

A SEQUEL TO THE BEST SELLER

Without You

His
**SUNSHINE
GIRL**

PREETHI VENUGOPALA

HIS SUNSHINE GIRL

(A stand-alone sequel to the best seller 'Without You')

Preethi Venugopala

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*“Someday, somewhere - anywhere, unfailingly, you'll find yourself,
and that, and only that, can be the happiest or bitterest hour of your life.”*

— **Pablo Neruda**

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Author's note

Dear Reader,

When I started writing '*His Sunshine Girl*', many told me that that a romance novel featuring a dark-skinned girl as the main character won't sell in India.

According to them, in India, where being fair skinned is the sole criteria to be termed as beautiful, it was not a prudent move at all.

Did they mean that dark-skinned girls never got a happily ever after? Or was it something else? But I wasn't ready to listen to them because this was a story that had to be told.

Bullies find ways to target our insecurities. You think you are too tall, dark, short, thin, fat...? There, you have become an easy target for a bully.

I have been there, faced the many demons called insecurities.

In school, I was often called discriminatory names by bullies because I was the darkest girl in my class. I didn't have the courage then to speak out or complain about them to anyone. For the longest time, I cursed the skin I was born with. Then one day, my best friend told me how much she admired my talents. I told her it didn't matter because no one recognised me for all that. I was merely the dark-skinned girl who was always the target of bullies.

Her words still ring in my mind.

"Have you noticed that the bullies who taunt you are good for nothing fellows? They are frustrated because you are a winner while they are losing continuously. Why should you be bothered about their opinion?"

That talk literally opened my eyes. I learnt to turn a deaf ear whenever someone called me names.

The colour of my skin was an issue the entire time as I was growing up.

What started in school continued later on, as many others in the society took on the role of bullies one after the other. When I became of marriageable age, I often heard whispered talks between my worried parents that the boy who had come to 'see' me didn't like me because of my skin colour.

Some marriage brokers even said it aloud in my presence. I cringed.

But then I met my husband. He liked me for who I was. And that was a miracle as far as I was concerned. He was a well-educated person, good looking and came from a good family. I guess it instilled a new confidence in me. And love is capable of healing all wounds.

The colour prejudiced Indian society will never accept that we are all brown-skinned people. Many still have this prejudice that being dusky is dirty or ugly.

Will this attitude ever change?

Perhaps we should be the changemakers.

Shalini is a lot like me because I have walked in her shoes for a long time. I can tell you it hurts to be at the receiving end of discrimination based on colour.

‘His Sunshine Girl’ is Shalini’s journey of transformation.

A disclaimer: This is not my story even though I have used many anecdotes from my own life to bring Shalini to life on these pages.

Hope you will love Shalini and Vishal.

If you have read ‘Without You’, this story picks up from where it ended. Look out for some of your favourite characters from ‘Without You’ taking on significant roles in this story.

Happy reading!

Preethi Venugopala

Chapter 1

April 6, 2014, Sreepuram

When Shalini arrived in Sreepuram, a quaint little village in the northern coast of Kannur district in Kerala, it was six in the evening. She had fidgeted in her seat and bitten off half her nails during the six-hour bus ride that took her from Thrissur to Sreepuram. Her new job, as a live-in literary assistant to the eminent author Arundhati Mukundan, was the best thing that could have happened to her. Yet, an unknown fear had raised its head and kept her nervous throughout the trip.

A jasmine-scented breeze entered the living room where she sat now and caressed her cheeks. A Gulmohar tree stood in the stretch of the garden visible through the open windows. Shalini felt a kinship with it. Stripped of all colours, it resembled her life.

Gopu, the middle-aged man who had welcomed her into Arundhati's house, was now pruning the row of decorative bushes near the tree with a pair of garden shears. A child's wail from somewhere inside the house shattered the silence and Gopu's shears paused mid-air. He seemed to be pondering whether to go inside when the crying ceased. He resumed his job. Was the child his?

While she sipped the coffee, Shalini wondered if Arundhati would like her. She didn't have any previous work experience in the publishing world.

"You will love Arundhati. Don't worry that you don't know her personally. She is almost like me in her likes and dislikes. We are, in a way, soul sisters," her grandma had assured her.

Shalini's grandma, Parvathi, had been Arundhati's best friend in school. They had lost contact with each other after getting married early on in life. Ten years ago, Arundhati had debuted with a poetry collection that went on to win many awards including the state award for literature. She had followed it up with novels that were hugely popular. The two had met again at a book launch in Kochi three years ago. Calls and handwritten letters had rekindled their friendship. Now they were close like before.

The beaded door curtains tinkled. Arundhati Mukundan, draped in a

simple, spotless white cotton saree, entered the room. Her silver hair was gathered neatly in a bun. She smiled at Shalini.

“Did I keep you waiting, child?”

“No, ma’am.” Shalini’s voice trembled slightly as she rose to greet the person whose writing had touched her heart.

“Sit, sit. Don’t be so formal with me. After all, you are Parvathi’s grandchild. That makes you my grandchild. Call me auntie or *Ammamma*. No ma’am business from now on.” Arundhati settled in the chair opposite Shalini.

“Yes, ma’am,” Shalini said. “I mean, auntie,” she corrected herself.

“That is better. I hope you had a pleasant journey. How did you come?”

Arundhati scrutinized the frail, dusky girl with doe-like eyes as she talked. Draped in a simple green chiffon saree, she resembled the Radha in the mural painting hanging in the study. Thick black hair cascaded gracefully down her back. The sadness that pooled in Radha’s eyes was reflected in Shalini’s beautiful eyes as well.

A few months ago, Parvathi had beseeched her for help. From what her friend told her, the girl had undergone quite a lot in the past two years. She needed a change. Arundhati required someone to help her with the manuscript she was working on. As Shalini was a post-graduate in English literature, the decision to appoint the girl as her literary assistant was easy.

As an introduction, she briefed Shalini about her work.

“Your primary duty will be to transcribe while I dictate. I prefer my good old pen and paper to create my stories. But age has slowed me down. The computer is an enigma to me. I get lost in the task of hunting for the letters to form words. You understand my situation, don’t you?” asked Arundhati.

“I completely understand. I am looking forward to beginning my work. It is a privilege to be able to read your unpublished work,” said Shalini.

“Hmmm... let’s see whether you will feel the same a month from now.”

Shalini smiled, sensing a new beginning, a new hope.

Arundhati led her to an upstairs bedroom. The light of the setting sun

had tinted the room a pale orange. A few beautiful paintings and sketches decorated the walls. The bed was adjacent to a three-panelled window. A door opened onto a tiny balcony. A writing table and chair stood opposite the bed. The wardrobe was empty and lined with newspaper sheets to store Shalini's things. The adjoining bathroom was spacious and clean. Adjacent to the room was a small library.

"Hope you find the room comfortable. This used to be my granddaughter Ananya's room. Now that she is married and settled in Dubai, nobody uses it. Those are her paintings. She is quite a talented artist, isn't she?" asked Arundhati with grandmotherly pride.

"Quite."

"She was a brat, a hurricane during the school vacations along with my other grandchildren." Arundhati's eyes sparkled with love.

Arundhati gave her a tour of the house; a double storied, tiled-roof building with four wings and a small open courtyard in the centre. Arundhati's bedroom was on the ground floor in the East wing. Gopu, the gardener cum housekeeper lived in the South wing with his wife Devi, who was the household help, and their two-year-old daughter Chaitra. The kitchen was in the North wing.

It was in the study that Shalini saw the photograph on the wall. Her heart skipped a few beats and involuntarily she ran her fingers on the framed photo. Five children—one girl and four boys—stood posing with bright smiles on their faces. A perfect shot of childhood innocence. The tallest boy among them and the other one who had his arms around the smiling little girl were the brightest memories from her own childhood. Memories tugged at her heartstrings.

"Ah, the notorious five! Those are my grandchildren. It was taken almost two decades ago, but it remains my favourite photo of them. Kishore, the tallest one was in high school then. The two others on either side of him are Naveen and Navneeth, sons of my eldest daughter. That is Ananya, daughter of my youngest daughter. That is Vishal who is hugging her. She was his pet and still is. Kishore and Vishal are my second daughter's children," Arundhati explained.

"I know Kishore and Vishal. We were neighbours while we lived in

Puvattur,” Shalini exclaimed. This was such a pleasant surprise. Her heart was racing. Puvattur, a sleepy little village lying at the northern tip of Kerala, was still close to her heart. Her fondest childhood memories belonged there.

“Ah, the world is such a small place. It is wonderful how these unseen chains connect us. So, you must be the Shalu they talked about incessantly,” said Arundhati.

“Yes. We were very close. Vishal was my best friend. Kishore was a prankster,” said Shalini.

“Kishore and Ananya are now civil engineers. They are both married and live in Dubai with their respective families. Naveen and Navneeth are software engineers and Vishal is a paediatrician. Naveen and Navneeth keep changing their jobs. Vishal is doing his fellowship in London. It is time for the boys to settle down. But they are not interested. They love the freedom they have now,” said Arundhati, narrowing her eyes. She clearly didn’t agree with that sentiment.

That night, while the moonlight bathed her room in pale blue light, Shalini’s thoughts wandered into the realms of the past. Especially to Kishore and Vishal. They had been her neighbours for six long years. Kishore had been the teasing tormentor and Vishal her protector. From the age of six to twelve, happiness had inundated her days and spirited away shadows of sadness because of their presence.

She had loathed summer vacations as Kishore and Vishal spent the summer holidays at their granny’s place in Sreepuram. In a bizarre turn of fate, she was now in the same house that she once hated. For her, this house had been the reason why she had spent many miserable vacations alone.

An owl hooted somewhere nearby and her thoughts began to cloud. As was her nightly routine, Shalini sat on her bed and prayed. For strength. For peace. For a new beginning.

Chapter 2

June 20, 2014, Sreepuram

As days progressed into weeks and weeks into months, Shalini became an indispensable member of Arundhati's household.

Her days began at six am every day when she joined Arundhati on her morning walk. They would walk to the nearby hill through the lush green paddy fields, and pastures that were home to rare wild blooms before returning home in time for breakfast. She loved those hours when Sreepuram sparkled with magical mist. The morning raga of the birds always fascinated her. Were the birds thanking the creator for helping them survive another cold, dark night? Or were they praising the beauty of the morning? Or was it love that she heard ringing in those melodies?

They would walk the miles, allowing the energy of the dawn to penetrate their being. The glittering dewdrops on blades of grass would remind Shalini of her grandma. Her bedtime stories had hinted that the dewdrops were, in fact, beads that had fallen from the necklaces of fairies. She would then wonder if those fairies were hiding among the shrubs, patiently waiting for them to pass.

During those hours, they talked. Arundhati studied Shalini daily and watched the light that shone in her eyes and the lively spring in her steps while out in nature. That spirit vanished the moment they stepped back into the house. Once inside the confines of the home, the girl immediately donned an invisible veil of propriety and professionalism and acted the role of a paid assistant. Arundhati wanted more from her; she wanted her to discard the veil and become the lively girl who appeared during these morning walks.

According to Parvathi, Shalini suffered from an issue of low self-esteem right from childhood. Her failed marriage had further strengthened it. Parvathi wanted Arundhati to talk to her about it. Yet every day she failed to begin, until that morning two months after Shalini first came to Sreepuram.

"Shalini, do you believe in the power of thoughts?" asked Arundhati, as they stood atop the hill to take in the beauty of the sun that was slowly peeping out from the distant hills.

"The power of thoughts? I am not aware of it."

“Okay, then listen. I have come to understand that our thoughts are powerful. They, in a way, define us, our life. Our thoughts become our truth. And believe me, we attract into our lives all our life experiences,” said Arundhati.

“Does that mean I attracted all that sadness into my life? Who would consciously attract bad things? I can’t agree with that line of thought.” Shalini’s voice wavered. She appeared agitated by the direction the talks had taken.

“Who said we are consciously doing it? It happens unconsciously because we are not aware of the power of our thoughts. Now tell me, do you love yourself?”

“Yes. We all love ourselves, right?”

“Does that mean you love everything about you unconditionally? Do you never criticize yourself?” asked Arundhati.

“No. Not that way. Obviously, something is wrong with me that prevents people from loving me. I guess it is my appearance, mostly my skin colour. I cringe whenever I see myself in the mirror. I resemble a charred doll, lustreless and disgusting. Who would love me?”

“A charred doll? Is that what you think you look like? The colour of your skin doesn’t define you. It doesn’t make you ugly. Trust me, you are one of the prettiest girls I have seen. Your features remind me of those murals of goddesses. You don’t realize how pretty you are. Stop criticizing yourself for all that you think you lack. Instead be thankful for everything you have,” said Arundhati.

Funnily, the first time Shalini felt her colour was a problem had involved a Goddess. She had dressed up as Goddess Parvathi for a solo dance competition at an interschool fest. The makeup man lamented he might have to use a full bottle of foundation to make her look fair. She still remembered the giggles that greeted his remark. She had used the humiliation and anger she felt in the dance. When she won, he had congratulated her but the embarrassment remained as a sore memory.

“I have turned into a pessimist. I don’t believe anything good can happen to me. I don’t think I can love myself.”

“If you don’t love yourself, how can you expect others to love you? You say you cringe when you stand in front of the mirror. Why not look into the mirror and tell yourself that you love how you look? You have hated yourself for so long. Try a different approach. Tell yourself that whatever happens, you will be there for yourself. Trust me, at the end of the day your happiness depends only on yourself,” said Arundhati.

“I am not that strong. While I was married, I used to ask God whether he created me to be disgraced daily,” said Shalini, a teardrop sliding down her cheek.

Arundhati went near her and pulled her into a hug. Shalini wept.

“Calm down, child. That man was obviously blind. I don’t think he deserved you. God helped you to escape from it. And yes, I firmly believe he has something better in store for you. We Indians consider marriage as the solution to everything. It is not. Find what your passion is and go for it. Also, let go of any kind of guilt, fear, or criticism that you have within you. You are totally loveable. You are God’s beloved child, like any of his other creations. Remember that.”

“And, child,” continued Arundhati, “If you want any help in confronting your problems, do ask me. You are like my Anu and I love you the same way.” Shalini murmured a feeble ‘thank you.’

Arundhati smiled, moved out of the hug, and patted her cheeks. Then she chatted about inane things all the way home. Shalini felt lighter than she had in months. It was as if the talk and the deluge of her tears had washed out all her hidden pains.

Shouts from an irate Devi and the cries of Chaitra greeted them as they entered the house courtyard.

“What sort of a father are you? You don’t even know how to calm her down. How am I supposed to look after the kid and do the household chores if you refuse to help me? It is our child. You have to take equal responsibility. I can’t depend on Shalini all the time. She has her work as well. From the time she has come, she has voluntarily become Chaitra’s babysitter.” Devi was cutting onions and wiping tears while shouting at her husband. Gopu sat slouched in front of Chaitra endeavouring to calm the wailing kid with the toy in his hand.

Though he loved kids, he had no clue how to look after a child. Chaitra was born after years of prayers. He feared his incompetence might permanently harm the child.

Shalini watched the scene with amusement and walked towards the trio. She scooped the wailing child, planted her on her hips, and wandered towards the hen's coop to distract her. Watching the hens pecking on the grain, clucking loudly, Chaitra forgot to be angry and began to smile. Gopu sighed in relief.

"Devi, don't scold my brother. I am here, right? Don't bother him," said Shalini. Arundhati smiled at Gopu and walked into the house, thinking warmly about the people who resided in her house.

Shalini had seemed heaven-sent to all of them. Gopu's child doted on her. Three kids, Deepak, Achyuth, and Anamika, from the neighbourhood, had become frequent visitors. Knowing that she was a postgraduate in English, their parents had requested Shalini to give English language tuition to them in the evenings. As it would have added to her income, Arundhati had encouraged her to take it up. The boys studied in the tenth class and Anamika was in the class seventh in the nearby school. Anamika, aka Ammu, was a constant presence in their house from the time she returned home from school.

While they were finishing lunch, the phone rang and Gopu went to answer it.

"*Amma*, it is Arjun," said Gopu. Arundhati ran towards the phone wondering what the matter was. "He sounds very upset," he said aside to Arundhati. Arjun was Anu's husband. What had happened?

"Don't worry, Arjun. Our prayers are with her. Call when you get the good news. Stay strong." Keeping the phone down, Arundhati slumped into the nearby chair.

"It is about Anu. The baby is coming a week early. They are at the hospital now. Oh, Shiva. She is such a delicate girl. How will she bear the pain? I wish I could be with her now." Arundhati muttered. Rubbing the back of her neck, she got up and paced, chanting 'Om Namah Shivaya.'

"Auntie, Arjun is a doctor. Why are you worrying?"

Shalini led her to a chair. Devi and Gopu appeared as worried as Arundhati. Only Chaitra remained unfazed by the agitation that blighted the air. Arundhati sat on the chair rigidly for a few minutes before getting up to pace again. Shalini tried to distract them by talking about the fair that was to begin next week in the nearby town. They ignored her. She next tried to discuss the weather. The only topic they wanted to discuss was Anu. When the phone rang again a few hours later, Arundhati grabbed it.

“No, no news as of now. Vishal, do pray for her. Don’t give me your stupid platitudes now. Call me if you get an update.”

At the mention of Vishal’s name, Shalini’s eyes darted towards Arundhati. She wondered why the name produced a queasy sensation in her stomach. Vishal belonged to this family and she might see him soon. Was she scared to meet him after all these years? Or was it excitement?

When Ammu, Deepak, and Achyuth came over for tuition in the evening, Devi told them the news as Ananya was their good friend. When the atmosphere became noisy with their many enquiries, Arundhati sought solace in her little prayer book. Ammu stayed back to wait for further news once the tuition was over.

At nine in the evening when the phone rang, Arundhati though exhausted with worry managed to run to the phone.

“How sweet! God bless you three. I am so happy,” cried Arundhati. Once the call ended, she faced the waiting gang with a wide smile.

“Thanks to Lord Shiva the ordeal is over! It is a boy. I have become a great-grandmother for the second time! Who would have thought?”

Ammu shrieked in glee and congratulated her with a hug. After instructing Gopu to walk Ammu home, Arundhati walked towards the prayer room to convey her thanks to the many Gods she had invoked that evening. Devi retired to her room with Chaitra. Once they left, Shalini sat down with a magazine on the couch vacated by Arundhati.

The phone rang again and Shalini answered it.

“Hello, who is this? Where is *Ammamma*?” A strange male voice asked.

“I am her assistant. I am afraid she can’t answer the phone now. May I know who you are?”

“Tell her that Vishal called. I will call again tomorrow. Thank you,” said Vishal and disconnected the call.

Shalini held onto the phone allowing the happiness to sink in. After fifteen long years, she had heard his voice. Her heart was thumping at her ribs. He would have changed, wouldn't he? He would not be the same seventeen-year-old who had vanished from her life. Her best friend. Shalini sighed, kept the phone back, and blindly continued leafing through the magazine. She didn't even realize that she was holding the magazine upside down.

Chapter 3

During the course of the next week, Vishal called several times. Shalini attended his calls thrice. Each time, she was tempted to tell him who she was. But then, she decided to wait. She was bound to meet him soon.

“Shalini, come here, child. Can you get me that album?”

Arundhati was standing in front of her open cupboard pointing at a heavy photo album on the top shelf. Minutes later, they were settled on the living room couch with the album open in front of them. It was Ananya’s wedding album. She described the persons and events depicted in the photographs with the enthusiasm characteristic to all grandmothers who doted on their grandkids.

“See, this is Arjun and Ananya. They are a pair made in heaven, aren’t they? Arjun was Vishal’s classmate in medical college. But I was the one who played Cupid for the two,” Arundhati said with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

Shalini’s heart raced in anticipation, expecting to see the grown-up version of Vishal any minute.

“Ah, my favourite five. See how happy they look together,” said Arundhati pointing at a photo of the four youths with Ananya.

Arundhati needn’t have pointed out Vishal to Shalini. She recognized him almost immediately. He had changed. The lanky teenager had transformed into a handsome youth. The thick moustache he sported didn’t spoil his innate boyish charm. He had been tall even while in school. Now he appeared to have grown broader and athletic as well. The sun shone on his thick black hair and a grin brightened his fair face. Kishore looked exactly as she remembered, resembling Vishal in build and looks, except he was clean-shaven. In another photo, Arundhati showed her Kishore’s wife Shreya and their son Aditya.

The marriage had been held in Mauritius. Within the pages of the album, Shalini found images of love and happiness. The white sand beaches, crystal blue lagoons, and the lovely couple vied for her attention. Yet, it was Vishal’s face that became etched in her memory as she turned the last leaf of the album. He had strolled out from a hidden, tiny corner of her mind and

taken a seat right at the centre of her thoughts.

What if she had not shifted from Puvattur to Thrissur? Would she have become a happier person in Vishal's presence? He had been her pillar of strength, her confidante, and motivator.

Would she have found love? Her pessimist-self mocked her. Did any man ever look at her with any emotion akin to love? The rendezvous arranged by her parents with the many young men who had come seeking a bride had always been brief and half-hearted.

"Our young men are so prejudiced against dusky girls. It is the after effect of the colonial rule, I say. The white men left us, but dumped their prejudice against the darker skin on us, to be followed and practiced. I don't know why we Indians, all various shades of brown, are obsessed with the fair skin. Is beauty just skin deep?" Shalini had overheard her father thundering after yet another prospective groom had refused to marry her years ago.

The fair, fat, chubby man with a pug-like face who he had come bride-hunting that day had not cared to even ask her name. He had taken a look at her and gestured to the broker that he wanted to leave.

"The girl is too dark. How dare you waste my time?" The man had snapped at the broker as soon as he stepped out of her living room. She had laughed at his impertinence and was glad to be rid of him. But her father took every rejection to heart. She had become his sorrow.

Arundhati soon returned after a brief siesta.

"Shalini, Anu called. She has returned home from the hospital. She wants me to bless the baby. She will come online on Skype in another ten minutes. Please go and log in to my account. I will join you after tea," said Arundhati.

Shalini hurried to the study room, switched on the computer, and signed in on Skype. Arundhati joined her a few minutes later. When the call connected, Anu appeared on screen with her bundle of joy. The little one was sleeping. Anu was beautiful with an angelic face, chubbier than she had been in her wedding photos. Her short curly hair was let loose. Arjun came to say 'Hi' and the three conversed happily.

"*Ammamma*, I had a surprise visitor today. Guess who? Ta-da," said

Ananya and moved sideways to reveal someone who was hiding behind her. Vishal! He looked the same as in the photos except that he was sporting a stubble, which seemed a few days old.

“How are you, *Ammamma*? I couldn’t wait to see my nephew. It seems like he has taken after Arjun. Handsome and quite the gentleman. Don’t you remember what a wailing banshee Anu was from the minute she was born?” Vishal howled in pain as Ananya pinched him hard on his arm. Arundhati laughed and Shalini grinned. Ananya’s son woke up following the commotion and vociferously began demanding to be fed. Ananya and Arjun walked away leaving Vishal to chat with Arundhati.

“Is that your assistant with you? Hi there, we have talked, remember? Hope you are still sane. My grandmother is famous for driving people insane with her many demands,” said Vishal. Shalini smiled though she felt awkward that Vishal was being so formal with her. Had time woven the web so thick that it had blotted out her presence from his memories?

“Vishal, you have shattered the sophisticated image of an author I had managed to build. I should box your ears. Anyway, what are you doing in Dubai?”

“*Ammamma*, I am on my way home! I have completed my fellowship. I stopped over in Dubai to see my nephew. A week with him and then I will be there,” said Vishal.

“I hope you are fine, child. You look so different.”

“I am, *Ammamma*. As fine as fine can get, I guess.”

The silence that prevailed for seconds on both ends sparked off a doubt in Shalini’s mind. Was something amiss in Vishal’s life? His eyes had dark circles around them. The presence of the unsightly stubble too seemed out of character for Vishal. She remembered how he used to scoff at people who sported beards. Was it the stress of his job or was it something else? Vishal resumed the conversation, breaking the thread of her thoughts. Shalini left the grandmother-grandson duo to continue their chat and retreated to a corner of the room with a book.

When the call ended, Arundhati turned to Shalini.

“He didn’t recognize you. And you didn’t try to jog his memory either.

If I were you, I would be disappointed. You should punish him for not remembering you when he comes next week,” said Arundhati with a sly smile.

“Should I?”

“You should.”

Chapter 4

One afternoon, a week later, Shalini was helping Gopu to tend the garden. Incessant rains had filled the garden with weeds. She wandered among the rose bushes and pulled out the grass growing lushly beneath them. The chrysanthemums and the various ornamental plants waited to be trimmed. Armed with a garden scissor to snip the stems, she paused near a garden palm. That was when she saw them. A whole army of caterpillars had made their home on the wide leaf of the palm. Dropping the scissors, she screamed, “caterpillars” and bolted from the garden, much to the amusement of Gopu.

She wished they never existed on earth. Why did nature make the beautiful butterflies undergo this revolting phase of being a caterpillar? Creepy, itchy, and greedy. In her haste, she almost collided with a car, which had entered the courtyard just then.

“Hey, girl, watch where you are going!” the man behind the steering wheel shouted.

“I am sorry... but there were so many caterpillars... almost a hundred ... that too, this big. I was so scared. Sorry,” Shalini blabbered, fully aware that she sounded like a dimwit. The exasperated face that looked at her was that of Vishal. Dazed, she rushed into the house before he could say anything further. His unexpected appearance had unsettled her completely though she was delighted that he had come. She ran into the house to inform Arundhati, who came out to greet Vishal.

After tea, Arundhati introduced her to Vishal. Shalini waited for him to recognize her and every minute he failed to do so, her frustration peaked. Devi came in then with her kid and a smiling Chaitra captured Vishal’s attention. He handed over a bag containing chocolates and some other gifts to Devi. Shalini sneaked out into the garden to calm her fluttering heart and wandered into the mango grove.

Later, at the sound of footsteps, she turned around and found Vishal approaching her.

“Hi, thought of taking a walk around the compound. Can I join you?”

“Of course.” Shalini continued to walk.

“Hey, when you jumped in front of my car screaming about caterpillars you reminded me of my childhood friend Shalini. She too was terrified of caterpillars. My brother Kishore used to torment her pretending that there was a caterpillar on her hair or dress.”

So, he remembers all that. Shalini paused walking and turned around to face Vishal.

“Yes, and you used to end up fighting with him for that.” She watched Vishal’s eyes open wide in surprise. Next moment, he pulled her into his arms.

“Shalini! Shalu... you....” Vishal mumbled, “I was wondering why you seemed so familiar. Where had you vanished all these days? Have you forgotten me, you idiot?”

Though surprised by the sudden hug, she sighed in relief and allowed his warmth to seep into her soul. The pleasure of being near him, being held by him, had she always craved that? Her protector, her best friend, and the best thing: he was back. With a smile, she composed herself and pulled out of his arms.

“I didn’t forget you. You did. You didn’t even recognize me in the first place.”

“How could I recognize you? You have changed such a lot. In my defence, I was so lost when I returned home that year to find your house vacant. Mom and Dad knew. They kept it from me so that I wouldn’t upset you. I tried to contact you later on. But your phone numbers had changed and I didn’t know your new address.”

“I came to visit next year during Vishu. By then, you had got into medical college. Dad was in a hurry and we didn’t stay long. Uma Auntie gave me hot, spongy, and moist *unniyappams*. I forgot all about you after that,” said Shalini, shrugging.

“Fair enough. *Unniyappams* did that to you always. By the way, my *unniyappam*, how did you end up here?”

Shalini’s face fell hearing the familiar nickname. They used to call her *unniyappam* because of her craze for the golden brown sweet. She never protested, but she had always hated it. Whenever they addressed her that way,

she thought it was a subtle reference to her skin colour. She took a deep breath and decided she wouldn't allow anything to ruin the happiness she was feeling.

"Long story. Auntie told me you are planning to join a local hospital. What happened, did they throw you out of London?"

"Throw me out? They were begging me to stay. After all, I was the only doctor there with an inexplicable healing touch. My patients invariably became my fans."

Shalini suppressed a giggle. Vishal puffed his cheeks, his eyes twinkling with mischief, and peered at Shalini who appeared ready to burst into laughter.

"That was supposed to be a joke and you should laugh," Vishal declared with a grin. Shalini snorted and then laughed out loud. He watched her with a fond smile. Her laughter reminded him of all the things he had once cherished.

Arundhati watched them through the window of her study. A dejected look had appeared on Shalini's face a minute ago. What had caused it? They were now chatting animatedly though and laughing as if nothing had happened. Vishal had suffered his own share of heartache. Could these two tormented souls become each other's solace? Or would this closeness bring more anguish? She didn't want any trouble creeping up on either of them. She decided to interfere and headed out of the house.

"Shalini, the kids have come for the tuition. Vishal, join me for a walk," she said.

"All right. See you, Vishal." Shalini walked away from them with a smile.

"*Ammamma*, you didn't tell me Shalini was my old Shalu. If I had known I would have brought some gifts for her."

"Ah, it is okay. She is a sweetheart, won't fuss over trifles. We were waiting for you to recognize her. Do you think she has changed?"

"She has grown so tall and looks so different. But she seemed a bit melancholy."

“Make sure you don’t do anything to make her sad. As it is, life has been hard for her these past two years,” said Arundhati.

“What happened?”

“It all began after Shalini was married off to a money-minded fool. Shalini’s father faced bankruptcy after a fire gutted their main factory outlet a week before her marriage. The tension brought about a heart attack and her father passed away a few days after her marriage. The poor girl was then tortured for dowry. She silently suffered for three long months before her mother came to know about her plight and rescued her. Married at twenty-five and divorced within a year,” said Arundhati.

She repeated to Vishal whatever she had heard from Parvathi. With each gruesome detail, Vishal wished he could rip apart the rascal who had married her.

“She says she is happy now.”

“I wish I knew about it then.”

“Are you over your own troubles, boy? Have you managed to let go of your past?”

“I am trying. It still has me in chains.”

“Ah, child.”

Arundhati stopped and gazed at Vishal. The dark circles around his eyes talked about the sleepless nights that were still his companions. His beard was proof of his indifference towards life, of the agonies of loneliness and misery.

The sun had set by the time they returned home. Shalini was teaching the kids and Vishal waited for the class to get over. Once she joined them, they resumed their talks, about their old acquaintances, about past events. Then it was dinnertime and he stayed for dinner. The years in between seemed to have vanished without a trace as if they had never been separated.

While he drove back home, Vishal pondered over Shalini’s troubles. Her eyes were always windows to her emotions. During unguarded moments, when the cheery mask she had worn in front of him had slipped, he had noticed her eyes cloud with sadness. He wanted to help her. Yet he had no

idea how to accomplish that.

Could he heal another while he was burning inside?

Back in their school days, those who didn't know them personally thought they were siblings. She would wait for hours on the cricket field for him to finish his practice so that they could return home together. She accompanied him everywhere. No one had known his innermost fears, ambitions, and secrets like her. Now a solid wall of mystery existed between them. She had become an enigma and he did not like it at all.

Chapter 5

The next morning, Shalini was drying her hair after a bath when the pitter-patter of raindrops falling on the roof tiles grabbed her attention. Was it because of her mood or was the sound of the rain always this pleasant? Outside, the areca nut trees were swaying, like drunken men lost in the rain.

The spray of the drizzle hit her face. She extended her cupped palm outwards to gather the falling droplets. Rain always reminded her of Vishal, the eternal lover of the rain. In their childhood, the monsoons awakened the explorers in them. During the day, they hunted for the red velvet mites that came out after a rain and housed them inside matchboxes. At night, they listened to the songs of the frogs and the crickets from the fields, and the distant hum of the Arabian sea. She inhaled the fragrance of the wet earth, slowly allowing the memories to take over.

“Vishal, get inside the bus shelter. See how drenched you are. You will catch a cold. It is raining heavily. Uma Auntie is going to kill you today.” Shalini’s shouts had fallen on deaf ears all those years ago when they were returning from school. In the end, she had joined him to enjoy the rain. The mad sixteen-year-old boy and his loyal eleven-year-old girl-shadow had played in the rain to their hearts’ content.

Vishal had started singing, imitating Gene Kelly’s famous rain song ‘*I’m singing in the rain*’, which he loved, and had begun an impromptu dance with Shalini.

Laughing and singing along, she had stayed with him and later walked home looking like a wet kitten. Her mother had been furious. Next morning, she had woken up with a high fever, chills and shivering and an asthma attack had followed. For two weeks, she had remained delirious, slipping in and out of consciousness, muttering gibberish due to the fever and sleeping long hours under the influence of the powerful antibiotics. Vishal had never tried to lure her to play in the rain again. In fact, he had pushed her out of the rain the next time she had attempted to join him.

Shalini cupped her palm, allowed the rain to fill it, and then washed her face with it. Did the rainwater have some secret potion dissolved in it? Her heart felt lighter. Watching the rain, she began to hum.

Miles away, Vishal’s thoughts were centred on her as he watched the

rain from his bed. Meeting Shalini had distracted him. After months, he had known moments where sadness had not devoured him. He had fallen asleep thinking about her and had slept peacefully the whole night. He could now feel the fog of sadness enveloping him again.

His fingers scrolled to the voice memos on his phone in his usual search for solace. The one voicemail recording that he must have played a thousand times began to play.

“Vishal... where are you, baby? I am off to the grocers to pick your favourite ice cream. I will be waiting...”

The voice still brought with it an iron fist that wrenched his heart. Where are you, Karen? Why did you leave me? One magical summer, wasn't that all we had shared?

He fired his laptop and clicked open the folder with Karen's photos. With liquid blue eyes and reddish curly hair that surrounded her heart-shaped face like a fiery halo, she stood out in any crowd. She spread happiness wherever she went. Yet, she was drowning him in sorrow now.

“Vishal, where are you? Haven't you got up? What is it that you keep doing upstairs? Come down. Talk to me.”

It was his mother. He had tried his best to act cheerful before her but she had sensed something was wrong the moment he had stepped into the house. ‘I am having a terrible headache mom. Maybe it is because of the jet lag,’ he had declared to camouflage the real issue. He should get over Karen. Hadn't he grieved enough?

“Mother, do you know who I met yesterday?” asked Vishal walking into the kitchen. His mother was busy adding the tempered mustard, red chilies, and curry leaves to the *kadala* curry she had prepared for breakfast. The *dosa* was turning a crispy golden brown on the skillet.

“Who?” asked Uma, without looking up from the curry she was stirring.

“Shalu. Our Shalu. You do remember her, right?” asked Vishal.

“Shalu? You mean our little Shalu? Where is she now? What is she doing?”

“Mom, she is *Ammamma*’s new assistant. Can you believe that? I met her there,” said Vishal.

“Shalu? Why would she need a job? Her father owned a huge cloth mill and was worth millions. Amma had said the girl was poor... the granddaughter of her friend and that she was giving her a shelter,” said Uma.

“Apparently, they are going through a rough phase now,” said Vishal. He then repeated what his grandmother had told him.

“Poor child. I so want to see her. It seems so horrible that she had to go through all that,” said Uma.

“Don’t worry, Mom. I will bring her. She would love to see you again. I am sure.”

“Yes, bring her. I will talk to Amma. Has she changed much?”

“Yes, she looks completely different now. I didn’t even recognize her initially. Don’t worry, I will bring her today itself,” said Vishal. Opening the kitchen cupboards, he took out the ceramic plates and set about laying them on the dining table.

Uma watched her son and remembered the frail little girl whom she had loved like her own. Life was indeed cruel sometimes. But that was how it usually was. She sighed and returned her attention to the *dosa* on the skillet.

Look at her. She had two sons. One was settled in Dubai with his wife and kid. The other one too had been away since long. Her husband was forever travelling on business trips being the senior partner in a thriving travel company.

In a huge, two-storied house with four bedrooms, her only companions were the many Gods who resided in her *pooja* room. Nobody understood why she spent hours cleaning the *pooja* room or decorated the idols with flowers daily. Nobody understood why she celebrated every festival in the calendar elaborately, taking care to follow every step listed in her little prayer book. Her Gods were the only people who were around, who understood her loneliness.

Also, travel sickness had made it difficult for her to travel. She couldn’t even travel to Sreepuram like she used to. But she had learned to be independent. Loneliness didn’t scare her now the way it used to. People often

asked her how she managed everything alone. But that was what one did when there wasn't another option, right?

"Mom, when is Dad returning? Ask him to stop this globetrotting. He should take care of his health."

"Does he ever listen to me? Kishore tried talking to him last time, but he says he will continue until the day he can. By the way, he wants me to find a girl for you as soon as possible. He is worried to leave me alone."

"Mom, please. I am not ready for marriage yet. Now that I am here for good, you need not worry about being alone. I have no plans of going away again."

"But Vishal, you are thirty-two already. It is time for you to get married."

What would his mother say if he told her about Karen? He had dreamed of bringing his mother and Karen face to face. Both were strong women who had definite ideas about how to live their life. Would they have become fast friends? Or would his mother have protested and tried to change his mind citing cultural differences? Why was he even thinking about it? Nothing of the sort could happen now. He was again being pulled into a mire of never-ending melancholy.

"Mom, I missed your curries. I tried my hand at cooking by checking recipes online. Nothing came close to your curries. Now I know all about homesickness. All shades of it," said Vishal touching the arms of his mother as he sat next to her on the breakfast table.

She smiled, finding it difficult to speak. She served them both *dosa* and curry. Silence loomed in the room except for the occasional clang of vessels when one of them scooped in a little more curry or took another *dosa*.

Chapter 6

“*Ammamma*, where is Shalini? Mom wishes to see her. Can I take her home? Surely, you can spare her for a few hours,” asked Vishal as soon as he settled onto the hall couch in front of Arundhati.

He had driven out directly after breakfast. The house had begun to stifle him after Karen’s thoughts had surfaced to hound him as usual. To his relief, his thoughts had returned to Shalini as he travelled the sixty odd kilometres that lay between his house in Puvattur and his grandmother’s house in Sreepuram.

“I don’t think she will come. Not because I won’t allow, but because she may not want to. And also, you’ll need Ammu’s permission,” said Arundhati.

“Ammu’s permission? Why do I need that brat’s permission?”

“Shalini is teaching her cinematic dance at the moment. There is a competition at school this Saturday and, since last Saturday, they’ve both been at it. They have limited time, so the practice sessions run longer every day. Ammu is determined to win this time,” explained Arundhati.

“Shalini was a fine dancer in school. I am tempted to watch her dance. Tell me, where are they?” asked Vishal.

“Go to the attic above the outhouse. But I warn you, do so with caution. They have declared it as a no-entry area. Enter at your own risk.”

When he reached the door of the outhouse, he heard the song ‘*Kajra re*’ from ‘*Bunty aur Babli*,’ a popular Bollywood flick, and the sounds of dancing feet. Stealthily, he climbed the stairs, taking care not to make any sound.

“Shalu, I can’t ever dance like you. Why, oh why did I think I can dance?” Ammu was complaining while Shalini stopped the song on the DVD player to explain the steps.

“You forgot the steps again, Ammu. See, after the clapping steps, comes the pirouette that I showed you.”

“Can you show me the entire dance in one go? Let me see how much I remember.”

“Okay. Watch carefully this time.”

Vishal kept himself well hidden and watched as Shalini re-tied her dupatta the way dancers did, crossing it over her left shoulder and around like a saree and then tying it with a knot at her waist. When the song began to play and Shalini began to dance, he stood mesmerized by her expression and movements. She had given a classical touch to the item number and turned it from raunchy to aesthetic. He couldn't help but notice that his childhood friend Shalu had turned into an alluring young woman.

When the song ended and Ammu clapped in glee, Vishal too joined in the applause.

“Hey, where did you pop out from? Old habits die hard, huh?”

“True. Very hard to kill them.”

“Old habits? You mean, he was always a peeping-tom?” Ammu narrowed her eyes at Vishal. Vishal ignored her. Shalini looked away to stop herself from laughing.

“Shalini, I came to take you home. Mom wishes to see you. And Ammu is done for the day. Right, Ammu?” said Vishal winking conspiratorially at Ammu.

“Who said we are done for the day? I have a competition this Saturday, dear doctor. Who will teach me if you take Shalu away? I have to finish learning the steps today,” answered Ammu haughtily.

“Okay, then I will sit here and watch you dance. I love Bollywood dances, especially the item numbers,” said Vishal. He sat on the lone chair in the room and shrugged nonchalantly.

“Ammu, let's stop for the day. I know this fellow. He is stubborn as a mule,” said Shalini and glared at Vishal.

“Ah, so madam has not forgotten my flaws. Are you coming with me or not?”

“What if I don't want to?” Shalini went towards the table to switch off the DVD player.

“Okay,” said Vishal and started to punch the buttons on his phone. “I will tell mom that you have turned into an arrogant female who cares two

hoots about the feelings of an old neighbour.”

Shalini snatched the phone from him and cancelled the call, which had not yet connected.

“Is that what you think about me?” she asked.

“Should I not?”

“I was not being arrogant. I had promised Ammu I will be with her the whole day.”

“Ha! Here I was thinking you were angry that I called you ‘a female.’ We doctors have that bad habit. Many get offended by it.”

“Why should I be bothered about that? You have become very devious.”

“I think I am smart, not devious. Listen Shalu, mom really wants to meet you. Won’t you come?”

“Okay. I will come. Will you care to give me ten minutes to change this dress?” asked Shalini, still angry at his manipulative behaviour.

“Take all the time in the world. But you are coming to my house today.”

Shalini walked out of the room after glaring at him one more time.

“I never thought she would leave me for you. How well do you know her, Vishal? You both don’t seem just schoolmates. Is there some story I missed?” asked Ammu, bobbing her eyebrows up and down.

“We were neighbours and best friends long ago. She would leave you for me in the blink of an eye, you brat,” said Vishal.

“Take her. She is nice. I like her. But she rarely laughs. Always down in the dumps. Can’t you do something to make her laugh instead of making her angry? Anu calls you the master clown because of your ability to make us laugh. Can’t you?” asked Ammu. The twelve-year-old’s perception astonished Vishal.

“Yes, little granny, that is the plan. The problem is, the last time I saw her she was your age. Now she has grown all complex and mysterious. I don’t think she even cares for me like she used to before,” said Vishal.

“I won’t ever forget someone who was my best friend. Ever. I am sure Shalu still likes you the same way. But why didn’t you people keep in touch?”

“It was fifteen years ago, my dear. We didn’t have mobile phones, Facebook, or the internet to keep us connected. They shifted to Thrissur and we never met again till yesterday,” said Vishal.

“So, do we have a love story on the cards? ‘Best friends meet after fifteen years to discover that they had loved each other all along.’ How is that for the headline of the news report about your love story?” joked Ammu. Vishal tweaked her ears, making her scream.

“You know what, even if you fall in love with her, she won’t love you. Who will love you? Devil?” cried Ammu before running out of the room for her dear life.

“Crazy girl,” muttered Vishal before walking towards the main block of the house. Her declarations had surprised him. Love and Shalini? She was almost like a sister to him.

Shalini was waiting for him in the living room along with Arundhati, leafing through a magazine. He had sauntered back after lingering at many of his old favourite spots in the house, taking in the memories.

“Why don’t you start after lunch? Shalini must be hungry after all that dancing.”

“What is the curry?” Vishal asked and Arundhati rolled her eyes.

“When you are hungry, you should eat anything that is served. I think Devi made dal curry and beetroot fry.” Vishal wrinkled his nose with a smile. He turned to Shalini and asked whether she was hungry. She was not. It was only half past twelve.

“That settles it. We will go then. We can eat on the way. I know just the right restaurant.”

“As you wish. Bring her back safely before nine. And no rash driving, do you get that?” said Arundhati. Vishal nodded gaily.

They walked out of the house together. He opened the car doors for her and closed it after she climbed in. Whistling ‘*Kajra re*’, he entered the car

only to encounter a scowling Shalini.

“Stop whistling that tune. Are you going to tease me all through the way?” asked Shalini. Puzzled, Vishal raised his eyebrows. Sensing her displeasure, he complied and switched on the radio once the car moved out of the house compound. When an old Hindi melody they both loved began to play, she smiled at him and the atmosphere inside the car turned amicable.

When they stopped at a traffic signal, Vishal turned to Shalini and found her observing him.

“Ah, are you checking me out? Am I handsome?” asked Vishal. Embarrassed at being caught staring, Shalini squeezed her eyes shut.

“I was. I am seeing you after years. You have changed so much,” she confessed.

“You didn’t answer me. Am I handsome?”

“You never tire fishing for compliments, do you? No change in that even after all these years. Okay, I approve, you have not turned out bad.”

“Thank you. You haven’t turned out bad either. In fact, you’ve turned out quite pretty.”

“Don’t let my ex-husband hear you. He would take you to a mental asylum for voicing that insane opinion,” said Shalini. She bit her lips moment the words moved out of her mouth. She should have kept her mouth shut. She shouldn’t whine about it to Vishal.

For a moment, he stared at her and then patted her shoulders as though to cheer her up. He drove in silence until they stopped again at the next signal.

“I know life has not been easy for you. *Ammamma* told me bits and pieces. But I promise, now that I have you back, we are going to have fun times ahead. Like before,” said Vishal taking her hand in his and squeezing it lightly. Shalini stared at their joined hands and then slowly pulled her hand back.

“Thank you. But I am okay. Hard times make us strong. Though that marriage left many scars that might take a long time to heal, I am happy where I am now.”

“That is like a brave girl. And don’t worry. Your knight in shining armour has arrived. If anyone dares to trouble you, I will make them regret it until the end of their life. See, can’t you see my sword?” said Vishal. He acted as if he was unsheathing an invisible sword and made a whoosh sound.

“I can. Thank you, my hero.” With a snort, Shalini urged him to continue driving as the signal had turned green and the horns were blaring.

“Tell me, how did you fall into that marriage trap? I always thought of uncle and auntie as sensible people. Didn’t they make enough enquiries about your husband?”

“They did. But hideous skeletons always remain hidden in private closets. Outwardly, everything seemed perfect. Piyush was a chartered accountant with a good firm and belonged to a well-off family. I don’t blame my parents at all. It was hard enough for them that nobody seemed to like me. Even cousins younger than me were getting married. Relatives can be such tormentors. Piyush was the first person who seemed genuinely interested. I agreed because I was tired of the whole matchmaking circus. Everyone wanted fair and pretty brides.”

Her relatives had made life hell for her parents. They couldn’t attend a family function without getting hundred unsolicited pieces of advice.

“You know how tough it is to get a groom for dusky girls. Now at least she has the advantage of her youth. The older she gets, the harder it will be to find a suitable boy.” An older relative had advised her mother, Manorama, loud enough for everyone to hear during one family function.

“Marry her off to a fair boy. At least her children will be fair then.” Another relative had hurled a ‘fair’ advice making Shalini cringe. Hence, the proposal from Piyush had seemed a godsend. Only her grandmother had opposed the match.

“Manorama, I don’t think this is the boy who will keep my Shalu happy. Ask her whether she likes him. Something about this boy spooks me out. Listen to me. Don’t make a hasty decision. Enquire about him. My instinct tells me something is not right.” Shalini had heard her argue with her mother for long.

But her parents had stood by their decision. Enraptured by the prospect of a worthy groom, they had informed Shalini about it only after promising

Piyush her hand in marriage. They had married her off to Piyush within the next fifteen days. She hadn't allowed anybody to see her confused tears.

The honking of the horn from a passing vehicle ended Shalini's reverie. She found Vishal giving her a concerned look.

"Hey, stop thinking about that idiotic ex-husband of yours or your in-laws. You deserve someone better. Someone who will love you for the person that you are. And who said you are not pretty? You are a beauty. The kind who would one day give some guy sleepless nights thinking about you," Vishal teased her.

They stopped for lunch at a roadside hotel, which was run by an old woman. It was just a shed with a few benches and desks arranged in neat rows. Many were eating lunch already. Vishal greeted the old woman warmly. She came forward and enquired as to where he had vanished all these days. She then asked him to be seated with his wife. Shalini winced hearing herself being referred to as Vishal's wife. Vishal didn't deem it necessary to correct the mistake. Didn't he hear it?

"You get the best homemade food here. I used to eat from here whenever I visited Sreepuram."

They talked whilst waiting for food to arrive. The restaurant was situated on the bank of a river and the cool breeze was inviting. Vishal offered to show her around the place after lunch. It had a beautiful viewpoint according to him.

Food arrived in a while and was served on banana leaves. Brown rice, homemade mango pickle, *sambar*, *pulissery*, and spicy fish curry along with freshly caught river fish fry. Indeed, the food was tastier than what she had tasted in some of the best restaurants she had visited while her father was alive. Now she understood why Vishal had refused to eat at Sreepuram. Why would he trade this food for the bland fare Devi had prepared for lunch?

After lunch, they walked to the small fishing cove on the bank of the river. Yellow flower bushes bordered the cove and Shalini was enthralled by the scenic beauty of the place. The river flowed gently, its waves sparkling silver in the afternoon sun. The lush green mangroves that grew around the banks were home to birds of every kind. They sat on the rocks talking, unmindful of time passing until Vishal's mom called, asking when he would

reach. Vishal glanced at his watch and whistled. They had spent almost an hour there.

Chapter 7

They reached Puvattur by four in the afternoon. As they approached Vishal's house, Shalini leaned out and studied the neighbouring house, which had once been her home. The small front gate of the single storied house still had branches of bougainvillea tumbling over the concrete lampposts on both sides. The moss-laden parapets, the white walls of the house, the side stairs to the terrace, and the clotheslines on the terrace with clothes drying on them were exactly how she remembered. A small boy was riding a bike in the courtyard of the house.

"Who lives there now?"

"A Christian family. The couple works in the town bank."

Though the past decade had left her old house untouched, Vishal's house had undergone a complete transformation. A majestic two-storied bungalow now stood in place of the tiled roof building that she remembered.

"So much change!"

"We replaced the old building with this new one nine years ago," he said as they entered the driveway. A perfectly maintained lawn with decorative plants flanked the driveway on both sides. It looked like a stranger's house. Not exactly what she had expected. It seemed to lack the warmth of the house that used to be her haven. Uma, who was waiting for them on the porch, rushed out to receive Shalini. The familiar smiling face erased half of her anxieties.

"Shalu, it's so lovely to see you. How are you, my dear?" asked Uma embracing her.

"I am good, auntie. I'm so happy to meet you," said Shalini, hugging back.

"Mom, first give me something to eat first. I am dying of hunger," said Vishal.

"Does he still eat like a starved cat, auntie?"

"Yes, exactly like one who hasn't seen food in weeks," said Uma and Shalini giggled.

Vishal went to his room upstairs after tea to call his former colleagues in London, leaving Shalini with Uma, who had started preparing dinner.

Uma peeled the carrot, potatoes, and gourds, trimmed the edges, and then began cutting them into thin rectangular batons.

“Tell me, how is Amma’s new book coming up? Does she allow you to rest? I used to assist her a few years ago. When she is in her writing mode, she scribbles so much within a short time,” said Uma.

“Now she dictates and I type. Almost three-fourths of the book is ready.”

“Ah, that means I will get to read another lovely novel soon. She is my favourite writer.”

“Mine too,” said Shalini.

“I am jealous of you. You get to read it first. It is a strange kind of thrill to read a novel when it is taking shape. I ... ouch,” cried Uma. The knife had slipped and blood was oozing out of a wound on her thumb.

Shalini rushed to her. Uma washed the wound with the tap water and asked Shalini to take out the first aid box from the bottom shelf of the kitchen cabinet. Shalini wound the bandage on the cut.

“Vishal wanted *avial* and *rasam* for dinner. I am so careless. My mind wanders while doing these chores,” said Uma, and resumed cutting the vegetables.

“Move aside, auntie, I will do it. And you sit here. I will cook. Tell me where the ingredients are.” She made Uma sit on a chair and took over the cooking. Shalini ignored Uma’s protests. An hour later, the aroma of *avial* and *rasam* filled the kitchen. Shalini had also cooked a spicy potato and capsicum fry dish that her mother used to make and which she knew Vishal loved.

“Shalini, go and call Vishal. Once he logs onto the internet, he is lost for hours. Tell him I won’t give him food unless he comes down this moment,” she said.

After sunset, it had started raining and the air had turned cooler. Vishal’s room was ablaze with lights. His laptop sat on the bed but its owner

was nowhere around.

The laptop's screensaver caught her attention and she walked towards the bed. It was the photo of a blue-eyed girl, smiling at the camera from a beach. A grinning Vishal had his arms around her and his face rested on her shoulders. The picture then changed to a close-up of the girl. She had pretty dimples and curly red hair. Who was she? Was she Vishal's girlfriend? Wait, why had he not told her about this girl? She should make him talk, Shalini decided.

The door to the terrace was open and the rain was pouring outside. Shalini knew where she might find Vishal. But the scene that unfolded on the terrace puzzled her.

Vishal was leaning on the balustrade looking away and his shoulders were shaking. Was he sobbing? Shalini paused and watched him. He was.

"Vishal, what happened? Why are you crying?"

He whirled to face her.

"Crying? Who is crying? I was enjoying the rain," said Vishal spreading out his hands and catching the droplets in his cupped palm. Shalini stepped into the rain and walked towards him.

"Vishal, don't lie to me."

"You go inside right now, you understand? You never liked the rain. The one time you tried, you caught a deadly fever that refused to go."

"Don't try to change the topic. That was a long time ago. I am not a child anymore," she said and continued to walk towards him.

"No, no no...go inside this moment, crazy girl," said Vishal and dragged Shalini into his room. Grabbing a towel from the clothes stand, he draped it over her head and began to rub her hair dry. Shalini swallowed. Caught in the intimacy of his actions and concern, she forgot momentarily that he was avoiding her question.

Vishal dried her face, scolding her for being reckless, and proceeded to dry her neck. He realized then that it was not the twelve-year-old Shalini but an enticing woman who stood before him. Alarmed, he stepped back and looked at Shalini. Her semi-dry hair had spilled over her shoulders. Her eyes

were closed and her lips were partly open. The rain had made her cotton top wet and it was sticking to her breasts like a second skin. He forced himself to turn his attention to her hair and continued to dry it.

“Vishal, I am okay. Stop fussing. Let me be.” Shalini pushed him away.

Vishal threw the towel at her with a sheepish grin. Grabbing another towel from the clothes stand, he walked into the bathroom to change out of his wet clothes.

Shalini dried herself and ran a comb through her hair, all the while staring at Vishal’s laptop’s screen. The screensaver now was a picture of Vishal and the girl dressed in scuba diving gear, showing a victory sign at the camera. Lost in thoughts, she walked down to the hall where Uma was waiting.

Vishal was definitely hiding something. She had to know. The Vishal she once knew never cried. He used to crack jokes every now and then and was full of life. The man he had turned into was perhaps harbouring a secret, which was devouring his soul.

“Oh, so you got drenched. Must have gone to drag him out of the rain, right? He is still mad about the rain. Don’t know when he will grow up. Maybe when he has kids of his own and they insist on running out into the rain,” said Uma. Laughing companionably, both walked into the kitchen to bring the dishes to the dining table.

“Shalini, the curries, and the fry are delicious. You are an excellent cook, my dear,” Uma commented once they were halfway through the dinner. Shalini mumbled a ‘thanks’.

“You made this? Wow, it almost tastes like mom’s curries. But why didn’t you cook, mom?” asked Vishal.

“She didn’t allow me to. I cut my thumb while chopping the vegetables,” said Uma with a sigh.

“Mom, grow up. Is there a place left on your thumb that doesn’t have a scar?”

“I will grow up when you stop walking out into the rain. Tell me when do you plan to do that?” Uma retorted.

“Never. I will always love the rain. How bad is the cut?” asked Vishal.

“It is a small cut. Nothing like the last time, when I almost sliced it up.”

Vishal still insisted on checking it. Shalini watched him forbid her from touching the knife again. A maid will do that from now, he insisted. Uma would hear none of it.

By the time they started towards Sreepuram, the rain had stopped. Vishal understood that Shalini was burning to question him about what had transpired on the terrace. Maybe, he should tell her about Karen. There was no closure even after one and a half years. Would he ever get closure?

The moment they passed the gates of Vishal’s house, Shalini turned to Vishal.

“Now confess. Why were you crying? And who is that girl in your laptop’s screensaver?”

Vishal looked at her and raised his eyebrows. She narrowed her eyes in answer. This exchange from their childhood was usually followed by laughter, just like it did this time.

Once the laughter subsided, Shalini repeated her question.

“Karen. Karen Anderson,” Vishal answered solemnly.

Shalini waited for him to continue. He drove on and did not say anything more. After a while, he slowed down, took a left turn, and parked the car in a deserted football ground.

Vishal leaned forward and pressed his forehead on the steering wheel. The same heaviness was building in his chest. Uttering Karen’s name had brought in a deluge of her memories. Very soon, the numbness would conquer him completely.

Shalini patted him on his back and ran her fingers through his hair, attempting to calm him down. He looked at her and declared in a voice that trembled with sadness.

“I lost her, Shalu. I lost her.”

“What? Won’t you tell me what went wrong?”

In halting words, he began to talk about Karen. The girl who had

arrived like a whirlwind into his life.

Chapter 8

“I fell in love with Mauritius during Anu’s marriage. Later on, I randomly applied for jobs and got placed at one of the best hospitals there. Karen was the life of our team at the hospital. Everybody was her friend, starting from the patients to the senior doctors. By age, she was a year junior to me but we were equals when it came to qualification. She was an adrenaline junkie. We went scuba diving, surfing, and snorkelling, exploring the coral reefs and the many wonders that Mauritius offered. It was so much fun.”

Shalini leaned forward and listened as Vishal recounted the many adventures they had embarked upon. How, within a short period, Karen had become his everything.

“There were days when we would set out on impromptu road trips. On the weekends, I would pick her up from her place before sunrise and we would be off on a new adventure. We would halt at the place we reached at sunset and explore it the next day. Karen had a special gift when it came to winning people’s hearts. Everywhere we went, she would befriend the locals and our stay would turn pleasant. We explored the interiors of Mauritius like maybe no one ever did, with the locals as our guides.”

Vishal paused speaking and twiddled his thumb. His downturned facial features troubled Shalini.

“And then? What happened between the two of you? You quarrelled?”

“No. No one could quarrel with Karen. She would merely shrug it off if you tried to provoke her and dismiss whatever you said. Or she would utter some nonsensical joke, making you laugh. She insisted on living in the moment. No past grudges, no grand plans for future.”

“I would have loved to know her. She seems like an interesting person.”

“She was.” Vishal pressed a fist against his chest and took in a deep breath.

“Where is she now? And what happened to separate you two?”

“Fate. Fate happened.”

Vishal fell silent and looked away. Clearing his throat, a while later, he

continued.

“On our last trip together, she confessed she was in love. With me. I loved her too but I was also confused. I was not ready then to commit to a relationship. I felt it wouldn’t have worked since our cultures were so different. A relationship might have destroyed the love we shared. I wanted to wait. Without any fuss, she agreed. She quietly dismissed everything and planned our next trip. This time, though, she invited me to stay at her place. She said she wanted to torment me with her culinary skills. On Friday afternoon, she called me to remind me of it. I was on a conference call with some doctors in the US regarding a case at that time and it went to my voicemail as I had switched off my mobile. I reached her place at about eight that evening but it was locked.”

“Why? What happened?”

“I got in with my spare key. She had told me in that voicemail that she was going to the grocer’s to get the ice cream. So, I locked the door and went to the shop, which was just a block away. The grocer who knew us said she hadn’t come. I walked around enquiring but no one knew anything. Then, I got a call from the hospital. Karen was dead.”

“Oh my God. What!”

“While she was on the way to the grocer’s, she was hit by an out of control truck coming the wrong way down the road. Hospital records showed she had been brought in dead.”

Shalini touched his arm and he flinched. In a wavering voice, he continued.

“I don’t know why God had to be so cruel to her. She never went to bed without praying. She lighted candles in every church we visited. She was only twenty-eight. Too young to die.”

“I am sorry, Vishal.”

“One and a half years have passed since she left me. But her memories still don’t allow me to sleep. When they were taking her away, she seemed like she was asleep and would get up any moment. I shouted at her and shook her like a madman, urging her to get up. They had to sedate me. Every breath seemed like an ordeal to me after that for months. I was treated for clinical

depression for a while. I left Mauritius and went to London to do my fellowship, unable to continue living in Mauritius any longer. I drowned myself in my job and career to get over her. But I failed every time. The pain seems to increase with every passing day.”

“Do any of your family members know about this?” asked Shalini.

“Only Arjun and *Ammamma*. During a Skype call with them, Karen had entered my room unexpectedly and kissed me. They grilled me until I introduced Karen to them. Arjun was with me for a few weeks after she passed away. I am alive because of him. Otherwise, I might have killed myself.”

Silence reigned in the car and Shalini looked at the hunched figure next to her.

“I can’t even presume to understand the kind of pain you are going through. But I wish I could help you.”

“You know, after giving it a lot of thought, I had decided to propose to her that evening. It is my fault that she left without knowing how much I loved her.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Vishal. Grief has a mind of its own and often works at its own pace. Don’t fight it. Give it time. After my father died, I felt I would never be happy again. If he had been alive, I would have found the courage to walk out of that hellhole of a marriage I was in. Losing a loved one brings in a trauma like nothing else. I am sorry this happened to you. Tell me if there is anything I can do to help.”

“You already did. By listening to me. I feel relieved after telling you. But, I am sorry. I have been thoughtless. You have been through hell yourself. I should not have dumped my sadness on you.”

“What are friends for then? You can dump your worries on me and I will dump mine on you. Can’t we? Hey, can I drive the rest of the way?” she asked, hoping to change the topic.

“Do you have your license?”

“Yes.” Shalini took out her driving license from her purse and flashed it at him.

“Okay, go ahead.”

Both of them got out and exchanged their seats. Shalini sat in the driver’s seat, strapped the seat belt, and watched Vishal do the same. An idea struck her.

The football ground they were in had streetlights that illuminated the length and breadth of it. Putting the car into gear, she pressed the accelerator and raced across the ground. She ignored the surprised yelp from Vishal. The ride turned bumpy as she swung the car left and right, applied breaks randomly, and purposefully made the car jump into every pit that was visible on the ground. Then she raced the car straight at a tree and swerved away at the last moment avoiding hitting the tree by an arm’s length.

“Whoa, whoa! Stop. You have no idea how to drive. You crazy girl, stop!”

Shalini slowed the car down and stopped it in the centre of the ground.

“How was that?”

“How was what? I nearly swallowed my tongue. Get off. I will drive.”

“Relax. I wanted to give you an adrenaline rush. It helps to cope with grief, you know,” Shalini explained.

“What? Are you out of your mind? You nearly killed us both. Who gave you the license to drive?” cried Vishal. He got out from the car and stomped over to the driver’s side. Shalini refused to get down.

“Relax. Get back in. I will prove to you that I can drive. Hey, I was just having a bit of fun.”

Vishal wasn’t entirely convinced, yet, he relented.

“Okay, I will check for the first kilometre. If I find you driving rashly, I am going to pull the handbrake and throw you out of the car, you understand?”

Watching his face, which had gone red with fury, Shalini repressed the urge to grin. An angry Vishal was definitely better than a sad Vishal. She nodded and slowly turned the car onto the road. The ride was smooth and Vishal relaxed when he found that Shalini’s driving was above par.

When the car entered the driveway of his *Ammamma*’s house, Vishal

patted Shalini's back.

“Good girl. That was well done. And thank you for that adrenaline rush. It assured me that I still want to live.”

“Aren't you lucky to have me as a friend?” asked Shalini, quirking her eyebrows.

“Indeed.”

While he drove away half an hour later, his thoughts were lighter than usual and were pleasantly directed towards the girl he had left behind in Sreepuram.

Chapter 9

“Auntie, Vishal spoke to me about Karen.”

They were returning from their morning walk the next day. Arundhati stopped and turned to face Shalini.

“Did he? Poor boy, he is still not over her.”

“I was thinking about it the whole night. They deserved happiness. Fate played such a strange game with him.”

“Try to keep him happy, Shalini. He needs you now. Give him support and try to bring him out of the grief. It is time that he moved on.”

“What can I do? I don’t have a clue. I do want to help him. Yesterday, he was crying in the rain. Rain used to make him happy. I have never seen him cry.”

“Distract him. Engage him in stuff that he enjoys. Why don’t you plan a trip to that aqua adventure park tomorrow? Ask him to accompany. Tell him it is a treat you promised Ammu and the kids,” said Arundhati.

After bath and breakfast, Shalini called Vishal. He was still asleep and answered his phone in a sleepy voice.

“What? Are you still sleeping? The sun has travelled half way through the sky.”

“Hmmm. I slept late.”

“Hey, would you join us on a trip to the newly opened aqua adventure park here in Sreepuram? I promised the kids a treat. Don’t say no, please!”

“Who said no? I will come. Who all are coming?”

“Ammu, Deepak, and Achyuth.”

“Okay. Done.”

Early next morning, when Vishal arrived, the unsightly stubble was gone from his face.

“Well done, doctor! Good that you showed the beard the door,” said Shalini while getting onto the passenger seat.

“And we have dressed alike,” said Vishal. Unlike the other days, when a churidar or a saree was her preferred dress, she had worn knee length black capris, a blue t-shirt, and sneakers. Her hair was pulled back into a high pony.

“They don’t allow saree or churidar inside the adventure park, citing safety reasons.”

“This attire suits you. Now I can believe that you are that mad driver who almost crashed my SUV last night. You manage to hide your streak of madness cleverly under those elegant clothes, huh?”

Shalini chuckled and swatted his arm. In the backseat, a war was raging as to who would take the window seat. Achyuth was standing outside holding the door open, shouting at his sister to get out.

“You are pathetic. I want to sit here,” Ammu snapped.

“Move to the middle seat, you monkey. I want to sit there.” The trip was beginning with an ominous note for the siblings.

“Achyuth, come here. I will sit in the middle seat. You can take my place,” said Deepak, their cousin, the peacekeeper.

Shalini felt like she was back in her own childhood. She could see her stubbornness in Ammu and Achyuth reminded her of Kishore. In their case, Vishal had been the peacekeeper and almost always her saviour. She looked at Vishal. His face had crinkled up in a smile.

While Vishal concentrated on navigating the treacherous and heavy traffic on the national highway to Kannur, Shalini looked outside and remembered their childhood. One particular memory came dancing unbidden to her from her first year at Puvattur.

It was during one hot afternoon that she heard Kishore calling her repeatedly.

“Shalini, come here. I have made something very special for you.” Intrigued, she went to check.

A play hut made of coconut fronds and stems of Mexican lilac plant stood in the courtyard of their house. Shalini loved to play ‘house’ and was thrilled that Kishore, who hated the game otherwise, was showing so much enthusiasm. He had laid out pretend dishes made from wild leaves, flowers,

and sand on a banana leaf. Shalini sat on the wooden stool and acted out her role as the perfect guest. She praised the food, pretended to eat it, and then thanked her host. She couldn't understand why Kishore looked glum when she walked out of the hut.

"Shalini, don't go into that hut. It is a trap. You idiot, don't you dare play such tricks on her," cried Vishal, running towards them. He had been at home, studying for a class test.

"But nothing happened here, Visu. He was the perfect host," clarified Shalini, flashing a grateful smile at Kishore.

"Yeah, nothing happened, to my disappointment. She came in and sat here," said Kishore and hopped onto the low wooden stool where Shalini had sat. The ground caved in and with a surprised yelp, Kishore fell into the trap that he had made for her. Apparently, the false floor made with sticks had been strong enough for a frail Shalini but failed when a bulky Kishore jumped onto the stool.

"Serves you right, you moron." Cackling with glee, Vishal grabbed her hand and said, 'Shalu, you come with me.' He had taken her to the safety of their home and his mother.

Much to Kishore's anger and disappointment, the tag of 'the one who fell into his own trap' had stuck to him from then on. But Shalini had stopped playing house after that.

The memory left a smile on her face.

The theme park was teeming with people, as it was a Sunday. Ammu went in search of the best rides flanked by Achyuth and Deepak after agreeing to meet Shalini and Vishal again at the cafeteria in two hours if they got separated. Shalini and Vishal walked around, checking on them from a distance and occasionally joining them in one of the rides.

The most popular ride was one where inflatable rubber boats carried the riders down a gigantic winding waterslide. Intrigued by the merriment and laughter surrounding it, Vishal and Shalini joined the queue. When their turn came, only a boat that could accommodate a couple was left. All the single boats were gone. Vishal and Shalini hesitated, but after being cursed and

coaxed by the others who were waiting for their turn, they both got in. She got in first and he sat in front of her.

According to the seating arrangement, she had to hold onto him to keep balance. She screamed after the first turn and held onto him frantically. Every plunge in the path made her press closer to him. Vishal's ears buzzed as her proximity was playing with his senses. At the end of the ride, they plummeted into a pool and the disparity in their weights overturned the boat. They emerged from the pool gasping for breath and then burst out laughing at the craziness of it all. Shalini's T-shirt was clinging to her and Vishal found himself admiring her curves. He caught himself and looked away, but a bit too late. Shalini had seen him staring. She scampered away towards the kids, who were still laughing at their awkward landing, muttering something like 'Men!' Taking a towel and the extra T-shirt from her bag, she headed to the changing room.

Vishal ran his fingers through his wet hair and slumped onto a park bench. Did he offend Shalini? Should he apologize?

The kids were hollering for food by the time Shalini returned after changing into a black t-shirt. Vishal looked at her awkwardly but she smiled at him. Thank God, he thought and strutted along with her and the kids towards the park cafeteria.

Vishal sat near Shalini and Ammu sat with her brothers. While they were ordering food, two girls wearing skimpy outfits, which displayed more than they hid, passed by their table.

"Are they a couple? The boy seems good enough to eat. What did he find in her? Does he have some eyesight problem? She is wearing black as though her black skin doesn't spill enough darkness." The better-looking one among the girls spoke loud enough to be heard by the entire cafeteria.

The other girl thumped her back and giggled as though she had heard the joke of the century. Both walked to a vacant table in a corner of the cafeteria. Ammu and the boys scowled and Vishal narrowed his gaze at the girl. He prepared to get up when he felt Shalini holding him back.

"No!"

"But what was that? How can someone be so mean? That was unprovoked."

“Welcome to my world, Vishal. Somehow, I tend to attract such comments. We don’t make an ideal pair. Admit it,” Shalini said. She then shrugged as if asking what she could do.

“Who said? Such bullies deserve punishment.”

Vishal and the boys excused themselves and got up to go to the loo. After a while, they returned. Apparently, the boys were in a bad mood and started to push and shove each other when they entered the cafeteria. They crashed into the waiter who was approaching the two girls, the ones who had passed snide remarks about Shalu, with their order of coffee. The cups of hot coffee fell on the girls and scalded them. While they howled in pain, Vishal profusely apologized on behalf of the boys. Seeing him, the girls forgot all about the mishap and asked him to join them.

He called the boys and ordered them to apologize. When they did, he asked them to fetch them coffee. The boys went to fetch the coffees.

For the next half an hour, Shalini and Ammu watched the trio talk with the girls like they were long-lost friends. They expressed their disgust by walking out of the cafeteria. A while later, Vishal and the boys joined them at the water mushroom.

“Why did you return? I thought you might have gone with them. Where are your girlfriends?” asked Shalini.

“Jealous, are we?”

“Jealous, my foot,” snapped Shalini.

“In the toilet, most probably. They will stay there for the next one week,” he said with an evil grin.

“What?”

“The boys wanted to punish them and so mixed something special in their coffee. The girls loved it and my attention. Even gave me their numbers,” he said, flashing a tissue with two numbers scrawled on it.

Ammu high-fived Vishal and the boys.

“Where did you get the special ingredient?” she asked.

“We visited the little kiosk near the entrance at the pretext of going to the loo.” He grinned and pulled out a half-empty sachet of shampoo from his

pocket. Ammu began rolling on the lawn with laughter.

They left the park after riding on a few more rides. The sun was setting when Vishal dropped them back. At Arundhati's insistence, he stayed for dinner. Their bright faces convinced Arundhati that the trip had been a good idea.

"Will you feel bad if I ask you something?" Shalini asked when he was about to start his car. She had come out to see him off after dinner.

"What? I will decide after I hear," said Vishal.

"Change your screensaver. You are not doing Karen or yourself any favour by not letting her go. Let her go, Vishal," said Shalini.

She watched as Vishal's face turned a darker shade of pink. Had she stepped into forbidden territory? She obviously had. Tires crunched, scattering the gravel as Vishal raced out of the courtyard. She walked back into the house, her head hung, and chest heavy. She should have waited. She had ruined his day by blurting out that philosophy.

Taking her phone out, she typed, "Sorry. Please don't be mad at me."

She tapped the send icon and waited. No reply came till the time she went to bed. After tossing and turning for hours, at last, she fell asleep.

Chapter 10

Vishal stared at the slice of the midnight sky visible through the open terrace door. He had left Sreepuram seething with anger. He hadn't given Shalini the right to interfere in his life. How dare she suggest that he forget Karen? How could one forget someone they still loved? Every time he closed his eyes, she appeared. He hated to face the reality that he was alive and she was long gone. The nights haunted him. His dreams made him yearn for her.

He browsed through Karen's photographs again. The familiar ache began to haunt him. And so did many questions.

Was Shalini right?

Was he punishing himself by looking at her pictures repeatedly?

Should he let Karen go?

He should at least try.

Ammu had called to remind him to upload the photos of their trip on Facebook as soon as possible. He connected the camera to the laptop and downloaded the photos. He found himself smiling, as he went through the photos and remembered the fun they had had. He would give heed to Shalini's advice, he decided. Maybe she was speaking from her own experience.

He clicked on the computer settings and changed the destination folder for the screensaver photos to that of the trip. He lay back on his pillow and watched as the screen began showing happy photos one after the other. Perhaps this was his first step on the path of healing.

He had still a month to go before joining a local private hospital as Consultant Paediatrician. He had wanted the break to enjoy after a year of intensive training and study. He picked his phone and opened Shalini's message. He didn't want to reply to that. He would go and meet her. That would be better. The thought was calming enough to induce sleep and, within minutes, Vishal drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

"Where is *Ammamma*? I came to meet her." Vishal declared as an icebreaker the next morning when a tired but composed looking Shalini

opened the main door of Arundhati's house.

"She has gone to the Hanuman temple in *Bekal*. Some offering," said Shalini. She walked away from the door leaving Vishal to decide whether to stay or leave.

"Why didn't you go?"

"I couldn't go...I mean, I shouldn't," she said and walked further into the house, turning away from him.

Hmmm...must be that time of the month then. Women were not allowed to enter most of the temples in Kerala during their monthly period. When a girl said she shouldn't go, it only meant that.

"Ask Devi to make me a cup of tea and something to eat as well," said Vishal, continuing to sulk as he slumped onto the living room couch.

Shalini went off into the kitchen but didn't return even after a long time. Just as he was wondering what was taking her so long, the smell of banana fritters wafted in from the kitchen. Tempted, Vishal went in search of them.

Shalini was engrossed in making banana fritters and didn't notice when Vishal entered the kitchen.

"Why are you preparing these? Where is Devi?"

"She went too," said Shalini as she transferred the banana fritters into a clean plate and poured the tea from the teapot into a cup.

"I am sorry that I left in anger yesterday. I now understand that you only wanted to help me," said Vishal. He picked up a banana fritter and bit into it. He howled the next moment because it was too hot and tossed it back into the plate.

"Greed is always rewarded at the apt moment. Now I gladly accept your apology," said Shalini and giggled when Vishal scowled.

Shalini kept the plate of banana fritters and tea on the dining table and gestured Vishal to sit. She pulled a chair back and sat across him.

"Won't you?" said Vishal, pushing the plate of banana fritters towards her.

“I normally avoid all oily and spicy food during ...,” stammered Shalini putting an early end to whatever she was going to say. But Vishal was a doctor, right? “I puke if I even smell oily food on the first day of my period,” she said.

“Are you having pain as well?” he asked. She nodded.

He sat back, crossed his arms, and narrowed his eyes at her, “Why the hell did you go through the trouble of making these for me then?”

“Vishal now don’t pick a fight with me. I am too tired to argue.”

She indeed seemed exhausted. Beads of perspiration had formed on her forehead and she was visibly in pain. The very next moment, she stood up, dashed to the washbasin, and vomited. Vishal ran to her and rubbed her back. When she had finished throwing up, weary, she leaned against the wall for support. She felt she might faint any moment.

“You should have told me you were unwell. Now don’t argue. You should take rest,” said Vishal. He picked her up as if she were a child and carried her to the guest bedroom. He gently laid her on the bed and switched on the fan.

“Is the pain unbearable?” She nodded weakly. “I will be back. Stay put. Okay?”

He rushed out and within a few minutes, she heard his car move out from the compound. She was embarrassed by the happenings. She had learned to tolerate the pain and managed to hide her nausea most of the time. But in front of Vishal, she had turned into a weakling. But then, it was Vishal. A few minutes passed and she heard the sound of his car again. The front door opened and Vishal walked in.

He went into the kitchen and came armed with a few bananas and a glass of water.

“How are you now? Don’t fuss, eat the bananas. I have brought a pill for the pain and nausea,” he said, peeling a banana and offering it to her. Once she finished eating a banana, he handed her the pill and a glass of water.

“Thank you, Vishal. I am so sorry for all this trouble.”

“It is not a trouble at all. It is not exactly a pleasure to see you unwell. But I am happy to help. Now rest,” he said. He patted her arm and walked out of the room.

She slipped into a nap and when she got up, she found Vishal sitting on the chair near her bed, reading a magazine. Sensing that she had woken up, he turned to her with a bright look on his face.

“What are you reading?” Shalini asked, getting up and sitting on the bed.

“Oh, passing time reading a weepy short story in a women’s magazine. Why do you women prefer such stuff?” he asked as he kept the magazine on the bedside table with a thump.

“Haven’t you heard the poem where the poet described a teardrop as a metaphor for women? Tears fall into our lot.”

“But why? Are you women genetically engineered to seek novel ways to remain unhappy?” asked Vishal.

“Look who is talking! Don’t you find pleasure in the pain Karen’s photos throw on you? Have you stopped torturing yourself over your past?” asked Shalini in the same light-hearted manner that he had adopted. Vishal tensed for a moment but then spoke.

“I am open to change. In fact, I am testing your suggestion. I changed the screensaver. Now tell me, are you open to change as well?”

Shalini bit her lower lip and wrinkled her forehead contemplating. A curl, which had fallen out of her plait, fluttered onto her cheeks. His fingers itched to tuck it behind her ears. He was amazed when he found himself wishing to trail his fingers down to her lips. Were they as soft as they appeared? Vishal shook his head to block out his wandering thoughts.

“Hey, where are you? You don’t seem to be in this room,” teased Shalini.

“You won’t believe if I tell you. You might even get angry.”

“Try me. Or is it about Karen? What is the change you were talking about?”

“No. Not about Karen. You rest. I will be in the living room watching

TV.” He walked out of the room intending to put as much distance between Shalini and himself as was possible. The attraction he felt towards Shalini was maddening. He sat on the couch and switched on the television. An old Hindi movie played on screen and Vishal slipped into thinking about the girl who had re-entered his life with a bang.

The sound of a car horn from the courtyard announced the return of Arundhati, and Vishal sighed in relief.

“You should not have left Shalini alone. She was sick. Thank God, I came here on time,” Vishal said as soon as Arundhati came in and she rushed in to check on Shalini.

“What happened?”

“Nothing, auntie. He simply wants to brag about how helpful a person he is. I am completely alright. Was tired, that is all,” said Shalini who had come out to receive them. She whispered to Arundhati that it was the usual monthly thing that disturbed her.

Arundhati left to drink a glass of water after firmly asking Shalini to go and rest. Vishal came carrying Chaitra, who immediately leaped into Shalini’s arms.

“By the way, there is an easy remedy to make all these symptoms go away. Want to know how?” asked Vishal.

“How?” asked Shalini tilting her head to the side.

“Get married again. Get pregnant. After delivery, such symptoms vanish in most females,” said Vishal. Scowling, Shalini punched him hard on the shoulders.

“If you would consider doing that, I want to offer myself as a suitor. I am free, you see,” said Vishal and fled with a chuckle when Shalini threatened him with her clenched fist. She kissed the kid and thought how wonderful it would be if this were her own child. She thought about Vishal’s offer. It made her snort and she shook her head. She quickly dismissed it as one of the jokes he loved cracking.

Chapter 11

July 12, 2014, Sreepuram

A week later, Shalini visited Vishal's home again, this time with Arundhati. Uma had organized a Lakshmi *pooja*, as she often did on certain full moon days. Uma revered these ceremonies. Days for her usually began by dusting and wiping the many photos and idols that adorned her prayer room before sunrise. After that, she would bathe and spend another hour or two reading from her prayer book.

Today, even though the *pooja* was to begin only after eleven in the morning, she was panicking, as many of the materials required were not ready yet. The priest had given a long list of materials. The presence of Shalini and Arundhati cooled her down a bit. The three bonded over the various chores. Vishal had left them and gone to his room after bringing some of the materials from the town.

"I don't know what is wrong with my boy. He sits huddled up with his laptop always or goes out to roam. I miss the long conversations we used to have. His stay abroad has affected our bonding. I don't seem to know my son anymore," complained Uma while stirring the *payasam* that was to be offered during the *pooja*.

Arundhati knew exactly what Vishal's problem was, so did Shalini. Yet, both ignored Uma's whines until, exasperated, Arundhati chided her.

"Give him his space. The life of a doctor is not always easy. They see so many traumas every day. He is a strong person. And he loves you. Don't worry."

"I wish a girl would come into his life and change everything. That is my only hope now." She had a long list of girls ready if he agreed to get married. "Shalini, can you ask Vishal to bring some more jasmines from the market? These won't be enough," said Uma looking at the few strings of jasmine Shalini had arranged on a plantain leaf.

"I will, auntie."

When she reached Vishal's room, he was on the treadmill. Dressed in a sleeveless t-shirt and trainers, his muscles shining with sweat, he looked straight out of an action movie. No wonder Karen fell for him, she thought.

“This is one machine I wish to own one day. To run without anyone ogling at you is bliss.”

“Ha, so who is the new admirer?”

“Admirer? What admirer? Can’t I even make a wish?”

“I am not a genie to make your wish come true. If your wish is to try it out I can help you, though,” said Vishal.

“Yes, I want to.”

Vishal switched off the treadmill and got down. He explained how it functioned, started the machine, and made her step onto it.

“Ah, this is so mechanical. I mean, even if I want to stop, it makes me walk. Kind of like a rude teacher.”

“Is the *payasam* ready? I can smell it.”

“No. Almost ready but you won’t get it until the *pooja* is over. Oh God, I am such an idiot. I came here to ask you to bring more jasmynes —”

She stopped suddenly and turned towards him remembering her folly. She lost her balance and stumbled as the treadmill belt pushed her back.

Vishal lunged forward and caught her. He fell, dragging her with him. She squeezed her eyes shut and grabbed his upper arms frantically.

Vishal felt his body tighten at the proximity. She felt like the warm fire on a freezing winter night, paramount to his very existence. Her freshly shampooed hair fell around his face like a curtain and he longed to run his fingers in them. Her skin reminded him of honey that he craved to taste. Her lips were mere inches away and he wondered if he could kiss her. She opened her eyes then and sniggered. He sighed in relief.

“I am so sorry,” she said.

Vishal smiled. He was not sorry. Not at all. Misreading his smile as a tease, she hastily got up and scampered off him. When she tried to walk, she limped. Her right toe was bleeding.

She sat on a nearby chair and grimaced.

“So much for trying to experiment with your mean machine,” she said.

“That is why we wear shoes on the treadmill,” he said. He hunkered near her legs, took her foot in his palm, and examined the injured toe. Shalini squirmed with unease. She did not like this. A tingle was spreading from the spot where he held her foot to everywhere in her body.

“Wait, I will find a bandage.”

He found the first aid box and resumed his seat. He wiped the wound clean with an antiseptic lotion and leisurely proceeded to stick the band-aid to the cut. His fingers lingered on her toe, feeling its texture.

“Your skin is baby soft, no wonder it got bruised so easily,” he said, wiping the last drops of the antiseptic lotion with cotton.

She stood up suddenly and began mumbling about jasmines, *pooja*, and angry Brahmins. Her cheeks felt rather hot. Ignoring the pain in her toes, she fled down the stairs as fast as her legs could carry her. He stared at her for the longest time and then walked to the bathroom to shower and change to finish the errands.

All through the *pooja*, Shalini watched Vishal from the corner of her eyes. She wondered why she was becoming so conscious of his presence. If she didn’t do anything about this, she would soon become tongue-tied like an idiot. So, when she got the chance, she complained to Uma about how Vishal was eating her share of the *payasam*, which was not a lie. She called him a greedy cat.

“Cats are better in every way. Even if they fall, they orient themselves perfectly. Not like you, who falls like a fat jackfruit, hurting themselves and others in the process.”

He showed her the slight scratch marks made by her nails when she had grabbed his arm while falling. When he continued to tease, she scowled at him. While they bickered, the elders watched them curiously without bothering to take sides.

By the time they left Puvattur, Uma was telling Arundhati that she felt fifteen years younger listening to them fight. Arundhati’s mind was filled with grander thoughts, which mainly centred on words like cupid, love, and marriage.

Chapter 12

Hey, where are you? I haven't seen you in days. Joined work?

Vishal smiled reading the message. He had been deliberately avoiding going to Sreepuram. Shalini was becoming a temptation that he wished he could indulge in. But he feared he might lose her. A wrong move and she might cut him out of her life. Instead, he had spent time catching up with friends and acquaintances. When alone, his thoughts often wandered to Sreepuram and the girl who was sneaking into his thoughts without invitation. He typed a reply.

Not yet. Have to join on the 1st of next month. I went trekking with some friends. Missed you.

He watched the screensaver, which was now zooming in on a photo of Shalini. Was he on a rebound? Was he pinning all hopes on the first girl whom he liked after Karen? But Shalini was not someone new.

His phone beeped with another message.

Can you join me on a book outing? I have to purchase some books that auntie wants to donate to the local children's library. Please?

Instead of replying, he called her. The week away, without even hearing her voice, had been torturous.

“Will you come?” Shalini asked immediately on answering his call. The girl wasted no time on small talk.

“Where do you plan to go?”

“There is a book fair happening in Kannur. We were planning to go with Gopu. But he has gone to his village on some errand,” said Shalini.

“Oh, so I was not the first choice.”

“Of course not. How could I depend on someone who doesn't even care to keep in touch?”

“I like that you missed me. I will come. When should we go?”

“Are you free tomorrow? Can we start early and visit the Muzhuppilangad drive-in beach as well? I have never been there.”

“Okay. I will be there by nine in the morning. Who else is coming?
Ammamma?”

“Mostly yes. But not sure. She will confirm only in the morning.”

It was bright and sunny the next day. Perfect for an outing. Vishal’s wicked hope that his grandma won’t accompany them had come true. As she had some writer friends coming to meet her, she asked Shalini to go ahead with Vishal.

“So, where did you go trekking? How was it?” Shalini enquired when they were mere minutes into the trip.

“Ranipuram. It is located in the Western Ghats at a distance of some sixty-four kilometres from my place. As it was right after the monsoon, there were so many leeches. We had stocked salt so it was not much of a problem. But yes, the sight of them sticking to our bodies was yucky. Bloody bloodsuckers.”

“So, the trip was a flop?”

“No way. The view from the top made up for all the leeches and tiredness. It is seven hundred and fifty meters above sea level. You should visit it once. Maybe we should go there once.”

“We should,” said Shalini. Vishal fell silent. Somehow, his silence disturbed her. She noticed how unless she initiated the talk, he preferred silence. Something was on his mind. Should she ask what was troubling him?

By the time Shalini decided she should question him about it, they had reached the book fair. One after the other, books by authors she liked beckoned her. She flitted like a butterfly from stall to stall carrying books she had selected for herself in one carry bag and the ones she had picked for the children’s library in another. Vishal took the bag from her when it was full, unloaded it in the car, and brought it back while she continued to browse through the many piles of books.

He picked a book of love poems by Neruda. After paying for it, he sat on one of the benches and began to read. After a while, Shalini came and sat near him, taking a break from the book hunting. She had purchased a Harry Potter book set. Many other popular Enid Blyton books were stuffed into her bag already.

“*‘Love is so short, forgetting is so long’*. He speaks my mind in this sonnet,” Vishal said, looking at her.

“Neruda! When did you progress to Neruda?”

“Karen. She introduced his poetry to me. Subtle, vigorous and sensuous. I love them.”

“Yes, his poems make one want to fall in love. I sometimes wonder whether the kind of love he describes in his sonnets exists. Can anyone love another like he says *‘without knowing how, or when, or from where, without complexities and pride’*? I am sure I won’t find such a love in my life.”

“When did you become such a pessimist, Shalu? You were the one who believed in fairies, princes arriving on white horses, and unicorns. What happened to that little girl who always told me that shooting stars made wishes come true?”

“She had to grow up. Okay, I am done. Shall we leave?”

She walked away without waiting for his answer. He sighed remembering the little girl who hid peacock feathers in her book expecting them to give birth to a baby feather. Had life altered her completely? Could he bring her back again?

At the Muzhuppilangad drive-in beach, after a ride in the car, splashing the waves around, Vishal found that little girl coming alive. She chased the waves and then ran away, laughing, when the waves pursued her.

He clicked photos without her noticing and wondered what he could do to make her remain as bubbly and happy always. He hated seeing the sadness that pooled in her eyes so often.

“Hey... come. Join me,” she called out to him.

“No need. I am happy here.”

She hurried to him, divested the camera from him, ran to their car, kept it inside, locked the car, and pocketed the key.

“Watch the marvels of nature through your own eyes. Not always through the eyes of that camera. Come on,” she said and pulled him to his feet.

She dragged him towards the waves and together, they allowed the

waves to kiss their feet. While the sand caved underneath them, Shalini steadied herself by holding onto him. He wound his hands around her waist and pulled her near. They stood that way in silence, the roar of the crashing waves and her intermittent laughter becoming the pleasant interludes. The sunbeam had coloured her golden, the wind was fluttering her long hair. Watching her, he sensed a permanent tenderness make home in his heart, a tenderness that had her name written all over it.

“Hey, I need to do one thing. Perhaps you can join me.”

Vishal watched as she approached the boy selling helium balloons. She purchased two red, heart-shaped ones and returned towards their car. She rifled through her bag and took out sheets of paper. She gestured to him to come to her. Laying the paper on the car bonnet, she began to write.

“What are you writing?”

“A letter to my father. Whenever I get hold of a helium balloon, I write to him. It feels good to tell him that I am remembering him at this moment. When the wind drags the balloon higher and higher, I like to believe, he is pulling its thread towards him. He would read my letter and shake his head wondering when his silly little girl would grow up.”

A heart-wrenching sadness shot through Vishal as he watched her bend over the bonnet, seriously penning a letter to her dead father. She turned towards him suddenly as though she remembered something and handed him a sheet of paper.

“Write. Write to Karen. Tell her all you want to tell her.”

He didn't want to say no to her. Like any true friend who accompanied his friend in the darkest of tunnels fully intent on leading them towards the light, Vishal accepted the sheet of paper without any ado. To indulge her further, he took out his pen and settled on the back seat of the car to write. He didn't know what to write. Words didn't come initially, then he watched the setting sun and memories gripped him. Words began to flow.

Chapter 13

Dearest Karen,

The sun, as it vanished beyond the horizon today, was the exact shade of red that you always loved. If you were here, you would have clicked numerous photographs.

But I am angry with you. You know that, right? You left without a single word.

Ammamma often says that words have a magic of their own. Do you remember that night at Bel Ombre, our last trip together? You had repeatedly asked me when I was going to accept that I loved you. I had kept quiet, still confused by all the hurdles my rational mind had strewn on the path towards our union. After a while, you stood up and laughed aloud. Then you teased me that perhaps I would understand how much I loved you only when I had lost you!

Did you think then that your words would become a self-fulfilling prophecy? Because you crafted my reality with those very words. A desperate longing, bitter regret, and sadness gnawed at my being all these months, refusing to leave me alone even for a moment. You never saw that, did you? The emotions of us mortals fail to reach wherever you have wandered off to.

It is not easy for me to let you go. But someone tells me I should. For your sake and for my own. Did you send her to me? Perhaps you are in league with her father, and you both have put subtle suggestions to the creator to bind us together.

I should tell you, it is working. Shalini is slowly but steadily healing me from within. Your memories don't haunt me the way they did. I will never be able to forget you. But perhaps, I might love another again. Perhaps, I am in love already.

I should confess it to her, shouldn't I? I have loved and lost once. A slight delay had become a forever regret. I should tell her soon, shouldn't I?

I know what your answer is...

Love,

Vishal

He rolled the paper into a thin tube and tied it to the helium balloon Shalini had given him. Then he let it go. He blinked back the tears that were beginning to sting his eyes. As the balloon surged higher and higher, he felt as if a weight was being lifted off from his chest. He could sense a finite relief.

A few feet away, Shalini was wiping away her tears. Her balloon was already a tiny dot in the sky. His heart leapt in a way it had never done.

By the time they started towards Sreepuram, it was already seven thirty. After they had travelled a few miles in complete silence, Vishal stopped the car and asked Shalini to step out. They were at the top of a hill and the place where they stopped had a viewpoint. The distant town below glowed like a carpet of multi-coloured lights and the sky glittered with stars.

“Beautiful! I have never seen anything as magical as this. Thank you,” said Shalini.

The light in her eyes lit a similar one in his, urging him to tell her all that he felt. Yet, he didn’t know where or how to begin.

“Let us go, it is getting late. Get in,” Vishal said after a while, opening the car door for her.

He got in, turned the key in the ignition, and then turned it off again.

“What happened? Why did you turn off the engine?”

“I want to tell you something. Do you know what I wrote in that letter to Karen? I asked her whether she sent you to me. You communicate with dead souls with those balloons, don’t you? Did she tell you to come and heal me? To become my solace and fill the hole she had left in my heart?”

“Vishal...”

“Let me finish, Shalini. Please don’t interrupt. You have helped me heal. I don’t pine after Karen the way I used to. Instead, you have taken permanent residence inside my heart. I have fallen in love with you.”

Shalini’s eyes opened wide and Vishal leaned closer. His hands moved up her arms and then pulled her into an embrace. After about a minute, he

pulled back to assess her reaction. She looked stunned, yet did not seem repulsed by his action. Cupping her cheeks, he looked into her eyes and tentatively caressed her lips with his thumb. Then, he touched her quivering lips with his own. One touch and he was lost. Each touch felt like remembering. Her lips trembled but his insistent mouth parted them to deepen the kiss. With her eyes closed, she welcomed it and her fingers curled into his hair involuntarily. With a groan, Vishal pulled her closer.

The light from a passing truck flashed on them and they sprang apart realizing where they were.

“*This* changes things. You realize that, don’t you?” Vishal asked with a warm smile, holding Shalini’s hands firmly inside his.

Shalini swallowed. This was not going right. She realized she had fallen in love with her best friend. The kiss had been magical. But she couldn’t imagine Vishal shackled to her for life. It was too much to ask from her best friend. He needed a life, away from her, one that didn’t have even a shade of unhappiness. Gathering all her courage, she looked up at him.

“Nothing has changed, Vishal. We were caught in the moment. I am sorry for leading you on. But this won’t do. It is a mistake.”

“It changes everything, Shalini. Don’t deny my love,” said Vishal.

“Love? Are you crazy? We don’t suit each other, can’t you see? There isn’t even a chemistry between us. You are my best friend. I cannot think of you in any other way. I was waiting for that kiss to get over. It was disgusting as hell,” said Shalini and turned away from Vishal, to look at the distant valley again.

How could she tell she was not affected by the kiss when she had melted into his arms just minutes ago? It had taken all his self-control to stop kissing her. Vishal stared at her, refusing to believe her words.

“Ouch. Am I a bad kisser? I don’t believe you. See, no one ever told me that. But I confess, I loved every second of it,” he said, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

When there was no response from her, he revved the engine to life and resumed their journey towards Sreepuram. He continued talking as if nothing had happened. And she remained quiet, fighting the silent behest of her heart

to surrender to its demands.

Chapter 14

“Vishal, what are you thinking about?” His mother’s voice ended his reverie. They were at dinner.

“On the 26th of September, Amma turns seventy. We have decided to celebrate her *Sapthathi* with a grand get together for the whole extended family. I want you to take responsibility for organizing the event. What do you think? Can you pull it off?”

“Mom, I was not selected the college union’s chairman simply because I had a loud voice. My batchmates were in awe of my organizational abilities. Don’t worry. *Ammamma*’s seventieth birthday will remain a memorable event for everyone who gets to be a part of it,” said Vishal and reached towards the plate of fish fry that lay on the table.

“We need to invite all our near and dear. Don’t want anyone to be left out. Ask Shalini to help you. She is, after all, Amma’s assistant.” Uma proceeded to transfer another piece of fish fry onto Vishal’s plate.

“Hmm. I will ask her. She is so involved in the affairs of *Ammamma*’s house as though she has been a member since like forever. Everyone seems to have become dependent on her. ‘Ask Shalini, she will know how.’ That has become the tagline there,” said Vishal, smiling fondly remembering the last few days he had spent at Sreepuram. Every moment he had spent with her had reinforced his decision to marry her. Though Shalini had declared that they were to remain just friends, he was reluctant to accept defeat soon. He was determined to tear down her inhibitions and make her his own, as soon as possible.

It was sometime after midnight that the ringing of her phone woke Shalini up. She answered it without checking who the caller was. She smiled when she recognized the voice on the other side. She switched the night lamp on and winced when she saw the time displayed by the clock on the wall.

“Vishal, why are you calling me at this late an hour? Make sure you have a valid reason for disturbing my sleep,” hissed Shalini, trying to sound as menacing as possible.

“What? Are you sleeping already? It is only twelve,” said Vishal.

“Here we sleep at ten. We get up at five. We need eight hours of sleep minimum if you ask me.”

“I called to discuss about the celebrations for *Ammamma’s Sapthathi*. But I guess it will not make sense to you now. After all, you are half asleep.”

“*Sapthathi*? Is auntie turning seventy? Oh my God! Who will believe? She looks so young, maybe in her late fifties. I wonder what her secret is.”

“Secret? I guess when someone has led a contented life, it shows. And with the kind of grandkids that she has, take me for example, what should she worry about?”

“Aha, you had to insert a self-praise there too. Actually, she is very worried about you. She wants you to find a girl and settle down. During dinner today, she was telling me that. So, any plans to obey that?

“The only girl I can consider for that lofty position is you. Do you think she would approve if I proposed to you?”

“Are you in your senses? We are friends and nothing more. Are you talking this way because of what happened the other day?”

“Partly yes. It made me realize that you are exactly what I need. But this thought has been brewing for weeks. You are uppermost in all my thoughts these days.” His voice turned mellow and soft with love.

Shalini took a deep savouring breath, drinking in the love she felt flowing towards her from Vishal. She wished she could give up all pretensions and allow the love hiding in the depths of her heart to be stirred into life. All she wanted was to sink into the warmth of his embrace. She had relived that kiss a thousand times in the last few days. But she couldn’t, and shouldn’t, allow love to blind her. Once this initial attraction had vanished, he might start to hate her. Her imperfect self would never suit Vishal. He deserved someone whole and worthy, and she was definitely not that person.

“Shalu, are you there? Please say something, my love. Don’t torture me.”

A lump formed in her throat. She swallowed, willing the despair suffocating her to vanish.

“Vishal, please. Why can’t you take no for an answer? I don’t want to

be married to anyone. Do you understand? Especially not to you. Please, don't give a different colour to our friendship. It is the one amazing thing I hold dear. Please Vishal...,” said Shalini. All her sadness burst out in sobs. She pushed the phone away and hugged the pillow, letting her tears flow unhindered.

On the other end of the line, Vishal was disturbed by the sobs he had heard and cursed himself over and over for his stupidity, for his eagerness. He had scared his Shalini.

His Shalini. Yes, she would be his; he would find a way to make her understand that his love was true and lasting.

A month passed. Shalini had not heard from Vishal again. It was heart wrenching, but she thought it was the best that could happen. Every second, regret tormented her and questioned why she had rejected Vishal's love. Her pillows got drenched with her tears every night. Her dreams were filled with visuals of being happily married to Vishal. She woke up every day with a heavy heart. Yet, every day she got out of bed determined to let the dreams remain just dreams. She couldn't allow them to become her reality.

Returning from the temple on a Saturday morning, she lingered at the village pond where Ammu, her brother Deepak, and their cousin Achyuth were enjoying a leisurely swim in the cool August morning. Watching the kids, she remembered Vishal talking about their summer vacation adventures. The village pond used to be the centre of their activities. It always brimmed with water, no matter the time of the year.

The car parked in the courtyard announced that the person who dominated her thoughts was visiting. She entered the house with a fluttering heart and found that Vishal was not alone. His parents were with him and she heard discussions about celebrating Arundhati's *Sapthathi* raging.

“You all are wasting your energy. Why should I celebrate my birthday? Are you planning to drum in the fact that I am getting old? That I should succumb to your pressure and agree to live with you? It won't work. Now that Shalini is here, I am feeling quite young again,” said Arundhati, refuting all their suggestions.

“But *Ammamma*, not everyone turns seventy every day. We should and

will celebrate this mega milestone. By the way, where is Shalini?” Vishal asked.

“I am here. I had gone to the temple. Hello, Uma auntie, hello uncle. So nice to see you all again,” said Shalini, walking towards them.

Vishal sucked in a breath watching her. This girl was going to be his death. She was dressed in a bottle green georgette saree that hugged her curves. His fingers ached to caress the enticing portion of her stomach, which was visible at her midriff. She had left her hair open. He could easily imagine it spread out on his pillow, caressing his cheeks like silk. The fragrance of the jasmine blossoms that adorned her hair wafted towards him furthering the charm and he muttered a curse.

“Is this our Shalu, Vishal? You have turned into a big girl. How are you?” asked Mohan, Vishal’s father.

“I am fine, uncle.”

“Great. How are your parents? Especially your father. How is he?”

“He...,” murmured Shalini.

“Her father is no more. I will tell you all about it later. Don’t upset the girl. Now tell what you came to talk about to Amma,” said Uma in a hurry.

Shalini mentally thanked Uma. It was still painful to talk about her father. Realizing that perhaps they had family matters to discuss, she made an excuse of having some editing work to complete and walked towards her own room. The discussions started again.

After controlling his urge to go after her for exactly ten minutes, Vishal walked out of the living room talking about looking for a book in the library. When Vishal entered her room, Shalini looked up from the book she was reading, kept it on her table, and hastily got up.

“Vishal, what are you doing here. You shouldn’t come here. It is not proper.”

“Why? This is my grandmother’s house and I am free to roam anywhere,” Vishal said nonchalantly with his characteristic lopsided smile.

“Vishal, please. Listen to me. Go out. I don’t want to create any misunderstanding,” said Shalini.

“Don’t worry, I will go as soon as I tell you something,” Vishal said, settling down on the chair near her.

“What?”

“Can you guess why Mom and Dad came here today?”

Shalini shook her head.

“Dad met his classmate this time during his Singapore trip. The family is settled there and his friend wants their friendship to turn into a relationship. They want me to marry their only daughter, a doctor who is working at AIMS, Delhi. See, this is the girl.” Vishal offered his phone to her.

Shalini gazed at the phone but didn’t take it from him. She felt like her whole world was crashing down and leaned onto the table for support. Getting a hold on her emotions, she looked at Vishal and grinned.

“So, that is the end of your bachelorhood. I am sure the girl would be very pretty. All the best,” she said, her voice so uncharacteristically shrill that it sounded false even to her.

She didn’t want to look at the photo. She turned away and began dusting some non-existent dust from her table.

“Don’t you want to see her?” said Vishal.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Why should I? A month ago, you proclaimed you were madly in love with me. You pestered me non-stop. Your so-called attraction vanished the moment you saw this girl, your own lady doctor. I am happy and relieved.”

“But you don’t look exactly happy. I can see a teardrop shining in your eyes. Any moment now, it will betray you,” said Vishal. His voice was tender but his eyes sparkled.

“What do you expect? Should I rejoice that the man who proposed to me changed his affections within the span of a month? Or should I rejoice because I obviously escaped another trap?”

“Trap? You think I was trying to lure you into a trap?”

“Obviously. You men don’t deserve to be trusted. Ruled by lust, you

fall for anything female that comes in your path.”

“That is the opinion you have about me? For your information, I haven’t agreed to the proposal. Because the only person I want as my wife is you. They have come here to get *Ammamma*’s help to convince me. But I think you can convince me better. Tell me why I shouldn’t marry you?”

Vishal walked nearer and took Shalini’s hands in his. She tried to pull away.

“Vishal, we are not an ideal match.”

“Who said? You suit me in every way. You are the one person who knows my very soul. You are the one person with whom I can think of spending my mornings, my evenings, and my nights. Your mere touch spirals me into a world of passion. You don’t know how much I desire you.”

The passion in his words rendered her speechless. Vishal ran his fingers through her hair and slowly pulled her near. Reverently, he kissed her cheeks. From there, his lips burned a trail of kisses down to the curve of her throat. His right hand kneaded the enticing skin at her midriff, finally giving in to his temptation. When his lips began descending further down, Shalini shuddered. She knew she couldn’t resist the way her body was responding to his touch. Another minute and she would fall into his spell and never recover. Remembering that she should antagonize him if she wanted the best for him, Shalini pushed Vishal away with force and ran to the other side of the room.

“Vishal, stop right there. If you touch me again, I will forget that you were once my friend. If you take another step towards me, I will scream. Get out of this room! Do you hear me? Don’t even dare to come near me again. What you feel for me is lust, not love. You again proved why I should not ever trust a man again in my life. Get out!” Shalini snapped at Vishal. Her eyes were burning bright with tears.

“Shalini, I love you and you are killing me with your denial,” Vishal said in a choked voice. Shalini looked away, unable to stand the sight of his distress.

“Go away, Vishal. I don’t believe you. Go marry that beautiful doctor.” She bit the inside of her cheeks to hold back the sobs that were suffocating her.

“Yes, I will do exactly that. You know what, I will ruin my life and that girl’s. Because trust me, I won’t love anyone again.”

Taking a deep breath, Vishal watched her tear streaked face and walked out of the room. More than her denial, her tears tortured him. He never wanted to make her cry. He muttered curses to himself. Perhaps it was time to put an end to this madness.

Chapter 15

“He says he is not ready to get married yet. The girl is smart, qualified, and pretty. Amma, only you can convince him.” His father was complaining to Arundhati when Vishal entered the living room again.

“Why Vishal? Almost all your classmates are married now. Arjun has even become a father. What is wrong with you?” Arundhati asked.

“Nothing *Ammamma*, these two are pestering me non-stop. Maybe I should agree. I am tired. Too tired. Dad, call whomever you want and give my consent. I am ready to show my neck so that you can tighten the noose,” said Vishal staring down at his own feet, both his hands buried deep in his pant pockets.

Uma and Mohan smiled. Uma hurried towards him and embraced him. Vishal did not return the hug but smiled at her.

“Thank God, you agreed. I thought you would never agree.”

A smiling Mohan walked out of the living room, taking out his phone to tell his friend the good news. Though caught in the sudden jubilation caused by Vishal’s declaration, Arundhati sensed something was wrong. Vishal’s smile felt forced. He seemed like he would rather cry than fake the smile he had pasted on his face. What was the boy was hiding?

The answer came to Arundhati when she saw Shalini during dinner. Though she was trying hard to act calm, her eyelids were swollen red and she was barely coherent. Most queries received one-word answers. Probably, the girl had been weeping. Earlier, Arundhati had been almost convinced that Shalini was the reason behind Vishal’s refusal. And then all of a sudden, he had come out and declared he was ready for marriage. What had happened between these two in the interim?

Yet, for the first time in years, Arundhati couldn’t bring herself to try to find a solution. This troubled the good old lady more than ever. The accomplished Cupid was now at her wit’s end.

Later on, Uma called to tell that they had fixed the engagement for the 14th of September, a Sunday, exactly a month later at a nearby hotel in Sreepuram. The girl’s family owned a home in the nearby town and they

were flying down to prepare for the engagement soon.

Arundhati announced it with more enthusiasm than she was actually feeling and watched with eagle eyes the impact the news created on Shalini. She appeared distressed on hearing the news. Yet, within a moment, she pulled on a happy face and congratulated Arundhati. At lunch, she picked at her food, lost in thoughts. When Arundhati asked her whether she did not like the food, Shalini said she had a headache.

From then on, every day, Arundhati watched over Shalini and tried to cheer her up. But with every passing day, she was retreating into the shell from which they had almost managed to prod her out.

Shalini, on the other hand, tried to convince herself that Vishal was happy. She was happy that his happiness did not involve her, wasn't she? But, he was lost to her forever. She cried bitter tears thinking about the unfairness of it all. If God had blessed her with a little more beauty, she would have never let Vishal walk away from her.

One morning, while in the shower, she scrubbed her skin until it started to burn, willing it to lighten. Stubborn, her caramel coloured skin continued to glisten. Was God mocking her? If he wanted to give her happiness, he would have made her pretty. He had written only sadness in her destiny. Though Vishal said he found her pretty, she was not convinced. She remembered the way the girls had teased her at the water theme park. She didn't want him to face such things again. She didn't want to burden him with her share of ill luck and ugliness.

That thought was redemption. When she came out of the shower, Shalini was determined to defeat the feelings of guilt and despair that kept taunting her. She would never become an obstacle in Vishal's path towards happiness. Looking into the mirror, she smiled at the girl whose eyes had pooled with tears. She blinked them back and whispered to herself to buck up and face the reality.

Arundhati saw a different Shalini that day at the breakfast table. The smiling girl was back. For a moment, Arundhati thought that Vishal had called her and everything was fine between them again. But Uma's call came in the next hour letting her know that she was bringing Vishal's fiancée to Sreepuram to meet Arundhati.

Shalini listened to the news with a blank expression but immediately started getting things ready to greet the guests. She swept and mopped the living room. The curtains and table runners in the dining room were changed. Expensive cutlery was taken out and cleaned. All this, within an hour after her announcement. The composure of the girl surprised Arundhati. The pain Shalini was putting herself through troubled her.

There was no way she would come to know what exactly had passed between the two. However, she could guess. Most probably, Shalini had rejected Vishal's proposal due to her self-doubts, which still held her captive.

When it was time for the guests to arrive, Shalini requested permission to go to Ammu's house. Apparently, she had promised Ammu a trip to the local market. Reluctantly, Arundhati allowed her to go. She didn't want her to struggle in front of Vishal and his fiancée.

Arundhati used the evening rather fruitfully. Though Vishal had accompanied his would-be bride and appeared cheerful talking to the girl, during unstudied moments, she found his eyes darting around seeking Shalini. Though he didn't put the question in words, his every glance was asking about her.

Riya, Vishal's fiancée, was model material. She had clear-cut features, smooth silky hair, manicured nails, and was clad in a designer kurta and jeans. Somehow, next to Vishal's rustic charm, Riya looked like a made-up doll. Arundhati didn't feel the girl was right for Vishal. Shalini would have suited him better.

Also, the girl talked with everyone in an overly familiar manner, as if she knew them from before. It reeked of artifice. She even carried little Chaitra on her hip and played with her until the girl peed on her top. She laughed out loud when she realized what had happened. Chaitra seemed to have become upset and began crying. Devi had come and took her away.

Devi came up to her after Vishal and party left carrying Chaitra who was still crying.

"See what that beast of a girl did to my child," Devi complained as she showed a reddish welt on Chaitra's thigh. It looked like marks left behind by nails.

"Who do you mean?"

“Vishal’s girl pinched my Chaitra. How can someone do this to a kid?” Big teardrops welled up in Devi’s eyes.

“How can you be sure Riya did that? She laughed off the whole matter, remember?” said Arundhati, not wanting to believe Devi.

“What caused this then? Did some bug bite her? I am so worried.”

“Don’t worry, we will take her to a doctor if she continues to cry. Don’t tell anyone what you told me. It is not right to blame someone without proof.”

“I am sorry. I won’t.” The chastened look on Devi’s face subdued Arundhati. The bruise was definitely left behind by nails. If Devi was correct, it put Riya in a bad light. She didn’t think she would do that to such a small kid.

Shalini returned only after eight in the evening that day. Ammu complained that they had spent boring hours at the local market roaming from shop to shop without anything particular to buy. Even after returning to Sreepuram, Shalini had rested in Ammu’s room citing a headache. Arundhati knew why the headache had come and knew the exact treatment for it as well.

The haunted look in Vishal’s eyes whenever somebody mentioned Shalini’s name was confirmation that the boy loved her sincerely. That Shalini too loved him was evident by her actions. But what could a third person do when these two were determined to make their own lives a living hell?

“*Ammamma*, I am coming down to Sreepuram for Vishal’s engagement. I can’t wait to see the girl he finally picked,” screamed Ananya when she called that weekend.

“It is only a few days to go. When are you reaching? And how is my little munchkin?”

“The engagement is on the 14th, right? I will arrive on Friday evening, the 12th of September. I am so excited to see you all.”

The news brought immense relief to Arundhati. Anu would perhaps find a solution to this dilemma. Vishal was her favourite cousin. Perhaps she

would sniff out the trouble once she saw him.

And that was exactly what happened.

“*Ammamma*, what is wrong with Vishal? He seems so altered. I don’t like this at all. What is the matter?” Anu cried, the same night that she arrived, shouting down the phone from Arjun’s house in Sreepuram.

Though she had spent only a few minutes with Vishal at the airport, his hidden sadness had spoken to her.

“I don’t know clearly, but I think Shalini is the reason.”

“Shalini, your assistant?” asked Anu.

“Did you know that Vishal and Shalini were best friends in childhood? I think this time when they met, it blossomed into love. My guess is that Shalini is not ready to accept his love.”

“But why? Anyway, I am coming down to the house early tomorrow morning. I can’t wait to see you and the heroine of my bro’s love story.”

“And I can’t wait to see my munchkin.”

Chapter 16

September 13, 2014, Sreepuram

The silence the house was used to vanished as soon as Ananya entered the house with little Aryan. The house bustled with visitors who wanted to see Arundhati's latest great-grandson.

Dressed from head to toe in blue, cheeks red with excitement, Aryan was a pleasure to behold. He looked like a carbon copy of Arjun except for his greyish green eyes, which were like Ananya's. When he saw Shalini, he flashed his toothless smile and kicked his legs in the air until she scooped him up.

"*Ammamma*, Shalini is such a sweetheart. No wonder Vishal sounded morose. But why does she dislike Vishal?" Ananya asked Arundhati almost as soon as she got to her side, leaving Aryan in the care of Shalini.

"No idea, Anu. I don't think she dislikes him. In fact, I think she loves him. She fears marriage and men in general." Arundhati then proceeded to narrate the details she knew about Shalini's life.

"But she is beautiful. Her skin is so clear and what curves! I would give anything to get such a clear skin and body."

Meanwhile, Chaitra became jealous and started to wail when she found Shalini carrying Aryan. The stubborn two-year-old toddled to her and demanded to be carried. Shalini made her sit near them and play with Aryan. Much to everyone's amusement, Chaitra soon assumed the role of a big sister to Aryan. The three had become a team by the time Ananya walked back into the guest bedroom with Arundhati.

"*Ammamma*, when is Vishal coming? He told me he would come and meet me as soon as I landed in Sreepuram. But he hasn't come yet," said Ananya training her eyes on Shalini, determined to test her response. Shalini stiffened at the mention of his name. But she continued to coo at Aryan as though she hadn't heard anything.

For the next hour, Arundhati and Ananya discussed Vishal and his fiancée and Shalini had a tough time trying to pretend to be unaffected. After fighting with her emotions for too long, Shalini escaped to her room striving

to dispel the despair binding her heart. Tears choked her, she couldn't breathe. When they fell, she wiped away the tears vengefully. She couldn't let the tears fall.

Adding to her angst, Vishal joined them late in the evening. Arjun came along with him, declaring he couldn't stay separated from his darlings.

As soon as he entered the house, Vishal's eyes sought Shalini. She was sitting with Ananya on a mattress placed on the floor in the living room, babbling with little Aryan who was lying on her lap. Chaitra, seated near, was vying for the attention of both, Shalini and Aryan. Vishal's heart lurched with an odd ache watching them. Shalini looked up then and he waited to see her reaction. The memory of the last time they had been together still sat heavily between them. She resumed playing with the kid. Wishing to be near her, Vishal went and requested her to hand Aryan to him. His heart hammered at his ribs when his fingers brushed against hers while she was handing the kid to him.

Shalini too was determined to ignore the feelings that the simple touch had evoked in her. The skin tingled, yearning for a warmth she had no right to wish for. Nevertheless, she longed for it.

Arjun, meanwhile, had gone and sat near Ananya and the two were exchanging looks as though they had been separated for eons and not just a day. Vishal had always thought that he would never feel that kind of attraction towards any girl. But even after being thwarted, he was experiencing inexplicable pull towards Shalini. It was madness, yet he couldn't help devouring Shalini with his eyes when he felt nobody was watching.

Devi came in then, coercing Chaitra to follow her into the kitchen where she promised she had kept a treat for her. Arundhati was in the prayer room and Gopu had gone to the temple to offer prayers. Shalini, feeling that she was not needed anymore, attempted to escape but Ananya made her sit down again.

"So, tell me, I heard that you were called Vishal's shadow when you were neighbours. Did he not trouble you at all?" asked Ananya with a sly smile.

"No, he was very kind to me..." murmured Shalini.

“She was a fine girl though a bit stubborn. Compared to you, who was a fiery firework in the tiniest packet, she was an angel,” Vishal said fondly. Shalini felt her cheeks grow warm.

“Oh, Anu is still a firebrand. You should have heard the names she called me when she was in the throes of labour pain. I didn’t know her vocabulary of swear words was that rich! My hands still bear the scars that she caused holding onto me for courage,” said Arjun and Anu glared at him.

Vishal chuckled.

“Don’t laugh. You men don’t have any idea the amount of pain we women undergo to bring a new life on earth. For nine months, we plod around carrying another life inside us. Our body throws surprises at us one after another. We are forever rushing to the restroom and nothing remains the same again. If it was not for the little bundle of joy that we finally received, no one would possibly want to undergo all that,” said Ananya.

Whilst Ananya was talking, Vishal’s eyes darted towards Shalini. An image danced into his mind. Shalini, heavily pregnant with his child and leaning onto him for support, her head resting on his chest. When their eyes met, he felt the yearning return with full force. His eyes burned bright with love.

Shalini tried to look away, but she felt trapped by the unsaid promises conveyed by Vishal’s eyes.

Anu nudged Arjun who was about to respond with a retort and made him watch them. Though he couldn’t understand exactly what Anu wanted to say, he remained mute allowing the silent exchange to go on uninterrupted.

Vishal’s phone rang then breaking the moment. Seeing the caller’s name, he quietly cursed.

“Yes, Riya. I was about to call you. So, what are you doing?” said Vishal, after excusing himself and walking out of the room.

Shalini, realizing exactly who Riya was, escaped to her room saying she had some work to complete. She was glad for the interruption. It had been a wake-up call to her pathetic heart that hungered for any tiny morsel of love Vishal might throw her way.

“What was that all about? Why were you nudging me?” asked Arjun.

In whispers, Ananya narrated the whole story to Arjun.

“But why did he agree to that marriage? I mean if you think he truly loves Shalini why would he agree to marry another girl? It doesn’t make sense to me. Vishal is a sensible person. You must be mistaken. They both acted as if the other didn’t exist!”

“You didn’t notice the vibe that existed between them? You men are so clueless when it comes to understanding women.”

“I don’t want to or need to understand all women, my dear. I understand the minutest nuance in my dear wife. And that is enough for me,” said Arjun. His mischievous gaze travelled from her eyes to her lips and back. Arjun’s palm snaked down to her shoulders and caressed them, then travelled up and cupped her chin with a look that was full of promises.

This was the scene that greeted Vishal when he entered the living room again. He had often found the love that existed between his cousin and best friend nauseating, yet very endearing. He now envied the love that they shared; he would never know anything like that. His fiancée Riya didn’t stir such emotions in him. He had been patiently waiting for her to disconnect the call. Mentally, he was questioning his decision to marry her. His despair increased when he found that Shalini was gone from the room. She couldn’t even tolerate his presence now. That thought was enough to send a new wave of pain to his already wounded heart.

His presence went unnoticed by the couple until he cleared his throat audibly. Though they moved apart immediately, he felt the love vibes still hanging heavily in the air.

“When are you guys going to become serious as parents? See, your son has realized that you guys are not going to be interested in him anytime soon and has started playing on his own. Poor baby, you have me, okay?” said Vishal and picked up Aryan and kissed him on his cheeks. Along with the baby smell, he could smell a subtle scent of roses that he associated with Shalini and he felt his heart clench. Why did she affect him so strongly? And why couldn’t she return his love?

“Vishal, tell me about Riya. Show me a picture at least. I am so eager to meet my would-be- sister-in-law. How is she as a person?” Ananya asked.

“She is a normal girl, I think, with all the girly needs and thoughts. I am

just getting to know her. She sounds okay! Anyway, you are going to meet her tomorrow.”

“That is all you will tell about her? Strange.”

Arjun changed the topic, as he knew what Ananya was trying to do. But Ananya being Ananya, found a new way to weasel into what she was aiming at.

“Thank God for Shalini. I was completely relieved of my motherly duties for hours today. She has a way with kids. *Ammamma* has chosen an excellent companion. By the way, why were you both acting like strangers today? You didn’t even greet each other! Did you fight with her?”

“Kind of, but she will come around. We have never remained angry at each other for long. Time does change things, though,” Vishal said with a sigh and walked out of the room, leaving Ananya and Arjun staring at each other.

“We have to do something to find out what happened between these two. He is in terrible pain. I am sure.”

“Anu, it is better to leave them alone. They are both grown-ups capable of taking decisions. If we meddle, it won’t do any good.”

“If it was not for Tom and Lily’s meddling behaviour, we would never have met each other again. Remember? We have to do something, Arjun. I feel so bad for Vishal. I am going to try to find out exactly what is wrong. Call me meddlesome if you want, I only want my brother's happiness.”

How could he forget Tom and Lily? If it were not for them, their love story would not have perhaps found a happy ending the way it had. He might have sat brooding about ways to approach Anu again for months after fate had separated them. Yet, Arjun was confused. If Vishal had moved past Karen, it was a good thing. But what was happening now? How could he get engaged to Riya if he loved Shalini?

“Okay, do whatever you must. But make sure you don’t hurt anyone’s feelings in the process. And darling, you can count on me for any help. After all, it is for Vishal. We do owe him some help, don’t we?”

Chapter 17

September 13, 2014, Sreepuram

The house had fallen silent after a hectic day. Shalini was sitting in front of her computer, attempting to edit Arundhati's novel. Her fingers felt numb.

Vishal's visit had left a heaviness in her heart. He was finally moving away from her. She wiped a few tears that had involuntarily slipped out. Why was she crying? She had herself to thank for all that had happened, right?

"Hello, can I enter?" Startled by the question, Shalini quickly turned around. Ananya was standing at her door. She minimized the document and stood up to welcome her.

"Come in. Where is Aryan?"

"Slept. I thought I would come and chat with you. I hope I didn't interrupt your work."

"No, there is no pending work. I was editing," Shalini said. Ananya wandered towards the window to look outside.

"Don't you think that the view from here is amazing? I miss the days I spent here during my vacations. They were pretty amazing," said Ananya.

Shalini agreed wholeheartedly. The view of acres of green paddy fields bathed in moonlight, bordered by the distant blue-tinged mountains was enchanting.

"Yes, it is very tranquil."

"I brought something for you. Don't know whether you will like it. It is my thank you gift to the girl who is taking such good care of my grandmother."

"There was no need, Ananya. I am paid for what I do. But yes, thank you."

"Do open and try it out. I would love it if you wear it tomorrow for Vishal's engagement function."

"Oh... okay."

It was a deep blue saree, with a rich border, and gold *zardozi* work along with a designer blouse.

“Wow, this is so pretty. Thank you. But still, you shouldn’t have bothered.”

“Try it out. If any alteration is required for the blouse, Devi knows a bit of tailoring. But I think it will fit you. I had taken your measurements from *Ammamma* before purchasing it.”

Ananya left after talking a bit about how much she looked forward to meeting Riya and teasing Vishal throughout the day.

Keeping the saree aside, Shalini edited Arundhati’s novel until she was exhausted and then fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. It was sometime after sunrise that she woke up. She remembered how important the day was for all the inhabitants of the house. However, she didn’t know how she would endure the day.

They reached the auditorium at ten in the morning. The engagement ceremony was scheduled for eleven fifteen and Ananya dragged Shalini to go along and meet Riya in the makeup room.

Dressed in a glorious onion coloured lehenga-choli that was exclusively engrafted with stones, *zari*, and patchwork in maroon, Riya looked stunning.

“Didn’t I tell you not to use that shade of lipstick? Where in the world were you listening, woman? No, rub it off. It makes her lips look smaller. Go for a lighter shade.” A girl standing near Riya, dressed in black jeans and a figure-hugging black top was lecturing the beautician who looked as though she might explode any moment. She ran her hand through her short hair and glared at the beautician who was searching her kit for the shade that was being demanded.

“Relax, Ahana. It is okay. Don’t make it such a big issue,” said Riya and on looking into the mirror saw Ananya who had walked in with Shalini.

“Hi, I am Ananya. Vishal is my brother. To be precise, my cousin. Hope we are not intruding,” said Ananya with a smile.

“Hey, hi Ananya. I have heard about you from Vishal. He was talking about coming to meet you at the airport a few days ago. Nice meeting you,” said Riya and got up to greet her properly.

“Riya, move with caution. Pick up the skirt and walk. You might trip and ruin everything!”

Riya shook her head and snickered.

“Relax, Ahana. Nothing of that sort will happen. Meet my soon-to-be sister-in-law, Ananya. Ananya, meet my best friend, Ahana. She likes to fuss over me like a mother hen!”

“Mother hen? What a ridiculous comparison. Hi Ananya! You are going to get a very silly girl as your sister-in-law. You are not very lucky I should say.” Ahana teased Riya.

After spending a few more minutes there, Ananya walked out of the room with Shalini.

“Not a bad selection. She seems okay. What do you say, Shalini? Will Riya prove to be a good wife to Vishal?”

“Yes. She seems nice and is very pretty. They will make a fine couple,” confessed Shalini.

Ananya stopped and stared at Shalini.

“You really think so?” Ananya asked, keeping her right hand on Shalini’s shoulder and looking straight into her eyes.

“Yes, I do. They should. I mean they will,” muttered Shalini.

Standing in the corridor that ran behind the stage and connected the men’s and women’s makeup rooms, Shalini bit her lower lips. Had Ananya somehow deduced her feelings towards Vishal? Was she expecting a confession?

“Hey Anu, where is your husband and your little munchkin?” shouted a tall youth walking towards them from the direction of the men’s dressing room with a huge grin on his face. Shalini’s eyes lingered on the face that looked familiar. She recognized him after a few seconds of shaking up her mind’s rubble.

“Kishore!” chorused both the women.

“Is she a friend of yours, Anu? How does she know my name?” asked Kishore when he heard Shalini saying his name.

“You didn’t recognize me, right? You mean neighbour of mine; do you still find poor girls to scare with your caterpillar pranks?”

“God, Shalini! How are you, kid? I can’t tell you how pleased I am to meet you again. I was looking forward to meeting you today. Vishal had told me you were *Ammamma*’s new assistant.”

“I am good. How are you doing? Where is your family?”

Shreya, Kishore’s wife, came in just then with their seven-year-old son. Kishore introduced Shalini to her.

“I have to talk to you today. I am stocking up on all the mischief my husband did. My son is proving to be his shadow in every way. My life is a constant torture caught between the macro and the micro version of the same entity,” Shreya mumbled to Shalini. All the three women laughed together.

Vishal came out of the dressing room wearing a maroon coloured sherwani, looking incredibly handsome. Shalini’s heart skipped a beat. The happiness that she had felt in the last few minutes after meeting Kishore and Shreya evaporated. His face looked haggard. All of them smiled at him. Vishal flashed back a wan smile.

“Ha, look at him. He looks like a lamb being led to slaughter. Shalini, give your friend some moral support. He needs you now. Let me go and check the stage arrangements.”

“Yes, even I have to check on Aryan. Shreya, you haven’t seen my little one yet, right?”

“No, I haven’t!” Shreya walked out of the corridor with Ananya, leaving Shalini with Vishal.

Taking a deep breath, Shalini composed herself and walked towards Vishal.

“Forgive me, best friend. Can we call it a truce?”

Vishal smiled in answer.

“Are you nervous?”

“Nervousness doesn’t describe my situation in any manner. I feel like running away.”

“Why? Are you scared? I saw Riya now. She will keep you happy. I am sure of it.”

The mention of Riya stirred up all his pent-up frustration. He glowered at Shalini.

“You are teasing me, aren’t you? Tell me one thing. Why did you dress up so grandly today? Is it to show me what I have lost? Because that is what I am thinking at this moment. I still can’t believe I have agreed to be engaged to Riya when all I want is you beside me throughout my life. Why Shalini? Why are you giving me this pain?”

“Vishal, listen. You are confused. You don’t love me. I was just a rebound solace for you. If you had loved me truly, you would not have agreed to marry Riya. You would have tried a million ways to convince me that you are the one for me.”

“Let me try one last time then,” snapped Vishal. He pulled her into the now empty dressing room, swiftly closing the door behind them. Before she could protest, Vishal pinned her against the wall and kissed her with a passion that made her tremble with longing. Shalini felt her resistance crumbling.

“Agree to be mine, Shalini. I will call off the engagement this moment. Please...,” he murmured against her lips.

This shouldn’t happen, it is not right, her conscience screamed. With all her might, Shalini pushed him away and rushed out of the room.

She ran blindly towards the bride’s dressing room. How will she bear this? All she had wanted was for him to find happiness in another. Would he not get over this madness?

With these thoughts whirling in her mind, she paused near the door to steady herself. She didn’t want to surprise the occupants by bursting into the room all of a sudden.

“You know how much I love you, don’t you? This engagement and marriage is a farce. I can never belong to anyone else. You know that. Didn’t we discuss this over a hundred times? Now don’t desert me this last minute. Please.”

The pleading voice that she heard was definitely of Riya. Stunned,

Shalini pushed open the dressing room door and entered. Ahana stood at the door that opened to a corridor, which led to the rear courtyard of the auditorium. The person Riya had addressed had obviously walked out of the door because there was no one else in the room.

Deciding to act that she had not heard anything, Shalini asked, “Sorry for intruding again. But I am feeling a bit queasy. Can I sit here for a while?”

“No problem at all. Are you not well? You look like you might faint. What happened?” Ahana walked towards Shalini who had slumped in the nearest chair. Riya too came near.

“I will be okay in a moment. It is just fatigue.”

Riya’s mother walked into the room then and asked Riya to get ready as the engagement ceremony was about to begin. Many other relatives came in too. The whole gang left soon with the would-be-bride and the room emptied.

A confused Shalini dropped her face into her palms and sighed. Questions sent her mind into a tizzy.

What was happening?

Was she pushing Vishal into a loveless marriage?

Who was Riya’s lover?

Why was she enacting this drama if she was in love with somebody else?

Chapter 18

Vishal mechanically went through the rituals and slipped the ring onto Riya's finger when the officiating Brahmin instructed so. A puppet in the hands of fate. When the photographer asked him to smile, he smiled. He posed with Riya's and his relatives for numerous photos acting like the jovial person that he usually was. The feast, later on, that boasted of a variety of his favourite dishes tasted like ash to him.

The only person whose sight brought a sense of life into his being had avoided him the whole afternoon. He had seen Shalini only once after the events of the morning, and that sight did nothing to cheer him up. She had been with Kishore and Naveen, his cousin who had flown in from the US. She had burst out laughing hearing whatever Naveen had said. Jealousy had stirred up a hornet's nest inside his brain. He didn't like that Naveen was standing so near Shalini. She'd turned towards him then and realizing that he was watching them, she'd walked away.

Naveen was his best pal among his cousins. He was two years older than him but was still a bachelor. Though Naveen came to him almost immediately, he ignored him. He acted as though he was busy talking to Riya.

"What bro, got a girl and forgot your chum? How girls change boys?!" Naveen exclaimed. Riya laughed.

Forced to face him, Vishal replied, "Glad you could make it to the function. I thought mother said your vacation began next week. How come you came early?"

"Ah, I am changing jobs again. The present company was giving me peanuts as an increment. I am launching a start-up based in Kochi. Hence, I will be here for a few weeks. At least till your marriage." Naveen changed jobs almost every year citing the same reason. Maybe he would be satisfied only when he was doing something on his own.

Vishal looked at the dapper young man smiling at him and fought the baffling urge to punch him.

Vishal wished him the best, posed for a snap, and then looked away

after promising to talk to him after the function.

Naveen noticed the lack of warmth in this interaction and walked away feeling awkward.

“Why was Vishal so out of character today? He treated me almost like a stranger. Is something wrong?” Naveen asked Ananya as soon as the cousins sat down together for a chat, over a cup of coffee at their *Ammamma*’s house in Sreepuram.

“Did you feel so? I felt it too. He is marrying the wrong girl,” declared Ananya.

“Wrong girl? The girl is his choice, right? Or is it a marriage arranged by uncle and auntie?”

“Arranged. I have reasons to believe that his heart is elsewhere,” whispered Ananya.

“You mean he is in love with someone else? Is he out of his mind to agree to such a marriage or what?”

“Bro, but what can he do if the girl he loves refuses to marry him? I don’t know for sure, but if my guess is right, the cause for all his worries is centred on a girl we have under this roof at the moment.”

“Who? Shalini?”

“Yes, they were best friends and neighbours long ago. I think Vishal has fallen hard for the girl.”

“But why did Shalini refuse him then?”

“Shalini has gone through a difficult marriage and divorce recently. According to *Ammamma*, she has lost all faith in the institution of marriage and is also struggling with the problem of low self-esteem.”

“That is sad. The girl seemed fine to me and I should say, she has a killer smile.”

“Yes, she is beautiful. But she doesn’t believe that. I think she should have her share of romance. Now that Vishal is out of the way, why don’t you try and woo her?” Ananya asked with a wink.

“Romance is not my cup of tea, dear. Are you pulling me into one of

your elaborate plans for bringing Vishal and Shalini together? Am I going to land the role of the villain in their love story?”

“Smart! Yeah, villain it is. But only for Vishal. Be the sweet, handsome suitor in front of Shalini and act like a lovelorn pup in front of Vishal. Jealousy, I have known, tears the veils that hide love faster than anything. I want you to help me understand Shalini. I don’t understand the girl at all. But somehow I am sure she is the one for Vishal.”

“Tell me what I should do. I am ready. This seems to be highly interesting. Do make sure that things don’t get out of control with Vishal though. You know his temper, right?”

“I haven’t planned anything as such. But let us go with the flow. Try to be near Shalini whenever Vishal is around. I want to see whether he still cares for her.”

While the duo was busy conspiring against her, Shalini was lying exhausted in her bed, both physically and emotionally. She had watched Riya the whole day. She had not found anything that seemed suspicious. She appeared happy throughout the rituals and merrily chatted with all those who came to meet her. Her friend Ahana appeared restless and was often by her side. Riya appeared to be a better actress than her. Ahana was tense throughout the rituals.

Vishal was another story. He had appeared totally defeated. The only time she had been face-to-face with him, he was glowering at her as if he loathed her thoroughly. It was becoming unbearable to handle both, his wrath and his love. What was she to do now? It was agony to watch the one she loved suffer, yet she did not find it a valid enough reason to spoil his life by becoming his wife.

Miles away, Vishal stood alone on his terrace, watching the evening sun setting far away behind the mountains. Tomorrow seemed mired in confusion and failed to excite any happiness in him. He was trying to comprehend the extent to which his life had changed. He was now engaged to marry Riya within three weeks. Yet the only face that appeared when he closed his eyes was that of Shalini. He remembered the way she had looked today, the way she had felt in his arms, and the kiss that had been a mistake in every way. He couldn’t understand how she managed to stir the animal in him every time

they met. He became blind with desire the moment he touched her and it was driving him mad. All he had wanted in the morning was to talk sensibly with her and try to persuade her to accept him. Yet, he had managed convince her that all he felt for her was a sexual attraction. She hadn't even come before him the whole day.

He closed his eyes and breathed. His life seemed dark and there appeared no escape route.

"Vishal, what are you doing here? The function was grand and I am so happy for you. Riya is a darling." It was his mother. Vishal turned and smiled at her.

"Aren't you happy that I am finally chained? Mothers... aren't you people a special lot in the whole universe. Until you find someone to love your darling the way you do, you never rest, right?" Vishal said, walking towards his mother and hugging her. He hugged her until Uma moved out of the hug.

"Son, aren't you happy? Why do I feel that you are hiding something from me? Tell me, Vishal. Remember, you can tell me anything."

For a moment, Vishal considered unburdening his heartache to her. But then, he didn't want to burst the happy bubble she was in currently. What good would come if he told her about Shalini? Could she convince Shalini to stop being so stubborn?

"Nothing, mom. You are imagining things. I will come down after a bath," Vishal said and turned away from Uma.

Uma watched Vishal plod into his room, and her motherly instinct screamed that something was troubling him. Yet, she had no idea what it was.

Since the past few weeks, he had been moody, she recalled. She remembered how it had been when Kishore was engaged to Shreya. Kishore was forever calling Shreya or making plans to meet her even before they were engaged. There had been a sparkle on his face throughout. The same sparkle and enthusiasm, which was always present on Vishal's face otherwise, was missing now. Except when Riya called, she hadn't seen Vishal talking to her on the phone. He appeared to be lost in thought always. His face looked careworn as though he was not sleeping well. What was bothering him? If only he talked about it to her, maybe she could have sought

for a remedy.

She should ask Kishore, Uma decided. Maybe he could find out what was wrong.

Chapter 19

September 26, 2014, Sreepuram

The *Sapthathi* celebrations were on with great fanfare. Arjun, who owned a local resort, had offered it as the venue for the function. Things had been planned for the entire day and the families attending were staying overnight. A public ceremony was scheduled for the morning with the Minister for Education wishing the state's most loved writer on behalf of the people. A lunch for 2000 people, evening tea for some of the famous figures from the literature field, and a night filled with games for the kids and youngsters had been planned along with a sumptuous family dinner later.

Vishal had drowned himself in his duties from the day after his engagement. He left home early and returned home late. Though he had contributed his ideas towards the *Sapthathi* celebration, he had not visited Sreepuram or made a hands-on attempt at making the function a success.

Kishore, Naveen, and Shalini had been neck deep in the preparations. Arundhati scolded them for making such a fuss about her birthday. Shalini, Kishore, and Naveen had become bosom buddies over the organizational process and managed to hold on. They had taken out every weapon, including emotional blackmail, to butter her up to the effect that she agreed to every single thing on their plan.

Everyone was super happy by the time the evening approached. For the evening get together, only the family friends, neighbours and relatives remained. And yet, the crowd was above 200 strong. Riya and her family were sharing rooms at the resort near to Shalini's. Ahana, who was staying for the wedding that was to take place in a week's time, was also staying with them for the night.

The evening games started with a musical chair game organized for all. Ammu won the competition with ease. Next was the paper dance for couples. Kishore and Shreya entered the small space cleared for the games first. Ananya urged her parents to join them.

"Come on, Mom and Dad. Show us how it is done."

Her parents walked hand in hand and joined Kishore. Naveen coerced Shalini to be his partner. Riya pulled a reluctant Vishal to join the fun. A few

other couples who belonged to the group walked in to participate.

“The couples have to dance when the music is played. Once the song stops, the partners should step on the piece of newspaper and avoid touching the ground. The newspaper will be folded after every round. The couple whose feet don’t touch the ground until the end will win the game. Any doubts?” Ananya asked and then began the game by switching the music on.

The first couple to go out of the game was Vishal and Riya. Vishal was not at all concentrating on the game as he was eyeing Shalini dancing with Naveen. Shalini, who had grown to like Naveen over the week, was dancing unaware of the tension she was creating in Vishal’s mind.

Each time Ananya stopped the song, Gopu came and folded the newspaper on which the couples had to step on. The first time it was folded in half, the second time into a quarter, and so on. Soon, only Kishore and Shreya stood undefeated along with Naveen and Shalini.

When the song stopped next, Kishore and Naveen, who were experts in the game, lifted their respective partners and stood on the newspaper sheet, which now only had space for a single foot. Shreya held onto Kishore but Shalini, who had not expected it, began to struggle. She surreptitiously scanned the crowd to see their reaction. Everyone was cheering them on except Vishal whose eyes shone like ambers. Scorched by their intensity, she wiggled out of Naveen’s hands. A cheer erupted from the crowd when her feet touched the ground. Kishore and Shreya were declared winners.

Ananya watched with delight as Vishal walked away from the hall fuming.

“Wasn’t that a little too much for Vishal? Poor fellow, he might kill Naveen if he ends up near him now. Ask Shalini to keep away from him for a while as well,” said Arjun watching Vishal stomp away from the scene.

“Why girl? If you had held on a little more, we would have won. Never mind. Let Kishore and Shreya enjoy the prize. I am not a big fan of movies anyway.”

“But I am. I am sorry. We lost because of me,” said Shalini.

The prize was a box of DVDs of several latest super hit movies. Kishore and Shreya were delighted. They had put together the winner’s kit

and it contained most of their to-be-watched movies.

While the games continued, Shalini's eyes searched the crowd for Vishal. Failing to locate him, she sat on a chair at the far end of the hall. Naveen and Ananya were announcing the rules of the next game, which was a treasure hunt. Someone pulled back a nearby chair and she turned, only to find Vishal settling on it. When his gaze landed on her, she smiled.

All she got in response from him was a glare. She looked away to hide her unease.

"Why did you stop? You should continue your shameless flirtation. You have turned out to be the worst sort of attention seeker ever," accused Vishal. His voice was low and cold.

"What do you mean?"

"What is there to explain? Tell me, why are you doing this? You preach morality to me. You are such a hypocrite."

"What did I do? You are mad."

"Mad? I am mad. You allowed Naveen to dance with you, to touch you and hold you. That dance was for couples. Were you trying to declare to the world that you are a couple?"

"What if I was doing exactly that? Why should you have a problem? It is my life, I will live it my way," Shalini said, her voice mirroring the anger that she heard in Vishal's voice.

Vishal grabbed her hand and leaned closer.

"I. HATE. YOU. Do you hear me? I hate you. I am glad that I am marrying Riya. Not you!"

"Good for you! Don't worry. I won't bother you in any way. You can enjoy your life with your doctor. Good luck!"

Shalini walked away with her chin up in the air. So, this was it, she thought. This was how it was ending. Her love for Vishal will now remain buried in the caverns of her heart forever. It was devastating. She walked through the crowd unaware of where she was going, partially blinded by the tears that had formed in her eyes. She bumped into a waiter and the juice he was carrying spilled over her. When the tissues failed to dry her top, she

returned to her room to change. After pulling on a fresh cotton kurta, she sat on her bed contemplating whether to return to the party hall. There was nothing interesting there anymore. The pit of sadness in her chest was growing bigger every moment. When the loneliness of the room began to suffocate her further, she decided to go and seek Arundhati or Ananya's company. A voice from the adjacent room, the one that was shared by Riya and Ahana, made her stop in her tracks.

"You know how much I love you, don't you? I am going through this to give my parents the satisfaction of seeing me married off in a proper manner. I swear I am ready to go to any extent to be united with you, Ahana. Before that, let me give my parents this last dollop of happiness. I can't believe you suspect that I am two-timing you. Don't you believe me anymore, Ahana? Look here, darling. I love you and always will."

Stunned, Shalini moved back into her own room keeping her door slightly open. Ahana was sobbing and declaring she wanted to die.

"You know how difficult it is for us, right? Allow me this last luxury, Ahana. For whom will I live if you die? We have been inseparable since college and we will remain so."

"Why do you want to act out this farce? Won't your parents become sad again when this marriage ends? Don't play with me, Riya. I will kill him. I don't like the way you roam around with him. I don't like it when he touches you. If you marry him, you will end up a widow before your honeymoon ends. I promise."

Shalini felt a chill grip her and she felt disoriented. Unable to stand anymore, she slumped onto her bed. What had she just heard? Were Ahana and Riya lovers? She clutched the bedstead and strived to make sense of what she had heard. Her inner voice screamed at her to rescue Vishal from this sham of a relationship. It also urged her to act immediately.

Making sure that she slipped out of the room unnoticed by the duo in the next room, Shalini went in search of Arundhati and Ananya.

She found Ananya first. From the pallor of her face, Ananya sensed that something was wrong. She had watched the heated altercation between Vishal and Shalini from far. Something was definitely amiss. She desperately wanted everything to fall in place between these two who she believed were

deeply in love.

“Hey, what happened?”

“Can I talk to you? I need to tell you something. And it cannot wait. Where is Arundhati auntie? She needs to know as well. Maybe she can find a way out?”

Ananya wondered as to what Shalini was trying to say and watched her eyes darting towards Vishal. Was this about Vishal?

“Shalini, wait in my room. I will find *Ammamma* and join you there. Here, it is too crowded to talk. Mine is the first room at the end of the corridor. Wait there.”

Shalini waited in Ananya’s room wondering whether they would believe what she was about to say. Ananya came in moments later accompanied by Arundhati. As they entered the room, the power went, plunging the room into darkness.

“Oh shit, don’t worry about the power. It will be restored soon. What did you want to speak about? You seemed very worried.”

Shalini quickly repeated the conversation she had overheard. Both of them gasped. But their response was not what Shalini had expected.

“You know you could have prevented all this. Nothing of this sort would have happened in the first place,” said Arundhati.

“Yes, I feel the same too. Vishal loves you. It is abundantly clear from the way his eyes follow you, the way he reacts to everything you do. Why do you turn a blind eye towards his affections? I didn’t like that girl Riya at all. Can’t you see the pain you are putting him in?”

“Am I putting him in pain? His pain is nothing compared to the pain I am going through daily. He hates me now. And that is even harder to tolerate than losing his love. I don’t deserve his love. If I could somehow convince myself that I can make him happy and content in a life with me, I would not have allowed him to walk away from me and into the life of another.”

“Don’t you love him? Marry him, Shalini. Don’t allow him to become a puppet in her game,” said Ananya.

“I love him and I have been in love with him since long. But I don’t

think I am worthy of being his wife,” confessed Shalini, holding onto the bars on the window that stood open. The cool air from the backwaters kissed her cheeks.

The power returned and Shalini quickly blinked away the tears that were forming in her eyes. Puzzled by the sudden silence that filled the room, Shalini turned towards Arundhati and Ananya. Both of them were looking towards the door. Leaning against the doorframe, his arms crossed over his chest, was Vishal. In contrast to his posture, his eyes were intense and oozed love. His words emphasized it.

“Let me decide that, Shalu. There is nobody who is worthier of being my wife than you. *Ammamma*, Ananya, I hope you are on my side. I need to talk to this silly girl alone. Come here, Shalu.”

Without waiting for anyone’s reply, Vishal hurried Shalini out of the room and onto a bench in the back garden. Making her sit on the stone bench, Vishal knelt on the lawn in front of her. He took her hand and kept it on his chest.

“Thank you. See how happy my heart is. Now don’t torture me again. Let me hear it, sweetheart, tell me that you love me.” He told her how Ananya had asked him to accompany her, but stay hidden in the corridor. He had heard every word Shalini had spoken. He thanked her for saving him from a life of unhappiness.

“I love you, Vishal,” Shalini whispered. She knew there was no use lying to him anymore. Vishal embraced her and squeezed her tight. Then he began showing her how happy she had made him, by showering her with kisses.

Enraptured in the joy that they had regained their lost love, talking and laughing with relief, and imprisoned in each other’s arms, they didn’t notice the group of four that had entered the garden as part of the treasure hunt, in search of their next clue.

“Vishal! What is happening here? Who is that girl with you? What does this mean?” Riya’s father’s voice startled them both. Vishal stood up, hiding Shalini behind him.

“It means I love this girl. I apologize for everything, but I cannot marry Riya. I am sorry.” Vishal blurted out the words.

“What do you mean by that? Are you cheating on my princess-like child for someone who looks like a street urchin?”

“My girl is my princess. I won’t tolerate anyone abusing her. And as I said, I am sorry for dragging your daughter into this. I have nothing against her, but I cannot marry her.”

“You bastard, you will pay for this,” said Pratap, Riya’s father, and caught Vishal by his collar and screamed, “You won’t live to marry your urchin. I will see to that. You understand?”

Riya’s mother tried to calm her husband down. Shreya, who was a part of the group, urged a stunned Kishore to help Vishal. Kishore immediately rushed near Vishal and pulled Pratap away.

While an angry Pratap walked into the resort to confront Vishal’s parents, Vishal looked at Kishore and Shreya beseechingly.

“Bro, Shreya, please support me. I cannot live without Shalini. Help me in righting all the wrong I have done.” Kishore’s eyes flitted between Shalini and Vishal and he slowly nodded in support.

“You should have told me this. I would have supported you. And you too Shalini! Why did you both hide such a big secret from me for all these days?” said Kishore frowning at Vishal and Shalini.

“I am sorry Kishore. Don’t blame him for anything. It is all my fault. But I have realized I cannot lose him, not when he loves me the way he does. Not when I love him the way I do,” said Shalini and Vishal pulled her closer to him.

“Okay, lovebirds. Let us go in and face the music together,” urged Kishore.

As the moon shone brightly on the river, creating silver ripples on the water, four people walked into the resort together, ready to face anything for the victory of love.

Chapter 20

“What do you mean by you loved her all along? Why did you agree to marry Riya then? We never forced you, did we?”

Vishal’s dad shouted at him in the hall of the resort in the presence of their immediate family. Almost everyone else had returned to their rooms. Pratap’s outburst had put an early end to the celebrations. Shalini was away in her room at Vishal’s insistence. He didn’t want anything to disturb her.

“No Dad, you didn’t. I made a mistake. I am sorry. But I cannot live without Shalini. I have come to understand that in the span of the last few weeks. I know I have put you in a big mess. Forgive me if possible.”

“Is this what you were tensed about all these days. Didn’t I ask you to tell me what was worrying you? Didn’t I? I love Shalini a lot more than Riya. If I had known what was on your mind, I would have supported you wholeheartedly. This public brawl could have been avoided,” Uma said.

“I am sorry, Mom. But I was in a very confused state of mind. I didn’t want to trouble you.”

“You ended up creating this big mess instead. Now tell me what we should do. We have sent out the invitations and the hall has been booked. The marriage was to happen in a week’s time.”

“Dad, everything can happen the same way. Only the bride will be changed. All those who are near and dear already know the reason behind it. It can be managed smoothly. I will handle it.” Kishore came to the rescue of his brother.

“Yes, uncle. We will all chip in and help in every way needed. Shalini, I feel, is better suited to Vishal than Riya.” It was Naveen.

“I have nothing against Shalini. Her father was a nice man and her mother is someone I respect very much. I like Shalini too. But all this could have been avoided if my mule-headed son had opened his mouth to tell us what he wanted. We are not narrow-minded dictators to impose our choices on him. We had proceeded only after he agreed to the proposal.”

“I know, Dad. But please, I am sorry I bungled up. Do forgive me. I will make up for all the mistakes I did.”

“Okay. I will manage. Anyway, I have lost my friend forever. It cannot be undone. But maybe it is for the best. What else can I say now? I hope you find happiness.”

Vishal hugged his father and Uma wiped a tear that was flowing down her cheeks. She hugged her son tightly.

A few rooms away, Shalini was in a state of panic. Was she ready for this change? In her haste to rescue Vishal, she had forgotten how she had suffered in her previous marriage. Now, when left alone, memories had returned to haunt her. Her thoughts wandered to the day when her mother had discovered her lies.

When the afternoon assembly of her in-laws had begun that day, she had kept herself busy finishing her pending chores, instead of listening to words that were aimed to wound her soul. But they had been loud, purposefully so. The topic again had been her looks.

“I always wonder Piyush, what you saw in her that prompted you to marry her. How can you tolerate being shackled to her for life?” It was Maya, Piyush’s elder sister.

“I know... she looks like a rag picker to me. He thought her father would wrap her in gold and present to him. Confessing that he was bankrupt just days before the marriage, the bastard cunningly fooled us. He hoarded his good-for-nothing daughter on dear Piyush with nothing other than a few old-fashioned jewels,” said Madhuri, Piyush’s younger sister.

“Don’t worry about me. I have touched her only during the marriage ceremony when her father made me hold her filthy hands. Radhika keeps me more than happy. You know that. At least now, you have a servant who doesn’t complain about anything or demand to be paid. Her working standards have improved in the last few months, you say. And you know I am waiting for their finances to revive,” Piyush had said with a chuckle.

The next sound that she heard had been that of her mother.

“How dare you treat my daughter like dirt? Oh God, what sin did she commit that you gave her these heartless creatures as in-laws? Where is she, scrubbing the floor in some part of the house, or washing your dirty laundry?” Manorama had screamed at the vile threesome who had fallen silent owing to her sudden entry. When no response came, she had walked

into the house and found Shalini in shabby clothes, trying hard to pretend nothing was wrong with her life.

Later on, her mother had told her how a chance encounter with her long-time friend had been the starting point of her worries. Her friend had been vague but had hinted that all was not well in Shalini's married life. At first, she had dismissed it all as heresy. But Shalini's next visit home had rekindled her doubts. She had arrived with a severe attack of asthma, which always troubled her when she was in some sort of a mental trauma. Concerned, she had made enquiries. The picture that emerged was bleak. Her decision to pay a surprise visit to her house had come as a result of a lot of deliberation. All her worst fears had come true when she had arrived unannounced at Shalini's house.

Shalini shuddered thinking of all the taunts that used to be hurled at her daily. After being caught red-handed, Piyush had agreed to an out of court settlement and divorce.

A soft knock sounded on her door and the gang of her soon-to-be in-laws entered her room, led by a beaming Vishal.

"Welcome to the family, Shalu. So, are you ready to reassume the post of his shadow?" Kishore asked and then hugged Shalini.

"Not my shadow. This time she is my partner in everything. Right from this moment. Aren't you Shalu?" asked Vishal softly.

Shalini felt her cheeks grow warm. The bright smiles that surrounded her were reassuring. She knew them. They were definitely not like Piyush's family.

"Shalu, *Ammamma* wants to talk to you. She sent me to get you," said Ananya.

Shalini immediately stood up and started to walk away.

"Not so fast, sweetheart. We have things to discuss," said Vishal, stopping her.

"Later, Vishal. I don't want auntie to be kept waiting. Let me go, please," said Shalini. Vishal let her go.

As Shalini walked away with Ananya, Kishore and Naveen sat with

him. Naveen put a hand around him. Arjun stood in front beaming at his friend.

“So, all the clouds have vanished. I can see some sunshine on your face now. Seriously, you are an idiot. How could you let her go if you loved her?” teased Naveen.

“I am happy. I will get to torture her on a daily basis like before. She used to be my stress buster,” said Kishore.

“I will break your bloody nose if you pester her again,” snapped Vishal. Kishore snorted.

“Now, now...Naveen, go and bring us something to eat. We married men have some serious advice to give to the would-be-groom. Bachelors are not allowed,” said Arjun.

“Please...no, not now. I have some more plans for tonight,” said Vishal as Naveen got up to get the drinks. “Arjun, I need your help. Can you help me to do some quick shopping?”

“It is nearing ten now. Which shop will be open now?”

“The reason I need your help.”

While Naveen and Kishore watched in amusement, Vishal dragged Arjun away to accomplish whatever he had in mind.

Chapter 21

“Child, your mother and grandmother are thrilled by today’s developments. They will arrive by tomorrow morning. I just finished talking to them. Aren’t you happy, my dear? I always thought you were in love with Vishal. My intuition never goes wrong,” said Arundhati and smiled at Shalini.

“I am happy, auntie. You are right. I have always liked him. I don’t know when I fell in love with him, though.”

“He is a gem of a person. You are one lucky girl,” said Arundhati.

“I am scared, to say the truth, auntie. I am afraid I will lose the love he has for me as time progresses. I won’t be able to bear it if one day he comes to hate me,” said Shalini.

“Why would he start to hate you, my child? He loves you dearly. And don’t tell me you are still feeling insecure about your skin colour. He loves you just the way you are. And Shalini, allow love into your life, don’t resist it. We often hide our fears and our vulnerabilities, because it’s easier that way. It seems easier than running a risk of losing their love. But, love requires that we surrender our vulnerabilities to it. When we tell the person we love about our darkest fears, love begins to strengthen its roots. We have to do that even when our insecurities threaten that they might hate us when they know about them. Your husband will then become your soulmate, the one who knows you inside out. So, child, relax and allow love to work its magic,” said Arundhati and patted Shalini’s shoulder.

“I will auntie,” she said and smiled at her. Yes, she would give this her everything. She could barter anything in the world for Vishal’s love, even her soul.

Arundhati removed one of the bangles she was wearing and presented it to Shalini.

“This is my gift to my dear assistant. You don’t know how happy you both made me today. This is the best birthday gift I’ve ever received.”

“Auntie, your love is enough. I don’t need material gifts,” said Shalini handing the bangle back to Arundhati.

“What? Now you are humiliating me. Take it, child. And call me *Ammamma* from now on. You are marrying my grandson in a week from now,” said Arundhati and then watched with a smile as Shalini wore the bangle.

Both Ananya and Shreya remained with Shalini the whole time through dinner, talking with her. They left her room only when their husbands came looking for them. After taking a bath, Shalini changed into a sleeveless nightdress preparing to sleep. She heard a knock on her door but dismissed it as her imagination. When it sounded again, she asked, “Who is it?”

“Shalu, open the door. It is me, Vishal.”

Shalini felt happiness and panic course through her at the same time. What did he want now? She paused a moment and took a deep breath. It was Vishal. She could trust him with her life. After pulling on the robe that came with her nightdress, she opened her door, taking care to make the least sound possible.

“What happened?” she asked coming out from of her room.

At the sight of Shalini in her nightdress, a delightful shiver shot through Vishal’s spine. His dazzled heart began pumping desire to every cell of his body. Swallowing, he chided himself. *Control the beast in you, Vishal.*

He gestured her to be silent, led her out from the deserted corridor, and walked towards the lift. Once inside, he pressed the button to the fifth floor, all the while holding her hand. He then led her towards the terrace. The terrace was the one place Shalini had not visited yet. The well-lit terrace had a green house on one side, which housed exotic flower plants, and a large swimming pool on the other side. The night sky was bright with the light from a crescent moon and a million stars.

“Beautiful...,” she said.

“Not as beautiful as you,” Vishal replied. He tipped her chin up and looked into her eyes that looked like two pools of temptation. Shalini allowed herself to be hypnotized by his heavy-lidded eyes and smiled. He leaned near and slowly captured her lips. When Shalini gave in without any struggle, contentment filled his entire being. She put her arms around his neck and

kissed him back. Lost in each other, they stood that way till Vishal remembered what he had planned to do. He forced himself to stop and lifted his mouth away from hers with a smile.

“Don’t stop, Vishal,” she whispered, hurt by the loss of his warmth. Inhaling deeply, she closed her eyes and lifted her lips to him in a blatant invitation. Desire blinded him and he seized her mouth again with a fierce desperation. He kissed her until they were on fire.

Long minutes later, Shalini felt the first stirrings of panic when Vishal’s roaming hands slowly pulled the silk-tie of her robe open and began pushing it down her arms. She froze and frantically pulled at the robe and moved out of his embrace.

In a flash, she revisited her worst memory.

On her wedding night, a heavily- drunk Piyush had pounced on her and disrobed her unceremoniously. She had lain holding her breath to avoid the stench of alcohol wafting from him and had waited for him to get over with it. After moments of silence, he had declared, “There is nothing in you that can tempt me. You disgust me.”

After throwing her clothes back at her, he had walked out of the bedroom. He did not return to the bedroom until morning. Months later, she had come to know that he had a mistress tucked away in a rented house a few blocks away from the house where they lived. He brought her into the house one day with the intention to emotionally harass and humiliate her.

“This is the girl who keeps me sated. Look at her. Isn’t she a temptress?” The girl, unlike Shalini, was fair and voluptuous. He had then kissed the girl in front of her.

After ordering Shalini to get out of the bedroom, he had slept with her in their bedroom. Shattered and disgusted, she had lain awake all night, spending the night in her bedridden mother-in-law’s room.

The trauma had resulted in a horrible attack of asthma. Her mother had been summoned and she had escaped to her own home, deciding never to return. She had hoped to confess about it all to her mother. The happy faces of her mother and grandmother had weakened her resolution. Also, her mother was slowly recovering from the loss of her father. Not wanting to break their happy bubble, she had instead presented a pretty picture of her

contented married life. Her husband's sisters, who obviously had missed their hands-on helper, had come to take her back within a week. Her husband continued to act as though she didn't exist in the house.

What would happen if Vishal found her equally ugly after marriage? Shivering involuntarily, Shalini took a few steps back and turned away to hide the tears caused by the memories of her humiliation.

"How do you manage to set me on fire within moments? And now, why are you walking away?"

Shalini stopped. Vishal came closer with an intense look in his eyes. Deciding to end all her doubts, Shalini slowly removed the robe. Then she unhooked her nightdress, pulled it over her head, and tossed it onto the small garden bench. She heard Vishal groan. She turned and faced him. The tears that glittered in her eyes startled him and wiped off his smile.

"You can remove the remaining clothing and test the ware you are agreeing to take into your life. After that, if you say that all you ever felt was sympathy for an old friend, I will bear it. I don't want to scar your life with my ugly presence. I am a rejected good, Vishal. Do you really wish to end up in my wretched life?" she said, her voice almost a whisper.

Vishal yanked her into his arms and whispered, "Do you think all I have for you is sympathy? I love you to the core of your soul. I love everything about you. And what makes you think that I will reject you or that I will find you ugly? I lust after you like a green teenage boy. Do you know that?"

"Vishal, I was repeatedly reminded by the man I married that no male in his senses would ever covet me. He never wasted any opportunity to humiliate me. I am a twenty-seven-year-old divorcee, but still a virgin. You dazzle me with the kisses you give me. I burn to drown in your love. But I am scared Vishal. What will happen when the temporary veil of sympathy that you have for me is torn by the reality of my flaws?" said Shalini moving out of his embrace.

Vishal glared at her, picked up the nightdress and the robe, and wordlessly made her wear them. Then he made her sit on the bench and kneeled in front of her.

"Don't talk to me about that bastard. I would kill him with my bare

hands if he ever comes near me. And flaws, yes, you have too many flaws. Your first flaw is that you don't recognize the love that pulsates in every cell of my body for you. You are a flawed being, Shalini. You don't recognize how beautiful you are. How can I not love your doe eyes? How can I not lust after the temptation that is your body? You are a flawed being, Shalu," said Vishal softly. He nuzzled her shoulders.

Shalini sobbed soundlessly and covered her face with her hands. Vishal took her hands and kissed her palms one after the other.

"How can I convince you? I agreed to marry Riya only because I thought I was scaring you with my unbridled passion. I thought that would at least bring you back to me as a friend. Yet, every moment, I rued my decision. Why do you think I drowned myself in work and avoided visiting Sreepuram all these days? Because a mere glimpse of you was enough to kill every damn decision. You don't realize how much I ache for you. And it is not merely lust. I dream of waking up in your arms every day, of sharing my life with you. I dream of our children. Naughty, mad devils, the way we were," said Vishal. He laid his head on her chest and whispered, "I love you, Shalu, with every ounce of my being. I want to fill your life with love and happiness. Wait. I will be damned. I forgot what I brought you here for," he said.

Shalini, who had begun to smile through her tears hearing his passionate avowals, looked up as Vishal pulled out a small velvet box. She could guess what it held. Vishal opened it and held it up to her, still kneeling in front of her.

"Shalu dear, never doubt my affection. I promise to love you until eternity but give me an opportunity to do that. Accept this ring and be my wife. I promise I will make you happy. But more than that, I promise you, I will always remain your best friend. Will you marry me, sweetheart?" asked Vishal.

Shalini looked at the ring and smiled.

"Girl, have some pity on me and say yes. My knee is hurting."

Shalini grinned and looked at the man who had moored the wayward ship that was her life with the anchor of his love.

"Yes, Vishal. I will marry you. Do we have a choice? We were caught

red handed, remember?” Shalini teased. Vishal sniggered.

“And now to seal the promise,” whispered Vishal and pulled her close for what he intended to be a brief kiss. But as always, his mouth descended hungrily on hers and his hands roamed restlessly over her warm body. Then he got up and stretched out on the bench, resting his head on her lap. Shalini ran her fingers through his hair and he sighed happily.

He was convinced of one thing. She was the blazing hearth of his soul. Their love was an ethereal fire. No matter how far he wandered or how tired his psyche, its warmth would guide him to her, back home.

Chapter 22

Vishal's laughter grabbed Arundhati's attention yet again. Uma, who was seated near her engrossed in making a to-do-list, had put down her pen and was studying her son who had lost yet another game of chess against Arjun, who was a novice in the game. The reason he had suddenly become a happy loser was the girl whom he couldn't help gazing at. He loved Shalini immensely, she decided. Even though he sat in an opposite corner of the room, away from Shalini, who was busy discussing the wedding arrangements with Ananya, his eyes never left her.

"What happened yesterday was a lesson for me. I have decided never to interfere in my children's life decisions. Mohan is livid that he was about to destroy his son's life caught in the lure of his friendship. And Amma, Kishore told me that girl is a lesbian. She had no right to destroy my son's life that way. And her father, he was acting as though the girl was a gem my son was throwing away. I had almost begun thinking of her as my own daughter," said Uma.

"Once our kids grow up, we should let them take their own decisions. After all, it is their life. What seems perfect to us might not be perfect in their eyes. We would have regretted if the marriage had happened. I still can't understand why the girl agreed to a marriage she obviously can't commit to. Love, in any form, is sacred. She should have married her girlfriend. Such marriages are becoming common in western countries these days," said Arundhati.

"I am lucky that Shalini is to become my daughter. Manorama and I were good friends and I always liked the girl. And after what she has undergone, she deserves a better life," said Uma.

"You owe her your son's life," said Arundhati. Uma sighed.

Shalini was now staring at Vishal with a shy smile and Vishal immediately went to her side. Ananya silenced a protesting Arjun, who wanted to record his third consecutive victory, by offering to take Vishal's place.

They spoke for a while and Arundhati watched as Vishal walked out of the hall tagging her along with him.

“Vishal, everyone watching us,” Shalini murmured as Vishal dragged her to a deserted corridor.

“Would you believe if I told you what I was thinking about while pretending to be engrossed in that game of chess?” he asked softly pressing her against the wall. His lips were a whisper away from Shalini’s lips. Her eyes danced and her heart began a jig.

“I was thinking about taking my lips on a leisurely journey over every inch of your delectable body. Of tasting you, seeking out the hidden treasures, and lingering over them....” Gasping, Shalini silenced him by covering his lips with her palm, muting out the rest of his words.

He pushed away her fingers and crushed her lips with his. His hands stroked her hair, slid down to her waist, and then began a lazy exploration of her midriff. She smelled of roses, her hair was like the softest silk, and her skin, warm and welcoming like satin. He could spend a lifetime exploring her.

“Auntie, I think Shalini went to her room. I saw Vishal walking out talking on the phone.”

Ananya’s unusually loud voice was coming closer and the lovers sprang apart.

“I think she is warning us. Go, run to your room. I will deal with whoever is coming in search of us. Relatives! Can’t they give us a moment alone?” said Vishal.

Shalini chuckled and ran towards her room. Her unruly body was protesting at the loss of the pleasure it had been experiencing. Closing her door, she leaned against it and smiled. She had never been this happy. If she died then and there, perhaps she wouldn’t have any regrets.

“Shalini, are you there, dear?” At the sound of the dear voice, she pulled her door open and rushed into the waiting arms of her smiling mother.

“Mom, when did you arrive? I was waiting for you all this time and where is Grandma?” asked Shalini looking around. Vishal and Ananya stood a few feet away, watching the happy reunion. She beamed at them.

“She is talking to her friend—your employer and soon-to-be *Ammamma*. My dear, you don’t know how happy I am. God is, at last, being

kind to you. If I had known this was going to happen, I would not have separated you both in your childhood. But, how could I have known then? Now hurry, kids. We have to go shopping. So many items to be purchased and so many things are to be taken care of. I don't know how we are going to manage all this."

"Don't worry auntie, we will help. Shalini, Arjun's family owns a mall in the city where there are outlets for everything you will require for the marriage. We will accompany you," said Ananya.

"Ah, that takes away half my worries. And I have happy news as well. The insurance money has, at last, come through, just in time. Time is smiling at us now."

"Auntie, wow! That is great news indeed. Now you can revive your factory to its former glory. Let us hurry, we have lots to accomplish today," said Vishal.

And that was how they ended up at the Shine mall, which was the best in and around Sreepuram. Vishal, Ananya, and Arjun took Shalini from shop to shop and helped her pick whatever she needed. While picking sarees for her wardrobe, Shalini fell in love with Vishal all over again.

Picking clothes was always a nightmare for her. Starting from the salesgirls, everyone would advise her about choosing the right clothes for her skin tone.

"No, in my opinion, that colour won't look good on you. Not all colours will suit you. If you were fair, that would have suited you. I think you should stick to light shades like pink, yellow, or off-white. Dark shades will make you look awful." The pompous sales girl in the upscale boutique was lecturing Shalini about her choice of a bottle green saree that she had chosen.

"Lady, my fiancée looks lovely in all colours. You have no right to decide what will suit her and what will not. Let her be the judge. Allow her to select what she wants. You are indulging in complexion bullying. Don't you think you are hurting her sensibilities by offering your prejudiced opinions?" Vishal had snapped and the sales girl had fallen silent. Shalini picked up the saree with happiness. She loved the colour green.

"That colour suits you fine," Ananya said, placing the saree on her to assure Shalini that her choice was fine. Shalini mouthed a 'thank you' to her

and Vishal. Vishal took her hand and squeezed it with a reassuring smile.

Shalini remembered then how people had thwarted her picking clothes in shades that she loved. Even if she wore a dress that suited her fine, they would say it would have looked better on a girl who was fairer. Moreover, her ex-husband and in-laws mentioned her complexion as her biggest flaw and lost no chance to humiliate her in front of others.

Her new family was different.

“We don’t need you to accompany us. It is a girly thing. It will be better if you don’t see what we are buying. You guys love surprises, right?” Ananya pushed away Arjun and Vishal as they were following them into a lingerie shop. Vishal seemed determined to accompany ‘his girl’ but Ananya put her foot down firmly, forcing him to walk away with a grinning Arjun.

“We women are enticed by words. But men are lured by visuals. A surprising and tantalizing visual always adds a little more spice in our lives,” said Ananya while selecting some outrageous lingerie for Shalini. Shalini protested, but Ananya insisted.

“You will thank me soon, trust me,” said Ananya with a wink.

“The shade of that saree you selected will look amazing in the photographs. Good that Vishal didn’t allow that sales girl to make you change your mind. Some people are so limited in their outlook.”

“I hate being photographed. I look a fright in photographs, with or without makeup. I am even thinking of skipping the whole bridal makeup thing. I look all caked up if I apply foundation. For one thing, I never get a shade that matches my skin colour. And without makeup, my skin looks patchy in photos. I wish I didn’t have to pose for wedding photos. My wedding album was the biggest torture device used by my former in-laws. The beautician had used a lighter shade to make me look fairer but ended up making me look like a made-up mannequin. I am dreading it all once again,” Shalini confessed as they waited for their items to be packed.

“Makeup is an art and it can be learned. The correct shade of foundation gives an even tone to our skin and thus makes our features appear brighter and sharp in photographs. Don’t worry. I will help you out. We Indians come in all beautiful shades of brown but most makeup brands come out with very few darker shades. Some brands like M.A.C offer shades that

suit the Indian skin. Let us check at their outlet. And trust me, you are beautiful even without any trace of makeup. Never doubt that. Good makeup but will make you look your best in your D-day photographs. I will help you with that. Come on.”

Ananya took her to M.A.C’s showroom in the mall. The outlet had shades of foundation that matched Shalini’s skin tone and they did a small demo on her too. The makeup artist showed her how to use different shades of foundation to contour her features and showed them the before and after looks through photos. The change was amazing. Shalini’s perfect features were beautifully highlighted and she was satisfied with the outcome. It didn’t look cakey or artificial. After purchasing a few other essential makeup items that would go with it, they left the shop.

Vishal and Arjun joined them again and together they walked towards the ice cream shop as Ananya declared she was starving. Shalini’s phone rang then. It was her mother.

“Shalini, someone wants to meet you. In fact, he wanted to meet you so desperately and came along with us yesterday when he knew we were coming to meet you. He is with me. Where are you now? I will bring him there,” asked Manorama.

Shalini disconnected the phone, puzzled, after telling her their location. Who could it be?

Chapter 23

Minutes later, Manorama walked into the ice cream parlour with a young man in tow and Shalini swallowed when she recognized who it was. She couldn't believe her eyes. Beholding her, he smiled and waved at her. Confident that she would be pleased to meet him, he swaggered across the room, arrived in front of her, and grinned.

"Hello Shalini, how are you?" he asked.

Shalini grabbed Vishal's arms. Puzzled by Shalini's reaction, he reached out and patted her hands. Vishal perused the new arrival with curiosity. The man was certainly shorter than him. He was fair, slightly chubby, and looked smart, dressed in chinos and a sky-blue shirt. The identity of the person dawned almost at the same time as Shalini turned to him and whispered his name, "Piyush!"

"Good that all of you are here. Piyush wanted to ask Shalini for forgiveness. He regrets that he behaved badly towards her. He is hoping for a reconciliation between the two families. He is hoping to marry you again, Shalini. Aren't you very lucky? He recognized how wrong he was after you left him. The poor fellow..." said Manorama and Shalini's mouth dropped open.

"As Amma said, I am extremely sorry for my actions. That vile woman Radhika was urging me to commit unpardonable sins. My sisters made me realize my mistakes and here I am. I want you back in my life. I realize now how blind I had been. My sisters miss you and are waiting to have you back home," said Piyush. His smile proclaimed that he was sure of his victory.

Shalini's eyes went hot and sharp, making Vishal stare at her in wonder.

Of course, they would miss her. Shalini was sure of that. Who was there to do all the house work now? It must be frustrating not have anyone on whom they could dump their ire. Had Radhika left him in search of better options or had the change in her family's financial status suddenly opened Piyush's eyes? She wanted to rage and rave at him.

"Aren't you ashamed to stand before me after what you and your family

put me through? I can't really believe that any human being can descend this low!" Shalini snapped at him. Her voice shook with anger. She felt Vishal's hands tightening around hers.

"Shalini, I realize they did indulge in some harassment. But I assure you, this time there will be no mistake. I will treat you like a queen. You deserve that," said Piyush. Shalini's lips twitched and she bit back a curse.

"Thanks for the offer. But I have already found someone who treats me like a princess and whom I love dearly. Now please go away." Shalini said in a low, dangerous voice. Instinctively, Vishal moved closer to her.

"What? Are you engaged?"

"Yes, Piyush. Meet Vishal. He is a paediatrician. He loves me and we are going to be married in a week's time."

Vishal stood then and faced Piyush. Shalini wanted to stand too but her legs refused to let her.

"Hello, Piyush. I will not say that I am glad to meet you. I think you should leave now." Vishal's voice was mild but Shalini sensed that his temper was taking over him by the minute from the way his jaw muscles were throbbing.

"How did you trap him? What kind of black magic did you use, you witch? I am sure—" Venom squirted out of Piyush's mouth the moment he found that his antics were useless. But before he could complete his tirade, Vishal grabbed him by the collar and slapped him hard across his face.

"This is for putting my Shalu through months of abuse and torture," Vishal bit out.

"You slapped me? I am calling security. There is law in this world," said Piyush and stomped out of the ice cream parlour in search of a security personnel.

Arjun, Shalini, and Ananya restrained Vishal who was intent upon going after Piyush.

"I am proud of you my girl. I wanted to give you a chance to show him that you were no longer the girl who trembled at his sight and obeyed his orders like a slave. He came to know about the change in our fortunes and

regrets the millions that slipped through his hands. He was making a last effort to save it. And yes, I played to his tunes to lure him here. He should know what my daughter truly deserves. Thank you, Vishal, for doing what I always wished to do,” said Manorama and sat on the chair next to Shalini, sighing in relief. All five of them began to relax when another commotion at the door caught their attention. Piyush was returning, followed by two security guards.

“That is the man, the one wearing the white t-shirt. He slapped me.” One security personnel walked towards them, but the other pulled him back and whispered hastily to him. The two walked near and Shalini pulled Vishal back, who appeared like he wanted to beat Piyush within inches of his life.

“What happened, sir?” The security guard who had recognized Arjun asked.

“That man was misbehaving with my cousin’s fiancé and he had to slap him. Throw him out of the mall and never allow him to enter. Call the police if he tries to,” said Arjun and the two security guards walked towards Piyush and asked him to walk out peacefully. When he started mouthing obscenities at them, they forcibly dragged him out.

“You will pay for this, bastard. You don’t know me,” Piyush shouted before being pushed out onto the road.

“Oh, I know you alright. Thank God, we all do,” said Vishal.

“Ah, the scoundrel. I can easily kill him given a chance. I can’t imagine how you could tolerate that vile creature for months. If it was me, I would have poisoned him at the first chance. I am so sorry you had to endure him because of our haste in selecting a groom for you. I brought him here, to a public place, because I was sure he would have created a nasty scene in front of Vishal’s relatives if we were at the resort.” Manorama was furious at what had transpired and that she was the reason it had happened.

“It is okay, mom. I feel relieved because it gave me closure. I am surprised that I found the courage to answer him. I feel now I can face anything,” said Shalini. Manorama pulled her into a tight hug.

“Auntie, what will you drink? I think we need to celebrate the ouster of that creepy guy in that grand manner from Shalini’s life. May he never come even miles near you, Shalini,” said Arjun and called the waiter to order for

Manorama. The others too joined him and called out their orders.

Shalini was amazed that she had faced the biggest bully in her life bravely. Love indeed was miraculous.

Chapter 24

Manorama had left to invite some close relatives. Ananya had dragged Shalini to a beauty salon where they had spent half the day. They had thoroughly pampered and groomed her for her big day. Now, seated near a window that overlooked the river on the bank on which the resort had been built, she was busy reminiscing about how life had changed for her in the matter of a few days.

Within three days, she would embark on a different journey, the prospect of which brought a smile to her face. Vishal was filling every hour of her life with love. When they were near, he couldn't keep his hands off her and if he was away, text messages or calls arrived at regular intervals on her phone. They spoke long into the night and had to be chided by the elders to return to their respective rooms.

At the parlour, she had switched off the phone as his calls were eliciting giggles from Ananya and the attending beautician. She missed him, although they had been separated only for a few hours.

Vishal had become her world and she treasured the way he made her feel. When she talked, he would listen intently, looking deep into her eyes. But, she would then forget what she was talking about and tremble with an unknown longing. He would look at her from a faraway corner of the room and her heart would forget to beat. When he touched her, a river of surprise thundered through her, awakening feelings that she could hardly recognize as hers. And he made her laugh... oh, how he made her laugh. He made her forget everything that had given her reasons to cry. It all felt like a dream and she shivered thinking she might wake up any moment.

“Hey sweetheart...”

Shalini turned back and there he was; the man who ruled her every waking thought. Leaning on the doorframe with his arms crossed over his chest and looking at her with a warm look on his face, he was the picture of domesticity. She smiled and stood up to walk towards him. Maybe she had run, or maybe he had met her midway, because the very next moment, she found herself imprisoned in his strong arms. Heat, which had nothing to do with the summer breeze that had been playing with her hair a while ago,

enveloped her.

With a sigh, he dipped his head to touch her trembling lips and flames erupted across his body. He could almost feel the same animal-like lust overpowering him. Everything about her inflamed his senses. The subtle scent of roses that he guessed came from her moisturizer, her hair that sunlight had painted golden, her lips that tasted like warm honey, the sight of her doe eyes that mesmerized his thoughts... every single thing.

He hugged her closer and led her to the couch where she had been sitting before. But this won't do; the closer they were, the more he yearned to take things a few steps further. Sighing, he let go of her, moved a little away, and leaned back on the couch.

"Tell me, do you intend to kill me before we get married? Why did you switch off the phone? Even now it is out of reach," asked Vishal giving her a wounded look.

"We are going to be together for a lifetime, aren't we? Do a few hours of separation matter?" asked Shalini with a teasing smile.

"I don't want to endure another day like today. Not hearing from you and not knowing where you were was a torture."

"Ha, Vishal. But you knew I was with Anu at the salon. I was busy grooming myself for you."

"Whatever, sweetheart. I don't see any change. You look as radiant as always."

"Men, do they ever notice anything? If I shaved my hair off Arjun might say that something is not quite right. But won't know exactly what!" Ananya said barging into the room, much to the displeasure of Vishal.

"Why did you come here now? Can't I spend a few minutes alone with my fiancée?" asked Vishal glowering at Ananya. He hadn't forgotten that she had also not picked his calls.

"*Ammamma* has asked me not to leave you both alone for long. Leave something for your wedding night, Vishal."

"Run from here or you will hear all the cuss words I know. I tell you, they are colourful."

“I know. I am going. But I am taking Shalini with me,” said Ananya and rushed out of the room tugging Shalini with her. Shalini joined the fun and ran out gaily.

Vishal cursed and ran behind them. They met Manorama in the corridor.

“Hey girls, watch where you are going. Vishal, I was coming in search of you. Can I speak to you for a few minutes?” Manorama asked Vishal.

Vishal stopped and faced Manorama who appeared tense.

“Auntie, what happened? Any issue?”

“Please don’t judge me after hearing what I am about to tell you. I went to our family astrologer today. He told me the time is very bad for Shalini now. In fact, he even mentioned a danger to her life.”

“Auntie, astrologers like to scare us and make us offer things that they will also get their shares from. Don’t fall into their trap.”

“Son, I have become superstitious after whatever we went through the last two years. This astrologer had warned me against marrying off Shalini to Piyush. But her dad was stubborn as he felt Piyush was the best she could get. And see what happened?”

“Did he tell that we are not suited to each other?” asked Vishal, anger welling up inside him.

“No, he said you are a made for each other pair. But this coming month has dangers in store for Shalini. If I ask you something, will you promise to agree to it?”

“Ask, then I will decide whether I can fulfil it or not.”

“Can you cancel your honeymoon trip to Switzerland? If you both are here, I can at least be assured that you are safe. Leave after the one month gets over. Or go to someplace that is near. Please Vishal, don’t say no,” pleaded Manorama.

“Only that? I don’t have a problem with that. I can wait. And if what he predicts is always accurate, I am equally concerned. But rest assured, I will take good care of Shalini. And trust me, most of these predictions don’t come true,” said Vishal. He didn’t believe in astrology at all. But for the sake of

Shalini, he was ready to agree to anything.

“And he has asked me to perform some special *poojas*. I will start performing them one by one starting today evening. Son, I do believe that you are the best thing that happened to my daughter until now. I am going to pray for both of your happiness,” said Manorama.

“Auntie, everything will be fine. Don’t worry. I love Shalini. I promise you won’t have anything to worry about.”

“Thank you, son. You have eased my worries.”

“Given a chance, I would like to strangle the neck of that astrologer for spoiling my honeymoon plans,” said Vishal with a grin.

“Don’t say that, dear. Let us pray he is completely wrong this time or that my prayers will make all the dangers vanish,” said Manorama and walked away.

First Vishal dismissed the entire thing as silly. But sitting and brooding on the same couch, he began to get paranoid. If anything happened to Shalini because of his negligence, he would never be able to forgive himself. Yes, he will have to change the honeymoon plans a bit. He didn’t want to take any risk when it came to Shalini. And when there were idyllic places right here in Kerala, why visit a foreign country?

Chapter 25

“What, you quit your six-figure salary job to become an astrologer?” Ananya asked Naveen who was sitting on the couch in the common hall of the resort with his laptop open. Shalini, who sat near her, leaned forward intrigued after hearing Naveen’s plans for his future.

“You got it wrong, girl. I am starting a venture for providing astrology related software to astrologers. It is different. I have spent the last three years of my life polishing and updating the software. A website that will create instant horoscopes is also on the cards.”

“But still, it seems such a different field. What gave you such an idea?” asked Shalini.

“I guess I got it from Grandpa. As you know, he has an excellent collection of astrology-based books in the home library at Sreepuram. Some of them triggered my interest in the field. And don’t think this is very different from the job I used to do. For years, I have created software to cater to the varied demands of our clients. This was far more interesting. Astrology is a very precise science and, if used correctly, it can improve our lives immensely,” said Naveen.

“You think astrology is a precise science? I have seen many lives turn into disasters by futile predictions made by the so-called reputed astrologers,” said Vishal, entering the hall. Wasn’t his life being turned upside down in an exact way? His eyes met Shalini’s and she smiled at him. God! He couldn’t even imagine anything happening to her.

“Are you saying that you have created a program that can accurately read our futures?” asked Ananya.

“Not only the future. It can read your past and even give details of your location. It can even identify the person based on it. Astrology can be used to find lost persons. It can even help with criminal investigations,” said Naveen, his face glowing with excitement.

“A whole load of tosh,” said Vishal.

“We won’t agree because you say so. Prove it to us. Do you know my birth date?” asked Ananya.

“I know you were born in November. I don’t know the precise date or year,” said Naveen.

Ananya whispered something in Shalini’s ears. They bent their head and discussed something. Ananya grabbed a letter pad from the writing table in the corner and scribbled on it.

“There. It has my birth date and Shalini’s with details of the time we were born, down to the exact minute. We share the same birth month. Now with your software, identify whose birth date is which and then make a sample prediction for us,” said Ananya and thumped the letter pad on Naveen’s lap. Naveen accepted the challenge with a grin. He began keying in the details of the first date on the paper.

Vishal did not like the way things were progressing. He didn’t want Shalini to hear anything that might upset her. And if astrology was a precise science, was Naveen going to predict the same thing that Manorama auntie’s astrologer had predicted?

“Okay. The first birth date on the paper is of Shalini. According to my software, the person born on this date was born on a Wednesday. She got married once and she got divorced. She is on the verge of matrimony again.”

“Okay. Correct with that. But we already know those details. Predict something else,” said Ananya. Naveen, who had been reading the predictions, suddenly wrinkled his forehead and looked up.

“There seems to be some danger in store for you in the next one month,” said Naveen with unease and looked at Shalini with worry clearly writ on his face.

Ananya giggled.

“Does the danger come from a burly guy who is at present grinding his teeth audibly? Naveen... run, Shalini’s life is not in any sort of danger, yours surely is,” said Ananya. Proving her right, Vishal punched Naveen hard on his shoulders.

“What is your intention, you moron? Are you planning to fill the initial days of our marriage with fear?” asked Vishal and he nervously looked at Shalini who seemed to be shaking with suppressed laughter.

“Vishal, relax. Leave him. I don’t believe in astrology at all. Didn’t

Piyush's horoscope match with mine perfectly? And we know what happened. This seems fun," said Shalini.

Vishal sighed in relief. At least she wasn't aware of the predictions their family astrologer had made about the fate of that marriage.

"What sort of danger, Naveen?"

"I don't know. It can be an accident. It indicates that you have created an enemy. Remain alert every moment. Avoid being alone at all cost. Be surrounded by people always. It will be better if you postpone your honeymoon trip abroad for a while."

"Even without your prediction, I was planning to postpone the trip. Some urgent requirements have come up at the hospital. I can't take a long holiday now. But I don't care. Wherever my Shalu is, it is my heaven," said Vishal. He leaned forward and kissed her cheeks.

"Ahem, ahem, bro. Control. Naveen, does that mean that you can predict anything about anybody and it will come true?"

"Astrology talks about possibilities. It helps to take adequate precautions. Like we can prescribe prayers to appease the planets that are creating problems in the life of the person concerned. Astrology actually allows us to lead a better life in rhythm with the cosmos," said Naveen.

"Mmm... sounds interesting. Predict something nice for me. I don't want to hear anything bad. Skip all the bad stuff and tell me the juicy bits from my future," said Ananya with a determined smile.

"Okay, let me feed your details," said Naveen and keyed in the details into the various fields in his software. "This shows this person gave birth to a child two months ago, and... wait... that she will become a mother again within a year! What?"

Naveen stopped reading his prediction and turned to Ananya who had blushed to the roots of her hair.

"Rubbish. We don't plan to have another kid soon. We want to give Aryan all our love before we welcome another kid into the family. And by God, how can I get pregnant so soon? The body takes time to come back into its cycle, does it not? My monthly cycles are not even regular yet! And I have heard that breastfeeding women don't usually get pregnant soon," concluded

Ananya.

“Oh, many ladies fall pregnant in the first three months after their delivery. Since you and Arjun paw at each other at the first given chance, I think you might even be pregnant now. You never know!” said Vishal enjoying Ananya’s predicament.

“Shut up. I don’t want to be pregnant so soon. Naveen, I know you are joking. Oh yes, astrology predicts the possibilities. We will take precautions to eliminate the possibilities,” Ananya said with a wink.

“Go, girl. Bring us some sweet. I predicted the arrival of another junior for you. I deserve it. And I tell you, I have been debugging the software since the last one year. There is no chance that an error has crept in,” said Naveen and laughed aloud seeing how Ananya seethed.

“Trust me, mine will be the first prediction of yours that will go wrong! You and your idiotic software,” said Ananya and walked out of the hall holding her chin up haughtily.

Sniggers filled the room and Vishal eyed Shalini who was clearly enjoying every moment of it.

While the remaining two continued to talk about the science of astrology, Vishal was uttering silent prayers. Naveen had echoed what the family astrologer had predicted. Was the danger that was lurking in Shalini’s life for real? How could he make it go away? Did Naveen have a solution for it?

So later, after Shalini had left, Vishal sat near Naveen and asked exactly what he had seen in the future for Shalini.

What he heard definitely didn’t please Vishal. But he was ready to face anything or do anything to make sure that Shalini was safe and secure. He noted down the special prayers that had to be done. Determined, Vishal left for the first temple that Naveen had suggested him to go to.

Standing in front of the deity, after submitting the *pooja* items to the priest, he closed his eyes in a heartfelt prayer. His prayers ended at the precise moment the inner sanctorum opened after the prayers. Through the flames that danced in the many lamps that lighted up the inner sanctorum, he felt that God was showing him a sign of hope.

Chapter 26

It was two days later that the first message came.

“Do you think you can walk away from me so easily? I will never forget how you humiliated me.”

The message was from an unknown number and Vishal ignored it. It must have been meant for someone else. As far as he knew, he hadn't humiliated anyone. Exactly three hours later, another one came from the same number.

“Think about your sins. You are about to pay for them.”

Irritated, he added the number to the blocked list. That, he thought, would end the menace. Either a lunatic was targeting him or the lunatic had the wrong number. Either way, he didn't care.

Shalini had gone to Sreepuram with Arundhati to prepare for the wedding. Arundhati had officially taken on the role of Shalini's godmother and insisted that she stay the days preceding the wedding at her house. Vishal had opposed the idea of Shalini and her family moving out of the resort vehemently. But because Vishal was always with Shalini, a few elderly relatives had expressed their opinion that a restriction had to be put on him.

“He will give her a child even before he ties the *thaali*, the way he is behaving. He can't keep his hands away from her at any moment. Separate them until marriage. People are already talking behind our back. With the cancelled marriage and the sudden change of bride, they are already having fun at our expense,” Mohan's elder sister, Padmaja, had complained. Arundhati would have ignored it but for the blanched look on Manorama's face. It would be better to avoid tongues from wagging than giving fodder to gossip. They had all left for Sreepuram after consulting Vishal's parents, much to his displeasure. He had compensated for it by spending hours on the phone talking to Shalini.

As the auditorium where the marriage was to be held was near the resort, Vishal's family and a bunch of relatives continued to stay at the resort. It had become like an extended vacation for most of them.

The result was that Vishal spent his days at Sreepuram and had to be literally pushed out of the house at the end of every day.

“Vishal, you should not come to meet the bride from now on. You are to be married in a day. It is considered unlucky.”

“Who says so? Don’t torture me, *Ammamma*. I cannot live without seeing her.”

“Patience, boy! She is going to be yours forever in a matter of twenty-four hours. You won’t enter the house until then. You understand?”

“*Ammamma...*,” groaned Vishal.

“Go,” said Arundhati, caught Vishal by his ear, and led him out of the house.

Shalini chuckled and Vishal scowled at her. She watched Vishal plodding towards his car and drive away. Back in her room, she sat on the bed reminiscing about her day.

They were having their breakfast when Vishal had arrived straight from the nearby Ganapati temple he had visited. Arundhati had teased him when he gave her the *prasadam*, as to why he was overly buttering the Gods.

But Shalini could guess why he was doing this. He hadn’t taken Naveen’s prediction lightly. Her doubt was proven true later in the evening. Towards the evening, Shalini had been on the way to pluck some jasmine buds to string them into a garland. Vishal was following closely behind, babbling away.

A bamboo ladder kept in the back courtyard had slipped and would have fallen on her if it were not for Vishal pulling her back on time. He had become deathly pale and she had felt his heart hammering in his chest when he had pulled her into a sudden embrace. He had then kissed her with an aching sweetness that almost made her tear up. Devi, who had been washing vessels in the courtyard, had dropped a vessel with a thud and sped into the house. Hearing her, they had sprung apart.

“Vishal, nothing is going to happen to me. Do you understand? I don’t believe in astrology and you know that. What happened now had nothing to do with any prediction. I am absolutely safe. Even if it had fallen on me, it would have given me a concussion or a bump. It was not at all life-threatening. You are being paranoid.” Shalini had told him firmly, unable to see him worry unnecessarily.

“I can’t bear to even think about any harm happening to you. Even if it is a scratch, I can’t allow it to happen.”

Her phone rang half an hour later and she answered it with a smile.

“I almost crashed my car thinking about you.”

“You almost crashed your car? My God! Are you okay?”

“I am perfectly okay. Only my heart is giving me a hard time. I want you here. Now!”

“Please don’t act like a fool, Vishal. I was and will always remain yours. And the next few hours will fly off in a flash,” said Shalini.

Vishal groaned and she sighed.

They talked unaware of the beauty of the setting sun. They talked without any care what others thought about them. They talked unaware that far away someone was plotting to wreck their happy bubble.

The car crash Vishal had escaped from had not been what it seemed. He had merely been lucky that a car from the next lane had overtaken him at the exact moment and had faced the intended hit from the truck.

Chapter 27

Shalini gazed at the golden orange sun peeking out from the horizon heralding the arrival of a new dawn. The dawn of a new life. The breeze carried with it the melodies of birds. The fragrance of the *Parijata* blossoms from beneath her balcony reminded her about an eternal love story. That of the lovely Princess Parijata and the Sun God.

Her grandma had told her the tale of the Parijata tree years ago, when she was arranging the fallen yet beautiful snow-white flowers with the coral core in a glass bowl. The story had touched the romantic in her.

Princess Parijata had fallen in love with the majestic sun. He smiled at her and encouraged her for a while. Sun, being the wanderer, however, did not return her love and soon deserted her. Depressed, she committed suicide and a tree sprung from the ashes. The tree of Parijata, whose flowers sent out a fragrance that made anyone long for their loved one. To avoid seeing the sun whom she still loved, the one who had rejected her, the tree bloomed only at night and shed the blooms at sunrise.

Like Princess Parijata, Shalini was hopelessly in love with her Sun, but unlike her, she was going to become his forever today. It was her wedding day.

The previous evening, people whom she hardly knew from in and around Sreepuram had arrived to wish the prospective bride on the eve of her marriage. Posing for the many videos and photographs, she had smiled. The memories of a similar evening came to taunt her frequently but she courageously told herself that this time it would be different. Vishal loved her for herself, not for her money. He had loved her when she was at the lowest point in her life. He had revived her lost faith in everything good.

Unlike the girl of two years ago, she dared to hope and the life unfolding before her promised to be wondrous. She turned to the rising sun, raised her hands and, with joined palms, prayed to him silently.

O, creator of destinies, please bless me. Shower your kindness on me, make the days ahead brighter with your loving light. Please help me release all the past insecurities and fears. Guide me while I make this change and help me know the right steps to take. Be my strength, my support.

The sun rays caressed her face and filled her with bliss. Gratefully, she got up from the bed, ready to face the bright new day.

The beautician arrived along with Ananya soon after that to get her ready. She pleated the scarlet red saree neatly and draped it with great care. Shalini's hair was pulled back from her face and pearls were woven into the ornate braids at the crown. Her long braid was covered with garlands of jasmine spiralling around it, creating an attractive pattern. The *chutti* and *matti* had pearls and red stones that matched her saree. Her earrings had diamonds set around rubies as its stud. The heavy, antique ornaments that her mother had insisted she should wear glittered brightly covering her chest in circular patterns. Ananya had taken over the makeup at Shalini's insistence. Once she was done, she slowly turned Shalini to face the mirror. Her lips parted in pleasure, and disbelief, beholding the beautiful bride looking back at her.

The scarlet saree with its delicate gold work had brought a glow to her skin. The subtle makeup had highlighted her best features with careful contouring. The graceful strokes of the eyeliner and the golden hue of the eyeshadow had given her eyes an ethereal beauty. Her lips had been painted to match the saree's colour and the lip-gloss gave them a fresh, moist look.

"Thank you, Ananya. I feel beautiful now," said Shalini.

"You were always beautiful. You just never let yourself believe it. I can't wait to watch Vishal's reaction," said Ananya and Shalini flushed.

At the auditorium, Vishal felt like he was in a happy trance. He was only minutes away from getting married to the love of his life. The pipes and drums began to play a merry tune and announced the arrival of the bride on the podium. He closed his eyes briefly to calm the sudden nerves that seized him.

Kishore elbowed him and he looked up at him and followed the direction of his gaze. The vision that appeared before him had his chest swell with pride and love. Walking towards the podium was the girl of his dreams, looking like a dream. The saree hugged her curves enticingly, making his heart skip a few beats as she completed the ritual walk around the fire and sat on the low decorated seats kept ready for the bride and groom.

At the cue from Kishore, Vishal entered the podium and sat near

Shalini. Up close, she looked even more stunning.

“You look like an angel, sweetheart,” he whispered. Shalini looked at him for a moment with a shy smile before returning her gaze towards the burning fire that would witness their wedding vows.

Amidst chants, Vishal took the *thaali*, the wedding chain, from the hands of his father and prayed silently for blessings before tying it around Shalini’s neck. When he bent near to tighten the hook, there were tears glistening in her eyes and a smile on her lips that was directed towards him. If there was no crowd watching their every step, he would have stolen that enticing smile with a peck on her lips, then and there.

It was when the photography session for the relatives who wanted to wish the bride and the groom began that they were disturbed by a commotion coming from the entrance of the hall. Lashing out at the people who were trying to calm him down was Pratap, Riya’s father. He was completely drunk.

“It should have been my daughter standing there. I will not allow this marriage to happen. My daughter is heartbroken. They have cheated me,” he shouted to all those who cared to listen.

Kishore, Mohan, and Naveen rushed towards him. What they said nobody knew but raised voices were heard. The auditorium security was called and Pratap was thrown out of the auditorium while slandering everyone around. Flashes blinked everywhere and people were seen capturing the scene that certainly would make it to the newspapers and social media. Only a handful of people understood what was happening but it left a bad taste in the mouths of the people who were close relatives of the bride and the groom.

The crowd’s chatter rose to a crescendo before the music from the auditorium’s speakers drowned the voices out. On the podium, the groom had put his arms around the bride and had pulled her closer as though to assure that everything was fine when the commotion had begun. The bride had clutched his arms and gripped them hard as if she feared that her happiness and her new husband would vanish in a wisp of smoke. The gesture made the crowd root for the bride and groom. Many of them wished they knew their love story.

Hours later, when they sat in the car that would take them to his home,

they sighed realizing it was the first moment in the whole day when they were free from the prying eyes of a crowd. The look they gave each other proclaimed their ardour, their desire to be alone.

Kishore, who was the driver, coughed to get their attention and when he failed to do so, turned his attention towards the road and pretended that he was the lone occupant of the car. The meaningful gleam in Vishal's eyes prompted Shalini's heart to begin a jig. He took the free end of her saree and unfurled the pleats. He covered both their heads with it and slowly lowered his lips to hers. He kissed her mouth with exquisite gentleness and Shalini surrendered to the sensual onslaught.

"You shouldn't have bothered. I was not planning to look anyway. Remember, don't mess her hair or dress too much. There will be a crowd waiting to see the new bride," warned Kishore. Shalini giggled, broke the kiss, and moved away from Vishal.

"Can't you just drive? Who asked for your advice?" said Vishal. Shalini smiled at him but refused to be kissed by him again the whole way home. Vishal compensated it by holding her hand and kissing it often.

Back home, the rituals and the formal photography began again with a vengeance. Once the welcoming rituals were over, the bride and the groom went in to freshen up and change costumes for the reception scheduled for six in the evening.

The reception guests were mostly Vishal's colleagues from the hospital, his friends, and some of his teachers. He reluctantly walked towards them and participated in the conversations that were bound to happen at such gatherings. When Shalini walked in attired in a golden silk saree, Vishal forgot to breathe. Though she had looked lovely in the wedding saree, the way she looked now was divine. The colour gave a soft glow to her caramel-toned skin making her look enticing. Her long hair had been left open with only strings of jasmines adorning it. Vishal would have given anything to be left alone with her in a room where he could make endless love to her. Instead, he stood surrounded by colleagues making meaningless conversation while his eyes devoured his bride.

"Your girl is a rare beauty. Does she have a sister?" asked a doctor, a bachelor, from among his college gang. Vishal immediately asked him to

stop ogling at his wife. Realizing he had been rude, he promptly apologized, eliciting laughter from the merry crowd.

All through the reception, Vishal wished for the ordeal to end. He longed for the moment he would be alone with his wife, in the privacy of his bedroom. But then there were relatives to be attended to, friends who deliberately wanted to delay him, and also cousins who devised innovative methods to torture him.

When most of the people left after a sumptuous dinner, Vishal set off in search of Shalini who seemed to be missing. Ananya said she didn't see her, Kishore and Arjun swore they knew nothing, and Naveen confessed he had last seen her at seven in the evening. A frustrated Vishal walked off without realizing that Shalini was in the adjacent room where she had been ordered to hide by the conspiring cousins.

"That was too cruel. He sounded worried," said Shalini to the four mean people who were smiling smugly after Vishal left.

"Hush, it is payback time. He made me suffer for two whole hours. I intend to prolong his torture," said Kishore.

But their plan was foiled minutes later when Vishal walked back into the hall unexpectedly and found Shalini. He declared immediately that it was time he rested his tired limbs as he had been up since morning. He caught a blushing Shalini around her waist and pulled her to his side. Then he climbed the stairs to his bedroom in a vigorous stride with limbs that didn't seem tired at all.

Minutes after he had succeeded in entering his room and closing it without any incident, a knock sounded on his door.

"Who is it?" he asked ready to bite off the head of the person who was attempting to enter his private paradise.

"Vishal, mother gave a glass of milk. Open the door," said Kishore.

"No need," Vishal declared.

"It is supposed to be an aphrodisiac. You might need it," said Kishore who seemed determined to enter.

"I don't need it. You use it," bit off Vishal and turned the key in the

lock of his door, putting an end to the conversation.

“I think he was being helpful. Newly married couples share a glass of milk on their wedding night, right?”

“Trust me, if I opened the door, the whole gang will enter the room and will not leave until the wee hours of the morning. After all, we tortured him for hours before we felt pity for a sleepy Shreya and decided to move out,” said Vishal with a chuckle.

Shalini smiled and set about removing her necklaces one by one. Vishal watched her struggle to unhook the last remaining ones.

“Wait, let me help,” he offered.

Vishal pulled Shalini onto his lap. He pushed away her tresses to the side and unhooked the necklaces one by one. He then pressed his lips to her nape and pulled her closer. Each one of her ears was branded with a kiss after he removed her ornate earrings. Shalini trembled when Vishal’s arms snaked around her and began an exploratory journey over her body. She sighed and surrendered to him.

Chapter 28

“How do you do this? The moment I touch you, I forget the world,” whispered Vishal resting his face on her shoulder. A tingling sensation was spreading to every inch of her being. Pure bliss, like a warm mist, enveloped her and she sank deeper into his arms.

Vishal picked her in his arms and set her down before the dressing table mirror. Hugging her from behind, he declared.

“We are a lovely couple, aren’t we? Did I tell you today how much I love you?”

“I think you mentioned it once or twice in the last fifteen minutes,” she replied with a smile and then looked into the mirror.

Shalini winced. Dressed in his golden kurta, Vishal looked striking. She appeared dull and lacklustre as usual. The jewels that had added the glitter were now gone. Her makeup had lost its sheen. Only a string of jasmines valiantly clung to her hair trying to brighten up her appearance. Her molten fears, like lightning, pierced the happy bubble she had been in the whole day.

“Vishal, you deserve someone better. I look like the night and you look like the day. We are not a good match,” mumbled Shalini and lowered her eyes in disgust.

“What? I don’t agree. I don’t agree at all. We are perfect together. See the way your curves fit into my body. Hear how my heart beats when I hold you close,” said Vishal pulling her near.

“And,” he continued, “even if you are night and I am the day, haven’t you seen the beauty they produce when they meet? Sunsets and sunrises are the loveliest creations of God. For me, you are my sunshine; without you, I am forever in darkness. Is there a beauty that can outshine the star-studded night sky? Look at yourself through my eyes, darling. You are splendid,” said Vishal.

“Vishal, you will detest me...”

Shalini’s lips trembled as sadness and sheer terror paralyzed the rest of her being.

“Allow me to decide that. Look at yourself. What makes you think that

you are not beautiful? God alone knows the temptation that you are to me. I have been waiting to get you alone since morning and now you are killing me with your doubts,” said Vishal.

“Vishal, I am sorry. But I...,” said Shalini.

“Hush, sweetheart... hush. I love you just the way you are. Trust me. I have never loved anyone with the intensity that I love you. What I felt for Karen cannot even compare to what I feel for you. Allow me to show you how much I love you,” said Vishal and turned her to face him. He kissed away a teardrop that had now slipped out of her eyes and picked her up in his arms. Then he tenderly laid her on the bed.

How could he convince her that he was on fire, that he was burning to make her his?

Shalini didn't know when or how he divested her of all her clothing. His kisses and the way he seemed to know every single pleasure point on her body had thrown her into a spiral of sensations. Or was it that her entire body came alive under his touch? The dread that had numbed her vanished slowly as Vishal hovered above her, whispering endearments. He was determined to see to it that before the night ended, she learnt to celebrate the delight that was her body and cherished the power of love that bonded them.

His lips were journeying over her, unhurried, as though he was determined to devote as much time as possible to each melting sensation he was pulling her into. Blood pounded in her ears as the pleasure increased with each tiny caress. He nipped and sucked at her breasts while his hands travelled down the slope of her stomach, reaching lower. His fingers teased and tormented Shalini until she exploded in a burst of pleasure, screaming his name.

Her silky hair was spread on his bed, in every detail resembling his dreams. He lay next to her and watched as she went languid and limp in the aftermath of the pleasure.

Capturing her lips, he guided her on the path of bliss again. This time, he allowed the pleasure to overpower him. The fragrance of jasmines had scented her hair. Her warm, honey soft skin made him go mad with need. When he felt she was ready, he slipped into her. As the initial uneasiness lifted, she clung to him and matched his thrusts with answering movements

from her hips. Mesmerized by their mating dance, when yet another climax drifted near, she heard him utter her name as if it were a prayer, their bodies convulsed and went up in flames together.

She lay in his arms, sated. The extraordinary tenderness on Vishal's face made Shalini's cheeks grow hot. He lowered his head and captured her lips. The passion they had shared had rendered their bodies weak. Insecurities were long forgotten. They talked and laughed. Before long, Shalini felt Vishal kindling the embers of fire yet again with a slow and lazy exploration of her body.

Sometime before the sun began to paint the horizon with shades of red, both of them slipped into a dreamless sleep, tired from their lovemaking but still cocooned in each other's warmth.

Vishal loved her. That was as clear as the blue sky visible through the bathroom ventilators. He loved her as a whole, her very essence. And it was not the blind ardour of a man in love. It was the kind of love that had inundated her soul and rejuvenated her spirit, healing her wounds one by one.

Shalini hummed to herself as she bathed. There was a tender ache all over her body. A reminder of all that they had done together, the peaks of pleasure they had conquered.

After bath, Shalini changed into a cotton saree and brushed her long hair. What time had they gone to sleep? The distant stirrings of a morning, the call of a rooster, and the unfettered birdsong had awakened them to the need of sleep. And it had been bliss slipping into sleep cuddled in strong, warm hands.

It was eight in the morning. Vishal was still asleep. She sat near him and watched him sleep. His was a happy face if you could classify faces as happy and sad. One look at him and one would want to smile. Or was it just her? Her hands itched to brush back the hair that had fallen on his forehead. But she wanted him to rest.

As though sensing her presence, Vishal opened his eyes. Even bleary-eyed, he looked adorable. Shalini smiled.

He rested his head on her lap and then pulled her head down, seizing

her lips in a long and fervent kiss. His fingers roamed around caressing every part of her body accessible to him and Shalini squirmed.

“Vishal, Vishal... it is eight in the morning. Won't we be late for breakfast? Go, take a bath,” chastised Shalini.

“A newly wedded couple is exempted from all that. Don't you know? You were married once,” said Vishal. He immediately regretted it because Shalini's face turned morose.

Were they? All she remembered from the morning after her first marriage was the despair of being unwanted. No one seemed to care about her. No one even acknowledged her presence. She had wandered into the kitchen after a bath early in the morning and found it empty. Everyone was still sleeping. Feeling thirsty, she had ended up making coffee. Hours later, a cook had arrived and greeted her. She had bonded with her and helped her cook breakfast. From then on, it had become her routine and weeks later, the cook had been dismissed. She had become the official cook, maid, and nurse in that household within weeks. An unpaid helper who got only scorns and insults as payment.

“Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. Forgive me,” said Vishal and kissed Shalini's palm.

“What is there to ask forgiveness for? You didn't say anything wrong. Perhaps I should tell you. I spent my previous wedding night alone. I cried myself to sleep thinking about the insults that my husband had hurled at me. I opened my eyes next morning into a world that had changed overnight, surrounded by people who treated me like dirt. But I had dared to hope, though every day ended in despair,” said Shalini. Tears brimmed in her eyes and she looked away to hide them from Vishal.

“No, darling. Do not dwell on the past. Today is a different day and a happy beginning. I won't allow tears to stain these lovely eyes again,” Vishal promised. He cupped her face and kissed the teardrops that were lingering on her lashes. Salty remnants of her sadness. A fist clenched at his heart and he swore. Smiling, he kissed her eyelids and then planted tiny kisses all over her face. Her face smelled like fresh roses and her lips tasted like strawberry.

“Hmm.... You smell like roses and your lips taste like strawberries. Are you an angel?” he teased.

“Yes, an angel who uses rose water as the skin toner and a strawberry flavoured lip balm,” said Shalini. They snickered.

“Ah, don’t dilute the magic by mentioning those mean materials. You are my angel,” said Vishal embracing her tighter.

“Do you want me to bring you some coffee?”

“No, I am thirsty for something else,” said Vishal and his fingers began to wander again.

“Vishal, no. Go bathe,” Shalini said and moved out of his hands.

Reluctantly, Vishal left the bed. Shalini made their bed and let the sunlight in by opening the curtains. The morning seemed bright but the house was still silent. No one seemed to be moving about. Perhaps everyone was sleeping late.

“Shalini, give me the towel. It is there on that cloth stand,” shouted Vishal from the bathroom. Shalini picked the towel from the cloth stand and walked towards the bathroom.

She knocked on the door and it opened a crack. He took the towel she gave with a smile. When she turned to go, the door opened wide and Vishal pulled her into the bathroom.

“What are you doing? You are making me wet,” cried Shalini as Vishal, who had been in the middle of his bath, embraced her. He turned the shower on and the warm water sluiced over them.

“I was tempted by the prospect of a hot shower together, sweetheart. Please don’t deny me this.” His voice was husky. As the water drenched her saree and blouse, desire darkened his eyes. He peeled off her clothes one by one. Each inch of bare skin was rewarded with a lingering kiss. The warmth of the water enveloping their bodies, heightened the sensations. His fingers played with her body and pleasure cruised through her. When his own desire made it impossible to wait any longer, he lifted her and marched into the bedroom. When he laid her on the bed, her heart flipped and she abandoned herself to the mystical dance yet again.

They walked into the dining room an hour later, and everybody greeted them with pleasant smiles. Perhaps this was how it happened normally. There were no accusing glances or grimaces, like from her previous experience.

Unlike Piyush, Vishal was treating her like a queen. Shalini took the seat next to Ananya and Vishal promptly sat on the opposite chair.

“Did he allow you to sleep?” whispered Ananya once everyone was busy with their food. Startled, Shalini looked up and Ananya winked. Shalini flushed.

“Don’t bother to answer. Just asking, you know,” Ananya said and snickered.

Arjun, who was seated near Vishal, seemed similarly engaged. Vishal whispered something in his ears and they both laughed aloud. He gazed at Shalini and when their eyes met, he pouted and blew her a kiss.

As the day passed, Shalini relished the care each member of Vishal’s family was showering on her. Aditya, Kishore’s son who normally didn’t warm up to strangers easily, had already become Shalini’s friend during the days they had spent together at the resort. Uma treated her like her own daughter.

Mohan was happy that his son had selected the right bride. But the short scene created by Pratap at the auditorium had left him a little troubled. He would go and meet him, he had decided. After all, they were once bosom friends.

Throughout the day, Vishal tagged behind Shalini, looking for chances to steal a kiss. He couldn’t wait to get her alone again. Never had a day seemed so long.

Unknown to him, though, the blocked messages folder in his phone received multiple messages from the same number. Messages continued to arrive throughout the evening and the night. And this time, the sender was furious.

Chapter 29

“So, when are you leaving for the honeymoon? How many days more do you have before you join back at work?” Naveen asked.

The cousins were relaxing in the living room along with their spouses after lunch a week after the marriage. Naveen had arrived the previous night. Ananya and Arjun had come in the morning.

The week had gone off in a flash for Vishal and Shalini. The inevitable lunch and dinner invitations at the homes of relatives had kept them engaged during most of the days. And nights never seemed enough. The hours of the night, when they were alone, never seemed enough. They wished they could spend more hours together.

“I have two more weeks. I had taken a month off starting from *Ammamma’s Sapthathi*,” said Vishal.

The house bell announced the arrival of a guest. Naveen went to answer the door. He squirmed when he saw who stood on the steps flashing a bright smile at him. What was the purpose of this visit? Should he close the door?

“Who is it, Naveen?” asked Vishal and then walked towards the door to investigate.

“Will you not invite me in? I promise I come as a well-wisher,” said the girl who stood hesitating on the doorsteps, nervousness writ large on her face. Naveen glanced at Vishal and raised his eyebrows. Though surprised, Vishal didn’t hesitate.

“Come in, Riya. I am sorry but you certainly have surprised us,” said Vishal and opened the doors wide to welcome Riya.

Riya walked into the living room and none of the occupants knew how to deal with the unexpected visitor.

“Sorry. I know I have barged in without being invited. But after what passed, I thought I owed Vishal and Shalini an apology on behalf of my father. He shouldn’t have done what he did,” said Riya and looked at Vishal. Her eyes flitted towards Shalini as if asking for forgiveness. Shalini, realizing how difficult it would have been for Riya to take such a step, walked towards her with a smile.

“There is no need for an apology. We do understand that it was all so complicated. It must have been traumatic for him. Any father would have reacted the way he did. Please don’t worry. We have forgotten about it,” said Shalini.

“Yes, you don’t worry about it. I owe you an apology as well. I am sorry I made a mess out of everything. You were dragged into all this and I apologize for that. I would not have made a good husband for you. I was in love with Shalini all the while,” said Vishal.

“I knew something was wrong right from the beginning. But I thought you were just shy. But it is okay. To say the truth, I was also not keen about getting married. Now I am free to pursue my career. I will leave for Delhi soon. And yes, no hard feelings,” Riya said with a wide smile.

“It was very brave of you to take it on yourself to right the situation. My father is upset that he lost his best friend because of my actions. I will meet him and apologize soon,” said Vishal. He was inspired by how Riya was trying to rebuild the burned bridges between the two families.

“Oh, he will calm down. Don’t worry. His anger takes a while to die down. He forgets and forgives very soon. I have sent him to Singapore to cool down. Please accept this gift. I sincerely hope you will not throw this into the dustbin the moment I am out of the house,” said Riya taking out a neatly wrapped gift out of the bag she was carrying.

“Wish you both a long and happy married life,” she said as Vishal and Shalini accepted the gift.

Riya stayed long enough to repeat the apology to his parents. Vishal felt relieved when she left them with a promise to stay in touch. He could breathe easy now. He had harboured guilt for having dumped public humiliation on her family. Riya had sounded genuinely content.

“Whoa, that was brave. She had the guts to come and apologize on behalf of her father. Let us check what she gifted you. Hope it is not a bomb.” Ananya said. Shalini opened the gift. An ornate digital clock that could also double as night lamp because of a neon light fitted into it.

“Hmm... Not a bad gift. She is so thoughtful,” said Ananya said in a voice filled with sarcasm.

“Maybe she packed something she had purchased to use after marriage. Aren’t we experts in recycling gifts?” Naveen expressed his thoughts.

“No, no. She bought it to gift us. Maybe she changed the boxes. But this definitely is new,” said Vishal.

“See, he is so protective about his ex. Beware Shalini, not a good sign,” said Ananya.

“No worries. I completely trust my husband,” said Shalini.

“So, what time are you leaving tomorrow? You are going to Alleppey, right?”

“Yes, for a honeymoon under the starlit sky aboard a houseboat. Tomorrow afternoon we take the flight to Kochi from where we will go to Alleppey via car. I heard the seafood is excellent there. Three nights and two days away from pestering cousins and meddling relatives. What bliss!” said Vishal with a sly smile.

“Pestering cousins? Really? Marriage is the harbinger of family feuds. I will never marry,” declared Naveen.

Everyone laughed together. Riya and her visit were soon forgotten.

That night, when Shalini was packing, Vishal questioned her as to why she was packing so many dresses.

“I plan to keep you devoid of them most of the time. Pack only a few clothes, my dear, we won’t need them.” Shalini threw a pillow at him and Vishal expertly ducked.

“God, it is ten thirty already. I have all the packing left. We have to leave by noon tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, I need you to be awake an hour more. That is enough for all I have planned for tonight,” Vishal said with an evil smile and pulled Shalini into his arms. Shalini protested and moved away. She ran around the bed but he leapt across the bed expertly, gripped her waist, and pulled her onto the bed. His mouth crushed hers and she surrendered after pretending to struggle for another few minutes.

“I regret becoming a doctor. I should have become a software engineer like Naveen. Then I could have opted to work from home,” said Vishal, when

they were lying sated in each other's arms a while later. Shalini sat up and began to giggle understanding from where the sudden aversion to the medical profession had sprung up.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"What if I am?"

Vishal caught her arms and pulled her near. He began kissing the tips of each of her fingers.

"Vishal, I am already tired. I love my sleep more than you," Shalini said tongue in cheek, trying hard to conceal that she was melting inside.

"Are you? Let me see how you will sleep tonight," he quipped.

"You know what? I am dreaming about eating *Karimeen pollichathu*, a specialty in and around Alleppey. I still remember the taste of it. I had ordered it every day when we had stayed there during my school holidays," said Shalini.

"I don't like Karimeen at all. I plan to eat plenty of king fish and prawns."

"Hmmm.... see we are already going separate ways. I wonder how long our mutual attraction will last." Vishal punished her by crushing her with a bear hug.

After Shalini slept, Vishal lay awake, cuddling her close. He loved the sound of his name flying off her lips desperately while in the throes of passion. He loved how his heart felt complete when he held her close.

Someone closed a window downstairs. He had an uneasy feeling as if someone was watching him. Unable to shake off the feeling, he walked out onto the terrace and watched the moon that was drifting behind dark rain clouds.

Why was he feeling that dark clouds were present in the horizon of his life as well? Why was the voice in his head telling him that something very bad was about to occur? Was it the predictions that were responsible for this tension or was it something else?

However much he thought, he couldn't reach a conclusion and he walked back to the room. He slipped under the sheets, snuggled closer to

Shalini, and sighed relishing her presence. Involuntarily, Shalini moved near and his lips curled up into a smile.

Chapter 30

“The presents have not stopped arriving.”

Uma handed a big parcel to Vishal who flipped it over to check the sender’s name. The parcel was addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Vishal. There was no return address.

Manorama had arrived in the morning to see off Shalini and Vishal who were leaving for Alleppey in the afternoon. The duo had spent much time closeted in the bedroom and Vishal had left them alone. Manorama, who had been apprehensive, had seen the sheen of bliss on her daughter’s face. Now she was busy helping Uma prepare lunch.

“Whatever is there inside is obviously broken. I can hear the clinking of glass pieces. Which idiot sent glass via parcel?”

Vishal cut through the parcel and opened it. A glass-framed photo was inside. The glass was broken. The photo was of Vishal and Shalini on their wedding day. Shalini’s face was crossed with a red X. The red mark eerily resembled blood. Written on the back of the frame were the words, “Her days are numbered.”

Vishal watched clouds of worry rush into Uma’s and Manorama’s eyes and immediately tossed the parcel into the dustbin.

“Mom, don’t panic. Somebody is playing a prank. That is all,” said Vishal.

“God, who is doing this to you? How can anyone do this to a newly wedded couple?” exclaimed Uma.

“Please don’t mention any of this to Shalini. She will worry unnecessarily. The box doesn’t bear the name of any parcel service. It was sent privately via someone. Do you remember the courier boy, mom?”

“I don’t. He was wearing a cap pulled low and was dressed in a red T-shirt and black pants. There wasn’t anything suspicious. He looked like any other courier boy.”

“I have to get ready. No need to mention it to anyone. Not even to Kishore or father. I can only think of one sick man who could have done this. Shalini’s ex-husband. And he is a barking dog.”

“He is a sick man. I feel this should not be brushed off. See the way the photo has been marked. It spooks me. We have to report this to the police,” said Manorama. Uma immediately seconded it.

“I will lodge a report if any more such incidents happen. We don’t have any evidence other than this parcel. We will appear paranoid,” said Vishal.

Once Uma returned to the kitchen, Manorama went to Vishal.

“All this makes me extremely nervous, Vishal. The words of the astrologer are haunting me now. Can’t you cancel the trip?” asked Manorama.

“It is just an empty threat!”

“I don’t think so.” The fear in Manorama’s eyes made him uneasy.

Shalini called Vishal from Kishore’s room then and he left Manorama to see what it was that Shalini needed.

Ananya, Arjun, and Naveen had left in the morning for Sreepuram. Kishore and Shreya were also preparing to leave. They were first going to Shreya’s parents’ house and from there to Dubai. Shalini was helping Shreya pack.

“Why did you call me?”

“Aditya is having a slight fever. Shreya wants to know if he can travel today.”

Vishal checked. Aditya’s tonsils were red and he was showing symptoms of a viral fever. He advised them to postpone travel.

All through lunch, Vishal pondered whether to go for the trip or not. But as the trip had been planned impromptu and not many knew of their plans, Vishal decided it was best that they moved away from their home for a while.

Manorama projected her fears onto him through the many questions that she asked. She was worried that they were staying on a houseboat. How much security did a houseboat have? One determined enough could enter it easily. When he assured that they will move to a hotel room after a quick cruise through the backwaters, she relaxed.

By then, Vishal had taken over the job of worrying. All through their

journey to the airport, Vishal checked whether any vehicle was following theirs. His vigil continued as he scrutinized every loitering person at the airport. Once inside the plane, he gazed around to make sure that none of their co-passengers appeared like thugs or stalkers. He glared at men who dared to glance at Shalini for long.

“What is wrong with you? You appear jumpy. What happened?”

“What? Nothing has happened. I didn’t like the way he was ogling at you,” Vishal said pointing at the passenger in the next aisle seat who had turned around to gaze at his co-passengers.

“You are pathetic. I am wondering why I married you. I was happy being your *Ammamma*’s assistant. Now I have become the wife of a possessive and overprotective husband,” Shalini teased.

“I am possessive, I agree. And I am not ashamed of it,” said Vishal. Shalini rolled her eyes.

“You are hopeless. Leave it. I hope we get to see the beauty of the backwaters under the full moon. How wonderful it will be to sleep under the stars with water rocking the boat and waves singing lullabies,” said Shalini and looked dreamily at the clouds above which they were floating. Vishal thought it would not be wise to mention they won’t be sleeping on a houseboat and kept quiet.

Shalini already cherished the thought of being alone with Vishal for three whole days with nothing other than the love they had for each other. Was this how every girl felt when she left for her honeymoon? With the love of her life, she was heading towards the place that was called the Venice of the East. She could lose herself travelling in the labyrinthine beauty of Alleppey.

Only one thing gnawed at her heart. Something had happened during the course of the morning. She had seen worry written in bold letters across the faces of her mother, Vishal, and his mother. No one had bothered to clarify anything to her. But she always knew something was wrong when her mom insisted that she take the oath to remain vegetarian and read the Devi Stotram daily for the next one month. Though she had tried her maximum to postpone it, her mother had been adamant. She had to agree finally. Maybe the astrologer she frequented had made some new prediction. After her

divorce, her mother had become highly superstitious.

They reached the resort at eight in the evening.

Shalini fell in love with the floating cottage that Vishal had booked for them. It appeared right out of the brochure of ultimate luxury living. Their cottage had a balcony attached to their bedroom that overlooked the backwaters and the distant canopy of coconut palms. The bathroom was equipped with a shower room and a Jacuzzi. After a relaxed dinner inside their room, they settled for the night. Vishal had calmed down considerably by the time they had landed at the Kochi airport. The relaxed ambience of the resort re-awakened the charming lover in him. They made love as the full moon bathed them with its pearly beams.

They did not suspect for even a moment that trouble had tagged along and would play havoc with their lives once again. The owner of the shadow that lurked outside their bedroom window growled in anger when the lights in their rooms dimmed long before the lights in the other villas. It was time to do something drastic. Their happiness should not last long. Hadn't they enjoyed their togetherness for long enough? What better time to die than during the ecstasies of a honeymoon? The girl had to die. She deserved nothing less than an agonizing and painful death.

The backwaters were a silent grave to many unknown lovers. The couple who was now in the throes of passion inside the room would join them soon. Forever here under the moonlit canopy of coconut palms, never to awake or stir again. The time was not far now.

Chapter 31

Shalini stirred at the first caress of the morning sun and walked to the balcony. The brilliant gold and orange hues burned like fire in the East over the backwaters, sending in warmth to the quaint resort. Most of the windows were dark, but Shalini could spot some early risers walking around the garden path enjoying the beauty of the morning.

She was bathed and ready by the time Vishal stirred. He sleepily asked her to return to bed.

“Get up, Vishal. It is too beautiful a day to be wasted frolicking in bed. Remember, our houseboat trip starts at eight. We will be late. Come on,” said Shalini, and pulled at his blanket.

“You wound me. You prefer to go out rather than spend time with me!”

“Visu, come on. I am dying to see the beauty of the backwaters again. I remember coming here while in college and while in school. And this time, I get to watch them again in your company,” said Shalini.

They had booked a houseboat that would be theirs for the next twelve hours. On Manorama’s insistence, Vishal had cancelled the plans to stay in the houseboat during the night. Their houseboat came with a driver and a cook. The couple had a bedroom, a sitting area, and dining area exclusively for their use.

Water lilies, groups of ducks, and some other water plants shared the space of the backwaters in harmony. They passed Chinese fishing nets, small boats carrying all sorts of materials, and thousands of coconut palms that lined the banks. Kingfisher birds and egrets flew around in search of good sport. Cuddled together on a couch in the sitting area that overlooked the backwaters, they relaxed, allowing the serenity to transport them into bliss.

“I love your hair. It is like silk. And it smells so good,” said Vishal pressing his face into her hair.

“Do you know why I started to let my hair grow long?” asked Shalini.

“No, why?”

“Do you remember that classmate of yours with silky long hair and a dimpled smile? I found you talking to her in a secluded corner of our school

and my friend whispered in my ears that you both were an 'item'. I hated you for hiding that secret from me. Though I did not know then what exactly being an 'item' meant, I wanted us to be an item. I wanted to be in her place. I was hurt and jealous. I did not talk to you for three torturously long days. But you came every day and told me such ridiculous jokes that I eventually forgot all my anger. I had to bury my jealousy. But from that day, I started to grow my hair and didn't allow my mother to cut them again."

"But you were hardly twelve that time. And that girl, she used to be a good friend. I stopped talking to her after she gave me a love letter filled with grammatical errors. By the way girl, why didn't you tell me you loved me that way soon?"

"Who said I loved you? I wanted to be pretty like her so that we could be an 'item'," said Shalini and Vishal hugged her tight.

"Are you happy that now we are an 'item', that too, a hot one? I thought of you like the sister I never had. But I realize the tug I felt then was more than sisterly affection. I always loved you. If you had remained near, I am sure we would have eventually fallen in love. Can't you see? We are a match made in heaven. You make me feel complete."

"I love you."

He planted kisses on her hair and pulled her closer.

"Tell me, Vishal. If something happens to me, what will you do? Will you find someone and get married again?"

Panic tore through him. Even the thought was painful. Had she come to know of the parcel? The prediction? He stood up abruptly and then sat down facing her. He found her smiling and relief flooded him.

"Of course, I don't like wasting my time mulling over the past. I will find a beautiful girl and get married to her as soon as possible," Vishal teased deciding he needed to change the mood.

Instead of hitting out at him as he had expected, Shalini fell silent. Her eyes had filled with tears.

"You are crying! Silly girl, I was joking. And tell me what would happen to you? You are hale and hearty and have a burly young doctor guarding you at all times. Nobody will even dare to touch you," said Vishal.

“I don’t know why, but I fear this happiness won’t last. Happiness never lasts for me. Life has always showered sadness on me.”

“*Ammamma* always tells us that we create our reality through our thoughts. Think positive, my dear. We have already walked into our happily-ever-after. Even nature wants to make us happy.”

He pointed at a flock of ducks that had waded into the water from the bank. It was a pleasant scene as the birds stepped one by one into the river and formed a long line, delighting the senses with their graceful swimming and fluid movements. Sitting near her, he pulled her into an embrace.

Soon, it was lunchtime. The food was delicious with many local delicacies. Shalini was sticking to vegetarian food at the insistence of her mother and had hence chosen a vegetarian meal. Vishal too ordered the same.

After watching a brilliant sunset and a graceful moon that added a bluish beauty to the backwaters, they returned to their room. After a bath, they set out for a leisurely walk on the beach. A stray dog that appeared to be a good breed wandered near them seeking food crumbs. Shalini threw a piece of biscuit at him and watched him lap it up in a flash.

“Poor fellow. He must have belonged to a good home. I don’t know why people abandon their pets. He looks so dear to be forgotten,” said Shalini. As though he understood what she was saying, the dog wagged his tail and continued to look up at Shalini with hope.

“Sorry dear, I don’t have any more biscuits left. Will feed you the next time we meet. Okay?” said Shalini and the dog sat down on the sand and whined.

“Poor guy. We will bring leftovers from dinner for him. Come, let us return to the room and order dinner,” said Vishal and they both returned to the resort.

When their food arrived, to their surprise there was a plate of *Karimeen pollichathu* with it.

“We didn’t order this. It is a mistake,” said Vishal.

“It is complimentary by the hotel, ma’am. If you don’t want, I will take it back.”

Vishal was about to ask him to take it back when Shalini stopped him.

“No, no. I know someone who would like it,” said Shalini. Vishal immediately understood who she meant. He gestured to the waiter that he could go.

“Our doggy friend will have a feast today. Poor darling.”

After dinner, together they walked back to the beach. Their four-legged friend waved his tail and stood up with a woof as though he understood what was wrapped inside the newspaper cover.

Shalini unwrapped the newspaper and took out the fried fish wrapped in a banana leaf and kept it in front of the dog. It leapt onto the food and gulped it down as they watched with happy smiles.

Shalini and Vishal turned to return to the resort when the dog finished eating it. A whine grabbed their attention. To their horror, they watched the dog pant hard and slump to the ground. They went closer to inspect. The dog shivered all over and, within a few seconds, stopped moving.

Vishal squatted near to inspect. His tongue was hanging out, eyes lifeless. It took a moment for the implications of the incident to set in.

Holding back a scream, he grabbed Shalini by her hands and ran towards the resort.

Banging on the desk of the resort manager Vishal screamed, “Explain! We pay you and you send poisonous food as complimentary food? I am calling the police now.”

“Sir, what do you mean? What complimentary food?”

“Then what was it? Luckily, we didn’t eat it, but a stray dog died after eating the food you sent us,” shouted Vishal, pushing the bag towards the manager.

“Sir, you are mistaken. We have a strict policy. We don’t send any complimentary food to our guests.”

“So you won’t agree. The police will find out the truth.”

“Sir, calm down. If there has indeed been such an incident, we will call the police. The safety of our guests is our first priority,” said the manager and dialled 100.

Upon his insistence, Vishal narrated what had transpired. The police arrived soon and the dog and the parcel were taken away for inquiry. The waiter who had delivered their food was nowhere to be found. The inspector in charge asked Vishal and Shalini to be cautious after the preliminary investigations revealed that the dog was indeed poisoned. There was rat poison in high concentration in the food he had eaten. They were advised to leave the place as the possibility of yet another attempt lingered.

“Was someone trying to poison us?” asked Shalini once they returned to their villa.

“Let us hope not. Pack our things, we will leave now.” His eyes darted around looking for anything that looked suspicious. “We are safe. Don’t worry, darling,” he muttered, doubting his own words.

While Shalini packed, he tapped on his phone screen. After brooding about what to do next, he called the only person who he knew would be able to help him. His schoolmate and friend, Circle Inspector Shyam.

Chapter 32

“Are you sure the resort people knew nothing about it?” Vishal asked Shyam when he called him back after a while. Circle Inspector Shyam, I. P. S, had been Vishal’s schoolmate and he knew Shalini too. He had been unable to attend their marriage. Shyam who had worked in this area before was pulling the strings from his office in Puvattur.

“Vishal, the local police team has done a thorough investigation. The hotel doesn’t give compliments to their guests in the form of food. They suspect foul play because the waiter has gone missing. Lucky that you didn’t eat the fish; it had enough poison to kill a person instantly,” Shyam paused.

Vishal covered his mouth with his palm and looked heavenward. He told Shyam about the parcel that had arrived the previous day at their home.

“Vishal, do you suspect anyone? Do you have any enemies?”

“I cannot think of anyone. I don’t usually pick a fight with anyone.”

“Did anyone threaten you recently?”

Then he remembered Piyush threatening him at the mall. He explained that to Shyam. Shyam cut the call promising to call back.

Shalini smiled at Vishal when he went near.

“I think you are panicking. The dog might have died because of some other reason.”

“Shalini, listen. Shyam thinks it was a deliberate murder attempt. The food had a high percentage of rat poison.”

Dazed, Shalini stared at him and her fingers flew to her parted lips.

“But who? Who would want us dead?”

“I don’t know. Clearly, someone wants me dead,” lied Vishal.

Shalini grabbed his hands and kissed them. With his hands, she cupped her cheeks. Vishal could feel her tremble.

“Hey darling, relax. Nothing will happen. Shyam will find out who is behind this. Don’t worry.”

Shyam called back after an hour with more news. He had initiated investigations about Piyush after getting in touch with the inspector in charge at Piyush's place, in Aluva. Since Piyush's place was at a distance of eighty kilometres from the resort, he could have easily done it.

The local police had taken Piyush into custody but he had denied it completely. According to him, he hadn't left Aluva since weeks and had proof too. His office records support his claim.

Even after threats and continued questioning, Piyush had refused to accept that he had been anywhere near Alleppey that day.

Shyam had yet another alarming piece of news. The body of the missing waiter had been found floating in the backwaters. His body had traces of the same poison that had killed the dog.

Shyam instructed them to leave the place as soon as possible. They checked out within an hour. The local police accompanied them at Shyam's special request.

When they returned to Puvattur, Vishal's place, the mood was gloomy. Shyam arrived within an hour and asked about the parcel that had arrived two days ago. Upon enquiry, Uma had said that she had kept it as she had felt that the threat was serious. Uma and Mohan were alarmed hearing about what had transpired at the resort.

"Uncle, don't worry. If needed, we will deploy security here. It can be done. By the way, can you think of anybody else who would want to harm Vishal and Shalini?" asked Shyam.

"Pratap, Vishal's ex-fiancée's father. He had threatened Vishal on the day he broke their engagement that he would not live to get married. He had even come to the auditorium on the day of the wedding and had created a ruckus. I didn't know he had such a cruel side to his character. I should never have dragged Vishal into all this," said Mohan.

"Do you have his number? Where does he live?"

"I have his number. His house is at a distance of about 45 km from here. I don't know whether he is there though. He spends half of his time in Singapore, where most of his business is based."

Mohan called the landline number and Riya answered the phone.

“Hello, uncle. It’s so nice to hear from you. How are you?”

“I am good, Riya. Can you give the phone to your father? His seems switched off. After your gesture, I want to ask him for forgiveness. We shouldn’t abandon our years of friendship just like that,” said Mohan.

“That is great, uncle. He is on his flight back from Singapore. He had a series of meetings there in the last five days with his clients. He will reach by nine. You can call after that. He will be happy to leave the past behind, I am sure,” said Riya.

Mohan ended the call promising to call back. This trail too had come to an end.

“If it was not Pratap uncle, then who could it be? I can’t think of anyone who would want me dead,” said Vishal.

“Oh, it can be him. He would have given money to a professional killer to do the dirty task. He’d be out of the country conveniently and nobody would be able to link the crime to him. I am almost sure that it is him,” said Shyam.

“Frankly speaking, I can’t believe it is him. He is a nice person. I agree he was angry when Vishal cancelled the engagement. But that was to be expected. After all, he was the father of the girl whom he wronged,” said Mohan in support of his friend.

“Do you have any enemies in your profession, Vishal? Any incident or threat?”

When Vishal rejected all the suggestions, they were again in a spot.

“Did you receive any email, message, or threat in some other form?”

“Nothing. Wait... I got some threatening messages before the marriage. I thought it was being sent to the wrong person and had blocked the number. I haven’t checked whether any more messages came after that.”

“Check it. We will trace the number. That makes our task easy.”

Vishal opened the blocked numbers folder and gasped seeing the many messages that had come in after the initial messages.

“You know what you did, don’t you? You son of a bitch!”

“You will suffer for your sins, soon. Very soon.”

“You are going straight to hell. And it is still better than what you truly deserve.”

“You are ignoring my messages. I get a busy tone when I call. Have you blocked my number, you fool? You will pay for this.”

“I smell blood. I want blood. I am thirsty for you. Do you know that?”

Messages, one after the other, had the same tone. Shyam smiled after reading the messages.

“Whoever it is, is a novice in the field of crime. Don’t they know that the number can be traced to them?”

He immediately called a friend who worked with the network operator with which the number was registered. Shyam was invited to stay and he readily accepted.

The enquiry didn’t prove fruitful. The registered address that had been used to acquire the number proved to be that of an abandoned factory. But there was good news.

The last message had been sent from Alleppey on the same day that Vishal and Shalini had received the poisoned food packet. The message that had been sent was even more disturbing.

“You love her, don’t you? I will watch you suffer when she dies.”

Vishal shuddered remembering that the dish had been *Karimeen pollichathu*, which he hated. But Shalini loved it. Vishal shared this new information with Shyam.

“This proves that the one who is sending the messages is the one who also sent the parcel. It is Shalini that he is after. But how do they know all these details? Maybe they are using some inside help. Do you have any new servants here?”

“No, our servants are all trustworthy and live nearby.”

After several rounds of discussions, which did not lead to anything fruitful, they retired for the night.

“I don’t want this night to end. I don’t know why I fear the tomorrows.

Hold me tight, Vishal. Make me forget everything. Make my fears go away,” whispered Shalini as they lay cuddled in each other’s arms later.

“Rubbish. We are safe. There is nothing to fear,” said Vishal as he pulled her close. He did not let her know that the killer was after her. He planted a line of kisses on her from shoulder to shoulder and then nuzzled at her nape. He turned her to face him. This time, he let his love course through his fingers. The tender caresses made her breath catch. His lazy explorations awakened a well of love.

When the moon rose outside and sent silver beams to peek at the couple, their naked skin was glistening with contentment and remnants of the secret tears they had shed.

The beep of a message alerted Vishal sometime during the night and he slipped away quietly to check the message.

“No matter how hard you try, you will never catch me. I am the eagle who flies high. My prey doesn’t escape. Ever.”

Chapter 33

Shalini opened her eyes to face a cold and overcast morning. Dark grey clouds loomed in the horizon hiding the warm sun. The other side of her bed was empty. She pulled the blanket tighter around her and willed the feeling of doom to go. He might be there in the bathroom. Or must've gone out of the room to get a drink. Relax, she told herself.

Every day after marriage, she had woken with Vishal's arms around her. The digital clock over the dressing table flashed the time as thirty minutes past six. He was a late riser. Where was he?

Getting out of the bed, she checked the bathroom and the terrace. He was not anywhere. Then, a note that was kept beneath her bottle of rose water caught her attention.

Dearest,

We have found who is behind all this.

Will tell you everything in detail the moment I return.

Tell mother and father that I have gone out with Shyam.

Rest assured and happy. All is well.

Meet you soon.

Yours,

Vishal

P.S: Miss me ;)

A slow smile spread on her face and she slumped on to the bed with relief. She closed her eyes and sighed. Gathering the clothes that were scattered on the bed, she walked to the bathroom humming a tune. What a difference a simple note could make.

Vishal's parents were relieved that the menace was finally over. Though they were eager to know who it was, they ate their breakfast with a calmness that had been missing since the last few days. Kishore had reached Dubai late last night and had called.

Breakfast was over, but Vishal had still not called. Mohan and Uma left

for a wedding that they had to attend after trying in vain to persuade Shalini to go with them. Shalini refused, insisting that Vishal might return any moment.

While she cooked, she went over the horror that had played out in their life in the last three days. She wished for Vishal to return soon. She couldn't wait to hear how it had all ended. The echo of the whines of the dog struggling after being poisoned still reverberated in her ears. How close had they come to death?

Ananya called a while later and she filled her on what all had happened after the last time they met. While they were at it, the doorbell rang.

"Anu, be on the line. I think Vishal has come." Shalini put the receiver on the table and went to open the door.

The person at the door was not Vishal. It was not someone she had expected to see either.

Meanwhile, Vishal was seated alongside Shyam who was questioning the man before him. The local sub-inspector, who had accompanied them, was waiting eagerly to go in for the kill. He had suggested that they arrest him and continue the questioning at the police station. After all, they had enough evidence against him.

"What you are saying doesn't make sense. What will I gain by killing him or his wife? I have been telling you for the past hour what I have been up to this week. You can check my phone records, my travel documents, and my alibi that will prove my whereabouts. This accusation is bizarre."

"The number that was used to threaten Vishal is registered to the mill, which is registered in your wife's name. The GPS tracking of the latest message led us to this house. You cannot hide whatever you are doing anymore, Mr. Pratap," Shyam said.

"What! But...."

Vishal looked at the man who had almost become his father-in-law with contempt. The man was still acting as if he knew nothing about it.

"We have more details that link you to the various happenings. Admit

it,” said Shyam.

Pratap wiped his face with his palm, looked around, and then stood up.

“I guess that is it. I am guilty of whatever you have accused me of. I think I have the right to call my lawyer.”

“We will talk about your rights when I have finished with you, you bastard. Walk...,” snapped the inspector who was delighted that the prey had finally fallen into the trap. He tied the handcuffs around the Pratap’s wrists, who walked out meekly without any struggle.

As he was led out of the hall, Pratap’s eyes strayed to the huge framed family photo on the wall. His wife and daughter flanked him on both sides and all three had happy smiles on their faces. He walked out of the house hanging his head.

Shyam’s eyes flitted to the photo and he looked up at the photo for a while. He walked out of the room and when they were about to exit the house, he returned and walked back to the photo again. Curious, Vishal followed him.

“Is that Riya, the girl you were going to marry?”

“Yes, why do you ask?”

Shyam ran out and stopped the police officer who was about to drive away with Pratap as the prisoner.

“Bring him in. I have a doubt.”

Puzzled, the police officer walked back into the room, pushing a reluctant Pratap.

“Mr. Pratap, I have a few questions that trouble me. You argued with us for over an hour when we accused you of the crime. I began to doubt whether my calculations had been wrong from the onset. But when I mentioned the mobile phone that was registered in the name of your wife, you immediately accepted it. Why? Who uses the phone? Who are you trying to save? Tell me,” ordered Shyam.

“Why are you asking me this? I’ve already accepted that I am guilty. What do you want now?”

“But I don’t think you are the culprit. Where are your wife and

daughter? Where are you hiding them?”

“My wife is still in Singapore. I don’t know where my daughter is. She never tells me where she is going. I never ask her,” said Pratap.

“So, you are still the same. Still protecting your little princess, huh? Inspector, take him,” snapped Shyam and dragged Pratap to his car without another word.

He barked orders into his phone to track the phone from which the threat had come. When he insisted that he would drive, Vishal sensed something was wrong. Yet, he got in and sat silently as Shyam raced the car down the road.

“Shyam, you are making me nervous. What are you hiding from me?”

“Okay. Don’t get worked up. Two years ago, a minister’s son was brutally stabbed multiple times by his girlfriend in City Medical College. Incidentally, he had flirted with a classmate in front of her. I was in charge of the case. The girl’s father was rich and employed the best lawyers and she walked free. A few months later, the boy died in a hit and run incident. Nobody was caught. The truck that hit his car was later found abandoned in Goa. Nobody claimed it. An eyewitness said they had seen the same girl arguing with him before the incident. But there was no connecting link,” said Shyam.

“Shyam... why are you telling me that story? What is the connection here?”

“Vishal, Riya was that girl. Let us hope that we will be able to catch her this time.”

“What? But Riya is a lesbian. She is in love with her friend. Shalini heard her confessing that to Ahana.”

“She is not a lesbian. She is a pervert, a psycho. During inquiries, the facts that emerged painted her in the dirtiest of colours. She was a drug addict and had undergone abortion twice while in college. I haven’t heard a lesbian ever getting pregnant in the first place. You are lucky that you didn’t get married to her.”

Shyam received a message on his phone and he read it when they stopped at a junction.

“Who all are there at your home?”

“My father, mother, and Shalini. Why do you ask?”

“Nothing. Nothing to be worried about.” He accelerated the car and raced down the road the moment the signal changed raising Vishal’s apprehension a notch higher.

“Tell me what the problem is, Shyam. I beg you,” said Vishal. Shyam quietly handed his mobile to him.

The messages contained the current location coordinates and the address of the phone.

“No....” Vishal cried.

“Nothing will happen. Let us hope we are not late. Or better that I am wrong,” said Shyam.

As the car raced down the streets, Vishal tried not to panic. Yet, all he could think about was his family. He tried the landline but it was engaged. Shalini did not pick up her mobile phone. Then he called his father’s phone, who answered it on the second ring.

The answer that he received to his inquiries had Vishal screaming to Shyam to drive faster. The thirty odd kilometres that they still had to traverse seemed never ending.

Perhaps he had never prayed as fervently as he did in the minutes that ticked away tortuously. Shyam had never broken traffic rules as blatantly as he did then. Their prayers reverberated with the same thoughts. Would they reach in time?

Chapter 34

“Hey, Riya. Such a surprise,” said Shalini. *What did she want now?*

“Hi, Shalini. I hope I am not intruding again. I have a message from my father for Mohan uncle. He wants to meet him as soon as possible. He tried calling, but his phone was out of reach. And I was eager to meet you all as well,” said Riya and bit her lips as though she expected Shalini to throw her out the next moment.

Her nervousness touched Shalini’s heart and she felt responsible for making her feel at ease. With a warm smile, she opened the door wide and invited Riya in.

“You came at the wrong time though. Father has gone out with Mother to a marriage. Vishal is also not here. He has gone out with his friend.”

“Oh, should I leave then? I can come back another day,” said Riya pausing near the sofa.

“No, no. Sit. They will return any moment now. You have come all the way to meet Father. I will call and ask when he will return,” said Shalini getting up to make the call.

“No. Don’t disturb him. I can wait.”

Shalini talked about random things to break the ice. Riya slowly relaxed and answered her queries.

“You haven’t joined work? You were working at the AIMS, right?”

“I was. I don’t plan to resume my job at AIMS. Thanks to you and Vishal,” said Riya and Shalini winced.

“I am sorry. I didn’t know about that...,” said Shalini. Cutting Shalini off, Riya spoke.

“How would you know? You were busy luring my fiancé and cementing your place in his heart while I walked around believing that he loved me truly. I didn’t even think for a second that he would leave me for someone like you.”

Shalini felt the vibe of hatred that was darted towards her.

“Riya, we were childhood friends. I don’t know when our friendship changed into love. We wronged you by allowing the madness of love to control us. I am sorry if you were hurt,” said Shalini.

“Hurt? No, I was not hurt. I don’t allow anyone to hurt me. I was humiliated when he trashed me and accepted you. What did he see in you that I didn’t have? You are not even beautiful. How did you trap him, you witch? I have waited for weeks to get an opportunity to speak with you. Alone,” said Riya.

“Riya, we were in love. And I believe you know what love is. It makes one do insane things,” said Shalini.

“Love? Do you want me to believe that? It doesn’t exist, do you understand? Human beings know only lust. And I can’t accept that you evoked lust in him. He had me beside him. A thousand guys covet me. No man in his senses would give you a second look. When Ahana alerted me how his eyes always trailed you, I laughed it off. Who will go looking for coal when they had a diamond beside them? But she was correct. You were making plans behind my back to take him away from me. Riya always gets what she wants. No one dares to humiliate Riya,” said Riya. Her cold eyes flashed.

Shalini involuntarily shrank back into the chair she was sitting. Why had she opened the doors for this girl? She was getting maniacal with every passing second. She shuddered realizing that she was alone. Their servants had left after finishing their chores long ago. Shalini silently prayed that Vishal or his parents would arrive soon. How was she going to handle this girl? She had transformed from a seemingly harmless girl to a mad woman spewing venom in minutes. Shalini kept silent because whatever she said was not going to be heeded by Riya. In fact, every word she uttered was making the situation worse.

“You don’t have anything to say, do you? You are going to pay for your sins. You humiliated me and my family. We are being ridiculed by people. Did you see the reports in the papers? Someone even made a Facebook post about it. I can’t return to my job. And you are the reason I can’t have Vishal.”

“But you don’t love him. You love Ahana. I heard you confessing that

to her. You were even ready to leave Vishal in order to be united with her. Isn't that true?"

Riya burst out laughing. She got up from the couch and walked around, laughing like a maniac, clutching her stomach. Abruptly, she stopped laughing. Halting before Shalini's chair, she planted both her arms on its armrests, imprisoning Shalini in her chair.

"Do you think I am a lesbian? You fool. I am nothing of the sort. I like experimenting in my sex life. Ahana is a good tool for pleasure. She believes I am in love with her and that we will have a happily ever after. I let her be happy in her illusions. I value my family pride and our position in the society. I can never accept being labelled as a lesbian. Vishal was the first man towards whom I felt something akin to love. His voice made me yearn to be his, his presence made me long to be held in his arms. I promised my father I would change my ways. I promised I would make him proud of me. You ruined everything, you bitch." She jabbed her finger on Shalini's forehead. She then slapped her hard across her face.

Shalini yelled and jerked her head back.

"I heard everything that was going on in this house through the microphones that I planted in the living room and in the digital clock that I gifted you. Including your disgusting moans when the man I loved made love to you. I came today knowing fully well that you were alone. You will not escape today."

Riya's hands moved to Shalini's throat and she started to choke her. With all her strength, Shalini pushed Riya away and ran towards the kitchen crying for help.

Ananya who was waiting at the other end of the line for Shalini to pick up the phone heard the cries for help and screamed. She had heard enough to panic. What could she do? Their house was at a distance of about 60 kms from Vishal's house.

"ARJUN, ARJUN..." she hollered.

Arjun came running carrying little Aryan. She narrated what was happening.

“Call Vishal. He will be somewhere near. We will leave now but they will be closer than us.”

When Ananya’s call came, Vishal answered it on the first ring. Even before she completed telling what had happened, he told her he knew and that he was reaching his home in a few minutes.

“Pray for us, Anu. I am so worried...” Vishal cut the phone before she could say anything and screamed at Shyam to hurry.

Minutes later, they drove up the lane to his house. Both of them darted towards it the moment the car came to a stop. The house was completely silent; Shyam grabbed his service revolver anticipating the worst.

The door of the house stood open and the duo entered. They didn’t hear anything. There was no one in the living room. Nor in the dining or the bedrooms. When they reached the kitchen, they found that the door to the back courtyard was open. Shyam strode towards the door, stopped, and gasped.

A dark red, shining liquid was slowly flowing down the steps.

“Shaliniiiiii.... Nooooooooo.” The cry that emanated from Vishal was heart-wrenching. Shalini was lying in a pool of blood on the steps. There were deep wounds on her shoulders and on the side of her head. A machete covered in blood lay near.

Vishal squatted near Shalini and checked for a pulse. It was feeble and almost not there. With an anguished cry, he scooped her into his arms and ran towards their car. Shyam hurried over, jumped into the driver’s seat, and drove out of the courtyard.

When the car moved out, Riya quietly slipped out through the gates.

Chapter 35

So, at last, he had come. Her Vishal had come. Love flooded into her being and the pain began to vanish. The peace, the warmth that came in made her serene. Never had she felt so content. She couldn't understand why Vishal was sobbing as she was being rushed into the operation theatre. She couldn't understand why the doctors appeared tense. She was all right. The pain that had vanquished her was not troubling her anymore.

She saw the group of doctors rush into the theatre. The silence was broken only by the beeps from the machines that were monitoring her. What were they doing? She was perfectly all right. But why was she not feeling anything? She tried to get up. She sat right up and then stepped away. The doctors were still huddled around her body. They were shouting words like cardiopulmonary stabilization, resuscitation, and CT scan.

Wait... her body? She was standing away from the group and watching their hurried yet practiced movements. Did that mean that she was dead? Was this how it felt? Why was she then feeling so incredible? So elated?

She was perfectly aware of everything that was happening to her. The burr of the scanning machine, the beeps of the heart monitor, and the words of the doctors were loud and clear.

"She has slipped into a coma," murmured the senior doctor in charge. He was wrong, wasn't he? A person in a coma never saw or heard anything. She was seeing, feeling, and hearing everything. The visuals were clearer and the sounds were sharper; she was feeling emotions that could not be hers. She was feeling the fear that was the dominant feeling in the room. She could even hear their thoughts. They seemed to have already given up on her. "There is no hope," the assistant surgeons were whispering.

She wanted to shake them and tell them that she was perfectly all right. That they were giving up on her too soon. Then he entered. Vishal. He was silent. His eyes dry. But his eyes shone with determination.

What was happening?

As though in answer to all her questions, the scene changed, the surroundings around her vanished. There was only light everywhere around

her. A light that made her feel calm and centred. As if she was watching from far, she could see the doctors hovering over her body. She was watching them now through a veil of light. Everything seemed surreal, yet the clarity of the visuals was perfect.

Am I dead? She wondered. Or was she at some kind of a crossroad between the heaven and the earth?

Then, random visuals began appearing before her. The first visual that appeared before her was that of her mother rushing to the hospital in their car. Her lips were murmuring prayers, eyes brimming with tears.

Simultaneously, Shalini became aware of Arundhati who had prostrated in front of the main idol inside the Shiva temple praying for her.

Ananya and Arjun were approaching the hospital. Ananya's eyes were red from crying. She was absently holding a teddy bear, which Shalini had gifted to keep Aryan from crying. Naveen followed them a few minutes later.

Shalini saw Shreya sitting stunned in their house in Dubai, Kishore frantically trying to book tickets online. And then she heard their thoughts too. Every thought she heard was praying for her. Vishal was staying inside the operation theatre even after being asked to go out. He was saying he would not budge. Understanding the trauma that he was in, his colleagues allowed him.

Visuals continued to appear before her one after the other. These were the people who cared for her. She had touched their lives and they had touched hers. Would she never be able to be near them again? Love emanated from each visual and she understood that only love mattered.

Then the visuals stopped and she suddenly knew she was going to live. If this was the crossroad, she knew which road to take. There were no doubts anymore.

The light dimmed and the surroundings became clear again. The sterile atmosphere of the hospital appeared once again. She saw herself lying senseless on the bed, dressed in a white hospital gown. There were bandages all over her head and her shoulders. The doctors had left. The senior surgeon was briefing Vishal in his cabin, three rooms away from the operation theatre.

“The next twenty-four hours are crucial. Anything can happen. But let us hope for the best.”

Vishal nodded to the senior surgeon and plodded towards where she lay amidst the various tubes and wires. She watched as he caressed her face. He bit his lips together as tears filled his eyes. He knelt down near the bed. His face was at the same level as the bed now.

“Listen, Shalini. You have no right to scare me this way. You know how much I love you, don’t you? They are telling that the next twenty-four hours are critical. I know what that means. You cannot leave me, you understand? If you leave, I will accompany you. I cannot and will not live without you. I will not return to the house that will not hear your laughter. I cannot breathe the air that is not rich with your presence. I know you are hearing me. Stay strong and return to me. Do you hear me? Please, Shalini. Come back. I love you...”

The plea was heartfelt. Visuals from their life together began to play before her eyes. Their first meeting, the pranks, the fun, and the joy of meeting him again after years. She relived the bliss of making love to him, the caresses, and the kisses. Perhaps it was time that she returned. Shalini could feel the pull of his love. It was indeed time. This was not how their story should end.

The moment she made the decision, the pain returned in full force. But this time, she was ready. She did not fear anything, anymore. She knew her essence was love and she believed in the magnificence that lived in her. There was nothing greater or more powerful than love. And this was to be her lesson for life.

Chapter 36

“Do you know what your daughter did this time? She murdered a poor waiter who could have given away her identity. She then brutally attacked Vishal’s wife with a machete. The girl is struggling for life at City Hospital. We have solid proof this time that she did it. How long are you going to shield your daughter?”

Pratap’s face blanched. He dropped his face in his palms and pulled at his hair. Had the constant shield of his protection turned Riya into a psychopath? She always knew her father would clean up after her. She always had that frightening ability to manipulate those around her, pressing the right buttons by projecting her vulnerable doll persona. Right from the time she had thrown her pet kitten that had scratched her into a cauldron of boiling water at the age of six, she exacted revenge without any delay. As she grew, she pounced on her victims with the agility of a tiger. And every time, he had protected her from the aftermath of her actions by using the power of his money.

“Right at this moment, the police are tightening the net and zeroing in on her. Do you want her to become a threat to every other person who is around her? If you continue shielding her, she will become a menace to the society. And trust me, I am not going to allow that to happen. Confess,” said Shyam, his voice calm yet every word throbbing with anger.

The wide television screen flashed with the breaking news.

“Eminent author Arundhati Mukundan’s grandson’s wife in ICU after murder attempt. Condition is said to be critical.”

Condition critical? Rage tore through Riya. She stopped slicing the apple and threw the knife at the LCD screen that was now showing a close up of Shalini.

“Condition critical? She should be dead,” she said as the knife hit the screen. The sound of the TV died and something like a rainbow-colored snowflake appeared on the screen. In the silence, she heard sounds and the headlight of an automobile piercing the semi dark living room. A police jeep

had just entered their compound. She was found out.

Stealthily, she opened the back door of the house. She had parked her SUV in the backyard to avoid anyone noticing her presence. Climbing in, she revved the engine to life and reversed onto the side road that led into their estate. The road at the end of their property was connected to the main road. She would drive straight to the hospital and finish what was incomplete.

Pratap had guided the cops to their country house where he knew Riya always retreated to after she had got away with her insane acts. Watching her drive away in her SUV, Pratap held back a sob as he informed the cops about where the road led.

As fate would have it, that turned out to be Riya's last drive. A random truck veered out of its path and suddenly appeared before her car when she was entering the main road. With a gasp, she applied the brakes and swung the steering to the left. Her car plunged down a cliff in the mountain pass. Her shriek reverberated through the air and stopped with the terminal thud of the car hitting the hard rocks below. While the police who had followed pondered about ways of getting to the car, the car exploded into a ball of flames.

Next day, around midnight, Vishal watched as Shalini's fingers slowly twitched and her eyelids fluttered. Her vitals had improved since last evening but she had not regained consciousness.

"Visu..." Shalini murmured. Her sound was like music to his ears and he knelt on the floor and laid his head near her face. Looking up, he sent up a prayer of gratitude to the creator. At last, he had heard his feverish prayers. Tears of happiness welled in his eyes.

"Yes, sweetheart. I am here. Relax. Everything is fine," whispered Vishal planting a gentle kiss on her cheeks.

"I ... love... you... I... almost ...feared ...I will never see you again." Shalini whispered.

"God is kind, Shalini. He loves us. Now rest and regain the energy you have lost."

Vishal patted her hands as she closed her eyes. Her lips curved into a

smile.

Vishal alerted Dr. Khurana, the doctor in charge, who came in immediately to monitor her vitals.

“It is a miracle. When you brought her in, she was waning away by the second. Now we have her back. She is out of danger. Congratulations, Vishal. I am happy for you,” said Dr. Khurana with a smile.

Vishal rushed out and hugged Arjun who was waiting outside.

“I think I can breathe again,” he said and then burst into sobs.

“I knew she would make it. She is a gem,” said Arjun.

Arjun patted him on his shoulders and held him until his sobs subsided.

“Now go home, freshen up and come. I will be here.”

“No, no need. I don’t want to be away. If they need something, or she wants to see me...”

“Shut up. She might faint if she sees you like this. Just go.”

And that was how it was for the next few days. Vishal resumed work at the hospital after a week so that he could be near her without anyone complaining. If someone asked, he was at work and had dropped in to check on his beloved wife. His colleagues stepped in place and allowed him breaks whenever he wished to be near Shalini. Uma and Ananya were always at the hospital until two weeks later when the latter suddenly threw up after lunch. Naveen who had been visiting greeted Ananya with a smug smile and asked.

“So is my second prediction coming true?”

Ananya blanched. Further tests revealed that it had indeed come true. Naveen and his software suddenly became the hottest commodity among the family members who queued up to know about their future.

All this while, Shalini was waiting. Waiting for the crowd to leave her alone. Then one night after two weeks, she got the three people she wished to be around her together. Vishal, Ananya, and Arundhati.

“I have been waiting for days to ask you all something,” she said.

They all got up and sat on her bed urging her to talk.

“This is something that happened on the day I was brought in here. Please do hear me carefully. I am not sure whether I can convince you.”

“What is it, dear? You can tell us anything,” said Arundhati. The other two seconded her.

“Auntie, when you heard the news that I have been gravely injured, did you go to the Shiva temple and pray for me?”

“I did. I told him I would never visit him again if something happened to you. He couldn’t unhear my prayers, could he?”

“Anu, when you were coming to the hospital, did you bring that teddy bear with you? The one I gave Aryan?”

“Yes, I did. Aryan refuses to part with it. Why do you ask?”

“Vishal, when I was shifted into the operation theatre, you were asked to leave. But you refused and stood there until they relented and allowed you to stay. Is it true?”

“Yes, how could I leave you like that? But why do you ask?”

“Because I saw all that happening.”

“What?” Vishal sat near her and grabbed her hands. Ananya and Arundhati gaped at her.

“It all feels like a dream now. I could see things happening around me, I could feel your emotions. I saw you breaking down when Dr. Khurana told you he feared you brought me in too late. I could feel your emotions. It was as if I was within every one of you. Like I was me and everyone else. Like I was at some sort of crossroads and I had to decide whether to return or go on.”

There was complete silence in the room.

Shalini felt Vishal holding her arms so tight that it was a bit painful. For a moment, he contemplated what would have happened if Shalini had not recovered. But that was insane. He knew what had happened.

“We call this the near-death experience. It happens when an injury or trauma disrupts the oxygen supply to the brain, causing hallucinations. The temporoparietal junction in the brain is supposed to be responsible for causing out of body experiences. In your case, the injury was near the

junction.”

“How do you then explain the events that I saw happening far away from this place? I could see Shreya and Kishore in their apartment in Dubai. You know I have not seen their place ever.”

“There are parts of the brain that are never used during one’s lifetime. One such part might have become active due to the trauma. Such things can’t be fully explained with our current knowledge of science,” said Vishal.

“I know what it is, Shalini. Our yogis talk about a magnificent entity called as the soul that resides in our body and makes our body come alive. The moment the soul leaves the body, the body ceases to function. The soul then embeds into the universal consciousness. The limitations of a physical body no longer confine the soul. You become your magnificent self. I am glad you experienced your magnificence, Shalini. Petty things won’t bother you anymore,” said Arundhati.

“I believe you both. But I prefer to think that Shalini came back to life because of your heartfelt prayers asking her to return, Vishal. I believe love is capable of performing miracles,” said Ananya.

“Yes, I believe that too. Love is the core essence of life. There is nothing greater or more powerful than love,” said Arundhati.

Arundhati and Ananya left the room a little later leaving the couple to decide whether to take the route of science or that of the mystics.

The moment the door closed, Vishal’s arms were around Shalini and he kissed her. Softly at first and then like always, it turned insistent, communicating all the things that he wanted to tell her. She was his life, his breath, his sunshine.

Epilogue

January 2016, Sreepuram

“So, what is this bomb that you are going to drop on me?”

Shalini was engrossed in folding clothes and Vishal plunked himself purposefully onto the neat piles she was creating.

“Bomb, what bomb? Vishal, get up, you are such an ass.”

“I know you are keeping something from me. Why do you always go into the ‘hmm-hmm’ mode when you are talking with *Ammamma* these days? Also, you go missing for hours altogether without informing me about your whereabouts. You know I will not rest till I know the truth.”

“You know what? I am having a torrid affair with a six-foot Romeo I met last week at Sreepuram. He is so much in love with me.”

“Are you cuckolding me? Does that mean that I get permission to stray as well? A gorgeous intern joined the hospital this week.”

“Go ahead. Try. I don’t care.”

Vishal stared at her open mouthed and then lunged at her. She avoided him expertly and ran out of the room laughing, abandoning the clothes. The door shut with a thud. A second later, the door opened again and Shalini peeped inside.

“If you want to meet my six-foot Romeo, do come to *Ammamma*’s book launch at the town hall this weekend. I guess she has sent you an invite as well.”

Vishal threw a bunch of clothes at her.

Standing on the stage, Shalini glanced at the familiar faces in the audience present in the town hall. This was going to be a life-changing event for her. Every person she had invited had come. Her mother and grandmother were seated in the front row and were talking to Arundhati. Ananya waved at her when their eyes met. Aradhya, her five-month-old daughter, was sleeping on her lap. Arjun was walking around entertaining his very fussy toddler, Aryan. Kishore and Shreya had been with her throughout the morning

helping with the last moment arrangements, the decorations, and coordinating with the publishers. Naveen had arrived with his brother Navneeth and had taken over the task of receiving the guests. They had kept Vishal away from the stage and made sure he was kept in the dark about the significance of the occasion. Naveen had gone to the extent of redesigning the invitation sent to Vishal to make it sound like it was Arundhati's book release function.

Vishal smiled at her from the audience. She felt guilty for keeping him in the dark. But she knew he would approve of what she had done. And he loved surprises.

The chief guest of the function, as expected, was the last to arrive. The beloved of the masses, the superstar of tomorrow, Sidhanth had many epithets that adorned him. What many didn't know was that he was going to be the hero of the movie based on Arundhati's latest and most popular novel, which told the story of an NRI businessman Sharan, who loses his business as a result of the recession and sets out to build an agriculture-based industry in his village. He was going to announce the movie today. She was eagerly looking forward to the main item in the agenda.

The audience clapped and cheered when Sidhanth entered the stage via a side-entrance. When he passed her, he nodded in acknowledgement and gave her a tiny salute. When she peered at Vishal, he was scowling.

She took out her phone and sent a WhatsApp message to Vishal:

Saw my six-foot Romeo?

A row of red angry faced smileys came as the reply.

Shalini sniggered and switched off the phone.

After the compere introduced everyone, Sidhanth addressed the audience.

"I have two tasks today. Let me use this opportunity to tell Arundhati ma'am about how big a fan I am. I am extremely proud to say that I am going to don the role of Sharan, her most loved literary creation, onscreen soon. I know her fans love Sharan and I hope to do justice to the character that she has created so well.

My second task is to launch a new book. Though I am privy to all the details, I think Arundhati ma'am can tell you about it best."

Sidhanth invited Arundhati to speak and then stood near her as she addressed the audience.

“Two years ago, a girl came into my life. She joined as my editorial assistant but today she is so much more than that. She has become a part of my family. She married my grandson and I should say I played a small part in bringing them together. You might be wondering why I am talking about her now. In the past few years, she underwent trauma and loss and yet persevered to succeed in whatever she did. I want everyone to know her story and so I made her write her own story.

It is the story of an ordinary girl who fights the odds to find love. In our nation, there are millions of girls who face body shaming, bullying, and atrocities because of their so-called flaws. The biggest insecurity of this girl was her dark skin. In our fair-skin obsessed society, girls turn into insecure individuals because of this discrimination.

This is the story of a girl who has faced the worst sort of such discrimination in her life and yet found success, love, and happiness. A near-death experience made her entire outlook towards life change and she wish to share how she overcame her insecurities one-step at a time after that.

She weaves magic through her words. She has told her story in a heart-warming manner. Sidhanth will launch the book officially today. Ark Publishers, who publish my books, is the publisher of this book too. I invite Shalini to join us as we launch the book. And yes, I ask my grandson Vishal, who has been kept in the dark and who now looks like someone has dropped a bomb on him, to join us.”

Amidst laughter, Vishal joined them onstage for the launch. The audience greeted the new book with a thunderous applause. Shalini addressed the audience and spoke about her writing journey, her struggle with her insecurities, and the support she received from Arundhati, Vishal and her family.

“...It was only when I faced death that I understood what really mattered in life was love. And loving should begin with ourselves. I wish to share with this audience a quote by Eleanor Roosevelt which has been my guiding thought ever since. ‘No one can make you feel inferior without your consent’.

When I stopped criticizing myself for my so-called flaws, when I stopped listening to others when they tried to pull me down, when I declared to myself that ‘I am enough’, life became more beautiful.” Shalini had to pause as people had begun to applaud.

She ended her speech by thanking all the persons who had made the book possible. The long round of applause at the end of her speech and the line of people who queued up to get a signed copy of her book was proof that her words had touched the right chord inside their hearts.

Once the function got over, Sidhanth walked towards Vishal and Shalini who were busy whispering to each other.

“Your wife is a brilliant writer and a wonderful speaker. I have read her book and I am sure it is going to be a bestseller. What a beautiful love story! I am happy for you both. Not everyone finds such true love.”

Vishal shook hands with him and waited until he walked away to meet some of his fans. Then he got back into what he was doing.

“So, let me tell you what we are going to do tonight.”

“I don’t want to know.”

“Come on dear, I think your imagination has run riot. All I want you to do is to read aloud our story to me. I want to make it our new bedtime routine. I want to preen hearing about myself as the hero of your book. You can stop at places where you want some real-life action, you understand?” he said, with a wink.

“You are pathetic.”

“I am. So what?”

“I still love you.”

“I know, sweetheart. And while we are at it, we can also set to accomplish what we have been putting off for months now.”

“What?”

“The arrival of a junior Shalini.”

“No, a junior Vishal.”

Arundhati, who had accompanied Sidhanth backstage, smiled with

amusement hearing their bickering transform into flirtation, again back to bickering within seconds, and walked towards the car.

They gave her hope. Love would always emerge the victor, no matter what.

The End

Acknowledgement

Every book comes to life because of certain reasons, certain incidents or certain individuals.

Writing a note of acknowledgement is an author's way to thank them all.

As always, I thank my family and God first for being with me throughout the period of writing this book. Venugopala, my husband and my son Akshaj has been my best cheerleaders ever since I became a writer. I thank my mother Panchali, my sister Dr. Mini and my brother Dr. Sunil for their unconditional love and support.

This book has been in the making since 2015 July. Perhaps this was the one which sat inside my desk untouched for the longest time.

'Without You' was published in June 2015. It brought home so much love that even before the month was over, I was thinking about writing a sequel to it.

Then one day I came across this quote on Facebook.

“Two damaged souls healing each other is love.”

It planted the seed of a story inside me and 'His Sunshine Girl' was born. A big thank you to whoever shared that quote, because I have forgotten who it was.

A lot of things happened in the interim which saw me almost quitting writing, attending the famed 'Anita's Attic' conducted by eminent author Anita Nair to hone my writing skills, and also a lot of hustle in between.

Thank you, Anita Nair ma'am, you literally brought me back into writing. I am very grateful to Anita Nair ma'am, who was kind enough to evaluate my manuscript and give valuable feedback while at the Attic and afterward.

Aathira Jim, my 2.00 am friend, I owe a lot to you for being my soul sister. But for you, I would have crumbled under the hatred storm that came my way in the beginning of 2016. Thank you for being my best friend.

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What do we writers value most? A support group that will continue to cheer us forward till the last word is written.

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A big thank you to astrologer [Chithrabhanu K Poduval](#), the real-life version of Naveen, Vishal's cousin. Chithrabhanu who also happens to be my junior in school is a software engineer turned astrologer like Naveen and makes eerily accurate predictions.

I also have many other friends for inspiring some of the other characters. Unfortunately, I cannot name them. But I am grateful that they touched my lives in their own special way. You know who you are.

Lastly, I want to thank you, dear reader, for picking up this book. I am forever grateful for the love you shower on me.

Much Love,

Preethi Venugopala

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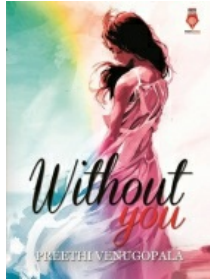
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Other Novels by Preethi Venugopala

Without You:



Blurb:

Dr. Arjun enters Ananya's life like a whirlwind, bringing with him the spirit of young love.

Does the path of true love ever run smooth?

Circumstances force them apart even though they were irrevocably in love. She becomes a victim of depression. When everything fails to return her to normalcy, help arrives from an unexpected source.

Will she ever find happiness again?

Will time allow her heart to heal and forget Arjun?

What indeed is true love?

What is that strange secret that locks all the circumstances together?

Travel with Ananya to the picturesque Sreepuram, face the chaos of Bengaluru, and relish the warmth of magical Dubai in this heart-warming tale of love, betrayal, friendship, and miracles.

A Royal Affair



Blurb:

What would you do if your Prince Charming turned out to be a real Prince?

Jane Worthington, a reporter with a London based entertainment channel, comes to India desperate to find a long-lost relative.

The only person who can help her in her quest is Prince Vijay Dev Varman, the scion of the erstwhile royal family of Sravanapura, the man who broke her heart years ago.

Vijay offers to help her but is determined to remain unaffected by Jane's presence as he is engaged to be married.

Can the two former lovers put their past behind and embark upon a journey that is filled with roadblocks?

How can they succeed to find a missing man in a land of 1.3 billion people?

A gripping suspense novella about second chances in love.