



A watercolor illustration of a woman in a pink dress, seen from the back, looking over her shoulder. The background is a soft blend of green, yellow, and blue, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The title 'Without you' is written in a large, elegant script font, with 'Without' in black and 'you' in red.

# Without you

PREETHI VENUGOPALA

# ***Without You***

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This book is dedicated to my late father, Dr. K.  
Kunhikannan

We miss you every day.

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*“Every night, when I put my pen to paper, I wish to rewrite our story. I yearn to begin it from where it ended.*

*I want to re-script the end, the middle, and the beginning. Then I realize that I love the beginning of our story. I cherish the moments in the middle. And the end—have we even written it yet?*

*I put down my pen then and listen to the unsung song that my heart begins to sing. I find you hiding among the notes. My moist eyes then sketch you on my pillow. While I drift off into the realm of dreams, you return, singing the same song and we go dancing in the moonlight.”*

**—from Ananya’s Journal.**

# Chapter One

“The earth has music for those who listen.”

— George Santayana

## June 20, 2010, Sreepuram

Returning to the place your heart loves to call home is always ecstatic. For me, home was Sreepuram, a picturesque coastal village in North Kerala.

Opening the car windows, I breathed in the pleasant, distinctive smell of the freshly bathed soil. The grey, evening sky showered its greetings on me with tiny rain droplets. My heart joined in the celebration, meting out an ecstatic drum roll. A whole month in Sreepuram, while it looked radiant in rain-drenched green.

Grandma often said that though God threw Adam and Eve out of Eden, he created many slices of heaven on earth for them. One of those heavenly slices was Sreepuram. It was a traveller's dream with ponds, rivers, hillocks, coconut palms and extensive paddy fields. The Arabian Sea guarded it along its western border. Visitors cherished its magnificent sunsets and serene beaches. Every season brought out a different shade of beauty in my Sreepuram.

My prayers had come true at last after three long years. My hectic engineering course had chained me to Bangalore during all my previous semester breaks. Every summer, I had missed Sreepuram.

By the time our car entered the courtyard of Grandma's house, the rain had strengthened. Grandma, whom I called *Ammamma*, was waiting on the porch with an ear-to-ear grin. Even in this pouring monsoon, she appeared bright like a daisy on a sunny day. As usual, she was attired in her spotless white cotton sari with her silver hair neatly pulled into a bun.

The moment the car stopped in the outer courtyard, I darted towards her, allowing the rain to embrace me. *Ammamma* received me with a hug but immediately chided me.

“Oh, Anu, you never change, do you? Running around like a whippet,” she said, inspecting my rain-kissed curls.

“Come on, *Ammamma*, don't scold. Couldn't resist the temptation,” I said.



She tweaked my ears playfully.

Following the aroma of the filter coffee, I ended up in the dining room. Inspecting the casseroles, I found what I had expected. *Appams*, the soft rice pancakes with lacy edges and a soft centre and chicken curry. The chicken curry lured me with its heavenly aroma of spices. The sight elicited a growl from my stomach.

“*Ammamma*, my stomach is rioting. The *Titanic* can sink in my mouth now if it tried. I am not waiting any longer to attack this feast,” I said. I pulled back a chair and opened the casseroles, ready to devour as many *appams* as possible.

“Crazy girl, you look like a wet hen. Go dry your hair and change your clothes. The coffee and *appams* can wait,” Grandma said, closing the casseroles back.

“*Ammamma*, please, let me first fill my tummy,” I tried one last time, but in vain.

After a speedy dress change into dark blue Capri pants and a white top with lace trimmings, I sat down to calm my raging hunger.

“Mmmmm, what an *appam*, *Ammamma*!! If you had given this to Shakespeare, he would have written a thousand sonnets about it,” I said as I closed my eyes, letting the *appam* dipped in spicy chicken curry romance my taste buds.

Grandma chuckled but urged me to stop talking and eat. I obeyed her without much ado.

It was almost twilight. The sun had begun to wane its lights and a cool zephyr brought in the fragrance of blooming jasmines. The peal of the bell broke the silence, which had slowly settled in after the initial hustle and bustle of vessels.

“Ah, who can that be?” Grandma said, getting up to answer the door.

“I will check, *Ammamma*. It might be the kids,” I said. I had a kids’ gang which gave me company during my holidays. I washed my hands and rushed to open the door.

Instead of the gang, a stranger stood on the portico with a small polythene bag in his hands. A salesperson, I assumed, inspecting the smartly dressed

young man.

“Yes?” I asked, summoning up my most apathetic look.

“Is Arundhati aunty here?” he asked. Was he a publisher or a journalist? I wondered.

I forgot to mention. My Grandma, Arundhati Mukundan, is an award-winning poet and author. After Grandfather’s death seven years ago, she had gone into depression. Later on, one of my aunts had discovered a collection of poems *Ammamma* had penned during her hours of darkness. After much coercing from her children, she had agreed to publish them. Her book had become an instant bestseller. She won the state award for literature that year. She had now added two more poem collections and a semi-autobiography to the list. Hence, publishers and journalists often visited.

“And you are?” I asked. Before he answered, Grandma entered the portico to receive the caller.

“Oh, Arjun, it is you! Come in. Wonderful to see you again,” she said with a huge smile on her face. The stranger’s face too had lit up with a bright smile.

“I came to give you these tablets. They are from Vishal,” said the stranger passing the small carry bag to her.

The names Arjun and Vishal, said together, rang a bell inside my brain. This is Arjun?! If I had it right, he was my cousin Vishal’s best friend, Dr. Arjun. He was the one who had been Vishal’s strength when Uma aunty, Vishal’s mom, underwent a critical operation to remove her inflamed gall bladder. The one whom Vishal said he trusted with his life.

Arjun had taken over the routine check-ups of *Ammamma*, whenever Vishal was unavailable. She had told me how well-behaved and loving he was. I had developed a crush on him just by hearing the praises they heaped on him. Yes, without ever having beheld him.

My interest in the visitor piqued a thousand times. I watched him with a renewed interest.

Standing before me was an immensely handsome youth. His hair was perfectly in place. Even at this hour, his white shirt was spotless and wrinkle free. His black trousers hugged his long athletic legs. He looked like a Greek god with his dark brown eyes, thick eyebrows, chiselled features, and whitish complexion. Even though I was 5’ 5”, I felt like a dwarf standing in front of

him. Any sane girl would have fallen for him instantly if she were in my place. I was, of course, sane.

“Thank You, Arjun. It is for Devi, our family retainer Gopu’s wife. She had a headache and Gopu had gone to Bangalore. I was expecting Vishal to bring it. I haven’t seen him in weeks,” Grandma said, while I continued my stealthy scrutiny from behind her.

“He was on his way here. But an emergency case came and he had to return to the hospital. I was coming this way, so I offered to help,” explained Arjun.

“That was so nice of you, Arjun.”

“Who is this, aunty?” enquired Arjun, gesturing towards me.

“This is my granddaughter Ananya. Anu, this is Vishal’s friend, Dr. Arjun. He is also a neighbour now,” said Grandma, conducting a mutual introduction.

“Hello Ananya, nice meeting you,” said Arjun, with a smile.

I bestowed on him my best smile and greeted him back with a quiet ‘Hi’.

“What do you do?”

“I am in my final year of engineering,” I said. To my amazement, a sudden attack of nervousness seized me. Wasn’t it okay to be nervous when one was in the presence of one’s long time crush? Moreover, what a ‘*crush*’ it had turned out to be!

“Wow, great!” he said.

“Come on inside, son. Have some tea.”

“No, Aunty. Thanks. I will leave now. Mum will be waiting,” said Arjun, walking down the portico steps. Huh, he couldn’t wait to escape!

Grandma and I watched as his white Toyota Corolla pulled off from our gate, turned a corner, and moved out of sight.

“You said he is our neighbour. When did that happen?” I asked, as Grandma and I returned to the dining table to finish our coffee.

“Do you remember that plot in the east, where that old shop used to be? They constructed a new house in its place two years ago. He lives there with his mother. Poor boy, his father passed away last year in an accident.”

“But *Ammamma*, I remember you telling me that the plot belonged to a

relative of yours, someone named Madhavan.”

“Yes, yes, Rajashekhar, Arjun’s dad is his son. So, we are distant relatives too,” said Grandma, helping herself to another cup of coffee.

A group of three kids came in then, putting an end to our conversation with a shout of “Yippee...Anu is here” and dancing in glee around the table.

It was Anamika, Achyuth, and Deepak, all three of them members of my vacation gang. Anamika aka Ammu though only nine years old was the chatterbox of the gang. Achyuth aka Achu, her brother and elder to her by three years, was the genius of the group. Deepak, their cousin, was Achyuth’s age and looked almost like a twin to Achyuth.

“Anu, you have become so stylish and pretty! Just look at your hair. Wow, now you look like a cross between Aishwarya Rai and Madhuri Dixit,” declared Ammu. A big fan of Bollywood movies, she walked around and inspected me closely.

I had allowed my short curly hair to grow out of its boyish bob-cut and had styled it last Christmas, in the layered style popularized by Madhuri Dixit. As my eyes were greyish green, like that of Aishwarya Rai, Ammu had given her verdict. I chuckled.

“Thanks, cutie,” I said. I pinched her cheeks, making her squeal with laughter, “All three of you have grown so tall.”

These kids helped me relive the days when, along with my four cousins, I had wreaked havoc in this place during our vacations. Though I had turned twenty last November, I loved being a child, which I became when I was with them.

With my cousins, Kishore, Navneeth, Naveen and Vishal, now grown up and working, vacations had become a lonely affair. Then these kids had moved into Sreepuram during my school vacation six years ago. The time spent in Sreepuram had become fun again. At that time, Ammu was barely three. I took full advantage of being the eldest in the gang. I cheated and challenged them on adventures in which I was already an expert.

Being the lone girl among Grandma’s five grandchildren, I had done everything under the sun that elders insisted a girl should not do. I was sprightly and mean, according to my cousins. Nevertheless, we were always a team. We fought like cats but managed to love each other despite it. Even

now when we were together, we were capable of bringing the roof down. Any place would instantly start to feel like home.

I had many nicknames too, thanks to them.

I was ‘Cat’ owing to my grey eyes and sharp nails, the name given by Kishore, my eldest cousin.

Due to my pale skin and ability to climb compound walls, Navneeth had christened me ‘Lizard’.

The most popular name was ‘Monkey’ because of my prowess in climbing trees. Nobody could beat me in that.

My cousins were the reason that I became a tomboy. I hated girly stuff and dressed in trousers and t-shirts just like them. My wardrobe had more jeans and t-shirts than churidars or skirts. Bless those, who started the trend of girls dressing up like boys.

In my engineering class, I was the odd one in a class overflowing with gorgeous girls. Did I regret that? No. Boys were better off as friends. They had no interest in me. It was not because I was ugly. Perhaps my lack of feminine grace drove them away. I was merely their tomboy friend with weird coloured eyes.

“How long is your vacation this time, Anu?” Deepak’s question ended my reverie.

“I will be here till the 18th of July.” Enthusiastic cheers from the trio greeted my answer.

We spent the rest of the evening merrily exchanging news and I distributed the gifts that I had brought for them from Bangalore. Ammu squealed with delight when I gave her a box full of colourful hair clips and bindies in varied designs. Achyuth rushed out to fill his water gun, his gift, from the courtyard pipe. Deepak and I shared a common passion for arts and so, I knew that he’d like the oils pastels that I had got for him. *Ammamma* came out onto the portico then, where we had settled on the decorative wooden benches that bordered it, to break up the cosy get together.

“It is getting dark, kids. Go home now. Anu is not going anywhere for the next one month. Run before your parents arrive with a stick.”

At the mention of their parents, they bundled out of our house, chattering

excitedly and promising to come the next day.

The rest of the night passed in unpacking and settling into my room. Devi, Gopu's wife, who was also the household help, had cleaned and prepared my room. The fragrance of Sambrani, a kind of incense, that she had lit to freshen up the room still lingered. The cupboards smelled of mothballs, and the window curtains were new. The monsoons had cooled down the temperature and a thick blanket, folded into a perfect rectangle, lay at the foot of my bed.

Grandma must have come to inspect the room a hundred times. She was a compulsive perfectionist. Her love was evident in every little thing that was present in the house. It was soothing to be back. The moment I entered it, something had unwounded within me.

Right after dinner I fell onto my bed, exhausted, unaware of the twist my life was about to take.

## Chapter Two

“I know what I have given you,  
I do not know what you have received.”

— Antonio Porchia

### June 27, 2010, Sreepuram

The week had passed in utter bliss for me. The absence of rushed mornings, boring lectures and suffocating traffic blocks had been rejuvenating.

The weather had played havoc with all the planned vacation activities with the kids and had confined me to the house. But I was not upset even a bit. Devouring a book, enjoying a hot cup of tea while it poured non-stop outside, proved to be closer to nirvana.

Grandma had stocked the home library with several bestsellers, which added to the pleasure of reading. Unlike previous vacations, when I joined the kids to feast on the mangoes like birds or go fishing and swimming in the nearby lake, this time it was indoor games, book reading sessions and many lazy hours chatting with Grandma.

That day, I entered the library to return *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, which I was reading for the umpteenth time. I lingered at the shelves searching for a book to read next. Mr. Darcy had made my thoughts hover unwittingly around Arjun.

I had met Arjun many times during my morning rambles through Sreepuram. Quite like how Elizabeth often met Darcy during her walks through her neighbourhood. Arjun would be on his way to the hospital and would stop his car to speak to me. We didn't talk much. Mostly our talks were confined to polite enquiries or talks about the weather. He always seemed to be in a hurry. But every time I met him, an unknown longing seized my heart. Why that stranger had taken possession of my thoughts over the last week was a sweet unanswered question.

The rain lashing on the windowpanes, like the relentless drumming of nails, made the odd ache coursing through my being to become stronger. Just then, the chime of the bells from the prayer room below alerted me to the necessity of a bath. Grandma insisted that all the members of the family bathed before she lit the evening lamp.

My room was on the first floor, adjoining the library, and had an attached bathroom. The bath did not take long, owing to the cold water that came from the shower. The steady downpour had made the water in the well grow ice cold. After changing into a rose-pink salwar kameez with blue embroidery, I took off the towel tied to my hair. I liked my hair better when they were wet—all curled up like noodles and soft. Another few hours and they would turn into an unruly mess. I left them uncombed, remembering one of Grandma's rules. "Never comb your hair when they are wet."

As I walked down the stairs into the foyer, the echo of a familiar booming laughter coming from the living room reached me. None in my acquaintance laughed like that, except Vishal.

I dashed into the living room, shouting, "Fatso... long time, no see."

I stopped abruptly at the door, noticing that Vishal was not alone. Watching me with eyes glittering with amusement was Arjun. I squirmed and wished for a hole in the earth to swallow me. Was that too much to ask?

"You nutty, loony girl, is this how you greet your poor brother after such a long time?" Vishal hollered, before smothering me with a bear hug. Though older than me by seven years, his chubby face made him look like a kid.

Among my cousins, he was the one dearest to me. He led me to the sofa and made me sit between him and Grandma, who had joined us after the evening prayers. Arjun occupied an opposite chair.

"Tell me, Anu, how were your sixth-semester exams?"

"Good. This time the papers were easy. I am expecting a good percentage."

"Wonderful. I believe you have campus placements. Soon you too will be earning well and enjoying life. It is good that you selected engineering. If you become a doctor, you just don't have a life," said Vishal.

"That is the most thoughtless speech I have heard from you, Vishal. You people are life givers, while all other jobs are just comfort providers. A doctor in a neighbourhood is hundred times more respected than any other professional," chided Grandma.

"But *Ammamma*, the hours we spend on duty are unforgiving and the atmosphere is so depressing. How cheerful can patients make you with their constant whining and complaints? Years of studies and we still don't have any time to relax," continued Vishal and appeared to be in no mood to give



up.

Did Arjun have the same sentiments? As if answering my thoughts, he joined the conversation.

“The pleasure of sending home a critical patient, completely cured, is unmatched. That is the satisfaction we get from this profession. I absolutely love what I do. It is true we have to work doubly hard and have less time for ourselves. The need to update ourselves with the newly emerging approaches in our field leaves very little time for other pursuits,” said Arjun.

His words impressed me.

“There! That is the way a good doctor should think. Money or comfort should not be your aim. Nowadays doctors are creating more diseases than they cure by prescribing unwanted and low-quality medicines with the sole aim to earn more money,” said Grandma.

“Okay, okay, even I agree with what Arjun said. But, as you know, I dearly love my sleep. Once a week, I have to do night shifts. With the babies deciding to pop out at all unearthly hours, I have so much of my sleep pending.”

They were senior resident doctors in the nearby medical college hospital, having completed their graduation and post-graduation from there. Vishal did a PG in paediatrics and Arjun in cardiology. Answering Grandma’s query about their career plans, both answered that they wanted to do fellowships abroad.

“Don’t you want to get married? I guess it is time that you both settled down,” said Grandma.

“Of course, I am eagerly looking forward to that event,” said Vishal. He was gulping down a banana that Gopu had brought in together with the tea.

“Oh my God, who will be that unlucky girl?” I asked, rolling my eyes. It was always fun teasing Vishal. His quirky replies were legendary.

“I will marry that friend of yours if I get nobody else,” said Vishal, teasing me back.

“Which friend are you talking about?” I asked. I knew that he meant Pooja, my pretty neighbour, with whom he had flirted endlessly when he had last come to Bangalore.

“Pooja, isn’t that your friend’s name?”

“Bad luck bro. She got engaged last month to a lawyer.”

“Oh my, I am heartbroken,” said Vishal, placing his palm over his heart and rubbing it, feigning sadness.

All of us burst out laughing, watching Vishal in his heartbroken Romeo act.

“What about you, Arjun?” asked Grandma, after the laughter subsided. My heart thudded.

“No, Aunty. No plans as of now. I want to study further. Settling down will come after that. I should also find a girl who will agree to marry me, right?”

His reply was a relief to me. I understood why. I had begun to think of him as my own. The possessive beast in me was slowly raising its hood.

“Yeah, yeah, that will be a great challenge! You know *Ammamma*, this person has girls swooning over him everywhere. The heir to the ‘Shine Empire’ is surely a prize catch. But this guy, he does not give a damn about anyone. There was this girl in our class, who wrote his name even on exam papers. Poor girl, failed in her exams and also in the attempt to win his heart,” said Vishal.

Grandma tweaked Vishal’s ears for embarrassing Arjun, but I snorted with laughter. I looked at Arjun and found him staring at me, with a mysterious expression, which left the moment he noticed me looking at him.

Was he the scion of the Shine Group? That was news to me. Shine Group had many hypermarkets in India and the Gulf countries. Add to it, his looks. No wonder girls chased him.

An hour passed soon with Vishal cracking jokes and replying to Grandma’s many enquiries about aunt Uma.

My eyes wandered to Arjun often and almost always our eyes met. I wondered what he thought about me. I would have traded anything in the world to enter his good books. He had made me fall in love with him without even trying. I know it was foolish; I didn’t even know him properly. I had fallen in love with the person Vishal and Grandma had painted with their words. It was possible that he might turn out to be a complete snob.

Arjun nudged Vishal then and whispered something.

Vishal grinned and said, “Yes, yes, I had almost forgotten.”

He took out a beautifully wrapped gift from a bag kept beside the sofa and handed it to me.

“Belated birthday wishes, Anu.”

Tears pooled in my eyes as I accepted the gift. What good did I do to have this loving person in my life?

Not a single year had gone by without Vishal giving me a birthday present. It was a tradition he had started since childhood. If he could not make it to my birthday, which was in November, he gave me a belated birthday gift the next time we met. This time it was June already.

“Open it and scream,” said Vishal with a huge grin.

I mumbled my thanks and opened the package.

“Oh my God! Thank you, thank you, thank you,” I screamed, just like he had predicted. I gave him a hug so tight that he snorted with laughter.

The gift was a smart phone. My friends Khushi and Poornima had similar ones. I didn’t own one because, in my parents’ opinion, I didn’t need it as I was a day-scholar.

My happiness soared and I wanted to jump and scream until I went hoarse. Only the presence of Arjun prevented me from doing that. I had an image to build.

“I have put in a local SIM card and it has a talk time of 500 rupees as well. You can start using it. Change it when you go back to Bangalore,” Vishal said. He then proceeded to explain to me the phone’s functions. My heart sang when the phone turned on with a chime. To make the whole thing even more memorable, I clicked photos of all of us with my new phone.

“Tell me your number, let me test my phone,” I said to Vishal.

“I have saved it in.”

“What is yours, Arjun?” asked Grandma, “Save Arjun’s number also Anu. Vishal’s phone is mostly switched off when I call,” Grandma instructed me. When Arjun gave his number, I saved it with a wicked happiness. Yay, I had his number.

“Give me a missed call so that I have your number too,” Arjun said. I did that promptly and my heart roared with pleasure.

Though I was eager to experiment with my new toy and wanted to learn all its hidden powers, I was disappointed when Vishal and Arjun got up to leave. How I wished the magical evening would stretch a little more!

I had a few moments alone with Arjun while Vishal discussed something with Gopu. I wondered why I had trouble maintaining eye contact with him and why my cheeks turned warm in his presence. When I didn't find anything to talk about, I complained how relentless the rains were. Thank God for weather. Otherwise, many like me wouldn't have started a conversation. Before I could proceed to complex topics, Vishal returned. And then he walked away with Vishal after bestowing a smile on me.

Once they left, I turned my attention back to my phone. Gushing with happiness, I took photos of random objects and many self-portraits. To boast about the gift, I called my friends Khushi and Poornima, who were doing some project work together at Poornima's house. They chorused "Big deal" and I asked them to shut up. It was, of course, their jealousy talking. They were angry not only because I had completed my share of the work on our project well before them, but I had also escaped the mad rush of Bangalore.

In my haste to be back in Sreepuram, I had slogged in front of the computer during all my free hours in college, completing my portion of our structural design project. They had been too lazy to join me. Now, I was enjoying while they were racking their brains solving design problems. Ignoring their jealousy, I wished them a sweet goodnight. I set an alarm for six am, and fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

Early the next morning, I headed out with my new acquisition with the intention of testing it. Sreepuram was prettiest an hour or so after sunrise. How much beauty my phone camera could capture, I was not sure.

There was a small hillock with a view point next to Grandma's house. I headed there. I took in the beauty of the scenery before me. The night rain had rendered the air cool and the morning mist made the scene ethereal. Sunlight filtering in through the few rain clouds that still littered the horizon gave shining silver borders to them. The fog that lingered gave the appearance of clouds coming down. Perhaps an angel was about to emerge from it, to prepare the earth for a hectic day. It looked like nature, in all its blooming glory, was sending up gratitude to the heavens for yet another beginning.

I brought out my phone and clicked away with zest. I captured the small flowers, the touch-me-not plants, the birds starting on their daily run and the green paddy fields spread in front of me.

“Are you new here? I haven’t seen you around.” I jumped in surprise on hearing a strange male voice.

I turned to face a slightly balding, bespectacled man dressed in a grey tracksuit. I had not seen this person before. Without answering, I scrutinized him through narrowed eyes.

“Oh, I have offended you. I was just passing by and asked you out of curiosity. Forgive my very bad manners,” said the stranger, and with a tiny shrug resumed his morning jog.

“I am not new here. But I haven’t seen you around,” I said, curious about the stranger who seemed embarrassed by my silence.

“I am Colonel R.S. Nair, formerly of the Border Security Force. I live down there,” he said pointing in the direction opposite to Grandma’s house, “Settled here two years ago.”

That explained why I had not met him before. In this tiny village, there were no strangers. If a visitor came anywhere, the whole village knew.

He continued with his morning jog with a smile after I introduced myself. I should have spoken to him longer. By village standards, I had acted rude to a seemingly nice country gentleman.

There was something familiar about him, though. I couldn’t pinpoint as to what it was. I think I had seen him somewhere. Where, I had no idea.

My photography continued uninterrupted until Gopu came in search of me and I returned home, fearing a yelling from Grandma.

## **Chapter Three**

Art washes from the soul the dust of day life.

-Pablo Picasso

### **July 2, 2010, Sreepuram**

After lunch, I selected a book from the library and retreated to my bedroom. I propped the pillows up against the bed's headrest, lied down, and began reading. I did not realize when I fell asleep. No matter the place or climate, the siesta was a weakness; it was a family trait in fact. My mother, Vishal and all my other cousins were experts in the area. The clock on the wall told me that it was three in the afternoon. Walking out onto the balcony, I faced a cool and clear afternoon. The rain gods had taken a break since morning.

Grandma's house had a garden filled with a variety of annuals, decorative bushes, and flowering trees. The garden was Grandma's pride. She spent hours daily pruning the plants and picking out the weeds. The Gulmohar tree that stood in the corner of the garden was in full bloom, which was a little unusual for this time of the year. Vermillion coloured flowers dotted the neatly maintained lawn. The lawn looked like a blushing bride, summoning me to paint it. Tying my hair into a ponytail, I went into the library. After gathering my painting materials from there, I headed to the garden.

A cool breeze was playing with the flowers, creating an enchanting dance of colours. I selected the shade below the mango tree facing the Gulmohar, for placing my easel. A few fallen blossoms that I had picked from the lawn found a place on the easel, as the reference for my painting. Creating a rough outline first with pencil, I completed the initial coat to establish the major colours. As usual, when I painted, the surroundings except my muse blanked out. I mixed and remixed colours to bring out the scenery before me. The green garden with flower patches, the vermilion-clad Gulmohar, the blue sky, with the greyish white fluffy clouds by degrees came alive on my canvas. I was completely engrossed in capturing their beauty.

Three hours later, I was still at it. Holding a thin brush in my mouth while blending colours with a round one, I walked back a few steps to inspect the blending I had done for the sky and bumped into someone. At the unexpected contact, I yelped, dropped both the brushes and I lost my balance. Before I could fall, two strong hands steadied me.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you,” said Arjun, as he released me, “You were so engrossed in painting. I didn’t want to disturb you.”

I looked past him and found his car parked in the courtyard. When had I turned so deaf?

Arjun believed he had disturbed me and sounded upset. Did I regret it? No way, I was happy that I fell into his arms. I struggled to control my wicked thoughts.

“You scared me,” I said, rolling my eyes, “Normally, everyone around here knows that I am nuts while painting and ignore me completely. I am never disturbed,” I clarified.

“Ananya, I am sorry,” said Arjun, repeating his apology with a stricken face.

“Hey, it is all right. I did not mind at all. See, you didn’t do any damage,” I said, gesturing towards the painting. His eyes flitted between the garden and my painting as though comparing the two.

“It is amazing! You have captured the beauty of the scene in front of you so well. You are a gifted artist, Ananya,” he said. His eyes had a sparkle, which I hoped reflected his admiration for my work.

“You think so? Thank you,” I said and floated to cloud number nine.

“Can I take a photo of your painting?” Arjun asked taking out his phone.

“Of course, go ahead,” I said, moving aside to let him take the photo.

He showed me the photo he clicked and yes, my painting looked lovely indeed.

“Don’t you want the artist’s photo? You’ll need it so that you can boast one day, that you know the great artist Ananya Shankar,” I said. I confess I was stunned by my audacity.

“Is that what you want to be, a famous artist?” Arjun asked as he picked the brushes that I had dropped on the lawn. His lips curved into a smile as he handed them back to me.

“No. Honestly, I love painting and sketching. It is a passion. I can’t think of painting for money,” I replied.

“So, it is ‘art for art’s sake’ then.”

“I would say it is ‘art for heart’s sake’. The pleasure I get from art is beyond

words.”

“Wonderful! So, would you be kind enough to pose with your painting, madam?” Arjun asked with a grin. Could a grin be lethal? His was. That grin alone could make girls drool over him.

“Okay. I am ready,” I said and posed near my painting crossing my arms over my chest.

“No. Not like that. Face your painting and pretend you are working on it. Here, take this brush,” he said, picking up a brush from the easel stand. He clicked the photo from the side so that only my profile was visible. He showed me the photo. I was elated that I had found a place on his phone.

“What brings you here today, Arjun?” I asked remembering that it was a week since I had seen him last.

“Vishal thinks I am the courier boy, I guess. Some documents this time, for you.”

Arjun took out a thick envelope from his shoulder bag.

“Thank you. I had asked Vishal to take a printout of some documents from my college website. These might be those papers. I hope it was not a bother,” I said, taking the envelope from him.

“It was a pleasure.”

His tone tempted me to interpret his answer in a different manner. Did my presence make the task a pleasure? One could always wish!

“Let us go inside, Arjun. *Ammamma* would love to see you,” I said and gathered my painting materials, mainly to distract myself from my thoughts.

“Okay, let me help you take your things inside.”

I denied his request but he insisted. He carried the easel with the painting still pinned to it into the house. As we entered the hall, Gopu came and greeted Arjun. Grandma was at the dining table having tea. She promptly invited us to join her. Gopu took the easel from Arjun and showed her the painting.

“Isn’t my Anu a good artist, Arjun?” Grandma asked, beaming.

“She is amazing. I am an art enthusiast. I think it can easily find a place in any reputed gallery. You should never stop painting, Ananya.”

His words were spreading goose bumps all over me. Arjun stayed for a little



over half an hour. For the entire duration, my heart seemed to be performing a Brazilian tango. I wanted him to leave before I did something foolish. I even wondered how it would feel to be kissed by him.

Later that evening, lying down on my bed, all I could do was think about Arjun and the time spent with him. I relived those brief moments in his arms a thousand times. I could even register the faint smell of his cologne. The memory of the warmth of his hands when he had steadied me made me curl into a ball, confining the warmth inside. I was inexplicably in love. I should have kept away from him, if I had wished to remain sane.

Grandma's call for dinner broke my thoughts. Reluctantly, I headed down. I was so overwhelmed by what I felt for Arjun that I wasn't even hungry any more.

During dinner, Grandma reminded me about our scheduled trip to the temple, early the next morning.

"For what are you bribing God this time, *Ammamma*?" I asked.

"For putting some brain into my goofy granddaughter," Grandma said, and I displayed my disgust by making weird faces.

Grandma was an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva, the Supreme God and the destroyer among the Trinity in Hinduism. She was highly spiritual and firmly believed in the power of prayer. She'd pray when someone in the family was in trouble, when any of her grandkids were expecting an exam result, or even when there was something good and auspicious. Grandma did not pray for herself. She believed that God had given her more than she deserved.

These days, her prayers were for Gopu, the family retainer, and Devi, his wife.

Gopu and Devi were childless even after eight years of marriage. Grandma had always thought of and looked after Gopu and Devi as her own.

Gopu was all of eleven when he had first come to our house, thirty years ago. His mother had been our live-in cook. Grandma had sponsored his education when she found that little Gopu was good at studies. After Grandpa's death, Grandma appointed Gopu as our family retainer. Gopu's wife Devi, an orphan, was another one of her protégées.

Normally I did not pray for anything. This time though, I did have something on my mind. I wanted my heart's most ardent wish fulfilled.

## Chapter Four

“To love or have loved, that is enough. Ask nothing further.

There is no other pearl to be found in the dark folds of life.”

-Victor Hugo

### July 3, 2010, Sreepuram

*The river is narrow and my small boat is loaded with a variety of flowers. Downstream, he is waiting. Even though he has his back towards me and it is foggy all around, I recognize him. I wish to be near him, as soon as possible. The thunder rolls and I shiver. The air is getting colder by the minute. Hasten, I tell myself, and paddle faster.*

“Anu, get up,” Grandma cried, pounding on my door. “You promised you will come with me to the temple.”

Sigh! I would have given anything to be able to go back to sleep and finish my dream. I wished to see the person who was waiting for me downstream.

“Huh, *Ammamma*, just ten more minutes, please,” I said. The clock on the wall warned me it was already 5.30 in the morning. I had to take a bath and be ready in half an hour, if we had to reach on time at the temple.

“Come on, Anu, we have to be there before the morning prayer begins,” Grandma persisted.

I raised my sleepy head and sighed again thinking about my lost dream.

We reached the temple by 06:20 and heard the familiar sound of the drum, heralding the start of the morning prayer.

The cool morning breeze, the chirping birds, the fragrance of the sandalwood paste combined with that of the incense, the chants from the priests together created a serene world. Unlike the temples in Bangalore, which were mostly small, this Shiva temple was huge and set amidst acres of paddy fields.

A huge banyan tree stood proudly near the entrance. The temple faced the holy pond in the northeast corner where the devotees washed their hand and feet before entering the temple. The water in the pond was sacred and, hence, washing one’s hand and feet in its water was thought to be an act of cleansing one’s body and soul.

I looked around, bored already. There was a moderate crowd inside the temple with more people trickling in now and then. According to the temple tradition, the devotees had to take a bath and come to the temple dressed traditionally, which explained why I had agreed to wear my silk skirt and blouse. Reserved for special visits or occasions like this, I loathed the heavy garb. It made me sweat like a pig.

While entering the inner sanctum of the temple, men had to remove their shirts. Therefore, a few paunches were visible and I tried hard not to giggle when our neighbour Krishnan, who was in his late fifties, entered the temple, his belly doing a slow dance.

“*Ammamma*,” I said, elbowing her, “Ever-pregnant-never-deliver just arrived,” using the nickname that Grandma had given him.

“Shush, girl, he might hear you,” Grandma cautioned with a smirk.

It was while doing the Pradakshina (the ritual walks around the sanctum sanctorum), after we offered our symbolic offerings to Lord Shiva, that I saw him. Eyes closed and hands folded in prayer, Arjun was standing in front of the main idol of Lord Shiva. He was dressed in the traditional off-white *mundu* with golden borders and had a similar shawl over his shoulders. Ogling at such a perfect male specimen, my heart skipped and jiggled like a Mozart symphony. I nudged Grandma in earnest.

“*Ammamma*... Arjun!”

“Good morning Arjun,” said Grandma, approaching him.

Arjun turned to face us. He seemed a little surprised by our appearance but greeted us back warmly.

“To what do we owe your presence here, Arjun? Is today a special day?” Grandma asked. “Today is my birthday, Aunty.”

“Wow, happy birthday, Arjun,” I whispered, “Where is the treat?”

“Thank you. But isn’t the birthday boy entitled to receive a gift first?” Arjun asked, smiling, his eyes glittering with mischief.

“Promise a treat and you will receive your gift,” I declared, with a smile that matched Arjun’s.

“Agreed,” he said, “I will bring you a treat in the evening.”

We waited as the priest said a special prayer for Arjun. He received the

prasadam, the symbolic blessing in the form of flowers, basil leaves, and sandalwood paste from the deity. All of us walked out of the temple together.

I did most of the chattering with Arjun listening intently. To keep the blabbering meaningful, I told him about the legend of the temple, as he was new to Sreepuram. According to the legend, which I had heard from *Ammamma*, Parusurama, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu, had consecrated 108 Shiva temples and 108 Durga temples after he had created Kerala to protect and prosper the land he had created. Our village temple was one among them. I talked about how much I loved the temples in Sreepuram compared to the ones we had in Bangalore. After listening to me intently, he confessed that he too liked the serene atmosphere. Caught up in the talk, I did not notice that Grandma was not accompanying us, until we reached our cars.

“What? Why is she standing there?” I wondered when I turned to find her still standing near the temple entrance, gazing in our direction. Puzzled, I ran back.

“*Ammamma*, what happened?” I asked, snapping my fingers in front of her. She was smirking, as if in a trance, “Saw some old lover?” I asked and she chuckled aloud.

“You loony girl, go, I was caught up in my wayward thoughts,” said she, taking the time to wear her slippers. We continued towards our car hand in hand. Arjun was waiting for us near his car, talking to Gopu. On beholding us, he flashed his lethal grin.

The attention he was showering us with pleased me. He opened the door for Grandma and me to get into our car and bade goodbye, promising to come in the evening. I stared at him in the rear-view mirror. He was standing at the same spot watching our moving car as if lost in thoughts. Did I feature in them?

All the way back, my thoughts were focused on him. I was not merely in love with him. I was obsessed with him. Was being in love an addiction?

“What should I gift him, *Ammamma*?” I asked when we sat down to breakfast half an hour later. My exhilarated state of mind was not letting my brain to function.

“To Arjun?”

“Yes, *Ammamma*. I can’t think of anything.”

“Gift him something you painted. He showed interest in what you painted yesterday.”

“No *Ammamma*, he took a photo of that painting with his mobile. What if I gift him his pencil portrait?”

“Good idea. But you need a reference photo to do that, right?”

“I have one already. Do you remember the photos that I took that day when Vishal gifted me the mobile? There is one among those that will be a perfect reference. That will be enough,” I told her with confidence.

I started working on Arjun’s portrait immediately. With his movie star looks, Arjun was an artists’ dream. The chiselled features, the broad forehead with neat looking brows, clean-shaven face, eyes that spoke volumes, all promised to make it the best portrait I had ever created. By lunchtime, I had the portrait ready. I used charcoal for the darker areas and pencil for the lighter areas. The outcome was satisfactory.

“It looks so real, child,” Grandma said when I held the sketchbook open in front of her. She asked me to hand the portrait to her for a better look.

“No *Ammamma*, you cannot touch it right now. I forgot the fixative spray. If you touch it, you will smudge it. I should get it framed in glass. Otherwise, the portrait will be ruined in no time,” I said, mentally cursing my negligence.

“But if you want to gift it today, I don’t think you will find someone to frame it for you here. I don’t know of any framing shops nearby.”

“I am sure Gopu will know someone, *Ammamma*. Tell him to help me please.”

Therefore, at Grandma’s order, a reluctant Gopu came with me in search of someone who could frame the portrait. We found a man at last, but he refused, saying that he was not free. I pestered him until he agreed to do it, but he made us wait an hour. What the hell? In Bangalore, there were framing shops in every nook and corner and they did it in minutes.

A gruelling hour later, when I saw the portrait framed in the silver and black frame that I had chosen, I forgot how tiring the afternoon had been.

I showed Grandma the framed portrait and she was overjoyed.

“It looks like it is done by a professional, Anu. Your drawing master would

be pleased if he saw it.”

“Pleased? No, far from it! He would have found out my mistakes. There are many. It is just that you have not noticed. My reference photo was not clear so I had to rely on my memory for the details.” I explained.

“Ahem, ahem, then you sure have looked at him a great deal, child.”

Her teasing cough and words floored me but I protested fiercely trying my best not to blush.

“Aye child, what is wrong in that? He is such a nice person. Handsome, educated, and friendly, I am sure any girl your age would love to look at him.” I narrowed my eyes at her beginning to suspect her sudden magnanimity and she chuckled.

“Go along. Take a bath and be back. He might come any moment now.”

“Ok *Ammamma*, give me the portrait. I need to gift wrap it.”

“Why? I know you just want to continue looking at it until the original comes.”

I rolled my eyes feeling helpless. She was plotting something. Knowing her, I could easily guess what it might be. Grandma was known as the cupid in our family circles because of her extra- ordinary match-making skills.

“You are impossible, *Ammamma*. Nothing like that,” I maintained, “I want to gift wrap it so that there is an element of surprise.”

She gave me back the portrait with another one of her smirks and I ran up the stairs clutching the portrait close to my heart. I didn’t want her to know that I had fallen for Arjun. For the first time in my life, I wanted to hide my true emotions from Grandma. Did love make one a liar?

After my bath, I sat down in front of the dressing table mirror. I had been thinking about Arjun all the while. The reflection of the portrait kept on the table in the mirror persuaded me to confess that instead of the portrait, I wished the man himself was near me at that moment. I wrapped the portrait in a fancy paper with care. I desperately wanted Arjun to like his portrait.

Moments from the temple visit played on a loop in my mind’s eye. He had looked handsome, and charming. The words he spoke were crystal clear in my mind. I’d had many re-runs of that conversation, revising and chastising my poor eloquence. I could have asked him so many things. And I had talked

about the temple. Phew!

What could I do to make him fall in love with me? If anyone knew how to brew the perfect love potion that could make him fall in love with me, I would have bought it, bartering my soul for it. Never had I felt anything akin to this. I had built an emotional barrier around me and prohibited anyone to enter my thoughts or life. Arjun had broken each one of those defences with ease and had cemented a permanent place in my heart.

From the very first time I had heard about Arjun, my heart had become partial to him. As though it had recognized destiny's cue that he was not just a glorified stranger. After meeting him, my heart had become obsessed with him. It convinced me that he was someone who wouldn't let me down, someone who wouldn't hurt me. It was like building a sandcastle with loose, dry sand. Failure was its only destiny. I was yearning to be connected with him without waiting for time to induce love. Oh, how I wished he would fall in love with me!

Bringing myself back to the present, I deliberated over what to wear for the evening. After much thought, I selected a peach cotton churidar with delicate white embroidery work, which in the opinion of Khushi and Poornima, became me. I applied my favourite moisturizer that smelled of lavender. I rehearsed what I should talk to him, checked how I looked when I said the words, and improvised. The soliloquy continued unabated.

If I had known what was about to follow, would I have gone through all those troubles then?

## Chapter Five

Speak low, if you speak love.

-William Shakespeare

### July 3, 2010, Sreepuram

“Anu, where are you? Come down, child.”

It was Ammamma. Maybe Arjun had come.

I ran down the stairs with the portrait and a wildly fluttering heart.

Arjun had indeed come. He was sitting on a chair near *Ammamma*. He looked at me when I entered and smiled. I basked in its warmth.

“Many happy returns of the day, birthday boy,” I said, following my many rehearsals before the mirror, remembering to smile when I gave him my gift.

“Thank you, Ananya.”

“Just thank you? Where is my treat?”

“Right here,” said Arjun and handed me a big box of chocolates—a pack of Cadbury Celebrations.

“Wow, thank you! I love chocolates. You want to know what I gifted you, don’t you? I won’t mind if you opened it here,” I told him. I desperately wanted to see his reaction.

He carefully removed the wrapping paper and took out the portrait. He gazed at it silently for a while. When he looked at me again, there was an intense look in his eyes, and my pulse raced.

“Thank you so much. It is incredible,” Arjun said. I tried hard not to blush but to no avail.

“Her sketchbook is full of many such sketches. The library has many of her paintings. She had done those during her previous vacations. Take him there and show him your creations, Anu.”

My breath quickened. I knew what my dear Grandma was trying to do. She had turned on her matchmaker mode. I had seen her like this, on many occasions, when there were weddings in the family. She had a remarkable history in playing cupid. Among her victims was Kishore, Vishal’s elder



brother. She had enough tricks up her sleeves, perhaps more than the original one. I looked at Arjun. To my horror, he kept the portrait on the side table and stood up to follow me. Though I had prayed for such a moment, I was a bundle of nerves. The library was on the first floor and I took him there. I took a moment to calm my jittery nerves before I carried my sketchbooks to Arjun who was inspecting my paintings displayed on the library wall.

“Wow. You should have a solo exhibition of your art, Ananya. These are one of a kind,” said Arjun as he leafed through my sketchbook.

“I don’t know if I wish to commercialise my art, Arjun. I draw for my pleasure. If someone asked me to do a portrait, it might not come perfect. I need inspiration. Sometimes, I get an idea to paint or sketch. Then until I finish it perfectly, it keeps haunting me.”

“Did my face haunt you?” Arjun asked with a piercing stare. “It is perfect I feel,” he added as though to explain.

I blushed furiously as he continued to hold my gaze. I mumbled a ‘No’. I sat on the couch as a sudden weakness gripped my knees.

“Your face is haunting me though, day and night, right from the moment I saw you.” He paused. His eyes searched my face as if analysing my reaction.

My heart was drumming a crescendo. What did he mean? He kept the sketchbook on the table and walked towards me. He stood before the couch facing me with his hands firmly in his pocket. I bit my lower lip and looked down.

“Pardon me if you find what I am about to say disgusting. I know this might sound weird. We met only two weeks ago. But I feel like I have known you since ages. My every waking thought is of you. I think I have fallen in love with you, Anu.”

Did he really say he was in love with me? He had called me Anu too, instead of the usual Ananya. I was rendered speechless by the tumult of emotions. I couldn’t even lift my eyes to him.

My silence was disturbing him. The tension in the room was palpable and I could feel it like a blast of air.

“Please do not torture me with your silence, Anu. Say something, please.”

Taking a deep breath, gathering all my courage, I looked up into his eyes.

The longing that I found there made me speak. The magic of the moment spurred me on.

“I don’t know what to say. I am lost for words. But, you should know. I love you too. I have been in love with you since long,” I blurted out in a voice thick with emotion.

Arjun’s whole face lit up. Immediately, he kneeled beside the couch and took both my arms in his.

“This is the best birthday gift I have ever received. I love you, sweet Anu.” He then kissed on my knuckles tenderly. A warm tingle radiated to every inch of my skin from the spot he had kissed.

Almost at that exact moment, we heard someone coming up the stairs. *Ammamma*? I got up in haste.

With a sigh, he stood and let go of my hands.

“Shall we will go down then?” he asked. I nodded.

He planted a chaste peck on my cheeks and then guided me towards the stairs.

It wasn’t *Ammamma*. It was Devi bringing my dried and folded clothes.

In the hall, my evil Grandma was waiting for us, with a grandiose grin. Had she suddenly sprouted wings to become Cupid himself? Her matchmaking skills were indeed at a peak. After a quick goodbye, Arjun left. I continued to watch him as he reversed his car and drove away from our compound.

“Ahem, ahem!” I heard Cupid no.1 clearing her throat in earnest. I turned around to glare at her.

“Why did you do that?”

“I had to keep an eye on you both. That is why I sent Devi,” she said, shrugging nonchalantly.

“Not that. I could have brought my sketchbook here. Why did you ask me to take him to the library?” I asked, even though I knew exactly why she had done that.

“Because, my child, we old people are crazy. A little madness comes in handy to help people open their eyes. I guess a few eyes have opened owing to my craziness today, haven’t they, Anu?”

I blushed scarlet at her question.

“Mmmmm, what did he say?” she asked wiggling her eyebrows.

“He said he loved me,” I confessed.

“And what did you say?” asked my nutty Grandma with a 1000-watt smile.

“I told him that I loved him too,” I said.

“That is like my girl,” she said proudly, as though I had just won a trophy for a hundred-mile race.

“My crazy *Ammamma*! What chance did we have, when we were pushed into a trap, by the greatest match maker of the century?” I asked.

“Oh, so it is ‘we’ already. Great! Without my plotting, you two would have gone on for decades, without uttering even a word. I used my tact to bring two of my favourite people together. I don’t regret that. I thought you both made a lovely pair today at the temple and I suspected correctly that you both were in love. I was thinking of doing something ever since. I can sleep peacefully today, because I know my Anu has found her prince,” she said. I hugged her tight. I do love her to bits.

Later that night, as I rested with my head on her lap, Grandma told me her own love story for the first time.

In her days, when girls were not supposed to even look at a stranger, she had dared to fall in love. That too with a man her family had not approved of. She had fought with her family when they tried to marry her off to someone else, succeeding in uniting with her lover.

“Never marry someone whom you can’t love and respect, Anu. Such marriages are the worst forms of torture, especially in our country, where divorces are still a taboo. I have seen many girls suffer in such hell holes,” she said, as she tried to tame my unruly hair with her fingers.

“How do I know whether Arjun is the right person for me? I do love him a lot, I agree. But will this last or would it fade with time?” I said, voicing my innermost fears.

“Trust your instincts, child. They are never wrong. Learn to listen to your inner voice. When there comes a time when your heart and brain are at war, listen to your intuitions. Many love stories have died a natural death, caught in such bitter battles. There is always a reason why you get attracted to a

person or hate some others right from the beginning. If you believe in those age-old stories of reincarnation, some souls are destined to meet eternally, life after life, age after age, forever.”

I did believe in reincarnation. That Arjun had been with me in many previous lives was a soothing thought. I wanted to believe that the love I had found was eternal.

It was after 10.30 pm that I went to my room to prepare for bed. I took the phone to set the alarm and found a message from Arjun.

“Can I call you?” The message had come an hour ago. Feeling ultra-awake suddenly, I typed a reply.

*Saw this now. Phone was not with me. You can...??*

The phone rang the next minute. My phone’s ringtone was “Hello” by Lionel Richie. Never had I listened to it ring with so much fondness. Never was the song so dear to me as it was then because the screen display said it was Arjun calling.

“Hello, Arjun,” I said, and a warmth coursed through me when I heard his voice.

“Hello ... what are you doing?” he asked. Why was my heart beating as if I had been running at twelve miles an hour on the treadmill?

“Was preparing for bed,” I managed.

After the initial hiccups, our conversation started to get smooth and I slowly relaxed, hearing him talk. It was as though his voice was hypnotizing me with each passing moment. While he told me why and how much he loved me, I realized how good it was to have someone remind me why I mattered to them.

“Will you come with me to the beach tomorrow evening?” Arjun asked suddenly, surprising me.

“Huh, why?” I asked and then realized that I should not have asked such a silly question. Lovers wished to spend time alone with each other. It was a universal truth.

“I would love to. But I’ll have to ask Grandma. Do you know she plotted to bring us together? When she asked me to show you the paintings, I knew she was up to something,” I said, trying to change the topic.

“I should thank her then. I was yearning to meet you alone. I desperately wanted to speak to you. In fact, I was thrilled when I got the chance.”

“You should thank Vishal too, I guess. He used to brag so much about you that I was half in love with you before we even met,” I confessed.

“Oh, my Anu, how did I get so lucky? The day I met you, you looked like an angel, right out of bounds for me. You have tortured me every moment since then. Especially your soulful grey eyes and those...,” he paused but I desperately wanted him to continue.

“You like my eyes? I have cat as my nickname because of their weird colour. I don’t like them much.”

“I love them. I have a hard time stopping myself from... you know... (There he went again, stopping midway!) Don’t ever say you don’t like them,” he said.

Half an hour later, I switched off the light after my conversation with Arjun came to an end. I was amazed at the turn the day had taken. Just hours before, I was praying to every God I knew to make Arjun fall in love with me. And it had happened. Not only had he confessed that he loved me but also that I had bewitched him from the first moment he saw me. Love at first sight?! Great!

For me it had been a steady and speedy fall. Nevertheless, I had fallen hard. I was beginning to crave to be near him. I could not wait to hear his voice again. I wanted to know what he was thinking about that very moment. As though answering my thoughts, my phone beeped with a message.

We should have talked a bit more. What do you think? Sleep well. Do visit me in my dreams.

I replied with a ‘💎💎 XO’ (A smile, a kiss, and a hug; I hoped he understood me. I had learned this lingo from Khushi, who ended all her messages and letters with a smiley face, a kiss, and a hug).

He replied after a minute.

XOXO, can’t wait to give it in real... ;)

I laughed reading it and from then on, we had a race sending kisses and hugs. When the clock struck twelve, like Cinderella leaving the grand ball in distress, I bade Arjun good night reluctantly. Unlike Cinderella, I promised my prince to meet him the next day.

Newfound love is like the nectar you can never have enough of. Its sweetness bedazzled me. I would be happy even if I drowned in it and died.

## Chapter Six

"I wonder by my troth,  
What thou and I did, till we loved?  
Were we not weaned till then?"

-John Donne

### July 4, 2010, Sreepuram

A new day had dawned and, lying in bed, I watched the sunlight sneaking in through the curtains and create a mesmerizing golden pattern on my bed. My eyes, newly tinted with love, found everything bright and beautiful. It was as if the world had slowed down, as though I was in a meditative trance. I opened my window and allowed the morning breeze to caress my cheeks. Love had intensified all colours and heightened all my senses; the smallest of things delighted me. The trees seemed greener, the melody of the chirping birds was bewitching, and the murmur of the dancing leaves, enchanting.

My last thoughts before sleeping were of Arjun. My first waking thoughts were of Arjun. What was the magic that made me want to smile and search for a face that had become fonder than the moon? I was so happy that I feared I would burst like a bubble any moment. The last twenty-four hours had turned my world upside down. But this tipsy world was strangely alluring.

Sitting in front of the mirror, I stared at the strange girl looking back at me. Her cheeks were rosy and her eyes had a glazed look. I looked like an idiot, smiling for no reason at all.

I took my phone and looked for any new messages. There were none. It was a Sunday and it was only seven in the morning. Maybe he was still asleep. I decided to be his wake-up call.

"Hello, love," said a sleepy Arjun, answering my call.

"Good morning, Arjun."

"I was dreaming of you. Want to hear about it?"

"No," I said, my cheeks suddenly growing warm at the thought of what he might have been dreaming.

"I was thinking about you, so I called you," I told him.

“Love you, Anu. Wish you were here.”

“I wish so too,” I confessed, and then cringed at my boldness. I could not comprehend the extent to which I trusted him. I was so madly in love, I was ready to follow him anywhere in the world. It was all happening so fast.

I had read romances and in all of them, love progressed in a predictable manner. The lovers met and there was a courting period. Then came the declaration of love that was followed by a happily ever after. Ours was a whirlwind love. We had been mere acquaintances until yesterday evening. I could barely believe that my love was just a day old. It was magic, and there could not be a greater magic than the reality where the person whom you loved, loved you back.

An hour later, I finally decided to come out of the solace of my room and went down the stairs, humming a song, a wide smile plastered on my face.

“What, girl? You seem to have bloomed overnight,” teased Grandma, as I joined her for breakfast.

“Effect of a new drink,” I whispered, winking at her.

“By any chance, is it called love?”

I laughed.

When I requested permission for the beach trip that I had planned with Arjun, Grandma agreed on the condition that she would accompany us. I did not have a problem with that, after all she was the one who’d brought us together. I was enraptured about the visit to the beach. Arjun and I exchanged messages continuously till it was time to get ready.

The problem began when I opened my wardrobe to pick a dress. I couldn’t find one that I liked. I discarded dress after dress. My wardrobe appeared insufficient for the first time. Every dress had some fault which I hadn’t noticed before. How odd! At last, I selected a blue tunic and paired it with a pair of black jeans. I left my hair open and decided not to apply any makeup.

When Arjun arrived, I met him at the door. I felt like a smitten puppy.

“You look angelic in blue, love,” he whispered as he came in and I beamed at him. We waited in the living room while Grandma made some last-minute arrangements with Gopu.

Arjun was taking us in his car, making me look forward to the journey even



more. When we set out, however, Grandma climbed into the passenger seat, next to Arjun. All day, I'd thought I'd be sitting next to Arjun. Grandma must've seen my disappointed look and quickly assured us that it was to prevent any accidents because of a distracted driver. My eyes met Arjun's and we burst out laughing.

Grandma talked non-stop to Arjun, while I sat silently in the back seat. Partially because I didn't know how to talk to him in front of Grandma. And partially because I was distracted by Arjun looking at me again and again through the rear-view mirror. By the time we reached the beach, I had floated into a dream world through the many unspoken promises that those eyes had conveyed.

Instead of the regular beach that we visited often, Arjun had taken us to the beach that was near the lighthouse, which was mostly deserted. We sat down on the sand with Grandma in the middle. Silent, we relaxed in the tranquil atmosphere. The sky was clear and the hum of the ocean soothed me. I looked at Arjun who seemed to be deep in thought.

Grandma broke the silence after a while and she asked Arjun how serious he was about me.

"As serious as I am about life, *Ammamma*. She is my life. It is as if she has seized my heart and invaded my blood. I need her beside me always; I want to marry her," he declared, passionately. I could have died then with happiness. I was pleased he was calling her *Ammamma*. It felt intimate. Grandma, pleased by his words, squeezed his hands and patted his cheeks.

"Both of you are my most favourite people in the world. How lucky I am that you two found each other!"

When she turned to me, there were tears shining in her eyes.

"Go, spend some time with your prince," she whispered to me.

"Arjun, show her the sunset from the top of the lighthouse. It is magnificent. Anu, I used to come here with your Grandpa when we were young."

"*Ammamma*, shall we go up together?" I asked, silently chiding my protesting heart that craved to be alone with Arjun.

"Show some mercy on my old limbs, child. I will stay right here. I love to watch the ocean. It drains away all my fears and bad memories. It does." She sighed and dismissed us.

My heart was drumming wildly against my ribs as Arjun and I walked towards the lighthouse. He took my hand in his and a tingle ran through me. His hand was warm and strong. Though it was a Sunday, the lighthouse stood forlorn, barring the presence of the old caretaker. We ignored his condescending stare and started to climb the spiral staircase in silence.

When we were halfway up, Arjun stopped and pulled me into an embrace. I did not feel any fear. It felt as though I had come home, as though his arms were my safe haven. Arjun cupped my face and traced my lower lip with his thumb, all the while looking into my eyes as if asking for permission. When his lips slowly captured mine, I knew I would never forget this moment, ever. Combined with the sensual assault of his presence, the kiss progressed into something so divine that I slumped against him weakly.

After what seemed like hours, but was in reality just a few minutes, we separated and Arjun led me to the viewpoint at the top of the lighthouse. On the bench there that seated two, with his arms around me hugging me close, we watched the sunset together. The sky was a golden orange with splashes of myriad colours. The view was breath-taking. With Arjun so close to me, it was even more ethereal. I wanted this moment, our love, to last forever. I wanted him to love me until eternity. Arjun squeezed my hands as though in assurance.

“I will always love you, Anu,” said Arjun, gathering me against him, and kissing the top of my head.

How does he read me, as if I were an open book? His words answering my thoughts baffled me. Like an emotional snapshot, I captured the moment in my memory, to savour it forever. Love indeed becomes magical with whispered endearments, knowing smiles, and warm hugs. We sat in silence watching the birds flocking back towards their homes and realized we had to head back as well, leaving this heaven behind.

After a more intense kiss again on the stairs, we headed back. When we reached near Grandma, she stared at us, and quickly looked away to hide a smile. I must have looked like a beetroot then. On our journey back, she took the back seat and asked me to go and sit near Arjun. The Cupid was back in action. She sat near the window, looking out all the way back home and acted like we were invisible beings. Arjun was silent but he made me keep my right hand on the gear, beneath his, so that the magic of touch remained with us for

the rest of the journey.

I rushed up immediately after dinner. I wanted to hear his voice again. We had been texting non-stop and Grandma had become angry, when I was struggling to text with my left hand, mid-way through dinner. He called me and we talked. We talked about our likes, dislikes, and our passions. He told me that he loved to swim and sing.

“One thing intrigues me. Why did you join medicine, when everyone would have expected you to take up business management?”

“It was always my dream to become a doctor. My father encouraged me to follow my dreams. He always advised me to listen to my heart.”

“He seems like a great man.”

“He was.”

I remembered that his father had died recently. He might still be grieving over the loss. I requested him to sing to lighten the mood. When he started to sing ‘I can’t help falling in love with you’ by Elvis Presley, I was enthralled.

“Did you like it?” Arjun asked when he ended the song.

“I am enchanted. So, are you an Elvis Presley fan?”

“Yes, of course. But I sang this song because it suits our story. *Wise men say... only fools rush in, but I can’t help falling in love with you,*” he said, singing the first two lines again. The warmth in his voice awakened a yearning in my heart. Wishing like never before that I were in his arms, I hugged a pillow to my heart. He sang two more songs on my request. One was in Hindi, and the other one was in Malayalam. Both were songs speaking of the grief of separation and longing.

“Why all these sad songs? Have you ever been in love, Arjun?”

“I never fell in love. My only prayer these days is never to be separated from you.”

“But why fear? We have only just met,” I asked.

“I don’t know why, but I am scared I might lose you. Maybe because God has taken away from me the ones I have loved dearly.”

“Arjun, I will never, ever leave you. I can’t even think about it,” I said to reassure him, only to be answered by a sigh from the other side.

We spoke a little more and then disconnected the call. Lying on my bed, I waded into the many questions fluttering in my mind. The more I got to know him, the deeper I fell in love and more were the wishes.

We had become like the word and its meaning, inseparable. Yet, we were still dazed with the astonishment of new love. Every moment brought new cheers.

But was I not leaping into the fire too soon? He was twenty-six and I was just twenty. I had to finish my course and both of us had our careers planned. One mistake and everything would be in jeopardy in this conservative society of ours. My parents had warned me about the pitfalls of young love.

“Anu, it is the girl who is often persecuted in our society. It is the girl who will be blamed if she falls into a boy’s trap. You are pretty, there will be many vultures waiting to catch you. The girl who suffers a bad name is a scar on her family’s reputation. Always remember that. We expect nothing else from you,” my mother had told me in a prep talk when I was about to join my engineering course. But Arjun’s love didn’t seem like a trap to me. It was giving me wings.

I could not wait to tell Khushi and Poornima about Arjun. But I decided to keep it as a surprise for them. How would Khushi react when I told her that I, whom she had declared to be pathetic when it came to love, had fallen in love? Would Poornima believe if I told her that I had kissed a boy?

I had not had even a crush until Arjun. For most of my friends, college romance was a time pass. None of them were serious. After watching my friends changing their affections week after week, my notion of romantic love had taken a beat. Classrooms after class, on the campus, were the haunt of couples seeking privacy. We innocents, as they called us, escaped fast before the experts invaded it.

Now that I was in love, I could understand their penchant to be alone. Were lovers the most idiotic and selfish creatures in the world? Must be, because that was what I was feeling. I had no thoughts to spare for anybody. I did not care about anything.

Love, with its mystical haze, had made me immune to the world. My sun, my moon, my entire universe was Arjun and only Arjun.

## Chapter Seven

“I am two fools, I know, for loving, and for saying so in whining poetry.”

-John Donne

### July 5, 2010, Sreepuram

What can you say about a person who seemed completely obsessed with you on day one and acted like a perfect stranger on day two?

I would call that silly person insane. But, I was the person going mad, the one at the receiving end. Arjun had not called me or texted me the whole morning. It was already afternoon and waiting for his call was frustrating me to the core. When I tried calling him, his phone was either out of coverage area or switched off.

I went for a walk to cool my mind and ended up near the village pond. My aim was to while away my time with the book that I had begun to read. Interestingly, that day, I was not alone in seeking the cool shade of the coconut palms. There sat Colonel R.S. Nair, with a thick book, on the rock that was my usual seat. He looked up, sensing my presence.

“Oh, we meet again,” he said.

“Hello, Colonel Uncle,” I said. Talking to even a stranger seemed like a relief then.

“Is this your favourite place to read? I see you too have a book with you,” he asked and I nodded.

“What book has caught your interest?” he asked and I showed him my copy of *Many Lives Many Masters* by Dr. Brian De Weiss to him. It was the true story of a prominent psychiatrist, his young patient, and the past-life regression therapy that had changed both their lives.

“An interesting choice. I read it years ago. Dr. Brian Weiss brings to us in this book strong concepts, that of past lives, rebirth, and of a higher consciousness or state. Do you believe in all that?” he asked with a smile.

“I do. It explains the causes for many fears, phobias and their possible relation to a past life experience. The fact that all relations are connected through series of incarnations gives me hope and also the messages from the masters are enlightening,” I said and involuntarily checked my mobile for

messages. The person who I believed was my soul mate and connected to me through incarnations was still ignoring me.

“Expecting a call from your boyfriend?” He closed his book and looked at me.

Was it so obvious? I didn’t like his question. How dare he act so familiar with me? I glowered at him and turned to walk away.

“Don’t get angry at me. I saw you with him at the beach yesterday. It must be frustrating for you that today he is away at a business meeting,” he said. I was suddenly intrigued as to how this total stranger seemed to know things about Arjun. Arjun had not told me about any meeting.

“How do you know that he is away at a business meeting?”

“On the fifth of every month, the ‘Shine’ group has its monthly meeting in Mangalore. It is common knowledge over here. So many from this village work for the group,” he said.

“So, the meeting lasts the whole day?” I asked getting angry with Arjun. He could have messaged me. That would have bailed me out of the frustration I was experiencing.

“He will be back by evening I guess. What did he tell you?” He asked.

“Nothing,” I said and shrugged helplessly.

“Don’t worry. The boy is sincere, as far as I know. Haven’t heard about any affairs or any other issues about him,” he said. I envied him for knowing things I craved to know.

“He didn’t tell me anything. I am glad that you told me about this meeting. But he could have at least messaged me.”

“When in love, people tend to forget about things that they should give importance to. I guess that is what happened in your case too. Maybe he is in a meeting and can’t message you. Or maybe, he wants to test your love,” he said. I was tempted to believe him. Still, how much time does it take to message? Mobile phones even came with templates that sent messages like “I am in a meeting, will call later”, at the press of a button.

Colonel Uncle left me to my musings. I started throwing pebbles into the still pond to counter my growing frustration. The pebbles vanished from the area where I was sitting at an alarming speed, but my annoyance at having fallen

in love grew with each passing moment.

Later, in the home library, I discarded book after book, each failing to hold my interest until I found a book of quotes.

Quotes marked under love caught my attention and with each quote, the urge to tear the book to pieces became huge.

*“Love doesn't make the world go 'round. Love is what makes the ride worthwhile,”* wrote the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

My ride currently was bumpy and it was irritating me through and through.

*“There is no remedy for love but to love more.”* This one was by Henry David Thoreau.

Is it? Then why was I thinking about wringing that arrogant Arjun's neck?

*“When we want to read of the deeds that are done for love, whither do we turn? To the murder column,”* wrote George Bernard Shaw and it echoed my murderous thought.

Maybe the jails of this world were filled with frustrated lovers. The thought was enough to quench my thirst to read further. A grumpy me stomped down the stairs to gobble up something from the kitchen. With my hunger for food satisfied, I headed out into the garden to clear my muddled brain. I helped Gopu who was busy re-potting the plants by taking charge of watering the newly re-potted plants.

The cool air, the chirping birds, the freshly bathed blossoms, and the gentle sound of falling water created a peaceful haven. Pleasant things grabbed my attention. The beauty of the water drops that lingered lovingly on the petals comforted my sullen heart and the smell of the blossoms filled it with delight.

Minutes later, the piercing sound of a car horn intruded my tranquil oasis. The culprit responsible for my black mood rode into the courtyard.

One glance at his face erased half my fears and apprehensions. His smile, like the sunshine, infused my heart with light and warmth. But my stubborn anger expanded rapidly, blotting out the tender emotions that attempted to re-surface. While I stood there dressed like a vagabond, with hair looking like discarded yarn, there he was dressed immaculately with not a hair out of place. The scoundrel, how dare he?

I knew how I could exact my revenge. I directed the water pipe at him,

making sure that his neat clothes were all soaking wet. I then ran for dear life with an evil cackle that would have put the most ruthless banshee to shame. He caught me before I reached the end of the mango grove. He shook his wet hair spraying water droplets onto my face and then pinned me against a mango tree.

“You are quite a mean thing, my love. However, I am meaner. Watch me,” said he, showing me a handful of mud he had grabbed from the garden. I closed my eyes and leaned back against the mango tree, anticipating a mud facial. But he punished me instead with a slow and lingering kiss that set fire to my whole being. When passion stirred up a thousand butterflies inside me, I pushed him off and ran.

Later, while Arjun was busy drying himself with a towel loaned by Grandma, she asked him the reason for my sulking. Grudgingly, he explained he had not been able to inform me about his whereabouts due to his hectic schedule.

“Is that all? He had a genuine reason not to call you. Understand that child. Love demands patience and faith. Do not think it is all child’s play. If you want to find stability in love, learn to meet its requirements,” scolded Grandma. I scowled at Arjun who mouthed a ‘sorry,’ genuinely looking like he was. I smiled, thereby ending my day long sulking campaign.

The kids came in then to invite me for a game of badminton. I joined them as they had been complaining how badly I was ignoring them. They didn’t know that their Anu had found new avenues of interest during her current sojourn in Sreepuram. To my happiness, Arjun joined us. The game that ensued found me displaying my best shots. But I watched reluctantly as Arjun won over my fans without much ado. Ananya, the Empress of badminton, turned out to be inferior to Arjun, the Emperor of badminton.

Mango trees are auspicious for lovers and the more time I spent in the mango grove with Arjun, the closer we became. The frustration I had felt earlier had evaporated into thin air; the sugary looks from Arjun were enough to send me sashaying into a world of romance.

“My phone battery had exhausted yesterday night. I had forgotten to charge it. So, I wasn’t having my phone with me the whole day. By evening, I had become miserable and I rushed to you as soon as I could,” said Arjun, as we sat beneath the mango tree after the game had ended. We had employed our best diplomatic skills to make the kids go.



With such confessions and tender caresses, the Emperor of badminton made the Empress of badminton fall hopelessly back in love with him and the day ended with sweet babbles and stolen kisses in the mango grove.

## Chapter Eight

"If you live to be a hundred, I want to live to be a hundred minus one day, so I never have to live without you."

-A.A Milne (Winnie the Pooh)

### July 13, 2010, Sreepuram

Arjun had come into my life like a fresh breeze, bringing with him the spirit of young love. We talked late into the night every day. Those conversations were the ones I did not mind losing my sleep over. We talked about our dreams, hopes, disappointments, childhood memories and music. We had many common interests.

However, one thing bothered me. The social disparity between us was huge. Arjun belonged to one of the richest families in South India. His family owned the retail chain "Shine" that had branches in India and abroad. We had one in South Bangalore that I frequented often. It was a huge store spread over three floors. His grandfather had founded it and now his mother headed it. He was on the board of directors. Whereas, my father was a manager in a nationalized bank and my mother a high school teacher.

Arjun was born and brought up in Dubai. He roamed the world. He had moved to Sreepuram after he got into the nearby medical college. I, on the other hand, had lived all my life in Bangalore and Sreepuram.

I belonged to an upper-middle-class family whereas Arjun was a multi-millionaire himself. Though this troubled me, Arjun behaved as if there was no such thing. I decided to ignore this nagging voice in my head and make the most of my time with Arjun.

My vacation was coming to an end. Within a week, I had to return to Bangalore. Arjun and I never talked about the imminent separation. Even the mention of it was painful. We met every day. He maintained that he couldn't go home without seeing me. I went to the gate while he was passing by every day. We sat and talked inside his car or in the garden before he continued homeward. Except for a few stolen kisses and some whispered-sweet-nothings, our relationship remained innocent.

Sometimes he came in to see Grandma and sat with us for a while. That day was one such day. Gopu and Devi had gone to their village to attend a

wedding. Grandma was at her evening prayer and we waited for her in the living room.

Sitting near me, Arjun traced doodles on my palm while he talked. He was wondering whether it was time to tell our parents about our relationship. I dreaded it and requested Arjun to wait. Knowing my parents, I was sure they wouldn't accept my boldness of falling in love. Arjun, too, was unsure of his mother's reaction. When he talked about telling his mom about me, my biggest fear was that of rejection. There would be hundreds of girls, after all, queuing to be married to the heir of the Shine group.

"I don't know how my mother will react. If my father were with us, it would have been easy. But I will tell her today. My changed behaviour has already puzzled her and she might have guessed a thing or two. Today morning she was frowning when I was busy texting you."

Arjun pulled me into a hug murmuring, "I can't wait to make you mine, Anu."

"Arjun, leave me," I said, struggling to escape from his arms, "*Ammamma* will come anytime now."

"She is praying, love. Can't you hear the chants and the chime of the bells?" he retorted, kissing my lips. And I forgot everything other than what his lips were doing to me. He was getting bolder these days. His fingers lingered on my breasts even as his lips continued their assault on mine. I squirmed in protest and moved away.

"Do you know how much you are torturing me? I can't even kiss you properly," he said, his voice husky and eyes intense. Moving near, lifting me onto his lap, he enveloped me in another tender hug and kiss. After a few exquisite moments, when he released me, I moved away to a nearby chair to compose my wild heart.

Grandma came into the room just then and I was relieved that Arjun hadn't kissed me a second longer.

On seeing her, Arjun got up. He took her hands and made her sit near him.

"*Ammamma*, you are running a fever," he cried, moving his palms to her forehead checking her temperature, "your temperature is quite high. Did you take any tablets?"

"I have taken medicine. I have been unwell since morning. If I take a little

rest, it will go off by morning,” said Grandma. In my euphoria, I had not even noticed any change in her.

“Arjun, can you give me my insulin injection? I think I will sleep early today.”

Usually, it was Gopu who gave Grandma her injection. This time, I too had learned to administer it. I handed Arjun the needle and insulin and watched as he measured out the required dose and injected it.

“Hey, that was painless,” said Grandma. “Gopu is a little clumsy and when he injects; it is too painful. Even Anu is better than him.”

“It is just technique and experience, *Ammamma*,” said Arjun, and taking on his doctor avatar said, “Now eat well. You are taking a high dose of insulin.”

I served Grandma her food and returned to the living room to Arjun once she started to eat.

By the time Arjun left, Grandma was preparing for bed. Most of what I had served to her remained on the plate. She must have lost her appetite.

Normally she never wasted food. After dinner, I secured the locks on all the doors and windows and brought my pillow and blanket from my room to sleep near her.

Entering her bedroom, I switched on the light to find the way to her bed. What I saw then, made me scream. With her mouth open and froth running down her cheeks, Grandma was writhing on her bed. Only the whites of her eyes were visible and she didn’t respond to my anguished calls. She was having strong convulsions.

Trembling, I called Arjun. I was barely coherent when I told him what was happening.

“Be calm, Anu. Stay strong. I am on my way. Fetch her medical files if you know where they are,” he instructed. I heard him start the car as we spoke.

Within minutes, his car pulled into the courtyard. Grandma had lost consciousness by then. Arjun carried her to the car and we dashed to the medical college where he worked. He had already informed the staff there of an emergency and that we would reach in ten minutes.

Grandma was on my lap and I couldn’t stop my tears. The convulsions had stopped but she was still unconscious. A medical team was waiting for us

when we reached and they took her into the ICU. Trembling, I prayed fervently sitting in the stark ICU corridor.

Arjun came out of the ICU half an hour later and briefed me. Grandma was out of danger. It was *hypoglycaemia*, a medical condition caused when the blood sugar level dropped dangerously low. She was under observation but was stable.

“She might not have eaten properly after that high insulin dose, which must’ve reduced the sugar level in her blood. Don’t worry, we have the best doctors here.”

I heaved a sigh of relief, but tears started to roll down my cheeks. Arjun whispered endearments, urging me to calm down. I had to inform my parents and Gopu. I was not capable of handling things in the hospital, financially or emotionally. I was lucky that I had Arjun with me. It was a huge relief.

While I called them, Vishal came running towards us. I had called him on our way to the hospital. Vishal went into the ICU with Arjun to check on Grandma. He came out and hugged me close, consoling me. After a few hours, they took me to see her. She appeared to be sleeping calmly. Vishal informed me the fever had come down and her blood sugar was normal. I finally allowed myself to calm down. We sat on the chairs just outside the ICU waiting.

“It is good that you had the presence of mind to call Arjun. I am glad that you found Grandma soon, Anu. A delay might have complicated things. Thank You Arjun, you saved my Grandma,” Vishal said, giving a man-hug to Arjun.

“I consider her my Grandma too, Vishal. I am glad I could be of help,” said Arjun.

I declined their offer of a cup of tea and they went to the canteen leaving me to my thoughts. I watched the doctors, nurses, and other hospital staff continue with their duties and wondered how much trauma they witnessed daily. Their life was indeed a complete sacrifice. When Arjun and Vishal returned, Vishal sat next to me and squeezed my hand.

“Naughty girl, so you have made a giant conquest, I see,” he whispered and winked at me, “I approve.”

I blushed as I looked up to a smiling Arjun. Two members of my family were now a part of our secret. Vishal persuaded Arjun to leave but he refused. He

told us that he had already informed his mom that a friend's relative was in the ICU. He would spend the night at the hospital. His mom called just then and he walked away to attend the call.

“So, your little love story has its benefits, you see. It helped *Ammamma* the most. Does she know?”

I nodded.

“So, you have her approval too? Don't tell me you are the latest victim of her matchmaking. She always had a soft corner for Arjun. You are her pet too.”

I chuckled and told him how Grandma had goaded us into confessing our feelings and how much she had encouraged the match. I told him what Arjun had told her about being attracted to me from the first day.

“That explains it. I remember Arjun readily agreeing to come to Grandma's house on the day I brought your gift. He normally refuses to accompany me, saying he doesn't want to intrude into our privacy. Now that I think of it, he kept looking at you so much that day. Though every other girl in college hits on him, I have never seen him take interest in any girl. You are truly lucky,” Vishal said with a huge smile on his face.

His words pleased me. It is a nice feeling to fall in love, nicer if the person loved you equally. But, the nicest thing is when you know you have made the right choice and you have the blessings of your loved ones as well.

## Chapter Nine

“Pain is temporary. It may last a minute, or an hour, or a day, or a year, but eventually it will subside and something else will take its place. If I quit, however, it lasts forever.”

- Lance Armstrong

### July 13, 2010, Sreepuram

Arjun joined us a while later, appearing agitated. I don't know what his conversation with his mother had been about. But it did not seem to have been a pleasant one. He gave me a strained smile when he felt my eyes on him. Something was bothering him. Suddenly, I sensed an impending doom looming over me. First Grandma had become ill and now Arjun appeared uneasy.

Vishal attributed my worried look to Grandma's condition.

“Anu dear, don't worry. Such things happen to diabetics when they are unaware of the complications of their disease. See, her fever might have made her lose the appetite to eat sufficiently to keep the insulin levels in check. Since she didn't eat much, the insulin levels in her blood shot up. The convulsions you saw were the result of lack of sugar reaching the brain. The brain needs sugar to function and when the blood sugar levels fall too low, the person gets a seizure.”

“What happens if such patients do not get immediate medical attention?” I asked.

“It can be fatal. The patient may go into a coma or even die.”

I shuddered and thanked God once again that I could find her in time. And that Arjun was there to help. Arjun was facing us but seemed lost in thoughts. When Vishal went in to check on Grandma again, Arjun came to sit next to me. In halting words, he told me about a trouble brewing.

“Normally my mother doesn't mind if I stay out late or stay at a friend's place. We have enough staff at home. There is round-the-clock security too. I think she heard me when I was talking to you. She asked me about you, Anu, and she was furious.”

“And...?” I asked, with a heavy dread in the pit of my stomach.

“I told her you were the one I wished to marry. And she, she just disconnected the phone. It is not a good sign. Unless she is upset, she never disconnects a call like that. I dread her coming here to drag me off now. She has a huge possessive streak. But I hope she will understand. I am sure, she will. Don’t worry.”

Things could not get worse. I felt like a giant apparition was hovering over me, blocking my dreams. It kept poking me repeatedly and foretelling that something terrible was going to happen soon.

When Vishal returned, Arjun moved to an opposite chair and they sat chatting about mundane things. I tried to sleep. The chair was comfortable enough but sleep didn’t come. I kept looking at Arjun. The past month had been the best in my life. Arjun adored his mother and, for him, everything she said was sacrosanct. She had single-handedly straightened the affairs of the company after the sudden demise of his father. If she decided to oppose our relationship, then only God could help us. Even in the few photographs of her that I had seen on Arjun’s mobile, she exuded power.

I woke up hours later to the sound of people talking and increased activity in the corridor. The morning shift had begun. My watch display declared 6.00 am. Vishal was asleep in a nearby chair, his loud snores not lost in the flurry of activity in the corridor. Arjun sat in the chair opposite to mine, gazing fondly. All my worries of the previous night evaporated under that single glance of his.

“Didn’t you sleep?” I asked, noticing his tired eyes and unruffled hair.

“How could I?” he whispered, coming to sit on the chair next to mine, “I was making the most of the chance offered to me. Watching you all night has been the most memorable thing I have ever done.”

“Or was it because there would have been a snoring contest?” I asked, pointing at Vishal, to camouflage that I was melting inside. Arjun sniggered and cupped my cheeks.

“Do you even realize the extent to which I love you?” he asked softly, his eyes animated with love. I nodded through a pink cloud. A nurse entered the corridor then and the moment was lost.

Arjun asked me if I wanted tea. I nodded and he went to the hospital canteen to get tea for us. Meanwhile, I found a washroom to freshen up. My hair was



all bushy and tangled up. My eyes were puffy as though stung by a bee. I found it ridiculous that Arjun still found me attractive. Maybe love was indeed blind.

When I returned after a futile clean-up session, Vishal was still snoring away peacefully. Arjun was waiting for me with a hot cup of tea.

“Drink it. Our canteen tea is the best you can get around here.”

When I finished it, he took my hands in his.

“Come, I want to show you something,” he said, guiding me towards the lift and once inside, pressed the seventh-floor button. We took the stairs from there to the terrace.

When we reached there, he covered my eyes with his hands. He guided me to a spot a few meters away and then removed his hands from my eyes. The view that greeted me seemed straight out of a fantasy movie. The hospital building was seven floors high and was located on a small hillock. We were facing the east and a golden orange sun was slowly emerging from the distant hills. The entire sky was a lovely play of colours. In the distance, to my right, I could see the Arabian Sea glittering. The misty morning air gave a celestial look to the landscape around. The lone river meandering towards the sea was the one bordering our village.

“Wow! It is heavenly,” I exclaimed, mesmerized by the beauty.

“I often come here in the evenings. The view here has a calming effect. I’ve seen this same view only once before. It was when my father had been in the ICU after his accident last year.”

We both fell silent, caught up in our own thoughts. I couldn’t even imagine the sadness Arjun might have gone through. The death of a loved one is traumatic. Death often leaves a heartache that is hard to heal.

He hugged me and together we took in the beautiful sunrise to treasure forever. I leant on him, cocooned in his all-encompassing presence. He showed me some familiar buildings, which appeared like matchboxes in the distance.

“Kiss me, love. Make this moment memorable for me,” he whispered in my ears, turning me towards him.

Shy at his sudden request, I stood on my toes to reach him and pecked his

cheeks lightly. His stubble pricked me. I frowned at him and he smiled. Slowly I gathered the courage and moved my lips towards his. With my fingers curled in his hair, I kissed him. His hands wound around my waist and pulled me close. He rained kisses along my neck and shoulders while his hands roamed all over my body hungrily. His caresses made me long for more.

“You, you make me crazy,” he murmured and pulled away from me only to pull me back again into an embrace the very next moment. How were we to bear the imminent separation?

“We should go down. Your presence is making me wish for more. This is not the place nor is this the ideal time,” said Arjun, as we headed down reluctantly.

When we came down to the ICU, we confronted a worried Vishal who questioned as to where we had been. Though we assured him that we had just been to the canteen to have tea, he refused to believe us.

“It is okay. When the time comes, I will ask this favour to be returned,” he said to Arjun who gave Vishal a friendly pat on his back. Vishal informed us that Grandma was completely out of danger and would be shifted to a private room in a few hours. I wanted to change my nightclothes as I was already inviting stares from strangers.

“Why don’t you leave Anu home on your way back, Arjun? I have to wait till Gopu comes,” said Vishal.

“Sure.”

The hospital had a spacious parking lot located in the basement. Since it was quite early in the morning, the parking was deserted. When we settled into the car, I slumped back on the comfortable seat and arched back like a cat, stretching my hands up and backward. I don’t know what caused it, but Arjun groaned and pulled me into a crushing hug.

“Arjun...someone might see,” I said, trying to squeeze myself out of his embrace.

“I don’t care, Anu. When you are near, I don’t want to see or feel anything. It is just you...only you —,” he said, his lips descending on me. I gasped when his hands fumbled with the buttons on my top. His fingers touching my bare skin brought in pleasure and fear simultaneously.

The sound of a car screeching to a halt into the lane in front of us pulled us apart the next moment. Arjun paled like a ghost. A woman in a red sari climbed out of it and strode in our direction. She arrived at my door, pulled it open and dragged me out. Before I understood what was happening, she slapped me hard across the face.

“You bitch, you slut, how dare you? Don’t you have any shame? That too in the light of the day! How pathetic can these gold diggers get?!”

This woman, who was showering expletives on me, was none other than Arjun’s mother. With her eyes burning red and her tongue spitting fire, she looked like the oracle from the temple shouting the prophecies of the deity. My cheeks burned with the pain from the slap, but the pain of humiliation burned stronger.

“I couldn’t sleep a wink last night. I had to help my son out of the trap into which he had fallen. What magic potion did you feed him, you witch? He was never like this. Don’t even dream that you will fit into our family, you, middle-class parasite,” she shouted and then pushed me.

I staggered backward. I looked at Arjun pleading assistance. He was rooted to his spot as though stunned by his mother’s behaviour. He only stared at us, like a rabbit caught in the headlights—dazed and frozen. The few feet distance that separated us seemed like an ocean, abetting my torture, my helplessness.

No one had ever slapped me in my life. Arjun’s mother continued to hurl cruel words at me. I was agonized more by Arjun’s silence and passivity than by the abuses his mother was gracing me with. I couldn’t face it. A few onlookers had begun to gather. I rushed back into the hospital wing, even as tears blinded my vision. How could his mother say such things? Arjun—he didn’t even move a finger or utter a word when his mother was slandering me publicly.

Humiliated, depressed, and defiled, my situation was pathetic. Grief muddled my mind and desperation engulfed me when I reached the familiar ICU corridor. Vishal got up in panic on seeing my tear-streaked face.

“What happened? Where is Arjun? Tell me, Anu! Why are you crying?” he asked bewildered.

“Later. I will tell you later. Can we go home? NOW?” I pushed off his hands

when he attempted to calm me down with a hug.

“Okay. I will take you. I’ll just check whether anything is needed in here. Just one minute,” he said, helping me into a chair.

My eyes darted towards the end of the corridor, dreading the arrival of Arjun or his mom. Maybe the woman was venting her ire now on Arjun or maybe they were already gone. I wished Grandma were awake. I wished I could hug her and cry. I wished she had not played cupid. But wishes didn’t always change reality, did they?

Vishal was back in minutes. Dreading to go back into the parking area, I requested Vishal to bring the car in front of the lobby and we drove out of the hospital in silence.

When we were half way towards Sreepuram, Vishal asked me what happened. My silent tears transformed into violent sobs and Vishal immediately pulled the car onto the side of the road. When my tears abated, in a voice hoarse from crying, I told him what had happened. I struggled to repress a sob, wiping away some errant tears, when I told him about Arjun’s silence and inaction.

“Spineless fellow! I didn’t know he was so little to be trusted. I am sorry, Anu.”

I tried to compose myself but my smothered sob made me tremble.

“I never knew she had such a side to her. She turns out to be such a snob. Her son loved you. Anyone could see that.”

“He loved me? I doubt it. Can a lover tolerate his lover being humiliated?” I asked amidst tears. I didn’t know Arjun anymore. A few minutes had turned around my beliefs, my convictions. One moment he had been my hero and the next moment just a weakling, someone I didn’t even recognize.

Vishal got down from the car to make a call. As he got in, he informed me that Gopu had reached the hospital and Vishal could take a few hours off.

“What do you want me to do, Anu? I feel like beating the hell out of him.”

“I want to leave for Bangalore, Vishal. I want to go the moment my parents reach here. They will reach in another hour or so I think. They started at twelve yesterday night. I just want to escape from all this.”

“Anu, there is no need to run. I am here with you to face anything. I need to

talk to him and then we will decide.”

“No, Vishal. What is there to talk about? If he had loved me, he would not have been a silent spectator to the scene his mother created. It may have been just a momentary infatuation for him and it will pass,” I said. The denial stage had passed. I had to face the reality. My love story had suffered an early death.

“What will you tell your parents? I mean the reason for your abrupt departure. With *Ammamma* in the hospital, they are sure to doubt your reasons. They know how much you love her.”

“I don’t want to face *Ammamma*, Vishal. I just can’t. She thought of Arjun and me as the perfect pair. See where it has taken me. To be labelled a whore, a slut. I’ll tell that Khushi called, I will say something. I hate myself, Vishal. I don’t know how I will face anyone anymore.”

“Don’t blame yourself for any of this, Anu. You didn’t do anything to attract his attention. Just remember, whatever happens, I am there for you. I trust you. Even *Ammamma* will understand you, once she comes to know about all this.”

Silence reigned in the car the rest of the way back to Grandma’s house. Like a leaf washed away by a fierce stream, I had been adrift. A quicksand of betrayal was sucking me into a mire of sadness. The furious face of Arjun’s mom flashed in front of my eyes every time I closed them.

My parents arrived, with my mother completely distraught. I banished my own wretchedness and told them briefly what had happened to Grandma. I assured them that she was out of danger now. Devi, Gopu’s wife, had returned and she served us steaming *puttu* for breakfast, all the while lamenting about their absence at such a crucial time.

“Good that Anu was here. Thanks to Lord Shiva. He never leaves his devotees in crisis,” said Devi. Why then was he punishing me?

Vishal’s parents and my aunt, my mother’s youngest sister, arrived soon and the whole house was filled with people. I tried to act normal but failed miserably. Thankfully, though, everyone associated my dour mood to Grandma’s illness.

“Amma should not be allowed to live alone anymore. She should stay with one of us. It is too dangerous in this age. Even with Gopu with her, it can’t be

the same as having one of us here,” my mom stated, as the three sisters prepared to go to the hospital. All three agreed. They also voiced their concerns as to how futile their efforts to convince Grandma would be once she was back from hospital.

“Only God can help us convince her. I have tried many times.” It was Uma aunty, Vishal’s mom, talking as she finished her tea.

When they left for hospital, I returned to my room to pack my things. I felt physically weak and broken down. I missed Grandma’s presence. The loss of Arjun’s love had left a gaping hole in my heart. It was as though nothing would ever be the same again. With a heart that still ached and bled, I urged myself to scrape together the broken pieces of my life. But a colossal sadness engulfed me and I sank onto my bed sobbing.

## Chapter Ten

“How lucky am I to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard.”

-Winnie the Pooh

### July 14, 2010, Sreepuram

When we left for Bangalore two hours later, the sky was pouring down its tears. The dark clouds echoed my wretchedness. I had told my parents that I had to leave, as I had to submit some important papers in college related to my project work. They didn't seem fully convinced. But with Vishal offering to take me to Bangalore and staying there until they returned, they were not worried anymore.

On the way to Bangalore, I turned off my phone, after restoring it to factory settings, thereby deleting all the stored photos and messages. Throwing the SIM-card into a stream that we passed by, I returned the phone to Vishal.

“No, Anu, you should keep it. It is a gift. I cannot take it back,” said Vishal, and I pushed the phone reluctantly back into my bag.

I had expected a call from Arjun, at the least. But there had been nothing. No call, not even a message. Tossing the phone away into the wilderness would have done wonders to my temper. My impulsive actions always tortured me later. Afterwards, I would regret my actions and hate myself evermore. I really needed to grow up.

Sreepuram, the place that held the best of my memories, was now the bearer of the worst experience of my life. I had come bustling with innocence but I was returning with a broken heart and a torn spirit. Of all the billions in the world, I had chosen to love the one person who had thoughtlessly tossed away my love. Together with the scenery that ran away from me, I wished all the memories of the vacation to vanish. I wished to return to the time when I had not met Arjun or known him.

I had heard a million times that love was blind. Now I knew enough to not trust that instinct of mine that had persuaded me to fall in love. I had always been an astute judge of character. Where had I gone wrong when it came to Arjun? Memories of him that were bright and colourful, had suddenly turned all dull and grey. I decided not to think of him. I wanted to forget him. But taking a decision was one thing, to make it happen, entirely another.

“Sleep a bit, Anu... You hardly slept yesterday.”

To quell the hundreds of thoughts running riot inside my mind, I tried to sleep. But the reverberation of the happenings of the morning had driven the sleep goddess away. We stopped for lunch at a roadside hotel. My appetite was near zero. Pushing around the food on my plate, I waited for Vishal to finish eating.

When we resumed the journey, I remembered the joy I had felt when I was heading towards Sreepuram, a month ago. On the way there, the untouched beauty of the forests we had passed through had enchanted me. The same scenery, on my journey back, was filling my heart with a sudden piercing dread. Tears came unbidden and the scenes from my short time together with Arjun played repeatedly inside my mind’s gallery.

My heart and brain were at war.

My heart refused to forget the love he gave me, but my brain reminded me of his disdain. The heart talked about the delight of his kisses, but the brain teased me with the visuals of his mother’s slap. My heart fondly remembered how he had come running to help when Grandma had fallen ill. But my stoic brain shouted at me, questioning his apathy when his mother was slandering me. This battle raged for hours, till my brain won. I bound my heart in the vice-like grip of the common sense my brain supplied.

Common sense told me that if he married me, I would have to live with his mother as well. His mother was dear to him. Her hatred would taint our love. I wouldn’t fit in his world as she had kindly informed me. To be vying for his affections with his mother seemed ridiculous.

The continuous honking of a horn broke my reverie.

“Run or else the police will catch you, you idiot,” shouted Vishal to a small kid who was defecating openly near the road, sending him scampering for cover. I doubled up with laughter watching the unsuspecting kid run.

“Never in his life will he repeat that. I gave him a real scare.” Vishal chortled with an evil grin.

Vishal’s sudden love for sanitation had served the purpose he had in mind. He had distracted me. If you have a person in your life capable of making you laugh, when even smiling feels like a burden, you are indeed blessed. He continued to make me laugh with his ready supply of jokes and funny



anecdotes.

We reached Bangalore at ten in the night. A quick bath and a takeaway dinner later, Vishal coerced me into my room to sleep. I tossed and turned for hours; sleep was nowhere near. In that blind bout of anger, I had deleted all the messages from Arjun and all his photos. My heart refused to calm down and, this time, my brain lost the battle. The pain that I felt made me dread the nights to come. I would miss those long telephone conversations, his messages wrapped in love that made me go all mushy, his kisses, and his happy presence that made my thoughts ecstatic.

To vent, I took my pencil and started sketching in my sketchbook. My heart guided my pencil. A single tear left my eye, leaving a trail of warmth on my cheeks. Wiping away the errant tear, I returned to the sketch and added colour using colour pencils. The clock on the wall chimed three times, coinciding with the last few strokes of colour. Looking at me from the sketchbook, with eyes dripping with love, was Arjun. I cried, overwhelmed by the deepened sense of loss.

Why was it that we wished for things we couldn't get?

Why do dreams vanish when they were only mere hairbreadths away from our reach?

Why was letting go so hard?

I wanted answers. I wanted to talk to Arjun. Desperately. But I did not even remember his number. Blame it on my euphoria and my carelessness, I had not written it down anywhere. All I remembered was that it started with 9895, the same as any other Airtel number in Kerala did.

I wanted to know whether he still loved me. Did I misread the love in those eyes?

It is the worst sort of pain when you begin to doubt whether your cherished memories had been real or just a figment of your imagination.

Had I thrown away all chances of reconciliation by running away from Sreepuram? It didn't matter that I regretted it now. My heart still hoped he would call me. He had my contact details and even my landline number in Bangalore. But, Vishal would not allow me to contact Arjun. How would Grandma react when she came to know of all that had happened? She might not encourage me anymore.

With only such thoughts giving me company, I cried all night. Sometime later, during the early hours of the morning, I fell asleep. I woke up when Vishal called me at nine in the morning.

“You were crying all night, weren’t you? Don’t lie, your eyes clearly tell me you were. And what is this that you are hiding?” Vishal asked snatching the sketchbook that I was trying to hide beneath my pillow.

“So, this is what you were doing. Why Anu? Is what you faced not enough?”

“Help me, Vishal. I am unable to forget him. I love him. Please do something, I cannot live without him.” I cried, even as Vishal’s face turned red with anger.

“Forget him, Anu. He does not deserve you. Did you hear that his mother made a scene at the hospital last evening? She vilified our whole family and branded you as a spoilt gold digger from the city, sent out to lure her only son. *Ammamma* was at the receiving end of her anger. And your professed lover was nowhere around when all that was happening. Spineless fellow....”

Vishal’s phone rang then and he glared at it before shouting at the caller, “I told you not to call me, didn’t I? Is there anything left to say now?” Vishal disconnected the call.

I realized it was Arjun’s call, but I was in too much of a shock to react. His mother had abused my whole family. Poor Grandma, how was I going to face her ever again? I had put her through this trauma at the worst possible time. And how would I face my parents? I had committed the one sin they had always requested me to abstain from. My heart weighed a thousand pounds and I felt nauseated.

“I can’t forgive the way he forsook you, Anu. Nor can I forgive his mother. Couldn’t he utter a single word in support of you? What if he sides up with his mother and tortures you after marriage? How are we to be assured that he will take care of you, protect you? Oh, I have heard enough about such idiots.”

Vishal continued venting his anger on Arjun but I wasn’t hearing him. I was in a trance of sorts, a stupor that had caught me unaware.

“Anu, are you hearing me?” Vishal asked but I didn’t answer. Like a zombie, I watched him tear the portrait into bits and throw the pieces into the bin.

“Forget him, Anu. He deserves nothing less than that,” said Vishal, before

storming out of the room.

That was the last straw, the end of every little hope that I had so painfully nurtured last night. Lying in bed all day, I agonized over every moment that the future held in store for me. My nerves were in a state of shock.

Feeling worthless, unloved, and suffocating with distress, soon I was down in the pits of depression. Arjun's mom's scary face, the abuses that she hurled at me kept playing on a loop in my mind. I could forgive her for what she did to me but I couldn't ever forgive her for what she did to Grandma and my parents. Also, the thought of facing my parents brought in fear again like an avalanche.

"Anu, eat something," Vishal ordered, coming in with a plate of sandwiches and tea.

"I don't feel hungry."

"Not hungry? You've hardly eaten anything since yesterday. You are being impossible. Anyway, your Dad and Mom will reach by midnight. Maybe they will know how to make you see sense. I am at my wit's end." Vishal left after placing the sandwiches on the table. I stared at them blindly.

My parents were on their way home. I had caused an indelible scar on their self-respect. My fear soared, threatening to choke me. I had to escape this. I wanted to escape this. The steel blade that I used to sharpen my charcoal pencils beckoned me. I got up quickly and locked the door. I picked up the blade, positioned it over my left wrist, and slashed my vein in one swift move. Blood gushed out and relief flooded through me. I was finally going to be free. Free from all the concerns that were haunting me. Free from every single distressing memory. Free from the throes of woes. The physical pain was now far more than the pain I was feeling in my heart; it was easier to bear too.

What I didn't know then was that the movies had shown it wrong all the time. By slashing wrists, nobody ever died. However, this I would come to know later. And it would be months before I would realize, how that one action had thrown away all my chances of being happy.

I was soon losing consciousness because of the amount of blood I was losing. The last memory I had, before I lost consciousness, was of Vishal breaking into the room. It must have been my frenzied imagination, but I also saw

Arjun running towards me, shouting words of endearment.

## Chapter Eleven

"I always knew looking back on the tears would make me laugh, but I never knew looking back on the laughs would make me cry."

- Cat Stevens

### July 16, 2010, Bangalore

When I opened my eyes again, my parents were sitting on either side of my bed. Their faces lit up when they found me conscious. When I tried to sit up, I grimaced. Looking down, I found an IV inserted in my right arm.

"Careful, Anu...", said my mother, while my father hurried to help me sit by piling pillows against the headrest of the bed.

"You scared us ...," said my mother and bit her lower lip, not saying anything further. She hugged me and started to weep. My father embraced us both and there were tears in his eyes. For a while, I couldn't understand what was going on. Then it all came back to me with sudden clarity, at least the images of what I had tried to do. The sharp awareness that I was the cause of my parents' tears made me cringe.

"Just know that we love you unconditionally. Never think you are alone... we are there for you always," my father said as he wiped the tears that ran down my cheeks.

For a parent, there could be nothing worse than outliving one's child. I felt terrible to have given them a taste of their worst fear. My parents, on the other hand, soothed me with their reassuring talks. I wanted them to scold me for my stupidity and selfishness. But all I got were loving caresses and unadulterated love. No one mentioned Arjun or his mother although I dreaded the moment they would start talking about it. It did not happen, not then nor later.

"How is *Ammamma*, mom?" I asked, my voice weak.

"She is okay and back home. She must've called ten times already. Wait, I will call her," she said, as she speed-dialled Grandma's number.

"And Vishal...?"

"He will come in sometime. He has gone home to get a few things. He was so worried and angry with you for doing this insane thing. But don't worry...",

my father said before he fell silent.

Vishal came an hour later and, as expected, snapped at me. Even in his anger, I found his love. He made me promise that I'd never attempt such an irresponsible thing again. His words made me wince in shame.

The extent of the agony my asinine action had put my loved ones through was huge. But I couldn't explain to them the pain that had made me numb to all sensible thoughts. I couldn't explain the hollowness that still wallowed in my heart. A single loss had made me forget all the blessings I had in life. Every worldly thing had ceased to be valuable when I had put Arjun and his love above the rest. Fate had given me another chance to retrospect and resurrect the things I had almost destroyed. I was among the lucky few, wasn't I?

Discharged from the hospital by around five that evening, we reached home an hour later, thanks to the bumper-to-bumper traffic. I was relieved to be home, minus the deep fear. My greatest fear had been facing my parents' wrath. With them giving me the support and love I had craved, I was sure I could survive. I now knew one thing. They valued me more than their battered ego or social reputation.

But even though everything seemed normal, I knew nothing would remain the same ever again. The Ananya who had lived in that house until the previous day was dead. The person who had returned from the hospital was no longer the naïve, bubbly girl who thought the whole world was a bed of roses.

Glancing around my room, I saw glimpses of that girl. The piles of sketchbooks, the scattered colour pencils, and the paintings that hung on the wall spoke of her presence. No matter how hard I tried, she continued to resurface, bringing with her the memories of the last month, and of Arjun.

Did I still love him?

Of course, I did. Maybe, I would love him until my last breath. It didn't matter that he had forgotten me. It didn't matter that he probably hated me. I would continue to love him.

I relived those memories repeatedly until I could feel his presence all around me. The thought that I had lost him forever was a constant dull pain. Maybe the poets had it right. Love was a pain in disguise. Nonetheless, I revered it,

as there was pleasure in that pain.

Grandma came to visit me a week after my hasty retreat to Bangalore. Even after repeated assurances that I was okay, she had to come and see me in person.

“What have I done to you, child? You have become so thin and pale. I am so sorry,” she cried, sobbing her heart out as she held me in her arms.

“No, *Ammamma*. You are not responsible for anything. I am. But I don’t regret any of it *Ammamma*. I am not sorry that I fell in love with him. I am just sad that he can’t be mine. Maybe this is my destiny,” I managed to say before my wrecked emotions made it too difficult to speak.

“If this is your destiny, Anu, I am angry with my God. Why should this be your destiny? I saw how much you both loved each other. Why is God testing you both?”

“No, *Ammamma*. Whatever God gave me during the last one month were some of the best moments I’ve ever had. I was so happy. It was all wonderful if I could just forget that last day. You fell ill suddenly and then everything went downhill from there. But I don’t believe I deserved this,” I said as memories of my humiliation tortured me again.

“Did you try to contact him?”

“I don’t have any means, *Ammamma*. In my first fit of anger at his silence, I had deleted his details from my phone, even his photos.”

“Has he not tried contacting you?”

“No.”

“Do you still love him?”

I nodded.

“I just wish I could see him just one more time, *Ammamma*. Just one more time, if only to...” I stopped as my grief choked out my words and I started sobbing uncontrollably.

“Anu, Anu... enough child, calm down. God’s plans are always a mystery to man. I am only praying that he gives you enough strength to face these troubled times.”

“I am stronger now, *Ammamma*. Whatever happened has broadened my

outlook. I don't blame Arjun for not supporting me. If I was in his place, I might have behaved in the same way. I know how much he loves his mom. I am just sad that I was not lucky enough to have the same importance." I bit my inner cheek to control my sobs.

"Time heals every wound, Anu, no matter how deep it runs. Maybe, just maybe, all this happened for a reason. Give him some time, Anu. I am sure his love was not an act."

I wanted to believe that too. That my Arjun would come to me, that I would have his love back. I couldn't.

Grandma stayed with us for three days. It was a huge relief for me. No one mentioned Arjun or his mom in my presence. But discussions raged in my absence. The stony silence that suddenly filled any room the moment I entered it was proof enough. Topics were abruptly changed if someone mentioned anything by mistake.

The care they took to make me forget about my loss, reminded me more of it. However much I tried, Arjun popped up into mind frequently.

Khushi and Poornima sniffed out that something was wrong within a few hours on the first day of college. After many prods and threats, I told them my tale.

"You did what?" they cried out in unison when I reached the last part of my narration, that of my attempted suicide.

"Were you out of your mind, Anu? You shouldn't have done that. Just think of what your parents must have gone through. And what if something had happened?" said Poornima, grabbing both my hands almost painfully.

"Forget him. If he can't support you in front of his mother, your love doesn't stand a chance in the long run," Khushi declared.

"Lovers defy the world to be together. Really, he doesn't deserve a place in your life, Anu," Poornima concluded.

They both examined the scar on my left wrist and scolded me repeatedly.

"Trust me. You are better off without him. Just look around, dear. There are better guys around here, with better looks, a better bank balance, and a better mom waiting for you. Look at that senior ogling at us from there. Isn't he a cutie? I heard his mom was dead," said Khushi, to lighten the mood. I just sat



there staring down at my hands.

“Anu, I know how hard it is to forget first love. Been there, done that. But that doesn’t mean you have a right to throw away your life. You should show them that you have moved on. We both are with you,” Poornima said.

Poornima too had a love story. The boy with whom she had been in love had ended up getting married to her cousin, though she still couldn’t explain that. She used to tell us how torturous it was to move in the same family circles as him. Seeing him now and then and having to pretend that there was nothing when she had never been able to forget him.

“This is why I never trust any guy. They are just for time pass, sweethearts. I intend to set a record, breaking male hearts. I have heard enough female sob stories,” said Khushi, who already had the reputation of being the biggest flirt in our batch.

She proudly confessed she got bored of any guy within one week. With her looks, she didn’t have a dearth of admirers. She belonged to a rich north Indian business family. The Sharmas were wholesale traders and Khushi lived in a joint family. The family owned a huge apartment complex in the suburbs of Bangalore. Once you were there, you were considered a part of the social family. She attributed her social skills to being part of such a huge family.

Poornima Rao was the daughter of a dentist couple. Her brother was a doctor who was doing his PG in Oxford University. She was a local and had relatives all over Bangalore and Mysore. With the many festivals that we celebrated, I was acquainted with both their families, as they often invited me to join them.

The bell tolled, announcing the end of the lunch break and putting an end to my reveries. I rushed to the geo-technical lab with Khushi and Poornima, hovering over me for the rest of the day.

Days began to pass in monotony after the regular classes began. The same rush hour in the mornings, the lectures, surveys, and labs kept me busy. I was grateful that I had those things to keep me busy. The moment I paused, I remembered him and the fact that I had lost him.

The inch-long scar on my left wrist reminded me of an enchanted world of love, which had vanished like a mirage. Although I still craved for any

contact from Arjun, all I got was silence, no visits, and no phone calls. I searched for him in crowds and every tall person reminded me of him.

It was the final week of classes for our seniors. The final year's day was one big party that lasted until morning. Every year I had to beg my parents to allow me to attend, as it was notorious because of the drunken antics of the final year students. This year, however, it was my parents who encouraged me to join Khushi and Poornima. I was least interested, but Khushi with her hollering and Poornima with her gentle persuasion convinced me to join them.

The final years had put their best foot forward. Every item on the stage was perfection. Yet my mind wandered to Arjun ever so often. Where was he? My heart was heavy and the duet dance on stage was not helping either. I didn't notice the tears until they rolled down my cheeks. Poornima squeezed my hands silently to console me. Khushi was engrossed in the dance and I quickly wiped the tears from my cheek, fearing her anger.

The lights in the auditorium flickered on when the curtains came down. The fun part of the program was the dedications—mushy messages from boys and girls to their lovers accompanied by a song—during the breaks between the items. For all cultural programs in the college, the dedication counter would be the most crowded spot in the auditorium.

Most of the dedications this time were interesting. There had been a breakup declaration, a proposal and a love message from a loafer of the senior batch to the prettiest girl in his class. Loud boos from the audience had greeted it.

“The next dedication is from Arijit Singh of S8 Civil to Khushi of S6 Civil,” the emcee announced and Khushi sat up in attention. Arijit was her latest victim.

“The message is ‘*You are the woman of my dreams, the sunshine of my days, and the song in my heart... I love you*’ and the song is ‘*Truly, madly, deeply*’...”

As the song began playing, Khushi bent down and laid her head on my lap as most of the audience were on the lookout for her reaction even as loud whistles and boos greeted the dedication once again.

“Duffer, couldn't he tell me in person? And such lines...crap...,” Khushi cursed Arijit as the song played on.

“I saw it coming. The way you were flirting with him, that poor fellow would have thought you had truly and madly fallen for him.” Poornima teased Khushi.

I tickled Khushi and she sat up straight, giggling.

“Wait, I will get my revenge on both of you. And yes, I have to find that duffer too.”

Khushi wandered off into the auditorium in search of Arijit amidst our giggles and teasing.

The lights went off again and when the curtains rose, our senior Shashank Shenoy appeared on stage sitting on a chair, with a guitar in his hand. Two mikes were placed in front of him, as though he was going to sing while playing the guitar. He was a good singer, but I didn’t know he played the guitar.

“I dedicate this song to you, my beloved. Sneha, I love you and this is for you,” said Shashank, and strummed the guitar.

Sneha was his classmate and, according to the grapevine, they had been a couple right from the first year of college. Sneha was sitting in the front row, enraptured, and looking fondly at Shashank.

*“Wise men say only fools rush in, but I can’t help falling in love with you...,”* Shashank began and memories overwhelmed me.

Shashank vanished from the stage and Arjun appeared, his eyes sparkling with love. Goosebumps erupted all over me., My eyes brimmed with tears. No sooner had I wiped one salty drop off my cheek, another followed. My heart felt like it weighed a hundred tonnes.

Poornima, turning to comment about something, quickly held my hands, puzzled by the tears shining on my cheeks.

“Poornima, I need to get out of here. Can we go?”

Although surprised by my request, she agreed immediately and pulled her phone out to call Khushi. We walked out of the auditorium into the dimly lit corridor that led to the college foyer. The song played on, its melody filling me with sadness. I leant on a pillar and wept my heart out, now that I was away from the crowd. Poornima disconnected the phone and came towards me.

“What happened, Anu? Why are you upset?” Poornima asked.

“Nothing, it is just that...,” I began but my sobs returned in full force.

“Calm down, Anu. Did the song reminded you of Arjun?” she asked, as she gathered me in a calming hug. “It is just a song, Anu. Don’t become a slave to your feelings. You will end up as an emotional wreck.”

“It is just that, Arjun sang this song for me, once. Hearing Shashank singing it...” I couldn’t complete and she hugged me tight.

“Calm down, Anu. I can understand. But you must move on, dear. If he were the one for you, he would have come after you for sure. I am sorry, but his attitude doesn’t offer much hope.”

I sobbed.

“Stop it, Anu. If you go on like this, I will stop talking to you. Fuck that bastard who is responsible for all this.”

Poornima shouted at Khushi for being so heartless and soon they were yelling at each other, as usual.

We returned home in Khushi’s car. My parents were surprised to see us back so early, but they asked no questions. I ate my dinner quietly and headed straight for bed thereafter.

I felt empty inside. Like Poornima had rightly said, I had indeed become an emotional wreck.

## Chapter Twelve

“We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect.”

— Anaïs Nin

### August 13, 2010, Bangalore

One afternoon, after college, I headed out to the nearby mall where a book fair was being held. As Poornima and Khushi had some other shopping plans, I was all alone.

Though I was roaming through the aisles stuffed with books that beckoned me to look at them, I had no interest to pick one. I watched without seeing and felt hardened inside.

“Oh, my child, Ananya, how thin have you become,” said a voice from behind me and I turned to see who it was. It was Colonel Uncle with a sad smile on his face. His smile told me all I needed to know. He knew. I wondered if the whole of Sreepuram now buzzed with stories about Arjun and me.

Colonel Uncle talked as though nothing had happened. Being a nomad, he told me, he was travelling and today was the last day of his trip to Bangalore. When I asked, he told me that Arjun and his family had left Sreepuram and were now settled in Mangalore.

“Those are his mother’s tactics to keep him away from you. Trust me, I know how much he loves you. The lad pines after you.” I wished I could believe him.

“No uncle, I don’t think so. I want to forget that phase of my life. I have to get rid of those suffocating memories,” I said, determined to act brave.

““Never bottle up your emotions, Ananya. That is a very unhealthy practice. Talk to someone or write about it. Or better, take out a paper and write to Arjun about how you are feeling—”.

“I don’t have his address uncle,” I protested weakly.

“There is no need for an address because you need not send it. That is not the purpose of writing it. Write down whatever you want to tell him. Don’t care for the grammar or the word selection or be ashamed of the feelings you are writing about. Let your words bring out all that you feel. Then, when you are

done, read it over again and burn it. Imagine that the flames are devouring all your hurt and sadness. Repeat it every day until you feel that the grief is gone.”

“But...”

“Try it, Ananya, it is very effective. This is one of the methods prescribed by psychologists the world over. Words have the power to heal.” Colonel Uncle went on and on about the power of the technique.

He insisted on walking me to the bus station and I watched him disappear into the crowd. His words worked like a balm for my aching heart. I could feel the faint stirrings of hope inside me.

And that was how I started writing to Arjun. In the beginning, the words just didn’t come. I struggled to express myself. But slowly, the words started to pour from my soul. I wrote my heart out. However, I couldn’t bring myself to tear the pages and burn them. It seemed too hard. I postponed the burning part for another time. But, that ‘time’ just didn’t come. Soon, the letters transformed into a journal that I kept locked in my shelf.

Time, they say, healed all wounds. But for me, time—the eternal river—had frozen the moment I had left Arjun. However, the words that I penned began to thaw the ice of depression that had settled in my heart. They soothed my wounded soul. Every night, without fail, I sat down to write to Arjun. With each line that I wrote, the heaviness in my heart became a little lighter than before. I wrote about all the things that I wished I could tell him. I wrote about my day, my wandering thoughts. Within days, my mood was better than it had been in the past few weeks.

Releasing all those pent-up emotions was doing me good. Moreover, I felt strangely closer to Arjun again. Although I had no direct contact with him, it was as if the words were forging an invisible connection between us. I still dreamt of him, but his memories didn’t haunt me anymore.

My journal became my secret friend, my connection with Arjun. I started to take a genuine interest in the things going around me so that I could write about them to him. Even though it was a one-sided conversation, it did what conversations with a dear one normally did. It took away my sadness and made me feel cherished.

No one would understand what I was doing or why I was doing that.

Therefore, I kept it a secret. From that one habit, the plethora of emotions that I struggled with—my anger, sadness, the loneliness, the feeling of not being good enough—became less and less prominent.

Poornima and Khushi told me that they were seeing glimpses of the old Ananya once again. To bring back the old me completely, they asked me to do what I was passionate about—painting. I had stopped painting and sketching. It was not that I had not tried. Whenever I took a pencil or charcoal to start a painting, I thought about the portrait of Arjun that Vishal had torn. I quickly lost any interest to draw altogether.

One Friday, Poornima had a visitor during lunch hour. She took Khushi along with her. I sat in the classroom completing an assignment, which was due the next Monday. I watched in amusement when they returned an hour later, bickering as usual. I didn't enquire about the reason for the fight nor did they bother to reveal it.

Something was brewing between them from that day. They excluded me from the many long discussions and arguments they were having. Unlike before, though, I didn't really have much interest in their gossip and hence didn't pester them to explain.

On a Sunday morning in mid-September, an excited Poornima called me to tell me about an invitation she had received to attend an art exhibition at ITC Gardenia, a five-star hotel in Bangalore. One of her cousins had gifted her three complimentary passes to the exhibition.

“Idiot, don't say no. Do you know who the artist is? I remember someone telling me that her biggest dream in life was to meet Vladimir Volegov,” teased Poornima.

“Poornima...is it true?!!!...Volegov? Who said no? Let us go....” I screamed in excitement and my mother smiled seeing my enthusiasm.

How could I say no to a chance to see the original art of one of my favourite artists in the world? Vladimir Volegov was a Russian painter who specialized in figurative paintings. His works often featured women, children, and flowers—the three things that he considered the prettiest in the world. His time-lapse tutorial videos of selected paintings that he did were huge hits on YouTube. I admired his works like crazy and a chance to see his art up close had always been a big dream.

Off we went—me, Poornima and Khushi—to the art exhibition, in a chauffeur driven car provided by the cousin who had given Poornima the passes to the exhibition. We had all taken care to dress up in our best. Khushi was still angry with Poornima for whatever issue they had. She had come only because I had insisted. After all, we had three passes.

The hotel was a good twenty kilometres away, and with the bumper-to-bumper traffic, it seemed farther away. However, the exhibition was worth the effort. The place was teeming with art lovers from the art fraternity of Bangalore. We were spellbound by the beauty of the paintings. Many of the paintings were never before seen works of the artist.

The buzz was that the artist himself would pose with some of the art lovers near his most popular painting if they had the gold pass. My joy was limitless when I saw that we had gold passes.

Poornima clicked my photo when I got my chance to pose with Volegov. He asked me whether I was an art lover or an artist. When I replied I was both, he said he was delighted to hear that. He seemed like such a down-to-earth person, chatting and laughing with all his admirers.

I couldn't stop grinning all the way back home. Khushi and Poornima were again talking to each other. The paintings and Volegov had done their magic on me and I thanked whatever it was that had made them forget their issues with each other. After a gap of two months, I had experienced moments of true bliss. I found myself laughing heartily at all the silly jokes cracked by Khushi.

“We will do this again, Anu. I am so glad to see you laugh heartily after so long. I believe the old, bubbly Ananya is slowly coming back,” said Poornima.

“Thank your cousin for giving us the passes. It was my long time wish to see Volegov's art, to see him in person. My God! I still can't believe that I actually saw him,” I said.

“The guy sure has talent. His oil paintings look prettier than the best digital photographs. Hey, we haven't seen any of your paintings lately! Why don't you paint one?” Khushi asked and Poornima immediately seconded.

“Actually, I am so inspired. I have to paint today. You can see it tomorrow.” I promised with a wide grin.



When I got home, I immediately sat down to paint. I began a random portrait. As usual, my fingers seemed to have a mind of their own because it didn't turn out so random in the end. The sketch was a realistic portrait of Arjun. With a content smile, I filled it with colours. With each stroke I painted, Arjun's face emerged clearer on the canvas. He had the same grin that I had fallen in love with and an intense look in his eyes that often made me go weak in my knees.

I kept the canvas board on the easel, turned it to face the wall, and went to have dinner. My parents were elated that I had started to paint again. At night, I wrote about it all to Arjun. I wrote about the exhibition, about meeting Volegov, and about his portrait that I had completed. The next day, Poornima and Khushi came home to see the portrait. When I showed it to them, they scowled at me.

"After all that you endured, you've painted him again? This is Arjun, right?" Khushi asked, shaking her head in disbelief while Poornima looked at the portrait fondly.

"If this is how the guy looks like, no wonder you fell head over heels in love with him," Poornima, and we all laughed aloud.

"This guy is lucky to have your love. How I wish I had someone as much in love with me that he could paint me from memory. You sure do love him immensely, Anu." Poornima said.

"Don't worry. I will paint you too," I said.

"But you are not my lover, dear." she smirked, and wrinkled her nose mischievously.

"Remember that long haired portrait artist we met at the exhibition? He would have made an excellent lover. You should have noted down his phone number." Khushi remarked tongue-in-cheek and Poornima punched on her shoulders.

"I would have, had he not smelled so bad. I think he has not seen water in weeks," said Poornima, making a wry face.

Khushi snorted hearing Poornima's agony and we ended up on my bed laughing until our stomachs hurt.

If you have at least one friend who will stay near you during the saddest periods of your life, you are truly blessed. I had twice the luck. Poornima and

Khushi stayed with me until late that day. It was like old times; we sat and planned where we should head for the weekend.

We stuck to our plans and spent the next weekend at the Nandi hills and the one that followed at the Lalbagh botanical gardens.

Months passed with outings planned spontaneously and no movie releases were missed.

We rang in the New Year at a concert by Sonu Nigam, a famous Bollywood singer, again because of the complimentary passes gifted by Poornima's cousin.

We passed with a good percentage in the seventh-semester exams and it channelled more celebrations.

## Chapter Thirteen

“Beauty is eternity gazing at itself in a mirror.”

-Kahlil Gibran

In the second week of February 2011, our college hosted the inter-collegiate cultural fest ‘Zenith’ and all of us were neck deep in the preparations. Most of the organizers belonged to our batch and Khushi was in charge of the fashion show team from our college. We had decided on ‘Brides of India’ as the theme and we ran around getting the costumes ready and picking the models for the show.

Three days before the event, Khushi stormed into the class from the rehearsals and pulled us out to talk.

“I am so dead. Our showstopper is down with chicken pox. We are in a big mess,” said Khushi, biting her nails in tension.

“We will help you to find a replacement, Khushi. Don’t worry,” I said, though I knew how difficult it would be to search for a new model and then train her.

“The Showstopper, it’s the showstopper we are talking about. I don’t think anyone in our acquaintance will look as stunning as Erica,” said Poornima, sounding defeated. Erica Fernandez, tall and gorgeous, was going to be our Anglo-Indian bride.

“How about you, Anu, can you help me? You have been at the rehearsals and you are familiar with the choreography.”

“Khushi, are you mad? You know I have stage fright. And I will be too short. I will look like a dwarf amidst all the other tall girls. And who will convince my parents?” I asked, laughing off the suggestion.

“I will convince uncle and aunty if you agree. You are not that short. The showstopper walks alone. Therefore, your height won’t be a problem anyway. We will make you wear heels too.” Khushi exclaimed, as though she had already finalized me as Erica’s replacement.

“What about Poornima?” I asked, looking for a chance to escape.

“Poornima is shorter than you and looks typical south Indian,” said Khushi.

“You are speaking as though my parents will allow,” added Poornima.

“Please, Anu. We have just two days to go for the show. If you don’t agree we will just have to pull out from the competition,” said Khushi.

“Okay, okay, I will do it if you manage to convince my parents,” I said, and Khushi punched the air in triumph.

“That is my brave girl,” she said, “so, that is one part of the problem solved. We must hunt for the dress now. Erica was to use her mother’s dress. But it won’t fit you.”

I was excited at the idea of dressing up in a Christian wedding gown. Dressing up as a Christian bride was a cherished dream. Though I was partly terrified at the prospect of walking down the ramp, the thought made me smile.

“We can ask around in some boutiques and then offer to advertise in return for the use of a gown for the evening,” Khushi suggested.

“I have a better idea,” said Poornima, “Remember my cousin who offered the passes for the exhibition and the concert? He might have contacts. He is in the wholesale business after all.”

“Poornima, do we need that? We can scout for shops ourselves as we have done for some of the other brides,” asked Khushi.

“Do we have time for that? I think this is our best option. I am sure he will help,” said Poornima and walked out with her phone to call her cousin.

“Who is this benevolent cousin of hers?” I asked, confused by Poornima’s confidence.

Why was this person always helping us? I hated being indebted to anyone.

“I’ve seen him only once. I am not very keen on the idea. But if he agrees to help us, all our problems will be solved,” said Khushi.

Poornima ran into the class a few minutes later, looking triumphant.

“We have to take her to ‘Lara’s Boutique’ for the fittings. We can use the gown for free if we run their advertisement during the fest,” Poornima said cheerfully and we all let out a sigh of relief.

Rehearsals started the same day and, to summarize them in one word, they were mad! I cursed myself for having agreed to be a part of it. For the ten minutes that we had to be on stage, there were endless rehearsals. The choreographer, Rona, gave me her full attention, as I was new and, most

importantly, the showstopper. She bombarded me with instructions.

“Ananya, throw your shoulders forward, and push your pelvis slightly forward.”

“Ananya, your toes should face outwards. Your footprints should form a zigzag. Walk like you are walking on your tippy-toes.”

“Ananya, take smaller strides, remember you are a bride.”

“Ananya, be a bit more graceful.”

“Ananya, keep your chin levelled and your eyes up, you want the spectators to see your face. Keep your head and shoulders still as your body moves down the runway.”

Two hours of rehearsals later, I was thinking of strangling Rona and my two friends who were watching me with huge smiles on their faces.

My feet were hurting by then and Rona taught how to exercise my feet to lessen the pain. My only hope was that my parents would refuse to let me participate in the fashion show. My parents agreed to anything those days. My last hope to escape vanished the moment Khushi introduced the topic to my father. They agreed wholeheartedly. They seemed happy that my friends were prodding me out from the shell that I had crept into.

The next afternoon, we reached ‘Lara’s Boutique’ that was located in a nearby mall to select a gown for me. The gowns on display were so gorgeous that we were confused. A simple A-line gown with lace work and trimmed with white satin roses caught our attention at last and Khushi helped me to try it on.

It was like the gown was made for me. Only a minor correction along the waistline and we’d be done. The only obstacle was the price tag that read Rs 30,499/-. Thankfully, though, Poornima informed us the shop had agreed to lend it to us on the guarantee of her cousin. We got a complimentary package with matching gloves, a veil, and a crown. All three of us glided out of the shop clutching the huge shopping bag, giggling like six-year-olds. Our next stop was a modern unisex beauty salon where Poornima and Khushi were regular visitors. It was my first time there. I did all I could to stop my jaw from dropping at the number of services they listed to the attendant. I wondered what the final bill would be, but Khushi and Poornima told me that this was a gift from them to me. “You have to look like a model dear, well-

groomed. Moreover, you are to be a bride. You have to be at your best,” they argued and I couldn’t refute. I spent hours grooming myself, getting a manicure, a pedicure, a facial, a haircut, and waxing.

The rehearsals the next day continued to be torturous and I feared I would end up in bed even before the show started. Khushi, Poornima, and Rona continued to pep me up, making me feel like a pampered child. With seven brides and their grooms ready to walk the ramp, the show promised to be colourful.

My partner was our junior Rahul and he was to accompany me only in my second walk down the ramp. All the men walked down the ramp in the first round followed by the brides and then in the last round they walked down together. The music was by heart for us all down to the last beat and all though things were going on smoothly, I was shivering inwardly on the day of the show.

Thankfully, the rehearsals had ended perfectly.

Within a few hours, Khushi’s cousin Sheila aunty, who was the beautician in-charge, transformed me into a beautiful bride.

Her brush worked its magic on my eyes, lips and touched every corner of my face. My lips were coated in a subtle magenta red colour. False eyelashes and a smoky eye added a bit of drama to my eyes. Highlighters and blush brought in some necessary shine and colour on my face. My hair was styled in a chignon, with a few curls left loose. Overall, I was amazed by the sudden change.

“You are the prettiest bride I have ever seen, Ananya,” said Sheila aunty.

“Thank you, Aunty. You are talking as though I am a real bride.” I couldn’t help laughing.

“Whoever gets to marry you will be the luckiest guy on earth. Let no one put an evil eye on you, my doll.” Sheila aunty smeared a dot of kajal beneath my ears to ward off the evil eye.

“Aunty, you are too much,” I said, suppressing a snort.

“I am sure you will be beseeched by boys after today,” she said with a chuckle. Khushi and Poornima joined us after taking care of some last-minute arrangements.

“If that idiot Arjun saw you now, he will trash his mom to come to you. You look like an angel, Anu.” Khushi grinned mischievously.

“Yes, you look angelic,” Poornima seconded Khushi enthusiastically.

“My legs feel like jelly. How will I manage this?” I asked.

“Imagine you are walking down the aisle to your prince charming, Anu. Think it is your wedding day. Let your love for your prince give you the courage you need,” Poornima whispered, and then she winked.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes. All the moments I had spent with Arjun flashed before my eyes. Visuals of his smile, his liquid brown eyes, his grin, and the kisses that used to make me melt in his arms, arrived post haste. How lucky would I be, if it were my wedding day? The day I was going to be his forever. The thought coursed a tingle throughout my body and replaced the dread with a kind of euphoria that only love could create.

Soon the show began and our team was the second to go on stage. When the cue came for me to enter the ramp, I didn’t feel nervous anymore. I walked with confidence, visualizing Arjun looking at me from the crowds, his eyes glittering with love. I stopped at the head of the ramp and posed. Then with a wiggle of my hips, I turned and walked a few steps and then again, on cue, turned back to look at the audience before walking away with confidence.

Now all the brides trooped back with their grooms and I walked in last with Rahul.

This time I heard the whistles, the hoots, and a collective sigh as we walked on the ramp. I looked out into the crowd and saw the happy faces of my parents, Khushi, and Poornima waving and cheering for me. I trooped back in with all the others. We posed one last time at the end of the stage before heading backstage. A thunderous applause followed and both Khushi and Poornima who had come running backstage smothered me with hugs.

“My God, you looked fabulous, Anu. So, so, so pretty. Love you, dear,” said Poornima, playfully kissing my cheeks.

“You should have heard the boys whistling when you came on the ramp. I heard at least a dozen guys swearing. This is it, Miss Ananya. Prepare to be hunted by the boys from now on,” Khushi said, with a huge grin on her face.

As though to prove her right, boys I had never seen before came in to greet me. My parents came in to see me just then and saved me from all the hassle.

They were beaming with happiness and thanked Khushi for convincing me to do the show. Our College won the first prize for the fashion and our joy was boundless. I was reluctant to part with the dress that had given me so much happiness and made me feel like a diva, but it had to be returned. I carefully folded it and kept it back into the bag in which it had come. We were all exhausted by the time we reached home and I slept like a log after three days of restless training and drama.

The next day, the local newspaper had my photo in the entertainment section, with a report on the festival going on in our college. My father woke me up and showed me the picture. His face shone with pride and happiness.

Indeed, I looked very pretty. Like a homing pigeon, my thoughts flew towards Arjun as they did every morning. If only Arjun had seen me yesterday! Where was he? Did he even remember me?



## Chapter Fourteen

“The beginning is the most important part of the work.”

—Plato

My journal had already extended into a fifth book and it had become my fondest secret. I had framed the portrait of Arjun but had kept it locked in my cupboard after I heard my mother speaking to my father about it one day. She feared I was still not over him.

“Let her keep it, Sukanya. It is just a phase, it will pass. Girls her age keep posters of Hollywood and Bollywood stars they have a crush on. This is just like that. He is quite out of bounds for her. She will realize it herself eventually. No need for us to interfere,” my father had said while calmly sipping his morning cup of coffee.

His words had saddened me. No one understood me. I was not yet ready to let go of Arjun. Seven months had passed without any news from him. But however much I tried, I couldn't forget him. The truth was, I didn't want to forget him. Like a forbidden fruit, I craved for him more, now that he seemed out of reach. In my journal that day, I vented all my anger and sadness, which helped improved my mood. It was as if the journal was magical—it calmed my tormented heart.

I started to learn cooking with mom. Within a few months, I managed to become an above average cook and was confident of dishing out a decent enough meal. Every morning, before getting ready for college I helped mom in the kitchen. It had become our special bonding time. However, we were not friendly enough to talk about Arjun. Maybe with time, I might trust her with my innermost secrets.

Experiences come with lessons attached. My experiences had made me strong. It was time for me to let go of the little girl I thought I was. That one month in Sreepuram had taught me lessons I had not learnt in the twenty odd years of my life. I learned who loved me unconditionally. I understood the love my parents had for me. I understood the importance of having good friends in life. Most importantly, I understood the value of life. Now when I think back, I understand how stupidly I had reacted to a small crisis that had crept on me unawares.

I hadn't tried to search for Arjun. Poornima had asked me to join Facebook

and look him up there. But I was reluctant, for two reasons.

First, I was in my final semester and my studies had me tied up. Project work, site visits, assignments, examinations, and the lab work kept me busy. I didn't want an added distraction from my studies.

Second, if at all I found him on Facebook only to learn that he had moved on, I would be devastated. I might slip back into that black endless pit of depression, into which I had already fallen and thankfully recovered, again. I was scared of being heartbroken again. Sometimes we love someone to such an extent that even the thought of him or her being with another person is enough to break our heart. I did not go even miles near social networking. I was happy in my illusionary world, the world I shared with him through my journal.

Days passed quickly. It was as if I had just woken up and, in a blink, a hectic day had passed and it was night again. With the preparations for the exams, the thesis submission, and our final board exams, I had even neglected my journal and days sometimes passed without a single entry.

When the mad rush of the exams was finally over, I realized I had reached the end of my college life. We celebrated the poignant final years' week and the final years' day with the same spirit that surrounded the events each year. The traditional farewell song harvested many tears onstage and in the audience. Even the most stone-hearted of our batch sat weeping, thinking about the four glorious years that we had spent there. Memories hung heavily over a cauldron of merry moments, vague destinies, regrets about unspoken words and broken promises. It was the moment of valediction to mad crushes, unrequited love, and bittersweet memories.

A rapid rush of retrospective thoughts took me wandering the lanes of loss and inheritance.

The year that had passed had been dramatic. It had not been a bad one if I could forget my attempted suicide. I had fallen in love, met my favourite painter Volegov, learnt to cook, and managed to become the college heartthrob after the fashion show. I had earned the title of Miss Beautiful from the final year batch later that night as a part of the final years' day festivities. The tomboy with the weird-coloured eyes had transformed into a beauty overnight.

I was now ready to jump into the big bad world and the thought was as

intimidating as it was exciting.

The campus interviews began after the last semester exams in June. Many companies from India and abroad had scheduled interviews and tests on our campus. Al Bayed LLC from Dubai was the most sought-after company for the civil engineering batch. It was a highly reputed construction and interior décor firm in the UAE, owned by one of the members of the royal family of Dubai.

Khushi was not interested in doing a job and Poornima did not qualify for the interview after the preliminary tests. I passed with high marks and the recruitment panel of Al Bayed LLC shortlisted me for the final round interview. My parents, on hearing the result, immediately called Kishore, my cousin, who worked in the UAE.

“Anu, just go for it... Don’t worry about the job being in a foreign country. The company has a good reputation. Also, I am here, right? Why do you worry?”

After his assurance, I prepared for the personal interview in earnest. I researched about the kinds of work they were doing, the major projects they had completed, and the skills they were looking for in their employees. Al Bayed LLC was the main interior décor firm behind the Dubai Metro, which was one of the most elegant and splendid metro networks in the world.

The placement cell gave the short-listed candidates mock interviews and coached us on the most common interview questions.

On the day of the interview, I resisted the urge to run away by doodling on every inch of my notebook. Almost thirty final year students belonging to various branches had huddled into a classroom before our interviews. If Khushi and Poornima were with me, I would have been at ease.

At last, I heard my name being called and dragged myself into the room. The interview panel had three people and except for one person who looked like an Indian, the rest were Arabs. Their smiling countenances cleared my nervous energies in a flash.

The balding chief interviewer introduced himself as the construction manager, the thin reed-like Arab was the design engineer, and the Indian was the HR manager. Their accent was slightly different but I was able to understand them.

‘Ok, Ananya...Tell us something about yourself. Which three words would describe you the best?’ asked the chief engineer, and the familiar routine began.

“I am a hardworking person with a positive outlook towards life. I am a perfectionist, a bibliophile, and an optimist.”

“What do you think is your greatest strength?” asked the design engineer.

“I have a genuine ability to learn things fast.”

“What is your greatest weakness?” It was the chief interviewer again.

“My perfectionism. I tend to double and triple check items.”

“How does that become a weakness?” he asked.

“I lose a great amount of time double checking data. Most of the time, there are no mistakes and the whole exercise becomes a waste of time.”

“Do you think this weakness can hinder your productivity?” asked the design engineer with a smirk.

“I don’t think my weakness will be a hindrance. I make sure entries are correct the first time itself. Though I double check, I am rather good at meeting deadlines.”

The two Arabs continued to fire questions at me, even as the Indian remained mute noting down my answers and God only knows what else. They asked me about my AutoCAD, STAAD, and Excel skills and some random design questions. My research about them served me well when they asked me what I knew about Al Bayed LLC.

When I walked out of the room, after fifteen long minutes, I gleaned it had gone rather well. Now it all depended on my luck.

The result of the interviews came out two days later and I squealed with delight seeing my name in the list of candidates selected by Al Bayed LLC. I was the only one chosen for the Dubai branch while another five had been picked up for their Abu Dhabi branch. The selected candidates, with the passport and certificates, had to meet up with their HR representative who would visit in August. We got our certificates of selection and offer letters. The salary offered was what I had not even dreamed of and it was a very good package.

My happiness knew no bounds. Khushi and Poornima pestered me for a treat.

We drove to Maiyya's, our favourite eatery, in Khushi's car for celebrating my achievement. Gulping down the sweets and other vegetarian delights that were on their menu, Khushi and Poornima teased me nonstop about eventually getting married to a mad Sheikh in Dubai.

"Hey, by the way, no news about your cousin these days...", I said to Poornima, in a bid to change the topic.

"What news? The last time he called me was the day after the fashion show. I don't know what happened but he is not available on his old number," Poornima said with a puzzled look on her face.

"Sad, I thought I would hear wedding bells soon," I said and Poornima scowled at me.

"He might be in love with you, Poornima. Maybe he is frustrated with the way you are using him," I joked.

"It is not that, Anu, he is just not my type," she replied with a shrug.

"What do you mean by 'not your type'? He obviously likes you. Or is it because you are not still over your first crush?" I regretted the words the moment I uttered them and felt like an idiot as tears welled in her eyes.

"No, Anu, it is complicated. You will not understand. Just leave it. Please...?"

Curiosity got the better of me and I blurted out again.

"Why does he give treats to all three of us?"

"I wouldn't have accepted it otherwise," said Poornima.

"Poor guy...you literally looted him. I hope I get to see him someday," I said.

"I hope so too," Poornima said, with a dreamy look in her eyes.

I winked at Khushi. She stuck out her tongue at Poornima who caught her at it and we all ended up laughing aloud, leaving the other diners cursing the noisy bunch of exuberant youngsters that we were.

## Chapter Fifteen

“It all begins when the soul would have its way with you.”

-Emerson

First experiences always hold a special place in our memories. Be it your first love, first kiss, or your first foreign trip.

While waiting to board the plane from Bangalore International Airport to Dubai, I was a bundle of nerves. Not only was it my first time on an airplane, it was my first trip abroad. Nervous jitters seized me once and again. To calm down my nerves, I dialled Khushi's number. My parents, along with Khushi and Poornima, had come to see me off.

“Sweetheart, relax. Many millions have travelled in an airplane till now. They have all actually survived to talk about it,” teased Khushi.

“Keep mocking me and I will come out right now,” I threatened, simply for the sake of it. Though scared like a rabbit, I was not going to turn back.

“Idiot, chill! Go to the washroom and relieve yourself. They have vacuum flush toilets in planes you know. It can be very messy...,” said Khushi, obviously with the sole aim of torturing me further.

“Shut up. I don't need to. If I get my hands on you, you would never utter another word, you ass,” I said, trying to sound menacing but succeeded only in eliciting giggles from the other side.

With help from a relative who worked at the Bangalore International Airport, I didn't have any trouble in passing through the emigration and security clearance. He left me in the boarding area and I sat there alone, with only an old woman snoring away in a nearby seat for company. Most of the other passengers were walking around making last minute purchases or talking to dear ones on the phone. When the announcement blared for the passengers heading to Dubai to start boarding the, I shivered inwardly. I prayed to all the Gods I believed in for help and tried to act bravely in front of the others.

Like an answer to my prayers, a smiling Colonel R.S Nair joined me in the queue.

“Uncle, are you also on this flight to Dubai?”

“Yes, sweetheart, I am on my way to visit my relatives there. Will be there for a few months,” he said with a smile and immense relief flooded me.

The smiling airhostess welcomed us and guided us to our respective seats. The captain of the flight welcomed us all and informed us of the flight duration, which was expected to be around three hours and fifty-two minutes and wished us a memorable journey.

At exactly eight pm, the plane started moving on the runway. I had the window seat, which was luckily next to Colonel Uncle's. He looked like an experienced traveller and appeared calm. My palms, however, were sweating, as I did not know what to expect when the aircraft took off. Most plane accidents took place either while taking off or while landing, didn't they? God help me!

"Are you travelling for the first time?" he asked guessing my nervousness, to which I replied in the affirmative.

"Don't listen to them then," he said, pointing to the flight stewards getting ready for the in-flight security speech, "they will convince you that this flight is doomed to crash, with all the demonstrations about the oxygen mask, the emergency exits and other terrifying things..."

Nervously, I smiled and then grinned as the flight stewards began doing just what he had said. His tip-off made it amusing.

When the flight took off, the view of the city of my birth was mesmerizing. It looked like a courtyard lit up with lamps on Diwali, the festival of lights. The cars that moved back and forth on the roads were like tiny fireflies. I swallowed, repressing an urge to cry. I had no idea when I would be back. I had never been away from Bangalore for more than a few months. Though the job entitled me to have an annual vacation of thirty days, I would still be away for a very long time.

My mother had taken to crying in my last week in Bangalore before I left for Dubai and I had seen my father too on the verge of tears. It had been a rather emotional week for all of us. There were times when I had thought of giving up everything and opting for a post-graduation in Bangalore instead. Then again, my mother was the one who gave me the courage to not let go of this golden chance at establishing my career.

My parents had pestered Kishore to give them all the details about UAE—the weather, the food and the working conditions. I became their next victim when all their enquiries met with favourable answers. If I could write down their instructions on paper, it would have run to thousands of sheets.

Grandma had sent so many varieties of pickles for me to take along. She was the most enthusiastic among all.

“I heard the tallest tower in the world is there, Anu. Be sure to go there. Once there, call me. I want you to tell me how it feels like. Okay?”

“I will take you there one day, *Ammamma*. Get your passport made and be ready to fly,” I told her. Memories of my last visit to Sreepuram made me drop the idea of visiting her before I left for Dubai.

The sound of the airhostess pushing the dinner trolley put an end to my musings. She served us a light dinner and a small bottle of mineral water. Colonel Uncle had gone to meet someone he had seen in the front row sometime after the take-off and by the time he returned, I had finished eating my dinner.

“So Ananya, are you on a visit to Dubai?” Colonel Uncle asked as he settled back in his seat.

“No, I have got a job there.”

“Great, which company and as what have you been posted?”

“I am going to work with the Al Bayed group, as a Civil Engineer,” I said and we continued to talk about mundane things.

Halfway through the journey, the Captain announced some turbulence ahead and asked everyone to fasten their seat belts. Colonel Uncle was cool even as the plane made scary moves and we had a bumpy ride.

“A ride on a horse is better than this,” said he with a grin.

My answering smile was a forced one. All the Gods I knew received whispered prayers in the tense minutes that dragged by. The faces of all my loved ones appeared before my eyes and tears began to trickle down when I thought that I might never see them again.

“Don’t worry my child, this too shall pass. We are nearer to our creators and I guess they hear us better when we pray in panic,” Colonel Uncle said with a chuckle, and I wiped my tears.

“It is common for flights to fly into regions of turbulence. It will be over in minutes unless we are facing a storm,” he told me and immediately, as though to prove him right, the captain announced that the turbulence was over. I thanked Colonel Uncle sheepishly and he laughed it off.



The rest of the flight passed smoothly with Colonel Uncle keeping me entertained with many anecdotes from his army life.

“There was this fellow called Murthy. He wanted a few days off desperately to meet his would-be wife. Hence made his friend send a telegram announcing the death of his uncle and requesting his presence at his maternal home. His uncle had no sons to do the after-death rituals, it claimed. After he came back, our Colonel called him to his office. He asked him then whether Murthy believed in life after death. When he said he didn’t as there was no proof, the Colonel disagreed, much to his worry. There is proof, he insisted. Murthy’s dead uncle had come to visit him at the camp while he was at his home doing his after-death rituals,” Colonel Uncle said, and I sniggered aloud.

“And then what happened to Murthy?” I asked, excited at what turn the story was to take.

“As expected, he received heavy punishment and was also given the toilet cleaning duty, the most dreaded punishment ever,” said Colonel Uncle, and I laughed heartily.

“Do you still write to vent?” he asked after a while.

I nodded and remained silent. My silence instigated no further questions from him. To discuss anything about Arjun was still painful. He changed topics and we returned to his travel tales and army days.

We landed at Dubai International Airport Terminal 3 airport at 10:10 PM local time. I sat in my seat with my cabin luggage along with Colonel Uncle to avoid the mad outward rush to get off the plane.

“I don’t know why they can’t wait for just a few more minutes and get out in an orderly manner. It is ridiculous and so typical of us Indians,” Colonel Uncle remarked irritated and I could comprehend his penchant for sticking to rules.

We were among the last few passengers to alight. The slightly warm breeze that greeted me reminded that I had landed in a desert. Though it was night, the air outside was warm compared to that in Bangalore, where nights were cool in October. Within moments, we were ushered into an air-conditioned bus that transported us into the terminal building.

From then on, the architecture screamed splendour and money. Turquoise

blue decorative light panelled walls and the extravagant settings created an ambience like that of a luxury hotel. The space, the colours and the elaborate framework marked the unique Arab touch to everything.

Though the airport handled thousands of passengers, it maintained a high decorum of discipline and cleanliness all around. The atmosphere breathed luxury. People of different ethnic origins and cultures were all around me, be it the airport staff or the people walking around.

“This is what I like about Dubai. It is a melting pot of the different cultures of the world. Do you know that we Indians rank top among the immigrants in Dubai? The natives are just fifteen percent of the total population,” said Colonel Uncle, as we walked into the luggage area after I got my passport stamped at the immigration counter.

What I heard fascinated me and I was eager to know more.

“Who will come to pick you?” asked Colonel Uncle.

“My cousin Kishore, who works in Sharjah,” I said.

“Good, see you then!” He said he had someone waiting for him at the arrivals. With a single shoulder bag that affirmed his belief in travelling light, Colonel Uncle left me to wait for my luggage.

After I had finally managed to drag my two large bags onto a trolley, the trolley refused to move. The trolleys at BIA had moved with ease. In fact, it had been difficult to stop them. To my surprise, all the other passengers were moving around with their trolleys with ease. Something was wrong with my trolley.

Seeing me in trouble, an airport attendant came near and pushed the handle of the trolley down, thus releasing the trolley break. It started to glide on the floor.

Giggling at my ignorance, I thanked the old Arab man who replied “Mafi Mushkil Habibi...”

Ah, my first Arabic sentence! I guessed it meant, ‘You are welcome’ and smiled at my benevolent helper before heading to the arrivals.

Scanning the crowd, I spotted Kishore who was waving to catch my attention.

“Hey idiot, you have turned out to be a babe. What happened to your lice-

infested bush hair?” asked Kishore, the evergreen tormentor. He was still the same cheerful, handsome person that I had always admired. His hair was no different from mine, but it suited him. The black T-shirt he was wearing set off his fair complexion and showed off his athletic build. His height and presence were reminiscent of someone who always remained uppermost in my mind.

I swatted his hands off my hair that had been carefully blow-dried and styled by Poornima and teased him about his slightly receding hairline in return. We walked out of the airport terminal verbally sparring like stubborn kids.

Once outside, I fell in love with the magnificent place where I had landed. The place was straight out of the Arabian night stories. Skyscrapers all around shone like the rarest diamonds, lighting up the horizon.

As we settled into his steel grey Toyota sedan, the latest Hindi hit song streaming out of the FM radio of the car surprised me.

“Hmmm, hearing this song makes me feel I am somewhere in India,” I said, already feeling a longing towards my country and hometown.

“UAE feels more Indian than the real India for me these days. You get to see Indians and Indian things everywhere. We have FM stations in Hindi, Malayalam, and Tamil,” Kishore informed me, as he gave me his phone to call home. The relieved yet distant voices of my parents reminded me how far I was from them. They spoke with Kishore too and I made a short call to Khushi and Poornima.

“What does ‘Mafi Mushkil Habibi’ mean?” I asked Kishore, as I gave him his phone back, remembering the old man at the airport. I told him about the trolley incident.

“It means ‘no problem, sweetheart’,” Kishore told me, and I was pleased with my first brush with Arabic.

Kishore lived in Al Nahda, in Sharjah—one of the seven emirates that constituted the United Arab Emirates. Al Nahda was along the border of Dubai and Sharjah. He told me that most of the people who worked in Dubai lived in Al Nahda, where accommodation was comparatively cheaper. On the journey to Kishore’s home and between interesting nuggets of information about Dubai and the UAE, glimpses of distant skyscrapers continued to beguile me.

“This place is amazing, Kishore. Bright colours, beautiful well-lit streets, it all looks so majestic.”

“Hmmm, wait for a few months, and you will start calling it a concrete jungle. True, though, it is one of the best-maintained cities of the world and one of the most visited.”

The vibe I picked up was all positive. I was determined to love this place. Straining my neck, I turned back to watch some unusually lit mosques and complexes.

“Don’t struggle too much, Anu. Now that you are here, we will visit all those places one by one. There are so many places worth visiting,” said Kishore, chuckling at my enthusiasm.

I watched the distant skyscrapers in awe. The United Arab Emirates was a desert kingdom. As a Civil Engineer, I knew how tenacious it was to construct skyscrapers in a desert. The amount of work that must have gone into the making of each one of them would have been huge. Our structural design professor had explained how much more cautious one had to be while designing buildings in a desert.

The design of foundations itself for each skyscraper must have taken years of research and detailed surveys. Eventually, the skyscrapers rested on the concrete jungles made of the numerous piles, which formed their foundations. These concrete piles transferred the tons of loads from the buildings uniformly to the hard rock deep under the layers of desert sand, keeping the skyscrapers safe and erect.

Just then, a song streaming out from the radio tuned out the external views and I listened to Doris Day singing, “Que sera sera...Whatever will be, will be...”

My life had taken a turn. To where it was headed, remained to be seen. Whatever was destined would happen. Que sera sera...

## Chapter Sixteen

“You can learn many things from children. How much patience you have, for instance...”

—Franklin P. Jones

Shreya, Kishore’s wife seemed relieved to see us, while his three-year-old son, Aditya, greeted me with an odd look. He hid his face with his palms, peering at me through the gap in his fingers and closing the gap when he saw that I was looking at him. Kishore had warned me about his tantrums on our journey here, preparing me for the worst. Aditya, apparently, normally treated all guests with disdain. Kishore’s last guest had been welcomed by a rain of peas.

Shreya had the harried look that mothers of toddlers have. Her unkempt hair, the dark circles under eyes, apparently from sleepless nights, and the water stains on her maxi were clear shout outs of the presence of an overactive toddler. The Shreya who stood before me was just a shadow of the pretty and graceful girl I had seen during their wedding. How motherhood changed people! Gone was the Shreya who insisted on wearing designer clothes and worried over a broken nail. Now her kid was her world and his smile was her biggest treasure.

“Is she a cat?” a little voice asked, and Shreya sniggered at the question. My grey eyes seemed to have warranted the enquiry.

“Yeah, she is,” replied Kishore, “and a terrible one at that. If you don’t behave properly she might just eat you up.”

Scowling at Kishore for the weird introduction, I took out a chocolate from my bag to nullify its effect. Aditya, who had believed Kishore to the last word, refused my offer entirely and howled in terror. Kishore carried him off to the balcony to pacify him.

Shreya told me Aditya was scared of cats after a rather nasty encounter with one at her mother’s house. He was terrified of people with cat eyes because, according to what Kishore had taught him, they were cats just grown up and not wearing their fur coats. So, he always tried to fight them off with innovative techniques. Kishore’s European colleague, the victim of the pea attack, was the latest among such unlucky cats.

“Remain a cat, Anu. We will have peace in the house. Just see what he has done,” said Shreya.

The house was indeed a mess. The walls had doodles with crayons and there were crumpled pieces of newspaper all around. The expensive looking carpet was wet with water. A mug of water with paper pieces immersed in it stood on the carpet.

“I had dared to leave him alone for a few minutes to take a bathroom break. He was giving the newspaper a bath, he told me...,” she said, bending down to pick the pulp from an equally drenched carpet.

“It is all in the genes, Shreya. Kishore was a terror when he was a young boy. We were his slaves, literally. He threatened us not to report any of his antics to *Ammamma* or the elders. His favourite prank was to build trap pits and make people fall.”

“Like father like son,” Shreya remarked, with another snigger.

“Don’t blame me. I remember your mother telling me how annoying you were as a toddler. Climbing and hiding in cupboards, pouring oil all over the kitchen, don’t make me list,” Kishore interrupted, returning to the living room with Aditya. Something tugged at my heartstrings, hearing their banter.

“Basically, genetics is the root cause,” I said in conclusion and received yet another terrified look from Aditya who hid in the safety of his father’s shoulder. Now what had I said to terrify him? Maybe my voice did the job.

The presence of a ‘cat’ had subdued Aditya, though his stealthy looks hinted at some strategic planning going on inside his head to counter the ‘cat terrorism’.

We had an uneventful dinner, apart from Aditya pouring water into his curd rice and Shreya having to prepare it all over again. Shreya had prepared a tasty dinner for welcoming me and I felt at home. I made meowing sounds at the behest of Kishore to keep Aditya at bay. Between pity for the toddler and the terror of things being thrown at me, terror won without much effort and I continued my cat avatar until dinner was over.

Before going to bed, I tried a hand at a truce with a handful of chocolates. Aditya rejected the offer with vehemence. Chocolates from a cat held little magic for him, as their fridge was overflowing with a variety of chocolates.

Kishore’s two BHK flat was on the twelfth floor of a forty-storied apartment

complex. The guest bedroom that they gave me was Aditya's playroom in the absence of guests. The toys crammed into the storage cabinet and the many cartoon posters that adorned the walls proclaimed it.

Kishore switched on the AC the moment we entered the room rendering the room pleasantly cool. He left after making sure that I was comfortable and wishing me goodnight. The sweltering heat of the United Arab Emirates was precisely the antithesis to Bangalore, which boasted of a mildly cool climate the whole year around.

Sliding the French windows, which opened to a tiny balcony, I watched the skyscrapers all around. It looked as if I was watching a sci-fi Spiderman movie and Spiderman was just around the corner swinging along on his webs and landing on the terraces in search of villains.

The truth that I was miles and miles away from my home country was slowly sinking in. It made me long for the warmth of home. My cosy bedroom and all the assorted home memories stormed into my being.

Taking out my journal, I wrote to Arjun about my day. UAE was his birthplace, the country where Arjun had spent his growing years. I felt oddly close to him as a sense of *déjà vu* engulfed me. In this new beginning, new life, my journal was the only familiar thing I had and that made it even more intimate.

The day's entry was lengthy as I had much to tell him. When at last I settled down to sleep, it was two in the morning. I dreamt about sitting wrapped in his arms looking at the distant skyscrapers, while a cool breeze played with my hair.

Sunrays beaming on my face woke me up and I remembered the sunrise atop the hospital terrace, in those last few stolen moments of love with Arjun. As always, I wondered why my heart was so obsessed with him. Whatever my brain said, my heart refused to listen and he was forever on my mind.

My eyes drifted to the digital clock on the wall opposite my bed. It was October 21, 2011. I had last seen Arjun on July 14, 2010; a year and another quarter had already elapsed without a single word or news about him.

Khushi had often tried to pair me up with the other boys in college but I could never imagine someone in his place. Maybe the thoughts I put into my journal were responsible for the unwavering love I had for Arjun.

There was a story that I had read, of a girl falling in love with a Gandharva, a celestial being. The Gandharva loved her, but the Gods forbade him to love an earthling. A girl once touched by a Gandharva became oblivious to the charm of any man on earth. She would continue to live like a shadow, pining for her celestial lover who did not retain even a single memory of his earthly lover. He had already moved on. Maybe, I was that girl and Arjun was my celestial lover.

During breakfast, when I again tried to make a truce with Aditya, the toddler hid behind a chair. Later, I went near him while he was drinking his milk only to have the milk thrown on me.

“Oh my God! Sorry, Anu. I don’t know what to do with him. Please don’t mind. He is like this with strangers,” Shreya apologised, running to fetch a towel to dry my top.

Returning to my room, I changed my top and spent the rest of my time reading, with the intention of not disturbing the toddler. Around lunchtime, Kishore, who had gone out to meet a friend, asked me to get ready for a trip to downtown Dubai.

“We will eat out today and will spend time roaming in The Dubai Mall. It is the largest mall in the world. The dancing fountains and the Burj Khalifa are also in the vicinity. Let me check the ticket availability for the observation deck at the top of the tower,” Kishore sat down with his laptop.

As luck would have it, the tickets to the observation deck at the level 124 of the tower were unavailable.

Ha...No luck this time too,” said Kishore. Friday being the day off in UAE, tickets were rarely available.

Later in the afternoon, we headed out to Dubai. The Sharjah to Dubai traffic was bumper-to-bumper and moved at snail’s pace. With a toddler who hated to travel in a car, the trip was drab. We reached The Dubai Mall at around 5 pm. Once outside the car, Aditya became excited and the naughty, unruly toddler resurfaced. He dashed the moment he found his feet on the ground and his hands free. He scurried back into his mother’s hands when he spotted a police officer at the entrance. Shreya sighed in relief and carried him again.

“You’ve come to Dubai at the most appropriate time Anu. The punishing summers are over and the climate will remain cool and pleasant for the next



few months,” Kishore told me as we walked into the aquarium at the mall. I marvelled at the sheer size and beauty of it.

It provided incredible close-encounter experiences with some of the most fascinating underwater animals on the planet. The aquarium apparently housed more than thirty thousand living animals, representing more than eighty-five species. Aditya loved what he saw and shouted out in glee. When a shark glided in too near the viewing glass, I moved away involuntarily, scared for a moment. Kishore assured me that the glass was strong and designed to handle any type of pressure.

After the visit, we spent time window-shopping in the various brand outlets across the mall. The mall was huge and almost never ending. We stopped to have dinner at the food court and after that reached the steps near the Burj Khalifa to watch the dancing fountains. People had already filled the area.

The Dubai rulers were filling their desert kingdom with the world’s tallest, largest, and the most expensive things.

When the show began, I completely forgot the jaw-dropping statistics and logistics about the fountains that Kishore had told me about. Watching the majestic and graceful fountains dancing was a surreal experience. The memorable song ‘Time to say Goodbye’ by Andrea Bocelli and Sarah Brightman playing in the background made the view mind-blowing. The crowds gasped and cheered as the fountains shot water into the air with a jet-like sound. Tears welled in my eyes, as I was entranced by the magical dance and the song.

We watched the show for two more songs and then returned to Sharjah after an enchanting day out, with a tired body but a rejuvenated mind and soul.

## Chapter Seventeen

“Good seasons start with good beginnings.”

-Sparky Anderson

On Saturday morning, Kishore took me to the huge complex in Al Karama, Dubai, where my office was located. The entire building, which sprawled out to wherever my eyes wandered, belonged to the Al Bayed Group.

Kishore left me at the reception asking me to call him when needed. He had taken the day off. All around me whatever met my eyes was alluring. The fully air-conditioned office had an exquisite setting. The designers had utilized every nook and corner to the maximum and more than luxury, the ambience exuded ease and comfort. I had taken care to dress up formally and had put on light makeup as well. Kishore had advised me against wearing Indian clothes.

“You will only attract unwanted attention if you wear Indian attire to the office. When in Rome do as the Romans do. Most of your colleagues will be from the Philippines or from Europe. Better mingle in, than stand out.”

The receptionist, after making me wait for half an hour, finally directed me to the HR department.

The HR manager was an Indian. Mr. Ravi Bhatia, a suave middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair, was from Ghaziabad near Delhi.

“You have to undergo a medical check-up to get your resident visa stamped on your passport and your work permit approved by the UAE government. So, is it okay for you, If I schedule it for today afternoon?” he asked and when I nodded my approval, he told me I could join work from the next day.

“You need to carry your passport with you at all times. Always remember you are an immigrant here. In UAE, there might be impromptu inspections in offices or even on the streets. Once you get your work permit, it becomes your ID card for the UAE. If you have any doubts about anything, feel free to contact me,” Mr. Bhatia said as he handed over his card to me.

“Sir, I have a query regarding accommodation. When can I move into the staff accommodation?” I asked.

“Oh yes, once you get your work permit, which you will within two weeks, you can move into the staff accommodation. I should warn you though. The

food is not at all palatable. You do have an option to cook on your own. Do you know how to cook?" he asked with a sly smile. He fully expected me to say no.

"I do sir, I think I can manage cooking on my own," I said and he raised his brows.

"Maybe then, I should introduce you to another Indian girl who stays there and cooks her own food. Come here when you are ready to shift to your accommodation. I will introduce you to her. But before that why don't you go and get acquainted with your colleagues?" he suggested, picking up the phone.

A cute Filipino girl came in after a while and Mr. Bhatia introduced me to her. Lily Alonzo Reyes was pretty like a doll. Dressed in chic feminine office wear, she was a few inches shorter than I was and had hair like silk. The small almond eyes on her heart shaped face crinkled into a smile when she shook hands with me.

Lily was bubbly and made me feel relaxed immediately.

"You know what? I was waiting for you ever since Mr. Ahmed, our manager, told me about your selection. I was craving for company, you see. Except for Mrs. Claire and Mrs. Joana, who ignores me most of the time, there are no other girls in our section," she told me with a frown, as we walked towards the department to which I was appointed.

Lily took me to the manager's office and introduced me to the Senior Construction Manager. Mr. Ahmed, a cool Egyptian, was the best manager possible, according to Lily. Mr. Ahmed appeared to be in his mid-fifties, slightly balding but with the most pleasant smile I had ever seen.

"Hello, Miss Ananya, how do you do? I am your new boss," Mr. Ahmed welcomed me, extending out his hands. The way he pronounced my name made it sound weird, with the 'nan' part stretched and stressed. He asked about where I was staying and went on to give me a brief introduction of the project, also enquiring about the schedule for my medical check-up. Lily then took me around and I met all the twenty-odd people in our department with whom I had to work.

Mrs. Claire and Mrs. Joana were also Filipinos, both in their late thirties. They were both quantity surveyors and the many numbers of files stacked on

their table and the complexity of the spreadsheets visible on their computer screen screamed about the strain of their job. They greeted me warmly but returned to their work immediately.

The Chief Engineer was an Arab and the site engineers were mostly Filipinos apart from two Indians. Sandeep Mukherjee was from Kolkata and Aziz was from Mangalore. Aziz was excited when I told him I was from Bangalore and that I knew his native tongue, Kannada. Sandeep spoke to me in a Bengali-accented Hindi. Both were here since the last two years and were campus recruits like me. Lily told me that the site engineers stayed only until 10 am and then came in the evenings, sometimes when there was a meeting scheduled or if there was an office party. They had a separate site office at their respective sites.

Altogether, our department would remain empty most of the time. Barring the Senior Manager, the two quantity surveyors and the office engineers—Lily and I—the others remained here only temporarily.

Lily then took me to the room that I was to share with her. It was huge and had many shelves packed with neatly labelled files. There were a few hangers for construction drawings in one corner. The walls had many maps and construction-drawings on a large scale with various red and green marks. I guessed they were the spots where Al Bayed had work sites. Lily briefed me about the work I was supposed to do.

“Here in the UAE, you need No Objection Certificates even for plucking the grass on site. And there are different departments to be addressed for getting the approval for different matters. There are project co-coordinators who are in charge, but the letter writing part and the drawings that show the relevant areas are to be provided by us,” Lily explained. Most of it sounded like Greek and Latin to me.

“Don’t worry, you will get the hang of it within a week,” Lily assured me, comprehending my confusion. She pleased me by her belief in me.

Lily seemed to be another version of Khushi. She blabbered non-stop as she tapped away on her computer and before I left at twelve for the medical check-up, I had heard half her life story. She told me about many of her love stories in hushed whispers, interrupted by an occasional snort. She was currently staying with her seventh boyfriend. The statistics startled me. Maybe this was just the tip of the iceberg of my new view of the world.

Alice, another Filipino girl from HR, came to take me for the medical check-up. The hospital was just around the corner. I returned in half an hour as the check-up took just a few minutes. They collected my blood and did a chest check-up to check for HIV and TB respectively.

I called Kishore and we grabbed a quick lunch from a nearby Indian restaurant before I returned to the office. With the help of the receptionist, I asked Lily to come down and get me, as I was not sure I could make it to the office on my own. Once back in the office, I offered to help Lily. She gave me some papers that were to be arranged date-wise. While we were at it, Lily looked up and exclaimed, “Ahoy- here enters the delicious joker!”

A well-dressed, handsome European, with blond hair and blue eyes, probably in his mid-twenties, walked into the room. He was taller than anyone I knew.

“What’s cooking, good looking?” asked the newcomer to Lily with a smile that made him resemble a baby boy. “Hey, hey who do we have here?!” he exclaimed, looking at me.

“Hey, Tom, meet Ananya Shankar, our new office engineer. Ananya, meet Tom, I mean, Thomas Smith. He is from the design department and comes in to help us with the changes required in the design drawings,” Lily informed me.

“Hello Miss Shankar, nice meeting you,” Mr. Smith said and I squirmed hearing myself addressed with my dad’s name.

“Call me Ananya,” I said as I shook hands with him.

“Ananya...that is a bit difficult to say. Would you mind if I call you just Ann? Otherwise, my tongue will start complaining,” he said with a smile. I definitely didn’t need another name.

“Call me Anu, like all my friends,” I said.

“So, Miss Anu, where are you from?” asked Mr. Smith as he grabbed a chair and sat near me.

“From India, Mr. Smith,” I said. The way he said Anu had made it sound foreign.

“From India? You can easily pass off as a Spaniard or an Italian. And, please do not call me Mr. Smith. It reminds me of my old man. Call me Tom,” he said.

“What, Tom? Forgot your sweetheart the moment you saw another fair one?” Lily asked with a pretend scowl and Tom rolled his chair closer to her.

“How can I forget you, sweetheart? After all, I do owe you a joke,” Tom said.

“Do you know Anu, I too will call you Anu, okay?” said Lily, “We play a game of finding new jokes every day. Today is his turn. So, Tom, what is on offer today?”

“Okay, here it goes...

*Sherlock Holmes and Watson are out camping. In the middle of the night, Sherlock wakes up Watson and asks, ‘Watson, what can you deduce from the stars above us this evening?’*

*Watson replies, “Well, I can deduce a number of things. For example, from their clarity, I can deduce that the morning will be clear and sunny. From the position of the constellations, I can deduce that it is currently early June. Finally, I can deduce that it is approximately 4:30 in the morning. Why do you ask?”*

*Sherlock bites off, “...because I deduce that someone has stolen our tent!”*

“Good one! Much better than your usual ones,” Lily said between peals of laughter.

“Of course, I had to invent a new one. I had a new audience,” he said and winked at me.

“Huh, then tell me the one you had come prepared with. I want Anu to know your real standard,” said Lily with a devilish grin.

“Upon my dead body,” said Tom. He then enquired about some data he needed to make changes to the pile drawing he had to re-do. Lily handed him the required papers, which she had already prepared.

“So, till we meet again, bye,” Tom waved at us and walked off.

“Isn’t he a sweetheart? I just love him. But I like Indian men you know...I have heard they are constant in their affections. Is it true?” asked Lily.

“We do have our share of unfaithful men, Lily. Not all Indian men are faithful,” I said, thinking how little she knew about Indians.

“Oh, but none can beat our men. They take in girlfriends wherever they go. You see that fat guy over there?” Lily asked pointing towards a fat Filipino

sitting in the cabin opposite to ours, “he has three kids and a wife back in the Philippines. He keeps two girlfriends here, of whom his wife knows nothing about,” Lily said, wrinkling her nose, displaying her disapproval.

“Even my father was a son of a bitch. He left my mother when she became pregnant with me. I haven’t seen his face even once. My mother burned all his photos,” continued Lily, and her voice suddenly went hoarse. Her eyes glistened with tears that she tried to hide by looking away.

Behind the bubbly mask she had put on, I realized, there was a person who was hiding all her troubles. The tears I had glimpsed endeared her to me even more.

As I returned to Sharjah, I thought about the people I had met, people with whom I was going to spend the major part of my waking hours. I was about to explore a different world, a world that seemed a dimension apart from the one I belonged to.

Amidst the glitter and glamour that surrounded me, perhaps I had many more lessons to learn. Being an optimist, I was on the lookout for the positives than the negatives. In another few weeks, I was to leave to live amidst total strangers, away from the comforting faces of Kishore and Shreya.

But as I have come to understand, the only thing that one can be sure about life is its ability to change. A moment ticking away can bring a barrage of change into our lives and leave us destitute or secure.

## Chapter Eighteen

“The Gods too are fond of a joke.”

— Aristotle

Next morning, I took a cab to the office. The cab driver, an old Pakistani, talked non-stop throughout the trip. From his conversation, the fact that Indians were their sworn enemies seemed valid only on paper. When he learnt I was an Indian, he told me the story of his life.

His best friend was an Indian. He swore that he would give his life for his friend. As an illegal expat youth, when he was living on the streets drinking water from the taps and at the mercy of strangers, a young Indian youth had taken pity on him. He had given him money to survive and a place in his house. Later on, he helped him get a driving license and got him a job as a driver to a local merchant of his acquaintance. Then a time had come when his friend became a pauper owing to some bad investments. The Pakistani had chipped in then with all the money he had saved to help the one person he said was his God. Now both were old and the Indian had returned to India a few years ago. They still were in touch with each other and never forgot to send gifts on special occasions.

At many moments, as he narrated his life story to me, his voice grew hoarse and I watched him wipe his eyes when we stopped at a traffic signal. There was something in the air of this country that turned total strangers into your closest friends. I didn't know then that I too was to learn this soon.

The old cab driver and his story were still on my mind when I entered the reception. The receptionist buzzed me into the main office with a nod, when I hesitated at the closed main door. It was a sensor-operated door and the employee ID card was the access card. As I had not been given my ID card yet, I didn't have access to the main office unless someone buzzed me in.

Lily greeted me with a loud ‘Good morning’ when I entered. I found my ID card, a new personal computer and a landline connected to my table. Lily gave me my company ID and password that I had to use to login to the company website. The promptness of it all impressed me. It felt good to belong to a firm so huge and prestigious.

When I switched the computer on, Outlook Express, configured with my company email ID, opened up and I noticed a few new emails in my inbox.



The first mail was a welcome mail from the admin to me with instructions as to whom I could contact in case of a technical snag. The next was a mail sent to all employees of the construction wing from Lily, intimating them of my taking charge as the office engineer for my designated section. It didn't take much time to realize that I had learned absolutely nothing in my college days. The documents, which lay open in front of me, were completely strange to me. Whatever I had learned and what I had to do were poles apart. I trashed my ego and sought Lily's help.

"Hey Anu, don't worry. We've all been through this phase. What we learned in our college is mainly the ABC of civil engineering. Once you come to a firm like this, you should start with the basics and begin applying what you have learned. Here they follow the British Standards unlike what you might have been following in India," said Lily, and then explained the basics of each task we had to do.

By afternoon, I got a general idea about my work responsibilities. Lily helped me in each step.

"Don't thank me so much, dear. What I am doing is for my benefit entirely. Now I have someone to share my workload. The faster you learn, the faster my work load decreases," said Lily, when I thanked her for helping me with yet another gnawing problem.

"Hello, sweethearts! How is the day treating you?" asked Tom, entering our room.

Tom looked at us and bobbed his eyebrows when we both didn't reply to his query.

"What brings you here, Tom?" asked Lily, with an I-know-what-you-are-up-to sort of smile.

"I had a dream that a girl with big grey eyes joining the construction wing as office engineer. I just wanted to confirm it," said Tom with an answering I-don't-care-what-you-think shrug.

"Are you always this subtle while you flirt or is this your first time?" Lily asked sarcastically and I snorted.

There were many guys in my college who flirted at the first opportunity they got. But Tom seemed like an entirely different story. He had the face of an angel and the tongue of *Eros* himself. Lily had told me earlier that he had a

different girl on his arm every week when he partied all night on weekends. Whatever he was, I couldn't bring myself to hate him. Maybe it was instinct or just an intuition, I felt we were going to be good friends.

"Always my dear, always... A man must live up to his reputation after all," Tom replied and sat on the chair across us with a smug smile.

They chatted about seemingly trivial things. Lily then asked Tom to help me with the bar bending schedules as he, she told me, was an expert in it.

Being in love with someone makes you oblivious to the attention from anybody. Tom openly flirted with me. I was able to laugh at his attempts without even a tinge of a blush. Nevertheless, Tom proved himself a good teacher. I understood the intricacies of the design elements involved in my schedule easily.

"You know, Tom, you would make an excellent teacher," I said at the end of a particularly confusing measurement that he taught me.

"Oh no, I should be anything but a teacher. Only I know how much I have harassed my teachers. If I become one, jeez... won't I get it all back? My mother used to warn me that we always paid for our sins. So, no risk...", said Tom gaily while doodling on a piece of paper on my desk.

Lily called his attention to something on her computer and Tom went to her. He left after a while armed with the papers he had come for.

## Chapter Nineteen

“It takes as much energy to wish as it does to plan.”

—Eleanor Roosevelt

Two weeks passed quickly and I adapted to my new job like a duck to water. I loved what I did and my colleagues were helpful.

Lily and Tom had become my best friends. We spent our lunch hours cracking jokes and sharing anecdotes from our respective countries. One day, they forced me to join Facebook saying it was ‘criminal’ to not have a Facebook account. I gave in and filled the login form. Within minutes, my account was set up. I added them both and then started searching for my other friends. I found Poornima and Khushi and sent them friend requests. I browsed Facebook for many of my other college mates, schoolmates, and relatives. Time moved slowly and Lily was engrossed in her computer.

A while later my computer pinged with the notification of an email. The sender was Thomas Smith...Tom.

It had just a line.

*What is a decent girl like you doing in a dirty mind like mine?*

A pick-up line? I decided to go along, considering I had no other work assigned to me.

I clicked on reply and typed:

*Housekeeping???*

Within a minute, I got the notification of another email.

*What is the cost per hour?*

I replied:

*I believe in charity. So, it is free... :)*

There was no reply from Tom for the next several minutes and I assumed he'd become busy with his work. I logged in to my Gmail account to check if there was an email from home. There was a long one from Poornima. She had written about her job at the MNC she had joined and about her grouchy boss. After typing a short reply, I returned to Facebook. My heart was tempting me to search for Arjun and I gave in to the temptation after resisting

for a little more than a few minutes. I typed Arjun Rajashekhar and pressed the Enter key. My heart started a drum roll against my ribs the moment I heard the keystroke. An excruciatingly long moment later Arjun's dear face looked back at me from a list of Arjuns and I clicked on it.

He looked the same except maybe a touch more serious.

The last update on his page was in January when he had changed his cover photo. It was a picture of a beach at sunset. Memories of the time we had spent on a similar beach overwhelmed me and I stopped browsing further down his timeline.

His about page revealed his location as Mangalore. My heart skipped a beat when I read his relationship status. *In a relationship...!*

Tears welled up in my eyes and I felt like my heart was being wrung out. I logged out and vowed never to log in again. The one person, with whom I lived a virtual life through my journal, had just pushed me out of it, leaving me in a bloody chasm of his memories. A deluge of anger and anguish shocked my faith in all things professed by my heart.

I got another email from Tom.

*(I am happy that you are so generous. But I can't be so ruthless. So, here comes the payment—a joke to bring a smile on your face!)*

*The phone rings at the Federal Drug Enforcement Agency headquarters.*

*"Hello?"*

*"Hello, is this the Federal Drug Enforcement Agency?"*

*"Yes. What can we do for you?"*

*"I am calling to report my neighbour Tony. He is hiding cocaine in his firewood."*

*"Thank You. This will be looked into."*

*Next day, agents from the Drug Enforcement Agency come to Tony's house. They search the shed where the firewood is kept, break every piece of wood but find no cocaine. They swear at Tony and leave.*

*The phone rings at Tony's house.*

*"Hey Tony, did the drug enforcement guys come by?"*

*"Yeah"*

*“Did they chop your firewood for you?”*

*“Yeah, they did.”*

*“Okay, now it is YOUR turn to call. I need my garden ploughed.”*

I smiled reading the mail, appreciating the timing. Tom’s joke had distracted me from the sadness that had dumbfounded me. Maybe Tom could help me forget Arjun, now that Arjun had moved on. With his never-ending collection of jokes, Tom seemed just the person I needed for now—someone who could make me laugh. I needed help to let go of my past and discard it as a joke.

I clicked on reply and typed my response.

*Hey... Thanks for the joke!*

Tom’s reply came within minutes.

*Glad that you liked it, sweetheart. Thank Google too. That is where I get them from.*

On the way back home, I decided to begin anew. I decided to forget Arjun. When I got to my room, I took the journal and hid it in the bottom of my suitcase, deciding to take it out never again. I took out the magazine that I had purchased on the way back and laid back, leafing through it. Deciding on a thing was easy but to act upon those decisions was the hardest part. It was difficult to not keep finding a reason to look at the journal one more time, even if it was to write a final letter to Arjun to end it all. But I was too determined to fall weak tonight.

The goddess of sleep seemed to have given up on me again. When the alarm rang at five thirty in the morning, I had not slept a single wink. Grudgingly, I dragged myself out of bed to start yet another day.

\* \* \*

Tom was in the lobby when I entered the office building. His eyes lingered on my face and I looked away to hide the tell-tale signs of a sleepless night.

*“Hey, Anu, good morning, how are you?”*

*“Fine,”* I said and we walked into the office in companionable silence. I was too tired to speak and Tom seemed preoccupied with his thoughts. He accompanied me to my section and then walked towards his own which was at the far end of the same corridor.

I checked my emails and replied to a data request from one of the site engineers. While I was busy with the tabulation of data in a new spreadsheet, the notification of a new email grabbed my attention.

It was Tom.

*What is wrong, sweetheart? You looked so sad.*

It was surprising that people often read me like a book. Arjun used to do it and so did Poornima. I didn't know what to tell him. Maybe I should tell him. It would keep him at a distance too. No man wanted a girl who pined for someone else.

I typed out my response.

*A bit personal.*

He replied immediately.

*Heartbreak?*

I replied in the affirmative and clicked send.

Tom asked me to come on chat instead of talking on email and we began to chat on Google Talk

*Tom: Tell me the name of the idiot who brought tears to your lovely eyes. I will tear him apart. And why should you value someone who doesn't care about you?*

*Me: I am unable to forget him, Tom. He is my first love. But yesterday, I found out that he has moved on.*

*Tom: How did you come to know about that?*

*Me: Facebook*

*Tom: Facebook?!! That is the most unreliable place for such truths.*

*Me: But his relationship status says 'In a relationship'*

*Tom: Hey, are you crazy? My relationship status has been that since I was in college. It is just that the 'relationship' was with different girls at different times. (Wink, Wink) I am still single. Don't you have any contact with him? Mail him and ask.*

*Me: It is a bit complicated. I don't have his contact information. As you know, I joined Facebook just yesterday. I searched him out and was*

*saddened when I saw his relationship status.*

*Tom: Sweetheart, you are so naïve. He may even mean you. Wait until I come there in the afternoon. Let me see. And stop being pissed off.*

*Me: Tom, I don't know what to do. I am so depressed.*

*Tom: Do you know who I thought of when I saw you in the lobby today? I thought of Jane, my best friend and neighbour, and the girl I never had the courage to confess my love. You do resemble her a lot too. I am there for you. I will help you in every possible way.*

*Me: Oh...what happened between Jane and you? Where is she now?*

*Tom: She is no more. She killed herself two years ago when the boy she loved left her for another. Depressed, when she came to me to talk, all I did was shout at her about how much I had warned her against the guy. I didn't realize that she was on the verge of a suicide then. I heard about her death the next morning. I regret it every day. I couldn't remain in the same neighbourhood that reminded me of my Jane. I ran off when I got the first opportunity. Don't be another Jane, Anu. I beg you.*

*Me: I am sorry for your loss, Tom.*

Tom went offline immediately. By venting my sadness on Tom, had I reopened his hidden wounds? I patiently waited for him to come to our section. As usual, he came around lunch break and straight to my seat.

"How are you now, Anu?" he whispered and I smiled back searching for any kind of sadness in him. To my relief, he seemed okay.

"Show me your guy," said he and snapped his fingers asking me to hurry.

I logged in on Facebook and opened Arjun's profile.

"Not bad, good choice," Tom remarked. He flicked through Arjun's photos, stopping with a start when someone spoke from behind us.

"Wow...who is that guy? He looks so handsome," Lily, who had sneaked behind us to find what the secrecy was all about, exclaimed.

"Stop drooling, Lily. It is Anu's boyfriend," Tom answered. Lily pouted and narrowed her eyes at him.

"This fellow is gonna give you a black eye. Anu, it is good that you showed him your boyfriend. He will now think twice before flirting with you," Lily

remarked, her eyes narrowed to a slit.

“Hey, he is here in Dubai,” said Tom and I stared at the screen. Arjun had updated his place to Dubai. He might have updated his location yesterday night. My heart skipped a beat.

“He has been working at the Canadian Specialist Hospital, Al Garhoud since March this year. That is literally a stone’s throw away from here. Hmm... and there is no sign of a girl in any of his photos, dear. I guess he means this about you. That is if you believe he still loves you,” said Tom.

“Will somebody tell me what this is all about?” Lily asked impatiently, giving us icy stares. I narrated my story in brief.

Tom cried, “If he loved you and you loved him, why should you both care about his mom?”

I told him that many Indian kids lived with their parents all their lives and their parents took most of their life decisions.

“Huh! Which century are you people living in, Anu? You both are educated and can be independent. Parents shouldn’t control your life,” Lily said.

How could I make them understand that when it came to moral values and traditions, the unwritten rules that prevailed in our society were still centuries behind the rest of the world? Most of the girls in my family had ended up in arranged marriages where astrologers had played matchmakers. Love marriages were frowned upon and love didn’t play much of a role in marriages. It was rather a family marrying another family, both matching each other in their status and culture.

“Your country sounds like the Victorian era England. Grow up, Anu! We should trash such age-old traditions when they become outdated. Forget about love. The girl and boy should to be compatible with each other for the marriage to last. New traditions can be started any day,” Tom argued. I sighed hearing his arguments.

“In our country, we live together with our boyfriends before we decide on getting married. I have heard you girls are supposed to be virgins until the time of marriage. Is it true?” Lily asked and I blushed hearing such things discussed openly.

“Yeah, true. Men expect their wives to be pure and untouched,” I said remembering Grandma’s words on the topic. She used to tell that even if a



man had slept with a hundred girls before marriage, he expected his bride to be a virgin.

“It is such a shame! I see many Indian men here seeking out prostitutes. Girls should be allowed to have fun too,” Tom said and I couldn’t suppress a snigger on hearing his idea of fun.

“You should meet up with this guy, Anu. Don’t leave things to chance. Fight for your love,” Lily encouraged me.

“Let me do some sleuthing on this guy. I will get back to you with all the details. I have some contacts at the Canadian Specialist Hospital. I will help you meet him,” Tom smirked at me. Their support encouraged me to decide what I really wanted. I had to take the chance that life was offering. I had to stand up for my love. I beamed back at them.

“See, how her face lit up! Count me in too. I will help you find him. Even I have some friends in there. We will spy on him and find all about him,” Lily cheered and she gave a high-five to Tom, “or even better I will act like I am pregnant and get an appointment.”

“Silly Lily...he is a cardiologist,” Tom.

“So, what... pregnant ladies don’t have a heart?” retorted Lily. Lily seemed more determined to meet Arjun than I was.

“Is he connected with the Shine Group?” asked Tom, looking at a photo that had Arjun at the inauguration of a supermarket belonging to the Shine Group at some place.

I nodded and Lily whistled. The Shine Group had many supermarkets across the UAE. Obviously, both were familiar with it.

“Oh my God...he must be abominably rich then. Just think what all you can buy if you are to become his wife, Anu! What jewels, what dresses, and you can go on exotic vacations any time you wish. And you can even gift me one such vacation,” Lily exclaimed, looking excited at the prospect of having a rich friend.

“Lily, control, control! Stop building castles in the air. We are not sure whether he has moved on or not. If he has, then we will make him regret it. A babe like Anu needs to have some revenge. What do you say?” Tom winked at me, a wicked grin splitting his face.

I didn't want revenge. I only wanted Arjun back. Back in my life, back to being the way we were...

"Of course! If he has moved on, I promise you, I will find the bitch who has taken Anu's place. I have enough plans for her. She has ruined all my exotic vacation plans," Lily declared, gearing up for the battle.

The loud ring of my desk phone interrupted our conversation.

It was Mr. Ravi Bhatia from HR. My permit card was issued and the company accommodation was also ready for me to move in. I could occupy it whenever it was convenient for me.

After Tom left, I went to the HR department.

"Hey, Ananya. I was just telling Sophia about you. Sophia, this is Ananya. Ananya, this is Sophia Fernandez. The other Indian girl I promised to introduce," said Mr. Bhatia, gesturing to a pretty and slightly plump girl who occupied the chair opposite him. Sophia was from Goa and she seemed excited at the prospect of having another Indian at the accommodation.

"Do you cook? I cook yummy noodles. That is my specialty," said Sophia.

When I told her that I could dish out a decent meal, she made a quick sign of the cross as though she was relieved.

"I cannot wait to have you at the accommodation," she said, grinning.

Mr. Bhatia then gave me my work permit. With the work permit issued, I was now officially a resident of the United Arab Emirates. My resident visa was valid for the next three years or until I quitted my job.

## Chapter Twenty

“For all those who believe, expect a miracle.”

— Linda Goodman

Kishore dropped me at my accommodation early next morning. It was a two-storied villa, with eight bedrooms. My room was on the ground floor. It came with a single bed, a writing table, a window AC, and a small wardrobe. A single window overlooked the small garden and the courtyard. Sophia’s room was right across mine.

Sophia and I left for office together after keeping my luggage in my room. We decided to take the metro. We boarded the plush and cosy metro train from the Rashidiya station near the Rashidiya Park, which was just a walking distance from our accommodation.

When I logged into my system at work, an email from Tom was already waiting for me.

*Come on chat. I have news for you.*

Without wasting another minute, I logged into Google Talk.

*Me: Hi Tom, What news?*

*Tom: What news?*

*Me: Don’t test my patience. Tell.*

*Tom: Okay! Your doctor is a confirmed snob. He doesn’t talk to anyone other than his immediate staff. An Iranian female doctor is always with him and my reporter suspects something is brewing between them. At least, the female seems to have shown enough signs that she is smitten.*

The message did nothing to block my hopes from draining out.

*Tom: Come prepared tomorrow. We will go out for lunch. My spy informs that Arjun goes for lunch in a nearby restaurant. We will meet him there.*

Stunned, I stared at the screen with unseeing eyes. Was I prepared to meet him, that too at a public place? I didn’t know how I would be able to control my emotions, and I said so much to Tom.

*Me: I am scared, Tom. I am not so courageous.*

*Tom: Why should you be scared? I am with you. Take a chill pill, girl.*

That afternoon, Tom had a tough time convincing Lily that her presence at the planned lunch was not needed. She was furious and glared at us for making plans that did not include her. A packet of Hershey's kisses, Tom's sacrifice, pacified her for the time being.

Later, however, I suspected that a serious online war was happening between Tom and her. Lily was typing; if you could call it that. With her forehead wrinkled, eyes narrowed and her fingers literally murdering the keys, she was a terrifying sight to behold. I felt sorry for Tom.

My suspicions were confirmed when I got a mail from Tom came an hour later.

*Anu... We will have to take Lily with us tomorrow. If not, I will have to face a horrible future indeed. A man needs certain things to remain a man. And he can't take it lightly when someone threatens to chop them off.*

Laughing aloud, I looked sideways to find a triumphant Lily, beaming, as though she had just won a million-dollar sweepstake.

## Chapter Twenty-one

“We don’t see things as they are. We see them as we are.”

—Anais Nin

I left the office with Sophia. On our way to the accommodation, she started talking about sun signs. Sophia was an Aries and I was a Scorpio; she predicted that we would become great friends. I smiled.

“If we scrutinize people according to their sun signs, we can avoid many unpleasant things. By the way, what is your boyfriend’s zodiac sign?”

“What? What made you think that I have one?” I asked, amused.

“I made a wild guess. And I guess, I am right,” she said with an enigmatic smile.

“It is a bit complicated. I don’t know if I even have one currently.”

“Okay. Then tell me the zodiac sign of this complicated one,” said Sophia, as we reached our station.

“Cancer.”

“Cancer is the most compatible sign for a Scorpio female. It is a match made in heaven. What complicated it?”

It is easy to confess our innermost secrets to strangers because there is no fear of disdain or judgement. I narrated my story to Sophia, the girl I had met just the previous day. Sophia turned to be a great listener. She urged me to go on when I was overwhelmed with emotions with the right words, without interrupting me until the end of my story.

“Cancer men are very typical that way. They are either close to their mothers or are completely alienated from them. Their relationship is never casual. As far as your story reveals, your Arjun is the most common type of a Cancer man. They can’t go against their mothers. But the silence on his part till now amazes me. Cancer men never fall in love easily. When they do, they never forget their lover, especially if she is a Scorpio. As I said, they are a pair made in heaven,” Sophia explained.

“You seem to be an expert on Zodiac signs,” I said.

“I have been studying the Zodiac signs since I was a teenager. It is my biggest craze,” Sophia told me as we stopped at a provision store to buy some

wheat flour, spices, and vegetables for preparing dinner.

Sophia was not much of a cook. Noodles weren't just her speciality, they were also the only thing she knew to cook well. But she confessed that she liked cutting and cleaning. Therefore, we decided to divide the cooking activities and the grocery cost equally between ourselves.

"Honestly, I prefer the sticky mass of noodles that I can make to the food that they supply at the accommodation. The cook is a Filipino and in the name of Indian food, he makes rubbish. He once made a dish that was called prawn *Sambar*," said Sophia, rolling her eyes. I giggled.

Once at the accommodation, Sophia came into my room to help me settle. While unpacking, the portrait of Arjun that I had painted tumbled out from the clothes.

"Who is this? Wow, you painted this?" asked Sophia, taking the portrait in her hands for a closer look, and running her fingers on my name painted at the bottom of the portrait.

"Yeah, that is Arjun," I replied, answering both her questions.

"Ah, Mr. Complicated?" Sophia handed over the portrait back to me.

"He is in Dubai, you know?" I said, wishing to talk about him some more.

"Is he? Did you come here in search of him? Don't do the mistake of chasing a Cancer man, Ananya, you will never catch him," warned Sophia.

"It is nothing like that Sophia... I came to know that he was here only a few days ago, much after I had come here. But I am planning to meet him. You think I shouldn't?" I asked, suddenly doubtful about the plans I had made at the office with Tom and Lily.

"Cancer men show the typical crab behaviour. If they are uncertain, desperate, or sad, they seek retreat and solitude. How much ever you chase them, they will dance away from you. They will curl in their shells and mourn till eternity if they think that they have done something wrong and that has brought upon the separation," said Sophia.

"So, you mean he might be blaming himself for what happened between us? Is that why he is silent? But he had promised to be with me through thick and thin. And then, he just vanished from my life, like he had never been there," I said. All the suppressed emotions tumbled out in the form of tears.

“Hey, Ananya! Relax. As far as I know, Cancer people are sensitive to the core. They don’t cheat. I am sure your Arjun is waiting for the right moment to dance back into your life,” Sophia consoled me, patting my shoulders.

“I don’t know about him, Sophia. But I have not been able to forget him. I am trapped in the maze of his love. No matter how hard I try, I can’t find a way out. I am convinced I cannot love anyone else in this life,” I said, wiping my tears and hushing my sobs.

Later, after taking a bath, when I reached the kitchen, Sophia was chopping the vegetables, humming a popular Hindi song. I pulled out a vessel from the shelf below and kneaded the dough for the chapattis. Sophia came near to watch when I started to roll out chapattis.

“You know what? I would prefer to marry a man who knows to cook. What fun it would be to be served breakfast on the bed by my husband,” Sophia said, fluttering her eyelashes. “By the way, Cancer men are good cooks. Your Arjun might be a very good cook himself.”

“I don’t know about that. He never told me about it. In his house, there were enough staff to do everything. He is, after all, the scion of the Shine Empire,” I said. Sophia’s jaw dropped.

“You mean the Shine Group? Those guys are loaded with money.”

“Yes, but our relationship was never about money, Sophia. Nor has he lavished any gifts on me. We were too much in love to think about such frivolities,” I said. He had not given me a single gift other than the flowers and chocolates he brought with him often.

“That is again typical Cancer behaviour. No matter how rich they are, they won’t be spendthrifts. But they will make up for their thrifty behaviour with passion and romance. He may, in fact, camp on your doormat and monopolize your phone. I guess that is what made you fall for him, right?” Sophia said with a sly smile.

I blushed.

“I will tell you something, Ananya. Find a person to act like your lover in front of him. He will pounce on him and drag you back into his life. Cancer men can be extremely jealous and possessive.”

I told her about Tom and Lily and the plan we had hatched that afternoon.

“Hey, that is a good idea. I know Tom. He is a big flirt but a sincere person at heart. I don’t know Lily, but I’m sure she’ll come in useful if things become a little nasty between the males. You know how they can be.” Sophia rolled her eyes.

So that day, when I went to sleep in yet another strange room, in yet another strange bed, my thoughts were a virtual vortex. They tipped and turned in the chasm of my mind, trying to churn out the perfect answer to all my questions.

In the end, I got up, pulled out a pen and paper, and started making a list of the questions floating repeatedly in my mind.

1. Was Arjun ever in love with me?
2. Will he acknowledge me when he sees me tomorrow?
3. Did I wish to meet him?
4. Would we make a distressing spectacle of ourselves at the restaurant tomorrow?
5. Was Sophia accurate in analysing Arjun’s character?
6. Was the Iranian doctor Arjun’s new lover?
7. What should I do if he acted like I was just another acquaintance?

Stopping there, I brooded. Arjun had loved me, hadn’t he? Or was it just my feelings that I had projected on him? I scribbled I don’t know against the first question.

Questions two to seven also ended up with similar answers and I crumpled the piece of paper and threw it into the dustbin.

\* \* \*

The next morning, I got a text message from Tom saying that he couldn’t go for lunch with me, as we had planned. The managing director had scheduled a design meeting at two in the afternoon.

The message failed to surprise me. Wasn’t I wishing for something to prevent the meeting with Arjun?

The day passed without anything much happening. Tom convinced me it was good that we rescheduled our outing. The next day being Thursday was the beginning of the weekend in Dubai. It was going to be a half day at work, giving us an entire afternoon free for the adventure planned.



That evening, while we were cooking, Sophia told me about her first love. From childhood, she had a best friend, Sebastian, the son of a family friend. They had studied together right from kindergarten and she had always been in love with him. But when they were in college, she'd overheard him telling another male friend that she was a fat fool and that he was trying hard to escape from her clutches. His parents had decided to get him married to Sophia once he settled in a good job, but he obviously did not want that.

"My heart broke that day. Every moment of my life, I had spent adoring Sebastian. When I heard him bitching about me, I just couldn't control myself. I went inside the room he was in and blasted him with a deluge of all the vilest curses and abuses I knew. I still remember his stunned look. But it brings me relief every time I look back. If I had run away from there after listening to his verbal abuse, maybe I would have pined for him my whole life. But now I am free. I am engaged to the most loving person possible on earth." Sophia showed me the photo of a young man, looking dapper in a tuxedo.

"Hey, congratulations! What is his name? What does he do?" I asked, genuinely happy for her.

"That is my dear Robert. He was my boss in my first job in Goa. I hated him then. Not only him, I hated all males after that incident with Sebastian. But he is such a good human being that I couldn't ignore his love for long. He has a green card in the US now and we will be married this coming June. Then I will just fly to my dreamland... And, Robert is also an excellent cook," Sophia giggled, looking very much in love.

"What about your sun signs? Are you guys compatible?" I asked, just because I was curious. It was impossible that Sophia would choose a person whose Zodiac sign was not be compatible with hers.

"Oh yes! He is a Sagittarian. We are hot together." Sophia winked at me.

Later that night, as I lay in bed, I wondered what I would have done if I had been in her place. Like all the other questions plaguing me, I had no answer to this one too.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

“Sometimes the heart sees what is invisible to the eye.”

— H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

Thursday dawned and it was colder than usual. My thoughts were calmer. Maybe the night had sprinkled some magic dust and erased the uncertainty from my mind. I was finally going to meet my Arjun.

I dressed in a bottle green top with cream pants and added a pink hooded jacket to ward off the morning chill. When I reached the office, I tried hard to control my laughter but failed. Lily was in full combat mode—dressed to kill. She had worn a peach tube top and a black mini-skirt. A lace shrug in black lay discarded on her chair.

“What? Is this the way you are going to dress up when you want to impress your guy? He should start drooling the moment he sets his eyes on you.” Lily looked at me horrified but I shrugged off her suggestion.

“Promise me you will leave that jacket here.” Lily pleaded when she realized I wasn’t going to budge. Thankfully, she approved my selection for the top.

Every Thursday, we had an office party and all the employees gathered in the big conference hall at 12:30 PM sharp. Tom, Lily, and I skipped the party that day and walked to the restaurant where we were expecting to meet Arjun.

The restaurant was just a block away from our office and was quite popular among Indians. The three of us made an eclectic trio—a European, a Filipino, and an Indian. People turned to look at us as though to decide what had fascinated us to have lunch in a restaurant that served typical South Indian fare.

“I have sacrificed my KFC bucket for this. Tom, you’d better be right about Anu’s guy coming here. Else it is going to cost you dearly. My stomach is roaring.” Lily sounded exasperated already.

Though the restaurant was South Indian, they had some excellent Chinese dishes listed in the menu. Tom and Lily selected chicken noodles and I chose mixed fried rice. Lily and I sat opposite Tom, his chair facing the door. He kept his eyes glued to the door throughout but there was no sign of Arjun even after we finished our lunch. We ordered ice cream to buy some more time. Lily had started taunting Tom when he suddenly exclaimed, “I think I

see him!”

There was no need for me to turn and look. The heightened sense of awareness and the tell-tale rumble of my heart told me that Arjun was near. The familiar fragrance of his cologne, as he passed by our table, caused an odd quiver to take over me. It was as though his soul had caressed mine as he walked past me, stirring a longing that was making it difficult to breathe. Tears were stinging at the back of my eyes and I blinked repeatedly to hide them.

He chose a seat at the far end of the room, a few tables away from us, and sat facing the door. The waiter approached him to take his order. With eyes that refused to look at anything other than him, I devoured him. My vain heart searched in him for any sign that proclaimed that our estrangement had affected him. He was a jot thin, wasn't he? And he looked a trace sad, didn't he?

“Anu, you have to act as if you have moved on. Don't look like a desperate puppy in love. Do you even remember a single word from our detailed plans?” asked Tom and I looked away.

“How will he notice Anu? He is engrossed in his mobile,” Lily said. When I looked at her, the look on her face hinted at a furiously working brain. God help me...

Like a sunflower that followed the sun, my eyes returned to Arjun. I was afflicted with tunnel vision. All I could see was Arjun. Everything else had vanished. He was dressed impeccably as usual. Browsing through his mobile, he ran his fingers through his hair the way he did when something was disturbing him. I suppressed the urge to run to him, hug him, and kiss off all his troubles. Have I lost that privilege to somebody else already?

The sound of breaking glass shocked me out of my reverie. It had grabbed the attention of most of the occupants in the restaurant. A smug looking Lily offered me a triumphant smile. She had, very slyly, dropped her glass of water on the floor. Through the corner of my eyes, I saw Arjun rise from his seat. The glass-breaking technique had succeeded in garnering his attention.

Tom rushed to my side and so did a waiter. I stood up and moved aside to avoid the shards of glass. The water from the glass was pooling near my legs. I wanted to kill Lily. She and her madcap ideas.

The waiter asked us to move to the next table so that he could clear out the mess.

“Anu... is it you?” The voice that I heard every night in my dreams asked and I felt lightheaded.

“Oh...,” was all I could say. I looked up and found the same sparkle in his eyes that I cherished. Up close, he was still the same I-can’t-take-my-eyes-off-you irresistible and my heart was threatening to jump out.

“Who is this, sweetheart?” asked Tom, his hands resting possessively on my shoulders. I cringed inwardly. I should not have told him that Sophia had advised me that we should present a rival to goad a Cancer man out of his shell. I had merely mentioned it. I never thought he would take it seriously. I glanced at Arjun. The twinkle in his eyes had vanished. In its place was something primitive. Fury, jealousy, vengeance, what was it? Whatever it was, I didn’t like it at all.

The next moment, Arjun pulled me to his side leaving Tom gaping at us.

“Who is he?” Arjun asked. He was furious.

“He is my colleague,” I said. Both Lily and Tom scowled at me. I could almost hear them thinking, *‘There...she has ruined our best laid plans.’*

“We have to talk, kindly excuse us,” Arjun said to Tom and Lily and walked out of the restaurant towing me along.

“Leave me. Do you hear? I don’t want to come with you. Do you understand?” I hissed at him but he ignored me. After vanishing from life for nearly year and a half, he was suddenly behaving as though he owned me. I was raging inside, but I followed him to avoid making a scene.

Tom and Lily were rooted to the same place. Turning back, I smiled at them to parry their worry. Arjun opened the passenger door of his car and asked me to get in. I did. What else could I do? I was taken aback by his attitude. What did he intend to do with me?

“Where are we going?” I asked when he turned the keys in the ignition.

There was no answer. His eyes were on the road and he was driving as though we were in heavy traffic. Only, the road ahead was empty.

“Arjun, talk to me.”

Arjun did not. What could I do? He had no right to be angry, did he? I

struggled to control the fury raging inside me.

“I am getting mad. If you don’t talk to me, I will jump off,” I said. He glowered at me and clicked a button, which promptly locked the door.

“How dare you take me away from my friends? After vanishing from my life and completely ignoring me for a year and a half, you barge in, drag me into this palace on wheels of yours, and then suddenly decide that it is your Day of Silence?” I finally screamed. I wished I could shake some sense into him.

“What did you expect? Something snapped in me the moment he called you sweetheart. He touched you. And you didn’t seem to mind it at all. He’s lucky that I didn’t punch him.”

“Oh, so getting territorial and possessive, are you now? You have no right to be. You left me alone to face your mother, without a word in support. You left me desolate for all these months. I expected you to come to me every day. I thought about you every day, every second. I cried for hours every night. But you, you never thought about me for even a single moment,” I said and wiped away the tears that were running down my cheeks.

“Anu...please, don’t make it more difficult for me. I promise we will talk. I am too upset to talk right now. Can you give me a few minutes?” he asked, returning his attention back to the road.

I didn’t know where he was taking me and I didn’t care. I missed my Arjun who was completely in love with me. The grouchy person who sat next to me, in a prickly mood, was definitely not my Arjun. The car slowed down in a residential area and then entered the courtyard of a sprawling villa, the gate operated by some button inside the car. The logo of the Shine group adorned the lone column on the porch. I could not believe it; he had taken me to his house!

“Don’t even think that I am going to come into your house. I will not. I don’t trust you anymore,” I said haughtily, sitting rooted in the passenger seat.

“Anu, please, I am sorry. Please look at me,” said he and touched my chin to turn my face towards his. I swatted his hand away.

“Don’t touch me, you, heartless monster. I don’t want to be heartbroken and pining away for someone who doesn’t care even a bit about me,” I said as my tears blinded me again. However much I tried to act stern, those traitors- my tears- betrayed my hidden feelings.

“I am sorry, Anu. For all the tears I gave you, for being a spineless idiot. Forgive me, love. But never say that I forgot you. I never can, not even for a second. You are forever in my thoughts. Please don’t cry, Anu. Please. I don’t deserve your tears.” He choked on the words as tears glittered in his eyes.

Grandma used to tell me that if a man cries for a girl, then he loves her truly and no one else could make her happier than him. The tears that I saw glittering in his eyes melted my anger and I rushed into his arms. He hugged me tightly, his silent sobs rocking us, as I let go of the dam of emotions locked up within me.

“I love you, Arjun. Please don’t leave me alone again. Ever,” I said between sobs.

His arms tightened around me. It felt so right to be back in his arms. His smell and his warmth did wonders to my distressed heart.

“Do you know how much I craved to see you, just to hear a word from you? I even tried to end my life, do you know that?” I asked. Releasing me, he moved back.

“I know, Anu. Why else do you think I thought you were better off without me? That day I fought with my mother over you, hurried to Bangalore to be near you, only to find you in a pool of blood. At that moment, I hated myself for having put you through all the sadness,” Arjun said. I sat staring at him unable to believe what he had just told me.

“You came to me?” I asked incredulously.

“I carried you in my arms to the hospital, Anu. Did you even think about me for a moment when you did that? If something had happened to you, I would have died. When you recovered, I felt you deserved someone better, someone who could keep you happy. So, I decided to go away from your life,” Arjun said. Then a vague memory of someone like Arjun running towards me on that fateful day returned to me.

“Why did Vishal never tell me?” I asked him, stunned by the realization that I had been so close to happiness when I thought I was at the peak of unhappiness.

“He told me I had killed the innocence in you. That the carefree butterfly, who loved to laugh, was forever gone and that I was the reason. A spineless

idiot like me didn't deserve his innocent sister. And he was right. He begged me to go away. So, did your parents. It seemed the best for everyone that I just disappeared from your life," he said. He turned away probably to hide the emotions he was trying hard to control.

"My parents also knew?" So, I needn't blame Arjun alone for the twists and turns my life had taken then. My dear ones were equally guilty.

It is ridiculous how people often meddled in the life of others, played with their emotions, took decisions on their behalf, and gave them the utmost pain possible. When they managed to tangle the threads of the relationships into a complex knot, they often cried off and heaped the blame on fate.

"Yes, but the past is in the past, Anu. I can't stand another separation. I love you even more than I did before. I don't care about what others think or say, but will you take me back in your life, Anu?" he asked, taking both my hands in his and kissing them.

"You were never gone from my life, Arjun. Maybe for a few mad moments when I thought I lost you, I believed it. But I always knew that you will be back in my life," I said.

Arjun closed the distance between us in a flash. His lips devoured mine with a mix of love and hunger. Time paused for me.

"Maybe we should get out of the car. What do you think?" asked Arjun after a few exquisite moments, the mischievous twinkle firmly back in his eyes.

I nodded. Simultaneously, my mobile buzzed with a message. It was from Tom.

*"Anu, where are you? Are you all right? Do you need me to come there? Please reply."*

I read it, smiled, and typed a reply.

"Who is it? Is it that lewd colleague of yours?" I could feel Arjun's anger in his voice. I decided to overlook it for now.

Jealousy was a green-eyed monster indeed. But for Tom, I would still be pining away for Arjun. I should do something to make Tom and Arjun friends.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

“Pure love is a willingness to give without a thought of receiving anything in return.”

—Peace Pilgrim

When Arjun rang the doorbell, an old Filipino woman opened the door for us, greeting us with a cheerful smile.

“Anu, meet Maria Bautista, our housekeeper and cook. She has been with us since my childhood and is like family. Maria, this is Ananya.” Arjun made the introductions, and the woman surprised me with a hug.

“Come on in, darling, make yourself comfortable. Let me get something for you to eat.” Maria took me by the hand and led me into an aesthetically furnished hall. She excused herself and went into what must have been the kitchen.

“A visual I have always seen in my dreams, the day you came home. Tell me, love, this is not a dream, and that you are real,” Arjun said, gazing into my eyes. Cupping my cheeks, he kissed me tenderly. Pleasure enveloped me.

The shrill ringing of his phone forced him to move away. Arjun swore on seeing the caller’s name.

“It is from the hospital. Give me a few moments. I’ll have to make some real big excuse now. I don’t want you to hear my expertise in lying,” Arjun said with a wink. He headed outside to talk to whoever was on the phone.

Alone in the huge living room, I admired how tastefully it was furnished. The designer had taken care of elegance and beauty while making sure that it was comfortable. An array of photos decorated the wall opposite to where I was standing. Warmth washed over me as I gazed into the eyes of a teenage Arjun gleefully displaying a trophy. There was also one that was taken on his graduation day in medical college. In another, a toddler sat on the lap of a handsome man, Arjun’s dad certainly, while his mom sat next to him with her arms around him, smiling happily at the camera. It portrayed a perfectly happy family.

Photographs have a unique way of slicing out moments and freezing them against time’s relentless melt. They take us back in time to moments someone had chosen to immortalize. A moment where the presence of a cheer had



made it extraordinary. Gazing at the photographs, I could hear the hum of time. Those glimpses of Arjun's life, when I was nowhere in his world, were irresistible.

"Darling, here, have some tea. I have some hot cake as well," Maria's voice and the smell of tea and warm cake brought me back to the present. Maria had also arranged an assortment of snacks with the tea and cake on the side table near the couch.

"Thank you, Maria! Where in the Philippines are you from?" I asked Maria who was looking at me intently as she mixed sugar in my tea.

"Manila. But I think I belong here now. Miss... you are lovely. No wonder Arjun fell in love with you. I knew you would come here one day. I always prayed for it," Maria said and I choked on my tea.

"How do you know that?" I asked. I didn't remember Arjun saying anything to her that might have implied I was something more than a friend.

"Oh, I knew the moment I saw you. After all, I clean his room every day. More than once, I have heard him murmuring your name as though it was a prayer. You should not torture him anymore, Miss. Just come home as his wife," said Maria and I was seized by the urge to see his room. Maybe he had a picture of mine on his bedside table. How romantic!

"Where is his room?" I asked, unable to hold myself or wait for Arjun to come back. I had to look at it before Arjun came in. If not, I might die from curiosity. I looked outside and Arjun was still on the phone.

"Come on, Miss. I will show you," said Maria and led me to a room through a small corridor that was decorated with paintings in artistic frames.

Maria opened the door for me and I stepped into Arjun's world. The room was furnished as elegantly as the living room and a king-sized bed occupied the middle of the room. Nothing, however, could have prepared me for the visual on the wall that faced the bed. My heart thudded and my head grew hot. I went near to inspect.

In the centre of the wall was a life-sized photo of me walking down the ramp in the bridal gown. A beautiful, ornate frame adorned the picture. All over the wall were several photos of me in various moods. I remembered some of them. Arjun had clicked them during our time together. My blood boiled when I found among them photographs of some major events from my life

after our separation. There I was, posing with Volegov, another cheering at the concert of Sonu Nigam and many other random photos which even I didn't have. While I was pining away for him, he was gazing at my photos that were obviously taken by someone whom he had entrusted to spy upon me. I wanted to strangle him.

"So, you are here." I heard Arjun say. I glared at him and threw a pillow from his bed at him. He dodged the pillow and laughed. Maria quickly left, finding the atmosphere a bit too hot to handle.

"Explain this, you jerk! All the while, when I was dying to hear just a word from you, you employed someone to snoop on me?" I pushed Arjun with all the anger I felt.

"Do you know you look rather pretty when you are angry?" he said, with a smile nonetheless. I punched him hard on his chest.

"Ouch! Relax, my warrior princess. Let me explain, please," Arjun said. I gave him another punch on his ribs, which I knew was good because of the pain I felt on my own knuckles.

He pinned both my hands against my own body and hugged me from behind, basically imprisoning me in his arms. Rendered breathless by his proximity, I purred like a cat being caressed. Where did all my anger go? Resting his head on my shoulders, he explained.

"I promised you I will always care for you, didn't I? I couldn't help myself, Anu. I wanted to know about you, even though I believed you were better off without me. Call me selfish or utterly foolish, but I wanted to fulfil all your dreams. I wanted to see you happy even though I knew I could never be a part of your happiness," said Arjun. The sincerity in his voice calmed me down a little.

Another glance at the photos rekindled my fury and I writhed against him to free myself.

"How much money did you pay this detective to snoop on me?" I asked struggling to free myself.

"I don't care. It was money well spent. I only wanted to see your dreams come true," said Arjun and nuzzled my ears, rendering me short of breath again.

"So, it was not only the snooping. You spent money to make these things

happen. Oh, wait! Don't tell me you were the one pretending to be Poornima's mysterious cousin! She was your spy, wasn't she?" I yelled, as the truth finally dawned on me.

"Oh, not only Poornima, Khushi too," Arjun said, releasing me.

"What?! The sly things... just wait and see what I will do to them," I said, wondering how they had managed to carry off this charade without letting me get even a hint. Arjun chuckled and moved nearer to the wall to gaze up at the photos.

"These photos... they helped me survive. I used to wait for them like a beggar awaiting a morsel. You are lucky you have such loving friends, Anu. They both nearly killed me the first day I had been to see them in college. They are fiercely protective of you. They would not have agreed to help me, if they were not as concerned about you as much I was. You were pining away and we wanted to bring you out of your depression. When they saw that you were slowly beginning to come out of depression with our efforts, they became more co-operative," said Arjun. I sighed. Oh, the extent he has gone to help me!

"Arjun, thank you for all that you did. It surely helped. But do you know what really worked wonders for me? It was the love that I poured into those thousands of pages that I wrote over the last year and a half. I wrote to vent my feelings. I never went to sleep without writing to you about my day, about my thoughts, and about my love for you. It was like having a bedtime conversation with you, even though you were miles away. It made me feel as though you were near me, listening to each word I wrote on the pages," I said. Arjun rushed to me and smothered me with a hug.

"I would like to see them, those thousands of pages of love. On my part, I talked to you through these photos. I woke up seeing your face and wouldn't go to bed without talking to you or kissing you good night. I have seen Maria giving me concerned looks hearing me whisper endearments to these photos. Poor thing, she worried too much over me. I was in a trance of sorts," said Arjun. I blinked back the tears that were starting to form in my eyes.

"Aren't we the silliest lovers on earth, Arjun? I guess we will win effortlessly. Both of us can't bear to live without the other. But we still managed to make our lives a living hell making asinine assumptions about each other. You lived in the belief that I was better off without you. I was

sure that you had forgotten me. I created a private haven through the words I wrote and was busy cocooning myself in my fantasy world. And you chose to romance my photos instead. I craved for a loving word from you but somehow managed to pour out a thousand words of love to you,” I said, snuggling into the warmth of his chest.

“We sure are. Nevertheless, I was near the end of my restraint these days. In fact, when I saw you today, I was browsing through my contacts, contemplating to call Poornima. And as though by magic, you suddenly appeared before me,” said Arjun running his fingers through my hair.

“You should thank Tom and Lily for today. They literally acted out the drama to help me meet you. Tom did the sleuthing and Lily broke that glass on purpose so that we could draw your attention. Both are half mad, you know,” I said moving out of his hands to sit on the bed. The proximity was igniting more wishes.

“I was contemplating to strangle him for touching you,” Arjun said. He came and sat near me.

“Don’t worry my jealous boyfriend, he is just a good friend. Talking about friends, I remember Poornima saying you weren’t in touch with her after the fashion show. Why did you do that?” I asked ruffling his almost perfect hairstyle, making him laugh.

“I had come to watch you walk the ramp as a bride that day. My promise to myself was that I would see you at your best, take in memories that would last me a lifetime and go away from your life forever. I watched you from far. You were glowing with happiness. All around me, guys were praising you and cheering for you. I thought one among them might suit you better than me. I came to Dubai the next week to join the Canadian Specialist Hospital and stopped all communication with both Khushi and Poornima. I deleted their emails without opening and discarded my old phone number. But I couldn’t forget you and gradually my resolve became weaker and weaker. All I want now is to spend my days with you and watch all your dreams come true. I want to greet every morning cuddling you,” Arjun said, lying back on the bed with his eyes closed.

I couldn’t help and did what I had always dreamt about. I slumped near him making his arms my pillow.

“I love you,” I said. Arjun pinned me against him and planted tiny kisses all

over my face. As I was sinking in the spell of his caresses, he stopped suddenly and shot out of the bed.

“Arjun, what happened?” I asked, puzzled by his reaction.

“You minx! One more minute there and I would have made you mine. There is a limit to my self-restraint. I might stop being a gentleman,” Arjun said in a strangled voice.

“But who wants you to be a gentleman?” I asked with a beatific smile. Laughing loudly, Arjun scooted me out from his room.

## Chapter Twenty-four

“To love is so startling it leaves little time for anything else.”

-Emily Dickinson

Arjun drove me back to my accommodation in his SUV, a white Audi Q5. He talked about his work and that reminded me of the Iranian doctor who was apparently in love with him.

“Is there an Iranian female doctor working with you?” I asked to confirm.

“Yes, not just one though, we have many. Why do you ask?” he said, as we stopped at a traffic signal.

“Tom’s informer told him about an Iranian female doctor. She is rumoured to be madly in love with you, though your sentiments are unknown,” I said, repeating Tom’s report. Arjun guffawed.

“You and your half-wit friends! That must have been about Dr. Afza. She is a two-time divorcee and lusts after any single male. I make excuses to escape from her advances. She is pretty and has a lovely neck, which I have wished to strangle many times. She is shameless,” said Arjun. I wished that this Dr. Afza did not appear before me ever, both for her and my well-being.

“What will your mother say if she sees us now Arjun?” I asked to change the topic from the beautiful Dr. Afza.

“We are not close anymore. The incident that day convinced me that she valued money and her ego more than me or my happiness. I find it difficult to love her in the same way that I used to. It is as if an invisible wall has sprung up between us. I talk to her but I am not able to forgive the trauma she gave you. Whenever I think I should forgive her, the memory of you lying in a pool of blood blocks all my good intentions. I remember how weak I had been that day and how I had failed you. I had promised to love you and to protect you but I had failed miserably,” said Arjun passionately and I patted his arm to comfort him.

“Arjun, I don’t hold a grudge against her, or you, for that day. No mother will tolerate what she saw that day. She had a genuine reason to slap me. She must have been miserable seeing the sudden change in you after you fell in love. And if I am honest with us, if I had been in your place, I too would have frozen momentarily, thinking whose side to take,” I said in earnest.

“This is what I cherish in you, Anu. You are kind. If someone else were in your place, I would have faced killer fireworks today. But you forgave all my failures far more quickly than I had expected,” said Arjun.

“You know what my name means? It means unique and that is what I am—one and only,” I said and gave an I-can’t-help-it shrug as his booming laughter filled the car.

“Love you, sweetheart,” said Arjun and blew a kiss to me. Playing along, I caught the kiss and placed it firmly over my heart.

He took my hand in his right hand as he controlled the car with his left. UAE has left-hand driving all over. His car was an automatic model, so there were no frequent gearshifts. Arjun laced his fingers through mine, keeping our palms kissing all the way to the accommodation. The security and peace that that simple gesture gave me would not compare to anything else in the world. It was as if he was sending all his love coursing to me via his hands.

He made me promise to spend the whole time next day with him. I wondered if he remembered that the next day, November 11, was also my birthday. To spend the whole day with him would be the best birthday gift for me.

An anxious Sophia was waiting for me at the accommodation. I ran to her and hugged her.

“So, all went well? Your Cancer man is back?” she asked, perceiving the reason for my happiness.

“Yes, Sophia! I am absolutely and insanely happy. Like you said, my Cancer man did not forget me. You should know the extent to which he loves me,” I said. Then I told her about all the things Arjun had done for me.

“Aha! That is so romantic. I am so happy for you both.” Sophia was all smiles. Just then, Arjun called and Sophia asked me to carry on.

It was like old times again. After dinner, Arjun and I talked late into the night. My heart sang with happiness. The deep pit of depression that I used to sink into had vanished without a trace. Arjun’s voice soothed me and I bathed in his bountiful love. But the thought that I should reveal the presence of Arjun in my life to my parents kept nagging me throughout. I even took the phone twice to call them. But I kept it back unable to decide how to break the news to them.

Next morning, a call at 5.30 am woke me up. When I answered, my eardrums

nearly broke with the combined shrieks of '*Happy Birthday*' from Khushi and Poornima.

"Idiots! It is just five thirty here and it is a weekend. I feel like murdering you both," I said sluggishly. I was damn pleased that they had remembered my birthday even though I was miles away. However, I pretended to be cross.

"Say thank you, you idiot! We got up early just to wish you. Be thankful that you have such loving friends," said Khushi, and tears filled my eyes as I thought of all that they had done for me.

"Thank you, dears. Not just for today but also for all that you both have done for me all these years. Especially for the last year! I miss you both," I said as I choked over the last words.

"Aww, Anu. We miss you too. Badly! Enjoy your day. So, what are your plans for today? It is Friday today, so you have the day off, right? Do you have any boy on the horizon yet?" Khushi asked, and I sighed.

"Yes, and an immensely handsome one," I said, playing on with the charade.

"Is it Tom? Dear, these foreigners can be fast! Take good care, okay? Do you understand?" Khushi cautioned me.

"No. It is not Tom. But you both know him," I said slyly.

"What? Who?" they asked in unison and I laughed to my heart's content.

"Arjun," I replied. I heard an audible gasp from them both and then there was silence for a few seconds.

"So, he found you? I knew he would never forsake you. From the way he talked about you, I knew he loved you sincerely," Poornima confessed and I couldn't help smiling.

"You sly things! You knew how much I loved Arjun and yet you managed to keep me away from him. What kind of friends are you both?" I said feigning anger.

"Anu, we did what we thought was best for you. We are sorry if you think we made a mistake in keeping you away from Arjun. We thought you would eventually get over him," Khushi said.

"Whatever you both did for me is amazing. Thank You. What did I do to deserve such loving friends? I don't have any worry now. My Arjun is back," I said and they cheered with whistles.



“So, we are clearly out. Now that the Prince is back in the picture, why would the Princess care about her lowly companions,” said Poornima, and I laughed.

My experience had taught me that friends are angels in disguise. If not for Khushi and Poornima, I would not have come out of my depression or completed my course the way I had done. If not for Tom and Lily, I would not have mustered the courage to go meet Arjun. If not for Colonel Uncle, I would not have learned the magic of journaling. And if not for Sophia, I would not have understood Arjun or his actions as much as I do now. God does send angels at the appropriate time, but we humans fail to recognize them.

I lay awake after they disconnected the call reminiscing over the past two years and the lessons I had learned. I had learned that happiness existed in the most unexpected places. I had learned that love was magical and it made someone’s heartbeat your favourite music. I had learned that not every dark cloud heralded a storm.

Two hours later, my phone rang again and it was Kishore.

“Come down here, Anu. My wife wants to test her cooking skills once again on you. Shall I come to pick you or will you take a taxi?”

How could I say no to Kishore and what would I say to Arjun?

“I will come in a taxi, Kishore,” I said, even though I hardly wished to go. When I disconnected the call, all my enthusiasm about the day was gone. I had to tell Arjun about the change in plan. Maybe we could meet later in the evening.

Arjun answered on the second ring.

“Hello, love. Good morning. It is lovely to wake up to your voice,” said Arjun. Even the most level-headed person would lose their composure on hearing such words. His charm made me forget the purpose of my call until he said that he would pick me up at nine. I reluctantly told him about Kishore’s invitation.

“No worries, I will take you there. Tell him, you have a friend with you. I want to meet Kishore. This time there will be no mistake, Anu. I can’t afford to lose you another time. I want to make my intention clear to everyone in your life. And since Kishore is your guardian here, I need to talk to him

anyway,” said Arjun and my heart raced in anticipation of the meeting.

Kishore might know about Arjun as my suicide attempt had created quite a stir in our family circle. Moreover, Arjun had been a regular visitor in Vishal’s house as they were classmates. They might have met. How would Kishore react?

As I went through my morning chores, I created and recreated the impending meeting many times in my mind. I didn’t want any complication again. I didn’t understand why my birthday had to turn so dramatic. I had hoped to be blissfully happy with not a care in the world. I had visualized a very happy day roaming around with Arjun, not chewing my lips in anticipation of a dreaded meeting between my lover and my family. I groaned at the unjustness of it all.

Arjun came at sharp 9. He looked gorgeous in a V-neck, white tee with full sleeves and blue jeans. A pair of goggles added a touch of style to his Prince Charming looks. I introduced him to Sophia. As we left, Sophia whispered, “Enjoy”.

When Arjun opened the door of the car for me, he said softly, “Happy Birthday!” I found a big bouquet of red roses and an ornate basket full of Hershey’s Kisses sitting on the passenger seat. A hand-written note with them said ‘To my darling, Anu’. Beneath the bouquet was a digital photo album with pictures from our time in Sreepuram. Amongst all the pictures, were many close-up candid pictures of mine that I did not remember him taking.

Life became rosy when love bloomed in our life. I felt I had been reborn. He was in my blood. Every breath I took, chanted his name.

He surprised me again when he stopped the car in his courtyard. He stepped out to open the car door and escorted me into the house. My heart went wild in anticipation of a day that was already springing beautiful surprises on me.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

“The best things in life are unexpected - because there were no expectations.”

—Eli Khamarov

Maria welcomed us with her usual cherubic smile. Once inside, Arjun led me straight to the dining table saying he had a surprise for me. The dining table was already laden with tea and breakfast. My favourite *appam* and chicken curry were beckoning me. I squealed in delight.

“Maria learnt this recipe online. Test it and tell me if it is as nice as Grandma’s,” said Arjun, and I complied without wasting another moment.

“Bravo Maria! This is as good as Grandma’s. This chicken curry is finger-licking good,” I declared.

“Aye, I have been making this ever since Arjun came here. He told me this was his favourite dish. Now I understand why it had suddenly become his favourite dish,” said Maria, her body quaking with laughter. Arjun grinned.

While we sat down to finish breakfast, Maria disappeared into the kitchen leaving us to indulge in little idiosyncrasies characteristic of lovers left alone. We fed each other and held hands all the while. Love seeped into the servings when someone fed you. Food became tastier and we ate more than we would have otherwise.

Maria returned after a while carrying a beautiful cake. It was a work of art. Tiny pink fondant roses bordered the chocolate cake. The topping was of a girl sitting on a rock, looking lost in thought.

“It is you, my dear, in the eyes of your Arjun,” said Maria, gesturing to the fondant figure of the girl. The tiny figurine had dark brown curly hair and large grey eyes.

“You made it?” I looked at Arjun, my eyes wide open.

“Just the girl, Maria did the rest.”

“It is such a beauty. Thank you so much Maria and this girl does look like me, Arjun.”

When I cut the cake amid happy cheers and loving caresses, I felt happier like never before. Arjun took care of me as if I was a kid and ran around doing little errands to make me feel comfortable and happy. He handed me a tissue when I smeared my dress with cream and ran to get me a glass of water when

I choked on a piece of cake. Maria left us alone after keeping the remaining part of the cake in the fridge. Arjun enquired what else I required. I requested him to sit next to me.

“You do know how to make a girl feel special, Arjun. I feel like I am a princess. That is enough. Sit next to me. Just being near you makes me happy.”

“You are my princess, love. And I want to do everything to make my princess feel special on her day,” said Arjun, sinking next to me on the sofa.

Maria was nowhere visible. In her absence, I treated myself by moving into his arms. Listening to the rhythmic beating of his heart, my heart did a happy dance. Whispering sweet nothings, he kissed me with an aching sweetness and I snuggled closer to him. All I wanted then was to curl up in his arms and go to sleep listening to the lullaby that his heart sang.

A while later, Arjun took me around the house showing me the rooms. Except for one closed room, which he said belonged to his parents, I visited all the other rooms in the two-storied villa. I liked the greenhouse on their terrace and the swimming pool in the basement most. While the former enticed me with the beauty of the rare roses and dahlias that bloomed in plenty, the swimming pool reminded me of the village pond in Sreepuram, where we used to spend hours during summer vacations. The house had an outhouse for the gardener and other staff in the backyard. Right now, with only Arjun occupying the house, they didn't have any live-in staff except Maria.

We left for Sharjah around noon and reached Kishore's house around 01:30 in the afternoon.

Fear clouded my mind when I rang the bell. Kishore opened the door with a smile that transformed into a scowl the moment he saw Arjun.

“You... how dare you come here?” Kishore growled, glaring at Arjun. I squeezed myself between them to diffuse the tension.

“Kishore, please...hear me out.” I tried to speak but Kishore dragged me and Arjun in. Our exchange was beginning to attract attention from some of the neighbours who were out in the common corridor.

“I will kill you if I find you even miles near my sister. You almost killed her once. What sort of a man are you? Get out of my house now,” Kishore

shouted, shoving Arjun towards the door.

Just then, we heard Shreya scream from the kitchen and we ran towards her. Aditya was lying on Shreya's lap and flapping his arms wildly. His face had become red and there was a frantic look on his face. He looked like he was unable to make any sound.

"He choked on a grape from the fruit salad," cried a frantic Shreya shaking the child.

Arjun immediately grabbed the toddler, placed him on his knees face down, and gave five back blows. With the last blow, the grape that was stuck in Aditya's throat shot out of his mouth like a projectile. He started to wail and Kishore and Shreya sobbed in relief, hugging the toddler.

And just like that, the atmosphere of hostility vanished. The foe had become the saviour. Aditya calmed down within a few minutes. Kishore carried him in his arms and led Arjun to the living room, all the while mumbling words of gratitude. I hugged Shreya to calm her down as she repeatedly thanked me for bringing Arjun with me.

Soon, Arjun won over Aditya. Arjun made weird faces and noises to amuse him. It had taken weeks for him to tolerate my presence; Arjun had charmed him in a jiffy.

The happy realization that a near tragedy was averted made lunch a calmer and happier time than what I had expected. After lunch, both men moved into the living room and then went for a walk outside. Maybe, they were having 'the discussion' that I had feared all the while.

The winds still appeared calm when they returned. The smile on their faces convinced me the discussion had had a merry conclusion.

"Anu, I had a conversation with Arjun. I want you both to reveal your plans to your parents. I have asked them to come online for a video call. It is not good to keep them in the dark about such an important decision in your life. Especially after what they have been through in the past," Kishore told me as he came to sit next to me.

The video call was the most difficult thing I had done in a while. Mother started to sob the moment she saw Arjun seated next to me. Kishore took the role of a mediator while I sat mum. Arjun talked to them and assured them that he would keep me happy always. He left me to talk to them after

promising them that his love towards me was genuine.

“Anu, do you understand the enormity of your decision? Are you convinced that he loves you? How can you still respect him after everything that happened last year?” asked Mom, while Dad kept quiet.

I told them then about all the things he had done for me in the last year. They were teary-eyed by the end of my narration and asked to see Arjun again. They blessed us both and requested us to talk to his mother as well.

“A marriage is not for the couple alone, it is the coming together of two families. Do remember that.” My father’s parting words echoed in my mind as we returned to Dubai.

Our next destination was the Burj Khalifa, the tallest tower in the world. All the general admission tickets were sold out, but Arjun purchased fast track tickets for the observation deck from the reception counter at a hefty price of 400 Dirhams while the general admission tickets were only 125 dirhams per adult. I objected, but he dismissed it saying that since it was my birthday, he wanted to gift me an ‘at the top’ moment.

“I always wanted to go up there with you. Heights remind me of you these days,” said Arjun gazing fondly into my eyes. Glimpses of us at the top of the lighthouse and the scene on the hospital terrace danced unbidden into my mind, making me blush.

Our ‘At the Top’, Burj Khalifa visit began from the reception area on the lower ground level of The Dubai Mall. Throughout our journey, a multi-media presentation that chronicled Dubai’s exotic history and the fascinating story of the Burj Khalifa entertained us. In our allotted sixty minutes, we took in the breath-taking, unobstructed, 360-degree view of the city, the desert, and the ocean. It was after sunset and hence the sparkling lights and stars too competed for our attention. The dancing fountains below added to the beauty of the scene.

My world became brighter when Arjun whispered endearments in my ear and a promise to be together for eternity, as the millions of stars, the bright horizon, and the dancing fountains stood witness. Remembering our very own Cupid then, I called *Ammamma* to fulfil my promise.

“*Ammamma*... Guess where I am now?! At the top of the tallest tower in the world; I am literally on the top of the world *Ammamma*,” I screamed the

moment she answered the phone.

“Whoa, that is great and is Arjun with you?” she asked mischievously. The news did travel fast.

“Yes, *Ammamma*.”

“Give him the phone, my child.”

After *Ammamma* talked to Arjun, she confided in me that we had made her deliriously happy. I blushed when she said that she was now waiting to hear the wedding bells.

We wound up the evening with a dinner at an upscale Italian restaurant, which overlooked the dancing fountains. I revelled in his love as we relished a candlelight dinner, watching the magical fountains, and savouring the tastiest food in the world. What else could mark the end of a day that had been exquisite from the beginning?

## Chapter Twenty-Six

“To expect the unexpected shows a thoroughly modern intellect.”

—Oscar Wilde

The days ticked away and a week vanished in a flash. Time was never enough. To be near Arjun was all that I craved. My senses were his slaves. My ears were partial to his laughter and all other sounds sounded soulless. The musky smell of his cologne was the most magical smell that my nose had perceived. My eyes wandered in search of him. My skin tingled in anticipation of his touch. And nothing tasted better than his kiss.

Tom and Lily did not leave me alone. They greeted me without exception each day, with the question ‘*Did you do it?*’

I answered in the negative every time and that made them furious. “*You guys need to grow up,*” became their favourite phrase. How could I convince them that even though we were physically apart, we were one soul? Would they understand if I told them that a mere glance seemed equivalent to hours of togetherness?

Tom even offered to have a man-to-man talk with Arjun. What nerve!

Their many dreary afternoons turned to laughter riots, me being at the receiving end. They preferred to treat with equal disdain, both my threats and pleas.

The weather had become cool. Christmas was just a few weeks away. On Thursday, after a long walk in the Zabeel Park, Arjun and I reached the south Indian restaurant in Al Karama. Both my well-wishers, Tom and Lily, were to have dinner with us that day. It was my idea to treat them to dinner at the place where we had first met Arjun.

They arrived a few minutes after us and, as expected, Lily was dressed to kill. They greeted Arjun excitedly.

“Did you do it?” Lily whispered in my ear and I elbowed her right in the ribs. At her howl of pain, Tom snorted and I glared at him. He winked at me.

Arjun, unaware of these subtle communications, led them inside playing the part of a perfect host. Arjun and I sat on one side with Lily and Tom facing us at a table that overlooked the crowded street.



“I want to taste this thing you people call *Biriyani*. Will it be too spicy?” asked Tom. Lily assured us she was happy with the Chinese prawn noodle that was on the menu.

“It is tasty. Go for the less-spicy variety, custom-made for people like you who like to experiment with the Indian spices.” Arjun suggested.

Munching on the chicken lollipops that we had ordered as starters, Lily launched into a praise of the Shine supermarkets and fired many queries about the intricacies of the working of the supermarket chain. I watched them fondly as Arjun answered all her queries patiently.

“When can we expect the wedding bells to ring?” Lily asked. I was all ears to hear his answer.

“We have not decided on a date yet. Given a choice, I would marry her now. I don’t want to wait any longer,” Arjun said. His eyes brimmed with affection and my cheeks grew warm.

‘Awwws’ and ‘Aahs’ from Lily greeted his confession. Tom smiled.

“Hey Arjun, I am surprised to meet you here,” said a voice then and a giant of a man with toad-like eyes came forward to greet Arjun.

“Hello, Mr. Mathews. Surprise is not the word,” said Arjun and from his tone, I understood that the word was not ‘happy’ either.

“Won’t you introduce your friends to me?” asked the man. The way he looked at me gave me creeps.

“Meet my friends Miss Ananya Shankar, Miss Lily Reyes, and Mr. Thomas Smith. Guys, meet Mr. Mathews, he is the operations manager of our group in Dubai,” said Arjun conducting a half-hearted introduction.

The man lingered and continued to ogle at Lily and me. His eyes wandered among us the way a tiger viewed his prey that he had finally cornered, with a sparkle of victory and hunger. He reminded me of those villains in movies whose mere presence indicated an evil twist.

“Excuse me, guys. Mr. Mathews, can I have a word with you?” said Arjun, getting up and guiding the obnoxious man towards the small L-shaped corridor that led to the washrooms. I followed them a while later after making an excuse to use the washroom. The man looked like a menace and I smelled a fight brewing.

“I only asked you for her number when you are done with her. After all, people like her crave attention. Why are you so furious, Arjun?” I heard the giant ask from the other side of the passage. Hiding behind the small decorative bush, I watched them. Arjun had caught him by the collar and pinned him against the wall.

“She is my fiancée, you bastard. Another dirty word out of your mouth and you are not going to breathe again. Leave from here this moment or you will never be able to show your ugly face in Dubai,” Arjun hissed, and the man gasped when Arjun’s hands tightened around his throat. I shuddered at the indecency of the man and his disgusting request. I felt as though a hundred caterpillars had descended on me, making me miserable with incessant itching all over of my body.

I dashed to our table and tried to collect myself. Arjun joined us after a few minutes. A lone muscle working on his jaw showed his anger and agitation. Conversation resumed on our table without much ado. Lily and Tom cracked jokes but I was unable to swallow another morsel of food. The man left after glaring at Arjun. Why did they allow such a person to continue in their organization?

On the way back to the accommodation, I questioned Arjun about it.

“Anu, he is a lecherous bastard. He is the biggest mistake my father has committed. He used to trust him with his life. If we could ignore his disgusting attitude towards females, he is actually an asset to our company,” said Arjun, muttering curses.

“Leave it, Arjun, Don’t allow such a man to spoil our evening,” I said, though I was sure I would never be able to forget it. Though I had not heard his exact words, I had heard enough to guess what the vile man must have assumed me to be.

Arjun’s phone rang then and he transferred it to the car Bluetooth. It was his mother on the other side.

“Who is the girl with you?” Arjun’s mom asked. God, was it a video call? Could she see me?

“Who are you talking about?” Arjun asked, giving me a how-the-deuce-did-she-know look. He had told me he wanted to talk to his mom in person about us soon. He didn’t think it would be wise to do that over a phone call.

“I am talking about the girl with whom you were having dinner, your so-called fiancée. Do not think about lying to me. Mathews called me just now. You can’t hide things from me forever,” said his mom and I quivered, recognizing the threat in her voice.

“It is Ananya, mom. You know her,” said Arjun and there was an audible gasp from the other end. The ominous beep of the phone filled the car the next moment because she had disconnected the call.

“I hate it when she does this. When she is disturbed, she immediately disconnects the phone. She does not even bother to listen to what the other person wants to say. I remember many fights between my parents about this behaviour. She never changes. And that rogue, how dare he call mom,” said Arjun. To pacify his anger, he pressed down the accelerator and the car, raced down the fast track lane towards our destination.

Unspoken words hung in the air heavily. Soon we entered the slow bumper-to-bumper traffic. I sat wool-gathering leaving Arjun alone with his thoughts. His mother’s phantom presence in our thoughts was certainly intimidating us both if the heavy silence that reigned inside the car was any indication.

When we almost reached my accommodation, the ringing of Arjun’s phone disturbed the silence that had become strong like a granite wall.

Arjun answered again using the car Bluetooth and Arjun’s mother’s voice provided an audible ending to my musings. We were at the gates of my accommodation and I longed to be back in my room to clear my muddled thoughts.

“Arjun, is Ananya with you? I wish to speak with her,” she said.

“What do you want to tell her? Do you have any more names left for her in that profane dictionary of yours? Sorry, mom, I don’t trust you anymore,” said Arjun and he was about to disconnect the call when his mother entreated him that she just wanted to apologize to me.

Stunned beyond words, I mumbled a greeting. Arjun grasped my hands as though he wanted to reassure me with his presence.

“Ananya, a thousand apologies for all that I have done. Your presence near Arjun tells me that God has better plans for you both than whatever my mediocre mind had envisioned. Please accept my apologies. I want only my son’s happiness. It lies with you and I wholeheartedly welcome you into our

family,” she said and I was at a loss for words. It was so unbelievable. Her words were oozing with affection.

Arjun laughed aloud and hugged me tightly, shouting a ‘thank you’ and ‘love you, mom’ at his mother. I heard her laugh and say ‘I love you too, son’ before she disconnected the call.

It was inconceivable that the last hurdle in the path of our union had fallen. That which had promised to be a storm, had passed like a pleasant breeze.

Arjun called me later to inform that his mother wanted him to go down to Mangalore as early as possible so that she could visit my parents along with him to ask for my hand in marriage in the traditional way. Arjun seemed overjoyed at the sudden turn of events.

A little voice in my head kept nagging me throughout the raptures of pleasure that all that seemed so amazing and awesome was the harbinger of something dark and mean. However, what it was, it failed to enlighten me.

It kept on bugging me even as I settled down for sleep. My pessimist half and optimist half were waging a war against each other. The pessimist bespoke of the horrid nature of the woman and warranted caution. The optimist assured me all mothers had the happiness of their child as their top priority.

Even when I drifted off into a disturbed sleep, the voice persisted to distress me.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Three things cannot be hidden for long: the sun, the moon, and the truth.”

-Buddha

Fridays in Dubai are the lazy in the mornings, slightly happier in the afternoons, and the merriest after the sun dives into the ocean. People tend to rest all day to ward off the sedulous week that had passed and to prepare for the hectic one that awaited them.

I was at Arjun’s house right at nine in the morning as Arjun insisted he wanted to spend every possible waking hour with me. So, there I sat, nibbling at the scones Maria had prepared for breakfast. I was still fighting with the little voice inside my head that was warning of dark clouds in the horizon. But the warm sun that was shining on the pretty flower shrubs that lined the compound wall and fluffy white clouds that glided across the clear blue skies took my mind off it. The sun was shining brightly in Arjun’s eyes as well.

I had never seen him so happy. He was brimming with joy and I couldn’t help but partake in his happiness. He was already planning our marriage and even our honeymoon. He wanted to take me to Paris and Venice. Maria was happy too, for she was preparing to visit her daughter who lived in Qatar, as Arjun was to go to Mangalore for two whole weeks. I had no such plans, as I could not get a long leave from work, as I had not completed my probation period yet.

If only the tiny voice in my head had fallen silent, I would have breathed easy.

Arjun left for the hospital after lunch to apply for the leave as he wished to leave for Mangalore at the earliest.

“I want the new year to dawn with you beside me. I cannot wait anymore, darling,” he whispered when I whined that he could not wait to leave me.

After Arjun had left, I volunteered to help Maria as she cleaned the kitchen and the dining room but she shooed me away with a smile. I wandered all over the house looking for ways to pass time. The hundreds of flowers in the cool shade of the green house seemed happy to see me, nodding their pretty heads at me. The chrysanthemums and roses quivered, like they were sharing a trending joke.

When I returned downstairs, Maria was cleaning the only room that I had not seen before-Arjun's parents' bedroom. Curiosity led me towards it.

"Come in child... We open this bedroom rarely. Arjun's mom has not come to this house after master died. Too many memories, she says," said Maria inviting me into the room, which opened towards the west.

It was a beautiful room. Everything was white, right from the curtains to the furniture to the bed sheets to the engraved side tables in white marble and the white sofa set that overlooked the front garden through the French windows. A colourful abstract painting of a couple walking together under an umbrella in rain occupied the wall near the bed, adding the only splash of colour in the decor. A night lamp that had the prettiest cherubs seated atop a crystal shade with hundreds of crystal drops lining its rim stood on the small writing table in the north end of the bedroom.

"This is Arjun's father," said Maria drawing my attention to the life-size portrait of a handsome man in military attire on the eastern wall. Recognition hit me, my head became hot, and my heart started an erratic rhythm. The whole room started to spin, things blurred, and the earth under my feet quietly slipped away.

When I recovered, I was lying on the bed and a frantic Maria was rubbing my feet trying to revive me. I tried to sit up but she forbade me.

"What happened, Miss? One moment you were happily moving around and the next moment, you fainted. You gave me a fright," she asked, worry etched on her face.

"Why is he wearing that uniform? Wasn't he a businessman?" I asked, pointing to the photo of the man whom I had met many times. Colonel R.S Nair!

"He worked in the army for twenty long years until his father forced him to leave and take charge of the business. He loved the army. He introduced himself to people as Colonel R.S Nair, not as Rajashekhar Nair, the CEO of the Shine Group," Maria said.

Terror gripped me and black spots began to appear in my line of vision. I lost consciousness again.

When I regained consciousness, Arjun was sitting near me checking my pulse. A worried Maria might have called him. I tried to sit up again.

“No, Anu, rest. How are you feeling now? Maria, please make her a glass of lemon juice with a good measure of salt in it. Her pulse is low,” Arjun instructed her. Maria left the room muttering about carelessness and hasty youngsters.

Arjun laughed hearing her and told me that Maria thought that I was with child. For a moment, I forgot the chaos of the thoughts churning in my mind and chuckled. Arjun massaged my shoulders as though I was made of the thinnest glass and might break if he pressed harder.

“I can’t tell you how I drove back after Maria told me that you had fainted, that too twice. How are you, love?” Arjun asked and for a moment, I thought to confess to him, about what had caused the fainting spell. A little voice in my head told me to be silent.

“I am fine. It must be the excitement. I am fine, Arjun,” I managed to say.

The moment my eye fell on the portrait, I shivered involuntarily. I had never believed in ghosts. I had once wandered with my cousins under the full moon near the *Ezhilam Pala* tree or the Indian Devil tree which, according to folklore was the abode of evil spirits during the full moon. I loved the intoxicating smell of the flower that was supposedly used by the evil spirits to entice humans. Kishore, the eldest and the bravest among us, had sung songs from the old horror movies that we had watched, posing with a single Pala flower, and we had all roared with laughter.

“Does your father have a twin?” I asked tentatively. Arjun replied in the negative but wondered why I asked.

“Just that he seems so familiar. Maybe I have seen someone like him,” I said.

“He would have loved to see you. He used to tell that he will choose my bride and that he will make me fall head over heels in love with her. Just in case I beat him to it, he had promised he would help me in making my way into the heart of the girl. He wanted me to marry for love, never for status or money,” Arjun said and a sigh escaped him.

I continued to gaze at the photo, reliving the moments I had seen and talked to his father. Colonel Uncle had always been very friendly and meeting him had marked the end of my worries each time.

“After that incident in the hospital, he started appearing in my dreams. He told me how wrong I was and that he will never forgive me if I forsook you. I

never used to dream about him before. It was as if he was living and doing just what he had promised he would do, trying to make me realize that you are the one for me,” Arjun said. The hoarseness of his voice revealed how difficult it was for him to talk about it.

I hugged him tightly. Was it possible that Arjun’s father had returned to do what he had left undone? I had read many stories in which souls of people, who had sudden deaths, had lingered back to finish unfinished tasks. The book *‘Many Master Many lives’* had also spoken of the same souls reincarnating to fulfil their unfulfilled dreams. It had seemed beautiful and enchanting to read. But I had always dismissed it all as hearsay.

To experience it, however, was now making me change my opinion. Who would believe me if I told them about this? Was it just my berserk imagination that was pulling me into a well of impossibilities? What was the purpose of all this?

Maria cleared her throat before she entered and I awkwardly moved away from Arjun’s arms. She left us immediately, leaving the glass of lime juice on the side table.

Arjun sniggered as he saw her retreating and got up to take the glass of juice.

“Arjun, take me out into the living room. You should clear Maria’s doubt. I don’t want you to keep her in the dark,” I said. I wanted to get away from the room that apparently had been the favourite room of Arjun’s dad.

As we were driving back to the accommodation, Arjun asked me again why I was so silent. I attributed it to my throbbing head and, to my relief, he believed me. He asked me if I needed something to help my headache, but I convinced him it was nothing a good night’s sleep wouldn’t cure.

I had two long lonely weeks ahead of me, as Arjun was to leave by a late-night flight to Mangalore the next day. Maybe the time apart would be enough to free my mind from the agitation that it was battling against.



## Chapter Twenty-Eight

It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves.

- William Shakespeare

I took the day off next day to be with Arjun. Maria had taken an early morning flight to Qatar and, for the first time, we had the house to ourselves. But the house had a morbid air about it and it was freaking me out. It was as though someone was watching us. I jumped even at the smallest sound. It was tough to make Arjun stay away from me. Like a bee coming to seek its flower, he kept coming near.

“Huh, love, why are you so scared? Trust me, I am not going to DO anything,” Arjun teased me, after I screamed when he touched me. I had been lost in my thoughts.

I made a face and acted sullen. I told him I hated him for leaving me alone. Again, an essay of explanations followed. Although I was looking at him, I was not hearing a single word he was speaking. I was so disturbed. After we had tea in the evening, Arjun left me to make some last-minute arrangements. I sat down to watch a popular Bollywood movie on television.

“It is an interesting movie,” said a voice. I quivered like a leaf and a chill spread through me when I recognized the voice. Arjun’s Dad Colonel R.S Nair was seated on the adjacent chair, appearing relaxed and cheerful.

“ARJUN...ARJUN,” I screamed. Terror glued me to the chair. Arjun was perhaps miles away. Colonel R.S Nair appeared eerie now that I knew who or what he exactly was. He looked at me with the same smile that had often soothed me. But this time, the effect was exactly the opposite. Frozen with terror, I was drenched in cold sweat within moments.

“Anu, are you scared of me? I am the same person you have met before. I understand that the way you perceive me has changed. But I want you to know that I am just a harmless soul, fighting my own inner demons. I wish you would give me a chance to explain,” he said.

“Why do you keep appearing before me?” I asked. It was a wonder that I could even speak.

“Because you, my child, didn’t know who I was, neither on the physical plane nor on the spiritual plane. But you were close to the ones I loved, who

are still dear to me.”

“I don’t understand. Are you not really gone from this world?”

“I don’t have a body if that is what you mean. But I am not gone from your world. I am as much a part of it as I was before.”

“You do not know how much the revelation of your identity has disturbed me. What will I tell to Arjun? Will anyone ever believe me? I am on the edge of losing my sanity.”

“You need not tell anything to Arjun or anyone. You must have seen the sadness of a person whose loved one has died. Even seen that time healed their wounds. However, have you ever wondered what happened to the departed soul? In a second, I had lost all that I held dear. My dreams had crashed in a flash. I had not seen enough, I was not ready to quit the world I had loved. My celestial guides gave me a choice. I could either move on or linger long enough to see what happened to my loved ones. I chose to stay. Like a silent witness, I watched the lives of my dear ones. I saw them grieve for me though I was not in pain or grief. I wanted to see them happy. That is when you came in,” he said.

“Me? I saw you even before I confessed my love to Arjun,” I said. Nothing made sense. I tried to get up. My trembling knees, however, made me sink back into the chair.

“Ananya, relax. I promise. I am not going to harm you. Let me explain. When we lose our body to death, we move on to the spiritual plane. On the spiritual plane, souls experience the intensification of everything. We have a 360-degree vision, we keep our form, and in fact, we also keep all our senses. I can comprehend the thoughts going on in anyone’s mind; I can move forward or backward in time. I saw you in Arjun’s thoughts, I could see you in his happy future,” he said.

“Why then do you bother to interfere if I was going to be in his future?”

“I said happy future, my child. There exists an unhappy future. A single choice alters the future of an individual. It all depends on the choices we make. A bad choice alters your future forever. I could see both his futures. Therefore, I chose to interfere. You may call me selfish but I wanted the happy future that had you in his life to materialize. I wanted true happiness for my child. I did not think about how my interference may affect you

eventually. I am sorry for that. I am doing the right thing as far as I know. You didn't know who I was," said he, leaning back in the chair with a sigh.

"Now I know who you are. And doesn't that change things?" I asked.

"Of course, this will be my last appearance before you. We are not supposed to appear before anyone who perceives our reality. Today, I have a strong reason to appear before you. Things might take a wrong turn today," said Colonel R.S Nair.

"What can go wrong now? Arjun's mom has agreed to our match and everything has finally fallen into place."

"You believe so? Do you think Shakuntala will give up on her callous rules so easily? Nothing is like what it appears, Anu. I have seen the future and it depends on a choice you make today. I know of things you and Arjun have not even thought about," he said cryptically.

"What choice?" I asked.

"You should not allow Arjun to go today. Do whatever you can, but do not allow him to go. Trust me. You are like my daughter. You are the one my son lives for. I want the best for you. If you choose to ignore my advice, you will regret that decision throughout your life. As I said, I have seen your future. Both the sad and the happy one," he said, mystifying the situation further.

"Tell me what lies ahead. So that I can be prepared for the worst," I said.

"I can't do that. Understand, though, that today is crucial. Let it pass and there is nothing more to worry. Do not allow him to go. I beg you. Be near him until morning. You are his lucky charm. I am glad that he found you. You have all my blessings. And dear one, believe me, you will always find me just a thought away in the form of that little voice in your head," he said and, with a sad smile, disappeared into thin air. Next moment, through the open French windows of the living room, I saw Arjun's car entering the courtyard. He had known Arjun's arrival.

I watched the empty chair with eagerness. I wanted him to reappear. There was no fear anymore, not a single trace of it. I had a hundred queries rambling in my mind and I wanted answers to them. At least he could tell me what to do to keep Arjun from leaving.

"Anyone here? Love, I am back," Arjun said as he entered the living room.

He strutted in with his hands held behind his back. He was going to give me some news. I was wrong. It was a surprise. There was a package in his hand and he asked me to open it. I opened it to find the wedding dress that I had worn for the fashion show. I gaped at him.

“Don’t look at me that way, Ananya. I just picked it from the dry cleaner. Of course, I bought that dress. I couldn’t let it go. I had it with me all the time. Would you mind wearing it for me, once again?”

“You are so full surprises, Arjun,” I said and pecked him on the cheek, before going inside to change into it. The dress hugged my curves and I felt like a princess once again. Carefully I recreated the hairstyle I had done on the day of the fashion show, brushed up my makeup and walked into the living room. Arjun stood staring at me as if in a trance.

“Arjun, how do I look?” I asked. Instead of answering, he swept me into his arms in a hurry.

“Like an angel,” he said before crushing my lips with his. When his lips left mine, he held my chin, looked into my eyes and said, “I love you, Anu. I fell in love with you the moment I saw you for the first time. When I saw you walk down the ramp that day wearing this dress, I had wept knowing I would never hold you again. But destiny has been kind and sent you to me again.”

He planted kisses on both my eyes. He took my right hand into his, got down on his knees, and presented me with a single red rose.

“You make me realize how little things hold joy. It is bliss to see your smile, it is peace to be near you. You made me happy when you confessed your love. Make me happiest by agreeing that you will spend the rest of your life with me. Will you marry me, Anu?” Arjun said opening a small velvet box. A ring with a shining emerald stone set amidst a band of small diamonds twinkled at me.

I answered with a nod and a hoarse yes. When he slipped the ring on to my fingers, my eyes welcomed the gesture with happy tears. It was bliss when he hugged me, and when he kissed me, I did not want it to end.

“Now I am content. You are mine now, in front of God’s eyes,” he whispered.

“Don’t go Arjun. Do not leave me. Don’t go please,” I begged. Wiping the tears that had slid down my cheeks, Arjun cupped my face and looked into

my eyes.

“I thought you were unhappy because we were not engaged. What has happened love? What is it that is worrying you? Are you not well? Tell me, sweetheart,” he said, feeling my forehead with the back of his palm.

My assurance that I was okay did not satisfy him. Blaming the impending separation for my sadness, he promised to be back soon. I remembered Colonel Nair’s warning. Fear gripped me as the hour Arjun was to leave was approaching. I had to do something, something fast.

Arjun found me lying on the sofa pretending to be unconscious when he came dressed to leave. I could picture his tense face in my mind’s eye, while he checked my pulse and rushed to the kitchen to get a glass of water. I did not dare to open my eyes while he continued to sprinkle water on me. He rubbed my feet to revive me. After continuing to act for ten minutes, I *regained* my consciousness.

A worried Arjun insisted that we should go to hospital and I agreed wholeheartedly. I would have agreed to anything that would prevent him from leaving. While he drove me to the hospital, I clutched him unable to face the fear that gripped me. I felt I would lose him again. At the hospital, after myriad check-ups when the general surgeon assured us that I was all right except for a slightly low blood pressure, Arjun calmed down.

A glance at my watch assured me that Arjun was late for his flight and that there was no way he could catch it now. I mentally patted myself on a mission well accomplished.

“Sorry, darling. You missed your flight,” I said, though I was not sorry. Not even a bit. I was, in fact, glad.

“The trip can wait. Nothing is more important than you, my love. I cannot leave when you are in such a weak state. Come let me drop you at your accommodation,” he said. I lied that I couldn’t go there as the gates would close at ten and it was already nearing midnight. I wanted to follow his father’s instructions to the letter; I would not leave him alone until morning.

That night would remain the strangest in our story. The shock that the night threw at us would prove to be the strongest glue that would keep our bond strong—strong enough to make it last forever.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

The single largest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

-George Bernard Shaw

On the way to Arjun's house, I kept looking at the ring, on my right hand. Its glitter tried in vain to brighten the dark clouds of doubt that had invaded the interiors of my mind.

Arjun's mother had become enraged when he had called to inform that he did not board the plane. When he gave her the reason, instead of asking about me, she had shouted at him that he had become a slave to the charms of a wicked girl. As was her style, she had cut the call immediately. All doubts regarding her eagerness to see us married had returned with full force.

Arjun had grown silent and, from the way he kept asking the same questions, I could fathom the maelstrom of his thoughts. His mother's outburst had left a chain of disappointments in its wake. It had retracted our story back by a few hundred pages, to a time when a happy, forever-future had resided in a hazy horizon.

We entered the house that was now ghoulish in ambience, with the moonlight casting crooked shadows. Both the living and the dead were taking turns to torture me.

"Anu, I am sorry if my mother's words hurt you. I do not understand her. Why is she changing colours like a chameleon? She thinks you are faking your illness. How much more pathetic can she get?" said Arjun, settling onto the sofa in the living room. I felt guilty to the core. For once, she had read me right.

"She was not wrong this time. I was faking my illness," I said ruefully. I regretted the words the moment they made themselves audible.

Arjun's face took on a disturbing shade of red and he stomped out of the living room without a word. I cursed the slip of the tongue and ran behind him. He shut the door of his room and I returned to the living room, sodden with sadness. How could I explain to Arjun why I had lied? His father had instructed me not to tell him. I sat contemplating but I had already run out of energy and courage to confront him.

Fatigue conquered my frenzied mind and soon, I fell into a deep slumber right there on the hall sofa still dressed in the bridal gown. I woke sometime later, hearing a sound. A thick blanket covered me and I was lying on Arjun's bed. Sometime during the night, Arjun must have carried me in here. The clock on the wall showed twenty minutes past three.

My grumpy boyfriend was nowhere around but noises were coming from the kitchen. I went there. Arjun left the kitchen, the moment he saw me enter. Tea was brewing on the stove.

"Arjun, I am sorry. Listen to me please," I said in vain.

The next moment, the television in the hall turned on. I prepared tea and returned to the hall where Arjun was blindly changing channels. When I reached near him, he gasped at something he had seen on the television screen. I turned around to see what had caught his eye.

It was the hourly news broadcast and the breaking news that was scrolling hit me hard.

*"Air India plane bound for Mangalore crashes during take-off at Dubai airport. All passengers and crew are feared dead."*

"Oh my God," I cried, sinking onto the sofa. Arjun sat immobile, his eyes glued to the television set.

The horrible scenes that flooded the TV screen disturbed me. I couldn't even continue to watch the news telecast. What if Arjun was on that flight, could I ever survive that?

"I know of things you and Arjun have not even thought about."

Arjun's father's words echoed in my mind. The implication of the words registered in my brain like hammer blows on a rock. As he had said, it had rested on a choice. If I had not obeyed his instruction, I would have lived my life in regret, exactly as he had predicted.

Arjun pulled me into a hug after switching off the television. I cried my heart out on his shoulders. The tears were of relief that we had escaped the disaster. The heaviness in my heart lightened with his ardour that slowly engulfed me. I sighed realizing God had been kind to me. I had my Arjun back.

"Thank you, love," he murmured against my cheeks. All thanks to Arjun's Dad, I could face my tomorrows with happiness.

How I wished then to tell him about his father! To reveal it then would have been overwhelming, but I knew I couldn't. But I promised myself that one day, I would indubitably tell him the extent to which his father loved him. He ought to know.

"Sorry, I became angry with you, my love. You rescued me. But for you—," he murmured, his words almost a whisper, pulling me closer. We sat in silence, content that our life still had its rays of sunshine, its share of joys. My lie had taken on the shape of a miracle for him. I could never praise the heavens sufficiently, for that miraculous escape, for the timely intervention, for sending a guardian angel to guide us out of darkness.

The moonbeam that filtered in through the curtains charmed us when we finally switched off the lights. We sat cuddled in each other's arms talking, looking at the moon, which now seemed unusually bright. Whatever topic we began, it would trace a circuitous route and return to the realization of the enormity of the disaster we had escaped. Then, we would snuggle closer, willing the proximity to erase the fears that had stemmed from the 'what ifs' that had cropped up.

We didn't sleep a wink all night. Sometime during the sanguine hours of the morning, when the pearly sunbeam gave an ethereal hue to our surroundings, hugs became insufficient. An urge to go beyond the hurdles of propriety, a wish to be each other's in every way, overpowered us. It was magical, mystical and in a sense, bordering on insanity.

Arjun carried me to his room, laid me on his bed with tenderness, and stretched out near me. "Are you sure, love?" he asked me, giving me a choice.

I nodded and sunk my face into his chest relishing his heat. His fingers moved on the zip of my gown, and I snuggled closer.

When he pushed down the gown slowly, I became his blushing new bride. Revelling in each other's arms without any earthly barrier, giving and receiving love, we soon became one rhythm of life. Like a symphony, when it reached the pinnacle of bliss, the tears in my eyes spoke of my contentment. Finally, I was merged with him, body and soul. We had dived into a raging fire of delight and ecstasy that had melted and remoulded us into one pure entity. Two kindred souls had united at last.



## Chapter Thirty

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

— Maya Angelou

When I finally woke up from the peaceful slumber I had fallen into, Arjun was sleeping peacefully with his arms around me. I could easily get addicted to this. To wake in his arms with memories of passionate caresses, his dear face near mine as I welcomed the first glimpse of the day. Remembering that I should get ready for office, I reluctantly left the bed to take a bath. When I came out of the shower, I loved myself more. The tender ache that our lovemaking had left in me made me blush. I smiled broadly as I remembered it all. Shaking out the water from my curls, I slipped on my churidar that I had worn before changing into the bridal gown.

“Good morning, sweetheart! What, leaving me already?!” Arjun asked, hugging me from behind. I wiggled out of his arms and ran towards the kitchen, giggling, closely followed by Arjun.

When I found myself a prisoner in his arms again with the kitchen counter hampering my escape, I tried to talk some sense into Arjun.

“I have to go to the office, Arjun. Moreover, I am hungry like a lion. We should eat. What will you have?” I asked. Arjun’s roaming eyes clearly suggested what he was hungry for as they finally lingered on my lips.

“You, I will have you. Please don’t go today, love,” he said and, with a sigh, I surrendered to him happily. The house bell rang then and concurrently I heard my phone ringing from the hall. We separated as Arjun went to check the door and I went to answer my phone.

There were already many missed calls. Tom as well as Lily had called many times and so had Kishore. Kishore was calling again. I could sense his tension from the way he stammered after I answered. I had not informed them that Arjun had cancelled the trip.

“Kishore, Arjun was not aboard that plane. He didn’t go,” I said and I heard him heave a sigh of relief. Shreya took the phone from him and I told her how God had been kind to us.

“See how strong your love is? If it were not for you, he would have been one among those unlucky passengers. Thank God, your illness prevented him

from going. I can't even imagine—," Shreya said and I shuddered.

A raised voice coming from the passage that led to the front door distracted me. Promising Shreya that I would call back, I disconnected the call.

To my surprise, it was Arjun's mom. With many flights cancelled after the tragedy, it was indeed a wonder that she had made it here so fast. But then, money could speed up things. Arjun had mentioned they had their own private jet for emergency travels.

Sadly, her conversation wasn't one that expressed happiness over her only child having escaped an ill fate. Instead, her authoritative voice was instructing him to act sensibly and marry the girl she had selected.

"What? You want me to marry Madhu uncle's daughter Surya? She is just a kid, Mom. I cannot even think about her as my wife. I am not a child anymore. I will not allow you to take such decisions on my behalf," Arjun said.

"I don't want you to think. It will bring about the merger of two of the most famous business families of South India. If everything had gone according to plan, you would now have been exchanging rings with her," said Shakuntala Devi, appearing like a tigress.

"So, you want me to have a marriage just like you and Dad had? Didn't Grandpa arrange for that grand merger of your Dad's and his business through that? I will not allow you to turn my life into another mockery of emotions. I will marry the one I love, Mom. Anu is my choice and it won't change," Arjun said firmly.

I decided to make an appearance before them. After all, the conversation was about my love and me. I had to face her.

"Let me see how you will marry that gold digger. A call to Dubai police and she will be behind bars for immoral activity. I have friends who can influence decisions. She will never see the light of the day," warned Shakuntala Devi. She turned around and our eyes met.

"The only reason I am tolerating your presence in my house is that in a way you are the reason my son is alive today. I am willing to pay you any obscene amount of money. Please leave my son alone," cried Shakuntala Devi, addressing me.

"Not everything comes with a price tag, madam. My love for Arjun certainly

does not, and you can't buy it. I don't care for your riches," I said. I bit my inner cheek in a bid to control the anger that was bubbling inside me.

My words further flamed her hatred. She came charging at me like a manic elephant. I mustered my courage, awaiting another slap or a deluge of profanities. However, Arjun ran to me and stood firmly between us.

"Don't even dare to touch her. She is mine and I have sworn to protect her. Whatever you do, you will not succeed in making me dance to your tunes, Mom. You will lose me too to your tantrums, just like you lost Dad," said Arjun. Shakuntala Devi turned pale at the accusation. She mouthed a silent 'You...'

"I know what had prompted Dad to go on that fateful drive that day. I remember your shouts and his appeals. Did you ever give him a moment of peace? No wonder he made me promise to marry for love," continued Arjun and I watched Shakuntala Devi tremble with the emotions she was battling against.

Arjun went to her and gathered her in a hug. She was his mother after all. Shakuntala Devi wept like a child. I felt pity for her. She might have regretted that fight a million times. She was living with the consequences of the wrong choices she had made. Regret, after all, is often the offspring of guilt.

"Mom, I should not have said that. I am sorry. Forgive me, please," said Arjun and Shakuntala Devi quivered with silent sobs.

"I never knew he would become so upset that day. I just wanted him to give up that charity project on which he was wasting loads of money and he would not listen. I never knew that the project was so dear to him," murmured Arjun's mom.

"You never asked him, Mom. That project through which he wanted to help families of army martyrs was his most cherished dream. You schemed against him to sabotage it. You don't know how it feels when dreams are crushed by others ruthlessly. You always found ways to fulfil yours," said Arjun.

"Don't say that I didn't care about his dreams. Don't say that I did not love him. I loved him. But we were two different individuals with strong opinions of our own. Our marriage, as you said, had been more like a business merger than a relationship. I regret that I never told him how much I loved him. I

always pretended I didn't care for his love even though I longed for it. Long years of separation due to his military career almost threatened to tear our relationship apart. But I tried. Please don't say that I didn't. But we never took time to analyse our feelings for each other. We were busy making money and in the meantime life just slipped away," said Shakuntala Devi.

"He wanted you to marry for love?" she asked after a long minute of silence, in which she tried in vain to stem the tears that were flowing out of her eyes.

When Arjun nodded, her lips quivered and she swallowed hard before turning away. Maybe, the revelation hurt her more. It, in a way, confirmed that Arjun's Dad was unhappy in his own marriage, which had been an arranged one.

"Okay, my child, marry the one you love. But don't insist that I should love her the same way that you do," Shakuntala Devi finally said, straightening up a bit. She moved towards the windows and gripped the curtains while looking outside. There stood before me a woman who had surrendered out of self-loathing. If tears were capable of erasing sadness from one's soul, Shakuntala Devi was undergoing a thorough cleansing of her soul. From what I had heard about her, she rarely cried.

"Thank you, Mom. Sorry for reminding you about that day, forgive me. Please bless us. I promise, you will never regret that you accepted Anu as my wife," said Arjun, guiding me towards his mom. When we bowed before her and touched her feet to seek her blessings, I knew the battle was not yet over. I had to win over her completely. It could be a Herculean task, or if fate continued to smile on me, it might turn out to be a cakewalk.

When Arjun carried me, and swirled me around shouting in happiness, his mother walked away with a slight smile on her face. I laughed. The ice seemed to be thawing. Maybe the tears that she shed had begun to melt her iron heart. Often, the elixir of love can offset the bitterness of hatred and prejudices.

When Arjun captured my lips in a lingering kiss, I felt the stirrings of a forever.

I had reached the centre of the labyrinth of his love. I was exhausted and exhilarated at the same time. But the journey had been eventful and memorable. With Arjun as my partner, the journey before me promised to be even more enchanting. I would not mind if he imprisoned me in there forever.

## Epilogue

“Happiness often sneaks in through a door you didn't know you had left open.”

—John Barrymore

**June 20, 2014, Dubai**

Dear Reader,

I am writing this on an anniversary—an anniversary that we celebrate with much more fondness and gaiety than any other day. Today is the day I had met my Prince Charming and the day he had fallen in love with his Princess.

Four blissful years have passed and I am now his queen. We are expecting our first child who may arrive any day now. I vouch that no other queen anytime in history was as happy as I am. We were married on New Year's Day, three years ago, in an exotic resort in the Maldives.

Arjun's mother had warmed up to our relationship sooner than we had expected. She made our marriage a grand affair with many celebrities and bigwigs from the business world showing up. The most pleasant surprise had been that Arjun's mom had insisted that all members of my family should have the chance to attend the wedding. Therefore, it was fun when one hundred of my family members had a plane to themselves on the way to the wedding. I heard from Grandma that discussions about our marriage are still the rage at all family gatherings. For so many from my family, it had been the first flight they had ever taken.

Tom and Lily still work in Al Bayed L.L.C. I had stopped working after the pregnancy blues had made going to work impossible for me. Tom manages to find a new girl every weekend and Lily still pines after Indian men.

Khushi and Poornima are both married now. Khushi married Arijit Singh, our senior. He had wooed her for more than three years and eventually she had fallen for his charms. Poornima had had an arranged marriage, but the person she married is the son of her father's colleague. Both assure me that they are blissfully happy. We still meet occasionally. Sophia is happily married to her Mr. Right and settled in New Jersey.

Arjun likes to surprise me with little gifts and the best one was a bound

version of those thousand pages of love that I had written. I will treasure it. He tells me he wants to show it to his grandkids and prove to them the extent to which their Grandma loved him.

Grandma still lives at Sreepuram and she has employed a girl to assist her with her written works. Gopu and his wife were blessed with a baby girl two years ago.

Vishal is doing his fellowship in London. He calls often. He was the best man during our wedding.

I have not seen Arjun's Dad after that day. But occasionally, when I want to make a difficult choice, I close my eyes and listen to that little voice in my head.

I must stop writing. A dull pain in my abdomen is increasing with each passing second. I guess the baby is on its way. What a great day he has chosen to arrive!

- Ananya

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As I begin to type this page, where I wish to express my gratitude to the people who were a part of my writing journey, many smiling faces appear in my mind's eye.

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And of course, I thank you wholeheartedly, dear reader, for picking up my

book.

**-Preethi Venugopala**



## Author's note

Dear Reader,

Every story enters the mind of its writer as an inspiration, a tale that haunts until the last line is written.

This story originated in a feverish dream and the characters pestered me until I let them loose to tell their tale on paper. They gave direction to my musings and very soon, word by word, they made me pen down their story. I cried with them, laughed with them and eventually, I fell in love with each one of them.

You can find a little part of me in all the characters in this book because they have a piece of my soul embedded in them. Hope you enjoyed reading their tale as much as I enjoyed listening to them.

I have used some popular quotes from poets and writers at the beginning of each chapter to set the mood. Hope you enjoyed them as well.

I would love to hear from you.

Do email me at [authorpreethi@gmail.com](mailto:authorpreethi@gmail.com). You can read more from me on my website [www.preethivenugopala.com](http://www.preethivenugopala.com).

It would be wonderful if you leave a review on the [Amazon](#) and [Goodreads](#) pages of the book.

Thank you!

- Preethi Venugopala