



*Revenge or Love?  
The choice is  
blurred...*

# Ruthless

MV KASI

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by  
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## **Ruthless**

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## EXCERPT

She shoved him away from her. "I hate you so much for this. I'll never forgive you for ruining everything!"

His eyes flared. He closed the distance between them, and held her arms. "You hate me? Show me how much you hate me," he growled, pulling her even closer.

The adrenaline rushing through her body picked up even more.

"Come on. Prove it to me," he whispered the challenge against her mouth, before kissing her hard.

She bit him. Not the gentle bite that she often used to drive him crazy. But a punishing bite, hard enough for her to taste the metallic tang of his blood.

He didn't flinch, and neither did he release the hold on her. She felt a strange combination of bloodlust, and another more familiar kind of lust coursing through her veins. But, before it consumed her completely, she shoved him away hard.

With blood tricking down his lip, he watched her with an intensity that made the blood roar in her ears, making it deafening, muting any reason or sense that would stop the madness from taking over her.

He wiped his bloody lip with his thumb and smirked. "I'm glad you had no one to take care of your pent up aggression. You are more than welcome to take it out on me tonight."

Listening to his taunting words, she lost it completely.

She attacked him like an animal.

Baring her teeth and nails, she literally jumped towards him.

But he was ready for her. He wrapped both his arms around her possessively, crushing her close until she could barely move.

And then, he kissed her again.

## DESCRIPTION

Sia and Ajay's story began where most romances ended. Instead of a happily-ever-after, their marriage began with Sia's manipulation and lies. However, over the course of time, they opened up to each other, each willing to work it out between them for the sake of their unborn child. And soon, it wasn't just about the baby. They had both fallen in love with each other.

But their happiness didn't last long. Dark secrets and betrayal were revealed. And this time, it was Ajay's manipulation and lies that were threatening to tear them apart.

With broken promises and a lack of trust, will Sia and Ajay find their happily ever after? Or was their love doomed right from the start?

Find out in—RUTHLESS.

**WARNING:** This book contains sexual content and some disturbing themes that are intended for mature reading audiences only.

**BOOKS BY MV KASI**

THAT SAME OLD LOVE  
THE HOLIDAY AFFAIR

**The Revenge Games Series**

SOULLESS (Book #1)

RUTHLESS (Book #2)

**The Singham Bloodlines Series**

BOUND BY REVENGE (Book#1)

BOUND BY HATRED (Book#2)

**The Captive: A dark romance thriller (Coming soon... Feb2018)**



## PROLOGUE

*Chaos was all around. Several people surrounded a prone body of a woman on the stairs.*

*Ajay's entire body shook in panic as he pushed through the crowd and knelt next to the bleeding woman. "Somebody help me! Please! Call an ambulance!" he shouted.*

*Conversations buzzed around him. Calls were being made, giving out the address and the details of the accident. Raising Sia's hand, he frantically began to search for her pulse as help arrived. Only when he could feel a faint pulse, did his own heart begin to beat again in hope.*

*He rapidly assessed Sia for other injuries, and noticed that her head wound was still bleeding profusely. He tore open his shirt, frantically shrugged out of it, and held it against the wound to stop the blood flow.*

*Very carefully he pulled Sia close against his chest, to cradle her in his shaking embrace before gently rocking them back and forth. "You'll be okay, baby. I know you're going to be okay. God, I love you. I love you so much."*

*Sia's eyes remained close and her face paled considerably due to loss of blood. Even her lips were beginning to take on a bluish tinge.*

*"Please don't—" His voice broke. "Don't leave me. Do you hear me?" His voice rose. "Don't you dare leave me!"*

*There was no movement or any kind of response from her.*

*Sirens blared at a distance and rapid conversations continued around him. He heard someone calling out his name and saying something to him.*

*But he ignored everyone. He kept his eyes locked on Sia's face, urging her to stay with him.*

*Memories flashed through his mind—Sia rolling her eyes at the movies he had made her watch. Both of them having a food fight because he had teased her about her culinary skills. Sia watching him with a soft look when he held her pregnant belly and spoke everyday to their unborn child.*

*Sia had been smiling all those times.*

*She was happy.*

*They were both happy when they were together.*

*They will be happy again!*

*His vision blurred, and he felt strange as tears burned his eyes for the first time as an adult. The last time he had cried was as a child, when his mother had killed herself.*

*No! He wasn't going to think of that time. Unlike his mother, Sia was still alive.*

*"You'll be fine," he told Sia, desperately hoping it was a nightmare that he would wake up from soon. A horrible nightmare for having kept secrets from her.*

*He would do anything if this turned out to be a nightmare. He would sell his soul to the devil to have Sia safe and sound, tucked next to him, and sleeping peacefully on their bed.*

*But he knew. He knew that both God and the Devil weren't listening to him.*

*His chest tightened with pain he had never experienced. An involuntary sob escaped out of his mouth as he kept watching Sia's still face, and felt her body getting cold in his arms.*



## CHAPTER ONE

“I’m sorry, Mr. Manthena. You need to make a decision. Your wife... or your child?”

A somber looking doctor stood outside the operating room.

“My wife,” Ajay immediately replied. “Save my wife at any cost.”

“But Mr. Manthena, your wife has already lost a lot of blood. Also based on her injuries, chances of her being brain dead are quite high. She might never gain conscious again. So, under these circumstances... usually the hospital’s policy is to...”

“I don’t care about the hospital’s policy. SAVE MY WIFE’S LIFE!”

Despite the loud and clear decision, the doctor waited with an uncertain look on his face.

Ajay clenched his fists. “I already told you my decision. Stop wasting your time arguing with me. Save my wife! Even if there is less than one percent chance for her to live, save her!”

The doctor nodded and went back hurriedly into the operating room.

Ajay wasn’t allowed inside. In fact, they told him he shouldn’t even be waiting outside in his state as they felt he needed medical attention himself.

He had already made a ruckus about that a few minutes ago. But when one of the nurses calmly pointed at his shirt, he finally looked down and understood why.

He still couldn’t get his eyes off his shirt.

It was covered in blood. So much blood. Only this time... it was his wife’s blood. Last time, fifteen years ago, it had been his mother’s.

He had found his mother lying on the ground, outside the three-storied building of his school. She had jumped off the tallest building in the village on a Sunday morning.

To this day, he feared heights, and seeing a lot of blood.

His body trembled. It had been shaking since the last hour of hell. Right from the time when Sia had revealed the identity of her abuser and stormed out.

He had been searching for her frantically with a sick feeling churning inside his gut. When he couldn’t find her, he knew something must have happened to her.

He had torn apart the entire party hall, where they had been attending a charity event hosted by a friend. He even commanded the other guests to help

find his wife.

A few minutes later, one of the guests did. Sia was found on the stairs.

Everyone had thought that she was already dead, especially the way she lay so still, bleeding a river of blood around her. But he refused to believe that Sia was gone or would ever leave him.

Ajay shuddered recalling those moments.

He began pacing the hospital corridor.

Thoughts flew inside his head.

*Was it an accident that she had slipped on the stairs?*

*It was my bloody fault that I told her the truth so soon. I should have taken her home after she found out about me.*

*I cannot lose her. I know I won't lose her like this.*

He didn't know how much time had passed until he was interrupted.

"Jay." A woman's gentle voice called from behind.

He swung around to see Jo and Harsha standing right behind him, looking at him with pity and worry on their faces. He responded to them with only a nod. He wasn't ready to speak to anyone yet.

Some of his friends and well-wishers from the party had stuck along until a while ago. But they left when he had ignored them completely and asked them to leave him alone.

Until he knew for sure that Sia would be safe, he wasn't interested to listen to anyone's platitudes, however well intentioned they were.

"I'll get him clothes to change into. I'll be right back." He heard Harsha tell Jo.

After Harsha left, Jo came closer and laid a hand on his arm.

"How is she doing?" she asked softly.

"Not good."

He heard Jo suck in a breath. "What did the doctors say?" she asked.

"That it's going to be hard to save her."

There was silence.

"What about the baby?" she asked.

"I told them to save Sia first."

Jo nodded, not saying anything. She knew him well. She knew that he hated pity or any kind of condolences. Especially when people said stupid things like 'It's going to be okay' when it was obvious that things were not going to be okay.

He had been hearing such platitudes since he was twelve. Right after his

mother had killed herself. Because she felt her *honor* was more important than him.

He still recalled how people had pitied that newly orphaned twelve-year-old boy.

*“I know your mother is gone. But don’t worry; someone will take care of you. You will be okay soon.”*

*“You are not the only one. There are lots of children in the world who have lost their mothers. They are all doing okay. So you’ll be fine too.”*

He didn’t care about such platitudes then and neither did he do so now.

Harsha returned with a shopping bag in his hands. “Change into these, Jay. Or the doctors won’t allow you inside later.”

Without putting up an argument, Ajay took the bag handed to him and went inside a men’s restroom to change.

His movements were hurried. He began shedding his bloodied clothes, and then threw them in a trash can. Ripping a paper towel, he wet it and cleaned away as much blood from his body as possible, before wearing the clean clothes.

Once he was done, he washed his hands vigorously with soap to get rid of the dried blood. When he was satisfied, he splashed water on his face to stay alert and awake through the night.

He caught his reflection in the mirror for a brief second while wiping away the excess water from his face,

He looked like shit.

He even felt like shit.

Maybe because he ached like hell.

His head. His heart. He ached everywhere. He ached with emptiness and helplessness of the current situation.

Before he could drown in self-pity, he shook his head and walked out of the bathroom.

Harsha and Jo were waiting outside.

“Did anyone come out of the operating room looking for me?” he asked.

“Not yet,” Harsha replied, handing him a steaming cup. “Have some coffee, Jay. It’s close to midnight. It’ll help you stay awake when the doctor calls you inside.”

Nodding briefly, Ajay took the cup from Harsha’s hands and gulped a few sips, not caring that it burned his tongue or throat. His hands were still

shaking.

Harsha nudged him towards the empty chairs, and gently pushed him down into one.

Ajay just sat there quietly, staring blankly into the cup.

*“I met you because I hated you. I’ve hated you most of my life. My hate for you was what drove me forward, and made me achieve things that a normal child wouldn’t even think of doing. I hated you so much that it became my very reason for living. My only ambition, even as an adolescent was to find you and destroy you.”*

The last conversation he had with Sia repeated inside his head, further intensifying the ache, until he felt like he would burst if he didn’t get the words out.

“The last time I spoke to her, I told her I hated her,” he said in a gravelly voice, as regret crushed him.

Harsha and Jo didn’t respond. They sat on either side of him, placing a comforting hand on each of his arms while listening to him calmly.

“If I could, I would take back those words,” he rasped out. “Even though they were true...”

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Eighteen Months Ago*

*“The only way I can move forward—is when I go back and face my past.”*

Ajay was at a gym, lifting weights.

It was very quiet, owing to the fact that it was an ungodly hour in the morning.

His eyes took in the unfamiliar place that was a good one hour away from his home. It was his first time here. Only because he didn't really see the need to exercise outside his perfectly functioning gym at his apartment. But he wasn't here for the exercise. He was here—for her.

Sia.

Birth name, Dharini.

Twenty four years old and the sole heiress to Blush Enterprises Ltd.

Also his long time obsession.

He had been tracking her movements for a while. Fifteen years to be exact. Long enough for him to know most aspects of her life.

He had tracked her through her social media accounts, her work email, her personal email, as well as through some of the camera footage at her Boston home and office.

He knew it was illegal to be cyber-stalking her that way. He had already gotten into trouble with the law as a teen, when he had hacked into a popular social media server to track her movements through her account.

But luckily, he was let go with a warning due to his age, and also due to the Colonel's contacts.

But that hadn't stopped him. It only made him think of smarter ways to hack into systems without getting caught. He had been succeeding pretty well so far.

He wasn't proud of it. Because he knew, it had become some kind of sickness within.

Whenever he pushed the limits by breaking into private networks, Harsha had begged him repeatedly to give up on the obsession.

*“Jay, please,” Harsha urged. “Stop! Why are you so determined to ruin*

*your life?”*

*“I can’t Harsha. I have to know how the girl who had ruined my life is faring. I have to know whether she is happy, while I lost the most important person in my life because of her. I just have to,” he said.*

*In his mind, it was a strong enough reason to drive him into the darkness, but Harsha thought otherwise.*

*“She was a small child when she told that lie, Jay. You need to get over it, and also get over her. You can’t take any risks like the last time. My father might not be able to get you out of jail again.”*

*“I know all that,” Ajay replied, feeling torn and helpless as always when it came to her. “Look at her.” He pointed at the screen that displayed a girl’s picture at a party with a drink in her hands and white powder coating her nose. “Unlike my mother, that girl is still alive. She has everything handed to her. And what is she doing with her life? Just drinking and doing drugs. How can I ever forgive someone like her?”*

With arguments like that, Harsha couldn’t stop him from continuing to follow Sia’s life.

Years passed, and he still kept tracking her movements. With each year, his sickness and obsession towards her only grew further. Until it was put to a stop when she turned her life around.

That was three years ago.

Suddenly, there were no pictures of alcohol or drugs filled parties. Instead she was working at her mother’s company and getting appreciation emails and awards.

He felt cheated. He had wanted her to continue in the path of destruction, until she felt helpless and desolate, and maybe until she eventually took her own life.

Just like his mother had.

However, that new phase of Sia’s life wasn’t a temporary one. It continued long enough, until his feelings towards her slowly morphed into something complicated. They were a combination of admiration and resentment.

She had become his daydream and his nightmare.

She had become his fantasy and his darkest desire.

But no matter what, his obsession remained constant.

And now, the object of his obsession was close.

A month ago, when he had found out that Sia was going to come back to India, he knew that he had to see her. It would be the first time he'd be seeing her in person as an adult. The last time they had met—was when they were children, and her presence had barely registered in his mind.

Ajay continued to lift the heavy weights while he looked towards the second level of the gym. He knew Sia would be practicing kick boxing there.

This particular gym specialized in it. Kickboxing was one thing Sia did religiously most of the days when she had begun to learn various self-defense techniques since she was thirteen.

He knew she would want to practice kickboxing even though she was extremely busy during most of the day. And so, he had 'suggested' the gym the night before on her phone browser results.

Hacking into her phone had also enabled him to track her exact location. He had installed a simple app on his phone that displayed a small red dot on the map of the city. Currently, he knew the red dot would indicate that she was only a hundred feet away from him, but on the top floor.

He put the weights aside. Then wiping the sweat off his face and neck, he grabbed his water bottle and workout bag, before heading upstairs to the second level.

\* \* \*

It was relatively quiet when he approached the top of the stairs. All he could hear were the sounds of someone punching a heavy bag systematically.

Hate and obsession swirled within him, consuming every cell in his body as he got closer to his target.

He couldn't understand why he felt so overwhelmed.

He had the power. He held all the cards. Yet when he went towards her, he felt out of control as his feelings intensified.

As soon as he reached on the second floor, he saw her.

He couldn't see her face as she was turned the other way. But he knew how she looked. The high cheekbones, the gentle slope of her nose, the soft plump lips—he knew them all quite well. He knew every feature of her face because he had watched her for enough years to be able to even dream about her.

He had seen her face several times, first in the pictures, and then, in the videos. He had watched those blank eyes turn cold and hard over the years. He had watched the short, sleazy dresses she wore during her teens, become



simple and classy dresses and suits.

But one thing that had remained constant all through the years was that she had always looked untouchable.

Not that it had stopped him from wanting what he craved. He had wanted to touch. Very badly. And it wasn't just to wrap his hands around her neck to end it all.

He had dreamt of touching her in different ways. The kind that disturbed him immensely.

She was his beautiful monster, who had no idea how much of her presence existed in his own life.

Taking a deep breath, he slowly released it. And then took a deeper one. And then, another one. He continued taking deep breaths, until he could calm down, enough to slip into his normal self.

*You are over-thinking this. She's just like any other woman. See her and talk to her. And then, get her out of your system to move on.*

After that self-pep talk, he went closer. "Need help holding the bag still?" he asked, trying to draw her attention away from the punching bag.

She swung towards him, and almost broke his jaw as her response to his question.

He found it mildly funny. Only because he supposed it was an apt response to a crazy obsessed stalker like him.

"Whoa, whoa, easy, lady!" He laughed with self depreciation.

He shook his head at the absurdity of the whole situation.

Harsha was right.

Despite a tragic incident in his childhood, there were people in his life who loved him. He had met with a good amount of success in his life too, so far. Then why the hell was he risking all of that for a girl who did something to him many, many years ago?

He knew he should leave. And he would, as soon as he was done fixing her phone that broke because he had startled her. He picked up the broken pieces of the phone and began fixing it immediately.

He realized hopelessly that he was doing it because he didn't want her getting a new one. Because getting a new one would mean not being able to keep a tab on her for another day or two.

He wanted to get rid of his addiction, but he had to do it slowly. He couldn't completely cut her off immediately. Because that would only lead to withdrawal.

He continued working on her phone. And even with his head bent down, he could literally feel her heated gaze on him.

His body responded immediately.

“Like what you see?” he asked, and felt her stiffen immediately in front of him. He didn’t know why he had taunted her.

Maybe because he was embarrassed. Despite his hate for her, she was still able to bring out some kind of raw, animalistic response from his body.

“I think I can fix my phone by myself,” she stated coolly.

“I’m almost done. This is a newer model, so there are smaller parts that need to be placed in the right sequence. And besides, I caused you to drop it in the first place.”

“True. But you have already done enough damage. Maybe next time, you should stop and think before sneaking up on the gym members, especially this early in the morning.”

Her icy, stern comeback finally drew his attention to her face. He hadn’t wanted to look at her too closely in person. Mostly because he thought he would be disappointed with the indifferent look she would direct towards him.

Like he was nobody to her.

Like their lives hadn’t intertwined in the most tragic way.

But she didn’t look at him indifferently. Her intense gaze lit him on fire in a way he had never experienced before.

It took him a while to come out of his hate-filled fog, and register what she looked like in person. And then, just like that, the time simply stopped as he held his breath.

The woman in front of him might be his worst nightmare, but she was wrapped in perfection. She was also more beautiful than he could ever imagine. Including his dreams.

The pictures and videos of her could not replicate the natural regal aura that was around her. Even in her workout clothes and with her face bare of any make-up, her beauty hit him like a punch.

It was a huge mistake to see her in person.

Even by just looking at her pictures and videos, he hadn’t been able to manage to distance himself emotionally. And now, in person, up close, she simply took his breath away.

He had never wanted to touch someone as much as he did at that moment.

Several thoughts raced through his mind.

He thought about various consequences of his actions, along with various scenarios that could happen between them. He knew what was right and what was wrong. He also knew he should stay away.

It was the right thing to do. And he had even promised himself.

But he just—couldn't.

*You hate her!*

*But I want her.*

*You need to forget about her!*

*I can't.*

His rational mind warred with the madness.

And as usual, when it came to her... his madness won.

\* \* \*

The madness continued to rule him as he arranged more 'accidental' meetings. It continued as he met her 'accidentally' in front of his apartments, at the restaurant, and then, at his office.

He began tweaking her search results in her browser and put entries that suited him. He just had to see her. Be in her proximity as much as possible.

He hadn't known at that time that it wasn't just hate and unfulfilled desire driving him. There was something else into play.

Each time he met with her, everything stopped—the time, the ability to breathe normally, his whole world.

And even though there was no emotion in her expression, and she was as cold as the arctic winter, she still had the ability to move him.

During one of his meetings with the Colonel, he confessed about meeting the girl who was responsible for his mother's death. The Colonel had sensed a friction between Harsha and him. And when the Colonel questioned him, he had given him the partial truth.

"Are you sure it's hate that's making you obsess about that girl like this, Jay?" the Colonel enquired while watching with his shrewd gaze.

"Yes. How can you think otherwise? Her lies ruined my life!"

The Colonel simply gave him a long meaningful look. "Hmm. I see. But you must also know that hating someone feels very similar to loving someone."

"What?" He let out a snort of disbelief.

"It does, Jay" the Colonel stated calmly. "I have hated a few people in

my life, and I have also loved some. The feelings I had towards both sets of people were the same.”

Still watching the Colonel with a look of disbelief, he listened as the Colonel continued talking. “The symptoms of loving and hating someone are the same too. For example, the stomach twists at the thought of them. The heart beats faster at the thought of them. They make you lose sleep and appetite at the thought of them. And during every interaction with them, you lose control of your mind and body. You’d be so consumed by them that you cannot think of anything but them.”

The Colonel eyed him with an intense look. “Do you feel that way about her, Jay?”

There was no answer. He couldn’t answer. He was shocked. Because whatever the Colonel had said was all true. He felt all those things towards Sia. But it *had* to be hate that was driving him. It just had to be. Because the other option was simply unacceptable.

He knew he needed to step out of the mess he was creating before she completely ruined him. He also knew that she had a serious agenda against the Naidu Estate and family that would blow up eventually.

His madness *had* to stop.

He didn’t even know her. At least not in the way, it actually mattered. All he knew was that Sia was a woman driven by a need for revenge. She was the kind who wouldn’t care who got destroyed in the process.

And she’d destroy even him quite easily without batting an eyelid. She would stop at nothing to bring her retribution to an end.

He knew all of that, but it did not in any way reduce his fascination towards her.

Maybe because deep inside, he knew he couldn’t blame her. She actually *believed* she was wronged.

The rational part of the mind didn’t agree with his reasoning. It said that even if her cousin had done the things she had accused him of, it was *her* problem. Not his. He could only sympathize. The sensible thing for him to do was to end the association he had with her. He could disappear completely from her life.

If only he had his usual willpower when it came to her.

Harsha was worried more than before regarding where the obsession would lead. “What the hell are you doing, Jay?” Harsha raged at him for the first time.

Sia had just left their office building. The app on the phone showed that she was already in the parking lot and was driving away.

Harsha saw it and was even more pissed. “Are you mad, Jay? You told me recently that you weren’t out to destroy her for a mistake she did when she was a small girl.”

Not removing his eyes from the tracker, Ajay replied calmly. “That’s still true.”

“Then why was she here? I know it had something to do with you. You must have led her here.”

Ajay didn’t deny the fact.

“Where is this leading to, Jay? I have the right to know. Especially since you have involved our company into your personal revenge.”

Ajay tore his eyes away from his mobile screen and looked at his best friend who had been more like a brother since childhood. “I like her,” he said simply.

Harsha was stunned. “What?”

Ajay shrugged, even though he knew he was oversimplifying it by telling Harsha that his feelings towards Sia was merely—like.

“You already know that I’ve met her a few times and spoken to her. And now, I happen to like her. I want to pursue her seriously.”

The look of disbelief remained on Harsha’s face. “Are you mad, Jay?” Harsha was agitated. “She isn’t some random beautiful chick you saw and developed a liking to. You know damn well it can never work out between the two of you.”

“Why?”

Harsha let out a disbelieving laugh. “Why? Because you spent more than a bloody decade trying to destroy her! And now, all of a sudden, you think those feelings are overshadowed by the *liking* you took to her?”

“Yes.”

Harsha shook his head at the calm reply. “What makes you think she is the kind to reciprocate your feelings? I have watched you track her movements over the years. You know she isn’t the kind to commit to anyone.”

Ajay didn’t comment or reply this time. Because Harsha had spoken the truth when it came to Sia’s interactions with other men in her life.

“Promise me something, Jay,” Harsha urged. “If she doesn’t commit to you or want you around her, will you promise to let her go, and move on with

your life?”

There was silence in the room. Because Ajay knew Sia was the kind to have one night stands and move on with her life. But for some reason, he foolishly felt that she would be different with him. Maybe because he saw something in her eyes that made him feel like she felt connected to him as well.

So, he made a promise to his friend. “Okay. I promise.”

\* \* \*

He held true to his promise—by leaving her alone when she rejected him after she had invited him to her home on the pretext of some maintenance work, when there was none.

But after a couple of weeks, when she approached him at the club, and asked him to take her to his place for the night, he knew. He knew that he had both won and also lost the game with her.

Their coming together was mind blowing.

It was beyond what he had ever imagined.

And later, when he pulled her naked body close to his after the first round of passion, it struck him hard. “*My god, I finally have her,*” he thought for the hundredth time since that evening.

He held her to him, gripping her hard and then inhaled sharply from the feel of her against him. She tried squirming away while feeding him some bullshit lines about having to leave early.

He could see it in her face that she felt as strongly about him as he did about her. He could also see that it scared her the same way as it scared him.

He didn’t let her go.

He sat up on the bed, and brought his mouth closer, and began to move his lips along her arm, causing goosebumps in his wake. “Who said we are done?” he asked huskily. “We just got started.”

Pulling away, she broke free. She gave him a few lame excuses about wanting to be clean and fled into his bathroom.

He wasn’t upset. He grinned as a strange euphoria took over his body.

He chased her inside the bathroom. She was stunned and pissed. But the yearning inside her eyes drove him on.

As soon as he opened the shower door, she dug her nails into his arms and pulled him closer. “My turn to be on top,” she said, challenging him further.

When it came to her, he was definitely up for anything.

Twisting their bodies, he placed his back against the bathroom tiles, with her legs wrapped around him. He joined their mouths and aligned their bodies together.

The water from the shower above trickled between their lips, making their kisses wetter. Soon, she positioned herself on top of him and willed him to move.

And move—he did.

He thrust hard, making them both groan in ecstasy.

He didn't stop, even when he was driven insane at the feel and sounds of their slick bodies beating against each other, or even when he felt the heavy weight of her breasts bouncing against his face with each hard thrust.

Her moans echoed inside the small shower cubicle, and also inside his head as he took her like a savage primitive.

He couldn't help it. He had become insanely hungry for her. Not just for her body. He wanted to claim each and every part of her as his own. He wanted her to belong to him completely.

It was already happening. He could feel the connection strengthen between them. But she put up a fight.

After they had both climaxed, she pulled away from him and frowned. She also looked at him haughtily to intimidate him. But it didn't work.

Amused, and also still wildly excited, he simply picked her and threw her on the bed.

It was a battle of wills, but they both ended up being the winners.

They had sex multiple times and in various positions. He pushed her to the limits, until she begged him with her body to give her what she craved.

Much later that night, even as she lay exhausted on the bed, and even though he knew he should let her be, he still couldn't help but raise her leg slightly to push inside her from behind. The need to be a part of her, and bond them intimately, drove him that night.

He kissed behind her ear gently. "I know you must be tired. Are you hungry too? I can get you something to eat," he offered.

"No, don't leave. I'm not hungry," she moaned, her internal muscles clutching him. But her stomach rumbled audibly.

He laughed and groaned at the same time, and then gently pulled out of her. She whipped around and held his arms with a death grip, pulling him closer. She didn't say the words, but she wanted him close to her.



He kissed her lips hard before gently pushing her hands away. “Just rest for a few minutes until I get us something to eat. You need food and energy.” He smiled wickedly at her. “Only because I’m not done with you, yet. We’ll eat, sleep and then pick it up again in the morning,” he promised as he stood.

He quickly put together a few sandwiches. And then, when they finished eating and he cleared up, he made love to her both passionately and tenderly. He drove her and himself crazy. He was determined to show her that it wasn’t simply animal sex driven by attraction between them. It was more.

And when she collapsed in exhaustion, he held her in his arms. He fell asleep that way, with his arms wrapped around her body. His mind finally at peace.

He was right where he belonged.

\* \* \*

By the time he woke up the next day, she was gone.

She had ended their brief relationship—if he could even call it that—abruptly with an offhand letter.

He was furious, and wanted to storm into her house, and demand an explanation.

But he remembered his promise to Harsha, and also to himself. However, even that promise didn’t stop him from checking up on her multiple times.

Sia looked sad. She looked devastated too. Or so he thought. Because two days later, she spent the night in another man’s house.

He went insane. His mind filled up with unholy thoughts that took away his peace of mind.

*Was she letting that man touch her the way she had let me?*

*Was that man worshipping the body that belongs to me?*

He couldn’t function with such thoughts.

*“What have I become?”* he wondered.

He had turned into a crazed psychotic stalker.

He knew it. But he still waited outside the man’s house, until Sia came out a couple of hours later, along with a tall man.

He noticed that Sia and the man barely touched. In fact they stood a couple of feet away from each other. Not something typical lovers did after spending the night together.

*Sia wasn’t sleeping with that man.*

As soon as those words processed in his brain, he felt relieved. It lasted

only for a second. Then anger hit him hard.

*Why the hell should I care how and with whom she spent her days or nights with!?*

*She had made her intentions quite clear in the fucking dismissive letter she wrote to me.*

He was done with her!

With that firm resolution, he drove away from there. He didn't look for her again, or even bother to check on her. Sia didn't ask for him on the professional front either. Any security questions she had, she dealt with one of his managers directly.

He didn't care. He was finally moving on.

Or so he thought.

Because nothing could get him out of the blues. Nothing could eliminate the gnawing pain in his chest. And apparently, it didn't go unnoticed by people around him.

"Jay, you look quite... ill. But more than a physical ailment, you look like you got your heart broken," Jo's mother remarked gently during one of the family dinners he was invited to every week.

Was that what he felt? Heartbreak?

He didn't know what it was, but it was ruining him. After a few weeks of living through the numbness, the only thing that surprised him and shocked him was Jo's marriage proposal.

"Will you marry me, Jay?" Jo asked softly, when they sat under the gazebo in her garden.

He was so stunned that it took him a few seconds to formulate a reply.

"Jo... I know you are shaken by what we found out about that potential suitor. But there will be better suited—"

"No, Jay. It's not because there aren't suitable men out there. I want *you* as my life partner," she said. She shocked him further by holding his hand and uttering the words he had no clue about. "I have always wanted to be with you, Jay. Right from the time we met," Jo confessed to him.

Jo and he had met when they were children. They both had been nearly eleven. Harsha and she were one of the best friends anyone could ever have.

He still recalled the day he met her for the first time.

### ***Fourteen years ago***

*It was his eleventh birthday and he didn't have a reason to celebrate.*

*After staying in and out of the boy's orphanage, the Colonel had brought him home and began the proceedings to adopt him legally. But he didn't want another family. He wanted his mother back. Even though he knew it was not possible.*

*When his mother had killed herself, she had left no money. She had no family he could turn to. And she also did not leave any last words for her only child. What she left him was a shit load of anger.*

*"Friends? Why the hell should I have any friends?" he grumbled as he sat alone in a secluded spot within the garden at the Colonel's house.*

*A few minutes before, Harsha had come to him to let him know that the Colonel was planning a small birthday party for him. To introduce him to the neighbors and friends.*

*"I prefer to be left alone," he snapped at Harsha. But Harsha continued to bug him and tried to build his enthusiasm for the party. Luckily Harsha had to leave when he was called by the Colonel.*

*Taking that opportunity, he slipped further away into the garden. He didn't know how long he was hiding in the secret nook in the garden, until someone invaded his space.*

*"Hello," a cheerful voice of a girl greeted.*

*"Go away," he snarled, not bothering to look at the person.*

*But that silly girl still came closer and sat next to him on the dirt.*

*"Are you the boy who lost his mother?" she asked.*

*Unable to contain his rage, he turned and glared at her. But the girl didn't flinch. Her softly rounded face held a look of curiosity and innocence.*

*He couldn't form any words. Because she reminded him of that **other** girl who had killed his mother and destroyed his life.*

*"You were crying," she remarked softly, and pulled out a piece of cloth from her pocket.*

*He flinched when the girl lifted a clean smelling fragrant cloth to his face and carefully wiped the tears from his face. Her kindness was so unexpected that he didn't know how to respond.*

*He hated all girls because of what that other girl had done with her lies. But this one seemed different. She folded her legs together and sat right next to him.*

*"Ma told me that you will be living in the Colonel's house from now on. And that you will be my friend along with Harsha," she said excitedly.*

*That enraged him again. "I'm not going to be a girl's friend. They are*

*all liars!” he shouted and shoved her away from him.*

*With a cry, she fell down and stayed cowering on the ground next to him, looking at his face with her widened eyes.*

*His face felt hot with anger, and he bared his teeth at her. “Get out of here. I don’t need any friends. Especially lying girls,” he growled.*

*She scrambled away from him and got up. She threw him a hurt look. “I’m not a liar,” she said, before running away from him.*

*Much later, he had expected her to tattle about how he had shoved her to the ground, but she hadn’t. In fact she came to him more often, always extending her friendship with a smile.*

*He growled and he raged, until he finally caved and agreed to be her friend.*

*She wasn’t like that other girl. Jo never lied.*

Since then, Jo had become his best friend along with Harsha. The three of them always got into scrapes and other adventures together. He re-discovered the sense of belonging with them, along with Jo’s family and the Colonel.

He loved Jo. But he didn’t know if it came close to how he felt about Sia.

“But, Jo. I’ve never thought of us in those terms,” he told her gently.

Jo’s face fell. “You don’t find me attractive?”

“You are beautiful, Jo. Stunning even. And you know that already, especially considering how many guys Harsha and I had to scare off from you over the years.”

“Then why not, Jay? Not everyone is attracted to each other instantly. You can know someone for years and see them differently at a certain point in life,” she said.

Jo was right. That’s how it was with Sia. He hated her at first. And now

---

“We already have what it takes for a successful marriage, Jay. We are best friends and we have the same future aspirations. What more can anyone want? I’ve heard that most couples don’t even have that. Even after years of marriage.”

He didn’t reply. He felt torn.

“You don’t have to answer me right away, Jay. Whatever you decide will be fine with me,” Jo said with an uncertain look that tugged on his heart.

“I will give this a serious thought Jo,” he promised.

Over the next few days, he voiced more doubts about being with Jo. But Jo made several arguments against all of those. She was being practical and convincing enough that he kind of agreed with everything she said.

But he also knew it wasn't fair to Jo, especially when his mind was still consumed by another woman. When he told Jo that, she asked him point blank. "Jay, are there any chances that you will get back with Sia again?"

He didn't have to think. "No."

"Then I see no reason why a past infatuation should come between us," she said.

When he didn't reply, she continued with the most convincing argument. "Remember how you told me one day that you wanted a family of your own? Children and relatives that were bound to you by blood and law? You can have all that, Jay. My family already loves you."

Jo was right. He had always craved for a family of his own. At twenty-five, he was still young, and getting married a few years earlier than he had planned wasn't that big of an issue. He was determined to squash all the doubts from his mind. He was determined to put a happy smile on his best friend's face.

"Okay, Jo. Let's do it. Let's get married," he declared.

A radiant smile broke on Jo's face and she hugged him. "My parents and grandmother are going to be so so happy, Jay," she said.

He smiled and kissed her forehead like always, in affection.

"Let's go and surprise them all with the news," Jo exclaimed in excitement.

As expected, the Colonel and Jo's family were thrilled with the news. Or so he thought. Because a few days later, Jo's mother met him privately at his apartment.

"Jay, I know there is someone else in your life. Someone that broke your heart."

He was taken aback by Jo's mother's words. He supposed he did look like a man whose heart was broken. Especially with a couple of week's worth of beard on his face, and hollowed eyes due to sleepless nights.

"That's not true anymore..." he began.

"I know my daughter, Jay. And also you. Jo has been in love with you for so long that she had weaved her entire future around you. If only there was a way to tell her without crushing her heart that love needs to be reciprocated."

The guilt he had been trying to get rid of—rose once again. “I do love Jo,” he told the woman who had been a surrogate mother to him over the last decade.

“I know you love her, Jay,” she stated sadly. “But that’s not the only kind of love my daughter deserves,” she said.

\* \* \*

Over the next few weeks he had been determined to prove to everyone that he would make a worthy husband to Jo. But life had other ideas.

He finally paid the price for not walking away from Sia all those months ago. He had relentlessly pursued her, putting himself in situations where she had no choice but to take notice of him. And notice him she did, in the most shocking way—by deliberately falling pregnant with his child.

“I’m pregnant. And the child is... yours,” Sia had announced when she dropped by his place unexpectedly.

He felt blown away with the news. He immediately felt protective towards his child, but the relationship with Sia was more than just complicated.

And a few days later, when Jo revealed the truth and circumstances of Sia’s pregnancy—of being with him that night for the sole purpose of falling pregnant with his child—he felt completely betrayed.

He wanted Sia to get out of his life. But somewhere inside, he also wanted her to desperately stay. Finally, when he realized that she was manipulating him towards a marriage, his feelings eventually morphed into anger.

He had raged at Sia for using him. He even threatened her. He felt trapped into what he felt was an unholy matrimony.

They began to live like strangers in her house after marriage.

He resented being there. Because he still wanted her. But he wanted her on *his* terms.

He felt stifled as he struggled to be cured of the unhealthy want when it came to her.

The conflicted feelings made him behave poorly with her whenever they came across each other in her large house.

During one of the visits, the Colonel had asked him how Sia was faring.

“I don’t know. And I don’t care. I’m only in it for my child’s sake,” he replied.

The Colonel gave him an admonishing look. "Jay, I'm not happy with your behavior and attitude with your wife," he said. "Whatever maybe the case, she's carrying your child and needs your understanding right now."

"You don't know what she did," Ajay murmured. "She doesn't deserve any kind of understanding."

"Well, whatever she did, it's no different than what *you* might have done to her," snapped the Colonel.

"What?" Ajay was stunned.

"I wasn't born yesterday, Jay. I know the girl you hated and your wife are one and the same."

Ajay was quiet. "That doesn't mean what I did, even compares to what she did with me."

"Oh really?" the Colonel asked. "And who made the judgment of that?"

Ajay had no good answer. So he simply murmured, "She should have known better."

"So did you, Jay," the Colonel stated.

"I can't forgive her for deliberately falling pregnant with my child."

"No one is saying you have to. You have always been quite cool and rational when it comes to dealing with difficult people or circumstances. Be that way even now. Face the facts and deal with them. Don't sulk and hide from your wife."

After Ajay's anger cooled, he began to feel like the worst kind of hypocrite.

Colonel was right. Who was he to judge Sia? He had deliberately planned each and every meeting between them. Now as a consequence to both their actions, they were to become parents to an innocent child. So he went back to Sia's place, determined to face the facts.

The Colonel was also right about another thing. Love and hate were the same feelings experienced under different circumstances. The passion. The pain. They were the same for both.

He began falling for Sia again, harder than he thought was possible.

Even though she was too much work, too much temptation, and far too much obsession, he continued to fall hard.

While he was falling, Sia was quite comfortable in her lies. She was drowning him in them. And the most disturbing part was that he was feeding himself more lies, by telling himself that he didn't care. But he knew. He knew that she was getting under his skin at an alarming rate. He also knew



that it was only a matter of time until she owned the most dangerous part of his body.

Soon, it was too late.

Each day, Sia took up more space in his heart. With every moment spent with her during their marriage, it became difficult to imagine being without her. He knew that his love for Sia wasn't romantic or sweet like it appeared. It was violent and desperate.

It remained that way, even when he could sense a storm inside of her.

He knew it would take a very long time for her need for revenge to die down. And, one thing he was absolutely sure of was that the world could get destroyed, but he wasn't going to let her go.

Not until she herself told him to go. Maybe, not even then.

She was his wife and he loved her. The light and the dark, the good and the bad. She was his to love, cherish and protect. And he fully intended to do all of them.

Whether she agreed to them or not.

## CHAPTER THREE

*It happened again.*

*Dharini had a bad stomachache in middle of the science class. It had gotten so severe that Mrs. Sita Chandra, her teacher, had to take her to a hospital.*

*Dharini couldn't remember much because of the blinding pain. But after the doctors injected a medicine, she could breathe without almost collapsing again.*

*"Dharini? How are you feeling, my child?" a soothing voice asked as she lay on a hospital bed. Everything smelled like an antiseptic, including the hospital gown she was wearing.*

*She opened her eyes slowly and saw her teacher's kind and affectionate face. Mrs. Sita Chandra was smiling warmly at her while placing a comforting hand on the head.*

*"My tummy still hurts a little. But not as much," Dharini replied.*

*"You are a brave girl and I'm proud of you," Mrs. Sita Chandra complimented with a gentle smile as she settled down on a chair next to the bed. "And don't worry; your family is going to be here soon. I have already sent them a message that you are not well and have been admitted to the hospital. They should be here shortly. When they come, I'm going to tell them how brave you were—"*

*The teacher broke off when she saw the raw, unadulterated fear on the little girl's face.*

*"I don't want him to come," Dharini pleaded. "Please. I don't! Tell him not to come!" she shouted, getting hysterical.*

*Mrs. Sita Chandra held one of Dharini's hands in both of hers and squeezed reassuringly. "Shh... it's okay. I will tell them it wasn't your fault. Just relax and don't worry about anything right now," she said.*

*Dharini began to breathe heavily, desperately trying to do as Mrs. Sita Chandra requested.*

*She tried. But it was a losing battle. "I'm scared," she blurted.*

*"What are you scared of, Dharini?" Mrs. Sita Chandra asked.*

*Dharini wasn't supposed to tell anyone. It was supposed to be her dirty secret. But she was tired of hiding it from people. She had told a couple of people before and they hadn't believed her. Just like he had told her they wouldn't.*

*"It's okay. Tell me what are you scared of," Mrs. Sita Chandra gently insisted.*

*"Of a monster," Dharini replied listlessly.*

*Mrs. Sita Chandra paused to look at her for a couple of seconds before gently probing further. "I'm scared of monsters too. What does the monster who scares you do to you?" she asked.*

*Dharini shook her head vigorously. "I'm not supposed to talk about him. He said if I tell anyone about him, he will stop being my friend whenever he's not a monster. And also that he'll tell everyone that I was a bad girl."*

*Mrs. Sita Chandra smiled, although it looked odd and different from her usual radiant dimpled smile. "He was joking, Dharini. Some monsters do that. Why don't you tell me everything? I promise I won't think that you are a bad girl," she said.*

*Dharini believed her. She trusted Mrs. Sita Chandra blindly because her teacher was the kindest and the most generous person she knew. Mrs. Sita Chandra had even taught the class about being kind when some of the children had made fun of her. They made fun of the fact that she had begun using diapers at the age of nine.*

*She hadn't been using them before. But lately, she had a lot of accidents. During the night and sometimes during the day as well.*

*Not only had Mrs. Sita Chandra defended her, she also made it a point include Dharini in the class discussions when she had stopped talking to the other children, and withdrew to herself.*

*Dharini hadn't always been that way. She had been bright, attentive and full of life when she had joined the school a couple of years ago. Gradually, the changes began to happen, and everyone was told that it was a delayed reaction to the grief of losing both parents at the age of seven.*

*It wasn't the truth.*

*"Tell me where this monster lives, Dharini?" Mrs. Sita Chandra gently prompted again.*

*Dharini didn't respond, and kept looking at Mrs. Sita Chandra with a torn look.*

*"Does the monster live under your bed? I've heard that some of them live there," Mrs. Sita Chandra prodded again gently.*

*Dharini shook her head. "No. He doesn't live under my bed," she replied softly, and then she hung her head down in shame as she revealed the secret. "He lives downstairs... with my aunt."*

*There was a long silence with absolutely no movement.*

*Dharini didn't dare to look up. She stared at the white hospital blanket instead and continued to smell the vile antiseptic in the air. She didn't want to see the disappointed look on Mrs. Sita Chandra's face. She didn't want her teacher to think she was lying, just like how her aunt and a few others had thought about her.*

*But Mrs. Sita Chandra surprised her. "What does this monster do?" she asked softly.*

*Dharini's eyes flew up from the blanket. Her teacher smiled reassuringly.*

*"Oh my god, she believes me!" thought Dharini.*

*For a moment, Dharini felt ecstatic. Then immediately, she deflated. Because she knew Mrs. Sita Chandra wasn't happy. Because her pretty teacher's dimples were missing even though her mouth was stretched into a reassuring smile.*

*Unsure yet feeling brave, Dharini forged ahead with the truth. "He hurts me. And I want him to stop doing it," she said in a shaking voice.*

*She couldn't believe how relieved she felt as she said that aloud. She was tired of always keeping it a secret, and still continuing to get hurt in return. And now... she was so glad she could tell her teacher the truth.*

*"Your uncle is hurting you?" Mrs. Sita Chandra asked.*

*Dharini shook her head vigorously. "No. No. Not my uncle. I love my uncle. But during the nights, my uncle turns into a monster. And that monster hurts me."*

*There was another loaded silence.*

*"I see." Mrs. Sita Chandra's voice sounded grim.*

*Before Mrs. Sita Chandra could ask more, a small boy who was wearing a school uniform similar to what she was wearing while she was admitted to the hospital, rushed inside.*

*"Ma, are you coming? You promised you'll take me to the movie this evening," he said.*

*Dharini noticed that the boy seemed to be the same age as her. He was holding a small video game in one hand, and it was still making noises, like he had left it midway. He was frowning at his mother and then his gaze slowly shifted to the bed.*

*"What happened to you?" the boy curiously.*

*Dharini didn't respond. Because she felt ashamed of telling him that she*

*allowed a monster to hurt her during the nights. A familiar sickness and envy rose within her as she saw that boy. Unlike her, he looked like he didn't have a care in the world and wasn't scared of anything.*

*She desperately wished she had what he did. A person like his mother to love and be loved in return. And also freedom. How she wished she could be that carefree without living each day in fear of what each night would bring.*

*"Dharini got hurt, Jay. I need to ask her something. Why don't you wait outside and I'll join you in a few minutes."*

*"You told that last week, Ma," he whined. "And you went to help someone else. That's why I came here, because I know you'll stay here for long, and we'll miss the movie this week too. I'm already upset that I missed watching my favorite hero's movie during the first week."*

*"Jay—" Mrs. Sita Chandra called out his name in gentle admonishment.*

*Just then, there was a knock on the door and someone entered the room. It was Dharini's uncle and aunt, looking worried and tensed.*

*As soon as Dharini saw her uncle, once again her stomach began to cramp painfully. It was so painful that she lost consciousness.*

*\* \* \**

*Dharini tried to wake up again.*

*Struggling through the pain, she slowly pried her eyelids open.*

*This time she was definitely in an unfamiliar place. The paint on the ceiling was chipped and the fan looked dirty. Blinking her eyes multiple times to get rid of the foggy sleep, she sat up slowly on the bed. She could see a lot of other beds placed within the large room.*

*Where was she? She couldn't ever recall being in the place before. She should have felt some sort of panic, but she didn't. Maybe because it wasn't her uncle's house and he couldn't hurt her any more.*

*Stepping down from the bed, she dragged herself to her feet and went towards what appeared to be a large bathroom. The place smelled strongly of some kind of cleaning solution, but she ignored it, and moved towards the washbasins to stand in front of a grimy mirror.*

*Slowly, she wiped the glass and stared at the reflection.*

*She couldn't find the girl she had always seen. She looked... unfamiliar. In fact her head felt heavy and mind felt blank. Closing her eyes, she tried to recall her parents, but their images were distorted.*

*Panic ran through her as she tried to remember someone from her life. But it was no use. Her memory wasn't allowing her.*

*Desperately, she tried to think of him—her abuser. But she couldn't picture his face either. In fact she couldn't even vaguely remember what he looked like. She could only recall the disgusting and soul - destroying things he did.*

*She gripped the sides of her head, squeezing her eyes shut as memories began to slip away steadily from her head.*

*All she could hear was, "I think it's too late for the mother. Let's try saving the baby."*

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Present*

Ajay kept his eyes closed as he sat on a chair, while leaning the back of his head against one of the hospital walls. Somewhere at a distance, he heard a baby cry. Then suddenly, it hit him hard.

A few hours ago, he had more or less just ordered Sia's and his child to be killed.

His chest tightened in pain and he wanted to break down at the loss. But he couldn't afford to. Sia will need him more than ever now. He had to take charge and be strong.

He opened his eyes and looked towards Harsha. "I need your help to get rid of some of the baby items at my home. We need to get this done before Sia gets back from the hospital," he said.

"Ajay..." he heard Jo saying gently. "You must know that Sia might not —"

He turned towards Jo and cut her off before she could voice his worst fear. "No, Jo. All I know is that Sia is a fighter. She is going to beat the odds and come out of this as a winner," he said with conviction.

And then, he turned towards Harsha. "It wasn't Dr. Kranthi. It was his father. Jagadish Naidu."

Harsha looked shocked with that information. "God, Jay. That means..."

"Yes. Sia hadn't lied. The truth was distorted to the outside world by him."

Harsha looked at him in sympathy. "I don't know what to say," he said.

"You don't have to say anything. Just help me win this battle."

Harsha nodded. "You know I'll always help you when you need me to," he replied.

Jo was watching them both curiously, but she didn't ask them any questions.



\* \* \*

After three more hours of waiting, the doors to the operating room opened. A familiar looking doctor came out with a grim look on her face.

Ajay's heart sank and began to thud.

"Mr. Manthena... we were able to deliver your daughter safely. We tried our best with your wife. We even gave her the first priority like you had requested. But... as we had expected, she slipped into a coma. We weren't able to revive her." The doctor looked regretful as she delivered the crushing news. "You can see them both right now if you would like to," she said softly.

Ajay wanted to rage and shout. He wanted to channel his hurt by blaming the doctor and the hospital. But he knew it was wrong, and also of no use. So, after nodding jerkily, he went towards the room where Sia was placed.

Harsha and Jo followed behind him, but he stopped them. "I want to be alone with her," he told them, and entered the room.

Ignoring the cradle placed next to the bed a few feet away, he looked at his wife's prone body.

Sia looked still and helpless. Unable to see her that way, he slowly crawled onto the bed next to her. Maneuvering around the IV tubes and other various cords attached to the monitor, he gently held her limp body in his arms.

He looked at her face, and felt a crushing guilt and helplessness take over him. Slowly, he shook those feelings off, and let determination take over. He couldn't afford to be helpless right then. Especially when she needed him.

She would be okay. He knew she would. His wife was a fighter and he was determined that he would help her come back to him.

"I love you so much, baby," he told her softly.

Sia's eyes remained closed and she continued breathing evenly.

He kissed her forehead. And then placing his mouth next to her ear, he spoke softly into it. "Baby, I know you are hurting, and letting the darkness comfort you. I also know that you wanted to get away from me because I hurt you. I understand all that, but I can't allow you to remain like this."

There wasn't any movement from her. She remained still as before. But he was determined to get his point across in case she was able to listen through the deep sleep she had slipped into.

“Do you hear me, Sia?” he said in a stern voice. “I’m here to drag you back to me. So listen to my voice and fight for us. I’ll wait here for you, however long it takes. I’ll keep waiting until you come back to me. And after you wake up, we’ll fight together. I promise I’ll help you in every possible way to bring our enemies down.” He placed a kiss against her temple as he held her close.

He knew she had to come back. She just had to. There was no other choice.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“Will I lose everything?”

Jagadish Naidu kept his attention focused on his lawyer. Ever since he got over the shock of coming face to face with his niece, he had spent several sleepless nights trying to save his birthright.

“Sir, the will prepared by your father is iron clad. I have already looked at the document several times for *any* possible loopholes. There are none. If that woman is indeed your niece, and is married with a child, then... you will have no choice but to give up your family estate and its possessions.”

Any other man would have raged or thrown a tantrum about the possibility of losing wealth and power of that magnitude. Jagadish Naidu didn't. In fact he didn't even twitch a muscle and kept on a stony expression.

Because only on the inside did his stomach churn and the denial boiled within.

The lawyer felt unnerved and impressed at the same time. Observing the man in front of him, he wasn't surprised that Jagadish Naidu had a fanatic sort of following in the surrounding villages. He had a strange aura around him that could make a person believe in anything. He would definitely find success in his political endeavors.

“I have already checked with my trusted family lawyers and they have told me the same,” Jagadish Naidu said briskly. “The reason I wanted *your* opinion was because I was told that you are one of the best lawyers in India, and that you have taken over a lot of tough family and estate cases and won.”

Jagadish Naidu's son who was also in the room with them, tried to intervene. “Papa, maybe we should first find out if that person is Dharini or not. If it is her, then—” Before he could complete, he was interrupted by the brisk shaking of his father's head.

“Kranthi. Listen to me, son. This is bigger than simply finding out whether or not she's Dharini. There is a lot at stake here.”

“But according to legal—”

“This estate and our people mean a lot to us, son. But unfortunately, there is a lot of money tied up to it, causing a few greedy people to try and claim it in whatever way possible.”

“But—”

“With the right kind of money, you know that a DNA testing can be tampered with.”

“But if we meet her, maybe we can find out.”

“You know it’s easy to draw information from a person. And being a doctor, you already know that a person can get a whole new face with plastic surgery. We simply cannot trust what we see and hear.”

Kranthi sighed, sounding tired and almost sad. “I suppose so.”

“And even if that woman happens to be Dharini—which is highly unlikely—we don’t know what her motives are. She might want to dispose of everything and return back to where she had come from. *We* are the rightful owners and *we* care about our organizations and our people. This is our legacy son. *Your* legacy. The one you can pass on to your future sons or daughters.”

The lawyer listened to Jagadish Naidu quietly. And by the look on Jagadish Naidu’s face, it was quite obvious that he loved his son. And also that he was prepared to go through any lengths to keep what he thought was rightfully his.

Jagadish Naidu looked back at the lawyer, “Find a way,” he instructed calmly.

“I will, sir,” the lawyer promised.

## CHAPTER SIX

Ten days had passed, but Sia remained in coma.

During that time, Ajay had gone through every possible emotion. From being absolutely terrified about not seeing his wife's smile again, to being overjoyed when the doctors had told him that there was some hope of her waking up as her vitals had stabilized.

But at the moment, he was just angry. Angry at himself and also at her. He went back to blaming himself for putting her through so much, and then, he blamed her for not wanting to fight back harder.

As he held one of her limp hands in his, the anger soon turned into despair. "Please wake up, Sia," he begged.

"Jay..." a voice interrupted him. And when he ignored whoever it was, "Jay, please look at me," the voice demanded softly.

Tearing his eyes away from his wife's face, he turned towards the voice, angry at that person for not leaving him alone in his misery.

It was Jo. Seeing her, his anger dissipated. But soon, another feeling was trying to take over. Panic.

Jo was holding a small bundle in her arms. And he knew that the small bundle was his daughter. And he also knew that he was yet to see his daughter's face or acknowledge her in some or other way.

But he couldn't find the courage to do so. His chest cramped at the thought of Sia being stuck in this hospital bed with tubes coming out of her mouth and lying still, while their daughter demanded attention with her cries filled with health and vitality.

Turning away from Jo and his daughter, he looked at Sia's still form again. "Wake up, baby," he whispered again.

"Jay, look here," Jo pleaded with him. "I know you are hurting. But you need to be there for your daughter. She needs you too."

He knew Jo was right. He knew he was being a coward, but it was too painful to even think of looking at the infant's face. Over the past ten days, thoughts of whether the baby girl resembled him or Sia ran inside his head. And if the baby looked like Sia, he knew he'd be even more devastated and finally break down.

"I c-can't, Jo. I'm really grateful that you are able to take care of my daugh—" He broke off and took a deep breath. "Thank you for taking care of the baby, but I can't look at her right now. I'm sorry."

Jo's face fell and she looked extremely disappointed with him, but with a look of determination, she moved closer, and stood right in front of him. "I know it's hard, Jay. But do you really think Sia would be fine with this? With you not bothering to look at your daughter?" she asked. "No mother will ever understand or forgive someone who has rejected her child."

Ajay's mind rebelled listening to those words. He wasn't rejecting Sia's and his child.

*Then what exactly do you call it?* A voice in his head whispered.

Jo was right. He needed to man up and take responsibility even if it hurts him.

Slowly and reluctantly, he lowered his eyes towards the small bundle in Jo's arms. He couldn't see the face clearly, because the small infant was completely wrapped up in blankets from head to toe.

"Is she going to be... hungry soon?" he asked.

"No. I just fed her and changed her. She's sleeping," Jo replied softly. When he just stared at the bundle with longing and guilt, Jo stretched her arms towards him. "Go on. Take her, Jay."

Nodding his head, he stretched his slightly trembling arms to carefully take the tiny bundle out of Jo's hands. And then, he almost broke down when he finally saw his daughter's face for the first time. He choked with an overwhelming emotion as he felt her warmth in his arms. His lungs constricted as though they weren't big enough for the deep breath he had to take.

His daughter was perfect. Even though she was still wrinkled and red with a scrunched up face while sleeping, she was so beautiful. On instinct, he got up and held her closer to his chest, and rocked her in a soothing motion.

He stayed that way for a while. "I want to hold her for some more time," he told Jo, not taking his eyes off his daughter.

Jo placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "She's your daughter, Jay. You can hold her however long you want. I'll be back in a couple of hours for her feeding."

He looked at Jo with immense gratitude filled eyes. "Thanks Jo," he said.

"You are welcome," she replied with a smile.

"Tell me what to do. I want to take care of her." He felt ashamed that he didn't know how to take care of his own daughter. But Jo made it easy for him. She didn't chide him and over the next few minutes, she gave him instructions on how to feed and change an infant.

“I don’t know what my daughter or I would have done without your help these past ten days,” he told Jo earnestly.

“You both would have done fine. And there is no need to thank me, Jay. You have always been my support when I needed it. This is simply me returning the favor for all those times,” she said, smiling.

“There is no favor to return, Jo. I’m lucky to have a friend like you. Even though I don’t deserve it for the things I’ve put you through lately.”

Jo smiled and touched his cheek gently, giving him a reassuring hug that included him and his daughter. “None of it was your fault, Jay. I understand.”

He wrapped his free hand around her. “Thank you, Jo. For everything.”

“You are welcome,” she murmured with a soft smile. “I’ll be back in a few hours. Don’t hesitate to call me if you need me for anything.”

“I will,” he said, and when they both turned towards the door so he could walk her out, their eyes clashed with a set of angry eyes.

The eyes belonged to a tall man who was giving them a furious look. Apart from Sia’s friend Anjali, Sia didn’t have any other visitors he didn’t know personally. Apparently, that was about to change.

Ajay didn’t know how he felt about that.

The tall man with a scar on his face sneered. “At least have the decency and respect to carry on with your cheating somewhere else. Not next to your wife, who by the way is in coma.” The man spat out the words.

“What? That’s not—” Jo began until Ajay squeezed her shoulder reassuringly.

“Jo. Let me walk you out. Don’t worry about anything. I’ll see you soon,” he said, gently leading her out with his hand that was still wrapped around her.

After seeing Jo off in the parking lot, he headed back into the hospital room.

Ajay recognized the man. He was the same man that Sia had been visiting and talking to quite often. And right then, that man was standing by Sia’s bed with a tormented look on his face.

Ajay knew that the man was helping Sia with her revenge on the Naidu family. But what he didn’t know was why.

“Are you a friend of Sia’s?” Ajay asked.

The man dragged his gaze away from Sia to look at him. “Yes. I also work for her company,” he replied with a hostile look.

Ajay knew that the man was lying. But he played along. “Sia never

mentioned about you to me before. What's your name?" he asked even though he knew it was Varun.

"Varun," the man replied curtly.

Ajay didn't say anything. He held his daughter and sat on one of the empty couches available in the room.

"What did the doctors say about Sia's recovery?" Varun asked.

"They said she is showing signs of recovery. And some of the specialists I've consulted think, she should have woken up by now."

Varun frowned. "I see."

And then there was no more talk. Varun stayed for a while and then left quietly.

Over next few days, Varun visited Sia often. And whenever Jo visited around the same time, Varun sneered at Ajay and Jo, obviously misunderstanding their relationship. But Ajay didn't care about such petty misunderstandings. He was too absorbed with the caring of his daughter and also talking to more specialists who could possibly help Sia wake up from the coma.

"Are you sure you want to continue setting things in motion before even Sia recovers?" Harsha asked Ajay one day during the hospital visits.

"Yes. I know she will wake up. And when she does, I want us to be prepared."



## CHAPTER SEVEN

“I think Mr. Jagadish Naidu already knows the truth about your wife. He has hired several lawyers to get out of the situation he’ll soon find himself in.”

Ajay was listening to the well-dressed man in front of him. Harsha and the man had come to visit him to convey information to him. There were meeting in the hospital corridor, outside Sia’s room. “I’ll need more information on what was being discussed with his lawyers, Hari.”

“Of course, Ajay. Give me a few more days and I’ll have everything sent to you in a detailed report.”

“I’ll continue helping Hari with whatever he needs, Jay,” said Harsha.

Ajay nodded. “Thanks Harsha. I’ll try coming into the office in a few days if you need my help. Meantime, call me if you need my help with anything.”

“Sure.”

Ajay shook Hari’s hands, thanking him. Soon Hari and Harsha walked away from the hospital corridor, towards the exit. Going back into the room, he sat next to Sia.

His eyes fell on their daughter’s face as she slept peacefully in a cradle, placed next to the bed. He didn’t want to think of anything beyond his wife and daughter. But he knew that as soon as Sia woke up, she will want to pursue her retribution. Until then—while Sia lay helpless—he simply couldn’t let her enemy scheme and plot against her.

He had to equip himself and also her, to be able to fight their enemy. Jagadish Naidu was now his enemy as well. The moment Sia became his, he took it upon him to fight for her cause. If only he had known the true identity of the abuser, things would have been in place much sooner.

### ***One Year Ago***

“Are you sure you want to begin investigating Dr. Naidu, Jay?” Harsha asked with a frown.

“Yes. I’m quite sure.”

Ajay understood why Harsha was having some serious doubts. Harsha knew that Ajay had spent the first eleven years of his life in the same village as the Naidu family. Ajay had also introduced Harsha to Jagadish Naidu, his

wife and his son, Dr. Kranthi Kumar. During their interactions, Dr. Kranthi appeared to be a kind and gentle man whose sole mission was to help the downtrodden and helpless. Nothing particularly seemed off about him.

“I don’t think any person would be so driven by the need for revenge like Sia, simply because they imagined things. I know that Sia’s suffering is real. I need to find out the truth and prove it once and for all.”

“But—”

“I need to do this, Harsha. Not just for Sia’s sake, but also for my sake.”

Harsha nodded. “But we don’t have any private investigators on our payroll. Unless you want us to do the investigation ourselves. It’s not going to be that easy,” he stated.

Ajay shook his head. “No. It’s too risky to do everything by ourselves. We need a professional. I’m going to contact Pavan to suggest someone.”

Harsha nodded. “Yes, that’s a good idea. When it comes to private investigations, Chauhan Security is top of the line. And we both know Pavan quite well.”

“Yes. I’m going to get in touch with him today. I just wanted to give you a heads up so you are not surprised when you find out.”

During the next few minutes, Ajay winded up everything at work. He didn’t want to call from his office where most of the phones could be tapped easily. The minute he sat in his car, he scrolled through the phone numbers until he found Pavan Chauhan’s number and then dialed it through the bluetooth.

The call was answered within a few rings. “Hello Jay. Long time, man,” a friendly voice greeted.

“Hey Pavan. How are you?”

“I’m good as always. It’s *you* we should be worried about. You seem to have disappeared from the face of the earth after getting married!” Pavan laughed.

“Yeah. I guess I have. Been quite busy lately, but I’ll come by your place soon.”

“Anytime, Jay.”

Pavan Chauhan was an ex-military man who was a protégé of the Colonel. Although Pavan and Ajay had a fifteen year age gap between them, they were pretty close since they had similar ideas when it came to entrepreneurship and building contacts. They both started security business around the same time. Ajay’s was more on the technology end while Pavan’s

company was based on human resources like private investigations and security guards placements.

“I need a favor, Pavan.”

Not wanting to stay in the parking lot, he started the car and drove towards Sia’s place that was slowly turning into their home.

“Sure. Anything you want, buddy. Tell me. What do you need?” Pavan asked.

“I need one of your best private investigators,” he replied.

“Alright. Sure. That’s not a problem at all. I’ll definitely send you one of my best ones.”

“Not just the best, Pavan. I need someone who isn’t afraid to bend the law a little while he’s at work,” he said.

There was a chuckle. “Whoa. That’s a surprise coming from you Jay. Usually you are quite a straight shooter with no hanky panky,” said Pavan. “Anyway, don’t worry. I have plenty of investigators that not only bend the law but are damn good at not getting caught.”

“Perfect,” said Ajay. “And please make sure that it would be someone who can be trusted to not blackmail us with the information they might uncover during the process.”

There was a pause. “Of course. That’s a given. And I think I already have someone who can be made available for you right away. He’d be perfect.”

“Great. Thanks, Pavan. I owe you a favor.”

“No problem at all. Call me anytime if you need anything else, Jay” he said before hanging up the call.

Ajay wondered if he was doing the right thing. He knew he was doing it mostly for himself. He wanted to justify that he was right to let a person like Sia into his heart again.

But what if he was wrong? Would he give her up if it was proven that she had been lying?

No. He couldn’t give her up, no matter what.

He knew it in his heart that she wasn’t lying.

But what if he allowed her into his heart, gave her everything he could, and it still wasn’t enough to earn her love?

Yes, there was definitely a possibility of that happening. But the risk would be worth it. It was in his nature to thrive on risks and challenges, and to not back down when faced with possible failures. He would definitely be

able to win her heart and ultimately her trust.

But what if she lets him down again? What if she left him like his mother?

He scrubbed his palm over his face to stop his head from thinking too much. He was going to take chances and go with his gut feel that demanded that he follow his heart. Period.

\* \* \*

A week later, Hari Prasad sat across Ajay and Harsha at their office, looking nothing like what they had expected.

They were expecting a middle aged man, who probably looked a little shady, but blended well within the crowd. But the man in front of them was young. He appeared to be the same age as him and Harsha. He was also dressed like a typical corporate employee in a formal shirt and trousers. The only thing that gave any indication to his actual job—was his eyes. They were bright and alert.

“I know I’m not what you expected Mr. Pavan Chauhan to send your way, when you asked for a PI,” Hari remarked with a small smirk.

“Are we that obvious?” Harsha asked with a laugh.

“I’m quite good at my job, Mr. Manthena. And one of things in my job is to observe people and read their body language.”

“That’s good,” Ajay commented. “But I hope you’ve been told that what we are going to ask you to do might require you to push some ethical boundaries to get the information we need.”

“Yes, Mr. Chauhan explained it to me.”

“Are you sure you can you handle that?”

Hari nodded. “Don’t let my age define my expertise and experience with such matters. I have successfully broken a few boundaries before.”

“Such as what?” asked Harsha. “Can you provide us with some details regarding a case you’ve worked on previously?”

Hari shook his head. “No. I’m sorry, I can’t. I might have broken several laws during my job, but I always maintain absolute confidentiality regarding the cases I handle. That’s the only way I can survive and remain in this business,” he said.

Ajay knew Pavan’s teams were involved in several high profile investigations that were deemed dangerous. Also, Ajay trusted Pavan enough to know he wouldn’t send a novice to him.

“Have you read through the Non-Disclosure document before you signed it?” Ajay asked.

“Yes,” replied Hari.

“The validity for that document began the moment Pavan told you about me,” Ajay stated.

“Yes, of course. I noticed the date as well, Mr. Manthena. You can trust me when I say that whatever we discuss now or in the future will never be discussed with anyone else.”

Ajay nodded. He wasn't naive to trust just about anyone. But he had no choice. Because the pros of hiring a PI outweighed the cons. He *needed* to find out the truth. Both for his sake and also for Sia.

“I want you to investigate Dr. Kranthi Naidu,” he said evenly.

There was a frown on Hari's forehead. “You mean Jagadish Naidu's son, Kranthi Kumar? The famous children's doctor?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Hari was silent and appeared lost in thought.

Harsha cleared his throat. “I assume you have done some background check on Ajay and our company,” he said.

“Yes. I have, Mr. Manthena. I only had a week before I could agree to the assignment and meet with you both.

“Found anything interesting about me during the week?” Ajay asked him casually.

Hari smiled. “Only that you were arrested as a teen for breaking into a secure server of a popular social media. Rest of it was information about how you started your company and built to what it right now.”

Ajay was not surprised that Hari could dig into confidential information that was not available on record or to the general public. Pavan definitely chose the best.

“You are good. But let's hope you can help with investigating Dr. Kranthi,” Ajay remarked.

Hari smiled. “How far do you want me to go with this digging?”

“As far as possible. Don't hold back,” Ajay instructed him smoothly.

“Money is not going to be an issue. I am willing to pay whatever is required for you to get the job done. And I'm going to do that through wire transfers using an anonymous name via a secure site.”

Hari nodded.

“Any other questions?” Ajay asked Hari.

“Yes. Before I get started, I need to know why? Is this business or personal?” asked Hari.

Ajay hesitated. “Personal,” he replied finally.

“Can I get some details? Because it helps to know what direction I should be taking, and what kind of specific information I should really be looking for.”

Hari was right. Ajay knew he had to take the plunge and provide as many details as possible. Only then, will Hari know what exactly he needs to be looking for. But everything inside him rebelled at the thought of someone else knowing what Sia went through as a child.

Harsha and Hari were watching him expectantly, waiting for him to reply.

Taking a deep breath, he forged forward. “Fourteen years ago, Dr. Kranthi raped my wife.”

There was a slight widening of eyes in Hari’s face, followed by a look of disgust. “How old was she then?” he asked.

“She was only eleven years old at that time, and her cousin, Dr. Kranthi was sixteen. From what I know it wasn’t a onetime thing. There was a police case registered, but since there was no concrete proof of the crime, or maybe because it was covered up well, the case was dropped.”

“Why didn’t your wife register a case later?”

“My wife was adopted by someone, and taken to America, where she lived for more than a decade. She returned to India last year.”

“So now, she has asked you for your help? To prove that the crime happened?”

“No. My wife isn’t even aware that I know,” Ajay informed calmly. “She doesn’t trust anyone, and doesn’t want anyone else to know about her past abuse. She’s running her own parallel investigation, trying to prove that Dr. Kranthi is a pedophile. I decided to investigate as well.”

“If she didn’t tell you, how are you sure that her cousin actually raped her?” Hari asked.

There was a loaded silence. “I’m not sure,” Ajay said, grimly. “That’s why I want to have him investigated thoroughly. To see if he is abusing children under his care—at the hospital, or at the children’s orphanages run by the Naidu trust.”

“I see.” Hari made some quick notes on his phone.

Harsha handed over their business card. “If you need help from our side,

especially with anything that is technology related, let us know. I can also send you the details we retrieved from the Naidu Estate's encrypted server," Harsha offered.

"Sure. I know what Manthena Corp does. I'll definitely need some help when I start my investigation."

"So, when can you start?" Ajay asked.

"I'm already on the job now, Mr. Manthena. As soon as I leave this building, I'll begin investigating," Hari replied, getting up from the chair.

"Please call us using our first names," Harsha requested. "We are both Mr. Manthena's. Harsha and Ajay will be fine."

Hari nodded. "Sure. I'll be ready with an update by next week, Ajay."

"That's fine. And before you leave, there is one more important fact that I should mention to you," Ajay informed grimly. "I know the Naidu family personally. I'm not close to them, but I have interacted with them a lot of times in the past."

Hari's head snapped up in surprise.

Ajay shrugged. "I used to live in the same village as them, until I was eleven years old. You can find out the rest during your investigation, or call me later to find out more."

"Definitely. I'll finishing doing some groundwork over the next few days. And then, meet you for more information."

"Sounds good."

They shook hands, and Hari left their office building after giving them his contact details.

Ajay sighed and sat back in his chair. For the first time, he felt lighter. He was going to find out what happened all those years ago and bring justice to Sia.

\* \* \*

Ajay continued to meet PI often over the past few weeks. He gave Hari all the information that was needed.

"What have you found so far?" he asked Hari, not bothering with any pleasantries.

For the first time, Hari looked uncomfortable. "Nothing," he stated. "Or at least nothing incriminating so far. Dr. Kranthi Naidu seems to be living a squeaky clean life. Apart from the police complaint that your mother filed, a long time ago, there is nothing odd or unusual about him."

Ajay felt a crushing disappointment.

“What about the camera footage?” Harsha enquired. “Did you check all the footage we sent you of his hospitals and orphanages? We used our program to only include the parts where Dr. Kranthi was around.”

With the sheer volume of the number of hours of camera footage they had, Ajay and Harsha had to embed the facial recognition software to weed out the parts where Dr. Kranthi wasn’t present.

“Yes. I have obsessively scanned though each and every one of them.” Hari answered. He looked at Ajay. “It’s only been two months. Maybe he is cautious, and doesn’t like taking risks often. I’ll continue digging. Meantime, if you want a detailed report of what I’ve found so far, I have it in here.”

Placing a thick file on the table, Hari stood up to leave. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t find proof for any ongoing abuse of any kind. At least so far. But I’m determined to bring out the truth soon.”

After Hari left, Harsha looked at Ajay. “Jay... are you sure Sia didn’t just misunderstand her cousin?”

“No. The abuse happened. I’ve already told you that no one goes through the things that she does, without having a history of abuse.”

Harsha didn’t seem convinced. But he was determined to find out the truth for Ajay’s sake.

Over the next few days, Ajay spent most of his time, reading the painfully detailed report that Hari had put together so far. Although there wasn’t anything significant to raise red flags, there were some interesting facts about Dr. Kranthi’s finances.

Dr. Kranthi was quite selfless. He did not draw *any* salary from the hospitals he ran. The hospitals built with the Naidu trust fund. Even Jagadish Naidu, his father, had declared publicly that most of the profits from the estate went towards the development of their village and the surrounding areas. The entire Naidu family seemed to be living off the basic amount allocated to the ‘guardian’ of the huge trust fund. Almost as if something was stopping them from making use of the money.

Hari would need to dig in deep to see if there was something stopping them from making use of the trust money in its entirety.

\* \* \*

A month had passed before they made some kind of progress.

Hari looked satisfied. “I got some critical details from the private



computers and the servers you hacked into. I found a will for the Naidu Estate.”

“What does it say?” Ajay asked.

“According to that will, if your wife fulfills the conditions stated in the will, then the entire estate, including the hospitals and charitable organizations will be hers.”

Ajay read through the report that had a copy of the will. He was stunned. According to the will, the conditions stated were for the female heir to be married with a child within an age of twenty five. And for a male heir, the age stated was thirty five. Failing to do so would revert back the status of the heir to the next in line.

Finally, he knew why Sia got pregnant in a hurry.

“So if Sia declares herself as the rightful heir and proves that she has fulfilled the conditions of the will, the Naidu’s will be left with no money,” Harsha deduced. “At least not enough to afford them the lifestyle they are currently used to.”

“The lifestyle Dr. Kranthi lives is simple enough. At least on the outside,” said Hari

Ajay jumped on that remark. “What do you mean?”

Hari looked victorious. “I have gone through some of his bank transactions that are allegedly donations.”

Taking the bank statements in hand, Ajay quickly scanned the documents. “These are definitely big amounts. But a lot of people donate to children’s charities and hospitals. What is the odd part of it?” he asked.

“The statement you are holding is from a joint account opened by Dr. Kranthi and his father.”

“So?”

“The huge transactions you see that were allegedly donations used towards campaigning. Not towards charities. There are separate accounts for charities that the trust manages.”

Frowning at the implications. “You think Dr. Kranthi has some kind of alternate business or dealings that he is making money from?”

“I believe so. The transfers are happening from several accounts. I traced those people and I found that the common person they all knew was Judge Sundaram Saini.”

Ajay frowned in thought.

“You know Judge Sundaram?” Hari asked.

Ajay nodded. “Not personally, but I met him a couple of times. I might even meet him again next month in a charity event.”

“Will Dr. Kranthi be there as well?” Harsha asked.

“No,” replied Hari. “Although I know that he was invited. But they have a different appointment on that day and are not attending the event.”

“We can change their calendars to put the charity event and send out some messages to remove whatever event they were to attend that day,” offered Harsha.

“No,” said Ajay. “I have invited my wife to this charity event. And I don’t want her to see any of the Naidu family members in her condition.”

“That should be fine. And besides, I guess it would be easier to speak with Judge Sundaram without the Naidu family around.”

“What about you, Harsha? Will you be able to speak with Judge Sundaram as well?” Hari asked.

“No. I have a family event that evening. Ajay was invited too. But since the charity event had been planned much before and is important for our business, we decided to divide and conquer.”

“I see.”

“Do you have *some* kind of inkling as to where the money might be coming from?” Ajay asked.

“No. But I can sense that something not entirely legal is going on with these transactions. I’m going to dig in deeper to find out.”

“We’ll need to hurry up on a lot of things with this investigation. My wife is expecting our child in a few weeks. I want any leverage we can get to be prepared for whatever is thrown towards us.”

\* \* \*

A month later, Ajay attended the charity event with Sia.

Not even in his horrible nightmares, did he think that things could go so wrong. Not only did Dr. Kranthi attend that charity event unexpectedly, but he also met with Sia in person. Sia also found out the truth about Ajay.

As for Ajay... by the time he could digest the truth of Sia’s revelation, and the identity of the actual abuser, she was gone.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Present*

Twenty days had passed since Sia lay in coma.

Ajay was in the despair phase. There was a constant influx of specialists he had requested from various parts of the country and abroad. Apart from using different medical terms, they all couldn't help revive her.

His daughter was the only bright spark in his life who kept him from going completely under. However, caring for an infant was hard work. When he wanted to employ someone to help him with his daughter, Jo insisted that she be allowed to take care of his baby girl.

From the past twelve hours, his yet to be named daughter was away from him. She was at Jo's house, resting and recovering from a slight cold.

"Ajay?" a voice asked over the phone.

When he didn't respond immediately, the voice continued in an urgent tone. "This is Hari. I found something. Please meet me at your office in an hour."

"You know I can't, Hari. Tell me whatever it is on the phone."

"Please Ajay. This might be big. I'm already here with Harsha and we are waiting for you."

Ajay frowned as he decided whether or not to go. Then remembering that Sia's uncle already knew about her, he didn't want to take any chances.

"Alright. I'll be there," he said, before ending the call.

For the first time since Sia's accident, Ajay left her side to drive to his office. As soon as he reached, he barged in and spoke. "Why couldn't you reveal that information at the hospital like always?" he demanded.

"We can't risk anyone listening to us, Ajay. What I found might turn out to be huge. It could prove dangerous if the wrong people got an inkling of what we are about to discuss.

As soon as Ajay sat down in his office, about to listen to that information, he received a call on his cell phone.

It was the hospital.

"Is my wife, okay?" he asked anxiously.

"Mr. Manthena, your wife has gained conscious."

Ajay was stunned with the news. And then, he felt ecstatic. "How is she?" he asked, getting up hurriedly from the chair and rushing out of the

office building towards his car.

“She seems stable. A little disoriented, but fine. It usually takes a while for recovering coma patients to be completely responsive or to recall everything.”

“Tell her I’ll be there in a few minutes,” he said before they ended the call.

Quickly, he dialed Jo’s number. “Jo, Sia has gained conscious! Please bring my daughter to the hospital,” he said.

After that, he drove like a maniac, trying desperately not to kill himself or anyone. But it still took him around forty five minutes to reach the hospital in the city traffic.

When he rushed inside the hospital room, he stopped short, outraged at the scene in front of him.

There were at least four members of the hospital staff trying to tackle his struggling wife.

“What the hell are you all doing to her?” he shouted at them furiously, rushing towards them.

They all froze. Including Sia, and she looked at him with tears running down her eyes, as well as a manic look on her face. He also realized that her body didn’t relax when she saw him. She appeared to get even more agitated.

“Where is my child!” she screamed at him. “Don’t you dare keep her away from me, you bastard!” she sobbed in a broken voice.

“Mr. Mathena, we tried telling your wife that you were on your way here, but she wouldn’t listen to us. She is trying to get out of the bed to get to you.”

Sia began to struggle again. “Answer me! Where is my child?” she shouted agonizingly.

Ajay moved even closer and kept his eyes firmly locked to hers. “I’m *not* keeping our daughter away from you,” he told her calmly. “She is with Jo, at her house. She’s on her way here.”

Slowly, her tensed arms began to relax. “Why is my daughter not with me?” she demanded.

“She’s a little sick. Nothing serious. Just a cold. Jo’s family offered to help because she wasn’t able to sleep well in the hospital.”

Sia sat up straight. “Is that even normal? She is only... three weeks old!” There was a panicked look on her face.

“Yes. It is apparently quite normal,” he told her in a comforting tone.

She still looked around at the uniformed nurses. They nodded in agreement as well.

Sia shook her head. "I need to see her right now. Take me to her," she asked. This time in a pleading tone.

Ajay looked at the hospital staff. "Please leave us alone."

Letting go of Sia, they began to leave. "Please press the button for any help, sir," one of the nurses instructed before leaving and closing the door behind them.

He sat next to Sia. And then, raising both his hands, held her face. She jerked slightly at the touch, but didn't shake his hands away. "Baby look at me," he insisted.

When she did, he looked at her reassuringly. "She is *our* daughter. No one will take her away from us. I promise."

Her eyes welled up with tears. "It's not just the others. I don't trust *you* either. You had threatened to take away my baby," she whispered.

His chest felt tight, listening to her words. "I know I said those things before we got married. And I also know that it's difficult for you to trust me right now. But I promise that I will never threaten you or hurt you again, baby."

He didn't give her a chance to reply. Pulling her close, he locked their lips, kissing her gently, adoringly, fervently. He savored the feel of her warm lips. The warmth that signified to him that she was safe and alive, and with him.

Sia didn't respond, and her lips stayed stubbornly still. But he didn't give up. He tried harder. He kissed her deeper, harder, and with more determination. She must have felt some of the passion and longing that radiated off him. Because soon, her body shuddered, and her lips finally moved underneath his. They continued kissing, until there was a knock on the door, that made her pull away and look towards it.

It was Jo with their daughter.

## CHAPTER NINE

Jo stood near the doorway, feeling uncertain. Slowly and carefully she walked towards the couple in front of her. Their baby lay asleep peacefully in her arms.

She felt guilty for interrupting an obviously intimate moment, and also because she was worried about how Sia would construe Jay's and her relationship. And more than that she was worried that Sia wouldn't allow her to visit the baby anymore.

It was stupid, but she had gotten very attached to their beautiful and innocent baby girl.

But fortunately, Sia wasn't glaring at her in accusation or watching her suspiciously. Sia's entire attention was fixed on the tiny bundle. She held a rapt look on her face as the little bundle was carried closer to the bed.

Jo half expected Jay to snatch his daughter away to hand over to his wife. But he simply waited with a smile directed towards Jo as his daughter was carried towards them.

Jo returned the smile tentatively, before extending her arms towards Sia.

Sia just kept staring at her child, but didn't extend her arms. "Oh my god," she whispered out reverently. "She's just so... so..."

"Perfect," Ajay finished his wife's sentence with a smile.

Sia nodded. "Yes. Absolutely perfect. She's also so delicate and tiny. I feel terrified to hold her."

"I'll show you," he said and gently took the baby from Jo's arms and placed her in Sia's. He kept a reassuring hand on the baby. Both the parents had their heads together, watching over their newborn with awe and love.

Jo's chest tightened at the sight. "I'll... I'll get going. I have... an appointment," she said hurriedly.

Ajay raised his head. "Thanks for your help, Jo," he said.

Jo nodded with a smile, even as her eyes began to prick with unshed tears. Turning away from them, she hurried towards the door, but Ajay's voice stopped her.

"Jo," he called out to her.

She stopped but she didn't turn. She didn't want them to see the tears that were flowing stupidly in her eyes. So she just turned halfway, enough to show them her profile.

"Please feel free to visit our little one anytime you want," he said, his

tone sincere.

“Thank you,” Jo whispered gratefully, and rushed out before she made a complete fool of herself.

Just as she went out the door, and took a few steps, she ran into a man’s body. She didn’t need to raise her eyes to know who it was. Because strong arms enclosed her in a warm, comforting hug as she broke down into silent sobs. He led her away, outside the hospital. When they reached her car, he kissed her on top of her head.

“I keep telling you that you should agree to marry me. Then we can have our own child who would inherit my superior genes,” he joked in a half-serious tone.

She laughed softly through her tears and buried her face in his chest. “You kept warning me not to get attached, but I didn’t listen. God! I already miss her so much. She looked so much at home with both her parents holding her. And I feel so so...”

“I know,” he said, kissing her softly on her forehead. “Let’s talk on our way. Let’s get out from this place first.”

She nodded and held his hand before walking away from Ajay and Sia’s daughter. And maybe even from Ajay. She still loved him of course. And she was quite sure she would always do so, until she died.

## CHAPTER TEN

Sia felt choked up.

Slowly, she brought her daughter closer to her face to smell her sweet baby scent.

So innocent and pure.

She felt speechless and in awe. She was still unable to believe that her child who had been a part of her dreams for so long was now a tangible thing to hold and cherish.

She knew then, that her life would never be the same again. Staring at her daughter, she couldn't stop herself from crying. Her whole body shook when she broke into uncontrollable sobs.

She felt so grateful. She felt so thankful.

*My own child. All mine. My hope and my dreams.*

*"I'm your mommy," she whispered. And I would do everything in my power to make you happy and safe. I will shelter you from any ugliness that exists in the world.*

She felt Ajay move next to her. He held a tissue in his hands and wiped away the tears that blurred her vision. She was grateful for that because, she could continue staring at the wonder she held in her arms. The wonder that now became the very reason to exist.

"Is she real? Or am I still dreaming?" she whispered.

"She's real and she is ours," said Ajay. And then, looking towards her, "What do you want to name her?" he asked.

"Anika," replied Sia. Somehow, she recalled that it was the name Ajay had picked for their daughter.

"Anika," Ajay repeated softly.

Their daughter began to stir slightly. She felt small and fragile in her arms.

"Am I holding her correctly?" she asked, worried that she might be hurting their sleeping daughter.

"Yes."

"Oh my god!" she exclaimed, remembering some of the things she had read during the pregnancy. She began to panic. "I haven't washed my hands or... or... even showered for a while. I don't think she should be around me —"

"She's swaddled, and you are fine."



She began to relax, listening to those words, but then, she remembered something else.

“You mentioned she has a cold. I have no idea what to do. Maybe I should have asked Jyotika before she left, or let’s call a doctor—”

“Baby, Anika will be fine. Don’t worry,” Ajay reassured again. “Just enjoy the moment.”

His words calmed her. Staring at the little face with tiny, delicate features, Sia sighed in content. “I still can’t believe she’s here with me. And that she’s safe and just so perfect...” Her voice trailed off when the baby opened her sleepy eyes.

Sia held her breath, half expecting her daughter to cry, seeing a stranger’s face. Although her mind rebelled at the thought that her own baby might consider her a stranger.

Their daughter looked at her quietly.

Sia had read somewhere that an infant’s vision wasn’t developed enough for a while. And that they couldn’t recognize faces or register much. But that still didn’t stop her from feeling overwhelmed with happiness as her eyes connected with her daughter’s.

It felt like the most profound moment in her life.

\* \* \*

Sia spent the next few hours in daze and awe as Ajay showed her the basics of feeding, changing and other things that made their daughter comfortable.

The first time, she fed her daughter, and burped her; it scared her so much that she immediately called for the doctors to ensure her daughter was okay.

“Your daughter is fine, Mrs. Manthena,” one of the doctors said.

The doctor then asked Ajay to pick their daughter, before beginning to take Sia’s vitals. Sia reluctantly complied.

“We need to check if your recovery is going smoothly, Mrs. Manthena,” said the doctor. He also mentioned that Sia would have to stay at the hospital for a week to ensure that the recovery was permanent.

She sat quietly as her blood pressure and heartbeat were being checked. Her eyes were completely drawn towards the sight in front of her.

Ajay was holding their daughter on his shoulder, and gently swaying to put her to sleep.

*Why can't I remember everything?*

A few hours ago, when she had woken up from what seemed to be a deep sleep, she was told by a doctor that she had been in coma for three weeks, and also that she had delivered a child.

Her memory was failing her and she couldn't recall much. Everything had felt groggy. But she did have a vague memory of Ajay giving her an ultimatum to either marry him or that he would take away her child.

That made her go ballistic. Especially after the hospital staff informed her that her daughter was with the father.

But now... looking at Ajay and their daughter, she felt confused.

The kiss from a while ago made her recall bits and pieces of their married life.

She had gotten along with Ajay. They were both happy at some point but what had happened after that? Why did the feelings of distrust towards Ajay still linger inside her?

Maybe a call to Dr. Patel can help her remove the cobwebs still stuck inside her head. But the call would have to wait until later. Much later. Until after she was satisfied holding her daughter close, the way she had desperately wanted to right from the moment she heard about her pregnancy.

"All done, Mrs. Manthena. You are doing great, but you should still take as much rest as possible to make your recovery faster," said the doctor.

After the doctor left, Ajay sat next to her on the bed and put their sleeping daughter on top of her chest. "She'll be more comfortable like this. I'll watch her as you nap," he said.

Sia felt extremely grateful. But she didn't have the energy to thank him properly. She simply held her daughter safely and slipped into a content sleep.

\* \* \*

Much later that evening, she woke up and fed her daughter again. Ajay and she had a simple dinner together. She was about to put her daughter to sleep when she had her first visitor.

Ajay left the room to give her privacy. He had used the pretext of taking their daughter outside for fresh air while she slept. She felt quite grateful.

"How are you, Sia?" Varun asked, looking relieved as he saw her.

"The doctor's said I'm doing fine. I feel fine as well," she replied. "How are you Varun?" she asked. She felt reluctant to talk or deal with their

mission. She wished she could purge everything apart from her daughter, from her mind.

If only it were that simple. “What has been happening since I was in... coma?” she asked.

“Nothing much, Sia. I wasn’t able to get in touch with the hacker either. I guess that teen needs a constant supply of money to be able to proceed.”

Sia nodded. “I’ll reach out to him soon. But what about the camera footages? Why are we still not able to catch anything significant on those?” she asked.

Varun looked unhappy. “He’s always surrounded by people these days.”

“I’m still monitoring them,” he said. “And I have already checked with the caretakers at the orphanages and also the hospitals. None of the children ever showed signs of abuse.”

“You think he stopped abusing children all of a sudden?” she asked.

“No. I think he’s being cautious. He’s getting more and more involved in politics and doesn’t want to risk it.”

“What about the people surrounding him?”

Varun frowned. “None of them seem the kind to offer much information. They seem to value him as some sort of demi-god.”

“Values can be bought for the right price, Varun. We need to hurry up on this or he’ll get even more cautious,” she stressed with a growing intensity.

“I’m ready to splurge more money on anything or anyone that can be bought and could help our cause.”

“I know. Trust me when I tell you, I’m already on it.” He paused for a second. “By the way, I need to tell you something,” he said.

“About what?”

“Your husband,” he replied

Immediately, she clammed up, trying not to show anything on her face. “What about him?”

Varun looked uncomfortable. But with a determined look, he forged on. “I think there is something going on between him and... his ex-fiancée.”

“You mean Jyotika?” she asked, relaxing slightly. She felt guilty for not telling Varun about her growing relationship with Ajay. She didn’t know why, but she wasn’t ready to reveal that part to anyone, until she understood it completely herself.

“They’ve been friends since childhood, Varun. And Jyotika had been helping him take care of my daughter while I was in coma.”

Varun didn't look convinced. "I don't think it's friendship I saw, Sia. I saw them being intimate. Physically. I caught them right in the act. And the worst part was that they were standing just a few feet away from you. They were hugging and even holding your daughter while they... touched each other intimately."

Sia looked at Varun's uncomfortable face, and felt both pity and guilty. She knew he would hate it if she let any of it show on her face.

At twenty one, Varun was relatively young. His life experience had made him lose his innocence in a brutal way. But he still remained relatively innocent about most things that made people human. He still couldn't decipher why two people might want to hug, or simply touch each other for comfort, without being sexual.

She couldn't blame him. It wasn't like she had been wise and informed of such things until Ajay began to show her the softer side of human emotions and touches.

"Ajay must have been drawing comfort, Varun" she said gently. "But thank you for letting me know. I know you meant well."

Varun looked embarrassed.

"I'm going to remain at the hospital for a week. You can continue to visit me or get in touch with me on my phone."

"I think it's better to remain in touch by phone. I don't want Jagadish Naidu, your husband or anyone else to be suspicious about what we both are discussing."

"Okay."

"Take care, Sia."

"You too, Varun. Be careful and don't hesitate to reach out to me for anything."

"I will."

After Varun left, Sia called Anjali to ensure that everything at work was running smoothly during her absence. Once she was convinced that things were fine, she sat back and waited for Ajay to return.

Ajay returned with their sleeping daughter and gently placed her tiny body on the wide hospital bed. Sia shifted closer and held her infant daughter. Before she could drift into sleep, she felt Ajay sliding next to her on the bed, and wrapping his arm around her and their daughter.

Her mind and heart at peace, she drifted into another blissful sleep.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*"I hate you. My only ambition is to destroy you."*

Sia woke up with a gasp.

Her heart was pounding. She slowly recognized the familiar couches and a large picture window of the hospital room where she had been staying over the past week.

She had spent one of the most idyllic weeks with Ajay and Anika at the hospital. There had been no outside intrusion or thoughts to break their happiness.

Until a while ago.

Her nightmare not only woke her up, but also managed to bring her crashing down to reality.

Feeling disoriented, she slowly sat up, trying to make sense of what she heard and felt.

Was that a dream? Or was it real?

Dreams had always been a major part of her life. Sometimes she couldn't differentiate between reality and illusion. Up until lately, most of those illusions had been giving her much comfort and security. Enough to make her hang onto them and not let go of them that easily.

But she knew. Those particular words uttered by Ajay—about hating her, and wanting to destroy her—were actually real.

Bile rose through her chest and she felt her lungs constrict, making it difficult for her to breathe. She felt like throwing up.

"Are you alright?" a deep voice that had played a major role in her recent illusions asked her from somewhere next to her.

She turned her head and looked at him. Memories continued to swirl inside her head. A mixture of emotions began fighting with each other, until one emotion that was still raw, overpowered everything else.

A feeling of betrayal.

Ajay's familiar face was watching her in concern and confusion. He still looked very approachable, caring and absolutely gorgeous.

All lies.

She felt the betrayal deep in her chest, devastating her as it spread to every inch of her body.

"I remembered," she said with a cold look, even as her heart continued

pounding with the memories. How could she not remember the conversation? And worse, her confrontation with her uncle!

Ajay's look turned guarded. "Oh? What exactly do you remember?" he asked quietly.

"Everything," she spat out. She felt the pressure building inside, filling her up with anger and misery. She fisted her hands, fighting the misery, until all that was left was anger. "I remembered that you targeted me for your personal revenge. I remembered that you played me while joining forces with my uncle. I remember everything!"

Ajay didn't reply. He looked at her beseechingly, almost as if he were willing her to look past their last confrontation.

It worked.

Especially when he was holding their daughter over his shoulder, and patting gently. He was watching calmly, with the same look she had been associating with security and love over the last few months of their marriage.

She couldn't remain cold or angry with him. No matter how much anger and betrayal she felt, she couldn't ignore the sight she had always yearned for. To have a normal family with security and love.

She shook her head to snap out of the spell he was again putting her through. Her eyes might have taken precedence over her rational thinking, but she couldn't completely ignore his betrayal. She looked at him in anguish and defeat.

"You betrayed me," she said. "All the while, I thought I was using you, an innocent man, to achieve my goals. But you were actually using me, while also playing with my emotions."

The expression on his face changed immediately. Carefully, he placed their daughter on the cradle next to the bed before turning back to her with blazing eyes.

"Using you?" He scoffed in disbelief.

"Yes, you made me trust you," she said.

He scoffed again. This time bitterly. "You never trusted me. Not even for a single moment. And I only *wish* I could have used you!"

She was stunned at his bitter retort, and with the look of anger on his face. He moved towards her, until he loomed. Until she fell back on the pillows.

Then caging her between both his arms, he snarled out his next words. "You have no bloody idea; how it is to fall in love with someone you have

hated most of your life. Someone you *know* was manipulating you with her lies. And yes, I did want to punish you, make you suffer, and maybe even hurt you. But I couldn't. Because I was falling in love with you!"

She shook her head, trying to push out whatever lies he was trying to feed her again. "You are lying," she whispered.

He continued watching her, not saying anything in return. The hurt look on his face made her want to trust him again. But before it could break through her defenses again, she fought back. "I don't believe a word you are saying. How can you fall for me? How can *anyone* fall for me? I am not loveable by any stretch. I am—"

"Human," he finished for her, his face softening at her words. "You're human, Sia. We all are. We all have our weaknesses, and our own monsters that we fight in the dark. And you happened to be mine. You were my weakness. And also my demon. You lived inside me for so long that I couldn't purge you. And it only got worse when I met you."

He pushed himself away from her with a defeated look on his face. He went towards a window and stared outside. "When I met you, and saw how you lived your life in fear, I realized that my life's ambition was driven by what I thought was a frightened little girl's lie. I felt stupid, and wanted to leave you alone. But I wasn't able to get rid of you from my thoughts. I tried. I even wanted to get married to someone else, thinking it would get rid of my obsession towards you."

His look turned accusing. "But I couldn't forget you. Even when I was almost engaged to Jo, you consumed my thoughts. And I just know it will always be that way for me."

"No," she whispered, trying to get him to stop speaking. Yet he continued.

He looked determined. "I love you Sia, for who you are," he said. "I love your imperfections too. I love you—even though I know you're capable of lying, and deceiving. I just love you wholeheartedly. Desperately and unapologetically."

She kept shaking her head, refusing to let his words affect her. "Please stop. I can't trust you or your motives, Ajay. You already know everything about me and my life. Once I officially inherit the Naidu Estate, and get my uncle arrested, we'll be done with our marriage," she said.

Ajay's eyes flared possessively, and he covered the distance between them in long strides. Holding her arms, he pulled her close, until she met his

eyes. “That will *never* happen. We will *not* be done. Because I’m *never* letting you go,” he stated. He looked ruthless and determined as he said those words.

“It’s not up to you to decide what—”

“Oh, it is,” he interrupted. “I may love you unconditionally. But I’m not that noble to let you or Anika go.”

Sia’s heart began to pound. Not because she found the threat frightening.

Her foolish heart was pounding because it was overjoyed that he wanted to stay with her. Be with her. Willingly, despite their history together.

With great difficulty, she shook those foolish thoughts away and stubbornly stuck to her guns. “You won’t have a choice when I decide, Ajay,” she stated even though her voice wavered at the end.

\* \* \*

Ajay felt frustrated as he watched Sia fighting what they had between them.

He knew it wasn’t the best course of action to threaten his wife who had woken up from a coma after having his baby. But the thought of her leaving him was truly unimaginable.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes, and opened them until he could calm down and think rationally. He sat next to her on the bed. “Sia, I know that having a relationship with a past like ours seems impossible,” he slowly said. “But don’t you think that we’ve both been through so much together that we’ve earned each other?”

She didn’t answer.

“Can you deny that?” he asked again.

Slowly, he laid a gentle hand over her shoulder. “What if I took away my past? Would you accept me if I didn’t know you from before?” he asked.

She still didn’t reply and neither did she meet his gaze.

“Look at me, Sia,” he said.

She slowly met his eyes. He saw the same look he had seen during the happy days of their marriage. Yearning.

He had discovered that despite her seemingly coldblooded need for revenge, Sia also yearned for love. She had been with a lot of men during her past, but she had never given her heart to any of them. But ever since they met, he had always felt that her heart had been involved. Just like his. She had even told him once that she was in love with him.



His mind drifted to one of the happiest times, when she had confessed how she felt about him. It happened a week before she slipped into a coma.

*They were both lying on the bed after setting up the nursery together with the items both he and Sia had collected over the months. He had begun to collect clothes, toys and books for a baby girl. While she did the same for a baby boy.*

*They had laughed together, and argued about silly things like whether an animal blanket or the cars one had to be used to cover the mattress on the cradle. Finally, when she looked tired after standing up for three straight hours, he had picked her up and carried her back to their room, where he had made slow and sweet love to her. Later, when they were both satisfied, they fell had fallen silent, lost in their own thoughts, until she had suddenly spoken.*

*"I think I'm in love," she said, smiling towards the ceiling. With her heavily pregnant belly, she could only lie on her back.*

*But as always, he was turned towards her, watching her. There was a beautiful smile playing on her lips.*

*"Oh yeah?" he asked. "I really hope it's with me," he teased.*

*She turned her head, and looked at him, her smile widening. "Yes. It is with you," she replied shyly.*

*He laughed. "I'm so very glad. Because I love you too," he said before he kissed her.*

*"You told me that you fell in love with me. Was that a lie?" he asked her softly.*

*Looking at her face, he knew she was recalling that day as well.*

*"I don't know if what I feel for you now is love, Ajay. But I know that I still don't trust you," she said.*

*"I already know that," he replied in defeat.*

*They looked at each other quietly; each of them trying to figure out whether love without trust can exist.*

*A phone rang next to them, breaking the trance.*

*Looking at the display screen for the caller id, he cut the call, stopping the ring. "Sia, let's—"*

*"We can talk later," she said, cutting him off. There was a look of panic on her face."I need to call someone," she said.*

*"Who?" he asked.*

She didn't reply. She got up and rushed to her phone.

"Are you calling Varun?" he asked as she began dialing numbers on her phone.

She looked stunned. "What do you know about Varun?" she demanded.

"Not a lot. Just that he has been helping you with getting information on the Naidu family."

She stared at him while continuing to hold her phone, waiting for the person on the other side to answer. "He's not picking up," she said.

He didn't move and watched her closely. "Did you just recall the details of how you fell down the stairs during the charity event?" he asked.

Her eyes flared, either in panic or in shock. "It was an accident," she said, her voice calm.

Her words made him furious. "Don't lie to me, Sia. I know you saw and spoke with your uncle before you fell down the stairs."

She didn't reply.

"You had revealed the truth about him that night. Why can't you tell me the rest of it? I can help you—"

"No. I don't need your help," she stated.

He leaned closer, until her eyes were firmly fixed on his. "You might not need my help. But you are getting it," he said with conviction in his voice.

But she continued to insist. "I said I can take care of myself."

That made him explode. "The last time I checked, you were lying under a flight of stairs. Bleeding and fighting for your life!" He literally growled out the last part.

She stayed silent, frustrating him. He knew that he badly needed to drive home a point before it was too late. "Your uncle knows you are still alive. That means he knows he would lose everything if you want to claim it. He could be dangerous."

That snapped her out of her silence. "He didn't push me. I fell. It was an accident," she softly said.

"I know that. But that's not the point!" he declared in frustration.

She was surprised. "How did you know that?" she asked.

"I saw it on the hotel camera footage," he said. "The whole damn thing. Him seeing you. You being upset and terrified. And then the struggle. I know you fell because you wanted to get away from him. If only that damn video could describe your feelings at that time, or even record the conversation clearly. Then he would have been arrested by now and rotting in some jail

somewhere. He almost killed you and Anika!”

He felt his hands tremble as he recalled seeing that video footage. He had never felt so helpless and in pain before.

Sia looked at his visibly upset face. “I’m sorry you had to see that,” she said softly.

“It felt like hell, Sia! I almost lost both of you. You have to tell me the complete truth and involve me with whatever you are planning. You and our daughter could be in danger. And—”

“That’s one of the reasons why I don’t want to involve you, Ajay,” she gently interrupted. “Because I want you and our daughter to stay away from all this. It was stupid of me to not think through my plan completely. I was too blinded by my need for revenge.”

She looked at him beseechingly. “Maybe you should just stay someplace safe with our daughter while I deal with a few things.”

He took a deep calming breath to stop himself from yelling at her. “I don’t think I can let that happen, Sia. Our daughter *and* you are equally important to me. You either let me in your plans, or I will find a way to include myself in them. And you should know by now that I won’t back down.”

When she didn’t reply, he stressed his point further. “I already know most of your plans. The will. The camera footage. Everything. I’m going to always be two steps ahead of you. So don’t think of keeping me in the dark with your misguided attempt to protect me,” he said.

When she didn’t say anything, he asked. “Did you understand what I just said?” he asked.

“How did you find out about the will and camera footage?” she asked instead.

“I will explain to you when we get back home from the hospital tomorrow. But first answer me. Do you understand that you are to include me in all your plans, every step of the way?” he asked.

He needed her to say the words. He needed her to promise him that she would not take any risks without letting him know.

“Okay. I won’t do anything without letting you know,” she told him half-heartedly.

Even though he wasn’t completely satisfied with her answer, he didn’t say anything.

\* \* \*

Sia racked her brain, trying to figure out how to keep Ajay away from everything. But she couldn't think of a way. And he was right. She couldn't *not* involve him.

She felt frustrated. Because for the first time she felt like she was losing control of everything. Until that point, she had played her game of revenge like chess, pushing the pieces around, and expecting the outcome she was completely prepared for.

The endgame had always been in sight. But after knowing the truth about Ajay, and also that head always known about her—everything began to change.

The endgame was growing fuzzier by the second. And all her carefully crafted plans were no longer completely relevant. All because he began to demand from her to change the rules.

Suddenly from being one of her pawns, he took over. He began to move the pieces around, putting several things at stake, forcing her to change her plans on the fly, without even playing the consequences in her head.

She had lost the ability to control him.

The only thing left—was to agree to bring him onboard as an ally.

She didn't know if she had the energy or the will to fight him anymore.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Sia was discharged from the hospital.

It was a bitter sweet experience. Because somehow, being at the hospital had made her feel like they were in their own bubble, where no external factors affected them. And even though they had a ton of troubles brewing between them, and from the outside, they had simply ignored everything and focused on their daughter. But now, it was time to get back to the reality.

They reached Sia's place which had been their home from the past six months during their marriage. Sia was about to walk into the nursery room to place Anika into the cradle, but Ajay led her away from it, towards her bedroom.

"I have placed the cradle in our room. Until she's three months old, it's better to keep her close," he said quietly.

Sia stopped short. "You know I can't have her close. What if I disturb her sleep with my... nightmares?" she asked.

"You won't. You already slept next to her at the hospital. And even if you do wake her up, I'll be there to help out," he answered.

"No. You won't," she said. "You'll be in *your* own room."

There was a loaded silence.

"You don't have to be worried about me being next to you. I'm not going to demand sex," he said, and then he ran his eyes over her in a scorching gaze. "At least not until you are ready, and ask me to," he finished smoothly.

She felt her cheeks turn hot. And stubbornly she attributed it to anger. "I only agreed to take your help for *some* things, Ajay. I don't appreciate your high-handed way in handling every aspect of my life."

He didn't answer her, but she could see a calculated look in his eyes. "Fine, then. I'll sleep in my own room and have Anika's cradle moved in there."

"No! That's not—" She broke off and took a deep breath. "But you said she'll be okay in my room."

"Yeah. If I was there to help out in case you accidentally disturb her sleep."

Sia felt torn. She knew Ajay was manipulating her by dangling the temptation of being able to sleep close to their daughter. It was obvious, and it was stupid, but the reverse psychology worked. "I... ok," she agreed

begrudgingly.

\* \* \*

Ajay freshened up in his bedroom. He returned back to the master bedroom to check on Anika. Sia was already standing by the cradle looking over their daughter.

Moving towards the cradle, he held her hand. "Come," he instructed gently.

She didn't say anything. She appeared tired. Even though she had delivered a baby a month ago, the coma had taken a toll on her. She looked too thin in her long sleeveless dress. But despite all that, she was still the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on.

He knew he found her exquisite, mostly because he was consumed by her, than with her actual appearance. But whatever maybe the reason, his body still craved her the same way it did before.

"I had Kamala prepare a meal for us. Let's eat now," he said, his voice husky.

She didn't argue. And went along with him.

\* \* \*

They spent a quiet evening together. And later that night, Sia had an extra bed placed in the master bedroom for her to sleep in. She was about to slip into that bed, but it was already occupied. By Ajay.

He was shirtless, and was only in his sleep shorts that hung low on his hips.

Heat surged through her cheeks as she admired the deep cuts of his abs and defined muscles that roped around his broad shoulders and arms. Even though he was devastatingly attractive, it hurt to look at him. She couldn't stop herself, but look at him.

"Are you alright?" he asked softly after a long silence.

"Sia?"

She took a deep breath. "No," she answered in truth.

He sat up on the bed, looking at her quietly.

"I'm feeling nervous around you, Ajay," she admitted.

A pained look passed on his face. "Tell me why?" he urged.

She bit her lip in uncertainty. "Because I feel I don't know you anymore.

I feel that the person you pretended to be with me—as a happy-go-lucky guy, with no worries, or past, or... an agenda—I was comfortable with him. I... fell in love with *him*. But you... I don't know you, and that makes me feel nervous."

He got up from the bed and held her face. "I'm still the same guy you fell in love with, Sia. The same guy who loves you desperately."

Even though he looked sincere, the confusion still lingered in her mind. "I need time getting used to everything," she said softly.

He didn't reply. Moving away from him, she got into the big bed they had shared during their happy times, and turned off the lights.

\* \* \*

The next morning, after breakfast, Sia asked Ajay to set up the baby monitor footage on her phone so she could check on Anika all the time.

While setting it up, the conversation they had the previous night—about her being nervous around him—still lingered in his mind. He was determined to make Sia feel safe and comfortable around him. And more than that, he was determined to earn her complete trust.

It was a sad state of things that from talking easily about wanting a big family together, they were now behaving like polite strangers.

*"I think I made a huge mistake getting pregnant or even wanting a child," said Sia.*

*They were lying on the bed after spending a lazy weekend together.*

*"Why?" he asked, slowly tracing her palm and wrist with his fingers. "I agree that the way you decided to get pregnant was wrong. But why do you think, you wanting a child in particular is a mistake?"*

*When she didn't answer, he prodded. "Does it frighten you to have kids?"*

*She stiffened at the word frighten, but when she saw that his expression held genuine curiosity, she relaxed.*

*"I feel I don't have it in me to be an ideal mother. I don't even know what an ideal mother should be like. What if our child hates me? What if having a mother like me ruins our child's future?"*

*He shook his head in amusement. And then stroking her hair, he pushed it away from her face to see her clearly. "Our child won't hate you. I know you will be loved as much as you love our child. And besides, I'll be there to*

*help you,” he said. Then slowly, he smiled wickedly at her. “In fact you’ll definitely need my help. Managing three kids will not be easy without my help.”*

*He waited for her to glare at him or give him a dressing down for presuming that she would have three children with him. But surprisingly, she only looked at him wistfully.*

Ajay wanted that wistfulness and ease back in her eyes. He wanted to make whatever promises he had made to her in the past, come true.

“Done,” he said, handing over the phone to her.

“Thanks.” She paused for a second, looking uncertain. “I need to step out for a couple of hours. Can you stay with Anika while I’m gone?” she asked.

“Where are you planning to go?” he asked.

She hesitated a while, before replying. “First, to Varun’s place.”

He frowned. “Why?”

“I have been trying to reach him. He usually gets back to me promptly. And even if he’s away, like he usually is once in a while, he doesn’t stay away for more than two or three days. It’s been more than a week now,” she said, with worry creeping into her tone.

“You don’t have to go,” he said. “I can ask someone to check on him.”

“No! He doesn’t like it when strangers visit him.”

“Then we’ll both go. You are not well enough to go out by yourself yet.”

“I’m perfectly fine, Ajay.”

“No, you are not.”

“The *doctors* said so.” Her tone held irritation.

“Well, the same *doctors* were trying to revive you from a coma until a week ago. You still look weak and tired.”

“Don’t try to control me, Ajay. I said I am fine,” she snapped irritably.

“I’m not trying to control you. All I’m asking you to do is to take it easy for a week or so. Until you recover completely. And meantime, if you have any urgent things to do, I can help.”

She watched him with a stubborn look on her face.

He pressed more. “We’ve been through this conversation already, Sia. You need to start taking my help.”

She didn’t reply.

Before he could completely convince her, the phone rang.

Walking towards the intercom placed on one of the bedroom walls, he



answered the call. “What is it Kamala?” he asked.

“There is a man asking for Madam,” Kamala’s voice said through the intercom.

“Who is it?” asked Sia.

“He says that... that... he is...” Kamala’s voice sounded uncomfortable.

“Who is it?” Sia asked impatiently.

“He says his name is Manish Goyal. And that... he is Madam’s... husband.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There was an absolute silence in the room, and then Ajay stiffened. .

But before he could respond, Sia spoke to Kamala. “Don’t send him in. I’m coming out to meet him at the main gate.”

Ajay frowned. “I’d prefer if you stay here so I can check who it is. We don’t know who this person is. And he could be dangerous.”

“I know him,” Sia replied softly.

That stunned Ajay. Before he could say anything, Sia turned on the camera on top of the cradle and strode out.

He followed behind her, fully expecting some kind of violent confrontation with the man at the gate. But the man who was waiting outside the main gate, had a broad smile on his face as he watched Sia approach him.

“Let him in,” Sia instructed the watchman.

“Oh my god, Sia! Finally! I really wanted to get here much earlier,” the man exclaimed as his eyes pursued her.

Not responding to the man in anyway, Sia led him to a small sit out area outside in front of the house. Only after they sat down, did she show her true feelings.

Her eyes turned cold. “Why are you here, Manish?” she asked him flatly.

“And why are you claiming her as your wife?” Ajay asked in an equally cold tone.

“Who is he?” the man asked Sia.

“My husband,” she replied.

The man looked at Ajay and then at her, with a hurt look. “You got married again?” he asked. But Ajay could make out that the man already knew it, and he was simply putting on a show.

“How is that any of your business?” Sia asked.

“It is my business, Sia. Because you can’t be his wife!” the man cried out. “Because you are *my* wife. Because we are still married!” he said.

There was utter silence.

There was no panic, and no drama on Sia’s face. And no protesting either. “How?” she asked simply.

If only Ajay could claim to feel the same inside. His brain was desperately trying to process what he was hearing. He was more than simply stunned. But pulling it together quickly, he remained alert, in case the confrontation with that man turned ugly.

But the man looked apologetic rather than agitated. “The lawyer we both hired to apply for the divorce... Turns out he never saw through the case. He just made up fake paperwork. And apparently, we are not the only couple he did that to.”

Sia watched the man with an unnerving look. “I see,” she said simply.

“Sia, it’s not just that...” the man moved his lawn chair much closer to her, and watched her with an imploring look. Ajay was ready to smash that man’s face. But he waited to see if Sia needed his help.

“Sia, I missed you,” the man said.

“You are missing me after five years of no communication between us?” she asked.

“No. I have been missing you from much a while. Especially when I could not have any meaningful relationships with anyone else. Because what we had between us... I know I can’t find it with anyone.”

Sia didn’t respond to the bullshit the man was feeding her.

“What do you want, Manish?” she asked him coldly.

“Nothing, Sia. When I found out that our divorce didn’t go through, I was happy. It made me want to turn into a better man for you. I know I should have told this before, but I was waiting for the right time. I was still figuring out what to do in my life. And now, I know that having you with me will be more than enough.”

Sia slowly smiled. And there was zero warmth in it. “Quite touching, Manish,” she said. “But I’m not buying your bullshit. I’m asking you again. What. Do. You. Want? Or better still, who put you up to this?”

Once again Ajay was grateful about Sia being the person she was.

Sharp and analytical. Rather than soft and emotional.

Her look alone was enough to make the person in front of her cower.

The man definitely looked shaken. “I want nothing apart from having you back Sia. A-a-and no one put me up to this.”

She continued to look at him in an unnerving way. “How did you know where to find me?” she asked.

“I... uh... have been searching for a while now. I’m glad my determination paid off,” he said with a smile. Although his smile looked forced and wobbly.

“I see. And what else did your *determination* make you think?’ she asked.

The man looked more than uncomfortable and he squirmed in his seat. “I

thought you would remember how good we were together. And... and... that you would consider getting back with me. I'm willing to sacrifice anything, Sia. Just come back with me as my wife."

Sia scoffed at the man's dramatics. "We were together only for a month. And if I remember correctly, we didn't have any meaningful conversations during that time. We were eighteen and bent upon getting back at our families."

"That one month was enough, Sia. You were my salvation at that time. I became a better man because of you."

She was quiet. "Show me your hands," she said.

"What?"

"I told you to show me your hands."

The man looked uncertain, but he held his hands towards her.

Ajay barely restrained himself from lashing out at the man and beating him to a bloody pulp. He was almost expecting the man to pull out some kind of weapon.

Sia looked deeply into the man's eyes, and then pushed back one of the sleeves of the man's shirt. Her gaze lingered on the man's hands and then his eyes. "Looks like your better version is still not good enough."

There was silence.

"Sia... I... I..." The man began, looking flustered.

"Tell your *determination* or whoever is making you do this—that he is right in getting this desperate. His time's definitely up."

"I-I don't know what you are talking about. I'm telling you the—"

"Save it," she snapped, silencing him. "I have sufficient proof that the divorce went through." She got up from the chair. "Get out. And if I find you trying to interfere in my life again, it won't end well for you."

The man looked shaken. "I-I'm still your husband. I have some rights. You owe me—"

"She owes you nothing," said Ajay, getting up to leave with Sia.

"She does," said the man. "There was no settlement made during our divorce. And I know that she has inherited a fortune along with Blush Enterprises. And she could be inheriting even more. She is worth a lot more than she was during our divorce."

There was a chilling silence. "I see. But is her fortune worth your life?" Ajay asked in a lethal tone.

The man's eyes widened in fright. But he tried to look outraged by

adopting a false bravado.”Are you threatening me? Do you know who I am? My family in Boston—”

“You are nobody,” Sia replied. “You are just a weak man who is looking for a payday from a woman’s past mistake.” She laughed coldly. “My uncle must be really desperate to scrape the bottom of the barrel to get out of the situation he’ll find himself in.”

The man looked shaken again. “I’m telling you, I don’t know what—”

“I asked you to save it. And my husband wasn’t joking. We will both bury you alive if you so much as look our way or try to interfere in my life again. Now, get out.”

The man didn’t argue anymore. His eyes swept over Sia and then Ajay. When he saw the cold look on her face, and the threatening look on Ajay’s, he just got up and walked out in a hurry.

There was a loaded silence, only to be broken by their daughter’s cry, heard on the camera monitor on her phone.

They both rushed towards the house and then inside.

“Let me pick her up,” said Ajay.

Sia nodded. “I’ll get the bottle prepared,” she said softly and went out.

After a while, both of them watched Anika in silence as she fed with minimal fuss.

A few minutes later, Sia spoke into the silence. “Manish was my first husband,” she said quietly.

Ajay didn’t say anything. He just looked at Sia, as she continued to feed Anika.

Keeping her eyes on their daughter, Sia continued talking. “Manish and I met at a rehab when I was eighteen,” she said. “We were both drug addicts who came from affluent backgrounds. And while we were at the rehab, we bonded over how controlling the adults in our lives were. We both had been temporarily cut off from our inheritances. And so, to teach our parents a lesson, we came up with this really stupid idea of eloping to Vegas and getting married. We wanted to prove to them that we could be independent, and that we were adults.”

Sia looked up and saw him watching her quietly. She took a deep breath and forged on. “The moment Manish and I got married; I knew it was a mistake. And that it wasn’t worth upsetting my aunt. And so, we applied for a divorce right away. I was able to convince Manish quite easily, saying that if his family found out about the marriage, they might cut him off permanently,

and that he would have no money to buy more drugs.”

Ajay had mixed feelings as he heard Sia talk about her past.

“Why did you agree to meet him?” he asked.

“Because I had to know why he was here,” she replied. “I needed to know what his motivation was.”

“I see. And have you discovered it?” he asked.

“Yes. Money. He’s still an addict. His pupil’s were dilated. And he also had needle pricks around his veins on his hand. My uncle is controlling and manipulating him using money as bait.”

“Do you realize that your uncle digging into your past is an attempt to find some kind of loophole in the will?”

“Yes.”

“What are you planning to do about it?” he asked.

“I have a plan,” she said.

He waited for her elaborate about her plan. But to his frustration she didn’t.

She patted Anika and gently put her to sleep in the cradle.

Ajay couldn’t wait anymore. He had to tell what he was up to while she was in coma.

“Sia, I’ve already send out a petition on behalf of you to claim the Naidu Estate.”

“What?” she asked in surprise, turning towards him.

“When you were in coma, I sent out the DNA test samples along with other proofs to proceed with your claim to the Naidu Estate,” he explained.

She frowned. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?” she demanded.

“I was hoping you would ask for my help first,” he replied coolly.

“I told you I can do this on my own, Ajay. And in my own way.”

“I know. But I already told you. I’m determined to help.”

“That’s not the point—”

“It is, Sia. I’m glad I did it. Because I know now how dangerous your uncle can be. He sent a man to sabotage your claim as an heir to the Naidu Estate.”

“Maybe. He was just desperate. And it was only Manish. I handled him easily,” she said.

“You only handled him for now. He could come back.”

“Even if he does, he relatively harmless,” she said.

“No one is harmless, Sia,” he said somberly, meaning it.

She didn't say anything. And she still looked upset.

"I know you don't trust people that easily. But I personally know the lawyers I hired to help you. I trust them enough to know they will always be on our side."

"Is there anything else I should know about?" she asked in anger.

"Yes. If the case proceeds as planned, we'll go to Naidu Estate in a few weeks. For you to claim it."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sia tried calling Varun again. And this time, it got answered in a couple of rings.

“Sia?” he greeted.

“Varun, what happened? I wasn’t able to reach you last week.”

“I know. I was... away.”

She sighed in relief. She had been worried, even though she knew Varun disappeared during his ‘seclusion binges’ for days together. And during his seclusion time, he never answered his phone calls or had any sort of contact with the outside world.

“What happened Sia?” Varun asked.

“I had a visitor today,” she said and then told him briefly about Manish’s visit.

After he heard about the visit, Varun became agitated. “How did *he* find out about that man?” Varun asked her, referring to her uncle.

“He saw me. At the charity event,” she said, and then told him about her face off with her uncle. She deliberately avoided telling Varun about her uncle following her to the staircase, where she eventually fell. Because she knew Varun would flip, and might do something rash and dangerous. She couldn’t risk anything at this point, when they were close to trapping their prey.

“He must have begun an investigation on me as soon as he saw me at that party.”

“So we need to move quickly with rest of the plan, then.”

“Yes. About that... Ajay has already hired a lawyer, and begun the DNA tests, to start the proceedings for me to claim the Naidu Estate.”

There was a brief pause. “You told him?” Varun asked. This time ‘him’ was her husband.

Sia could make out that Varun was upset.

“I didn’t tell Ajay anything. I didn’t have to. He already knew everything about me,” she said, and told Varun about her confrontation with Ajay during the charity event. She also told him a little about Ajay’s background. But she left out the part where Ajay had an agenda against her.

“Sia, you can’t trust him or take any help from him!”

“Even if I don’t trust him, I need him for claiming the Naidu Estate.”

Varun let out a frustrated sigh.



“We don’t have a choice, Varun. So far we haven’t accomplished much with regards to catching my uncle in the act. Ajay has contacts and other help that we need. And we have to move quickly. Before my uncle lets up his guard.”

“Alright,” said Varun grudgingly.

“Take care, Varun. I’ll call you again to keep you informed.”

She ended the call.

Sighing deeply, she sat on the bed, and looked down at Anika, who was sleeping peacefully in her cradle. She felt a tug in her heart as she looked at Anika’s innocent face.

“I’m so sorry, my angel,” she whispered.

She had always known that she would be a terrible mother.

It didn’t matter if she loved Anika with all her heart. She became a horrible mother the moment she decided to bring an innocent life to the world for the sole purpose of revenge.

\* \* \*

That night, after dinner, Sia and Ajay remained in the kitchen for a long time. Ajay briefed her with information on what he had been doing while she was in coma. He had just finished speaking when she voiced her one burning question.

“How did you know I’d every wake up from a coma?” she asked him softly.

“I knew,” he said simply. “It only frustrated me that you didn’t come out of it sooner.”

Her look softened. “You can’t bully a coma patient to wake up, you know,” she said.

“What do you mean?” he asked, looking confused.

She had a small smile on her face. “I recall having several dreams during my coma phase. Some of which were actual memories. But one thing I distinctly recall was with you. You were demanding that I fight, and return to you,” she said.

He was quiet and looked surprised. “You could hear me?” he asked.

“No. Not all of it,” she said. “I just had these dreams where I could hear you plead with me at first. And then, you became angry. And then, you shouted at me to stop escaping into the dark. Somehow I have a feeling that it actually happened.”

He was quiet, and then he replied. "It happened," he confirmed, but didn't elaborate.

Those two words were enough to melt her heart.

"Tell me something," she asked. "Does it bother you that I have a past?"

This time, his response was quick. "Yes," he replied.

She didn't know how to feel about his frank answer. Hell, even she herself was ashamed of her past. Dr. Patel had told her several times to embrace her past, but she was never able to follow through. Then how can she expect someone else to be okay with her kind of past?

Ajay sighed. "I know I should be more modern and have forward thinking... but this afternoon I was badly tempted to bash that man's head somewhere. I wanted to remove the memories of you," he said, watching her face intently. "Not just from his head, but also from all the other men's heads who knew you before."

"I see," she said.

"I admit I was jealous. Hell, I am still jealous."

"What about me, then? And *my* head?" she asked. "You don't want *me* to forget all the men from my past?"

A crooked smile appeared on Ajay's face; bringing out a dimple, and causing all kinds of stirrings within her. "No. I want you to remember other men," he said, reaching out and tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Why?" she asked softly, her heart stirring inside.

"Because only then, will you know how awesome I am than the others from your past."

A surprised laugh escaped out of her. *God! This man*, she thought. Before she could analyze her complicated feelings about him, she gave in to her need to touch him.

\* \* \*

Ajay loved listening to the sound of laughter escaping from her. He felt the light touch of her hand on his cheek, making his heart thump and speed up. Deep within her eyes, while she watched as her warm hand touched his cheek, he found it again.

He had seen it before, several times.

Her loneliness and her longing, reaching out to him.

Swallowing the lump that had formed in his throat, he turned his head sideways, and kissed her palm that lay on his cheek. "I'm going to fight for

your forgiveness, Sia,” he promised. “I’m going to fight for your happiness too,” he persisted.

The expression in her eyes slowly changed from longing to wonder. And then, it was gone. It got replaced by a sad smile.

“Why?” she asked simply, dropping her hand.

He pulled her hand back, holding it to his cheek again. “Because I love you,” he said.

She didn’t respond. He didn’t expect her to.

They sat in silence, until the events of the day crept up to her, and her eyes drooped in exhaustion.

“Let’s talk tomorrow,” he said gently, and led her to their bedroom, where she fell into an exhausted sleep. But before she fell asleep, she murmured, “Stay.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The next morning, Sia woke from sleep in the best way possible. With half of her body lying on top of Ajay.

There was a rumbling chuckle. "Our lawyer will be here in another hour. We need to get ready, and also get Anika ready," he said huskily.

With that, reality came crashing back into her life. Her body stiffened and her heart beat faster. She wished she could stay cocooned in the bed all day with no lawyers or Private Investigators to deal with.

"Okay," she said with great difficulty.

The next moment, his hand was at the back of her head, dragging her close. He tucked her head into the crook of his neck, and shifted her so she lay fully on top of him.

She didn't protest. She nuzzled closer.

"It's going to be fine, Sia," he murmured into her hair. "We are going to fight this together. And I promise you, we will win. Not just the property, but every other game we'll play as well."

"I hope so," she whispered, trying her best to control the overwhelming paranoia that was back with a vengeance.

"It's just meeting with a couple of lawyers. Rita Nair and her partner. They will explain to us what our options are."

Sia didn't answer. She just nodded.

As though he could sense she was in the verge of a panic attack, he wrapped his arms tightly around her.

"It's going to be fine," he repeated.

They lay that way, until Anika woke up from her sleep.

"Feed her while I fix our breakfast," he said, kissing her forehead.

Sia pulled herself out of her self-pity. She shouldn't have clung to him like she needed him, even though she liked it so much. There were several reasons why she shouldn't be trusting him or his lawyers. But at that moment she couldn't recall a single reason why.

She had lived most of her life in constant paranoia. It was quite ironic that the man who had betrayed her was also the one who made her feel safe.

She rolled away from him reluctantly.

\* \* \*

An hour later, they met with the lawyer.

Rita Nair seemed quite young. But listening to her as she spoke to them in detail about their case, it was obvious that she felt the need to bring justice to a wronged party.

“Sia, Jay called me yesterday to inform that Jagadish Naidu sent your ex-husband to visit you, trying to claim that you were in a bigamous relationship with Ajay. That alone is enough to prove he is desperate and knows he’s going to lose everything.”

Sia nodded. “So far there has been no DNA test done on him. What if he declines to test?” Sia asked.

“He won’t,” said the lawyer. “I have already made it very clear to his lawyer that any decision his client takes will be made public knowledge. Jagadish Naidu’s Lawyer also knows that we have the security tapes of him being with you when you fell down the stairs. So if he declines taking the test, I will release those tapes as I threatened. That alone will make him appear guilty. He left a heavily pregnant woman, bleeding and injured, without calling for help.”

“I still feel quite strongly about getting him arrested for that,” Ajay said with a frown.

“No, Jay,” said the lawyer. “I’ve told you. That’s the only leverage we have for now. He cannot fight too dirty with that hanging on his head. Maybe once the property transfer takes place, Sia can press charges.”

Over the next few hours, Rita went over the details of the case. Rita Nair was not only bright, but she was also the kind to give attention to the smallest of the details.

“Thanks for taking up my case,” Sia told her when they began to wind up.

“No problem at all. In fact, I should thank you and Jay for trusting me with such a high profile case.”

Ajay smiled. “I knew you would do great, Rita. You were always good at winning arguments.”

The woman rolled her eyes, but smiled back at him. “True.”

After they escorted Rita outside, Ajay began to raid the refrigerator. “That session was long. I’m starving again,” he announced. “Want something to eat?” he asked, his eyes still scanning the contents of the fridge.

“Maybe some fruit,” Sia replied.

Ten minutes later, he put a plate of cut fruit in front of her, and began to

dig into a large sandwich he prepared for himself.

“What?” he asked when he caught her staring at him.

“How do you know Rita?” she asked.

He shrugged. “We dated for a while.”

She placed the fork on the plate to give him her full attention. “You hired your ex-girlfriend to argue my case?” she asked in disbelief.

He continued eating, watching her in amusement. “Calling her an ex-girlfriend might be a stretch. We went out for only a couple of weeks.”

She frowned. “Why?”

“Why, what?” he asked with laughter in his voice.

She narrowed her eyes. “Why did you go out with her for only a couple of weeks?” she asked.

He continued eating, but the amusement was gone from his face.

“That’s when you decided to move back to India,” he replied quietly.

That stunned her. “But... what has that got to do with you dating a girl you liked?”

“Everything,” he replied, and continued to eat quietly.

“Can you please elaborate?” she asked in frustration.

He raised an eyebrow. “Well, would you have dated a man when your mind was filled with another?” he asked.

“Your mind wasn’t filled me with in a good way. You despised me!” she said.

He shrugged. “Yeah, same thing.”

“What?” she asked in confusion.

“Apparently I was already halfway in love with you by then. I just didn’t know it.”

She shook her head. “That makes no sense whatsoever,” she said.

He smiled, and then explained what the Colonel had told him. About love and hate being so similar that it was difficult to identify the difference between both.

“You let a good woman go because of me,” she said, feeling guilty.

He finished eating and sat back. “Rita and I dated quite casually, Sia. We met at a party and hit it off. She was bright and beautiful, and I... well you know what a catch I am,” he said, gaining an involuntary laugh from her. “We both had busy schedules and liked spending time with each other sometimes. It wasn’t like we made any promises to each other. She was fine when I told her I couldn’t see her anymore. We broke up on good terms and

stayed in touch. And the reason I chose to hire her was because of her professional track record, not because of personal reasons.”

Sia nodded in understanding, although she didn’t quite understand the part about his relationship with an ex. Before Ajay, she was never in a real relationship. Even though she had gotten married to Manish, she had never considered it a relationship.

“I want you to meet the PI I have hired as well,” said Ajay, breaking through her thoughts.

She raised an eyebrow. “Another ex-girlfriend of yours?” she asked.

He burst out laughing. “Nope. Just a regular guy named Hari Prasad. He’s currently away. But he’ll be back in a few weeks.”

Ajay began to give her the details of the investigation done so far.

\* \* \*

That night Sia had her first nightmare since moving home. She woke up to her own screams, which were now muffled within Ajay’s chest.

“Shh... it’s okay baby,” he soothed while rocking her. “You are safe,” he said.

She began sobbing. “I-I had a b-bad dream,” she said.

“You are okay now,” he said, still running a soothing hand on her back.

“And this time... in my dream, it wasn’t me who had been in danger. I-I dreamt that my uncle had killed you and Anika.”

It had been quite traumatic to watch Ajay and Anika get killed brutally by her uncle. She had been begging him to leave them alone, and that she would do anything to keep them safe. But her uncle had only laughed, and then slit their throats, as she stood watching helplessly.

“Just a dream,” he repeated. “Anika and I are right next to you. Open your eyes and look at us, baby.”

She opened her eyes slowly. And then cried out, “Oh my god!” while struggling out of his arms. She rushed towards the cradle. “I must have disturbed her with my screaming.”

“No. You didn’t,” he said. “She’s a sound sleeper. Barely moves to any kind of noise.”

Ajay was right. Anika was still asleep peacefully in her cradle.

Sia went back to the bed and sat on it, not willing to go back to sleep. The nightmare and the horror she experienced were still making her hands tremble.

“Here,” he said, handing her a bottle of water. “Drink some, you’ll feel better.”

Taking a few sips, she handed the bottle back and leaned against the headboard.

“It was just a dream, Sia,” he repeated softly.

“I know that. But the fact that it could easily come true under these circumstances is what scares me.”

“I can protect myself and Anika, Sia. It’s *you* whom I’m worried about,” he admitted.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because there is a lot of money and pride involved with the Naidu Estate Sia, people have killed for even less,” he said, holding one of her hands.

“I can protect myself, Ajay. That’s not a problem,” she said.

He looked angry. “No, you can’t. So don’t dismiss it that easily!” he snapped, making her stiffen next to him.

When she tried pulling her hand away from his grip, he refused to let her go.

“The danger is real, Sia. So is my fear. And even if there is no danger, I have this crazy need to ensure you are always safe.” He pulled her close. “I lost you once,” he said, holding her close, as though to reassure that she was still there. “It was one of the most devastating feeling I’ve ever had. I don’t want to ever feel that way again,” he said.

Slowly her body relaxed and she hugged him back in comfort.

“I promise I’ll be safe,” she said softly.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A few weeks passed by and they sort of fell into a routine. Sia had begun her exercising regime. She was keen to get back to her strong form. Ajay supported her wholeheartedly. And he either worked out with her or he watched Anika while Sia spent a couple of hours each day at the gym.

Every evening, they went on a two hour jog with Anika in a stroller.

Sia was still laughing at one of Ajay's jokes while they entered the house. She was getting Anika out from the stroller when Ajay received a call as soon as he turned it on.

"It's Rita. I'll take the call, you go ahead with dinner," he said.

Nearly an hour, later, when Sia was settling their daughter down for sleep, he came into the room.

"We won, Sia," he declared. "You are now the sole heir to the Naidu Estate."

"When do we have to go?" she asked.

"In two days. There's also going to be media coverage on that day. And your uncle is going to pretend in front of everyone that he is willingly giving away the estate and property to you."

Listening to that news, instead of feeling victorious, Sia felt her legs shake, and sat on bed. She clutched the cradle for strength.

"Sia..." She heard Ajay's voice calling her.

When she didn't respond, he sat next to her and called her again. "Baby, are you alright?"

"I-I don't know if I'm ready to face him again, so soon," she whispered.

She felt Ajay's arms enclose her in an embrace, offering her comfort. "You don't have to see him again if you don't want to. I'll ensure that he isn't anywhere around you."

She shook her head. "No. It'll be okay. It's stupid of me to still be scared. Especially when I know he can't hurt me anymore."

Even though she said that, her body trembled. "I-I just can't get past the memories of him hurting me when I was a child." Tears began to flow out of her eyes as she cried silently. "Two years, that man abused me and robbed me of my childhood," she sobbed as she spoke. "He made me feel helpless and alone. I guess there will always be a part of me that will be stuck in that timeframe, re-living that abuse over and over again."

She felt numb as she spoke to Ajay. He remained quiet as he listened to

her. She didn't want to look at him while she spoke to him. Because she didn't want to see the disgust and horror in his eyes. Gently, one of his hands held her chin, and raised her head until her eyes met his stormy ones.

"Two years?" he asked. His eyes were stormy. "Why didn't you tell someone sooner? Why did you not stop him right away when you knew it was wrong?" His tone was harsh as were his words.

Sia was stunned at his questions and his anger. She got past the shock quickly, only to descend into a furious rage at his words. She began to struggle out of his arms.

"You don't know shit!" she spat out. "You have *no* clue how it is to be abused as a child. You always had someone with you, and you were safe with them. So don't bloody question and judge the actions of a child. You don't know how it is to be manipulated, using love and security as tools. I may have not stopped him or told anyone for a long time, but one thing I *do* know for sure... I didn't *ask* for those things to happen to me. What happened wasn't my bloody fault!"

Jerking away from him, she stood up. Instantly, he grabbed her arm, and pulled her back to him. When she tried to pull away furiously, he tightened his grip.

"Let me go!" she hissed out. She couldn't yell because Anika was sleeping a few feet away from them.

When she struggled again, and pulled away from him, he let her go without saying anything. Not waiting another second, she walked away from him, to calm down, and to make sense of whatever had transpired between them.

She didn't expect him to understand how it felt to be abused as a child. But for him to think that as a little girl, she willingly didn't stop her uncle from abusing her was too much.

She heard the door open and shut behind her. Rapid footsteps followed behind her.

"I'm sorry," his voice called out as she continued to walk away towards one of the spare bedrooms. "Baby, please... stop."

She stilled when she heard the agony in his voice. With hurried steps, he joined her and stood before her. He looked guilty and ashamed.

"I was just a child," she told him with a broken voice.

"Don't," he said, looking devastated. "You don't have to explain anything to me. I'm sorry. I have absolutely no excuse for uttering those

terrible words to you. All I can say is that I felt angry and helpless.”

She didn't reply.

He wrapped his arms around her, until she could hear his heartbeat. “I feel angry and helpless because I want to wipe away that fear and pain from you,” he said.

“You can't,” she whispered.

“I know. And it kills me,” he admitted.

She was quiet. He kissed her on her forehead. “I was being a selfish asshole, letting *my* feelings take precedence over yours. This isn't about me. It's about you.”

She raised her head to look at him. “It can't always be about me,” she said softly.

“In this case, it is. You were the victim of a horrific crime. And you survived it. Just because you are a survivor, I have no right to expect you to completely forget your past trauma and feel happy and whole all the time.”

She was quiet.

“Forgive me, baby,” he pleaded.

She looked at him and realized something. Ajay wasn't perfect.

She understood where he was coming from when he questioned her about not getting help sooner. It was his helplessness that made him lash out. However, regardless of those reasons, for the first time, she stopped seeing Ajay with rose tinted glasses. She realized that he was human too, with flaws. Just like her.

It somehow endeared him even more to her.

“I forgive you,” she whispered, and let him lead her back to their room and hold her while they slept.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

They stood in front of a familiar sprawling majestic house.

The Naidu Estate. Now, completely under Sia's control.

Ajay's arm was wrapped around Sia's shoulders protectively as she carried their child.

They were standing outside, surrounded by the media who thankfully stood at a distance. There were also dozens of people from the village, watching Sia with a hostile look.

Ajay knew that the people from Ghadhwai considered Jagadish Naidu and his son to be demi-gods as well as the rightful heirs to the Naidu Estate. But fortunately, most of those people were relatively harmless. Besides, it wasn't other people or their opinion, Ajay was worried about. He was worried about one man—the one who held the power to break Sia.

He subtly squeezed Sia's arm in reassurance, and turned towards her, expecting her to be overwhelmed. He wanted to let her know that he was with her. But he needn't have bothered.

Because Sia was taking in everything with a steady gaze.

Once again, he felt extremely proud of the woman he loved. He had married a true boss. He had married a woman who was not only a survivor, but also a fighter.

Sia walked towards a small group of people that were her blood relatives, and greeted them calmly and politely. As though everything was completely normal. She sounded clear and confident, making eye contact with each and every person. Including her uncle.

"Dharini," her uncle greeted her with a guarded look.

"Hello Uncle," she said. "Sorry, I wasn't able to greet you better when we met a few months ago."

The words, '*Where you also left me bleeding on the stairs to die,*' were unspoken, but quite loud between them.

Her uncle didn't reply. Ajay knew that Sia's uncle was still smarting from the blackmail. The camera footage had captured the struggle between Sia and him, and her uncle ultimately leaving her bleeding and hurt on the stairway.

That very video was solely responsible to gain Jagadish Naidu's cooperation, and in determining Sia as the rightful heir.

\* \* \*

Sia continued to look at the man that had once been a father figure to her. He was able to earn her love and complete trust quite easily. Then, he had betrayed her in the cruelest and devastating way that no child ever deserved.

“Dharini... I mean Sia, I’m sorry, I wasn’t able to reach out to you earlier. My lawyers had advised me against it. They told me that until we could be sure it was really you, I shouldn’t take any chances. Although I knew it in my heart that it was you.” He smiled. “Now that we know it’s you, I have been telling everyone how glad I am to have you back. I thought I had lost you.” His eyes appeared warm and inviting on the outside. But Sia could see the blackness deep within their depths. Even his smile held coldness. As a child, she had missed those signs completely. Maybe that’s how he was able to lure his young and innocent prey. His disguise easily instilled trust, not betraying that he was a perverted monster who destroyed innocence.

To the public, he was a logical and dynamic leader. Even at his age, he was physically fit. He also looked youthful with thick dark hair, glowing skin, and barely any wrinkles. But she knew he didn’t have any genuine compassion or empathy. The only softer emotion he had was the love for his son.

During the investigation, she had found enough evidence to know that he genuinely loved his son. It took her a while, but she was finally convinced that her cousin didn’t know that his father was a serial pedophile.

“Mrs. Manthena!” a few reporters shouted. “Please tell us why you are here,” they asked.

“I’m here to claim all this,” said Sia—stretching her hands and indicating to the huge mansion and vast expanse of the lands outside— “My birthright.”

It wasn’t the truth. She gave a damn about the birthright or anything that came with it. She was there to take away her uncle’s wealth. His connections. His reputation that he had built over the years. And the respect he commanded from the people around him.

She wanted to ruin him.

So that when he is completely broken, he will not be able to hurt anyone again.

There was a flurry of activity and noise, while the reporters scrambled to take pictures. They also began to shout out more questions.

“Mr. Naidu. You have been running the estate until now, and the people

around these districts have always treated you like their leader. How do you feel about your niece taking over?”

Jagadish Naidu smiled at the cameras. “I’m happy to have her back.” Then turning towards her, “Please come in,” he invited.

Soon, they were seated at an elegant dining table that Sia remembered from her childhood. Her uncle sat at the head of the table—with Ajay and her on either side of him.

While the food was being served, polite conversation ensued around her. Her heart thumped painfully against her ribs. Every piece of furniture and the surrounding rooms reminded her of the painful agony she suffered at his hands.

At his close proximity, her hands trembled slightly in anticipation. She wanted revenge so badly at that moment that it became physically exhausting to stop herself from attacking him.

Her uncle was less than three feet away from her. Her eyes fell on the fruit knife placed in a bowl in front of her. It looked sharp and lethal enough for her purpose.

She badly wanted to blot out her pain and memories with his blood. She wanted to know the feeling of sinking the knife deep into his heart, and watching the life, drain out of him. However, she couldn’t do any of those things. Anika was sleeping peacefully in her arms. Also there were several servants around, ready to save him if needed. Stopping herself from such an easy kill did take a great effort from her end.

The lunch was a quiet affair. Soon, they were directed to another room where dessert was served. Only her uncle, aunt and her cousin, along with Ajay and she were present in that room. “Your aunt and I remembered that you enjoyed sweets a lot. Remember, how I used to help you sneak out some from the kitchen when no one was looking?” her uncle asked. He looked at Ajay, “Your wife and I used to be co-conspirators in a lot of adventures. She loved playing tricks on people around her. Except for me, because she doted on me,” he said.

Her uncle was attempting to instill some kind of nostalgia. She found it insulting that he thought she would be dumb enough to fall for such bullshit.

She watched him with a steady gaze. “I remember everything quite clearly. Especially the parts where you conspired with me to keep my own abuse a secret from everyone,” she said.

There was absolute silence.

Her uncle struggled to keep his expression neutral. His hands shook visibly. "Sia, I'm very sorry about what happened in your life," he said. "I know you were troubled with your parents passing. I tried very hard to take my sister's place so you wouldn't miss them too much. But you were just a child, who was easily manipulated and confused. I'm sorry if some people made you misunderstand my affection to be something else."

"Misunderstood your affection?" He was trying to manipulate Ajay into thinking that she was a disturbed child who had imagined abuse, where there was only love and affection. "I didn't know affection required nine year old girls to give blow jobs and have sex with their uncles." She tilted her head with a cold smile. "Sure, you even made sound like it was fun to do some things at first, until it began to hurt. Until, I was hospitalized enough times."

Her uncle looked liked he had been shot. He gasped, but no other sound came out while he attempted to formulate any reply. Not surprisingly, he got up and rushed out of the room.

Dr. Kranthi, her cousin, threw her a glance with an odd look on his face and followed his father. Rita Naidu held out. "Jay?" she said.

"Yes, Mrs. Naidu," said Ajay's, his voice sounding strained.

"Can I please have a few minutes alone with Sia?"

He hesitated, until Sia said, "It's okay, Ajay. Give us ten minutes."

He nodded reluctantly and left.

Sia and the woman seated in front of her looked at each other quietly.

*"Dharini, wash your hands and come quickly, my child. There's fruit custard waiting for you."*

*Eight-year-old Dharini ran towards the washbasin excitedly, and cleaned up before rushing back to the dining table where her uncle's wife was seated. Her aunt had a smile on her face as she put a large portion of fruit custard in a silver bowl that was reserved particularly for Dharini. Right from the time Dharini began to live at her uncle's house, her aunt always made sure Dharini didn't miss her parents. Whatever she asked, her uncle and aunt would get for her or do for her.*

*"Ow!" said Dharini, as she tried to sit on one of the dining chairs.*

*"What happened?" her aunt asked in concern.*

*"Uncle was showing me a new game last night. He said it won't hurt after a while. But it still hurts," she said, trying to get comfortable while waiting to devour her treat.*

*Her aunt seemed to have frozen. Even her smile had disappeared completely from her face.*

*“Aunty! Custard!” Dharini whined.*

*Her aunt didn’t make any eye contact with her. She simply pushed the bowl towards Dharini and got up to walk away.*

*After that day, rarely did her aunt ever speak to her in an open or friendly way.*

“You were the enabler of my abuse,” Sia told the woman in front of her. “You might not have abused me yourself. But the fact that knowingly you chose to ignore my pain, and decided to not stop your husband—makes you equally guilty.”

“I know,” the woman whispered, looking guilty. “I knew right after I gave birth to my son that the man I married had a sickness,” she said. “I didn’t want to deal with it, because he was kind to me, loved his son, and looked after the people around him. So I rationalized to myself that maybe it wasn’t that bad.”

There were tears in her eyes. “As long as I couldn’t see the children he had been abusing, I didn’t have to think about it. But once it began to happen with you... I... I went into pieces. I’m not proud to admit, but I was busy feeling sorry for myself rather than try to save you.”

Sia didn’t say anything.

“I chose my son’s well being over a little girl’s. I didn’t want him to be shunned or affected in any way because his father was a... a...”

Sia did not want to forgive the woman in front of her. She didn’t deserve it. But somewhere deep in her conscious, she understood how her aunt’s actions or rather lack of actions were driven by the society around her and the love for her son.

“Was it you who decided to get me out of there eventually?” Sia asked, giving voice to a long held suspicion.

Her aunt didn’t pretend to not understand. “Yes. Sita was more than ready to help,” she replied.

“If you were willing to fake my death in a drowning accident to get me away from him, why didn’t you also save Mrs. Sita Chandra who was being shunned by everyone?” asked Sia.

Her aunt had no answer. “I’m sorry,” she said instead. “I know I’m selfish and a coward. Please, forgive me.”



“I might have had a barest possibility of forgiving you when it came to me. But for what you *didn't* do for Ajay's mother, I'll never forgive you for it.”

Her aunt's face fell.

Sia got up from the chair and adjusted Anika in her arms, before striding out. Ajay was waiting for her with a somber look on his face. “Let's go,” he said.

As soon as they stepped out, the reporters lying in wait began questioning them.

“Mrs. Manthena, are you going to live in the house from now or in the future?”

“In the future, yes,” she lied. “Once my uncle and his family are ready to move out to a different place, and settle comfortably.”

Not bothering to answer any more questions, they continued towards their car. Just after they began to drive away from the mansion, Sia turned towards Ajay.

“Ajay?” she said.

“Yes,” he replied, keeping his eyes on the road. She saw that his fingers were clenched on the steering.

She knew why. “Would you like to stop by your childhood home?” she asked softly.

“No,” he replied. He didn't elaborate or speak much during the rest of the journey.

The village held bad memories for both of them. She wondered when—if at all—they would be rid of those memories.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

They reached home after dark.

After they fed Anika, they had dinner. Later, putting their sleeping daughter in the cradle, they lay quietly next to each other on the bed.

Ajay broke the silence. "I wasn't upset with you, Sia," he said quietly.

"I know," she replied. "And I also know that today's visit made us recall our pasts."

"Yes it did. But I was more worried about you," he said. "I saw how the people in the village were watching you. They looked like they wanted to hurt you."

"There was security, Ajay. I don't think anyone would have dared. And even if they had tried something, they wouldn't have succeeded."

He turned towards her. "Sia," he said, urgently. "The security was mostly for your uncle. And they would have been useless if someone was really determined to hurt you."

"Ajay, please. I know you are worried. But, can we not talk about my uncle, or anything related to him right now?" she requested.

Ajay remained quiet. And then, he sighed. "You are right," he said.

Then there was another stretch of silence.

"We should talk," he said. "About things that make us happy. You know what part of the past I'd rather remember and talk about?" he asked.

"Tell me," she said. She was glad he was providing them both with a distraction from the otherwise morbid thoughts.

"The first time we saw each other as adults," he said. There was a small smile on his face along with a hint of a dimple.

"Oh yeah? When was that?" she asked softly, even though every interaction with him was stamped into her brain.

He smiled. "At the gym," he replied.

She returned his smile while recalling their interaction, and her reaction to him.

"The first time I saw you, I knew I had to make you mine," he said.

"Tell me more," she said as she moved closer and rested her head against his chest as she listened to him talk.

"I never felt that way before about anyone," he said. His deep voice rumbled under her ears. "I still remember how beautiful you looked in your sportswear. You were sweaty and had no makeup on, but I was more than

just fascinated by you.”

“And I remember you being shirtless and sweaty yourself,” she teased.

He wrapped his arms around her; enclosing her, and making her feel safe.

“I know all of our interactions were pre-meditated and messed up. But you know what?” he asked.

She lifted her head to look at him watching her with an earnest look on his face. “I wouldn’t change a thing about what happened between us. Because without it, we wouldn’t have had Anika.

She felt torn with conflicted feelings. “I don’t regret her either, Ajay. But I’ll also never forgive myself for deliberately getting impregnated by you.”

He removed the arms from around her and held her face in both his hands. “I want you to know something,” he said, all the laughter and lighthearted manner gone. “I need you to know that I forgave you for that. In fact, quite a long time ago. And most importantly, the hate I had towards you... it wasn’t there the night we made Anika.”

Ajay’s words began to have a healing effect on her.

“You were the only woman I wanted and needed that night. And not just then, but even now,” he said. “And when I say need, I mean it. I need you *and* want you by my side. And I know that having someone as brave as you by my side, I can face anything.”

She recalled the time he had called her brave before. “I’m not that strong or brave,” she said as her eyes blurred with unshed tears.

“Believe me, Sia. You are. The things you had to face, the things you endured, it would have broken most people. But here you are, still fighting.”

Sia’s throat constricted with emotion.

“Baby, all I’m saying is... I want to be fighting alongside you,” he said softly.

She nodded and moved up to kiss him. He parted her lips with his tongue and kissed her back. Soon her heart began to pound and a strong need rose within her.

He seemed to sense it too. Because he pulled away slightly and move his mouth lower.

She moaned as she held him closer.

“Tell me what you need,” he demanded huskily, grazing his lips over the sensitive skin of her neck.

She closed her eyes as she shivered. What did she need?

“I need you,” she whispered. “I need you to bring me peace. Even if it’s just for a while.”

She felt his lips leave her neck to cover her mouth. She wrapped her arms around him, pulling him closer, kissing him like it was the last time they would touch each other.

He kissed her with urgency, like he was going to devour her, and like he wanted them to be one. His hands were everywhere, firm, insistent, seeking and demanding as she melted into him with her heart pounding wildly.

She reached out a hand towards his, to link their fingers, and then squeezed them tight. She felt herself transported to the time when they were lost in each other’s world during the later months of her pregnancy.

They kept their eyes open and on each other, as they conveyed a message that no one else apart from them understood. He was the one person in the world with whom she felt a deep connection to.

She knew she didn’t deserve someone like him, but he was there with her, and he loved her. He was all hers.

She reached between them to tug his sleep shorts, needing more, but he pulled away, shaking his head slightly. “Wait,” he said as he sat up and began to tug her nightdress.

When she was nearly naked, she tried to pull a bedcover on top of her healing body that still showed signs of a recent birth. He stopped her, firmly brushing away her hand holding the covers.

He held her gaze with a tender look. “You are beautiful,” he said, running his fingers over the slightly marred flesh near her stomach. “All of you.”

She bit back tears as he lowered his mouth to her stomach and started kissing her. She knew he should hate her, he should find her loathsome, but he didn’t.

“Tell me,” he asked between kisses. “What do you feel?”

“I feel guilty,” she confessed. “I feel like I don’t deserve you.”

He trailed his kisses lower, to her hip, to her thigh. She gasped as he pushed aside her panties and placed his mouth on her most sensitive part and kissed her. It has been weeks upon weeks since they had even touched in such a way. Mostly because she had been too raw, emotionally and physically due to the birth of their child.

But now, she gripped her hands in his hair, pulling him closer as he continued to work his mouth and tongue over her. It felt so good, she felt like

she would come in just a few seconds.

“Oh god,” she whispered, her hips moving involuntarily as her entire body felt like it was strung so tight that she might snap any moment.

He took his mouth away briefly to get rid of her panties, sliding them down and throwing them aside with rest of her clothes. He used both his hands to push her thighs as wide as possible before resuming his worship of her body.

She began panting loudly; feeling so close to the edge that she could hardly bear his tongue. It felt so good that it almost hurt.

Maybe he sensed that she was close, and he began to move his tongue faster. He held her hips in a painful grip that added to the already intense feeling.

And then, she let go. She saw stars as she came hard in one big explosion. Her breath caught in her lungs as she squeezed her eyes shut while her entire body shook. She felt the lightness, and then the pure, unadulterated relief. She knew that it was only a temporary relief, and that sooner or later, all the problems will be back to weigh her down.

But she had needed this release very badly.

Slowly, she opened her eyes and he was there, waiting, and watching her. She smiled at him, pulling him down on top of her, until he fell, and then kissed him deeply.

“Tell me what else you want,” he asked between feverish kisses.

She could feel his hardness as it pressed into her stomach. “You. I only want you,” she murmured, moving her hands to remove his sleep shorts once again.

This time he didn’t stop her. He held himself slightly higher, aiding her frantic movements as she opened his shorts, and then pushed them down with her hands and feet, taking his boxers along. And then, taking his hard length into her hand, she pulled him even closer.

He hovered at her entrance, one hand tugging her hair back until she focused her eyes completely on him. “I love you,” he declared, before pushing into her, filling her so completely that it almost hurt.

She cried out against his mouth once at the intense pleasure pain. And then, they kissed frantically again. It was a desperate exchange between two lovers who were kept apart for too long. She dug her nails into his back, and his fingers held her hips in a firm grip. He kept moving as though he couldn’t get deep enough, or close enough. His movements became harsh, frantic,

emitting an involuntary cry from her.

He slowed down briefly. "You want me to stop?" he asked while panting out loud.

She shook her head emphatically. "Don't stop," she gasped. "And don't be gentle. Please, I need it."

His eyes were watching her with a mixture of lust, concern and possessiveness.

He began to move in deep and steady strokes. "I almost lost you once. I told you I can't go through that feeling once again. Promise me you'll be safe," he demanded as he pressed his forehead to hers.

She didn't want to think of anything. But she knew he had been worried about her since that morning. She also knew he wanted to hear the words that she wouldn't do anything risky. But she couldn't lie to him. So she gave him the truth. "I wish I could," she whispered. "I wish I could be the wife you deserved or the mother our daughter deserves. I wish I wasn't... this," she said with a broken voice.

He lifted his head and watched her face. "Sia," he rasped, still moving in deep with steady strokes. "When this is all over, I promise you that we are going to have more children. We'll have movie nights, picnics and a lot more. Our house will be the noisiest and the busiest house. The kids and I will nag you so much for each and everything that you'll wonder what you did to deserve such husband or children."

She laughed, even though she felt like crying. Because she craved that picture he painted so very much. "I won't mind," she replied, pulling him down to meet her mouth once again.

\* \* \*

Much later, after he satisfied her in ways only he could ever do, they lay next to each other facing one another. He held her hand, and slowly pulled it towards him to kiss her wrist.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Sure."

"Why did you try to kill yourself?" he asked, tracing the faint silver lines where she had slashed her wrist when she was young.

She had been too young. Maybe thirteen or fourteen, and she wasn't into drugs at that time. So she tried to end her misery by doing a half-assed job of slashing her wrist. She didn't try again because all she got was a long lecture

from her aunt about how disappointed she was with her action, and that it was an extremely ungrateful act.

She contemplated whether to tell him the truth or not. Then she decided to answer him truthfully. "I was tired of feeling helpless due to my recurring nightmares and depression along with extreme paranoia. I tried to end it the only way I knew at that time."

"Do you still feel that way?" he asked.

"Sometimes," she replied honestly to him. "But I can control those thoughts and urges better than before. And now, with Anika and you in my life, I don't feel the same kind of hopelessness as before."

He squeezed her arm reassuringly.

They had been intimate in every possible way, but they still held a lot of secrets from one another. It wasn't very fair, but she wanted him to bare all his secrets to her, even though she wasn't willing to do the same with him.

"Can I ask you something?" she said.

"Anything," he replied.

"Do you still blame me for your mother's death?" she asked. She knew that for the longest time he did. And that feeling couldn't have magically disappeared within a few months.

He was quiet for a couple of seconds before he answered. "No. I don't blame you anymore," he said.

"Why not? Even if I had been speaking the truth at that time, the primary reason for your mother's death is still me."

"No," he said immediately. "The reason for my mother's death was her own decision."

There was anger in his voice as he said that. But she realized that the anger was not directed towards her. It was at his mother.

"Are you still angry with your mother for having taken that decision?" she asked softly.

His jaw was clenched tight, until she placed a comforting hand on his cheek.

"I know it's stupid to be angry with her for so long, but I feel justified," he said.

She didn't say anything. She offered comfort through her silence and encouraged him to speak his heart.

"Unlike your parents, my mother left me by choice. She knew I had no one apart from her, but she left me all the same. She left me with nothing but

this anger for her.”

“No, you rose above it, Ajay. You made your own relationships with people who are now your friends and family.”

The tension on his face slowly faded, until he smiled. “Believe me; I didn’t make it easy for them to do so. Pissed off twelve year olds are a pain in the butt. I was an asshole to Colonel, Harsha and Jo. Until they wore my anger down and forced me to let them in.”

“Tell me about it,” she said, wanting to know more of his life.

His eyes shone with heat. “I would love to. But first, I need to be inside you again.”

Rest of the night, he took her to the unimaginable heights with him. In between breaks, he told her about his life at the orphanage, and then about his life after getting adopted by the Colonel.

Much later that night, they fell asleep, exhausted and wrapped around each other.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Sia, meet Hari. The PI we have been communicating with,” said Ajay.

Sia had spoken to Hari before, over the phone. He had been providing them with regular updates on how her uncle and family were coping after having to give up everything and move out of the Naidu Estate.

Despite a significant reduction in their income, there were still a lot of anomalies in her cousin and uncle’s joint bank account. So far they couldn’t figure out the proper source for that money.

When Hari had called Ajay late in the evening to discuss about some critical information he wanted to convey to them personally, her heart began to pound in anticipation. Shaking Hari’s hand, she ran her eyes briefly over him, assessing him.

She was taken aback with what she saw. Hari was young, maybe around the same age as Ajay and her. Like them, his eyes looked somber. She normally didn’t trust anyone with her secrets, but Ajay had told her that he went with his gut instinct and trusted the man. The man had already done a significant amount of digging about her and her family, so she had no other choice but to go with the flow.

She was more than anxious to hear what he had to say.

“Mrs. Manthena—”

“I’ve told you before, you can call me Sia,” she said.

He nodded. “Sia, I wanted to tell you in person that I’m sorry for what you suffered at the hands of your uncle. And I’m glad Ajay put me up to this investigation. Because what I’m about to tell you... it’s big.”

Her heart rate increased. “Big? What do you mean?”

“You were right about sexual abuse being a premeditated act. And also that sexual predators seek their victims in advance.”

“Who are the victims?” she asked.

“I think they are orphans from the orphanages run by the Naidu Estate. And not just that, I also think your uncle, along with Judge Sundaram... are involved in child abuse as well as child trafficking.”

There was absolute silence.

“Is there proof?” she asked quietly.

Hari shook his head. “Unfortunately, no. Or at least, not yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“From what I understand, they have a very exclusive group. CEO’s,

ministers, judges and even a few police officers. They meet twice in a year in an undisclosed location and have questionable parties where children are involved, after which to eliminate any proof of abuse, these children are shipped off to various countries abroad. Either as sex slaves or as bonded labor.”

“They meet twice a year? How can they not be worried of being caught?” Ajay asked.

“Because they are too complacent,” Sia replied. “They think they are above law with their money and power. I’m sure some of them even think they are above god too. And not even the distant threat of going to hell match up to the need for instant gratification by claiming the innocence of a child.”

Sia’s stomach churned. “How can anyone not know or complain about any of the missing children so far?” she asked.

“I’ve thought about it too. But there are so many missing children each day, it’s easy to chalk it to that. But I have a feeling that some of the missing children might be from the orphanages that Naidu estate runs.”

“We are going to comb through the files starting tonight,” said Ajay. “Even if they have listed the missing children as adopted, we are going to verify each and every case.”

Sia nodded. She knew her uncle was more or less broke with all the estate and trust funds transferred to her. He will be desperate and will want to make money. And if he can make money through his perversions, then why not?

She had to get him. This was the only chance they had.

Hari showed them printouts of calendar entries. “From their private calendars, I see that Judge Sundaram, Jagadish Naidu and some other bigwigs have kept their evening open. The entries marked in some of them simply said. Sundaram. But there is no event being planned in the Judge’s house which is quite large enough to host a big party.”

“This is next month,” Ajay observed with a frown.

“Yes,” replied Hari. “I think if we have someone infiltrate their inner circle by attending that party, we can bust that racket and catch them red handed,” he spoke quietly. “Someone we trust or even one of us.”

A bolt of excitement ran through Sia, and she sat up straight at Hari’s words. She was thinking on the same lines.

“Sia and I can’t take such dangerous risks at this point,” said Ajay.

Sia immediately felt deflated. Ajay was right. They were parents to an

innocent baby. They cannot afford to go to that place personally or talk to anyone related to the child trafficking. It could be dangerous. One thing she understood over the past few weeks was that Anika and Ajay were the most important things in her life now. While she still craved and wanted justice for herself, she had to balance it by keeping her family safe.

“So we give tips to the police?” she asked.

“Yes,” replied Ajay. “Along with that we need to also check if we can get a live video of the happenings in that place.”

“How?”

“We have the technology. So I’m sure we’ll figure something out.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

“Ready, baby?” Ajay asked as he waited outside the main door, pushing the stroller towards the gates.

“A minute,” said Sia as her eyes scanned what he assumed was her checklist on the phone.

“Uh uh,” he admonished her. “Remember our rule? No phones during our walks. Turn it off.”

Sighing, she turned off the phone. “I think I might have missed something,” she said, opening the overstuffed diaper bag and checking the items packed.

Ajay chuckled. “Baby, seriously. Anika will be fine. It’s just a one hour and half walk. We just fed and changed her. And even if we need something, we are only fifteen minutes away.”

Sia nodded and locked the door behind her. And then, frowning at the stroller, she joined him. “Can you hold this for a minute,” she said, handing over the diaper bag to him.

“Baby, this bag is about to burst and weighs a ton. What did you pack?” he asked, laughing.

Sia was too occupied to answer him. She was leaning over the stroller and adjusting the blankets in a canopied way.

*“That way, no one can get closer to her and spread their germs.”* Ajay found Sia’s over-protective parenting style amusing. He was quite protective of Anika too. But Sia... she took it to a whole new level.

He opened the zip and peeked in. Wipes, back-up wipes, half a dozen diapers, a change of clothes, hand sanitizer, a hat, socks, a change of socks, baby formula packets, and a first aid kit. There were other things stuffed into the side pockets! Bottles with warm water most likely.

“What? Nothing for us in here? No snacks and stuff?” he teased.

She paused as though considering it. “There was no place. And besides, if we are hungry, we can simply get back home,” she said.

He laughed. Then pulling her into a bear hug, he kissed her noisily on her lips. “Let’s go. Before this perfect, not-too-hot and not-too-cool time of the day finishes,” he teased.

They had been going on walks pretty regularly from the past few weeks. It was for only an hour. But it was perfect for them to relax and spend time together as a family, leaving their worries, and also switching off from the

outside world.

Ajay opened the gate while Sia pushed the stroller out. Kamala, their help was visiting her family for a week. Somehow with no one to cook, they spent their evenings just like before. Before Anika was born. Ajay spent half a day at his office and the other half working from home. Sia completely worked from home. She delegated most of the operational tasks to her executives in US and to Anjali in India. Whenever they needed her decision on critical things, she dialed in from their home office.

During the evenings, he cooked while she helped with prepping. Even though their problems were still there, they were lost in a safe bubble within their home.

The park was perfect. It was noisy with children laughing and playing in the play area while their mothers and caretakers watched over.

Sia watched the kids wistfully. "I can't wait for Anika to play with all those kids," she said. Observing them closely, she frowned. "Although, some of those things that kids are playing with look a little dangerous. I think they need a safety helmet or something."

Ajay smiled. "Baby, the slide and the swings are fine for the kids."

Sia sighed. "I know that sometimes I go overboard with my paranoia."

"It's not unusual, baby. Apparently all first time parents go through the same." Then he grinned. "And it seems, only a second child can cure that over-protectiveness."

She didn't reply and just smiled wistfully. "Let's take the flowery route. Last time, Anika woke up and watched the trees for quite a while," she said.

They spent the next one hour, walking. Sia spoke at length about her work meeting that day. "My board thinks we've spent enough money marketing in the India and that we should be satisfied that we have surpassed the expected amount of profits. But I feel we've only tapped into maybe 15% of the potential market. There is still a huge potential marketing to the middle class and to the towns, and not just the major cities. People, not just women, want to use natural products for themselves and their families. It's just that we need to market in a way that they have the technical understanding of how are products are made."

"I've read that a lot of people are using Yogic products that are being endorsed by the popular holy man. They are supposedly much cheaper and natural."

"Yeah, Yogic as a company is growing rapidly. But Blush and Yogic

products are totally different. There is a lack of technical understanding of the word natural. There is natural, nature derived, nature identical, and semi natural. Our products at Blush are natural in every sense. We have strict technical guidelines regarding raw materials, quality control and ethical practices. We can't afford to compete with rest of the much cheaper products that simply slap the word natural without adhering to the rules. I—" Sia broke off when loud sirens passed by the normally quiet park and street. "What's happening?" she asked with a frown.

"Don't know. Must be some kind of emergency."

Sia's heart began to thump heavily. "Let's head back," she said.

"We've only been here a little over an hour. We can—"

"Turn on your phone, Ajay," she said, pulling out hers to turn it on. She knew she was letting her paranoia take over. But given the circumstances, she didn't want to take any chances.

Ajay didn't argue, he turned on his phone, even as they began to walk back rapidly towards their house.

"Shit!" Ajay exclaimed, looking at the messages on his phone screen.

"What?" she asked, almost breaking into a run as Ajay hurried towards their home.

As soon as they entered the gates, they saw the police cars and an ambulance.

Harsha and Jo were waiting outside with worry on their faces. As soon as they saw Ajay and Sia with Anika, they look relieved.

"What happened?" Ajay asked.

"Where the hell were you, Jay?" Harsha asked. "Someone tried to break into your home. The footage showed at least a half dozen men surrounding the area. They used some kind of crude explosives to break open your door and a few windows. But luckily, they didn't succeed."

"We went for our daily walk with Anika. We usually keep our cell phones turned off."

Sia was stunned. "What were they after?" she asked.

"We don't know," replied Harsha. "One of the outside sensors picked up on a movement and went off. When neither of you responded to the message sent to your phones, I was contacted. I was at Jo's place at that time. I just got here five minutes ago."

"They must have been observing us. Or they wouldn't know the exact time we'd be out for a walk every evening."

“We can’t be too sure, Jay,” said Harsha in a somber tone. “One of the men wore some kind of a makeshift baby carrier. Almost as if...”

“As if they expected to snatch a child,” finished Sia, her heart thumping at a crazy speed.

“Wait here outside, I’ll check if everything is clear inside,” said Ajay, heading towards the policemen who were scanning the outside and making notes. He spoke to them and opened the door before disappearing inside. Harsha followed behind him as well.

Sia was left alone with Jyotika along with a few policemen that continued to check the perimeter of the house.

“They wanted her,” Sia said aloud to no one in particular. She was still in shock.

“We don’t know that for sure, Sia,” Jyotika replied softly.

“Even if they hadn’t come particularly for her, I can’t take any chances with Anika. Her safety is my utmost priority. What if we were inside our home, or worse approached by these men while we were on the street.”

Jyotika didn’t offer a reply. Mostly because she had considered those scenarios as well. When Jay or Sia didn’t answer their calls, she begged Harsha to take her along to see if they were okay.

Ajay appeared outside the doorway. “It’s all clear. Come inside,” he said, heading towards them to bring Anika and the stroller inside the house.

Fifteen minutes later, the police left after taking down the information needed.

“You think someone knows what we are planning?” Ajay asked.

“I don’t know, Jay. Things are only going to get dangerous for a while until everything is over, Jay. You guys need to be on high alert,” said Harsha.

“But whatever we did so far at Citizen’s Hotel, we did it while hacking into the systems. Not personally or involving anyone so far.”

There was a long stretch of silence, until Anika woke up with a cry.

She was hungry. Sia began to fix her bottle, while Jyotika picked her up from the stroller and put her over the shoulder to pat her. Then as though she thought of something, Jyotika froze.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I-I... just assumed it was okay to pick her up. I was so used to her for a few weeks. I...” she drifted off looking torn and apologetic.

“It’s fine, Jyotika,” said Sia.

Once they settled down to feed Anika, there was another tense silence as

all the gazes fell on Anika, who was a helpless baby they all loved and adored.

Ajay broke the silence. “We’ll hire some private security with guards who will be outside the house 24/7. We’ll have to just limit our walks and outings for the next few weeks until that bust happens.”

“No, Ajay. That’s only going to make Anika miserable.”

“I want her safe, more than anything, Sia.”

“Me too. But not at the cost of her well-being. And how can we trust the guards? They’ll change shifts and come up with excuses on why the people we vetted cannot be with us always. It’s easy to buy loyalty with money.”

“Sia, the guards are only going to be outside. We won’t let them in. I can —”

“So, is Anika never going to play out in the open?”

“It’s only until it’s over. Only three more weeks. “

“We don’t know when it will be,” said Sia. “What if we find nothing at Citizen’s hotel? We are planning on alerting the police and possibly getting some video footage. What if something goes wrong?”

“We don’t have a choice.”

“Jay... Sia...” Jyotika interrupted hesitantly. “Can I suggest something?” she asked.

Sia didn’t reply. She simply nodded.

“Sure Jo,” said Ajay.

“Do you both mind if I take care of Anika until everything settle’s down? She can stay in my house. It’s as huge as your house with lawns and open spaces. My parents and grandparents will have constant vigilance on her. They loved her when she was with us the first four weeks of her life.”

“No, Jo,” Ajay said immediately. “That’s not an option. We want Anika with us. We can’t—”

“Jyotika is right,” Sia interrupted Ajay.

“What?”

“Anika’s safety is critical at this point.”

“I think so too, Sia. But we can’t stay without Anika. Especially you. Sometimes you still wake up every few hours in middle of the night to ensure her breathing is normal!”

“We don’t know how long this whole thing will take Ajay.” Sia answered instead. “We can’t afford to be selfish right now. I prefer to keep Anika safe while also let her be free. Her well-being is important too.”



Ajay didn't reply for the longest time. He simply stared at his wife's face. She had a blank but determined look that he recognized. Nothing was going to change her mind.

Everything inside him rebelled, even if he knew it was the most logical thing to do.

"Okay. But no one outside Jo's family and us should know that Anika is not with us," said Ajay.

Harsha and Jo nodded. Sia was silent. And then she got up, "I'll pack Anika's things for you to take. I prefer if you take her when no one is watching the house. The police checked the outside already."

Sia began to pack a large suitcase. Ajay joined her to help. They both didn't talk while they quietly, put each and every item into the suitcase.

Thirty minutes later, the four of them along with Anika stood inside the enclosed parking garage. Hugging her close and kissing her, Sia handed Anika to Jyotika. "Please take care of her," she said softly.

"I will," Jyotika replied reassuringly.

Ajay didn't speak for several seconds. Then taking a deep breath, he finally relented. "If we have missed packing anything, I'll bring it later," he said.

Soon, Harsha and Jyotika left with Anika.

Sia went straight to bed. She lay down holding a small baby sock in her hands.

Ajay joined her a few minutes later. He didn't say anything and simply lay behind her and held her.

Her body began to tremble as she cried softly. "God. I miss her so much already. Sometimes I wonder whether all this is really worth it. Especially if it is keeping her away from us," she said.

He kissed her ear as he held her tighter. "It is worth it. She will understand when we tell her why we had to leave her for a while. It was for her safety."

Sia didn't respond. Her body shook with emotion. Possibly heartbreak.

He felt devastated too. But he knew he had to hold it together for the sake of his wife. He held her until her body stopped trembling and she slipped into an exhausted sleep.

\* \* \*

The next morning, when Sia woke up, she felt empty.

The cradle next to her was laid bare with missing bedding and Anika's favorite toys. Her heart felt like it was being ripped out.

She must have been crying because Ajay woke up and turned her towards him.

"Baby, Jo and her family will treat her like one of their own. And you can see her on camera every day."

"I know," she whispered. When Jyotika had seen them return from the park, her gaze had fallen on Anika first. Her body visibly relaxed when she realized Anika was safe.

Sia wondered why she couldn't be like Jyotika. Sweet and giving.

Jyotika would also probably have a big heart to be able to forgive a person like her uncle.

If she were more like Jyothia, then Anika would have been safe and with her.

But unfortunately, she was still messed up beyond the thought of any kind of forgiveness when it came to her uncle.

He was a pedophile and a possible child trafficker. The fact that she held him responsible for distancing her from Anika only added to the hate she held against him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

It was D-day. Sia felt both anxious and restless.

“We already have the surveillance in place, Sia. The idiots practically use default camera settings in that hotel. We hacked into it and have covered every angle. So just relax.”

She simply nodded even though Ajay’s words sounded confident.

But two hours before the event, they received bad news.

“What’s wrong?” she asked after Ajay finished speaking on the phone to Harsha. His face looked tensed.

“The cameras. They turned blank even though there is no power outage. And even if there was one, a hotel that big always has a backup.” Ajay stared at the information on his phone. “I’ll have to head to my office to find out what’s happening,” he said.

She just remained still. “You think that they are onto us?” she asked.

“No. Not us, specifically. But they might have done something as precautionary measures. But no matter what, the police will get a tip and be notified in the next three hours to raid that place. So things would proceed according to the plan.”

“Getting video proofs is critical here, Ajay.”

“I know. That’s why I wanted the overhead cameras to work along with sending in Varun.”

Sia frowned. “I’m not sure if it’s safe enough for Varun to be in there if they are onto us.”

“I agree. That’s why I’m going to check with a few others on what’s going on in there.”

He hurriedly began to throw on a t-shirt and pulled up his pants. “Get ready and come with me. I’m not comfortable leaving you here by yourself,” he said.

Sia shook her head. “No. I’ll be fine. I think I’ll just be a nervous wreck if I’m outside. I’ll just stay home and catch on my sleep if possible. You know I was awake most of the night.”

“Sia, I’m not sure—”

“Ajay, I have a car. I’ll drive to your office if I really need to.”

Ajay sighed. “Okay. I’m going to keep you posted, no matter how this turns out. And if we find out they are onto us, I’ll ask Varun to pull back,” he said.

Combing his hair with his fingers, he grabbed his wallet and car keys, and hurried outside.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Sia dialed Varun's phone, feeling guilty as hell.

\* \* \*

Thirty minutes later, with guilt and nervousness still churning in her stomach, Sia was ready to go.

Her phone began to ring, causing her to jump. When she looked at the screen, she saw Ajay's number displayed on the screen. She let it continue to ring, until the call eventually got cut. Hopefully, Ajay would think she was sleeping like she had told him.

She also saw that her phone was filled with text messages.

***Baby, are you sleeping? Call me when you get this message. I hope you are not worrying too much.***

***Baby, we are still trying to find the glitch in the system. We think they turned off the security footage in the entire hotel for today. I'm not too sure about Varun going in there without us knowing for sure.***

As she read through the messages, she was wracked with further guilt. But she knew he'd go crazy if he knew what she was up to.

It was a huge risk on her part to go ahead with her own plan for that day, but she couldn't help herself. She couldn't take any chances of losing the opportunity to catch those monsters red-handed. When she had spoken to Varun about it, he felt the same.

Leaving behind her phone, she picked up another temporary one and placed it inside her purse.

It was showtime.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Varun walked towards the exclusive hotel where his assignation awaited.

His stomach felt sick, thinking about what he would be forced to do. Over the next few hours, he had to pretend to participate in one of the most deviant acts, without resorting to the violence that lurked inside him.

It was going to be very hard. Especially because, most of the nights, with every nightmare that plagued his sleep, a greater need burned somewhere in the darkest corners of his mind. The kind that made him question his own humanity.

He wanted to rip apart the limbs and tear open the stomachs of the monsters that destroyed the innocence of children. He especially wanted to cut off the extremities that touched the children.

Each night, he cut himself deeper, to lay rest to some of those dark urges. The only thing that stopped him from cutting even deeper was the possibility of seeing devastation on Jagadish Naidu's face, when he would lose everything.

Varun couldn't wait to see that bastard in jail, where he would watch his entire world drift slowly and mercilessly from him. Just like all the innocent victims who were devastated by his perversions. Jagadish Naidu needed to know what it meant to be in pain. To suffer, and to be in desolation.

Sia was right.

No quick bullet from either of them would deliver the monster to the hell he deserved. By catching him in the act and providing proof to the world, he would lose the very reason he lived for. Respect and admiration from the fawning public.

Revenge.

That word was solely responsible for preventing him from blowing his own head during the past two years. When Sia uttered that word to him, he clung to it. That was the only word that held some kind of sanity, and gave him a purpose to live.

Donning the mask that he carried in his hand, he approached the back entrance of the hotel.

He came across a man wearing a security guard's uniform. He knew he didn't have to talk. He simply took out the RFID Key card from his back pocket and flashed it towards him.

There was exclusive access card for the event. With Ajay's help, they were able to configure the setting of all the accesses to one single master key card.

As soon as he scanned the key, there was a beep and the light turned green as expected. There was also a mandatory retina scan that again turned green. All the required information was pre-fed into the database by Ajay and his friend.

"This way, sir. You will be escorted inside."

Varun nodded in response and walked towards the opulent hallway of the hotel. There, another uniformed man wearing a similar mask such as him, waiting inside. When Varun reached him, the man nodded and led him deeper into the hotel. After navigating through several pathways, they arrived in front of an innocuous looking door. The man opened the door and indicated inside.

Varun walked in, and then stopped short as the sight that met his eyes nearly made him drop to his knees. It was the first time in his adult life he was witnessing evil in its true form.

The men in front of him didn't have a soul, a conscience, or even an ounce of remorse or compassion for what they were currently doing.

They were snatching away the innocence of several small children who were in various stages of undress. Some of those children couldn't have been more than six years old. There were also half-naked terrified children, hunched over and held in cages on one side of the room, surrounded by masked men.

Varun felt a thick suffocating rage spreading quickly through his body, replacing every feeling, every emotion, and every last thought that crossed his mind. All he saw was the need to wreck vengeance on those monsters.

"I'm going to kill them right now with my bare hands," he growled.

"Varun," Sia's soft voice cut through his rage. "Please listen to me," she implored through the concealed headphones. "I know this is not going to be easy. But we need to record them and catch them red-handed."

"I just can't, Sia," he gritted through a clenched jaw. His fists tightened to the point of pain to the sides. "I want to—"

"Please, the police should be on their way. Just distract them, and help us incriminate them. Please!"

He didn't reply. Taking a deep breath, he walked towards the main seating.

“What would you like to have, sir?” a server asked as he held out a small tray with a notepad.

“I don’t drink.”

“I meant, what would be your choice for the evening, sir,” the server elaborated, causing Varun to clench his fists to stop himself from knocking the masked server’s teeth.

“Children,” he spat out.

There was a laugh behind the mask. “Sir, all our stock here is under aged and classify as children. You need to be more specific.”

“Male. Twelve to fourteen years,” Varun replied curtly. He needed a child that was old enough to understand and also maybe play along with him.

The server nodded and left after making a few notes.

Varun scanned his surrounding from under the mask. He turned his head slowly, because his mask held a tiny recorder within it. It also had an in-built facial and voice recognition software that displayed a person’s picture alone with their name and some of the public data.

The recorder was from Ajay. The facial recognition in-built glasses were from the hacker, Mafiaboy. Sia had paid a fortune to the hacker for it through an anonymous bank account.

The hacker must have figured out that what they were doing must be illegal. But being young and also dabbling in illegal hacking, he readily offered. He was extremely skilled, and mostly relied on technologies that were already developed. He apparently simply cloned the existing technologies and added his own touch to them.

Varun continued scanning the room. Amongst various soft conversations, there was one voice the recognition software alerted to.

Judge Sundaram Saini.

The main kingpin who had organized the event. A few feet away from him, was another man with a stately posture and distinctive grey streaked hair. Varun recognized him immediately. He didn’t need the voice recognition software.

The sudden increase in his heart rate was the indicator.

The grey haired man held a boy on his lap. Unlike other children, the boy wasn’t crying or struggling. He was watching the man with a hypnotic look. Varun almost broke down when he recognized himself in that boy.

There was a time during his childhood when he hadn’t believed in monsters. Until he was seven, he was brave enough to sleep on his own or go

wherever he wanted. But later, he met a man, and realized that monsters did exist. And that they weren't ugly creatures that hid under the beds or closets. They lived among humans, destroying innocent lives.

Varun's body shuddered as he recalled some of the atrocities done to his fragile seven year old body by the very monster in front of him.

But now, he wasn't helpless. He knew that to defeat a monster, he needed to become one. Even though his skin crawled at what he would be forced to do, he knew that there was no other way.

Taking a deep breath, he walked straight towards the hell, where he found the lowest depths of human depravity.

"Ah, welcome." said a slightly drunk voice of the judge. The judge was laughing at the attempts of a sluggish and obviously drugged little boy trying to squirm away from his lap.

Bile churned inside Varun's stomach when he heard the judge's laugh. He couldn't get over the judge's picture with his family that included several grandchildren.

The therapist that Sia had forced Varun to speak with had told him that most people who sexually abused children weren't mentally ill. They often led normal lives, and were married, and even had sexual relations with their spouses.

Varun wondered how the judge's family would react to the current video recording.

Tearing his eyes away, he looked at the man seated next to him, the one he hated the most in the world. That man didn't enjoy tormenting his prey. He preferred to employ more nefarious methods to lure them into a false sense of security. It was quite obvious to most sane adults that the way Jagadish Naidu was touching and fondling the child on his lap didn't bode well. Varun recalled being in a similar position with the same monster during his childhood — but the adults around him weren't sane.

"Pity, we couldn't get a lot more of the younger ones for our guest's enjoyment," the judge remarked.

"More children missing around the same timeframe would definitely raise eyebrows. Even if they are orphans."

That very conversation was enough to get them arrested.

Varun shook his head, choking back the fury as he felt some kind of blackness settling over him. He wanted to lose control and kill the two men in front of him.



A small sobbing sound broke through his thoughts.

“Sir, your request,” said a masked uniformed man. He was accompanied by a boy completely hunched over, trying to calm the sobs escaping him.

“I think we have enough,” Sia’s voice broke through Varun’s torturous screams in his mind. “Get out of there Varun. You don’t have to do anything else.”

Varun ignored Sia. Until the police arrived and rescued the children, he refused to leave them in the hellhole.

Meantime, not to raise any suspicion, Varun slowly went towards the boy. The boy continued cowering and sobbing quietly. What struck Varun odd was the clothing and the general look of the boy. He was delicate to the point of frail. He had a jagged hairstyle as though his hair was growing out recently after having shorn it. Varun could even see blue veins on the boy’s painfully bony hands, making him look almost sickly.

Did the monsters not even spare the sick children?

“Sir, on your request, you mentioned that you preferred a private room to a show.”

Varun opened his mouth to answer. He felt his voice to be literally stuck at the sights and sounds around him. He cleared his throat. “I’m not the type to enjoy exhibition. I need privacy,” he gritted out.

Listening to his words, the boy’s sobs intensified.

“VIP rooms are arranged towards the back of the hall, sir.”

Jerking his head in a nod, and even though everything inside him rebelled, Varun moved closer to the boy. “Come with me,” he requested him softly.

The boy shook his head vigorously.

Moving even closer, “I’m not going to hurt you,” he rasped out.

The boy didn’t respond, making Varun feel helpless. He needed the boy’s cooperation. A lot depended on that. He couldn’t simply drag the boy to a corner to explain. Not only was it wrong to frighten an already terrified child, but Varun couldn’t even touch the child to offer him comfort.

“Sir, do you need help dragging him to the room?” someone asked.

“No! Don’t touch him,” Varun snapped vehemently.

At his tone, a lot of heads turned his way. Some even stared for long. He could feel their suspicion leaking even through the masks.

“Come with me!” he ordered the boy in a firmer tone, hoping the child would be terrified enough to jump at his command. To his surprise, the

sobbing stopped and the boy whipped his head up to glare.

“I won’t!” hissed out a feminine voice.

Varun was so shocked, that he couldn’t react for a couple of seconds. Even though the frail thin body and the jagged cut resembled that of a boy’s, Varun was pretty sure it was a girl. That news didn’t matter. He needed the help of that girl, and quickly.

Bracing himself, and with a harsh look on his face, he bent over, and threw her frail body over his shoulder. The girl put up quite a fight, yelling and slapping him and clawing his face around the mask, wherever she could reach. Yet he didn’t stop her. Couldn’t stop her. His body shuddered at the contact. He hated that he was touching another human and that too in the role of an aggressor.

He was led towards the private rooms by the uniformed man. When he reached inside the room, he dumped the girl on the bed, and went back to check the lock on the door. His entire body trembled and broke into sweat. It took a great effort but he moved back towards the bed, his vision blurring.

“D-don’t hurt me,” a voice broke through his blank mind, reminding him of the other presence in the room.

He pulled his mask up, and shook his head hard, trying to get rid of the blurriness. Finally a vision comprising of the small terrified form became clear.

“P-please,” she begged.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he rasped out.

She didn’t believe him. She curled up in a fetal position on the bed, making her painfully thin body look even frailer.

“Please,” he begged. “Listen to me. I need you to help me.”

Her body continued trembling.

He moved a couple of steps away from the bed and crouched down on the floor next to it. “My name is Varun,” he began. “I need your help,” he repeated. “I need your help to save the other children outside. I promise, I’m going to get you all out of here. I’m not one of them. I’m not one of the bad guys. I never harmed any children.”

Listening to those words, the girl’s body lost some of the tension, and her sobs slowly subsided.

“Please listen to me carefully. There’s going to be violence out there in a few minutes when the police arrive. I need you to keep the children within this room and lock all of you from the inside.”

“W-what?” she asked, sitting up and watching him huge eyes.

“Please listen carefully. I’m going to get the children here. I don’t know how many of them are out there. But I want you to remain here with them and not open the door until I ask you to. Alright?”

“O-okay,” she whispered.

Then moving away from the bed, he went out of the room and shut the door.

“Varun, please. Don’t,” Sia’s voice begged. “They might be armed, Varun.”

“I don’t care anymore. I need to get those children away.” He knew he sounded deranged. His rational thoughts had shut down the moment he’d seen the deadened eyes of the drugged children in the arms of monsters.

He marched towards the familiar evil bastard first. Quickly he dragged the child away from his lap. In the next instant, he ripped away the mask, revealing Jagadish Naidu’s identity. He did the same with judge Sundaram.

“What the hell?” boomed the judge’s voice.

“We have been compromised. I think we have an undercover police officer here,” a panicked shout emerged. Before he knew it, there was chaos.

He knocked down the people surrounding him with sheer brute strength. And he quickly began to grab all the children. He picked three of them in his arms and ran towards the back room. A few other children followed.

“Listen to me, all of you. I want you all to hide in this room until I say so,” he told them in an urgent tone, even though he had a feeling that the entire place wasn’t safe enough.

The girl was standing and waiting inside the room. Even though she still looked terrified, she pulled the children in.

Varun could only make two more rounds with more children in his arms. When one of the masked guards tried to stop him, Varun caught his throat and crushed it, until the man collapsed.

During the third run, he was outnumbered.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Sia's heart pounded as she got out of the car to run towards the hotel, a few blocks away. She didn't have any time to spare, but she called Ajay. Before he could greet her, she spoke to him first.

"Ajay. I'm outside Hotel Citizen. Varun is already in there, capturing proof of my uncle's activities. I know you asked us not to go ahead with the plan. But I did. I'm sorry."

"Sia!" Ajay's voice shouted frantically. "Don't you dare do anything stupid!"

"I'm going inside, Ajay."

"Sia, don't! Don't go in there by yourself. I'm on my way."

Tears began to roll down her eyes. "I love you, Ajay. If anything happens... tell Anika I'll always love her. "

"Shut up! And stay where the hell you are. I'm warning you. DO NOT MOVE!" he roared out.

She ended the call and continued running towards the entrance of the hotel. There were guards outside. She had asked the hacker to cut off any communication from the inside. Scanning her master RFID card and retina, she was led inside. Once the uniform guard led her to where the event was held, they heard shouts and sounds of struggle from the inside.

The guard froze.

The doors were completely locked to not let anyone out. She initiated her master key and unlocked them. As soon as she entered, she shut the door again.

"How did you come in!" a panicked voice shouted.

"Let us out!" another panicked voice shouted.

Before they could surround her, she pushed them away, trying to find Varun.

"Varun!" she screamed.

There was no answer.

"Get her!" someone shouted.

Just then, in middle of the room, she saw Varun overpowered by half a dozen men who were punching him repeatedly. There were a few other guards too next to him, most of them lay unconscious.

Before she could go near Varun, one of the uniformed guards rushed towards her direction. Immediately, her body braced itself and automatically

took on a combat position. She waited until the guard was close, and stepped aside. As soon as he was thrown off balance, falling to the side, her fist connected with his stomach. The man went down with a whoosh of exhaled air and landed hard on the floor.

There were two more guards circling her. From the corner of her eye, she saw one guard, edging around the outside of the room, hoping to come at her from behind. Another was striding towards her to attack her head on. She tackled the one who was in front of her. She smashed his face with a sweeping high kick, breaking his nose, and causing a good amount of blood to be spurted on her as well as on the man.

Not pausing, she twisted around, landing a blow to the guard behind her on his abdomen, until he doubled over. She kicked him again in the stomach to ensure that he remained on the floor.

Immediately, a few more guards tackled her at the same time, getting a few kicks in. It hurt. She almost doubled down in pain. She ignored the pain and attacked them back with speed and ferocity on her side, soon they all lay groaning on the floor.

There weren't any other guards left. Any help from outside was also blocked since the door was locked. Six guards were still holding onto Varun who was thrashing against them. They didn't leave him to tackle her. They knew Varun was a bigger threat than her. Listening to his roars, they knew if they let him go, he would tear them apart with his bare hands.

"Let us outside, you bitch," a well-dressed masked man shouted at her. He was one of the 'patrons'. That man was taller than her and built quite strong with bulging muscles in the neck, powered mostly likely through steroids. He looked as though he was trying to lunge at her even though he was still a good six feet away from her.

She knew that behind his mask, he must be a pathetic coward, trying to show off near his perverted cronies. She knew he wouldn't have the courage to attack her. So she decided to use him as leverage.

She calmly removed her gun from her purse and pointed it at his knees. Then not bothering to warn him, she pulled the trigger.

A high-pitched scream rent the air as blood spurted out from the wound.

"That bitch shot me!" the man squealed like pig. "She shot me! Kill her!" he ordered, sobbing out loudly.

"If anyone moves, the next bullet will be inside his head," she warned in a chillingly calm tone.

It worked. No one dared to move.

“Remove your masks and stand back,” she ordered. When they hesitated, “Right now!” she snapped.

They all complied. Including her uncle.

Slowly, she headed towards her uncle, standing in front of him. Then sweeping her eyes over him in disdain, she shook her head. “Tsk, ts. You really surprised me. I thought it would be much more difficult, in fact impossible to catch you in the act. But seems like you are just a dumb, pathetic offender who would do anything to get your vile fix. Child trafficking? Is there no low you can go?” she asked.

Her uncle’s eyes flared wide in anger, but he remained quiet. A fat man standing next to him, hissed out his threat. “You will regret this,” he warned.

She directed her cold look his way. “I already do,” she said with a controlled smile. “It should have been your kneecap I shot.”

“Do you know who I am!” the fat bastard, exclaimed.

“Yes, Judge Sundaram. You are the person responsible for all this. The mastermind behind the ‘thriving business’.”

There was fear in his eyes, but he puffed up his chest. “You can’t do anything to me. To any of us. We are not ordinary men,” he grated out.

“Definitely not men,” she answered him. “A real man wouldn’t have to rape an innocent.”

Meantime, Varun got up on his shaky legs and moved closer to her holding the mask that held the camera. His face was a bloodied mess. When he approached her, she took out her phone from her purse and gave it to him.

“Varun, take the rest of the children to safety. The police and reporters will be here shortly,” she said.

She began to rip out the masks from everyone’s face.

“You are making a big mistake,” the judge cried out. “And all for these nobodies. We can pay you how much ever you want. We can—”

“Shut up,” she said quietly. The pure menace shining from her eyes was enough for him to follow her order.

“They are innocent children. Not nobodies. And definitely not commodities to be sold to the highest bidder.”

The judge clenched his hands.

Sia took the mask from Varun’s hands and raised it towards the ‘esteemed’ guests, clearly recording everything.

“I’m going to ask each one of you to tell me your name and your

profession along with information on whether you have a family or not.

“Let’s start with my loving uncle first,” she said as she pointed the mask towards him.

Her uncle was quiet.

“Do you need assistance?” she asked. “Don’t make me shoot you between your legs like I badly want to,” she threatened softly.

Her uncle took a deep breath. “My name is Jagadish Naidu. I am a...”

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Varun searched the place for any remaining children. He had already taken most of them to the back room. But he wanted to ensure that all of them were safe before he could stay with Sia while she tackled the men.

As he approached a darkened corner, where a large cage lay open, he noticed a small naked boy, huddled and shivering inside. The boy was so small that Varun could have easily missed him. Only the small muffled sobs gave an indication to his presence.

Varun approached the cage slowly and crouched in front of it, at a distance. He tried not to appear threatening with his six feet four inches frame and his bleeding face.

“I won’t hurt you. You are safe now. Please come out.” Varun spoke softly and tried to maintain eye contact to instill some amount of trust into the obviously frightened child.

The boy got up slowly and when he saw Varun, he began to rush towards him.

Varun braced himself as the little boy’s body collided with his chest, almost knocking him back. The little boy clutched him tightly, shivering against him.

Varun’s body shuddered at the contact, and he tried hard to resist his natural instinct of wanting to throw the child away from him. Instead, he placed a comforting arm around the boy.

“It’s going to be okay,” he said, fully knowing that the days of the little boy’s hell had just begun. He wished wholeheartedly that he could take away the pain and nightmares that would follow the little boy for years.

“I want my mummy.” The boy’s voice vibrated against Varun’s chest.

That simple request reminded Varun, yet again, of how young and innocent the little boy was.

“You are going to be home soon. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure you get back to your mother.”

The boy clung to Varun as he carried him towards the back room.

Knocking the door, “Open,” he ordered firmly.

“Who is it?” a feminine voice asked.

“It’s me again,” he said, feeling stupid. He didn’t want to give his real name. It didn’t matter if the girl knew, but he didn’t want anyone to know his identity. Unlike Sia, he wasn’t willing to testify against his uncle regarding



his abuse.

He felt it would only make him feel abused all over again.

The door was opened by the girl. She looked frightened, but she immediately stepped aside to let him in.

Varun gently let down the boy in his arms on the floor. “Stay here. You see this girl here?” he said. “She’s my friend. She will take care of you all until I’m back.”

The boy didn’t say anything. But he didn’t cling to Varun either.

Varun looked towards the girl and held out the phone. “Call your parents or someone to let them know where you are,” he said softly.

She shook her head. “I-I can’t,” she said, trembling visibly.

“You don’t have anyone?”

She didn’t reply.

He looked at the distraught girl’s face. “How old are you?” he asked.

“Nineteen,” she replied.

Varun was stunned. The girl barely looked twelve with her small pale face and a tiny frame.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

The girl didn’t reply. Her face indicated that she didn’t want to give out any information either.

Varun was frustrated and worried. He wanted to help the children remain safe and also contact their parents or guardians. But he couldn’t stay to make those calls. Sia was alone out there, with a room full of animals that wanted her blood.

“Listen to me,” he said sternly to the girl in front of him, and watched her body stiffen. “You are an adult. I need you to behave like one. Take this phone and call up whoever can help get you home from here. And also call on behalf of the children here. I need to go out to help my friend.”

The girl stayed silent.

“Do you understand?” he snapped, when the girl continued to remain stubbornly mute. “This is not just about you. The children here are frightened and need to be safe.”

Her face fell, and she looked ashamed. “I’ll call,” she said softly, taking the phone from his hands.

“Lock up again and don’t open unless it’s the police this time,” he said. Swiftly, he headed back to Sia.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

“Jay, slow down or you’ll crash us,” warned Harsha’s voice next to him. Ajay ignored his friend’s warning his mind consumed with worry and fear.

Thirty minutes ago, when he received a call from Sia, he realized that she decided to go headfirst into danger. He didn’t wait a second after that. He began barking out instructions to Harsha, Hari and everyone else working on his team to call the police and also the media to the Citizen Hotel earlier than planned.

“Jay!” Harsha cried out as their car narrowly missed, yet another truck.

Ajay focused on the road as he drove the car like a manic towards where Sia was. His breath came out in harsh pants as fear seeped from his bones. His hands were shaking like a leaf on the steering wheel and sweat began to pour out of his skin.

His heart was thumping fast and hard.

*Please let her be okay. Please let her be okay.* He began chanting that in his mind over and over.

Sia had to be okay. He did not dare to think of any other possibilities.

By the time he arrived in front of the hotel, the place was already surrounded by police cars and media. He simply shut off the engine and got out of the car, to run towards the entrance of the hotel. “Sia!” he began to shout. “Where’s my wife!”

A few people recognized him as he ran around crazily, shouting Sia’s name over and over.

“Ajay, your wife is safe. She’s inside with the children,” a man in police uniform replied.

“Have you seen her? Is she okay?” Ajay demanded. “Take me to her right now!”

Ajay blindly followed behind the officer towards a large lobby. He could finally see Sia waiting at a distance with a few children while a few policewomen stood guard around them.

“Sia!” Ajay shouted.

Her eyes met his, and he saw her mouth form his name as she called out to him softly. Relief blasted into his heart as he rushed to her side.

“Are you alright?” he demanded, as soon as he reached her. His eyes began running over her, along with his hands, looking for any visible injuries. He could see bruises beginning to form on her face and on her arms.

“I’m fine, Ajay,” she reassured quietly.

He wanted to yell at her and chew her out for pulling a dangerous stunt without even cluing him in but he controlled himself. She had been through a lot that day.

So instead, he held her hand as they waited for the hellish day to end.

\* \* \*

Much later, after Sia had been questioned for hours together by the police and the media, they called it a day.

“It’s over, Sia. By getting your uncle caught, you not only proved him guilty of being a child abuser, but also a child trafficker. Congratulations!” said their lawyer.

“Thank you. Can we resume talking tomorrow? I’ve had a long day.”

“I’ll call you when Sia is able to speak with you again tomorrow, Dheeraj,” Ajay told the lawyer he had hired to represent them in the possible criminal case against Sia's uncle.

“Of course, Jay. I understand. Sia has been through a lot today.”

Ajay drove them back home. Sia didn’t speak much. She simply rested her head on the car seat, closing her eyes. As soon as they reached home, she got down the car and headed inside.

Locking the doors and turning back the security, Ajay headed upstairs, towards Sia.

He found her sitting on their bed. Staring blankly towards a wall.

In two quick steps, Ajay sat next to her and held her close. He began rocking her gently.

He remained quiet, so did she.

\* \* \*

Sia clung to Ajay, drawing every ounce of comfort and strength he could give her. Closing her eyes, she cried silently.

She mourned her lost childhood. She mourned the lost childhood of the children they rescued that day. More than that, she mourned the lost childhood of those children that cannot be saved.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

The bright sun shining from the windows stung Sia's swollen eyes.

She was lying on the bed, still wrapped up in Ajay's arms. Her body ached everywhere. Not just from the position she was lying in, but also due to the blows she had taken during the fight, the previous night.

She supposed the pain was good. Because apart from the physical pain, she felt empty and dead inside.

She couldn't understand it.

For the longest time, she had dreamt of the day when she would finally get her retribution against the monster that destroyed her soul. She had always imagined that it would finally bring peace to her. That it would calm down the burning need to lash out at the world.

But somehow it all felt empty when she achieved it.

Ajay began stirring next to her. He opened his eyes slowly, and within a second, his gaze became alert. His eyes fell on her immediately and he began scanning her face thoroughly. His gaze lingered for a couple of seconds on her eye that felt sore. It was blackened probably due to one of the blows she took during the fight.

Rage and pity filled Ajay's eyes as he took in everything.

The rage she understood, the pity she loathed. "Stop it," she said.

Ajay didn't say anything. He continued looking at her quietly.

Pushing away from his arms, she sat up. "Stop looking at me with pity, Ajay," she said.

"It's not pity, Sia," he replied softly. The tone in which he spoke also indicated he was being careful not to agitate her.

"You are trying to pity me. And you are also looking at me like I'm going to snap any moment."

There was a considerable pause. "I'm just worried about you," he said.

"Why?" she asked. "Like everyone said, it's finally over. Don't you think that too? That after getting my uncle and his cronies arrested, I'd be at peace?"

She met with silence again. A long loaded one.

Not waiting for his answer, she got down from the bed.

"You are hurt, Sia," Ajay called out to her. She didn't know if he was referring to her physical hurt or the mental feeling. "You need to rest and catch some more sleep."

She gave him her profile. "I can't. Not with these clothes that remind me of last night. I feel unclean in them," she said, as she continued walking towards the bathroom.

\* \* \*

Ajay watched Sia as she walked towards the bathroom with stiff movements.

He wanted to assist her, but he knew she wanted to be left alone. He continued watching as she threw away the previous night's clothes, before she stepped inside their bathroom for a shower. Before she disappeared from his view, he noticed the obvious bruises and cuts on her body.

Rage took over him, followed by the feeling of helplessness. His rage was directed at the people who had hurt her. He felt pent up and lingering anger towards her as well for putting herself in danger the previous night.

He knew she didn't need him to lecture her about her safety and the risk she took. She simply needed him for strength and for solace.

The bathroom door banged open, cutting off his thoughts. Sia walked out, and headed towards him with a determined look on her face. She was wet and completely naked. His body responded immediately while his mind remained tormented with worry and anger.

Sia crawled on top of the bed, and then over him. "I can't get the images out of my head," she said as she pulled at his clothes. "Please, make me forget," she begged when he remained unmoving under her.

She ripped some of his shirt buttons in a hurry. But he didn't move to assist her. He knew he would be out of control the moment he touched her. Especially with the things brewing inside his head.

"Touch me," she demanded. "Take away the filth from my mind and leave me with the memories I need."

"You are hurt, Sia," he rasped out as he clenched his fists to the sides.

"Don't you dare reject me," she said. "Take me right now," she commanded.

Her mouth met his neck as she kissed him in need and desperation. Unable to control himself, he grabbed her by her arms, and pulled her close, until their bodies were crushed together. He knew he would leave more bruises with this encounter. Because she wouldn't allow him to be gentle with her.

She looked extremely volatile. And so was he.

He didn't want to hold back. He wanted to feel her warmth. He wanted to reassure to himself that she was safe. And so, he pushed her underneath him, covering her body with his.

When she flinched at the contact, he made one last attempt to hold onto whatever ounce of control he could. But it was a losing battle.

"Don't hold back," she warned him, digging her nails into his arms, and knocking his control completely off the axis.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Ajay woke up with a start.

Sia was sleeping next to him, with visible shadows under her eyes. The clock next to their bed displayed that it was half past noon.

They had only been asleep for a couple of hours. Considering the stress and trauma they had undergone over the past few hours, he should have also been fast asleep. Yet, he felt extremely alert. He couldn't explain it, but he felt a great sense of uneasiness.

Gently, removing the hand curled around his chest, he slipped out of the bed. He watched Sia's face as he threw on his clothes. When he was sure that her breathing remained even, he walked out from their room and went towards the media room.

He turned on the television, and kept switching the channel, until he found the one he was looking for. Varun hadn't wasted any time. Last night's live video was already on the news.

*“—people are in utter shock,” said the newsreader. “Last night there was an exclusive event held inside the Citizen Hotel where various influential members of the society were present.”*

*Images flashed on the screen. Images of a large group of well dressed men with masks on. Adding contrast to them, within the opulent surroundings were skinny and barely clothed children. Most of the children were on the masked men's laps looking lethargic and drugged.*

*“In a shocking sting operation conducted by a secretive social service group, several children were rescued. Not only were those children being abused, but they were also planned on being trafficked to other locations soon. Police were able to retrieve the passports and visas of several other countries as proof.*

Ajay kept waiting for some indication of the identity of the people involved to be revealed but it didn't happen. Only a vague statement of several arrests having been made was read out loud.

Disgusted, Ajay turned off the television and dialed a number on his phone.

It was answered immediately.”Jay. I've been trying to reach you. How is Sia doing?”

“Did you see the news?” Ajay asked.

“Yes.”

“No indication whatsoever.”

“I know. Jagadish Naidu has been arrested along with the others. Including judge Sundaram.”

“You know that won’t matter soon.” Ajay’s hand clenched as he tried to control the turmoil inside him.

There was a long pause on the line. And then, “Yes,” came in a quiet reply. “But please Jay. Don’t do anything rash,” Harsha warned him. “At least not yet. Until we try for some more time.”

Ajay took a deep breath and let it out, relaxing a little. He was glad he had someone like Harsha as his best friend and brother. Harsha was the only one who would ground him when the irrational thoughts took over.

“How is Sia?” Harsha asked.

“Sleeping right now.”

“How is she coping after last night?” Harsha probed for a better answer.

“Not good. And that is after knowing that the person who hurt her is behind the bars. You can only imagine what would happen later.”

“Jay, let’s try to stop it from happening. We can still speak with—”

“You know I already tried as much as I could, Harsha. And I will continue trying. But it’s not going to help. Not until...” He let his sentence drift off.

There was a deep exhale. “You are right,” said Harsha.

“And knowing Sia, she will not let it go. Not that I expect her to. But I need to keep her from spinning out of control,” Ajay stated.

“I understand.”

“Find out as much as you can and keep me updated.”

“I will.”

“How is Anika doing?” Ajay asked.

“She’s doing well. Jo and her family are always with her, taking really good care of her.”

Ajay felt the familiar tightness in his chest and throat whenever he saw or heard about his daughter. “Double up the security around Jo’s place,” he advised.

There was a long pause, as though it was now sinking into Harsha’s brain that there were several others who could be possibly impacted. “I will, Jay,” he replied.



“Thank you, Harsha. I’ll get in touch with you tomorrow,” he said, before ending the call.

He went down towards the kitchen. On his way, he turned on an app on his phone. It was of a security camera. He felt grateful towards Jo for agreeing to place the camera pointed at his daughter as much as possible.

Anika was placed on a thick blanket on a plush green lawn under a shade. He could hear Jo’s family chatting and laughing around her.

Ajay’s heart clenched with longing to hold his daughter in his arms. It has been close to four weeks since he last held her.

He hovered at the entrance of the kitchen, continuing to watch Anika’s antics as she tried to lift her head towards the people calling out her name.

“Soon, my love,” Ajay promised his daughter. “Daddy and mummy will get you back soon,” he said softly, before turning off the camera footage.

He went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. He put some food onto a plate. Then grabbing some ice, he wrapped it in a towel, before heading up towards the bedroom.

Sia was stirring lightly when he sat next to her on the bed.

The area under one of her eyes was swollen and blackened. Gently, he touched the ice to her skin and she flinched.

“Sorry,” he said softly when she opened her eyes to him. “There’s a lot of swelling,” he explained.

She nodded and remained quiet as he continued with his ministrations. The previous night he had insisted on taking her to the hospital or having a doctor check her in the police station while she was being interrogated. Sia had brushed it away, insisting that she was fine.

Ajay watched her as she closed her eyes, allowing him to take care of her.

After a few minutes of silence, tears began to leak out of her eyes.

“Sia...” he said, simply calling out her name.

She didn’t open her eyes. But spoke to him softly. “Why does it feel so incomplete?” she asked. “He’s locked away. Where he can’t possibly hurt any other children. But somehow I feel so... incomplete.”

Ajay didn’t reply. Couldn’t reply.

He put the icepack away and lay next to her. Holding her close, he waited until she calmed down.

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Sia woke up to the phone ringing next to her. It was dark outside and the clock showed it was just past eleven.

Ajay was lying next to her, and he had woken up to the phone ringing as well.

She grabbed the phone next to her and answered it anxiously. “Varun?”  
“Sia.” The voice on the phone trembled.

Sia straightened immediately, all the traces of tiredness and sleep gone.  
“What happened?”

“He’s already out, Sia,” the anguished voice cried out. “They let the animal out of the cage, along with the other disgusting animals.”

There was a stunned silence.

“That’s not possible,” she whispered.

“It happened. And it’s all over the news as well,” he said.

Hurriedly, Sia turned on the television in the room. She flipped channels until the local news channel came up. She had to wait for five excruciating minutes until the headlines of her uncle being released scrolled through the bottom. And then, ten minutes later, there was coverage where the news was confirmed by his lawyer.

*“Mr. Jagadish Naidu is innocent. He was being framed unnecessarily by vindictive people around him. Luckily, with his background and good deeds, he has more well-wishers than others.”*

*The camera panned on her uncle while he was being led towards his car, outside the jail.*

*“I didn’t know what was going on in there. I was told it was a children’s charity event. I’m equally shocked and appalled that such atrocities can happen with our innocent children.”*

*He spoke at length about how he was determined to bring justice to those children and get the actual perpetrators into the jail.*

A little later, the topic of the news changed to something inane. But Sia couldn’t get her eyes off the screen.

\* \* \*

Ajay turned off the television as Sia continue to watch late night infomercials.

He wasn't surprised with the news they just watched. He already knew that would happen, even before Sia received the call.

The only thing he wasn't entirely prepared for was how Sia looked right then.

"Sia... baby..." he called out.

She was staring right at him, but it felt more like through him. Her chest rose and fell with heavy, uneven breaths. Her pupils were dilated with a suppressed emotion.

"Baby, please. Say something," he pleaded with her softly.

He held her shoulders. "Sia... listen to me baby. We can—"

"No," she stated in an eerie calm tone. "I don't want you to do anything."

She stepped back, until his hands dropped from her shoulders.

He could feel the walls between them get higher and higher, and he didn't know how to overcome the suddenly hopeless situation.

"Sia, we can try to get them arrested again," he said. "I can—"

"I said no!" she shouted. Taking a deep controlling breath, she turned away from him, to look outside a large window.

"I'm going to do it," she stated quietly. "I don't need outside help. I'm going to bring justice in my own way."

His heart began thumping. "Sia, you can't take justice in your hands. I know what he did to you was—"

"Don't," she interrupted him sharply. "I may seem cold-blooded for what I'm planning on doing to him. But unless you understand what he is still capable of doing, you have no right to judge me."

He went closer to her. "I'm not trying to judge you for what you want to do to him. Hell, I wanted to destroy him from much before for what he did to you. But, I can't let you do something that is irreversible. You could get arrested, and sent to jail for taking law into your hands."

Sia looked crushed and disappointed as she heard him trying to talk her out of whatever she was planning out of sheer rage and helplessness.

"You think they don't deserve to get punished for what they have done?" she asked.

"They deserve to suffer in the worst way possible, Sia," he said with an edge to his voice. "But it should not be at the risk of you getting arrested."

She didn't reply.

“For god’s sake, Sia!” he shouted, shaking her once. “Don’t do anything rash or stupid. We have a daughter! We are a family now. Think about us!”

She didn’t look at him. She stared at the floor. “I can’t give up,” she whispered in a hopeless tone.

He then knew that the beginning of a very rocky patch ahead had already started.

## CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

A week had passed since the child trafficking bust. Sia was seated at the police station to give another ‘statement’ of what she had seen that day during the child trafficking bust. Usually Ajay or one of her vast legal team lawyers should have accompanied her. She was told that Judge Sundaram wanted to meet her, and he would do it if she came alone.

And so, she did. She was sitting in front of Judge Sundaram, along with a police officer and a lawyer.

“I told you before that you can’t do anything,” said the judge. “And also that the world works that way.” He sighed. “I forgive you Mrs. Manthena. Only because of your uncle. Also because we are of the same status and level. We all need to work together. Why do you want to rock the boat for a few filthy kids that nobody wanted in the first place?”

When she didn’t reply, he broke into a small fleshy smile. “You need to be careful, you know. I heard you have a beautiful daughter.”

Her breath caught in her throat, but she remained silent.

“How old is she?” he asked. “Less than a year I assume. A few more years and she’d be... just right,” he taunted.

Sia felt the walls closing on her when he spoke of Anika that way. The fact that she was at a police station where criminals should have been locked away, instead of threatening the witness— further added to the feeling of claustrophobia. Everything was fading around her. Shrinking, condensing. She wanted to scream and punch the animal in front of her. She wanted to tear out his face, and throw him on the floor, and stomp on his head until all that was left of him was left a bloody pulp.

But she stopped herself.

*“For god’s sake, Sia! Don’t do anything rash or stupid. We have a daughter! We are a family now. Think about us!”*

Ajay’s words rang through her mind. She knew what Ajay had said made absolute sense. He was being practical and reasonable.

The only problem was that those things were also killing her quest for retribution.

Someone cleared their throat noisily, interrupting her murderous glare and thoughts. It was the police officer, who was obviously on the judge’s

payroll. “Mrs. Manthena, we called you here to speak with you personally. There was obviously a misunderstanding on that day. Please—”

“What about the other evidence that was presented?” she asked in a chilling tone. “The bank statements with transactions made to Jagadish Naidu from him.”

Judge Sundaram’s lawyer frowned and shuffled through all the bank statements and other information that linked most of the people to Judge Sundaram. “This isn’t exactly evidence,” he said. “All this proves was that there were a few check deposits made into Mr. Jagadish Naidu and his son’s bank account every month. The fact that some of those people, in a very roundabout way are known to Judge Sundaram is merely a coincidence. You must know that most of the elite are known to each other in the city.”

“What about the missing children?” she pressed further. “Don’t you think it’s strange that the missing children’s cases spiked over the last few years in the city? And even the children in the orphanages who were supposedly adopted, couldn’t be traced?”

“I assure you, Mrs. Manthena. We have our best officers looking into this matter. But at present, we want to tell you that there is no connection to those missing children to Judge Sundaram or to Mr. Jagadish Naidu.”

“Find all the adopted children from Naidu Trust over the past few years and I’ll withdraw the case,” she said.

“We don’t have the resources to do something like that,” the officer answered.

Sia knew she was wasting her breath demanding answers from the officer in front of her. The asshole must definitely be working for them.

“Mrs. Manthena, let it go,” said Judge Sundaram. “Like I said, spend time with your family. Don’t waste your time for a bunch of nobodies. I wanted to tell the same to your husband. But he seems to be quite a hothead.” There was another fleshy smile. “I really like Ajay. I’ve met him a few times before. I would hate anything happening to him or your beautiful daughter,” he said.

\* \* \*

The next few weeks were devastating. Not only did the news channels dig into her murky past, but they made out her uncle seem like some sort of misunderstood hero.

She didn’t care what people thought about her. However, she couldn’t

bear the thought of her uncle being hero worshipped blindly by his followers even though he was caught red-handed and there were videos of him being present in the party.

*“We have been living in the same village as him for over thirty years now. Not once had he made an overture against any woman, even though many tried to get his attention. How can such a person abuse a child?”*

*“He has a son! How can a man who has intimate relations with his wife be a pedophile?”*

*“Jagadish Naidu is God! He has saved so many children from being abandoned. How can such a person ever abuse and then sell a child as a commodity?”*

*“It’s definitely a conspiracy from that ungrateful lying niece of his. We all heard from her ex-husband about how she was a drug addict who slept around with several men. The poor guy even told how despite her cheating on him and dumping him after their marriage, he still came back for her all the way from Boston.”*

*“She’s greedy that woman. She wasn’t satisfied with the money her adopted mother left her. She wants to grab the Naidu Estate too. And in the process, she chose to defame her own uncle.”*

*“It’s also been confirmed that Mrs. Sia Manthena, formerly, Miss Sampath was a troubled child. She was diagnosed with being delusional, having hallucinations and also to being psychotic.”*

*“She is definitely a psycho! Have you seen her face in those videos? When she confessed that her uncle used to abuse her as a child? She gave me the chills with her blank expression, and eyes devoid of any emotion. That’s not how a person behaves if they were a victim.”*

*“Yes, Mrs. Manthena does portray the symptoms of a psychopath,” said a so called noted psychiatrist that has never even met Sia. “Compassion, happiness, anger. She is incapable of experiencing any true human emotions. She can only just mimic those she observed once in a while. She is also quite skilled at identifying the weakness of her victims, the way it suits her*

*purposes. She knew her uncle loved to save downtrodden children. So she used it to falsely accuse him and his friends of being child abusers.”*

Sia was more than just angry. Nobody even for a moment thought through any of the junk that came out of their mouths. There were some half-hearted discussions on the news about how a typical pedophile and their victims behaved. People just refused to listen to anything negative against their favorite leader.

“Is there some kind of list with behavioral rules that victims need to follow, so people are satisfied that they are ‘acting like victims’?” Sia raged when she spoke to Dr. Patel.

“No,” Dr. Patel replied. “Everyone copes differently.”

“Apparently, I’m a psychopath. Because I didn’t show enough reactions on my face.”

“You aren’t the psychopath here, Sia. Your uncle is,” stated Dr. Patel. “From what you have told me so far, and from what I’ve learned about human motivation and experience, he fits the profile perfectly. Despite his lack of conscience and lack of empathy for others, he is quite good at fooling others. And for typical pedophiles, having any kind of conscience would deter them from abusing.”

“There are clear proofs with videos. But no one is willing to doubt his innocence.”

“Sadly, there are many such cases. I’m sure some of his supporters will continue to invite him home and leave their young children alone with him.”

Dr. Patel was right. During the following days, her uncle’s supporters grew in size.

Sia was fed up and felt let down with how things were proceeding. Each day, she withdrew to herself. She longer wanted to speak with Dr. Patel to find any kind of logic or reason towards the things happening around her.



## CHAPTER THIRTY

Several weeks had passed since the child trafficking bust. Ajay worked constantly with the legal team, leaving no stone unturned. Each time, they thought they could file charges again, they hit a dead end. He was frustrated. Not just with the way things were proceeding, but also with Sia.

She stopped showing interest in the investigation. She became a shadow again. Going through the motions, with a vacant look on her face, lost in her own world.

Maybe having Anika with them would have taken out some of the emptiness inside her, but she insisted that Anika remain with Jo for safety purposes.

“Sia,” Ajay called out to her one night after finishing another long call with the legal team.

She didn’t respond. She continued staring outside the window.

“Sia, look at me,” he demanded.

She turned and saw the frown on his worried face. “Why are you not talking to me? Tell me what is happening with you,” he demanded.

“I’m fine,” she said in a calm, vacant voice.

“You are not fine. You are holding in everything.”

“I said, I’m fine,” she repeated.

“No. You are not fine. If you were, then you would be speaking to me. Be involved in some of the decisions I’m making with regards to the legal team.”

She looked away from him and stared outside the window again. “I just don’t care anymore Ajay,” she said.

That made him angry. He held her shoulders and swung her to face him. “Don’t feed me with bullshit. You care. More than anything. In fact you care so much that it is breaking you inside.”

That made her angry. “I’m not breaking. And instead of leaving me alone, *you* are the one forcing me to break right now.”

“You have been breaking down for a while, Sia. It started the day your uncle was released from the jail. You are forcing yourself not to feel any anger or hurt at that verdict. And you pushing me away or presenting a barrier between us is proof to you breaking down.”

“Leave me alone. I’m fine,” she snapped.

“No. You are in denial. I can see right through you.”

“Don’t push me, Ajay,” she warned, pissed that he could see right through her and wouldn’t leave her alone.

“I will push you, until you agree to get back to the living world again.”

She held a stony look on her face.

“You have been living like a ghost these past few days. Simply existing,” he said. “I left you alone initially thinking you needed time. But it has gone long enough.”

“What do you want me to do? I’m right next to you all the time. Every morning and night.”

“Yes, you are next to me but you are not really there. Do you think I don’t know that you don’t go to sleep during the nights? You are lost somewhere deep in your mind, hiding from the reality.”

She responded by glaring at him.

“Talk to me!” he demanded.

“Is it just talking or have you been missing something else?” she spit out. “You are just pissed off because I would lie next to you on bed each night, but I wouldn’t let you fuck me anymore.”

His eyes flared and pulled her close. “Let go!” she shouted as he held on.

“You think this is about my ego?” he asked. “And all because I am not able to have sex?” He was fuming with anger. “If I wanted to, you know damn well I could have had you anytime.”

That made her furious because he was right. All he had to do was touch her, and she would be panting for him, begging him to take her, until he wiped away everything from her mind. That was one of the main reasons why she had been staying away from him. She wanted to continue to hurt, and keep everything bottled inside before it destroyed everything around her.

Pushing his hands away from her, she ripped open the side zipper of her dress, and let it drop. She tore the hooks off her bra and threw it away. Then, she pushed down her underwear to stand naked in front of him.

“Take me now,” she taunted. “However you want and how many ever times you want. Maybe that will stop you from badgering me any further.”

His eyes remained on her face, and he looked infuriated. “Stop being in denial. You know damn well, it’s not just your body I want. Without *you* being present, I have no use for your body.”

Her face fell at his words. She looked away from him, feeling ashamed.

“I am present,” she whispered.

“No. You are not, Sia,” he said with frustration.

She slowly raised her head to look into his eyes. For the first time in her selfish state of grief, she noticed how exhausted he actually looked. She hadn't even considered what *he* had been dealing with over the past few weeks.

"I can't face the reality, Ajay," she confessed softly.

His hands held her face. "You can. I need you to try, baby. If you keep it all in, you are going to snap."

She stood quietly, not saying anything for a long time.

Soon, his hands dropped from her face, and he looked at her for a few seconds before walking away from her without another word.

She didn't try to stop him.

She let him go.

She sat down on the floor, naked and shivering. Leaning against the wall, she bent her head over her raised knees, willing her mind to clear up.

She thought through what she had to do.

Outrage and fury with her uncle and his cohorts, fought alongside sadness and longing for her husband and daughter.

But soon, fury took over.

She had mourned her childhood the way no other child should ever have to do. She had allowed the retribution to dominate her existence, giving her the will to survive. Without that need for retribution, she would be consumed with fear for her family and loss of control.

Right from the beginning, that had been her choice. The choice, she would now take up.

She could begin implementing her plan for retribution once again but there was one more critical thing left to do. The right thing to do. To compensate Ajay for what she had put him through.

The very thought of it, almost broke her.

## CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

“Why?”

That one little word from Ajay held anguish and anger.

Ajay stood near the doorway of their bedroom, waiting for an answer.

“I want a divorce,” Sia declared in a quiet voice, not quite meeting his eyes.

He took long, quick strides and stood right next to her. “I understood that as soon as I received those fucking papers you sent through a lawyer to my office,” he growled out. “What I want to know is why!”

“I’m signing away all the rights to our child. Anika will remain with you and—” she broke off.

“Me and who?” he demanded.

“Whoever you decide to marry or be with. I’ve already opened a trust on our daughter’s name and gave you complete access to use it.”

He kept his eyes on her. “You want our daughter to be taken care by me and who?” he demanded again.

“Does it matter?” Sia asked softly.

“To you, obviously.”

“No. It doesn’t,” she lied.

“I saw the date, Sia. Some of those papers were prepared a month after you recovered from the coma. You already knew you wanted to leave me and our daughter.”

Sia was quiet. “I’ve always known. Even before our marriage. I just changed the terms and conditions recently. Now, you’ll have complete custody of Anika.”

Her words were not a surprise for him. When they got married, he knew she had planned to leave him at sometime. But after spending time together as a married couple, and after what they had been through, he had expected...

He had expected bloody miracles apparently.

Ignoring the pain, he continued pressing her for more answers. “Who do you think I should be with?”

“You already know.”

“Say it! I want to hear it from your mouth.”

She looked at him. This time along with pain, there was regret in her eyes. “I’m sorry, Ajay. I can’t be someone I’m not.”

“I’ve never asked you to be one either,” he said angrily.

“I love Anika, but she’s better off with someone like Jyotika as a mother. I’m not a good role model for her. And I can never be one.”

Ajay watched his wife in disbelief.

This wasn’t the woman he knew and loved desperately. This was an entirely different woman. The woman he knew was bold, and could make decisions based on her ever present cool. This woman looked heartbroken and insecure while spouting nonsense.

“According to the will—” he began, pushing everything else from his mind other than fighting for them. “—we are supposed to be married for at least a year after our baby is born for you to claim the Naidu estate,” he said.

“It was never about the money or the inheritance,” came the quiet response.

“I know. But with only six more months remaining to fulfill all the conditions of the will, why do you want to pursue the divorce right now? Why take chances? What if your uncle claims his properties and everything else back?”

“I don’t care anymore. Because, I can’t keep yours and Anika’s life on hold for the sake of a will. I don’t want Anika confused, shuttling between me and someone else. She’s already where she belongs—”

“Don’t ever say that!” he snapped, losing his cool. He gripped her arms, pulling her until her eyes met his. “She belongs with us! With you and me. In our house. Or wherever we both are.”

Her eyes fell. “Sign the papers, Ajay,” she said softly. “I know this is abrupt, but if you think about it, you’ll know I’m right. Anyone can see that. And they will advise you to do the same.”

“I don’t give a shit about what others think.” His face fell. “Don’t do this to us,” he begged.

She didn’t reply. Her shoulders hunched down in defeat, as though whatever was happening was beyond her control.

“I refuse to divorce you,” he said in a determined tone.

“You’ll have to, Ajay” she said softly. “Because I can’t be with you anymore.”

“Just tell me why? And don’t feed me with the some bullshit lies about not being a good mother or wife.”

She didn’t say anything.

He shook her. “Tell me why!” he begged again.

She looked torn. “Why would you want to be with me in the first place?”

she asked. "I manipulated you. I lied."

"Yes, you did all those. And I hated you for them. I told you that already. And I also told that I love you more than anything in this world."

"It won't last Ajay. Just let me go. Please. You'll be fine," she whispered.

"No. I won't be fine. I cannot simply fall out of love with you."

"You know you are only prolonging the inevitable, just because you are not ready to let me go," she said.

He was quiet. He knew she was right. She had already made up her mind. Knowing her, he knew nothing would change her decision.

His hands dropped from her shoulders in defeat.

"Promise me something, Ajay," she pleaded. Her chin wobbled and her eyes began stinging with unshed tears.

"I would promise you the entire bloody world if that will make you stay with me," he said.

She closed her eyes. "Just promise me you'll be happy," she said.

He didn't answer. He was too furious to do so.

When she opened her eyes, he continued to watch her angrily.

Looking at him for a few more seconds, she walked out of the room.

His past, his present, and his future, walked out of his life, leaving him helpless. He wanted to shout at her, and then drop to his knees, and beg her to stay. He wanted to take her into his arms and let her know that everything would be okay.

At that moment, he knew that their life couldn't be magically okay. That her quest for revenge wasn't something he could compete against.

## CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Sia moved in with Varun for a couple of days. Until Ajay packed his stuff and moved back to his apartment.

A month later, Ajay signed the divorce papers.

Even though she had more or less blackmailed him into it, she felt the razor sharp agony of a bleeding heart, aching for him and their daughter. She missed them.

Sometimes, she was tempted to pick up the phone and beg him to take her back.

If only life had offered her that chance.

No. Life was a piece of shit. It gave her a taste of what happiness looked like, only to snatch it away from her, and remind her that she was all alone in the world.

Chills wracked her clammy body as she lay on the bed, holding Ajay's and Anika's picture in her hands. She was in the empty nursery room that Ajay and she had put together.

It was not supposed to end this way.

However, this was it. It was the end of her happy life that she could only experience for a brief while.

Her thoughts were scattered and confused while she ached for her husband and daughter.

She still craved his love, his touch and his kisses. She wanted to hold her daughter close and promise her that she would make the world a safe place for her.

But she couldn't do any of those things.

She was amazed how much a heart could take. She felt broken, devastated, but her heart continued to beat in her chest.

"Sia," a deep, quiet voice called out to her.

It was Varun. He was watching her with an impenetrable look.

"What is it Varun?" she asked, blinking her eyes rapidly to get rid of the unshed tears.

Bracing her hands on the bed, she pushed herself up to sit.

"I saw them today. Ajay is getting engaged to Jyotika."

Her body froze, causing the photo she held in her hands to fall down. Lifting it quickly, she ignored the pain in her chest. Why did that news hurt her more than the lifetime of loneliness that waited for her?

*This is what you wanted for him—to get married to Jyothika. A woman who would make him and Anika happy. A woman who could give them things that you couldn't.*

Slowly, she looked up at Varun and opened her mouth to say something. Not a word came out of it.

“Sia?”

She cleared her throat. “Good for them,” she got out finally. “Ajay already signed the divorce papers. It means that he won't be held accountable to anything I do. I think we should proceed with our plans quickly,” she said.

Varun nodded. Slowly, he came closer to her and sat next to her.

He wasn't touching her, but there was a certain intimacy in his proximity. Maybe because she had never seen him be that close to anyone before.

“Sia... I... I want to be with you,” he declared softly.

She sucked in deep breath in shock, and swayed slightly away from him to look at him better.

“Varun, what are you saying? You know we can't afford to have any attachments. Not with the kind of plans we made.”

“I know. But just in case this turns out differently, and we are free, will you be with me?” he asked softly.

Sia looked at him quietly. There was no denying that Varun was a good looking man. Unlike Ajay's stunning good looks, Varun had a raw masculine look. The scar on his face only added to the sex appeal. But... to her, he was Varun. He wasn't Ajay.

Suddenly, she could feel Varun's intent gaze land on her mouth. Slowly, he lifted his trembling hands towards her cheek. She should have jerked away, but she didn't.

She waited to see whether he was able to willingly touch another human. He was.

His thumb landed on her cheek, and it moved back on forth, rubbing it softly. His eyes were riveted on his hand.

“You are able to touch,” she said softly.

“Yes,” he murmured.

“Since when?” she asked him gently.

He was quiet. “Since the child trafficking incident. I-I was able to hold and carry a girl and a child that time.”

“I see.”



He moved his hand away from her cheek. "Sia, I know this is all of sudden. And I also know it's stupid of me to be thinking of such things right now. But I am so sick of feeling so dead inside. And when I realized that I could touch and hold that girl, I felt that there was some hope for me to feel normal."

"Varun, I'm happy that you are able to make progress. But I don't think I'm the person you should be with."

He shook his head. "No, Sia. I have thought about this a lot," he said. "You are the only person who actually gets me. Yes, I know you are in love with someone else. But were you ever satisfied with simply love? Didn't you want to spend your life with someone who also gets you too?"

Sia understood what Varun was talking about. Although she had no doubts about Ajay's love for her during their marriage, there were times when she felt he couldn't completely understand what she went through during her childhood, and the impact of it on her life.

Even though she loved Ajay and Anika more than her own life, she had sometimes wished that their happiness wasn't dependant on her mental state. Years of abuse, and the following consequences and trauma couldn't simply be wiped away by a loving husband and daughter. Or that she couldn't just wake up being happy or feeling whole.

"Please Sia, say you'll think about it," said Varun.

"Varun, I can't make any promises at this time. It won't be fair to you too."

Varun looked disappointed, but he nodded in understanding.

## CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

The days that followed were filled with planning their next move. Sia and Varun got in touch with the hacker. He began feeding them information, and also mailing them all the technology needed to execute their elaborate plans.

Two weeks before their original plan could be executed, they met with an unexpected shocking news.

Jagadish Naidu's wife, Mrs. Geetha Naidu had died of a heart attack.

"We can't get him now, Sia," said Varun in frustration. "He's going to be surrounded by people now. Including your husband," Varun said angrily as he played a video in front of her.

There was a hazy video of Ajay standing next to her uncle and her cousin. Ajay's head was bent down as he looked mournful.

*"Mr. Jagadish Naidu's wife, Mrs. Geetha Naidu passed away due to a heart attack. Top leaders and city's well-known faces visited outside the Naidu Estate premises to pay respects. Including Mr. Ajay Manthena who is married to the heiress of the Naidu Estate who has accused her uncle of child abuse and trafficking. With this gesture, will the ongoing investigation of Mr. Jagadish Naidu being involved in any nefarious operations be completely wiped out?"*

Varun's angry voice spoke, "That bastard is milking his wife's death."

*"My wife died of heart break because she could not tolerate such obscene accusations about me." The seemingly grieving widower wiped the tears from his eyes. "She told me she hated seeing someone like me subjected to embarrassment and humiliation by my own flesh and blood."*

*"How is Dr. Kranthi Naidu taking his mother's death?" a reporter asked. They tried to speak with him, but he didn't respond to them and continued looking at his mother's body in shock.*

*"Hard. Very, very hard. He was very close to her. And now he is left motherless because of a senseless vendetta against me."*

*"Mr. Naidu, your niece's husband is here. Does that mean there is no longer a family feud? Will the ongoing case will be dropped?"*

*There was a loud exhale. "I don't know. All I care about right now is to*

*provide solace to my grieving son. And I would like to thank all those who have offered me support and condolences during these difficult times.”*

“I hate that bastard,” Varun spat while watching the video. “And why did your husband go there?” he demanded.

“Ajay knew that family, Varun. He was simply paying respect to her.”

“We both knew her too, Sia. Yet, we didn’t rush to pay our respects.”

Sia didn’t answer.

She felt torn about how she felt with her aunt passing away. When she had heard the news the day before, she felt a deep regret.

Even though her aunt hadn’t stopped the abuse on time, Sia still recalled some of the good memories she had with her. Her aunt was also the one who was responsible to get her out of the village under false pretenses with the help of Ajay’s mother.

“Varun, we cannot afford to change our plans. We will still proceed with what needs to be done. Only, our first target will be different.”

Varun was quiet. “Are you sure about this Sia?” he asked.

“Very sure. There is no going back.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

*This is it. No turning back.*

Sia repeated those words like a mantra while standing in front of a bathroom mirror, staring at herself.

She hated what she saw. Because she hated what she was. She hated it all.

She was not destined to be with a loving husband or a child to cherish. The moment she decided to set her course towards retribution, all her dreams had vanished.

Reaching a trembling hand, she touched her reflection.

For some reason it felt safe doing that. She needed this distance tonight. Because after the night was over, she was going to be left with two choices.

She was either going to be arrested or she will be a lifelong fugitive.

There was no turning back.

With those kinds of choices, any other sane person would rethink their course in life.

She had no second thoughts. Especially now. Because the reflection she saw was that of a nine year old girl. The same nine year old girl whose soul was ripped away.

Similar to all those other children who suffered abuse at the hands of monsters she was determined to destroy.

Her heart began to pump harder as the feelings of rage and sadness took over.

She knew she was stronger than the pain. She had to be. She couldn't knowingly let any other child go through the same things that she did.

The monsters had to die.

Taking a deep breath, she leaned forward and turned on the tap. Placing her palms under the running tap, she wet her hair slightly. Parting her hair in the middle, she twisted each part, and pulled it across one another at the back of her head. She secured her hair with small pins until all her long hair was fixed tightly against the scalp.

She couldn't risk any hair strand to fall to leave evidence that night.

Then taking a wig cap, she slipped it on top of her hair. It also held the earpiece for her to stay in contact with Varun.

Over the next ten minutes, she adjusted the wig cap until there were no imperfections. Bending slightly, she tightened the holster around her hips

before smoothing her black top over it. Her black slacks and boots would also blend in with the dark.

She stood still in front of the mirror, looking at herself from all the angles.

Satisfied, she grabbed a small handgun and placed it in the holster concealed near her waist.

“This is it. There is no turning back from this,” she told herself out loud.

She didn’t have any regrets. The man whom she was going to kill that night had admitted to having no regrets while destroying many innocent lives. He even dared to threaten Anika and Ajay.

And lately, each night she had a nightmare, along with her uncle’s face, she also saw the other man’s face too. The horrible smug grin he wore while thinking he was beyond law.

She could not let it go. The need to kill him was strong and raging within her.

She wanted to get to her uncle first. But the fact that he was surrounded by his minions to console him, made her choose the other animal first. After this, she wanted her uncle to live in constant fear. Until she killed him as well.

\* \* \*

An hour later, she stood outside a large house where the bastard judge lived. It was close to midnight and nobody was around, either on the road or around the house. There were two security guards at the front gate that were fast asleep. Thanks to the meals they had that night.

“I’m still not comfortable with you going in there by yourself, Sia,” said Varun. He was dressed in all black like her. But unlike her, he was to remain outside and keep watch.

“We have discussed this before. We can’t afford to make any mistakes or deviate from our plan. Just... keep an eye and alert me if anything goes wrong.”

Varun nodded reluctantly. “You remember all the instructions?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

And then, taking a deep breath, she began to scale the wall easily from a corner, and jumped inside the compound. The wall had an electric fence, but their hacker had deactivated it currently until the morning.

Taking out a flashlight from her holster, she flashed it towards the obvious camera on the outside wall ceiling near the doorway, blinding the camera's sensor. According to the hacker, there weren't too many cameras placed in the judge's house.

She pulled out a master key and unlocked the main door with it. Scoping the place thoroughly, she noticed that there were four exits on the ground floor. The main entry, backdoor, the French doors to the outside patio and also to the downstairs bedroom. It matched with the information she got from the hacker. She kept flashing the beam of light on two other cameras, she encountered.

Walking up the stairs, she adjusted her gloves and opened the bedroom door with the master key.

The room was semi-dark with only a reading lamp turned on next to an empty bed.

Her heart jolted, wondering if her prey wasn't at home that night. But she had gotten the confirmation that he would remain home that night.

Just then, she heard the sound of a toilet flushing.

She waited quietly, standing in the shadows while looking around the room, not touching anything. A few minutes later, the portly shape of the judge emerged.

The man jumped and then froze when he saw her emerging from the shadows. With great effort, he schooled his features to a normal look.

"This is a pleasant surprise, Mrs. Manthena," he said.

She watched him calmly, even as her fingers itched to draw out her weapon right then, and to keep pumping bullets into his worthless body.

He sighed dramatically. "We already spoke Mrs. Manthena. I thought this whole thing was over with. And it's already been proven that I'm not guilty."

"No. It's not over. Far from it," she said softly. "You need to pay. And I'm here to make sure you do."

He got agitated by her tone and stance. "You and your husband have already ruined my reputation. Even though I've been proven not guilty, a lot of people are worried to be seen with me, or be with me. You don't think that's enough?"

"No. For what you did to those children, not even close."

His pudgy hands clenched. She knew that he badly wanted to call for help or at least do something.

“I didn’t kidnap any of those children, you know. Most of them were sold to me by their poor families or guardians.”

“What about the ones missing from the orphanages?” she asked.

He narrowed his eyes. “Why does it matter, Mrs. Manthena? Why don’t you get to the reason you are here. Information? Confession?”

She looked at the man in front of her. “No. I don’t care for your confession. Because nothing can excuse it. You are not only a sick man, you are deliberately evil,” she stated.

She knew she had to hurry and finish the job she had come for. She couldn’t afford to waste any time talking to him, or bother to try making him see the error of his disgusting ways.

She just couldn’t move to draw out her weapon.

She thought she was mentally prepared to take a human life. Even though the said human was piece of shit. Still she felt sick. Her head began to throb and she held her breath to appear steady in front of him.

The judge studied her face quietly, searching her face and posture to look for any signs of weakness. “So you decided to take law into your own hands and... maybe make me confess while you take a video or something? That’s what you people already tried before, right?”

She heard the sound of the French doors near the balcony sliding open. From the corner of her eyes, she saw Varun’s tall figure dressed in black moving towards them inside the room.

She kept her attention on the judge’s face as he tried to look around for something, maybe a weapon or to simply alert someone from outside.

She whipped out her gun from the holster. “Don’t move or so much as raise your voice or you’ll feel a bullet in your stomach. Heard that’s a painful way to die,” she warned the judge.

At the word ‘die’, and looking at the gun, there was fear in the judge’s eyes. Almost as if until then, he hadn’t considered the possibility of her being there to kill him.

As soon as Varun stood next to her, she hissed out in frustration and anger. “Dammit. I explicitly told you not to come inside. Get out of here right now!” she ordered.

There was no reply. He simply stood a few feet away from her. Something about the stillness made her glance towards him.

The tall figure wasn’t as tall as Varun. He also had a leaner muscle definition than Varun’s. His face was covered with a woolen mask.

Sia felt paralyzed, and for a second her mind couldn't process what her brain was trying to tell her. Until, she met a pair of familiar angry eyes that were dark with intensity.

*Ajay!*

She was stunned at the discovery.

"W-who are you?" the judge asked.

To her shock, Ajay drew the woolen mask and some kind of goggles away from his face, completely revealing his identity.

"Mr. Manthana! Ajay! Thank god, you are here. Your wife was about to do a grave mistake. Tell her—"

"She doesn't want to be my wife," Ajay interrupted coolly.

"What?" the judge asked in confusion.

"She doesn't want to be my wife anymore. We are divorcing," Ajay stated as though it were the most important information he had to impart right then.

"Well, whatever the case, Ajay. Tell her she's wrong to threaten me this way. Life is not black or white. People make mistakes. There is law—"

Ajay smiled chillingly. "We tried the law once. But you know what happened," he said in a polite tone.

"No. No. You are both making a huge mistake—"

The judge broke off as Ajay carefully pulled out a transparent plastic bag from his waist pocket and opened it to draw out a gun. He screwed on what appeared to be a silencer on the gun and pointed it towards the judge.

"The only mistake that happened was that you were let go. On top of that you threatened my wife, using me and our daughter as pawns. *That* pushed her away from me. *That* made her want to divorce me to protect me and my daughter."

"Ajay," Sia whispered with shock. "What the hell are you doing? Put down the gun."

Ajay looked at her again with a look that scared her.

He looked cold. Emotionless.

He looked like a killer.

He turned back towards the judge. "Maybe if you were rotting in jail like you deserved, you wouldn't have uttered those threats to her. And maybe... just maybe you wouldn't have to pay such a heavy price," he said, moving quickly behind the judge.

Before the older man could get away, he was held in a chokehold.



The next few seconds were a blur to Sia.

The judge struggled for a while, gasping because he was unable to make any noise. There were three silent pops, and then his body became limp. Ajay released him slowly, and the lifeless body fell on the floor with a thump. Thin streaks of blood began to pour out from the body where bullet holes were present.

Ajay carefully held the gun and placed it back into the plastic cover. She noticed that like her, he had worn gloves. He then walked towards the closet and opened it to reveal a safe box. Punching in a code, he placed something in there.

She was still too stunned at the events that happened so rapidly in the space of a few minutes. "Ajay," she whispered.

He ignored her, and began to rumple the bedding, and pushed down the lamps and other knickknacks in the room making it appear like a struggle. She joined him, helping him. Meantime, he pulled out another small plastic packet and then pulled transparent strips and pressed them to few of the fallen objects.

She didn't ask him any questions. She didn't think her voice would even function through the shock that gripped her body.

She jumped when she heard him speak after a while. "It's done. We are heading back now," he said softly.

She thought he was talking to her, but the stillness of his form and the expression on his face, as though he was listening to something, made her aware that he was speaking with someone else.

"Whom are you talking to?" she asked.

He looked towards her. "We need to get out of here," he said quietly.

She didn't argue. She simply nodded quietly.

"Follow me," he instructed. Then he pulled out a pair of goggles from his pocket that was similar to the one on top of his head. He wore his and slipped the other one on her face.

They were night vision goggles. He began to move. He didn't look back to check whether she was following him. He went towards the balcony and slid down a thin rope that was suspended.

Taking a deep breath, she followed behind him. Just when she was about to drop on the ground from a four feet height, she felt his hands on her waist to assist her.

Again not bothering to ask her if she was fine, he tugged the rope several

times until the other end with something shiny attached came free and fell at their feet. Rolling it smoothly around one of his hands, he began to walk towards a wall in the backyard. It was pitch dark on this side of the house with no lighting seen anywhere but with her night vision goggles, she was able to see everything.

“You go first,” he said, indicating up with his chin.

When she hesitated, “Do you need help?” he asked coolly.

“No,” she replied and climbed the wall smoothly. On the other side of the wall, there was a car parked.

She didn’t recognize it. But she had other concerns. “Where’s Varun? He was waiting for me on the other end of the house.”

“He’s fine. We asked him to leave.” Ajay didn’t elaborate anymore.

Moving towards the black car, “Get in,” he instructed, indicating again with his chin.

Sia began to get angry. More than that she was upset. She was also damn freaking terrified.

Ajay must have sensed some of those feelings. He turned her way.”I know you have questions, but we need to remain quiet until we reach your house,” he said.

She wanted more than answers. She wanted to attack him for the stunt he just pulled. But she remained quiet, shaking with the adrenaline still coursing through her body.

Fifteen minutes later, the car stopped near another residential area. Ajay’s car was parked there.

“We need to change cars,” he said.

She nodded jerkily. He paused and looked at her for a while.

“Take off everything. Your wig and clothes, and hand them to me. I’ll be right back with a change of clothes,” he said.

He returned when she removed the last of the pin and held the wig in her hands.

“You clothes too,” he reminded.

Not bothering to ask him to leave, she began to undress. He didn’t speak or show any reaction on his face when she was left mostly naked. Once she was done, he placed a bag on the seat and took the wig and the discarded clothes into his hands before disappearing to the other car again.

Soon he returned to the passenger side of the door and opened it.

“Come out, we need to switch cars,” he said simply.

She saw that Harsha was in the other car, but he came towards them and got into the driver's seat of the black car. Not wanting to risk wasting any time by asking them about the entire plan, she got down the car and sat in Ajay's car.

Soon, they headed towards her house.

\* \* \*

A few minutes later, Ajay drove them into Sia's garage and parked the car.

Not waiting for her to get down from the car, he went towards a door and punched in a code along with a retina scan before going inside. She followed behind him.

The door closed shut behind them. Sia wanted to demand answers, but Ajay was busy looking around the house he had called home for nearly a year. She knew it had really changed a lot since the last couple of months he had been there.

The house was back to being the cold and bare shell it once was, with family pictures of them during her pregnancy and of their daughter missing.

"Looks like you redecorated," he remarked.

Not answering his casual offhand remark, she walked towards him and stood right in front of him. When he looked at her, she slapped him. Hard.

The impact was powerful enough to whip his face towards the side.

"You've ruined everything!" she shouted, finally letting her emotions show, and breaking down due to the events that had transpired during that night.

Ajay turned his face back towards her. His eyes held rage. Along with some kind of other emotion that she didn't care to know at that particular moment.

"How could you do it, Ajay? You killed a man!" she shouted at him.

"Oh? I didn't know you went there to have a pleasant chat with that man," he replied in an even tone, gritting his teeth.

"Oh my God! *You* weren't supposed to kill him!"

"Why?" he asked.

"Because *I* was supposed to!"

"Why?" he growled out again.

"Because he deserved it! I had a plan in place. You were supposed to take care of our daughter. Be safe, move on, while I—" she broke off not

wanting to complete the sentence.

“While you did what?” he demanded.

He was in her face. “While you rotted in the jail? While you possibly died during one of your revenge games? Is that the *great big sacrifice* you’d planned?” he taunted.

That *was* the plan. But he ruined it. Instead he put himself in danger. The adrenaline rushing through her body picked up even more. She was shaking in fury.

She pushed him away from her. “I hate you so much for this. I’ll never forgive you for ruining it,” she hissed out.

He closed the distance between them again, and held her arms. “You hate me? Show me how much you hate me,” he growled, pulling her even closer. “Prove it to me,” he whispered the challenge against her mouth before kissing her hard.

She bit him. Not the gentle bite that she used to love doing, to drive him crazy. But a punishing bite, hard enough for her to taste the metallic tang of his blood.

He didn’t flinch, and neither did he release the hold on her. She felt a strange combination of bloodlust, and another kind of lust coursing through her veins. Before it consumed her completely, she shoved him away, hard.

With blood tricking down his lip, he watched her with an intensity that made the blood roar in her ears, making it deafening, muting any reason or sense that would stop the madness taking over her.

He wiped his bloody lip with his thumb and smirked. “I’m glad you had no one to take your pent up aggression out on. You are more than welcome to take it out on me,” he said.

Hearing his taunting words, she lost it completely. She attacked him like an animal.

Baring her teeth and nails, she literally jumped towards him.

He was ready for her. He wrapped both his arms around her possessively, crushing her close until she could barely move.

He kissed her again.

She struggled furiously, but he didn’t release his hold on her. He continued kissing her, almost robbing her breath along with her reasoning. His strong fingers dug into the skin of her back. She could feel the throb of his aroused body, and it made her tremble violently.

Slowly and involuntarily, her lips parted wider, while her whole body

shuddered, feeling his warmth. He dug the fingers of one of his hands into her hair at the back of her head, forcing her head back, and exposing her neck to him. His mouth moved away from her lips and he kissed her throat upward, until he found her mouth again, and took her bottom lip between his teeth.

Trying to pull in the last shred of control together, she hit his chest again, until he released her lip.

She wiped her mouth. Trying to remove the addicting taste of him from her. "You think you did me a great favor by trying to protect me?" she snarled at him. "You did not!"

He growled, dragging her to him again. "I can say the same thing to you!" he said and crashed their lips together, kissing her ravenously.

Gasping and moaning, she kissed him back. She was reminded once again, about how much she had missed him. She wanted him with a violence that stunned her.

"I want you inside me," she gasped out, unable to bear it anymore.

"Believe me, I plan on being there pretty soon," he gritted out.

With joined lips, they fumbled and tore through their clothes.

She wrenched her mouth away from his again. "This doesn't change anything," she panted out.

He looked annoyed and furious. "We'll see about that," he snapped, pulling her back to him

He picked her up and threw her on the nearby sofa. And then crawling on top of her, he began to kiss her again while shedding his torn pants with one hand.

Her eyes flared in surprise and heat before she narrowed them in a glare at his dominant position. A small smile broke on his face, remembering her need to control and be on top. But he had no plans to accommodate her this time.

Getting hold of her hips, he tore away her already ripped clothes. Her gaze continued to burn bright with anger and arousal. She dug her nails hard into his shoulders, drawing blood.

Another growl erupted from him as he snatched the last of their clothes. And then, finally she felt the heat of his naked body on hers.

She wrapped her legs around him, crushing him with her thighs, pushing herself towards him so she could feel the hardness of his aroused body against the soft wetness of hers.

Groaning, his mouth left her lips to kiss her neck, and then down her chest, until his teeth found her nipples to bite them hard enough to elicit a pain and pleasure filled gasp.

He raised his head until their eyes met again. There was still anger, hurt and a raw suppressed emotion that they were both unable to express in form of words.

She tugged him upward to kiss him, but he resisted. Instead, he slowly began to slide inside her, until she could barely keep her eyes open anymore. Her legs trembled, and her body shuddered with small tremors that began to explode inside her almost immediately.

Gasping, she shoved her hips forward, forcing him to go deeper.

She had never imagined that she would be able to be with him again that way.

He raised his body from hers, balancing his weight on his knees between her legs, and grabbed her thighs in his hands. Pulling her towards him, he controlled the movements, going so slow that it drove her mad. But with each thrust, he pushed in deeper, until her thighs began to tremble, and she couldn't hold them steady around his hips anymore.

She arched the back of her head against the soft cushion, moaning and gasping, digging her fingers into the flesh of his hips. Finally, he moved faster, thrust harder, became ruthless, and out of control. She moved her hands to grip the cushion hard, pressing against the sofa arm, forcing herself against him, feeling him deep inside her.

He swept her in his madness, overwhelming her.

But instead of taking them to the finish line, he collapsed on top of her, and she could feel the wetness of his mouth on her breast. She felt it moving up towards her throat and then her lips. She felt his heartbeat thumping against her chest as he paced himself again, moving slowly.

She knew he wanted to prolong the feel of their bodies joined intimately. His movements were slow, and his kisses were deep, hot and hungry.

Curling her fingers into his hair, she gripped him tightly, moaning into his mouth. She had missed his taste and the feel of him moving inside her.

They continued moving against each other, until they realized that they couldn't prolong it any longer. Feeling attuned to each other, they found their release together. Even when he finished, he didn't stop moving. He kept moving until her body stopped shuddering, and until her legs stopped trembling.

He rested his head across her breasts as he held her close. She brushed her fingers through his sweaty hair, and they stayed that way for a long time, lost in their thoughts and memories.

She broke the silence with a confession. "I still see Anika on the cameras," she said. "And you too, because you are with her most of the time."

"I know," he replied.

"Where do we go from here?" she asked softly..

"We'll figure it out," he said, his arms squeezing her gently, as though in reassurance.

There is another long stretch of silence between them.

"I'm still angry with you, Ajay. I can't believe you would do something like this, and not even warn me," she said. Her tone calm. "I had everything figured out. I was prepared for... anything."

He lifted his face to stare down at her with an intense look. His hands moved until he held her face in a firm grip. "You are mine, Sia," he stated. "You alone don't get to decide if you want to sacrifice your life or not. Because when you do, you are destroying me along with you too."

His eyes were dark and glittering, openly showing her everything he felt.

Love.

Lust.

Anger.

Protectiveness.

It was the last emotion that softened her.

"Tell me what you planned," she ordered softly.

"I can't," he said. "I know it's hard for you, but I need you to trust me on this time. It's critical that your reactions remain genuine tomorrow when things begin to fall according to my plan," he said.

She had a million questions she wanted to bombard him with but he was right. She had never trusted him completely before. Right now, she wanted to. She had to.

After all, he had just killed a man for her.

"Alright, I will trust you," she said.

That earned her a smile. She couldn't look away from his lips as they tilted in that smile. All the months of anxiety and loneliness washed away from her. His smile always had that effect on her. It gave her a feeling of a strong connection between them.

He raised his body away from her and balanced his weight on his elbows. She watched as his biceps flexed.

“Baby,” his voice came out husky. “I know we have a lot to discuss. I promise that I’ll tell you everything soon. But first, I want us to make up for the lost time,” he said.

She could see that his smile had disappeared, and in place was a look which she also loved. “How?” she asked huskily.

He didn’t reply. He preferred to show it in actions.



## CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

Sia woke up feeling groggy and stiff.

She was on the floor, naked and half-lying on top of an equally naked man.

It was her husband. Rather her soon-to-be ex-husband. And they had spent the night together.

Her body felt sore everywhere. Especially the intimate muscles that she hadn't been using since they had last been together. Last night... or rather until a few hours ago, those muscles got a good workout, multiple times.

Ajay hadn't been gentle or slow with her. He had taken her against the wall, on the table, and finally on the sofa again, before they landed on the carpet midway.

It was rough and hard. Even angry at times, but all through it, Ajay had maintained eye contact with her that reached deep into her heart.

She looked at his sleeping face and felt a familiar tug in her heart again.

Ajay didn't belong to her anymore. In fact, he was engaged to be married to someone else. Then why wasn't she feeling guilty about last night?

Was it because of what he had told her last night?

*"No matter what happens, however tough the journey, we will remain together. I promise."*

God! How she wanted to believe him. She felt a lump form in her throat as her eyes burned with emotion. She wanted him so badly that it hurt to imagine letting him go.

She didn't move. She was scared. What if this was another of her dreams where he was with her?

If that was the case, she didn't want to wake up from that dream. She simply wanted to get lost in the feel of his body against hers.

She had missed him like crazy. His touch. His smell.

And so, she closed her eyes again, to let herself dream a little more.

A loud knock on the door made her jump. She opened her eyes and saw a lot of shadows outside the window shades.

"Police. Open the door!" a loud voice stated.

Her heart began to thump. Rolling away from Ajay, she got up from the carpet and hunted for her clothes. They were long rips everywhere.

“Open! Or we’ll have to break down the door!” a man’s voice shouted. Hurriedly, she slipped on the torn dress over herself.

“Open!” shouted another voice followed by insistent banging.

She tried to search for her underwear. Finally, she found it where it was flung faraway.

“Shit. Shit. Shit,” she muttered.

“They can’t break that door you know,” said a sleepy deep voice.

Ajay was awake. He slowly sat up, yawning and watching her with a sleepy look on his face.

“What?” she asked, trying to pull her underwear up. But it was impossible, as he had torn it into shreds.

“The metal door you custom ordered. It’s bomb proof, remember,” he said lazily.

“That’s the police out there, Ajay. They must have found the judge’s body and come here,” she said, trying not to let panic overtake her.

Ajay shrugged. “I know.”

“Open the door!” roared a man from outside.

Throwing the ripped clothes towards Ajay, “Dress up, I’m opening the door,” she said, walking towards the main door. She stopped briefly, turning half way, exposing only her profile to him. “If they think you had anything to do with this, I’m going to tell them I did it,” she said softly.

The second the words left from her mouth, there was a growl, and she felt him move quickly behind her. “Like hell you will!” he hissed out.

He looked angry, annoyed and was in a full-blown protective mode.

“Don’t talk anything beyond what we discussed last night,” he warned her.

“But you didn’t tell me anyth—”

“Well, keep it that way. I will tell you whatever you need to know once a few things get sorted out.”

His face softened when he saw the uncertain look on her face. “Baby, I promise you we’ll get through this,” he said.

She nodded, not because she believed they could get away with a murder, but because he needed to believe that she trusted him.

Which she began to do in real.

She moved towards the door after a couple more bangs on the door. Then, unlocking the bolts, she opened to see at least a dozen or so uniformed men and women along with sniffer dogs, standing outside the door.

“Miss. Sia Sampath?”

Before she could respond, she felt a warm body behind her. “Mrs. Sia Manthena,” Ajay answered.

“Mr. Ajay. Good morning, sir,” the officer greeted politely.

“Hello Rajesh. How are you?”

“Quite good, sir. I’m here for questioning Miss... Mrs. Manthena.”

“Why?”

The officer looked uncomfortable. “Sir, according to the information we have, Mrs. Manthena and you are separated. May I know what you are doing here at her place at his time in the morning?”

“May I know why? It’s our personal matter.”

“I apologize for intruding, sir. But Judge Sundaram was shot dead last night.”

The officer watched both Ajay’s and Sia’s face closely. Both of them didn’t betray anything on their faces.

“Oh? That’s unfortunate. But why is Sia being questioned?” Ajay asked.

“Mr. Jagadish Naidu’s car was seen driving away from Judge Sundaram’s house. When we went to question Mr. Naidu, he was insisting that Mrs. Manthena must have killed the judge.”

“As you can see, that’s impossible. She was here with me, the entire night.”

“Maybe I ask you why?” the officer asked.

“My soon-to-be ex-wife wanted to reconcile. So I visited her last evening, and as you can see, she managed to convince me successfully that we should get back together.”

To others, it might sound like a slightly crude joke made at her cost. But Sia knew Ajay. It was one of the tactics he had used before with other people, including her. Answering a serious question with a joke, so there wouldn’t be any further digging.

“I see,” the officer smiled awkwardly. “We’ll need to check the house. We... uh... have a search warrant.”

Ajay shrugged nonchalantly. “Be our guests, but you’ll need to hurry. Because our daughter is waiting for us,” he said.

The next couple of hours, there was an intense search, even though the interrogation was light. Most of the conversation was dominated by Ajay, and he managed to convince the police that apart from reigniting their passion last night, they weren’t involved in anything nefarious such as murder.

The search also didn’t turn up with anything suspicious.

“I’m sorry for the trouble Mr. and Mrs. Manthena. It was a required formality from our end. I hope you understand,” the officer told them at the end.

“Not a bother at all Rajesh. I understand that you were doing your duty. Do let me know if you need any kind of help from us.”

“We will, sir,” he said, before thanking them and leaving with his entourage.

Sia sat on the couch, her legs weak with the narrow temporary escape they had.

Ajay looked unperturbed. Yawning and stretching elaborately, “I’m starving. Got anything in the fridge for breakfast or lunch?” he asked.

Her head whipped up. “How can you be talking about food at this time?” she demanded.

“Why not? And why do you look so worried?” he asked.

She was back to being angry with him again. “This is not a laughing matter, Ajay,” she snapped.

He looked at her visibly upset face and sighed. Moving closer, he pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head. “Baby, I know you are worried. But apart from the possibility of getting caught by the police—which I think is quite low—there is nothing to be worried about.”

He rubbed her back slowly. “In fact, we should be celebrating our reconciliation again,” he continued huskily.

Her head jerked up and she stared at him with widened eyes. “Don’t,” she warned even as her voice sounded breathless.

“Ok. I won’t,” he said, sliding his hands to her sides, and slowly moving them up until he reached the back of her head. He tugged her hair gently until she watched him with glazed eyes. “Only because I know we’ll be interrupted soon,” he said.

She clutched his shirt, caught in a limbo of not knowing whether to push him away or pull him closer. “This is crazy and foolish,” she scolded half-heartedly.

He smiled. The smile on his gorgeous face was so easy and carefree—she couldn’t help returning it with her own wobbly one.

“I know,” he said softly. “It’s always been that way with us.” Leaning forward, he kissed her hard on her lips. Once, twice and then, he stepped back. “Let’s freshen up and grab some food.”

When she didn’t move from her spot, he squeezed her arm in

reassurance. “Trust me, Sia. We’ll be fine.”

She took a deep calming breath. “Okay. So what’s going to happen next?” she asked him quietly.

His face sobered up immediately. “Next, we begin the main event of the game you started.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

Sia freshened up before Ajay. Feeling restless with so many questions bouncing around her mind, she headed towards the media room. She needed to watch something. To be reminded that the world still remained normal around her.

She began to search through her movie collection. She wanted to play something mindless where not much thought would be required.

There were several new titles. But they didn't appeal to her. And so, she browsed through the movies marked as favorites by Ajay. He had made her watch them all before, and they seemed pretty apt currently.

A small smile began to play on her face as she scanned through the titles of the movies that starred Ajay's favorite movie actor. Just when she was about to hit the play button on one of the titles, something nagged at her.

Frowning, she went back to the list and began to look at the titles of the movies again.

Ajay's favorite actor acted in a lot of movies, but there was a common theme amongst most of the titles.

Mafia.

"No. That's impossible," she whispered out loud.

*Why not?*

It made perfect sense.

The things he knew about her...

The way he knew exactly when to turn up last night...

But... but... how?

She had thought that Ajay was simply tracking her using his technology. Never in her wildest dreams did she realize that *she* was the one feeding him most of the information!

Not wasting any time, she marched towards one of the spare bedrooms purposefully.

Ajay was shaving. When he saw her, a smile broke on his face.

Hardening her resolve, "Are you the MafiaBoy?" she demanded.

His smile slipped. And there was silence.

*Oh my god!*

"Sia... baby listen—"

"Answer me! Are you the hacker I hired to help me track my uncle?" She thought back to when she contacted the hacker. "Two years ago!"

There was a stretch of silence before he answered. “Yes,” he said.

She was stunned. “B-but how? I distinctly remember that the person was a teenager living in America.” She also remembered how that ‘kid’ had used a synthesized voice to speak with her when he did for the first time. At that time, she hadn’t cared. She had needed the information about her uncle and the Naidu Estate immediately.

“Sia, I have a lot of explaining to do. And I’m going to do it soon, alright? But Harsha is on his way with information we need,” he said.

As if on cue, the door bell rang. “Please answer it. I’ll join you guys in a few minutes,” he said.

She shook her head in frustration, but left him to answer the door.

“Hello Sia,” Harsha greeted her politely at the door.

“Harsha,” she greeted back equally politely as she led him into the family room that offered them more privacy. Technically every room in the house had privacy, but the family room seemed more apt for someone like Harsha.

She had not interacted much with him. But Ajay spoke enough about Harsha to know that they grew up close, and they were family. She was also quite sure Harsha must have known about the MafiaBoy episode as well.

“While we are waiting for Ajay, can I ask you something?” she said.

A look of surprise passed on Harsha’s face, but he nodded.

“I know Ajay trusts you with his life. Enough to help him cover up a... murder. So I’m sure you must have also known that Ajay contacted me as a hacker named MafiaBoy,” she stated.

Harsha’s expression turned wary. However, he answered truthfully. “Yes,” he admitted.

“But how? He was right next to me when I received messages from the hacker.” She frowned as she still tried to wrap her mind around the revelation. “Did you also contact me as MafiaBoy?” she asked.

“No. It was always only Ajay. When he was around you, he simply scheduled them to be sent to you. I did offer to help, but he wanted to be the only one dealing with you. He didn’t want me to be involved.” As though an afterthought, he added, “At least not in the way it really mattered,” he added.

Sia was quiet. Her mind was still processing the news and trying to put together every little interaction she had with MafiaBoy over the last two years.

“Sia,” Harsha interrupted her gently. “Ajay might have started it as a

way to get back at you. But as soon as he married you, he was always on your side.”

“But he even demanded money from me. Around a few million,” she stated.

“Only because he didn’t want to raise your suspicion. He used to donate all the money you had sent him. And lately, some of it had gone to bribe a few influential officials.”

“I see,” she said, her mind confused, warring between trust and suspicion.

With over fifteen years of conditioning, trust did not come easy. But she was determined to trust Ajay. She had nothing to lose at this point. Ajay did. If he got caught, the consequences would be devastating.

“Thanks Harsha. For trusting me with your friend’s secret,” she said.

Harsha smiled. “Believe it or not, I had huge doubts about you initially. I even begged Ajay to not pursue you. But when I realized that you were the only one he wanted to spend his life with, you became my family too,” he said.

Sia felt her chest tighten in guilt. Ajay had asked her several times to join him during his visits to the Colonel or even meet Harsha and Jo. She had always turned him down as she wasn’t willing to make any kind of attachments.

And now, the very people she didn’t want to risk bonding with—were the ones willing to put their life and freedom in line to save her.

A few minutes later, Ajay joined them.

Harsha gave them a detailed update on the things that had transpired since the time Judge Sundaram’s body was found.

“I think the fact that they found the incriminating tapes of Jagadish Naidu in Judge Sundaram’s house is enough to convict him for the conspiracy of murder. And the DNA and fingerprints results will also come out in a few days, making it the final nail in his coffin.”

“What about the security tapes?” Ajay asked.

“I checked. Apart from the car with visible nameplates, the tinted windows didn’t allow for anyone to see who was inside. It was way too dark.”

“Call logs?”

“I verified it again this morning. The code you put into the Mobile company’s encrypted server changed the call logs over the past ten days.”



“Bank account transaction still reflecting the same as yesterday?”

“Yes. A large amount of money has also been transferred directly from Jagadish Naidu’s account to Judge Sundaram’s, making it seem like blackmail money.”

Ajay nodded in satisfaction.

“And Commissioner Tarun Sharma?”

“He’s prepared. There won’t be any swaying of law this time. The political leaders are also antsy now. No immediate statements of automatically supporting their favorite leader.”

“Was Dr. Kranthi notified?”

“No. There are no phone or internet signals in those areas. It will be a good couple of weeks before anyone can notify him or reach him.”

“The truth pills from pharmacy?”

“Already shipped to the postal address.”

“Good.”

Listening to Ajay and Harsha, Sia felt hope.

Maybe there was a third option. An option other than going to jail or being a lifelong fugitive.

There was now a fighting chance to be free.

After the update, Harsha left, promising to stay in touch with updates on the ongoing investigation.

As soon as she closed the door, Sia asked Ajay a burning question. “Why did you do it?” she asked.

“Get in touch with you as MafiaBoy?”

“No. Harsha gave me some of the details. And I don’t care about it anymore. But everything else, Ajay. Why did you risk your freedom for my sake?”

He didn’t hesitate to reply. “Because I love you,” he said.

Those four words made her insanely happy and also incredibly sad at the same time.

“I don’t know if love is really worth one’s freedom,” she told him softly.

“It is definitely worth for me. Don’t ever doubt it,” he said.

Her heart leaped at his words. Since the time she could recall, other than Ajay, no one had ever displayed that kind of unconditional love towards her.

“I love you too, Ajay,” she said, giving him the words. She only wished she had repeated them more often.

But this time, Ajay remained quiet. And she could literally feel the

waves of his disbelief.

Her heart clenched at the knowledge that she made a man such as him doubt his worth to be loved unconditionally in return.

“I have always loved you, Ajay. Desperately. How could I not?” she asked. “You were the only one who made me feel safe and well-loved. You have the power to make me feel worthy. You still do.”

“Then why did you leave me? Why didn’t you stay to fight together? Why do you want to do everything alone?” he asked.

In his words, she heard the pain of rejection and heartbreak.

“I wanted to protect you. I had to distance myself from you and Anika. So that if and when I was caught, you both wouldn’t be dragged in it,” she said.

He stared at her for a second and laughed out loud. And it wasn’t in amusement. “We both make quite a pair,” he said.

“Why?” she asked softly.

“You had murder on your mind, Sia. I knew it. And I tried my best to blackmail you emotionally to discourage you from that path. I wanted to protect you. Because I knew that if you go ahead with it, then I would lose you completely. You would have been killed or arrested or worse, haunted by it all your life.”

When she didn’t reply, he continued. “I knew right from the day your uncle and the others were caught during the child trafficking bust, they would be released from the jail using their political influences.”

She reared back and she stared at him with widened eyes.

He smiled sadly. “Yes. I knew right then, that in order to finish what you started; your uncle and maybe a few other pedophiles had to die. I just didn’t want *you* to be the one to do it.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I was planning on doing it.”

“What?” she asked in shock.

“Yes. I was putting together a premeditated plan to assassinate your uncle and the others without any suspicion. It was to happen after I had baited them with a possibility of having willing children for them to corrupt. Then suddenly, you dropped a bomb on me by wanting to divorce me. If I had told you of my plans, you would have stopped me with your misguided attempt to protect me. Even then, I tried my best to make you change your mind, asking you to choose between family and your revenge. It was unfair, but I felt

compelled to do it.”

Heartbreakingly, she had chosen revenge over her family or happiness. “I’m sorry,” she whispered,

“Don’t be,” he said. “Believe me, I understand. You wanted to stop him from destroying other children’s lives at the cost of your own happiness. Not many women or men can make that call.”

“I still feel that way, Ajay,” she confessed.

“I know. I’m proud of you for your determination. But lucky for us, we don’t have to sacrifice our happiness or freedom. Your uncle is going to lose everything. He’s going to jail and then he’s going to lose his life,” he promised.

She nodded. When they began to eat, she asked another thing that had been haunting her since that morning. “What about Jyothika? This is the second time I’ve come in between her engagement to you,” she said.

Ajay looked amused. “I was never engaged to Jo. Harsha was,” he said. “What?”

“I knew what was running through Varun’s brain that day when he followed Jo, Harsha and me to the jewellery store. I didn’t correct him and I deliberately let you think I moved on.”

She felt relieved that he didn’t jump into another relationship even though she had practically pushed him towards it. “So Jyothika picked Harsha over you?” she asked, unable to believe it.

He smiled. “Yes. Because she finally knew that he was crazy about her, and also because she loved him back equally.”

“Really?” she asked, looking unconvinced.

“Yes. Jo told me that the love she felt for me until recently was simply a longing for a childhood fantasy she had for a very long time since she was a little girl. She just wanted to love a boy who had desperately needed it at that point. And I did need her friendship and love,” he said, smiling fondly. “But over the last few months, she realized that a woman’s love was vastly different from a girl’s. Harsha was the one who showed her that. Jo’s family is thrilled. Especially her mother.”

“I see.” Sia was still skeptical. How could anyone not remain in love with Ajay?

He pulled her close, chuckling. “Even if Jo wanted to pick me, I wouldn’t have agreed.”

“Why?” she asked softly.

“I already told you why.”

“Tell me again,” she said. She would never be tired of listening to those words from him.

“Because, I love you,” he said, smiling.

And then she remembered something else. “What about me? Don’t you have any questions about me living with Varun? Or him staying here with me for a while? Won’t you ask if I cheated during that time?”

He didn’t even before for a second, before he answered. “Frankly, no.”

“Why not? Especially with a past like mine. You must know that by most people’s standards, you’d be considered crazy to get back to someone like me.”

He nipped her ear playfully, “You did have quite a wild past,” he said.

When she didn’t comment or react, he pulled away to look at her. Slowly his expression turned serious. “Sia, what you and I have... no one can understand it. And that’s okay. It might be crazy, but it’s real, and it’s how we both are. I’ve already told you this. We’re going to be together, no matter what.”

Listening to the conviction in his voice, her mind began to ease and she began to believe in what he was saying.

## CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

Jagadish Naidu was arrested on the murder charges of Judge Sundaram.

It was utter chaos inside the police office where he was being questioned. Mindful to his status, he was offered a glass of juice which he drank owing to the heat in the overcrowded room. Also upon special requests, they let Ajay and Sia stand outside the room where they were visible to Jagadish Naidu.

“It’s a clear cut case Mr. Jagadish Naidu. Your DNA and fingerprints were found around the victim’s house. We also feel, there is enough evidence for your motive as well. Videos of you molesting young children were found in Judge Sundaram’s safe box at his house. I’m sure there must have been some sort of disagreement or blackmail attempt by the judge, due to which you were driven to murder. And we also found large financial transactions made to Judge Sundaram’s account from yours.”

“Is that true, Mr. Naidu?” one of the officers questioned.

“I’ve told you several times! I’m innocent! They framed me!” Jagadish Naidu pointed at Sia and Ajay.

“Framed you how, Mr. Naidu?” the officer asked in a condescending manner.

“I don’t know. But I know *she* must have killed Judge Sundaram.”

“What would be Mrs. Manthena’s motive?”

“She hates me. She wants to ruin my reputation until I’m left with nothing.”

“Mr. Naidu, there is no need to be dramatic. Did you or did you not exchange several calls with Judge Sundaram before visiting him on the evening of his murder?”

“I didn’t call him! And neither were those pictures or videos sent to me on my phone by him that day. I don’t know how the calls or the messages—”

“Mr. Naidu, that’s for the investigation team to decide. And we haven’t found any strange anomalies—”

“That’s because of him!” Jagadish Naidu pointed at Ajay. “He’s capable of anything. In fact I think *he* must have killed Judge Sundaram.”

“Mr. Naidu, first you blamed at your niece. And now her husband, who was also not present at that time. They both have no motive to kill Judge Sundaram. It was *your* car, *your* DNA, *your* call logs, and last but not the least, *your* gun with your fingerprints! And aside from murder, the videos of you and the children are criminal enough to—”

There was a manic light in Jagadish Naidu's eyes. "I'm being framed. They are in this together!"

"Why? Your niece was even getting divorced, even though she knew she would lose the vast property from the Naidu Estate. What would motivate her to frame you if she already had the money and was willingly to give it all up?"

"I know it's her."

"That's not enough. We want to know why!"

"Because I touched her when she was a child. And now she wants to pay me back."

"Sir—" Jagadish Naidu's lawyer protested. "Please don't say—"

"What do you mean touched? Touched her how? Can you please be clear?" the officer pressed, cutting off the young defense lawyer. None of the competent defense lawyers were available to take up the case. The one's Jagadish Naidu used to have on his payroll, had mysteriously remained silent. Maybe because they knew he lacked funds to pay them and also because there was no way in hell, anyone could get him out of this case.

"I had sexual relations with her!" Jagadish Naidu said, ignoring his lawyer.

There was a stunned silence. Even Jagadish Naidu's lawyer was shocked as well. But he composed himself. "Sir, that's enough. You don't have to say anything."

"I have nothing to hide now. I'm being framed for a murder I didn't commit!"

"Mr. Jagadish Naidu, can you please elaborate on what you mean by sexual relations with your niece when she was a child? From the information we have, your niece left the country when she was nine. How can an adult have sexual relations with a child? Unless it's rape."

"It was consensual," Jagadish Naidu immediately answered, brushing it off. "All the relations I've had, they have always been consensual. But after all these years, she remembers it differently. They all do!"

"They? Who else apart from your niece?"

"A few over the years. But there is another man who wants to get back at me for the same reason. He was with her when they tried framing me during the Citizen Hotel event. So even now, he must have been with her, planning all along to frame me."

"Sir. First you said it was Mrs. Manthena, then her husband. And now,

you are accusing another man. I'm not sure—"

"They are all in it together. And that man—" He pointed at Ajay. "He is quite capable of killing a person in cold blood!"

"Mr. Naidu—"

"He killed his father!"

There was absolute silence.

"What?"

"Yes, he killed his father who was in the military."

"As far as we know, the investigation did not show a prior arrest record for Mr. Manthana. When was this?"

"When Ajay was seven," Jagadish Naidu replied.

There was silence.

"Sir, I know you are under severe mental stress. With your wife passing away, your political career on hold. Your family and friends are also concerned about your erratic behavior. Would you like to plead guilty due to mental illness? Your sentence will—"

"I'm not crazy!"

"Then how do you think a boy of seven can kill a grown man who has been in the military? That too his own father? And why wouldn't there be a record of any such thing happening?"

"He... he..." Jagadish Naidu shook his head. He began to squint in an erratic manner and shake his head. "It's true. My wife helped him cover it up. I didn't see the need to oppose her."

"Sir, even if what you are saying is true. You will be considered an accomplice to a murder that happened when Mr. Manthana was seven."

"I don't care! They took everything from me. I want to see them get punished!"

"So to punish them, you are trying to place the murder *you* did on to them?"

"Yes!" he shouted. And then, he thought and shouted. "No! They are the murderers!"

But, by then it was too late.

They got everything on record.

## CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

"I think his fate is pretty much sealed," said Ajay as soon as he and Sia arrived home.

Sia shook her head. "Until he is behind the bars and remains that way for a while, I don't trust the system," she said.

"This time, I'll do everything in my power to make sure he is not released under any circumstances."

"What if they realize there are chemicals in his bloodstream making him speak the truth?"

"They won't. It's not like he slurred or anything. There is no reason for them to do it."

Listening to his statement, she let loose her biggest fear. "I sometimes still wish you had stayed away from all this, Ajay. You got involved with me again, and now... you lost your innocence by killing a man for my sake."

She took a deep breath. "I was mentally prepared to take a life. Even then, I hesitated at the last minute. Now... his murder is going to haunt you, Ajay. I didn't want that."

"I lost my innocence a long time ago at the age of seven, Sia"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"When I killed my father," he said.

"What?" she asked stunned. When her uncle was accusing Ajay for his father's murder, she had thought it was a mad raving from man who has been pushed to the limits due to the chemicals pumped into his body.

Ajay's face turned into a stone, revealing no emotions. "I killed my father," he repeated. "I deliberately pushed him into the water and let him drown. Even though he begged for help until he was dragged down into his watery grave."

Sia was quiet, trying to digest the revelation.

"And you know what the most disturbing part is?" Ajay asked. "That I still have no remorse. Not even for a moment have I felt bad about killing my father. Given another chance, I would have done it again."

"But, why?" she asked him softly.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, she could see the darkness of his past that still haunted him.

"Because... when my father was drunk, he turned into an animal that attacked my mother and beat the shit out of me."



She didn't say anything. She simply waited until he finished before she could offer him any kind of comfort.

"My father was in the Army. My mother had told me that it was the war that had messed up with his mind. That made him drink and be violent with his wife and son. Apparently, he wasn't like that before. She told me that he loved us both. But after a while, I didn't care about the reasons. I just wanted him to stop. I wanted to protect my mother from his abuse."

He watched her with a vulnerable look on his face. "When I was seven, my father visited us during my holidays. And by then, I already began to dread his visits."

"On that particular day, my mother worked hard. She cleaned the house thoroughly, prepared all his favorite dishes... But when he came home, he hit her because there wasn't enough salt in some dish."

He scoffed bitterly.

"I still remember that there was nothing wrong with the dish my mother had prepared. My father just needed an excuse. When I intervened, he turned on me. My mother tried to protect me, and in the process, she was hit so hard that she lost consciousness. There was so much blood from the cut on her head that I thought she was dead."

He turned to look at her with a devastated look of a small boy who was recalling the incident clearly. Her heart broke that Ajay had to witness such violence at a young age.

"And guess what he did next? After knocking his wife unconscious?"

"What?" she asked.

"He went out for a smoke," he spit out. "I was so angry and mad thinking that he killed my mother that I marched towards him and I pushed him into the well in our backyard. The well was the kind that had a very short wall around it and offered little safety. He was sitting on it and smoking."

"He was so drunk that he couldn't even shout much. I didn't even bother to get help. I wanted him dead."

"What did your mother do when she gained consciousness?" she asked softly.

"She knew I was responsible. I confessed to her as well but she decided to take the blame."

"Then why wasn't she arrested?" Sia asked. She also didn't think the school in the village would have hired a murder suspect.

"Your uncle's wife helped us," he said quietly, shocking her. "Our

neighbor, an old woman knew what happened and she told your uncle's wife. Mrs. Geetha Naidu made sure the police thought it was an accident. She even got my mother a job as a teacher in the local school."

\* \* \*

Sia's heart ached for Ajay as he described the death of his father. The love she felt for him was overwhelming.

"Does my confession make you afraid of me?" he asked her with a vulnerable look in his eyes. "I've killed. Once for my mother and the second time for you. I'll probably kill again if it's to protect the ones I love."

Sia smiled at him softly. "I'm not afraid. Nor do I think less of you in any way. In fact your confession has made me love you even more," she whispered, holding his face within her palms. "I'm proud that you are so strong and resilient. You fight for everything you believe in. Including us. Especially us. It didn't matter to you how many times I pushed you away, thinking you and Anika were better off without me." She smiled and it felt wobbly with emotion. "You just wouldn't have it. You dragged me back into your life, kicking and screaming" she laughed through tears. "Not just that, you yourself have gone through so much in your childhood, but you never let it define you in a negative way. You used those experiences to become stronger. That's one of the things I love the most about you."

Ajay smiled at her softly. He wiped away the tear that ran down her cheek. She wasn't even aware that she was crying. "My love and commitment for you aren't just words either, Sia. I mean it when I say I'll be with you and our daughter until the end."

He turned towards her with a torn look. "I have another confession to make. Growing up, I was always grateful to your uncle's wife. Because she saved me and my mother. That's the reason why I attended her funeral as well."

"I understand," she said softly.

"Then also understand that my utmost priority in my life are— you and Anika," he reiterated.

"Mine too," she said, meaning it. Over the past few hours, she realized that she cannot save the world. She made peace with that fact and wanted to start a new chapter with Ajay and their daughter. She was more than grateful to be offered a second chance.

She had to let Varun know that she won't be able to go through rest of

their plan. She would let Varun or the law take care of her uncle. It was a proper closure for her. Her uncle losing everything and living with that knowledge or dying at the hands of one of his tormentors.

“Let’s go get Anika,” said Ajay.

“I need to call Varun and keep him posted. He must be waiting for my call anxiously.”

“Alright, I’ll go and get her home. Will you be okay?”

“Yes.”

Kissing her forehead, he went to the key holder to grab the car keys. He also pulled out the infant car seat from a shelf that he needed for Anika while driving back home.

Watching him go, she thought of something. Something very simple that she should have done a long time back. She wanted to start over. She wanted to make a true attempt at giving Anika a normal family as much as possible.

“Ajay...” she began.

He looked at her questioningly.

“Can you invite Harsha and Jyotika over?”

He frowned. “Why?” he asked.

She smiled tentatively. “No specific reason. I just wanted to meet them and thank them properly. And... and if they don’t mind, I’d like to spend time getting to know them better,” she said.

His face softened. “Baby, they’d like to get to know you as well. And I promise you they’ll love you like family too.”

“I hope so. It’s just that I never had any friends or relatives before. So I might screw up in the beginning...”

He laughed and strode closer to her. “You are worrying too much. You’ll be fine,” he said, kissing her forehead. “Ok. Be right back. Finish your call and get some rest.”

She nodded and waved him goodbye. When the door closed behind him, she dialed Varun’s phone number. It kept ringing for a long time and went to the automatic answering machine.

“Varun, call me when you get a chance. I want to talk to you about something important—”

She was interrupted when she heard the front door bell ring. Her eyes fell on the forgotten car seat on the table next to the front door.

Grabbing it, and still on the phone call with Varun, she opened the front door to hand it Ajay. Before she could register anything, she was knocked

back hard, and a sweet smelling cloth was placed on top of her entire face, blinding her and covering her nose and mouth. She struggled hard, using her elbow to hit back at whoever was holding her in a tight grip.

The person cursed viciously, and the grip on her loosened. Slowly, her movements became lethargic, until she began to lose consciousness. The last sight she saw as the cloth was slowly lowered and before the darkness took over was her uncle watching her with madness filled eyes of a manic.

## CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

The main door was left open.

The sick feeling Ajay had felt when Sia didn't answer her phone intensified. Every menacing thought crossed his mind as he ran inside.

He was halfway through the ride to Jo's house when he got a call that Jagadish Naidu had managed to disappear from the police station.

Immediately, he had called Sia to warn her and to ask her to get out of the house until he could get her. But Sia's phone went unanswered.

"Sia!" he shouted.

The silence was deafening around him. The only sounds that could be heard were the ones resonating off his body. His breathing got louder as adrenaline began coursing through his body. He threw open each and every room, checking inside even though in his heart he knew it was futile.

"Sia!" he screamed in each and every room because most of the rooms had been soundproofed.

He returned to the living room, hunched over with his hands on his knees, hyperventilating to the point where he felt the pain inside his chest. He had checked each and every inch of the house, but there was no trace to be found.

He ran outside. "Sia!" he shouted, whipping about as though they would suddenly appear out of thin air. He felt his blood turn cold, causing him to shiver and the hairs stand straight on his arms.

Before he gave it anymore thought, he ran towards the maid's quarters. Frantically trying to ignore the nervous and fearful feeling he felt inside the pit of his stomach, he focused on the task ahead.

"Kamala!" he shouted, but there was no reply.

Pushing the door open, he stepped inside the outhouse.

His mind raced and his chest heaved at the sight inside.

Kamala was lying on the floor with her eyes wide open and her throat slit.

"No. God no," he whispered as panic began to set in even more until he had no control over his thoughts as they ran wild.

"God, let her be okay. Please let her be okay," he kept repeating as he dialed for help.

When he finished informing the police about his wife missing, he called Harsha.

“Harsha!”

“Jay, we’ve been waiting for you. Are you stuck in traffic?”

“No. I came back home. Sia has been taken.”

“What? But how? And who?” Harsha asked in shock.

“I received a call from the police that her uncle has disappeared. I know he has Sia. With those chemicals in his body, I don’t think he could have taken her by himself. Someone is helping him.”

“I’m on my way Jay—”

“No Harsha. Don’t come here. I’ve called the police already. My maid has been killed.”

There was silence. Ajay knew what was going through his friend’s mind. Sia was taken by people that were capable of killing an innocent person. That meant there was a good possibility she could meet with a similar fate.

“Ajay, listen to me. Don’t do this alone. It’s dangerous—”

“No. You listen to me Harsha. I want you to make sure Anika and Jo’s family are safe. I also need your help while I go after Sia.”

“I’m here with Anika and Jo. We are all at Jo’s place right now.”

“Good.”

“How can I help, Jay?”

“Help me look up Sia’s uncle’s phone numbers. Especially the ones he hasn’t listed on the public records.”

Meantime, Ajay put Harsha on the speaker and looked at his phone screen. He pulled up the GPS app and tried to trace Sia’s phone. The satellites took a moment to pinpoint the exact location. But frustratingly, they showed that Sia’s phone was only 100 feet from him.

“Dammit!” he shouted in frustration as he saw the phone lying under a table next to the main door.

“What is it Jay?”

“Her phone is at home. Were you able to pull up Jagadish Naidu’s numbers?”

“Yes I pulled it from our recent file. Give me one minute. I’m sending you the list.”

“Send them to the police as well. Meantime, I’m going to trace that bastard down to see where the hell has taken her.”

Twenty frustrating and terrifying minutes later, Ajay got a lead. There were chances that Sia was not at that place, but not having any other choice; he decided to go there first.

## CHAPTER FORTY

Sia slowly began to gain conscious.

Her head was pounding and her mouth was dry. She felt disoriented and dizzy as she tried to sit up. She shook her head to get rid of the dizziness, but it only got worse, until she was forced to lie down on the hard concrete floor again.

A few minutes later, fighting the nausea and dizziness, she pried her eyes open slowly. She could see cemented walls of what seemed to be some kind of a construction site. She couldn't see much. It was sometime in the evening and the darkness was slowly taking over. There was only a small dim bulb emitting a light adding to the ominous silence.

"Oh good, you are finally awake," said a familiar voice from somewhere around her.

She sat up slowly, and turned towards the voice, only to see her uncle sitting on a cheap plastic chair, holding a gun in his hands. She couldn't see him clearly, but she knew that he was going to be unpredictable. Not just due to the circumstances, but also with the drug in his system.

"What do you think you are doing?" she asked, keeping her voice steady.

"What do you think! The only thing you reduced me to do right now. You left me with nothing!" he seethed.

"I don't know what else you expected from me," she said. Keeping her eyes towards him, she stood up slowly, her legs wobbly under her. "You raped me repeatedly as a child. You have been doing it to others as well."

"Shut up!" he shouted, waving the gun towards her.

"It's the truth. You are a sick person who deserved everything you got," she said. She knew the truth would goad him. If she was going to be shot dead eventually, she refused to beg for her life. She wanted a confrontation that he had been avoiding.

As expected, he sprang up from the chair.

"Do you think I had an easy life being this way?" he hissed.

"You could have controlled. Or gotten help—"

"Control? Help?" he said, laughing bitterly. "One cannot change the natural instincts that one is born with," he said with conviction.

"Natural or not. That doesn't give you the right to force yourself on innocent children. You chose to follow through your urges at the cost of *their* innocence. *My* innocence!"

He was quiet for a while. She knew he would have no remorse towards what he had done to her and many other children. As she watched him the expression on his face threw her off.

“My father knew,” he said. He had a faraway look on his face as though he was lost in the past. “I thought he was the best father anyone could have. He was well respected and he taught me everything he knew to be able to run our estate and its people. I was his heir.” He took a deep breath and a look of loathing passed on his face. “But that all changed when he caught me with a younger child for the first time when I was fifteen. He didn’t want to understand my ‘*unholy sickness*’ as he called it. He whipped me until I bled and until I promised him that I wouldn’t do it again.”

He scoffed bitterly.

“As if it’s something I could control. I could hide it better. But he caught me again when I was twenty.”

His hands clenched around the gun.

“Then, my own father,” he continued, with a pained look on his face. “My own father left me no choice when he cut me off his will because of that discovery.”

Sia’s heart dropped, when she heard that. She had always suspected her uncle to be involved in his father’s early death which was staged as an accident.

“But luckily, he valued family honor more than anything. He didn’t discuss about me to anyone. There were no rumors about me in the village and no one suspected a thing because I was always a gentleman. Especially because I treated women with respect. When it comes to the society, a man’s character is usually measured by that.”

Sia recalled the women who had publicly vouched about his character that helped weaken the child trafficking case against him.

“At first I tried to convince my father that I was an ideal son. That I was an ideal leader. That I was everything that a man needed to be, to be able to lead and manage the vast estate with several families livelihood depending on. But still, the old man made a crazy will cutting me off, stating that only the stated heir who was married with children could inherit the estate.”

He scoffed bitterly again. “My father didn’t think people like me could also marry and sire a child.”

His eyes were filled with rage. “I had to marry. Even though it went against everything I believed in. But at least I married a very *young* looking



sixteen year old, and was able to sire a child within the first year of our marriage. But did that please my father? No. He deliberately went ahead and still cut me off from the will even though I fulfilled his requirements. That very act was enough to cut his life short to snatch my birthright back.”

Sia couldn’t stay quiet. She had to know. She had a gnawing feeling for a while, but she didn’t know whether she could handle the truth.

“Did you kill my mother?” she asked him bluntly.

He remained quiet, and so she asked him again. “Did you kill your own sister?” she demanded.

His face softened, an expression of regret passing through it. “I didn’t want to,” he confessed. “I really loved your mother. She was ten years younger to me and adored me.”

“If you really loved her, you wouldn’t kill her for the sake of money!” she shouted, losing her cool.

“It wasn’t just money. It was *my* birthright!” he shouted back. “And your mother, who was supposed to be a loving sister, didn’t do a thing to stop our father from cutting me off and declaring her as the heir.”

“Did you...” Sia couldn’t complete the sentence. The very idea was horrific. “Did you touch her like you did to me?”

“No. I didn’t touch my sister,” he replied with an offended look on his face. As though touching his niece was more acceptable.

“So you didn’t touch her, but you just killed her along with her husband and their infant son,” she stated in loathing.

“You should have been there with them too. But unfortunately, you weren’t.” He pointed the gun at her chest. “You have cheated death way too many times. And now, you’ve come back to ruin me.”

His voice wavered as he shook his head erratically. “You succeeded,” he said. “You have ruined the one thing I valued the most. My reputation. My own son who is the only person I love in this world, looked at me with suspicion after I was arrested like a common criminal.”

“*You are a criminal!*” she declared out loud.

He was the worst kind of criminal that no amount of punishment could atone his crime. “Don’t you regret what you’ve done to all those children and to me?” she demanded. “And on top of that you murdered your own family! Your father! Your sister. Her family!”

“Shut up! I have a gun. I can kill you right away.”

She smiled. She probably looked as crazy as him, smiling when she was

staring down the wrong end of the gun.

“What’s so funny?” he demanded.

“You are,” she said. “You think my death will get you some kind of victory? I already won.”

His eyes narrowed in a murderous glare, but she didn’t stop adding, “The only thing that you’ll earn is an even bigger punishment in the jail. Or worse, you’ll earn the time with my husband who will destroy you in the worst way possible.”

She smirked. “You remember my husband, don’t you? Your family protégé. The one your family saved from a murder charge. But alas, what did it get you? A knife in your back,” she taunted.

The old man’s hand trembled, but he kept the gun firmly pointed at her.

“I know that. But what you and your husband don’t know is that he is well justified for betraying me,” he said.

She had a sick feeling again. “Oh?” she asked, nonchalantly.

He laughed, even though it came off as forced. “I have one more victory up my sleeve against your husband. Do you know how his mother died?” he asked.

She was quiet when another suspicion of hers was confirmed. She thought she was being too paranoid about her uncle. Pinning all the cause of deaths to him. But now, she knew that he was a monster inside-out.

“How did Mrs. Sita Chandra die?” she asked.

“She wouldn’t shut up. So I asked one of my loyal servants to shut her up.”

“You murdered Ajay’s mother?”

“I had to. She was an ungrateful bitch! I saved her son from going to jail and gave her a new life to start over. What did I get in turn? Insistent demands to have an investigation against me. She deserved it!”

Sia shook her head. This was no longer about her. It was about Ajay too. And his mother—the sweet, generous woman who didn’t deserve to die for trying to protect an innocent girl.

“You are crazy. You don’t deserve to live. You deserve to die in the worst possible way!” she hissed and lunged.

She drove her elbow into his arm, knocking the gun out of his grip. Driven solely by adrenaline and rage, she didn’t even hesitate when the gun went off. The bullet was fired into the concrete wall. It rebounded and zipped across the floor.

Kicking the gun away, she wrapped her arm across the uncle's neck in a chokehold. For an old man, he was quite strong. But she was stronger, especially due to her rage. She squeezed as hard as she could without completely crushing his windpipe, and began counting in her head. At ten seconds, he stopped struggling, and by fifteen, he slumped forward.

She was about to let him go when she felt something sharp slicing through her side, making her immobile. She fell forward, stunned and unable to react. Gasping, she ran her hands through the source of pain radiating from her side. She felt something wet.

Her hands came back red.

Raising her head through bleary eyes, she saw a man standing over her with a large knife. Shaking her head slightly, she tried to focus.

It was Manish. Her ex-husband. He was grinning like a maniac, his pupils dilated.

"Oh no. You didn't win. I'm the winner now," he raved.

*No one is harmless.*

Sia recalled Ajay warning her about Manish.

"Do enlighten me. How are you the winner," she asked, her voice coming out as a wheeze. Clutching her side, she attempted to roll onto her side and up. It was impossible to do so with a feeling of fiery burning pain dominating her side.

"I'm a winner, because I got even with you," he said.

"For what?" she asked him. Gasping for air, she held herself, making an attempt to drag herself away from there. It was too hard, so she just lay back down. She didn't want Manish, who was obviously high on drugs, to stab her to death while she attempted to get onto her feet.

Waving the knife, he began to shout, "You insulted me! You thought I was a loser who isn't man enough to be your husband. You should have been grateful that I wanted to get back with a whore like you!"

She tried to talk, but she could only gasp as she tried to draw in air.

When she didn't respond, "Should I show you that I'm still a man?" he hissed, his eyes roving over her greedily.

Still holding the knife in his hand, he began to undo his pants.

Even through the pain, she waited calmly, keeping her blurred vision on him.

*Go on, come closer, you loser, she thought. Try and touch me. I'll stab*

*you so deep in your neck—*

Her thought was left incomplete when Manish suddenly disappeared from her vision. It was mostly dark, so she had to squint her eyes to see what was going on.

Manish was tackled to the ground, and someone was beating the shit out of him while straddling his chest.

Shaking her head again to get rid of the blurredness, her gaze focused on the man on top.

Ajay!

She felt immense relief seeing him. But then, looking at the way Ajay was punching Manish, relief turned into something else.

“D-don’t,” she gasped out. She was barely audible. The bloodlust in Ajay was evident. He wasn’t calm and controlled, like he was when he had tackled the judge. Right now, he was like an animal trying to protect its mate. He was out for a kill.

She couldn’t let Ajay do that. He won’t be able to come out of this.

“A-ajay!” she whispered, even as a shooting pain shot up again from her side.

This time, Ajay froze. Then as though in a trance, he blinked a couple of times, before letting go of Manish’s limp body, and rushed towards her.

“Sia!”

“I’m fine,” she gasped out. “Let’s just get out of here. Please.”

“The ambulance and police are on the way. I notified them when I started looking for you.”

Ajay held her, taking most of her weight on him. She tried to limp towards the exit, but they stopped when they heard a gunshot sound. In the dim lighting, saw her uncle standing like a bad specter with a gun in his hand.

She shoved Ajay’s hand away from her waist and tried to move in front of him, blocking his body.

“Don’t,” said Ajay. Holding her firmly, he tried to push her down on the ground to safety even as she resisted.

“What a heartwarming sight,” her uncle slurred slightly. “Each of you trying to save the other. I would have appreciated it if you both hadn’t been ungrateful snakes that you are.”

Taking a deep breath, she stood straight, gasping in pain, trying to form the words to stop her uncle from possibly hurting Ajay. “Y-your grudge—” she gasped. “—is with me. Let Ajay go,” she begged.

When it came to Ajay, she was willing to beg and do anything to protect him until her last breath.

“No,” her uncle said with a cruel, manic smile as moved under the light. “But I think I will spare you, my dear.” His smile turned vicious. “Not because you are my family. But only because your tears are better than your blood or life. I want you to live with the knowledge that you were responsible for his death. That he died trying to save your worthless life.”

He moved the gun and pointed it straight towards Ajay’s chest.

Ajay pushed her down and stood in front of her, blocking the path to her uncle. She didn’t have the strength to stand up or struggle against his leg that held her down. “No!” she sobbed, tears running down her eyes, desperately trying to stand up or push Ajay’s leg away.

Ajay didn’t budge. He stood calmly. He turned his head to look down at her. “I love you,” he said tenderly. “Tell Anika that she was the best thing that had happened in our lives, and that I’ll always love her, and be with her, no matter what.”

There was finality in Ajay’s voice. He was saying his goodbye.

The man who told her that he loved everything about her, including her darkness was going to die because of her.

The man she loved more than her own life was going to be killed in cold blood.

The man who was the very reason for her living was going to be gone.

As though he could read her thoughts, “I love you,” he said again. “Don’t ever give up, baby. I know you are strong. And time... it heals everything,” he said softly.

“No!” she whimpered, barely able to move, fighting the darkness that was trying to take over completely. She still tried with everything she had, to push Ajay away.

It wasn’t enough.

“No!” she repeated again and again.

Until there was another loud gunshot, and then total darkness.

## EPILOGUE

### 5 years later...

Ajay had been right all those years ago.

Time healed everything.

Tragedy. Heartbreak. Losses.

Everything.

Sia couldn't claim that she had been cured magically. Or that she didn't suffer from nightmares anymore. She still did, until this day. One of the most recurring one featured the worst. Where she lay helpless on the cold concrete ground while she couldn't stop the gun from being aimed at Ajay by her uncle.

But over the time, the frequency of those nightmares had reduced. Even her paranoia toned down to simply being cautious.

She tried to live her life to the fullest as much as possible.

Just like Ajay had promised all those years ago, the house was now filled with laughter.

There were movie nights, game nights and plenty of family get-togethers. Harsha, Jo and The Colonel had become an integral part of the family now. Even though Harsha and Jo had children of their own, they held a very special bond with Anika. And Anika loved them back equally.

Although it was still painful, Sia also maintained contact with her only blood relative—her cousin. They didn't meet often or talk often. But each year, she made it a point to call him and check on how he was doing. Dr. Kranthi Naidu was now one of the biggest philanthropists in the country who dedicated his life to the betterment of downtrodden children.

Sia was happy for him. If only she could say the same about another important person in her life.

Varun still lived alone, choosing to remain an enigma all through the five years.

Sia tried to spend as much time as possible with him. But between taking care of her family and Blush Enterprises, she couldn't dedicate as much time with him as she wanted to.

Not that Varun begrudged her for that. He had told her he understood and also that he preferred to remain alone.

She still worried about him. He disappeared for days together, and each

time she met him, she still saw the same demons haunting him. She wished she could help him somehow.

The only silver lining when it came to Varun was that he was opening up to someone else in his life. Sia had often bumped into a pretty woman who had been visiting him lately. Even though Varun didn't offer Sia any details, she could see that the new woman held a special place in his life. She only hoped that the woman would be the one to remove the shadows in his eyes and bring him peace.

Sia's thoughts were interrupted when the Cuckoo clock began to strike on the wall. It was one of the gifts to Anika from Harsha and Jo for her fifth birthday.

After the loud production of noisily striking six times, the room became quiet again. Yawning behind her hand, Sia slowly began to get up from the couch in the media room where she had taken a short nap.

It was summer, and still very bright and hot outside. It had been a hectic day that began quite early in the morning. They had gone to a water park with Harsha and Jo's family. The kids were super excited and weren't willing to end the day anytime soon.

By the time they got back, it had been four in the afternoon. Still the kids wanted to continue the day with something fun outdoors. Sia suggested watching a movie along with some homemade buttered popcorn.

That finally tempted the little devils to stay indoors.

As soon as she got up from the couch, her eyes fell on one of the most beautiful sights in front of her.

Ajay was sitting on a large reclining chair with Tej and Anika lying in his arms. Both the kids must have passed out like her while watching the movie.

Sia smiled at their small slack faces that were drooling on their father's shirt. Tej, who had turned two, a week ago, was sleeping on the crook of Ajay's arm, and Anika was curled around her father's chest.

The three people in front of her held her happiness and the reason for living. With them, she knew she could face anything.

There was a time when she thought she had lost everything.

She still recalled the day from five years ago. It had been the worst and also the best day in her life.

***Five years ago***

*Sia woke up from a deep sleep, feeling groggy. A second later, her mind became instantly alert. All she could recall was her uncle holding the gun towards Ajay's chest, threatening to kill him to punish Sia.*

*For a few painful seconds, she felt so distraught that she wanted to go back into the darkness again. But then, slowly her eyes focused on the person, sleeping next to her in a chair.*

*It was Ajay.*

*As soon as her brain processed that information, she began to sob in relief.*

*Listening to her loud sobs, Ajay woke up immediately. And when he saw her, his tired face broke into a happy smile.*

*He got up from the chair and came close to her. Before he could even sit on the bed next to her, she pulled him towards her. She began to kiss him all over his face with tears running down her cheeks.*

*"I'm fine, baby," he reassured.*

*She held him in a death grip, not letting him move away from her.*

*"Baby, I might hurt you. You are still weak," he murmured.*

*Listening to his concern for her, she stiffened and pushed him away from her. She sat up with great difficulty, and then slapped him as hard as she could.*

*It was a weak slap, because she was still shaky from the knife wound, and also because the last horrifying events still ran in her mind. They would probably be forever etched into her mind.*

*"Don't ever do that!" she hissed. "If you **ever** try to save my life at the cost of yours, I'm going to kill you myself," she threatened him.*

*Instead of consoling her or offering an apology or even promising her never to do it again, Ajay grinned.*

*"I'm serious!" she hissed out.*

*"I know, baby," he said and kissed her nose tenderly. "Let's just hope there aren't more of such circumstances in the future," he said.*

*And then, he told her what had transpired after the single most horrifying moment in her life. "There was a gunshot. But it was from your cousin,"*

*"What?" she asked in shock.*

*"Yes. Apparently, Dr. Kranthi got a letter written to him by his mother before she died. In that she confessed everything. About how her husband got his father and sister killed. About how he... even got my mother killed*



*because she was demanding an investigation.”*

*Ajay’s voice broke when he told her the part of his mother’s murder.*

*“I’m sorry Ajay,” she said softly.*

*“It wasn’t your fault, Sia.”*

*“Your mother was a brave lady who fought for what was right. She didn’t give up on you.”*

*“I know,” he said softly.*

*“I wish I could go back in time and kill my uncle all over again.” She felt furious with that monster that haunted them even after his death.*

*“Believe me, getting shot by his son was the worst kind of death for him.”*

*“Why did my cousin shoot him? Knowing my cousin, he is the kind to let the law take over.”*

*“Dr. Kranthi had a strong reason. His mother’s death. Apparently, after the child trafficking bust, Mrs. Naidu had threatened her husband by telling him that she would reveal his ugly truth to everyone. And so, to stop her, your uncle got her murdered, making it appear like a heart attack.”*

*Sia was stunned.*

*“During his last moments, you uncle even tried to beg his son’s forgiveness for ordering the death of his mother. Dr. Kranthi told his father to burn in hell. Those were the last words your uncle heard before he died.”*

*Ajay held her hands. “Your uncle died a broken man, Sia. His death will not be mourned by anyone he cared about. His death is only going to cause relief.”*

*Sia was quiet. Her uncle more than deserved that kind of death.*

*“What about the police?” she asked. “Was my cousin arrested?” Her heart clenched for the man who had been an innocent party all along.*

*“Yes. But my lawyers are arguing the case using self-defense as the motive. They have a good chance of winning.”*

*A few weeks later, Ajay’s prediction came true. Her cousin was acquitted of the murder charges using self-defense as claim. She had offered to hand over the Naidu Estate to her cousin, but he had refused. But when she let Ajay convince him, her cousin reluctantly agreed.*

*Signing away the last of the documents that cut her ties with the Naidu Estate, had made her feel relieved. The only reason they would ever visit that place was to pay respects to Ajay’s mother’s grave.*

*“So, it’s finally over,” she said after walking out of the lawyer’s office..*

*Ajay kissed her and smiled. “No, baby. This is just the beginning.”  
She would never forget those words in her life.  
Those very words had set the tone to their new journey ahead.  
Their beginning.*

\* \* \*

Smiling widely, Sia looked up from the children’s sleeping faces to that of Ajay’s.

Her breath caught. in her lungs.

Ajay was watching her with a look that she recognized quiet well. The same look he directed at her during the past six years of their marriage. A look that made a woman’s womb quiver in need.

She laughed out softly.

“Stop watching me like that, or before you know it, you’ll be holding three kids in your arms,” she teased.

Even though Anika and Tej were a handful—keeping both Ajay and her constantly on their toes—they were the light of their lives. Their home was always filled with laughter and happiness because of them.

Ajay continued to watch her, and slowly he lifted an arm that was free. “There is plenty of space for another one,” he replied to her teasing.

She laughed again. And just like that, she fell in more love with her husband.

Covering the distance between them, she stood closer.

Ajay smiled at her, his gaze warm, reminding her that with him next to her, she could withstand anything.

She bent her head to kiss him tenderly and passionately before pulling back slightly. “As long as you have place for me too,” she whispered against his lips.

He pulled her down on one of his thighs, and wrapped his free arm around her. “Always, baby. Never ever doubt it,” he replied.

Wrapping her arms around him and their kids, she sighed contently, once again feeling extremely grateful for having the life she did.

**The End**

#### NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you, dear reader for hanging on with Ajay and Sia's story until the end. I hope you enjoyed the story, especially the happily-ever-after ending. :)

**Please do Rate and Review SOULLESS and RUTHLESS on Amazon and Goodreads!**

Thank You!

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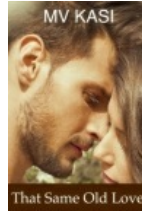
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#### **DESCRIPTION**

#### **A passionate tale of two broken, imperfect souls finding love...**

Mahi—the most hated yet adored girl during college—was back to India. After suffering through a divorce and a tragedy, all she wanted to do was to start over. But when she arrived to her hometown after a very long time, her path to the new beginning was challenged by her rude, grumpy and hot neighbor who was once her classmate.

Samrat—the college nerd turned tech billionaire—was one of Mahi's victims in the past. After the recent tragic loss of his family in an accident, he spent most of his days and nights alone, inventing things and running his company. He did not like being distracted by the beautiful, annoying and cheerful neighbor who also became his employee.

Will these two opposites with broken imperfect souls find their second chance at happiness? Find out in—That Same Old Love.

**WARNING:** This is a fictional romance story. Please proceed with caution as the book contains sexual content along with some adult themes that are recommended for mature reading audiences only.

#### **EXCERPT**

“Samrat, wake up,” he heard the whisper again.

Somehow managing to pry his eyes open, he saw Mahi’s face in the dim lighting of the room. He thought he was having another dream about her. She was touching his cheek gently and he groaned into her hand.

“Oh god,” he whispered. “Why won’t you leave me alone in my dreams?”

She laughed softly. “It’s only fair that I don’t, because you won’t leave my dreams either. But that’ll be resolved soon. No turning back, remember?”

“What?” he asked in confusion.

“You said you want me, and I want you too, desperately,” she whispered in his ear.

Samrat was slowly realizing that he wasn’t dreaming.

*This is not a dream.*

That thought woke him up completely and he stared at her in shock.

Mahi was in his room.

## Enjoy the sample of the #1 Bestselling Romantic Suspense... **THE CAPTIVE**



### DESCRIPTION

Nina Bhupati was a lucky woman. Her husband, a political figure and business tycoon, loved to keep her in the lap of luxury. Rich, handsome, and caring, he was also what most women dreamed of as an ideal husband.

But their fairy-tale life blew apart when Nina was kidnapped and held hostage.

Between the distraught husband who badly wanted her back, and the brutal, determined man who was bent upon shattering her soul, Nina must survive her days as—THE CAPTIVE.

**WARNING:** This is a fictional romance story. Please proceed with caution as the book contains content that are intended for mature reading audiences.

**NOTE:** This is a full-length, STANDALONE romance novel that has a thoroughly satisfying happily-ever-after ending.

### --The Captor--

When he kidnapped her, all he expected was a weak, pampered rich woman. What she actually was completely different. She was a fighter, a survivor, a wily seductress, and a genuinely beautiful and giving soul who

destroyed some of the darkness that lurked inside him. The more time he spent around her, the more he became addicted. And before he knew it— he was falling in love with the wife of his enemy...

### **--The Captive--**

When she was taken, all she knew was that her captor was dangerous. He had snatched her from her fairytale life, so he could use her as a tool for his revenge. But each time she spoke to him, and spent time in his company, he made her heart feel things it shouldn't. Under the cold, hard and cruel layers, she saw the real man. Soon, the lines were beginning to blur between what was needed and what she actually wanted...

### **EXCERPT**

Nina hated the wait.

She sat in the corner of the room with her back against the wall and her eyes trained on the door. She was sure her captor would return to torture her painfully for stabbing him in the arm.

She felt a crippling exhaustion in her body due to lack of sleep during the past few days of her captivity. Her head kept falling forward, trying to reach for the comfort of sleep. But each time it did, she jerked it back up, refusing to give in to sleep, especially when she was at her most vulnerable.

She didn't know whether attacking him was a logical move. But when he had stalked her in a slow, unhurried manner, with menace radiating from his body, demanding his knife back, he had looked like a hunter who had cornered his prey. And she, his trembling, whimpering prey.

Her mind had instantly rebelled at the comparison of herself with a prey. She wasn't weak. She had never been weak. Even when the odds were heavily stacked against her, she had always fought back. So, not making it any exception, she had sliced his arm.

And now, the thought of what he could do to her was tearing her apart.

Will he come to her room tonight? And if he did, what would he do? Will he follow through his threats?

She thought about the video taken to send to Suraj. Her captor had spoken about the follow-up videos. She didn't have to guess about his intentions of what the later videos would contain.

Nina's thoughts threatened to take her into darkness to escape into a place where there would be no worry or fear.

*Don't you dare give up!*

She shivered and rubbed at her trembling arms as her mind ordered her not to give in to fear. But even as she talked herself into being brave, her heart almost stopped when the door to the room opened.

Her captor entered the room once again.

**Amazon Link: [www.smarturl.it/TheCaptive](http://www.smarturl.it/TheCaptive)**