausted to fabricate another lie.

And it wouldn't hurt to have a friend.

'I'm twelve weeks along. But I can work. Please, Neil. I need this job until I figure out a way to go to India.' Mahika began shedding silent tears. Neil stepped closer but did nothing, as they were already standing at the elevator and some mothers with bags of party supplies were waiting for the lift.

In the car, he gave her a tissue packet. 'All of us will support you. I will . . . we will take care of you.'

His care and assurance made Mahika go weak in her knees, but then Rudra kicked again and brought her back to her senses.

She couldn't trust anyone.

'He must be thrilled to watch the World Cup semi-finals on his birthday. India should win tonight's match.' Mahika changed the topic. Neil took the hint and drove her back in silence. He hadn't offered to take her to the pawn shop.

Maybe he was part of the whole set-up. Maybe this was her husband's way of keeping her happy, just like those expensive baking classes in New Jersey. In the restaurant, she cooked all the things Neil had listed as Mr Mehta's favourites while fulfilling patrons' orders. Mahika had not brought along the heart monitor, but she didn't need it. Rudra was kicking just fine. Mahika was glad she'd managed to sail through another uneventful day when Neil came in.

'I will drop you home at two thirty.'

He'd ask her to not come in tomorrow. No one would let a pregnant woman work in the kitchen. But Neil said nothing and guided her to the car park. However, she could sense his feelings, how he was weighing his words, and when the car reached the cusp of Goodman Road, he said, 'This should be enough to buy a ticket and survive for a while. I've also given you a travel agent's number. He can help you with the ticket. This has my number stored in it just in case you need to call me.' He handed Mahika an envelope and a mobile phone.

'I can't take this.' Mahika returned the phone. From her bag, she brought out the bundle of Indian currency and her mother's gold chain, handing them to Neil.

But he placed everything back in her lap. 'Keep this for an emergency. But perhaps instead of running away, try to fight for what is yours. I . . . we will support you. Mahika, I'm here for you. I will take care of you and the baby. Please don't go, Mahika. Please.' His voice had a quiver. Mahika looked at him, surprised. She'd definitely not seen this coming, and now it was too close to dodge it.

‘I had not planned to tell you this so soon. But I guess I don’t have too much time left with you, and I don’t want to regret not telling you this . . .’

‘I need to go, Neil.’ She tried stepping away from his confession.

‘Please, Mahika. I know this is wrong—my falling in love with you, my desires for you. But it feels so right. I’ve never felt so sure about anything, Mahika. Never. I know my saying this is hurting you because you’re still staying with your husband, and that means you’re still in love with him. But if given a chance, I won’t fail you.’

Neil’s voice was thick with emotions. Mahika parted her lips to say something to reduce Neil’s ache, but all her words were lost in that moment of silence between them. Neil’s eyes were filled with love and care, a look she’d craved to see in Shivam’s eyes. But all she’d seen there was passion and aggression. Mahika found something else in Neil’s gaze, a familiar sense of sorrow.

They were both in love with the wrong person.

Mahika got out of the car. Her words would’ve hurt him more than her silence. Neil’s raw emotions had created a new crater in her heart and his confession had snatched from her the one place in which she’d found refuge.

She needed to run away from Shivam and his lies—and Neil and his love.

Suddenly, the need to find her passport superseded every other priority. Mahika rushed into the house and managed to haul the aluminium ladder up the stairs, pausing for breath at every level. The fear of losing Rudra to a forced abortion outweighed the risk of climbing the ladder.

In the attic, she searched the top two shelves. But to Mahika’s disappointment, she only found boxes full of Shivam’s coursework and research papers.

All this for nothing.

She sat on the floor with her head in her hands. If there was a way out of this maze, she couldn’t see it. Mahika folded the ladder and was about to head downstairs when something fell from the top shelf. It was a cardboard box lid. She reopened the ladder, climbed up to replace the lid and spotted a

box. The brown box was pushed aside as if hidden. Mahika tried pulling the box towards her, but it was beyond her reach. She placed one leg on the shelf and inched forward to drag the box closer. It dropped to the floor, its contents spilling.

The hidden box had given her some hope, but the scattered papers were all junk. Old, faded invoices with punched holes running on both sides. She was about to climb down to clean up the mess when a steel-grey vault caught her attention. She hastily climbed down and pulled the ladder closer, but the vault was still out of her reach. She stretched while standing on the ladder's last rung, but it didn't help. She put one leg on the shelf. It didn't give way under her weight, but her fear of falling made her double back. Mahika tried again, this time getting a good glimpse at the vault. On her third attempt, Mahika could drag the vault towards her.

‘Rudra, I need a code. Not for the door. This is some vault kept in the attic. Do you know it?’

Rudra took his time to decipher the code. Her skin was again lined with goosebumps as she mentally noted down the code given by her unborn. She wanted to punch it and get her passport. But her fingers were barely able to reach the vault's silicone pad. Mahika gathered her courage and once again placed one foot on the shelf and pulled the vault to the front.

This could kill them both.

But she decided to take the risk. She leant forward, balancing her weight on one foot on the ladder and placing the other on the shelf, and punched the numbers. The lock gave way swiftly, but Mahika was disappointed at the sight of a single file. She pulled it out and slammed the vault's door shut. Mahika threw the file down and descended carefully, cursing herself for risking her and Rudra's life for nothing but her medical records.

But why would Shivam keep a medical file in a vault?

Mahika sat on the floor and scanned through the file cataloguing her medical history. She flipped through every page, trying to find an anomaly, but there was none—except her medical tests performed in Singapore had been filed twice. Mahika flipped back and spotted the difference. The reports were nearly identical, but she was diagnosed with bad eggs in one

and healthy eggs in the other one. She flipped to the next page. The words ‘fit to conceive naturally’ hit Mahika more than ‘unfit for a natural pregnancy’. Both reports were issued by the same lab, but one was reviewed and signed by Dr Cynthia and the other wasn’t. Mahika flipped the pages. Shivam’s research on chimps and humans was catalogued in it. It was too much for Mahika to process. She flipped through the file again, this time going through it slowly and steadily.

Shivam was keeping a record of his sins.

This was the first physical proof of Shivam’s deceit, and its extent was worse than what she’d imagined. Did she need any more proof? She should confront him.

But Mahika had no plans to alert Shivam and his accomplice yet. She collected the scattered papers that had dropped from the cardboard box and put them back. As she was placing the box back on the shelf, she noticed a yellow, faded paper in the vault. She pulled it out, reading the message.

Hide and seek part 4: I found your ~~deceit~~ deceit. Now it’s time to show it to Mahika and Prof. Chua, too. Are you going to show it, or do I do the ~~honours~~ honours of telling them about your little secret hideout in the clinic’s basement?

So, Shivam wasn’t cataloguing his sins, someone else was. The spelling errors and the untidy longhand made her connect the dots. Her anonymous messiah was threatening Shivam. But who could it be? And what was in the clinic’s basement?

A lab where Shivam designed Rudra and the previous baby too?

She looked at the Post-it and felt dizziness wash over her.

Five steps more. Hold on.

But Mahika had counted the steps wrong. She came crashing down with a scream for help. Her father had come to her rescue.

He extended his hand to stop the fall, but he was a moment too late.

Rudra

March 20, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Something was wrong with me. And now my mother, my father and the team of clinic doctors knew about it, too.

It's not something. It's your heart. It forgets to beat sometimes.

For the time being, maybe you can borrow a few heartbeats from your mother. Her heart has been perpetually in overdrive since last night.

My mother hadn't uttered a word since returning from the restaurant, and I had the feeling that she didn't like the idea of Neil falling for her.

Well, I liked it. Although it will complicate things for her. But a little love won't harm her. What say, man?

'Where the hell is the passport?' my mother said. It was meant to be a rhetorical question, but I was eager to help.

How about we try to find her passport using your grandfather's meditation techniques?

I brought my attention to the rhythmic fall and rise of my mother's breath, and this time I compelled my mind to imagine her world. The real world outside this womb. The glow between my eyebrows came almost instantly, but soon the golden rays were eclipsed. I tried harder but something rectangular blocked the light between my brows. The object wasn't blinking or flashing; it sat like a boulder blocking the path.

Try pushing it away.

And that's what I did. I became one with this rectangular object, blurring the boundaries between us, and then I flicked it away, like moving my hand away from my face. The glow of light was back, and the obstruction had disappeared.

Now let's look for her passport!

But a loud thud threw a spanner in the meditation process. And then my mother requested a passcode, which felt like pulling out all the stops because moving the rectangular object had exhausted me. I kicked her in the numerical pattern and left my mother to unlock the door, yet again wondering how I'd managed to conjure the digits that locked the door outside her womb. The door that was nowhere in my memory a moment ago.

Is your brain somehow connected to your father's?

Before I could probe more into this new logic, my sharpening meditating skills had wrongly teleported me to the boy's world. I knew I shouldn't have left my mother alone, but I selfishly moved away from what could happen to her to what was going to happen to me in the future.

The boy was sitting in his room with the door ajar. The commentator's voice was echoing in the room and outside it too. My heart leapt in my chest. The match commentary could be heard on the stairs, in the living room downstairs and on the driveway outside too. His father's car wasn't in the driveway, and the silence in the house meant his mother was also not at home.

Fear still gripped my throat, hard and choking. I paced from one room to another, worrying about him, but he was glued to his bed, holding the broken speaker, which was held together by a red yarn. The device was functioning well apart from the occasional lack of signal, but he'd found a cure for this, giving the device a hard tap. He was simultaneously filling up the pages of his cricket journal. I peeked into it. The pages were peppered with comments. He'd jotted every match's scorecard and every technique the commentator had explained in the previous matches. He flipped the page and went to the commentary on the India versus Australia match. His handwriting was unreadable, yet the figure of 118 sent a jolt of recognition.

India won this match by 118 runs.

Before I could steal a glance at the detailed scorecard he had created, he turned the page to catalogue today's game between India and England. The buzz of the match filled the room as he cranked up the volume.

'The Indian bowlers are making most of the conditions on offer . . .'

'I knew you would do this, you son of a bitch. This cricket will ruin our life. Your coach can't afford a pair of new shoes for himself, but he wants you to play for the state. I want to see what the fuck he'd do if his bloody son failed an English exam.' His father's voice had swallowed the commentator's voice. His father was seething with rage.

I felt a pinching pain in my arm, but the boy freed himself from his father's clutches. I wanted the boy to run and hide somewhere safe, but he dropped to the floor to pick up the rolling batteries. His father's jaw had

dropped at his son's indifference. He shook him and asked, 'Are you ignoring me?' But the boy was busy pushing the battery into the socket. A smile lit up the boy's face as the commentator announced India's victory over England in the semi-final match, driving his father mad. But nothing could touch his happiness, not even his father pushing him down the stairs. The boy raised his hand as he rolled down the stairs, trying to reach out to me. But then I turned and saw that he was calling his mother for help.

'Papa!' he screamed. But before I could see him going down, a loud shriek shattered my concentration.

My mother's voice had merged into my dream.

'Papa!' she screamed, crying for help. Then the attic fell silent. Her heartbeat started slowing. I kicked my mother with all my strength, but nothing in her moved. I screamed and cried and kicked her again, but my mother, who would normally respond to my slightest movement, was dead.

And you know what that means for you. Don't you?

In desperation, I kicked her until there was nothing left in me to kick.

Mahika Rathod

March 20, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Mahika opened her eyes. The attic was as dark and silent as her womb.

'Kick me please, Rudra.' But nothing in her moved. She pushed her womb with her palm. Still nothing. Mahika stood up with a start and felt something between her legs.

'No, Rudra. Please wake up and kick me. Please.'

But he didn't move. Another drop trickled down her legs. She pulled her leggings down and spotted blood on her panties. Before Mahika could pull her pants up, another drop had trickled down. She rushed to the living room and dialled Shivam, patting her womb non-stop.

'Something is wrong with Ru . . . the baby. Please come home.'

'How do you know?'

'I'm bleeding.'

That was enough to get Shivam's undivided attention.

'Lie down on the bed and place your legs up on a pillow. I'm on my way. Don't move around too much,' Shivam said in a calm yet uptight voice.

Mahika did what she was told, leaving the file and the ladder in the attic. If Rudra was over, her battle was over too.

The thought of losing Rudra caused another sob to heave from her chest. She shouldn't have taken the risk of climbing the shelf. Her act-first-and-think-later attitude might have killed Rudra. She chanted the Maha Mrityunjay Jaap between her fractured sobs. According to her father, the Maha Mrityunjay Jaap could conquer death.

'Papa,' Mahika said and rushed to the attic. His father wasn't there but she had seen him. Or had she imagined him?

But the warmth of his touch and his smile had felt real. She ran from one room to another looking for him.

'Papa, I am alone, and I need you. Please come back, Papa. Please,' she pleaded. But her pleas went unanswered. Another drop of blood trickled down. She pressed her lips and stifled a sob. With every sob, blood gushed out. Rudra was melting between her legs, and she couldn't do anything.

'Papa, please come and help me. Ma . . . I need you.' She kept crying until Shivam's car entered the driveway.

'What happened, Mahi?' Shivam rushed to her.

'I slipped in the bathroom.' She managed to fabricate a lie.

Mahika had expected Shivam to get angry or play the blame game. But he surprised her.

'Are you okay? Are you hurt?' Shivam asked.

'I'm okay, but I'm bleeding.' Mahika began crying again. She waited for him to blame her for this accident. But he wiped her tears with his palms and pulled out the foetal monitor.

'I won't let anything happen to our baby.'

His positivity was contagious but the number on the screen dashed her hopes. Mahika once again patted her stomach, hoping to wake Rudra, but there was no movement, and the blood between her legs was dripping, causing an unbearable ache with every drop.

‘Shall we go to accident and emergency?’ Shivam asked. He didn’t insist. It was then that Mahika realized that Shivam was scared, as scared as she was.

And he was seeking her support.

‘Don’t cry, please. Nothing will happen to our baby,’ Shivam said as he drove. The sense of emergency had swallowed Shivam’s fear of speeding, and he hit the gas pedal, picking up speed. Mahika’s tears dropped unchecked as she read the loss written all over Shivam’s face. She patted her womb time and again, hoping to catch Rudra’s movement.

How could Rudra have died if she was still alive? She would die with him.

Shivam turned into the clinic’s carpark and said, ‘Mahi, he’ll be okay. I promise you.’

And as if on cue, Rudra woke up and kicked her hard and intensely. The breath that had left her lungs came back with a gushing sense of relief, and she flashed a happy smile at Shivam.

‘What happened?’ Shivam asked.

Mahika was so overwhelmed with joy that she pulled Shivam’s hand to her belly and waited in anticipation for Rudra to kick. Rudra’s kick was even stronger than usual, as the baby announced his presence to his father.

‘Oh my god, Mahi,’ Shivam said and wrapped his arms around her. He kept his hand on her belly and moved to face her. The softness in his eyes made Mahika’s heart flip, and Shivam tucked her hair behind her ear in that familiar way and kissed her gently on her forehead. ‘I’ll die if something happens to you or him.’

Mahika’s heart melted into a soft blur as once again the calamity had peeled away the sense of fake calmness from his face, revealing the soft and vulnerable side of Shivam. His phone pinged and shattered the moment. Shivam read the text with a frown. He closed his eyes as if trying to hide the storm brewing within him and stared out the car window. Dr Steven appeared from nowhere. ‘All good?’

Mahika wished she could convince Shivam to go back home as Rudra was kicking.

Shivam was as lost as Mahika, as if he was contemplating going back home too.

‘Cynthia is in the OT. Let me page Dr Grace. Meanwhile, let me have a quick check,’ Dr Steven said.

Shivam’s kiss, still lingering on her forehead, disappeared as the duo guided her to the scan room.

You have the first right to the baby.

The memory sent a shiver down her spine. Last night she’d pledged to not come back to the clinic, but her fall had changed everything. Dr Steven placed the stethoscope around Mahika’s belly and flashed a smile.

‘Everything is okay. Can you feel the baby? He’s very active.’

But Mahika didn’t answer. She was staring at the screen, looking at the image of the baby. Rudra was her companion. Her reason to live. And she had almost lost him.

‘Mahi, Dr Steven is asking you something. Can you feel the baby’s movement?’ Shivam asked.

‘Yes, I felt the first kick a minute ago. But the bleeding? The fall?’ Mahika asked.

‘She means she slipped.’ Shivam corrected her in a patronizing way.

‘The heartbeat and the movements are fine. I’m not worried. Some light vaginal bleeding is normal. If it increases, come back immediately. And don’t worry, Mother Nature has her ways of protecting the baby—unless you really came tumbling down on your stomach.’

An alarm went off in Mahika’s head. How did he know she had not come tumbling down?

Dr Grace came rushing into the clinic and confirmed that Mahika and the baby were unscathed. She left the heartbeat on for Mahika and Shivam to relish. ‘Next time be super careful in the bathroom. Some superior power saved you today. Please get an anti-skid mat for the bathroom, Mommy.’

Mahika’s thoughts again travelled back to the attic. She had felt her father’s presence.

You could have fallen on your stomach. Maybe he really saved you and Rudra.

He is dead. He died years ago.

‘Are you eating well, Mommy?’ Dr Grace asked. But Mahika was still roaming in her head. ‘The baby is fine. Don’t worry.’ Dr Grace rubbed her palm on Mahika’s arm. Dr Grace’s warmth compensated for the lack of it otherwise in the room.

‘Let’s go home,’ Shivam said and walked her to the basement car park.

Shivam was guiding her to the car when the anonymous note flashed like lightning in her head.

‘Or should I send Prof. Chua to look for you in the clinic’s basement during lunch hours?’

Was this the clinic’s basement mentioned in the note? And where was the anonymous messiah? Mahika glanced at her surroundings, noting the door and exit. There was nothing out of the ordinary about this car park, but that Shivam had avoided using it meant that the note’s threat was real.

If there was a lab hidden in this basement, the passport must be in there too.

In the car, Mahika waited for Shivam to shower her with love as he had earlier, but Shivam had turned as cold as a slab of ice. Rudra was fine and the crisis had disappeared, leaving behind the calm and focused Shivam.

He’d said he loved her. He’d called Rudra ‘our baby’.

You have travelled down that road several times and you always come back hurt.

Something stopped Shivam from letting go. If only she could figure out how to unchain him.

Mahika was still swaying between loving Shivam or not when Shivam turned the car into the driveway, and, like a flash, it came back to Mahika. The ladder and the file in the attic were still where she’d left them. She had to find a way to put them back. But how was she going to do it with him around?

‘I’m craving ice cream, Shivam. Can you please get some chocolate ice cream?’ She wasn’t sure of his mood as Dr Steven had pushed Shivam’s default mode on. Mahika was used to Shivam’s mood shifts, but today it

had cleaved her heart because for a minute she'd tricked herself into believing that Shivam was falling for her.

Yeah, like last time and before that. And before that.

'I'll pick some up from NTUC. But I need to use the washroom first.' Shivam walked ahead of her to open the door before she could see the new code. But she had bigger fish to fry. As soon as Shivam's car left the driveway, she rushed to the attic. No one was there, but a faint fragrance rekindled her hope. She frantically searched for her father but was disappointed.

What she'd seen was a figment of her imagination. Her father was dead. Yet Mahika closed her eyes to sense her father's presence. Rudra kicked her hard to bring her back to her senses. And by the time Shivam was back with milk, eggs and ice cream, Mahika had hidden the file under the rug in the shed and returned the ladder to the yard. Mahika fixed a quick dinner while formulating a plan in her head.

Although a single sleeping pill was enough to knock Shivam out, she needed more than that tonight. After dinner, Mahika went up to the bedroom with a glass of milk and found Shivam waiting for her. The canvas bag and a logbook were on the bed.

'Dr Grace asked me to monitor the beats per minute. So let me show you how to log in,' Shivam said. Before Mahika could hand him the glass of milk, Shivam asked, 'Is my baby kicking?' His eyes were twinkling with childlike excitement. Mahika felt a pang of jealousy. Shivam had never called Mahika his, but the baby was his.

Her hormones were driving her mad. One minute she loved him and the next she hated him. She had to get her act together.

'I want to feel his kicks again. I loved it so much. It felt like I was talking to him, and I'm so envious because the baby is so near you and so far away from me. I can't wait to hold him.' Shivam gulped down his milk as if to dispense with whatever was coming between him and his baby and pulled her to the bed.

Mahika placed her hand on her belly and Rudra responded almost instantly.

‘Is he awake? Can I please touch him?’ Shivam asked, and Mahika felt Shivam’s excitement. She guided Shivam’s hand to her belly, and his smile spread to his eyes.

They were together in that moment. The three of them.

Mahika waited for Shivam to move his hand away, but his hand remained, mapping Rudra’s every move. The light snore that soon followed meant Mahika could act on her plan. She gently placed Shivam’s head on his pillow and kissed his forehead, drinking in Shivam’s calm face one last time. Mahika had loved him so much that it felt impossible not to love him, especially when in the last two days his love had rained on her like an unexpected shower. But Rudra’s kicks were keeping her focused, and the two trips to accident and emergency had cemented Mahika’s decision to escape.

Mahika flipped through the file once again and then placed it in her bag. She found the cash she’d stashed in nooks and crannies and had packed it, along with the money Neil had given her.

She could call him rather than going alone to the clinic, and later he could drop her off at the airport.

Mahika dialled him, and he answered immediately. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes. Sorry to call you this late. But I need your help.’ She then instructed Neil to wait for her on the far side of the road.

While waiting for Neil, Mahika flipped through the file, and this time a prescription slip caught her attention. She noted the name and went to the study to search for it. It was an abortion pill. She didn’t remember taking it.

She thought her second miscarriage had been because of the stress of moving to Singapore from New Jersey.

Shivam had killed that baby, too.

Mahika felt her stomach going numb with betrayal, but she couldn’t afford to waste time because Neil would be here any minute. She walked down to the switchboard cabinet next to the main gate and studied the power-layout plan sheet tucked in the panel. Finally, she found the MCB that would cut the outdoor power supply. She pulled the MCB down and

peered out of the window. The porch had turned pitch dark. She walked out of the house to find Neil's car.

'I need to go to a clinic in Clementi,' she said.

'Are you okay? What's the emergency?' Neil asked.

'Can you drive fast, please? I think he hid my passport in his lab. If I can find it, I can leave Singapore tonight,' she said, wondering how much to share. Neil drove faster but was silent.

'Can you wait here? I'll be back soon. Hopefully.'

'I'll come with you,' Neil said. But Mahika stopped him.

'Can you please wait here for me and if I'm not back in thirty minutes, please look for me in the car park of the fertility clinic. I can't pull you into my mess. Moreover, I need someone to stand by in case we need to call the police,' Mahika said.

'Where are you going, Mahika? You know you are scaring me, right?'

'I am scared too, Neil. Very scared. He pushed me down the stairs to kill my first baby. Then he killed my second one by giving me an abortion pill, and now he's hidden my passport somewhere. But I won't let him touch Rudra.' Mahika wiped away her tears. The dark and sinister truth hidden in the file had unleashed Mahika's rage. She didn't wait for Neil to respond and walked away.

The silent car park was a good omen. Mahika spotted two doors in the basement and bolted towards one. The first door led her to the stairs that ended at a cleaning closet. There was nothing in there. Mahika walked to the next door, keeping her head low so the camera could only capture Shivam's T-shirt and his cap on her. The other door was locked. She fished out Shivam's key chain from her bag and tried one from the bunch of keys. Nothing. Her shaking hand and her teary vision weren't helping, but she brushed away her tears of fear and found the correct key to unlock the door. The warm light in the stairway lit up, startling her. Mahika spotted the sensor, breathed a sigh of relief and walked down the stairs, looking out for surveillance cameras.

She paused before a steel-finish door. It felt like a guarding door of an Indian fort. She needed to think before she went in there. They could trap

her here and no one would know. Mahika's courage was playing hide and seek, yet she held herself together and waited for Rudra to decipher the code. He was quick as ever. The steel door opened into a lab that felt like the set of a sci-fi movie. A tall unit was the only storage space, and it was filled with lab supplies. She browsed through all the shelves; there was nothing there.

Mahika paced in the lab; the hum of the machines reverberated in the silent night. She read the name of one piece of equipment. It was an incubator loaded with petri dishes.

How many mothers had they conned?

And the rage she'd contained all these hours, days and weeks began boiling over.

This place had ruined her life. Rudra's life too.

Mahika's anger was brewing fast and furious, threatening to destroy everything in its way. But she held herself together and searched for her passport, going from one tabletop to another. The lab had no personal belongings to give away anything about the people who worked there. Realizing this, Mahika concluded that she wasn't going to find her passport here. All her efforts were for nothing.

She was an idiot. She got carried away.

The humming of the machines only added to her anger. She turned off all the devices and the lab turned silent. She could hear her heartbeat.

Mahika had planned to sneak in and out quietly, but seeing this hidden lab had melted her resolve. All the wounds that Shivam had inflicted on her self-respect, all the things she'd ignored in the name of love, every grudge against him, all of it had been growing within her since she'd seen the contents of the file.

And that growing rage took over.

She took all the petri dishes and dumped them in the bin and began throwing every piece of equipment to the floor. Her rage showed no mercy until all the beakers, jars and petri dishes were reduced to shards. And when the anger that had possessed her body left, tears started flowing non-stop.

Shivam had killed only three babies. She'd just killed so many.

Mahika wanted to mourn for the lives she'd ended but the stench of chemicals was turning unbearable. She was about to shut the door behind her when her phone rang.

'Are you okay?' Neil asked in a tense voice.

'I'm coming.' The coat hanger by the door caught her attention. She recognized Shivam's scent. She felt the pockets of the lab coat and spotted the closet behind the coat hanger. Mahika opened the door and found a vault as huge as a mini refrigerator. She relied on Rudra's powers again.

'Rudra, are you awake? There is a vault in the clinic's basement. Can you help me with the passcode?' Rudra jumped into action, teaming up with her.

'This is the place where they created you. But they won't be able to create anyone else here,' she whispered, opening the vault. It was loaded with cash and documents. But her passport wasn't there. Neil's incoming call brought her back to reality. Her search had hit a dead end here too, and the chemicals had begun burning her airway. She picked five thick wads of cash and stuffed them in her bag. Mahika was about to stash more when something fell in the pantry.

She turned around to check, but no one was there. She rushed out. A shadow was following her. Mahika sped out and found Neil's car.

'Let's go. Someone is following us.'

'Did you find your passport?' Neil asked.

'No. It has to be at home. Let's go . . .'

 Mahika said. The euphoria of revenge had drained away, leaving regret in its wake.

She'd declared war by destroying everything. But the ammunition to fight was missing.

What if they decided to punish her? What if they harmed her baby?

'Mahika, we can go to the police station and file a complaint against him,' Neil said.

'I am so sorry. I shouldn't have called you. I have put you in danger too. I ruined the semi-final match for you. I shouldn't have called you . . . not sure what I was thinking, I am such an idiot. Always making mistakes,' Mahika said. She wanted to cry and let the weight off her chest but the tears in her eyes had dried up.

‘Stop blaming yourself, Mahika. And stop treating yourself like shit. I don’t know what lies in your past, but I’ve seen a confident girl with immense talent hiding behind your timid facade. You need to bring that girl out if you want to protect the baby. And if in the process you make a few mistakes, it’ll be worth it. Stand up against him,’ Neil said. Mahika nodded. Neil was right; this game of hide and seek had carried on long enough. She had to confront Shivam. Mahika asked Neil to drive her back home.

‘If I don’t call you in the morning, or if I don’t show up at work, please call the police and come looking for me,’ Mahika pleaded.

‘I can wait here or come with you to find your passport. Let’s wake him up and ask him about it,’ Neil said. But Mahika asked Neil to go back home. She wanted to fight this battle herself without putting Neil and his family in danger.

Was she being brave or foolish?

She closed the gate behind her and spotted someone staring at her from behind a tree. A sense of dread gripped her.

She should’ve gone with Neil to the police station.

But the only way to keep Rudra safe was to go unnoticed. A trip to the police station would mean Rudra would become the talk of the town in no time.

Mahika stepped into the house. Shivam was curled into a foetal position, with nothing but innocence radiating from his face, and Mahika yet again wondered how she could go so terribly wrong in understanding him time and again. How could she still love him, yet hate him too?

Why couldn’t love just evaporate? Why did it have to fade, causing so much pain in the process?

In the washroom, she took off Shivam’s T-shirt. Wearing his oversized clothes to deceive the camera had become meaningless because instead of sneaking in and out of the lab, she’d left her traces on everything.

She’d lived in fear and deceit long enough. Not a moment more. But before that Mahika had to wash off the stench of the chemicals from her body. She let the hot water from the faucet scald her skin, a penance for

killing those yet to be babies. She was about to turn off the faucet when her phone startled her. Did she leave her phone ringer on?

Rudra

March 20, 2003

Clementi Fertility Clinic, Singapore

I thought my visions were scary. A roller-coaster ride that left me gasping for breath. But tonight, my mother decided to give all my visions a run for their money. First, she'd fallen, risking her life and mine. And now she was heading home after creating pandemonium in an unfamiliar place.

She's going to get caught, bud. And what bothers me most is that she isn't worried about it.

I wanted to kick my mother to warn her of the dangers ahead. But the action-packed night had left me exhausted. Moreover, I knew that nothing could change my mother's decision now.

'Do you know where the passport is, Rudra? Kick me if you do.' She waited for me to respond before giving up on me. She'd asked the same question before leaving the house too. And I'd tried to help her locate the passport by using visual meditation, but it had failed me. Perhaps I didn't control my visions; perhaps they were forces of nature. I waited for my mother to act on her plan B, but there was no plan B.

How can she walk back here?

My mother wasn't behaving like my mother tonight. She'd walked into the lion's den not to look for her passport but to sleep in there, too.

Maybe you're underestimating her. Maybe she's the rabbit of that story about the foolish lion and the clever rabbit.

But the idea of my naive mother trapping my father in his own game was too far-fetched. She was going to get caught, and for that I did not need a premonition. The ringing phone confirmed my suspicion. My mother stopped the faucet, which meant she'd heard the conversation too.

'I was sleeping. Why?' my father said. 'She's in the washroom.'

The game is over.

There was a moment of silence. The man on the other end was probably describing the disaster in the lab.

‘I’m coming now.’ My father’s hasty reply confirmed that my mother had screwed up her escape plan.

Maybe your father is right. Maybe your mother is that dumb.

I was leaning towards the same conclusion but agreeing wouldn’t help any of us. I had to take action. Last night after my mother’s fall had coincided with the boy’s fall, I had come to a conclusion that there was a common thread running between my visions and my mother’s world. And because I couldn’t untie this knot here in this world, I decided to unfurl it in my visions.

I entered the boy’s world with a sense of urgency, and the destruction in the boy’s room yet again had me comparing worlds. The boy’s mother was searching for something, throwing books, pillows and everything else she found. Just the way my mother had thrown things last night in the hidden lab where my father had fabricated me.

I went through the house searching for the boy. He was nowhere.

He didn’t survive the fall! You didn’t survive the fall.

‘He took the money from my wallet.’ His father was talking to the boy’s mother.

She stole the money, and he stole the money. Get that?

The similarities again pointed to the logical conclusion that these visions were nothing but a manifestation of the life outside the womb.

The boy appeared in my vision, but a loud thud broke my trance, bringing me back to my mother’s world. Her world was soaked with pounding sounds. Another loud thud and my world fell silent. I left my mother and rushed back to my alternate universe, where my future life was hanging by a thread.

‘I told you that no one can stop me from watching the finals,’ the boy said.

He held a brand-new speaker, which meant he’d stolen the money to tune into the finals. The bruises on his face were still raw, but he’d forgotten all about them.

‘We discussed this. Did we not?’ the father said in a threatening tone.

‘As if I care.’

His father pulled his belt from his pants and whipped the boy’s face. But this time his mother came between them, saving her son from her father’s rage.

The way your mother took that first courageous step last night.

The determination in his mother’s eyes made the man retreat. I felt some burden lifting off my chest. My mother would begin protecting me at some point.

Isn’t it too late?

Again, the voice in my head was ahead of me. Before I could decide whose side to take, my mother’s excited voice pulled me back.

‘It’s time for us to leave. I found the passport, Rudra.’

I wanted to celebrate, but the grim future waiting on the other side wasn’t anything to look forward to.

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Chapter 8

Week Twenty-Seven

Warning: You skipped two weeks again! Our system still shows you thirteen weeks pregnant. You should be reading about your baby's development in week thirteen!

Look who's looking! It's your baby! Those little eyes that have been closed for the past few months are beginning to open. And that means your little one can see what's going on now. But there's nothing much to see in your womb.

Your baby's brain-wave activity is gearing up at this stage, which means [your little one can not only hear noises](#) but can now also respond to them. Not in so many words, of course, but with an increase in pulse rate or movement.

Thirteen weeks to go.

Shivam Rathod

March 21, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

'Where are you?' Dr Steven's shrill voice woke Shivam up as he answered the phone. He pushed away the fog clouding his thinking and fielded all the questions Dr Steven threw at him. They were all about Mahika, who was taking a shower so early in the morning.

'There was a break-in at the lab. I have reason to believe it's you because the camera placed at your house stopped working last night for a good three to four hours. And that's sufficient time for you to create havoc in my lab.' He paused for a breath. 'Come downstairs right now. We need to talk.'

Shivam peered out the window and spotted Dr Steven's car. He changed into a T-shirt and jeans and walked downstairs. Out of habit, he reached for his car keys from the key cabinet. His keys were missing. Shivam walked back upstairs. The keys weren't on his nightstand either.

Maybe he left them in his trousers' pocket.

Before he could knock on the bathroom door, his phone started ringing again.

'What's taking you so long?' Dr Steven snarled.

'I'm changing the door's passcode. Can I?' Shivam said. His voice was about to acquire the same anger as Dr Steven's. His patience with Dr Steven's tantrums was running thin, and today something had thrown Dr Steven's mood to hell. Shivam found him pacing at the gate.

'Is your wife in there? I want to see her.'

'She's taking a shower. You're most welcome to wait. But what should I tell her? That her scan technician has dropped by to say hello at six in the morning? Do you want to tell me what happened?' Shivam asked.

'Why don't you come and see for yourself.' Dr Steven beckoned Shivam to sit in his car.

'Can I take my car? Just allow me to find my car keys,' Shivam requested.

But Dr Steven was in no mood for negotiation. 'Why do you think I came to get you? I found these in my lab.' Dr Steven handed Shivam his missing keys.

'How did they get there?'

'Where were you last night?' Dr Steven asked as he closed the passenger door for Shivam and walked to the driver's seat.

'I was at home. And can you please drive slowly? I'm not very comfortable with fast-moving vehicles. What's wrong, Dr Steven?' Shivam asked again, trying to calm him. But Dr Steven hit the gas pedal again, sending fear into the pit of Shivam's stomach.

Shivam closed his eyes to remember how last night had ended.

With his kicks. And the thought that he would name his son Sarthak.

Dr Steven's hateful glance brought him back to the crisis. 'Can you please tell me what's wrong?'

'Everything. And don't act like you know nothing.'

They reached the clinic's basement. The staircase door was unlocked. Dr Steven, leading the way, pushed open the steel door, and a gush of strong chemicals assaulted Shivam's nostrils.

'You were sleeping, right? Then who did this?' Dr Steven walked over to a pile of files scattered on the floor. The destruction in the lab looked like the aftermath of an earthquake; everything was on the floor, the countertops bare. Dr Steven beckoned him to come in, but no way was Shivam going to step in there. The mess and the stench were turning his stomach upside down.

'You think this is my work?' His stomach was threatening upheaval, and he wasn't sure what was causing it. Losing years of research or losing Dr Steven's trust. 'If you know me at all, then you know I couldn't have done this. I suffer from OCD, and this chaos can act as a trigger. It's messing with my brain right now. Moreover, why would I do it?' Shivam asked, staring at his polished shoes instead of Dr Steven to avoid seeing the mess.

'You'd do it for your son. Because you think he's your son, and you need to protect him.'

Dr Steven surprised Shivam. His anger was making him illogical.

'And you think I can protect him from you by making you angry? By destroying your lab? This is an act of revenge. I didn't want to alarm you earlier, but I've been getting some—'

'I found your keys here, next to the shredder, and I found this on the basement camera. Weren't you wearing this polo shirt yesterday evening? And isn't this your cap?'

Dr Steven beckoned for Shivam to walk to the monitor. Shivam jumped over the piles of scattered instruction manuals and shards of petri dishes and walked closer to the computer screen. The recording was paused and zoomed in on a figure wearing his shirt and cap. But he hadn't left the house, unless . . .

‘I can have you arrested, Shivam. I’m sure you’re aware of that.’ Dr Steven narrowed his eyes.

‘Of course, you can. If you’re ready to reveal the existence of this lab. Think about all the eggs and sperm the police will discover; I’m sure the samples were all illegally obtained from the clinic upstairs. And, yes, do let me know when you decide to call the police. I might want to show them something too—a file packed with lies. The false reports you generated to show that Mahika was infertile when, in truth, she was fit to conceive naturally. The genetic modification you did in her first round of IVF attacked her egg reserves too. You must’ve done the same with the other couples. Maybe one of them found out about this lab. But if you think I did all of this, and going to the police will help settle this, by all means. We’re going down together in that case.’ Shivam started to leave.

He then turned back and said in a calm voice, ‘Alternatively, please call me when your rage is settled, so we can find the person responsible for this disaster. You might’ve called me your “son” for the heck of it, but I’ve always cared for you. So, I’m happy to help you with this, but only if you stop doubting me.’

Dr Steven followed him.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’ Before Shivam could respond, Dr Steven had hit Shivam on the head.

Mahika Rathod

March 21, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Destroying the lab hadn’t helped Mahika much with her rage. It was back with a vengeance, like live coals covered in ashes. She waited a minute before walking out of the bathroom. Shivam was gone, having left in Dr Steven’s car, giving her time to gather her courage.

Or she could look for her passport.

Her instincts again pointed to the attic. This time she searched the attic her way, by pulling everything down. But the passport wasn’t in the boxes

now scattered all over the floor. Mahika had lost thirty minutes.

Maybe Neil was right. She should report them to the police.

The file on Shivam and Dr Steven she'd found in the vault, along with the address of the hidden lab, was enough to put them behind bars.

But what would she do with Rudra? How would she hide him from the world after the news of his genetic modification came out? There was no time to think now. When it had been time to think and act, she'd let her rage take over, jeopardizing his existence and her safety.

'Think before you act. Why can't you get that straight in your head?' Shivam's insult came to her again. But it was too late to regret her decision.

She needed to hide first and think later. Check into a hotel maybe. Now that she had some cash. And Neil could help her.

Mahika had no clue where she'd run to, but she'd do it. She pulled out one holdall bag and put a few photo albums in it. These childhood memories and her wedding photographs would be her only companions after today. Some clothes, the stolen cash stowed away under the altar table and her Shivling were the last things to pack before leaving. She was about to leave the attic when she tripped over a box, losing her balance and knocking out a swollen parquet. A piece of wood jutting out from the floor had come in her way, hurting her directly under the nail. Mahika bent down to numb the pain by pressing it with her foot when she spotted the opening on the floor. She lifted the loose parquet and found a cavity large enough to hold a book. Her heart was filled with hope.

She found a plastic bag containing her father's copy of the Bhagavad Gita. He'd died holding this book. She turned it over and found her passport taped to it. Again, her father's connection made her hopeful. She looked around, hoping to see a glimpse of him again. But no one was in the attic.

He was dead. And she had the passport. She had to escape.

Mahika rushed to the shed to pick her bag that she had hidden there last night. It was heavy with the cash that she'd lifted from Dr Steven's lab. She placed the Shivling and was about to head out when a thud made her stop in her tracks.

Shivam was home.

She'd taken too long to pack.

Acting purely on impulse, Mahika slid a plant pruner into her pocket and walked into the house, which was again engulfed in silence. She searched the kitchen, living room and dining room. No one was there.

Goosebumps appeared on Mahika's skin as she peered through the window to check if Dr Steven's car was on the road. It wasn't. She sped to the backyard to get her bag when someone put a hand around her throat. Before Mahika could scream for help, a handkerchief loaded with an anaesthetic had established its control over her.

Rudra

March 21, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

'You can't stop me. No one can. I can do anything for Mahika.' He then pushed Steven down. Steven lost his balance and fell over the glass shards scattered on the floor. The pool of blood oozing from Steven's neck meant the man had fallen exactly where he'd wanted him to, on an incubator's sharp edge.

'I can kill anyone for her,' he said. He walked to Steven's desk, unlocked the drawer, pulled out a syringe and said, 'I wanted to clear all the roadblocks in a single shot. But I think I need to tackle her enemies one at a time.'

'What is this? And how did you manage to open my drawer? Where did you get the keys?'

'You shouldn't bother your tiny little brain any more, Steven.' He held Steven's arm and inserted the needle, pushing the content of the syringe into his veins. Steven's heart stopped at once.

'This is how you killed that little chimp, right? How is the taste of your own medicine?' He walked out, closing the door behind him. He then pressed the reset button on the digital lock. The new passcode was his revenge for locking Mahika in her own house and locking Shivam in his deceit by implanting a chimp's zygote in Mahika.

He then flagged a taxi and went home to free Mahika from her bondage, but the silence in the house hit him hard.

Mahika was gone.

He rushed to the shed and the empty plate on the altar table made his knees buckle. The absence of her father's Shivling meant she wasn't coming back.

He dropped to his knees and began to cry. He'd lost the woman he loved because of Steven and his game.

He was about to run out to find Mahika when he noticed the holdall bag. The Shivling was in it, along with loads of cash. He spotted the passport, and that's when he connected the dots.

Mahika had not escaped. She'd been abducted. He drove back to the clinic, jumping all the red lights. All he cared about was Mahika. Steven was as dead as the lab. He keyed in the password into the computer and replayed the surveillance video. There was no sign of Mahika in the last two hours. She hadn't left the house.

'You liar. You abducted her. I know you've done something to her. I'll kill you, Steven.' But Steven was dead. He scanned Steven's computer to find a clue. The folder titled 'OT' caught his attention. It was saved in the recorded videos folder. Steven was monitoring another house with a similar layout as Mahika's. He zoomed in and recognized the green canopy and the rusted swing.

'Hang in. I am coming to get you.'

He drove to Goodman Road, jumping all the red lights. He rang the bell and knocked. No one answered the door.

'Mahika, are you there? Don't worry I am here.'

When no one replied, he shattered the window using a crowbar he'd found in the garage and unlocked the window.

A scream startled him.

Kids in the room began screaming hysterically, flapping their hands and blabbering as he entered the room. There were twins—something was not right about them. Their foreheads were bruised, and so were their bodies.

His heart leapt in his chest. Steven was even more dangerous than he'd assumed. These weren't normal kids.

Mahika Rathod

March 21, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Mahika opened her eyes and then shut them because a bright pendant light dangling from the ceiling had pierced them with pain. She turned her head and narrowed her eyes to open them slowly this time. She was in an operating theatre. Her hand instantly travelled to her belly.

Rudra was still in there, kicking her frantically.

She patted her belly to reassure Rudra and made an attempt to get off the bed she found herself in, but her leg was tied to the bed's steel frame.

Mahika sat up and tried to undo the rope's knotting.

'I picked up this rope from your husband's lab. He used a similar rope to chain the chimp. Or maybe he used the same one,' the voice said. Mahika was still groggy from the anaesthetic, but her motherly instincts were waking up, bringing a sharp taste of danger to her mouth. She tried to wrestle with the knot when a hand stopped her.

'It won't open, Mommy. According to Dr Steven, this sailor knot is the strongest. I learnt it from him to tie my boys, so they won't kill themselves or each other.' The woman walked closer to her. Mahika blinked, trying to put a name to her familiar face.

'Dr Grace,' Mahika said.

'So, you're not as big an idiot as your husband thinks you are.'

Mahika remembered the strong chokehold. How could she fight with this woman? And who else was part of this abduction? Mahika twisted her leg to loosen the knot and felt something poking her near her hip bone.

The plant pruner.

She was tempted to fish the pruner out of her pocket and cut the rope. But she held back, trying to come up with a plan. Then a scream startled her, but Dr Grace didn't react.

She wasn't the only one in this place.

'So, Mommy! Are you ready to see the baby?' She lifted Mahika's T-shirt with a gentle hand. Mahika had liked Dr Grace and never thought she could be a part of this team. But it looked like she was a bad judge of character.

Mahika lifted her hand to push away Dr Grace but couldn't fend her off. The thud of Rudra's heartbeat, at least, alleviated some of her pain. Another kid was screaming in the other room. How many were held captive in this house?

'So, I was right. The baby can hear everything. See how he's responding to his brother's voice? Dr Steven thinks no one can match your husband, but I've beaten the genius Shivam by reducing your gestation period.'

Mahika looked at the image on the screen. Rudra looked bigger than he had two days ago.

'Okay, time to give me my baby back.' Dr Grace replaced the probe at its stand.

'But he's just twelve weeks old.' Tears had started blurring Mahika's vision.

'My baby is eager to meet his mommy. Aren't you?' Grace said.

The doctor was calling Rudra *her* baby.

'Why are you calling my baby yours?' Mahika asked.

'Ask your husband. He calls my lab his lab, my research his research. Your husband snatched away years of my research and is using it now, trying to create a perfect baby using my perfect eggs, because yours were good for nothing. But he's not as smart as Dr Steven thinks he is. Well, who would know better than you? I like the way you've been fooling him and Dr Steven by working in that restaurant. How much are you earning there? Do you think you can raise him on those hourly wages?'

Had Dr Grace written the notes? If so, Mahika's assumption had been right. This was office politics gone wrong.

'And I enjoyed the show last night. It was outstanding. However, your turn in revenge is over. Now it's my turn. Taking this little perfection for myself will be my revenge,' Dr Grace said.

Mahika's mind gained clarity as the medicine started to wear off. She recalled her meltdown in the lab last night. It hadn't been fear that had made her turn her head time and again. It was Dr Grace watching her every move.

'You followed me to the lab?' Mahika asked.

'I've been hired to be there in case of a medical emergency as your genius husband and that dumb Dr Steven couldn't figure out your due date. My job was to stay near you. And it's fucking frustrating to wait in the car park while you cook in the restaurant to earn what—\$20 per hour? Or follow you to the mall to see you flirting with another man. I'm sure your husband isn't aware that you've managed to get yourself chauffeured around just like he managed to get a free house and free car from Dr Steven. The house, the car and the baby are mine,' Dr Grace said.

'You can take everything you want, but the baby is mine. Please leave my baby alone, Dr Grace,' Mahika said.

'You are absolutely mistaken. The baby is very much mine. It was tailored to cater to my needs. Aren't you going to take care of your brothers, honey?' Dr Grace was talking to Mahika's unborn. Her intimate voice sent a chill down Mahika's spine.

'Where are we?' Mahika asked.

Another scream rattled Mahika's nerves.

'Don't get startled, honey. Your twin brothers aren't very good with change. They're still getting used to this new house. See how much your mother and brothers are sacrificing for you?'

Mahika hated the idea of Dr Grace sowing seeds of doubt in Rudra's mind. 'You work with my husband?' she asked.

'Didn't I tell you just now? Your dear husband came and took away years of my research. I was the brightest brain in Dr Steven's eyes—until your husband called from New Jersey with a plea to save your Down syndrome baby. Back then, Dr Steven was helping me with a gene technology aimed at treating my autistic twins. But then we introduced a new gene into them, which made the boys violent and unmanageable, and Dr Steven lost his faith in me. To add the cherry on top, your genius husband's research led to

a breakthrough discovery in treating Down syndrome in the womb. And that's when Dr Steven closed the lab door for me and opened it wide for your genius husband. I created that lab from scratch. But your husband first took my lab, then my house that you live in and then my years of research. I had nothing left. However, I'm so glad that Dr Steven soon realized your husband was more than meets the eye. He thinks your husband is playing some game with him, and you are part of it too. So, Dr Steven came back with his tail between his legs. But I won't let my baby be part of this power play.' Anger spilled out from Dr Grace's voice.

Mahika gently pulled the plant pruner from her pocket as Dr Grace tapped a syringe to release the trapped air.

'He's my baby.' Mahika positioned the pruner as Grace moved towards her with a loaded syringe.

'Now, Mommy, all you have to do is to behave and sleep like a good girl.' She held Mahika's arm to insert the medicine into her veins. But before Dr Grace could stop her, Mahika had stabbed Dr Grace with all her might. She'd gone straight for Dr Grace's stomach, thinking about nothing but Rudra.

Dr Grace screamed, and the screams coming from the other rooms intensified in response. 'You bitch! My boys.'

Mahika felt guilty, but Dr Grace made her decision easier as she pulled her phone from her pocket. 'You will rot in jail. I'll make sure of it.'

Mahika leapt and pushed the phone out of Dr Grace's hand.

Dr Grace again screamed in pain. But Mahika's instinct to protect Rudra continued to blur the boundaries of right and wrong. She needed to cut the rope, but there was nothing accessible. The pruner. Mahika pulled the bloodied pruner from Dr Grace's stomach as Dr Grace writhed in pain. The screams coming from the other room continued to grow louder. After much effort, Mahika had freed herself. She left the room and was startled by the house's strikingly similar layout. She walked to where two identical boys were chained to their respective wheelchairs. They started screaming as soon as she came near.

‘Don’t you dare touch my sons,’ Dr Grace shouted. The boys, maybe ten, were identical twins but something was wrong with them. Their faces were bruised. She heard a knock on the door. It was Shivam.

So, he was a part of it too.

‘Mahika are you there? Don’t worry I am here.’ She wanted to rush to him, but she locked the door and pushed the couch to it. Shivam was screaming to open the door, and panic shot through her heart. He was very angry. She ran to the backyard to hide and spotted a green canopy and a set of rusted wrought-iron furniture. She had seen it somewhere. Mahika looked around and spotted her house. She’d been held captive in the abandoned house behind hers. Mahika ran across the yard and unlatched the door between the two houses. She was right. It was the backyard of her house, and the door that was visible from the other yard was painted to match the wall of their backyard. The back door merged into the wall as she shut it close on this side. There was no handle or bolt on this side of the door. Shivam would soon come chasing her. Mahika dragged the planter and blocked the door. The kids’ screams faded as she moved away from the backyard. The screams she had heard in the middle of the night the week before weren’t part of her dreams. They were Dr Grace’s twins screaming for attention.

Mahika grabbed her holdall bag, which she’d left in the backyard, bolted it to the main door and punched the code into the silicone pad. The lock rejected her input with a loud beep. Mahika wiped her blood-stained hands on her jeans and keyed the numbers again. Nothing.

Shivam had changed the passcode.

‘Rudra, give me the passcode, please. But be quick. Please, Rudra,’ she said.

The life within her jumped into action but something was wrong. He kicked only two numbers. Mahika punched them in. ‘It should be three digits, Rudra.’ But Rudra kicked only twice.

He was deliberately not giving her the numbers to punish her for hurting Dr Grace.

‘Rudra, whatever that woman said was bullshit. I am your mother; I can feel it in my bones, and we’re about to break free. Just help me open the door please.’

Rudra kicked again, stirring hope in her. But he again kicked only two numbers.

He was punishing her.

Mahika fell to her knees and pleaded with Rudra to give her the numbers. But the life within her had turned against her.

Rudra

March 21, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Here comes another twist. You’re not your mother’s child.

‘My kids! What will happen to my kids?’ Dr Grace pleaded for help, but my mother walked out of that house, leaving behind a wounded woman and her kids.

And you wanted to hand the cruelty award to your future father.

But once again, I was thinking differently than the voice within me. My mother wasn’t doing this for her, she was doing it to save me. Before I could argue back, her panic-filled words reached me. ‘Do you know the code, Rudra?’

I jumped into action. But my mind was too agitated and scared to step into the meditation instantly. My mother kept reassuring me I was her son and not that woman whom she’d just stabbed. I ignored her explanation and focused on the task. The numbers appeared, and I kicked her in a pattern to communicate. Seven kicks, nothing and then six kicks. But she wasn’t able to get the code.

Dude, she’s not getting the middle digit.

But I knew only one way to communicate a zero, by not kicking.

Karma is such a bitch. It came too soon for your mother.

But the file in the attic and the samples in the lab had ignited a fire in her, and my mother was in no mood to give up.

‘Is it a three-digit code, Rudra?’ she asked.

I kicked her back.

‘Is the first digit seven? Kick back quickly,’ she said with a sense of urgency. I confirmed with a kick.

‘Is the second digit six? Kick, if yes.’

This time I didn’t.

‘It’s the third digit? Kick, please. Hurry, Rudra.’ I kicked her. ‘So, you don’t know the middle digit? ‘Kick me if you know it.’ I kicked her.

‘Please tell me the middle digit, Rudra. Kick and tell me, Rudra. Please.’

But how should I convey a zero? She patted again. ‘Please, Rudra. We will get caught. Give the middle digit.’

Think of a way, man. Quickly.

‘You don’t want me to leave the house?’ my mother asked. ‘Are you upset that I hurt your mother? Is she your mother? Are you angry with me? I was doing it to protect you.’

Whoa! Where did that one come from, mate?

We were losing time, and my mother’s mind was going to places dark and dangerous instead of thinking about the obvious.

‘Or is the middle digit zero, Rudra?’ my mother said. But by the time I could kick her to confirm, she’d fled. The freedom that should have lifted the burden from my chest dragged me down the rabbit hole as a sense of foreboding wormed its way to my mind.

Something bad is about to happen.

I tried to calm down and push the dreadful thought away. Nothing worked.

You need to be calm, my friend. Inhale and exhale.

I shouldn’t have listened to the voice in my head. My effort to calm down had sent me back to the boy’s world.

The boy wasn’t in his room. He was someplace new and unfamiliar. I felt the anxiety of living all alone in a new place creep into my body. They were leaving him alone in a place that smelt of loneliness—punishing him for the money he’d stolen to buy the new speaker and much more. The ache that gripped my heart was like the sting of the whiplash.

That's the purpose, dude. To hit him where it hurts the most.

'I think we need to go,' the man said, and she followed, leaving the boy alone in a room that wasn't his. I waited to see the boy's reaction, but he was solving a maths problem, indifferent to their departure. They'd left him. But the look on his face suggested he had abandoned them too.

So, you will abandon them. Finally, I can see some light at the end of the tunnel.

Shivam Rathod

March 21, 2003

Goodman Road, Singapore

Shivam opened the door to a mini operation theatre with an incubator to support a premature baby. His breath caught in his throat.

There was a woman on the floor, curled up in a foetal position, lying in the puddle of her blood. She was too tall to be Mahika. His woozy mind took a moment to register her blonde hair and the freckles around her eyes. She was Mahika's substitute doctor. Dr Steven's puppet. She'd passed out or was dead. Someone had stabbed her with a plant pruner. It was identical to the one he had in his backyard.

'Mahika,' he said.

'Please call the ambulance,' Dr Grace pleaded.

'Whose house is this? What are you doing here?' Shivam asked.

'I have lost so much blood. Please call the ambulance.'

'I will. But first tell me where my wife is. And what are you doing here, Dr Grace?'

'She can deliver any minute. I need to be up and running to deliver my baby.'

'You mean my baby, Dr Grace?'

'Everything is fucking yours. My extraordinary research, my house and my lab, everything is yours.' She sighed in pain. 'Ambulance . . . please call the ambulance.' Dr Grace was losing a lot of blood, but Shivam was losing time.

‘So, where is Mahika?’ Shivam asked. The screams coming from the other room turned louder.

‘Please call the ambulance. I don’t want to die. My kids . . .’

‘I will call the ambulance only after you tell me where Mahika is?’

He noticed the trail of blood leading to the backyard. Mahika had left breadcrumbs to find her. They stopped at the backyard, but the yard door was jammed. Without wasting time, Shivam climbed up the wall with an agility that surprised him, bringing back some forgotten memories. He pushed his thoughts away and jumped to the other side. Mahika had left the house. He rushed to the dishevelled attic. He kicked the boxes with the tip of his shoe and found the floor opening. The passport was gone, but the edge of a plastic bag hidden in the cavity caught his attention. There was a notepad in it. He lifted the notepad’s cover. There was a message for him:

You have ~~found~~ found me. Now it’s your turn to hide.

Rudra

March 21, 2003

2 Stadium Walk, Singapore

My mother hid until she heard the car come closer to us. In a fit of panic she’d called Neil using her handphone. And twenty minutes later, he’d appeared like a knight in shining armour. My mother rushed to the car with a sigh of relief.

‘What happened?’ Neil asked.

But my mother could barely speak. ‘Airport . . . India . . .’ Her voice quivered, which made my heart shatter into pieces.

‘Did you manage to get the ticket?’ Neil asked. My mother must’ve shaken her head. ‘Let me arrange the ticket for you. Where do you want to go?’

‘I don’t have anyone. Just Rudra . . . and she tried to kill him. She would’ve killed him. That’s why I . . . I . . .’

‘You can stay with me. I mean us. I’m here for you. We’re all here for you.’

I think she should take that offer. Any opinion, mate?

But my mother’s heartbeat had started pulsating in every part of her body, causing similar tremors in my world. And the question of whether we’d be able to escape safely gnawed at me too. I shifted my thoughts away from her world, intending to steal a glimpse of our future. The bright light appeared between my eyebrows almost instantly and was quickly replaced by the colourful world of my vision.

I saw a road.

I was happy that my thoughts had taken me to my future this time. A man was driving a car and a woman was sitting next to him. Her belly was too swollen to go unnoticed. She was pregnant. The man driving the car blinked his light-brown eyes and hit his foot on the gas.

You just saw your mother and father. In one car. He’ll get her. Do something about it.

The brakes screeched, which brought me back to my mother’s world.

‘I have some more cash at the restaurant. It will come in handy. Meanwhile, think again. Do you want to go? You could stay and face him. Fight for what’s yours. We’ll help you file a case against him,’ Neil said.

The police case will be on her, mate, for slicing that woman—your maybe biological mother—like an apple.

My mother was apparently thinking the same. ‘I need to go away. If not now, then I’ll never be able to go.’ Her sobs increased.

‘Sure, Mahika. You know what’s better for you. But I’m here if you need help. There’s a water bottle in the back. And in this bag, you might find some cookies. I’ll be back in a minute. Don’t open the car door for anyone,’ Neil said.

Neil was gone, and I was about to go back to my trance when my mother’s words stopped me in my tracks.

‘Did I kill her, Rudra? Or is she still alive? Can you see her?’ Since there wasn’t a kick-if-yes attached to her question, I bypassed it as rhetorical. I had no intention of going down that slippery road.

‘Do you think we can escape? Because if we get caught, I’ll have to spend my life in jail, and you’ll be with your father. All this for nothing. What was I thinking?’ My mother began crying again.

You should’ve thought of that before destroying his lab and stabbing his accomplice.

But the need to protect her and help her was running through my veins. I closed my eyes, hoping to see Dr Grace, but my mind returned to the boy’s world.

Stay here. I’m telling you, there’s a connection between your future and these visions.

I did stay in the boy’s world, trying to find a connection between these two worlds. He stood by the window of his new room. From the road, his mother was looking up at him. A tear fell from his mother’s eyes as she waved goodbye. His father was already in the car, waiting impatiently. He didn’t look angry. He looked resigned. And the feelings were mutual, as the boy looked away from him, breathing a sigh of disgust. The hot anger brewing in the boy’s heart boiled over in my heart.

His parents were leaving him someplace lonely and morbid.

The anger, betrayal and sadness the boy felt began ruling my heart too. He blinked, and a tear coursed down my cheek. I was still watching the car, hoping for it to turn around and take him back, but it exploded into a ball of flame. The boy, still by the window, was calm and unmoved, as his mother and father burst into flames. I screamed for help, but there was nothing I could do.

He could’ve gone to help them.

The boy walked to his desk and tossed some white pills into his mouth. A moment later, I felt anxiety and rage leaving my body. The boy pulled out a notepad from the drawer and wrote:

I ~~found~~ found you. Now it’s your turn to hide and my turn to seek.

Neil’s panicked voice peeled me from the boy’s world.

‘Mahika, I think someone is following us.’

‘Please drive fast,’ she said. And the memory of the car burning flipped my world upside down. The dreadful feeling was back. Something wrong was about to happen.

You’ll die in a car accident with your mother, and someone would watch you be consumed by flames. Your father?

Suddenly the darkness of my mother’s womb and the boundaries around me became more profound. I wanted to break free.

I had to do something. I focused my energies on discovering what had caused the accident. Maybe I could stop it. Suddenly, the visions that had come in bits and pieces were sewn together. I saw the boy’s story from the start to the end: the first push down the stairs, the lashing, the slap, his playing cricket in the field, his getting caught, his stealing the radio, then his getting caught again and being abandoned by his parents, and his parents’ car turning into a ball of fire. I wasn’t sure if they’d actually been consumed by the fire or if he’d just wished for it.

Are you sure you want to live a life like that? You could let the flames come and swallow you and your grief. This way it will be over before it starts.

But the thought of seeing my mother burning into flames was pushing the boundaries of my sanity. I wanted to keep her safe.

‘Your husband drives a steel-grey Toyota?’ Neil asked.

‘Yes. Is it him?’ The panic in her voice again caused my heart to flip.

‘What was he wearing this morning?’ Neil asked.

‘A white T-shirt—’

‘Yes, it’s him. I tried dodging him by changing the route, but he’s back with us.’

Do something, Rudra.

‘I can’t live without my baby,’ my mother said.

‘What kind of a man would kill his baby? Do you have the proof for all that you’ve claimed? And whose blood is on your T-shirt and fingers?’ Neil asked.

Bingo. There you go. The lover boy is doubting her.

‘He’s a geneticist and he has been using my womb to experiment. I wasn’t aware until his experiment became successful.’

What the hell! All this while she didn’t want to tell anyone.

‘Please help me. Please,’ my mother cried.

The helplessness in her voice compelled me to break free of her womb to help her. But the only way to help was to stay calm and visualize the world outside. I focused my energies on the spot between my eyebrows, and this time, instead of seeing a golden dot or the boy, I saw a man in a white T-shirt driving a steel-grey car. His face was tense and angry.

You have successfully visualized your father, mate. Does he look like the man who pushed his son?

‘Did he find us?’ my mother asked. Her panic-filled voice shattered my meditation.

Running away wouldn’t be an escape for your mother. She’d always live in fear of getting caught. Unless you eradicate the reason for her fears.

At that moment, I knew what I had to do. I wasn’t sure if it would work, but I had to try.

‘To move an object with your mind, you need to become one with the object—feel it and make it a part of you. And once you reach that heightened state of awareness where the pen on the table becomes a part of your body, then all it takes is just a flick as you would move your arm.’

That’s all it would take to keep my mother safe.

No, no! You can’t do that.

But I’d done it. I flicked the steering wheel of my father’s car. It startled him, and the car hit a petrol road tanker speeding in the parallel lane. I felt a sigh of relief as everything turned into flames.

You just killed your father.

I felt no remorse. I wasn’t even sure if my telekinesis had worked.

But if it had worked, it was a cause to celebrate.

You killed your father at the very moment you first saw him.

‘Everything will be okay now, Rudra. We’re going to board the flight soon,’ my mother said.

Of course, everything will be okay. Your son has taken care of things by killing his father. And they say no one is born a killer from their mother's womb.

Mahika Rathod

March 22, 2003

Changi Airport, Singapore

The car stopped at the departure gate. Neil said, 'I like you, Mahika. Maybe there's a way you can stay with us.' But Mahika knew there was no turning back now, not after what she'd done to Dr Grace.

'I can fight on your behalf. Let me help you,' Neil added.

But Mahika had no words that could plug the hole in his heart. This ache of incomplete love was Neil's cross to bear the way Shivam's incomplete love was her cross to bear.

'Take care, Neil. And thank you for everything.' Mahika got out of the car. The automated departure-hall door slid open and welcomed her in. Mahika managed to keep calm while the staff at the Singapore Airlines counter issued her a ticket for Chennai. The flight bound for Chennai was the first to take off, and that's all that mattered to her at that moment.

'Next,' the immigration officer said. She'd cleared one hurdle without anyone catching her for killing Dr Grace.

There was still some time before they boarded. She locked herself in the bathroom cubical and let tears stream down her face as the adrenaline left her body and remorse replaced it. She fished her phone from her bag and dialled the SOS call for ambulance. Mahika wasn't able to give the house number but describing it as 'the house with the old, rusted swings' was perhaps enough for the paramedics to find the wounded Dr Grace.

If she was still alive.

Mahika threw the phone into the bin and walked out. There were no signs of Shivam or Dr Steven or the police, yet the fear had not left her. It wouldn't, not until the plane's doors closed.

Rudra was free.

She was free too.

And that's when it hit her. She was alone with a baby in tow, a baby that wasn't normal. She knew nothing about living alone, raising a kid or earning money.

How'd Rudra manage if something happened to her? And how would she explain to doctors about the mutant in her womb? At least Shivam had been taking care of all that. And she'd loved Shivam. How would she live without him?

In her rush to leave, Mahika hadn't planned how to live. And now when she'd set herself free, the fear of her first flight alone was messing with her mind, tempting her to return to Shivam. But the plane was already taxiing for take-off. She closed her eyes to let the fear pass when an old man approached her, asking, 'Can I sit next to you?'

Her father perched on the seat next to her with a book in his lap.

'Do you know the story of a musk deer, Mahi?' he asked.

Before Mahika could say no, he started reading the story to her as if she was six again. 'There was a musk deer. He was attracted to a sweet fragrance. He ran from one jungle to another to find the source of this musk scent. He searched for it in the rain and the scorching sun, in the winter and the summer, but he wasn't able to find it. One day, while searching, he fell off a cliff and broke his leg. The deer leant close to his body to lick his wound and found the source of the sweet fragrance he'd been chasing for months. It was him. It's within you, Mahi. The courage to live and fight. Like the deer, you've fallen off the cliff, but you'll only find the answer within yourself.'

Mahika was still waiting for her father to continue the story when a crew member woke her and asked, 'Tea or coffee?'

Her father had disappeared with the dream, leaving her alone. Mahika relived the dream, and it started making sense. She'd been looking for courage somewhere else, but today, after falling off the cliff, she'd found it within herself.

Mahika closed her eyes again and dreamt of a happy future.

Shivam Rathod

March 7, 1982

Kota, India

Shivam was in the examination hall, writing an English composition on ‘A True Friend’. His mother had prepared him well for it. And because Shivam didn’t have too many friends, his mother had created a fictitious friend for him—a bubbly, fun-loving and fearless boy called Rudra. But instead of writing about Rudra, the twelve-year-old Shivam sat there dreaming about being fearless Rudra.

The era of Shivam’s genius ended that day.

‘You left the entire English paper blank,’ his father shouted. The red thread of anger in his father’s eyes was a deeper red than the ‘Failed’ written on his report card. However, his father’s anger didn’t send a shiver down Shivam’s spine. Because Shivam wanted to be as fearless as the Rudra of his imagination.

‘What happened? I need an answer.’ His father shook Shivam. Shivam pushed Rudra from his thoughts to recall the moment, but his mind went blank. Those three hours spent in the examination hall had gone missing from Shivam’s life.

Those were the first three hours. There were many more to come.

‘I need an answer,’ his father said.

But how could Shivam tell his father about the moments that slipped away from him?

‘I don’t remember anything, Papa.’

‘Of course. The English paper wasn’t as important as the cricket match. That’s where you went after the English exam, right? Shivam, last warning, tell me what you were doing in the examination hall, or I’ll break your legs and we’ll finish your love for cricket forever. And then we won’t have to discuss signing this.’

Shivam had been selected to play cricket at the state level, and he needed his father’s approval. Failing this exam, however, pushed Shivam’s dreams down the drain.

‘Please, Papa! I promise I won’t do it again, and I’ll score well in the final exams. Please forgive me this time, Papa. Please sign this form for me. I want to play.’ He’d fallen on his father’s feet, hoping to get his approval. But the anger in his father’s veins had turned his father into a monster, and a hard kick deep into Shivam’s stomach was all it took for Shivam to fall down the stairs. Shivam had hoped his mother would come to his rescue, but she stood still, enjoying the show. That fall broke Shivam into two fragments—the Shivam who loved his mother and the Shivam who hated her.

Next day, Shivam begged his mother to sign the approval letter on his father’s behalf, but she took his father’s side.

‘Focus on your studies. Cricket will give you nothing, and this form will get you beaten again.’ His mother tore the approval form, breaking Shivam further. His dream to play cricket for his state and then his country was over.

The desire to play never left him, though. And whenever that desire became untameable, he skipped his classes to play with the boys across the street.

‘What’s your name?’ someone asked the first time he went.

‘Rudra,’ he said in a timid voice.

‘Say it loudly,’ the boy shouted, and Shivam repeated it: Rudra.

That day on the cricket field, the Rudra within Shivam became real. Soon this fearless Rudra started breaking all the chains Shivam’s father had shackled Shivam with. He made Shivam jump the school wall to play cricket; he stole the radio to follow the World Cup. They both lived in the same world, unaware of each other’s presence.

Until one day Shivam’s mother heard the boys on the street calling Shivam ‘Rudra’, and then she spotted Shivam playing cricket during school hours. She confronted him, but the Rudra within Shivam told her Shivam hated her for being a coward and for not standing up for her son. Shivam speaking in the third person was what raised the first red flag, as he was too old to play these pretend games. His mother regretted giving him the concept of an imaginary friend. Before she could teach Shivam to filter the

real from the imaginary, Shivam's father caught Rudra, too. Not once but twice. And when no form of punishment could chase Rudra out of Shivam's body, his father consulted a doctor. They boarded the train for Bombay the very night India won the 1983 World Cup, scarring Rudra further because they didn't let him watch the iconic win. The doctor confirmed that Shivam was suffering from multiple personality disorder.

'Rudra lives inside him,' Dr Aggarwal explained.

'But don't we all have someone different inside us? We're all several people at the same time,' Shivam argued. He'd seen his parents beaming with happiness at parent-teacher meetings and then scolding Shivam for the same scores at home. Everyone Shivam knew acted differently at different times.

But his problem was bigger than others' because, according to the doctor, most people could easily recall what happened when they moved between their different personas. For Shivam, there was a rigid memory wall.

'This disability to recall is part of having multiple personality disorder. I can help you break this wall. Or, rather, you'll break it for me. You're a genius, and I think your rational mind can help you win over this disease, because, in twenty years of my career, no one has ever asked me the questions you just asked,' Dr Aggarwal said.

Soon Shivam was left in this man's care.

His father had given him some hope. 'Men don't cry. Don't waste your time thinking about us. Train your mind to win. Dr Aggarwal also believes your genius mind can win over your craziness. So put your mind to some good use. If you want to come home, fix yourself.' Then his father walked out of Shivam's hostel room. Shivam's mother begged his father to take Shivam home, but she had no choice in the matter.

That day a part of Shivam died—their Shivam.

During the first session Dr Aggarwal met Rudra—the cheeky, vibrant and loveable Rudra. He was the exact opposite of Shivam. Soon, Shivam's weekly sessions with Dr Aggarwal turned bi-weekly, and then daily. Dr Aggarwal sat with a big notebook to take notes. Half the book was

devoted to Rudra and the other half to Shivam. He'd talk to Shivam one day and Rudra the next.

Dr Aggarwal tried merging the two personalities, but it wasn't happening. Shivam was now aware of the Rudra within him—the impulsive, unorganized and dyslexic Rudra. He detested Rudra for leaving the room dirty and for folding the pages of a book instead of using a bookmark. And Rudra hated Shivam for everything. The more Dr Aggarwal tried bringing them together, the farther apart they moved. However, they were united in their hatred for his parents. That summer, Shivam's parents returned, but instead of taking Shivam to his grandfather's village for an annual summer vacation with his cousins, they'd taken Shivam to an isolated ashram in Igatpuri. They weren't taking Shivam home until he was fixed.

After a year of therapy, Dr Aggarwal finally found a way to integrate Shivam and Rudra. Their hatred for Shivam's parents was a common link that brought Shivam's alter egos together. As Rudra and Shivam became friends, Dr Aggarwal, subjected Shivam to different real-life scenarios, by creating a crisis at school or staging a fight in the hostel. Shivam's alter ego emerged in times of such crisis, taking control of the situation. Dr Aggarwal assessed that Rudra was better at connecting dots and solving problems. His emotional quotient was also much more developed than Shivam's. But Dr Aggarwal needed a calm head to run the show. Shivam was trained by his father to be calm in a crisis. After several consultations, Dr Aggarwal started an experimental therapy of playing a game of hide and seek with Shivam and his alter ego. Dr Aggarwal made up a couple of rules for this game. The first rule was that only one of them could win the game, and the second rule was that the one who lost had to hide for days. Then Dr Aggarwal trained them both separately; Shivam was trained to seek, and Rudra was trained to hide. And for weeks Dr Aggarwal conducted these hide and seek games by throwing Shivam into difficult situations and waiting for Rudra to jump in to solve the matter. With repeated sessions, Shivam learnt to spot Rudra's actions, and every time Shivam found Rudra, Dr Aggarwal punished Rudra for losing the game by training him to hide

deeper. Shivam and his alter ego played this game of hide and seek until Shivam couldn't find Rudra. That was Rudra's last summer.

Or so Dr Aggarwal and Shivam thought.

Months later, after Shivam had passed all the trigger situations, Shivam's parents were summoned to take him home. He was looking forward to being with his family. However, his mother's pregnant belly shattered his composure. Tears welled up in his eyes, but he didn't want to cry in front of his father and be called a weak creature. So, he focused his attention on his sleeve's cuff, as Dr Aggarwal had trained him to do. But a stain on his cuff got stuck in his brain. He tried to clean the stain. He pulled out a handkerchief and rubbed it on the cuff. But the stain was still there. The stain soon replaced all his other worries. He removed his shirt and scrubbed the sleeve. His father was watching him keenly and his mother was crying with silent sobs, but Shivam was obsessed. The stain soon shifted; now it was on the bookshelf. Shivam pulled the books down and rearranged them. He then cleaned and scrubbed until he couldn't clean any more.

It was Shivam's first meltdown, and his parents had witnessed it before Dr Aggarwal could.

'He's still as crazy as he was, and violent too. I can't have him around my pregnant wife. I cannot risk another life. You said you'd fix him. He doesn't seem to have been fixed,' his father said to Dr Aggarwal. His mother sat there and nodded in approval. The baby had filled the missing gap in his parents' life. No one needed Shivam.

He didn't need them either.

'You can keep him safe. You can prevent him from breaking any further,' Shivam's mother said. But there was nothing left within Shivam to shatter. Shivam left the clinic to go to his hostel. The taxi waiting to take them to the train station devastated him. He was supposed to go back home tonight in this taxi—if not for the baby. But the life in his mother's womb had kicked him out of his mother's life.

'The baby will love you. You want to feel his kicks?' Shivam's mother tried to make up with him when they came to say goodbye. Shivam placed his hand on her belly at her request, hoping to feel some happiness, but he

only felt sadder. He left his room and returned holding a bolt. The missing bolt from the car's wheel was about to return Shivam's life to normal. He wanted a small accident to hurt the baby and punish his parents. But instead, the entire car caught fire. Shivam stood by the window and watched them turn into ashes. He wanted the baby to vanish, but the baby took along his mother and father.

Dr Aggarwal adopted Shivam when his extended family refused to house a crazy boy. Years later, Dr Aggarwal submitted a paper about Shivam's line of treatment to the medical board, referring to Shivam as a patient and not his son. It broke Shivam's heart, and he walked away from Dr Aggarwal, bringing along his mother's Bhagavad Gita, Dr Aggarwal's diagnosis and a family photograph.

He managed the last year of his college life all alone, and then went to Chandigarh to stay away from Dr Aggarwal and the newly acquired fame he'd gained by successfully integrating the personalities within Shivam. Shivam had promised himself he would never love anyone, but then on his first day in a lab, he'd fallen in love with his job and his boss. Professor Mishra's warmth filled the void in his life; he became the father Shivam never had. He taught Shivam how to code and splice. He taught Shivam how to change the colour of flowers. This power to be in control was intoxicating. And then, because of Prof. Mishra, he found Mahika too.

For the first time, someone had fallen for him. Shivam wanted to love Mahika back, but he didn't know how to do it. But Rudra did. While Shivam pretended to be in love with Mahika, Rudra hiding within him had fallen in love with her—madly in love.

Shivam's alter ego came out of hiding for the first time a week after Prof. Mishra's death. Shivam was in his father-in-law's study when the Bhagavad Gita caught his attention.

'Papa was reading it when he died,' Mahika said.

He had flipped through the pages, inhaling the residual fragrance of her mother's jasmine perfume. But his mother's Bhagavad Gita was in New Jersey, hidden in the files. He wanted to remove the jacket to confirm, but Dr Aggarwal's diagnosis slipped and landed on the floor.

So, you killed her father, Rudra.

No, you killed him by not destroying the diagnosis sheet when I asked you to.

While packing for New Jersey, Mahika might have accidentally swapped his mother's copy of the Bhagavad Gita with her father's. Or Rudra had done it to free himself. Shivam's alter ego announced his first presence in Mahika's life the night Mahika was looking for tickets to return to India after her first miscarriage. Mahika believed some wine had shown her Shivam's hidden side, but the passionate love-making and night of telling stories about playing cricket as a child, that was Rudra. After that night, Rudra started occasionally appearing in Mahika's life, loving him the way Shivam couldn't. While Shivam was trained to find him, Rudra had gotten better at covering his tracks.

In months to come, Dr Steven's deceit and his obsession with the baby in Mahika's womb made Shivam split more often, losing the plot. He was trained by his psychiatrist to find the notorious Rudra but when Rudra saw Mahika pining for her father, he split further, taking Prof. Mishra's personality. Prof. Mishra first coded the unborn's mind with dreams that narrated a story of Shivam's disorder. He then started writing notes to Mahika. Shivam's new alter ego protected Mahika as if he was Mahika's father.

However, a notepad hidden in the floor cavity of the upheaved attic made Shivam connect the dots. His anonymous blackmailer was none other than the Rudra hiding within him. Shivam wanted to stop Mahika before getting control over Rudra. But this time, though, Rudra decided to win the game of hide and seek. Forever.

Rudra had already killed Dr Steven, and Dr Grace was beyond recovery. Now the only trouble in Mahika's life was Shivam. So, he turned the steering wheel to the left and drove Shivam's car straight into the tanker.

He'd freed the Rudra trapped in Shivam and the Rudra living within Mahika.

Epilogue

Rudra

Six months later

Chennai, India

Nothing much has changed for my mother. She's still living in fear of getting caught, startled by every knock on the door. However, my world has turned upside down. The layers of her body, which had hidden me from everyone, including her, have disappeared. The frowns and smiles that were all mine—inside her womb—aren't mine any more. Because someone was now always watching me. And all thanks to my dead father, I've been deprived of the bliss of ignorance.

Not sure what is more frustrating for you, the absence of innocence or faking it.

'Rudra, today is your father's birthday,' my mother said as she latched me to her breast. A huge lump of guilt rose in my throat. It nearly choked me, and I struggled, coughing. My mother immediately jumped to my rescue. She patted my back. 'It's okay, Rudra. It happens.'

This was another thing that hadn't changed in my mother's life. She still talked to me the way she did when I was living in her womb. The only difference was now I didn't respond.

I wanted to scream that it doesn't happen to anyone else. However, I began crying instead. She patted and rocked me, and then sang a lullaby, treating me like a typical baby. I'd made my mother believe I'd lost all my powers. And I'd like to keep it that way.

The only thing you lost in your mother's womb was your conscience.

Soon I'd be three months old, and according to the doctor in a nearby clinic, I was growing normally. And growing normally took a lot of effort.

Because I have figured out that my perfectly tailored mind could trigger a message to generate a self-corrective DNA that would, in turn, change my weaknesses into strengths, making me more perfect than before.

A perfect evil baby.

But today wasn't the day to worry about my growth charts or my conscience. Today was a day for closure.

'It's your father's birthday today,' my mother said again, and I prepared myself for how the day would unfold. My mother's aching heart would drag her to the cyber café, and a quick search of Shivam Rathod's name would populate news articles about his car accident. It would leave her devastated.

Instead of looking out for her, though, I'd inflict a new wound on my mother.

Because sometimes you must lance the wound to heal it.

'Let's go to the temple,' she would say, and she would take me with her to the cyber café. And after reading the news of my father's death, my mother would stare at my face, attempting to read my expressions. She is still unconvinced I'd lost all my powers, and hence, she keeps testing me. Today, however, her thoughts would quickly shift from my powers to my father's death. She'd be a mess, yet she would hold herself together.

Maybe you can do this some other day?

No, the book had to drop today.

My mother had completely forgotten about the book she'd found hidden inside the floor of our house in Singapore. She'd flipped through the book on our flight from Singapore and had found nothing, even though my father's medical diagnosis was still glued to the Bhagavad Gita's hardcover, hiding his dark secret. However, my mother deserved to know the truth about my father. She deserved to get closure on my grandfather's death too.

And don't you think she deserves to know that you killed her husband?

Like father, like son.

Once again, I would ignore the voice living in my head and pull the book down, using the strength of my mind. But I would time it right, as she has a huge catering order to fulfil today. And thanks to my paranoid father, who had taped the paper in three different places, I'd have to use my mind's

powers or telekinesis to tug the diagnosis sheet out of the cover. The paper would slip out and finally, my mother would see it. A diagnosis would make her revisit many things—my father’s meltdowns, his occasional love and her father’s death. And just when the ache would become unbearable, the maid would summon her to the kitchen to fry the samosas.

My mother manages a small catering service, supplying homecooked food to hostel students. But tonight, she is about to fulfil her first biggest catering order, which would start a chain of many, so today she did not get the time to grieve or regret my father’s death. Every event unfolded as I had seen it coming.

You’re a planner just like your father, no? But let’s see if you saw this coming.

‘Rudra, see what I found. A photo of your father with his parents. I’m seeing this photo for the first time. It was in the book,’ my mother said and placed me upright in her lap. She held the photo and pointed at the boy. ‘He’s your father, Rudra.’

I blinked, but the boy was still there. The boy of my dreams.

It was his past you were chasing in your dreams—not your future. And you killed your father to undo those dreams, which were never about you.

I was gripped by an urge to scream and cry until my heart was hollow. However, I didn’t want my mother to see me cry. I waited for her to put me down on the bed and head to the kitchen. She placed pillows around me to prevent me from falling. But I rolled over and made myself fall from the bed, to punish myself. My head was throbbing with pain, but I kept my cries silent.

Falling off the bed is not equivalent to burning alive in a car accident. Just saying.

Well, my father’s pain has ended. However, I am still burning. And would burn every time I foresee hot oil splashing on her skin or the delivery van’s flat tire delaying her order. But I would watch these things happen without reacting, hiding my blinding visions of the future in the mundane art of being a baby. I would also have to swallow all my desires to walk, run and play cricket, letting them burn in my belly.

How about burning with remorse for killing your father?

But this is one thing I don't regret. Because my mother's happiness is the only imperfection in me, I'd do everything in my control to keep her happy—even if it means killing my father again. I would not hesitate.

How about Dr Grace? She's not dead.

I would kill her if need be. Because my desire to keep my mother happy is my only imperfection.

No, it's me within you that is your imperfection.

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