

PIYUSH AND SUNAINA'S SANCTUM

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# *A Promise*

TOGETHERNESS FOREVER

VERMA CLAN'S SANCTUM SERIES

RESHMA RANJAN



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# **A Promise**

*Togetherness forever*

Piyush and Sunaina's Sanctum

*Book 2 of Verma Clan's Sanctum Series*

By

**Reshma Ranjan**

*Torn and shattered she stood,  
waiting for the next assault to break her further,  
but just today;  
tomorrow she would end this all,  
bid adieu to all the pain and sufferings—her life.*

*She didn't see coming,  
the care and soothing,  
the family and him,  
towards her for a lifetime-*

*A Promise*

*Togetherness Forever.*



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## **Acknowledging and Thanking**

I am thankful to Rubina Ramesh for just being there, guiding and pushing me in the right direction.

I thank Dola Basu Singh for walking through the world I created, seeing the characters through my eyes and editing it to the best it can be.

Thanks to PG Van, for giving insights into detailing.

I can't not mention Sachin Venkatesh for surprising me every time with the cover design.

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### **Note from the Author**

Dear Friends,

A Promise, Togetherness Forever, Piyush and Sunaina's Sanctum, is the second book of the Verma Clan Sanctum Series. I started penning it in November 2015 for NaNoWriMo. The family constitutes of mostly adopted members from different parts of the world that hold on together, stronger than any blood relation. I realized I needed to give each character their space instead of cramming them up in two or three books. And the first person of the family whose story I had written was Piyush Mauli, though Dr Salim Verma's story was published first.

I hope 'A Promise, Togetherness Forever - Piyush and Sunaina's Sanctum' will take you through the pains and turmoil of the character just as I did and make you fall in love with their love story.

With Love,

Reshma Ranjan



[illegible]

*Verma Clan*

## Chapter 1

*The year 2000*

Piyush needed the blueprint of the project immediately so that he could go through the designs before he attended the meeting tomorrow. It was already 8:30 pm. Usually the staff left by 6:00 or latest by 6:30 pm. Sunaina Ramachandran was a new recruit. She was a hard-working woman. She was known for her punctuality and had never missed a deadline before. Why was she late now? This morning she had said that she would go home only after submitting the plan for the new project that was starting in Bangalore. Piyush had already had an argument with one of the clients. He didn't like being talked down to, and this client had been acting very snobbish. Piyush had lost his cool and told the client that unless he changed his attitude, he could hire another company for the project or let someone with more amenable work with them. Despite that, he needed to keep his word and have the presentation ready for the meeting tomorrow morning. He was known for his timeliness and no-nonsense way of working, and he wasn't about to change it for some new recruit unaware of her duties. His ire was feared by not just his employees but anyone who knew him.

Piyush walked with purpose to Sunaina's cubicle which was on the twelfth floor of the Brigade Tower, one of the tallest buildings in Bangalore with sixty floors to its credit. He had the eleventh to fifteenth and twenty-fourth to twenty-ninth floors booked for their office. The sixtieth floor had four penthouse apartments that were used by four men of the Verma Clan—Raj Verma, Milind Verma, Sujal Verma and Piyush himself.

The Verma Architecture Firm founded by Raj Verma, his uncle, was one of the most successful architecture firms not just in India but in many other countries, especially Dubai which was full of architectural wonders.

Apart from the ten floors they already occupied in Brigade Tower, Piyush was planning to lease the eight floors in between the already leased floors as his uncle wanted to shift the office in MG Road here as well. As Raj had put it, the office would be more efficient with no need to shuttle between the two offices.

When Piyush reached the twelfth floor, he realised it was empty. He paused

at the entrance. He saw Sunaina slumped on the table asleep, with the design under her instead of on the drawing board. He fumed. He had never expected such slack from Sunaina. The first thing that came to his mind was that the blueprint would be ruined with the heavy make-up Sunaina always wore to the office. He hated heavily made-up faces.

“Sunaina!” He shouted to wake her up from her slumber but his voice came out louder than he intended. He didn’t realise how loud he was until he saw her spring from the seat like a scared rabbit and stand plastered to the corner of her cubicle. There was a pure terror in her eyes and her palms were pressed flat on the cubicle walls.

Piyush was shocked to stillness. He had never seen such fear in anyone’s eyes like he witnessed in hers at that moment. Then he noticed the slightly smudged make-up by the corner of her lips and the left eye. Her glasses were askew as well. He felt a bout of anger course through him when he saw the bluish-green bruise on the corner of her lips and the black eye. *How dare someone hurt such an innocent girl like her?* When he moved towards her, Sunaina tried to shrink into the wall, her breathing laboured with fear. She didn’t make a sound but her terrorised eyes were taking in his every movement. He could see her tremble. He raised his hands slowly to hold her by the shoulder, but she didn’t push him away. He would have preferred if she had done so, instead of the way she flinched in pain when he touched her. When he lowered his hands a little, he noticed how her body slumped in surrender. He felt the anger bubbling deep within.

Piyush made her sit on the table after moving the designs to a corner. He looked on the table for a tissue and found wet wipes in a small packet. He took one, removed the glasses from her nose, and started wiping her face. She didn’t move a muscle as he wiped the corner of her lips. When she flinched with pain and raised her hand to hold his, he saw another bruise on the back of her hand.

“Damn!” he cursed aloud and she almost jumped. Then he started cleaning her eyes. She whimpered.

“Please! Just do what you want to do to me and then let me go. Don’t humiliate me more.” Her voice was laced with so much pain that it pierced though his heart. He had never felt more ashamed of being a man than he did now. Piyush didn’t say a word and carried on. He noticed how she was in so

much pain that she struggled to breathe. He had been in enough fights, thanks to his furious temper, to know when breathing was painful. He cleaned her face and saw her once blemish-less skin blue and green with bruises.

*Who could do that to a woman, especially such a young and pretty woman as her? She must be only twenty-one or twenty-two. Just a fresher.*

She slowly opened her eyes when she felt him staring and looked into his. He noticed for the first time that they were greenish-grey like a clear glass showing the pain and hurt clearly. How could he have missed all the signs and never noticed anything wrong until now? She had been working here for the last three months and was already an important part of the design team with her fresh ideas and designs. Then he remembered he had seen her blood-shot eyes once before but thought it a result of either an infection or a bad case of a hangover. He didn't interfere in his employees' personal lives until it interfered with office work. And once they did interfere, he gave them a warning or asked them to leave for good.

Now looking at Sunaina's bruises, Piyush became sure it was never an infection. He gently placed his hand on her left shoulder to inspect the damage. She closed her eyes, expecting the worst. He slowly slid the blouse slightly off her shoulder and saw discolouration and swelling. Then he sat down on his knees and moved the saree away from her midriff and saw what he had feared. The last two hooks of her blouse were unhooked, probably because she couldn't bear the pain, and the swelling was a clear indication of a broken rib. He knew the reason for her laboured breathing now. He got up and adjusted her saree and blouse. Without a word, he collected her handbag, and placed the glasses back on her face. He watched her slumped form still sitting on the table, as if resigned and waiting for the oncoming onslaught she expected from a man. Piyush wanted to kill the guy who did this to her.

"Sunaina...Who did this to you?"

She opened her eyes, first confused, and when she realized what he was asking, she became distant, as if a virtual shutter had come down her eyes. He knew she was not married and yet she had bruises not only on her body but also her lips. She had used loads of make-up to hide the marks which he had removed with those wet wipes. When he saw that she was not ready to answer, he tightened his hold a little. She slid down from the table and moved back.

“Please tell me.” he asked softly.

A single tear slid down her cheeks. “Appa.” She said.

He cursed when he heard her broken whisper and freeing his hold, he hit the table with his open palm in anger. She cowered at his violent outburst.

“Come with me.” He didn’t wait for her response and took the designs along with her bag that was already in his hand and walked straight into his cabin.

She walked slowly as it hurt badly. Everywhere. Just for a few minutes she had slipped into oblivion, where it was pure bliss. Now wide awake, she could feel the pain screaming at her. She didn’t want to think what Piyush, her boss, had planned for her. But she no longer thought or cared. *All men wanted the same thing from a woman.* Her experience told her that. Just as she was about to enter his cabin, he came out carrying his laptop bag and motioned to her to accompany him. He walked in front of her, his pace quick. She had trouble walking that fast because it hurt.

Piyush noticed that she was walking slowly so he waited patiently by the elevator. He didn’t want to think what this young woman had gone through. He remembered that he had parked his car a little away from the elevator and wondered whether she could walk that far. He thought it odd that he didn’t want to leave her alone for even one more second. When they reached the parking space he asked her if she could walk. She nodded. He didn’t mind the time it was taking for them to reach his car, which, under normal circumstance would have taken only a few minutes.

He helped her sit into the passenger seat. She flinched as she sat, any movement painful. He clenched his teeth seeing her in pain.

“Did you go to the Police?” He asked as he slid into the driver’s seat. She nodded and he noted her lips tremble as she took in a deep breath. He was sure it was not just the pain but how the Police would have handled the situation.

“They-” She paused as she struggled to put it in words, “They were more interested in knowing things in detail than taking down the complaint.” He bit down his anger. He started the car, took out his phone and placed a call. She closed her eyes and turned her face away from him. “You still on duty?” Piyush barked into the phone. After he heard the response he said, “I am coming.” and cut the call.

She didn't turn towards him but sat there, as if blocking everything. Slowly her breathing became relaxed and she drifted off to sleep. When she felt hands on her shoulder, she didn't want to come out of the oblivion, but someone shook her. She opened her eyes and looked up to see Piyush leaning in, holding the door open for her. She glanced around and realised they had reached a hospital. She looked worried but Piyush motioned her to accompany him. She felt tears welling up. *What did he want from her and why had he brought her to the hospital?* She followed him as he took her to a doctors' room. As she entered, she saw a big man in his late 30's drinking coffee.

Piyush didn't greet him in a normal way. He just nodded and Prathyush, Piyush's friend the doctor, immediately knew something was not right. He asked them both to sit. Prathyush saw the bruises on the girl's face but didn't react.

"Prathyush, I want you to look at her. She is bruised and is in pain."  
Prathyush just nodded as if it was a normal occurrence. He called a nurse in and asked her to get Dr Savitri, and wrote something on a slip of paper, which he gave to the nurse. Prathyush wanted a female doctor to examine the patient. In few minutes Dr Savitri came in. She was a small woman in her late 40's with a warm face.

"Dr Savitri, this is Sunaina. You can use my room for her examination. We will go to the canteen and get some coffee."

Dr Savitri looked at the defeated girl with her bruises. She helped her from the chair and took her to the examination table.

It was a couple of hours later that Savitri called Prathyush and Piyush back. She was waiting outside for both of them. Piyush looked at her grave face and his heart sank.

"Piyush, is she your employee?"

When Piyush nodded she continued, "She has a badly bruised shoulder and fractured ribs. I examined her X-Ray and I also saw her scanning results. She was brutally raped-" she paused for a moment before adding, "-by more than one person."

Piyush banged his fist on the wall, expletives flowing freely from his mouth,

while Prathyush clenched his teeth. He sensed what was coming when he heard ‘more than one person’. “I am sorry, Doctor.” Piyush apologised to Savitri for using bad words when he came to his senses.

“I had to perform a D and C.”

“Was she pregnant? Did she miscarry?” He feared the worst. Piyush had heard about it from Salim, his cousin who was in a medical school.

“No, No. They had put some foreign object in her. That’s why I had to clean up the clots in her uterus and stop the heavy bleeding. D and C, Dilation and Curettage, is used to control heavy vaginal bleeding. It is the quickest way to stop active bleeding in the uterus.” Piyush grasped the new information. For a moment he was shocked and feared who ever had done harm to her had made her pregnant and also made her lose the child. “Do you have any idea who could have done this to her?” She asked Piyush.

Piyush’s jaw tightened as he shook his head in the negative.

“Did you ask her, doctor? She would speak to you,” Prathyush said.

“She didn’t say a word throughout her examination. When I asked her if I can do the D and C and if she wanted me to call her family, she immediately said ‘NO’ vehemently. When will women ever realise that being raped is not their fault and they need to discuss these with their mother and father? Only they can help her come out of the trauma, if at all.”

“It’s her dad.” Piyush said.

Dr Savitri’s expression changed from shock to anger in a fraction of a second after hearing Piyush. It was Prathyush who swore this time. Sunaina slowly made her way out as a nurse helped her sit in one of the chairs. Dr Savitri looked at Sunaina and said,

“I will inform the police.”

“Wait!” Dr Savitri turned as Sunaina stopped her.

“Please, no! Not now.”

“But dear, you need to understand it’s a criminal offense and we need to inform the police. And time is a major player in such cases.” Piyush noted the fear and worry on Sunaina’s face.

“Can we wait until she is on the mend?” Piyush asked.

“Piyush, this is a criminal offense and you know that it has to be reported.”

“I know, but can’t you wait until she regains her strength? Or at least give her a day or two to be ready to face it?”

“But why?”

“Doctor, you know more than I, what it entails. There is no law which stops the cross-examination of the victim or the insensitive ways they are spoken to. In her present state such grilling and questioning will be like getting violated again.”

Sunaina looked at Piyush with gratitude in her eyes.

“But time is of importance.”

“This didn’t happen now, Doctor, did it?”

“No, not in the immediate present.”

“So, a delay of a day or two wouldn’t matter much, I hope?”

“But-”

“Doctor, I’m not saying not to file a complaint. But I would like her to do it herself, without pressure. That way she will be ready to face the questions. And we all know how some people derive sadistic pleasure from questioning the victim.” Then Piyush realised his own words would seem insensitive.

“I agree with him, Dr Savitri. Since time is no longer an important factor, we should give her time to do it at her pace.” Prathyush chipped in.

Dr Savitri looked at Sunaina doubtfully.

Sensing her doubts Sunaina said, “I will report it, Doctor. Just give me some time.”

She remembered clearly how she had walked into the police station that morning. It had taken great courage for her to go there. They had called in other staff members in the station as if she was a new exhibit. And soon, instead of taking down the complaint, they had started asking her why she was alone with her stepdad, what dresses she wore around him, how low her saree would be on her midriff. Soon their tone had changed and the questions moved from harmless to explicit—where her dad and the others had touched her, who had touched her and where, and the last straw was when one of the Policemen asked whether she had enjoyed any of the sexual acts at some



point of time. She had stood up mustering her tattered dignity, and had come to the office. And had made the final decision.

Savitri frowned, watching Sunaina's expressions, and finally nodded.

## Chapter 2

Dr Savitri finally allowed Piyush to take Sunaina with him as two hours had passed since the procedure and she had used just local anaesthesia. While going home he asked her if she wanted to take some clothes and important things from her house. She just nodded.

Sunaina didn't care where she went. All she wanted at this moment was to be alone when she could end it all. She had not said a word to Dr Savitri but she had felt the pain despite the local Anaesthesia when the doctor had performed the procedure. The kind doctor had given her a painkiller while leaving and now she felt a little numb but a slight nagging pain was still present in the background. Sunaina gave Piyush directions to her house. Getting out of the car took more energy than she expected.

Piyush walked behind her. He didn't go inside because if he saw the monster, he was afraid he won't be able to control himself and might kill him. He could feel the hatred and anger running through his veins. He told her that he would wait outside and asked her to get her stuff and call him if needed. He hinted to her that she won't be returning here.

Sunaina nodded. *She was leaving soon anyways.*

After a few minutes he heard raised voices. He didn't wait for her to call him; he just ran in to see a bag on the floor and a man holding Sunaina menacingly by her hair. She looked drained out. Her eyes held no terror or anything for that matter. They were just blank. That was even scarier than the terror he had seen in her eyes in the office.

"Leave her alone." His voice was barely a whisper but it had a dangerous texture to it.

The man let her go. Piyush couldn't see any resemblance between the two. *Is he her father or someone else? Is he one of the other men?* Piyush could already see red.

"Who are you?" the man asked Piyush.

"Who are *you*?" Piyush countered.

"I am Subbaiyya, her father. This is my house" It was obvious that the man was drunk.

“My Stepfather.” Sunaina said.

He saw the pain flash in her eyes as she cleared his doubt.

“Come Sunaina, you’re going with me.” Piyush took her bag from the floor, took her hand and was going out when he heard Subbaiyya shout.

“You are sleeping with him, aren’t you?” He slurred. “I knew you are not a naïve girl. Your innocence and struggle were just an act? Whore!” He spat.

Piyush didn’t want her to hear any more. She had enough to deal with without the added verbal abuses. He grabbed her arm and took her away. As he opened the car she swayed. He supported her and gently put her in the car seat. He badly wanted to go back in and break that bastard’s jaw but taking care of Sunaina was more important now.

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“Sunaina, we have reached.”

She got out and saw that it was a farm house with trees all around. *It must be his farm house where he brings the women. But I don’t have the strength to endure it tonight*, she thought. She felt faint.

Piyush supported Sunaina as she swayed and knocked on the door. After a few seconds the door opened. Sujal stood in the doorway.

Sunaina looked at Sujal and her eyes filled with tears.

Sujal frowned. He hadn’t recognised her at first glance but at the next glance he did. He had been going to the office often to learn from Piyush and see how they worked on projects. He would be completing his college soon and he planned to join Piyush. He had worked with Sunaina. In fact, he had even picked up many tips from her.

“Sunaina! What happened to you?”

Sunaina turned and looked at Piyush who was supporting her. Tears about to spill, she whimpered, “I...I...please I can’t...not tonight, please. I am in too much pain.”

Piyush could only grind his teeth as she begged. Sujal frowned at what she had said, when the meaning dawned on him. He cursed out aloud, “What the hell?”

She flinched involuntarily and moved back, almost losing balance when Piyush straightened her. He picked her up and placed her on the couch in the living room. He gave her a cushion and asked her to lie down. Then he brought a comforter from the next room and put it over her. It was cold during this part of the year and the temperature sometimes dipped to a single digit Celsius during the nights. Sunaina didn't lie down. She watched Piyush as he pulled his tie loose. Sujal still stood by the door, his eyes full of question and anger at what she had meant. Piyush raised his hand and pointed upstairs, signalling to his cousin. Sujal nodded and left. Piyush walked towards the fire place and switched it on. He opened the glass to let the heat in. He had felt how cold her body was when he had helped her in. Then he eased himself on the seat across the couch she was sitting on. All the while her eyes were following his every movement.

They sat in silence for some time. Sunaina didn't know how long that was since she couldn't keep track of time. The medicines must be kicking in. *If only he would quickly finish off and I could drift into oblivion! And tomorrow morning I can bid good bye to everything as planned.* She didn't have any more strength left in her.

"Will you both let me go once you finish with me?" Her voice was barely audible.

With a swiftness she could never fathom, he loomed over her. She cowered at his big frame shaking in anger as his fingers dug into her arms.

"Listen, Sunaina. Sujal and I both have been bought up single-handedly by two strong women. We have been taught to respect women, not to hurt them. Growing up with many girls around, we know when they are in pain and how to help them ease it. We don't inflict pain on them." He struggled with his words, his voice dangerously soft. "All men are not like your dad, damn it!"

"Piyush!" Dia's alarming voice echoed in the room. Piyush let Sunaina's arm go.

Sujal had just come downstairs after asking his mother Dia to come down to the living room. He had heard Sunaina clearly. He didn't want Dia to hear what the girl said. He had not woken up Mia, his aunt and Piyush's mother, from her sleep.

Dia quickly came to Sunaina who was clutching the comforter for dear life.

She tried to hide the involuntary gasp that came out of her lips when she saw the bruises. Dia had heard what Piyush had said. As a matter of fact, she had even heard what the girl had said earlier.

She took the comforter from the girl's hand and wrapped her in it.

"Do you want to lie down?"

When Sunaina looked at her confused, Dia knew she must have taken some medicines. She slowly made the girl lie down on the couch. The girl pulled herself up into a foetal position but immediately flinched and cried out.

"You shouldn't do that. You have to sleep straight, girl." Piyush's impatient voice boomed.

Dr Savitri had given Sunaina some real strong medicines and wanted Piyush to keep a keen eye on her for a few days. "It's common for girls to try something stupid after such trauma," she had said.

"I will lock the door," Sunaina said, her voice almost like a whisper. "But, how can I? He removed the lock from the door." Her lower lips trembled. "It was just him at first," a painful sob broke from her throat. She was only half conscious due to the medications. She struggled to keep her eyes open. "I can't sleep." Sunaina looked at Dia and with quivering lips she continued, "they had bottles and...and something..." she paused taking a breath, and her body shivered remembering the agony "...metal. It hurt" She sat up and pulled her knees to her chest. "Tomorrow morning, I will end everything." Her voice suddenly held a stubborn-ness which was absent a few seconds ago.

"NO!" Piyush's voice sounded desperate. Dr Savitri was right. He came running towards her. She cowered into Dia who sat with her on the couch. She let the frightened girl in her arms. Piyush moved back.

"Look at me, Sunaina! You have your whole life in front of you. You have your work. Remember the design? Tomorrow we are going to present your design to the clients. You are a vital part of our company. Do you hear me?" Piyush wanted to sound hopeful but his voice held an unknown fear.

"Company?" She frowned. She was a new recruit. How can she be vital for a company of that magnitude? "I am tired." She looked at Dia and her eyes filled with tears. "Ma..." she sobbed. "I hate being a woman, Ma. I feel

dirty...” she started rubbing her body, trying to rub off the dirty touches. “I tried washing it off, but I am still dirty...” She was starting to get delirious, probably because of the medicines, when Dia stopped her.

“You are not dirty. Honey! Look at me. Those guys that did those terrible things, they are dirty. They are bad, horrible, but you are not. Do you hear me? I am here for you. Look at me, honey!” Sunaina rested her head on Dia’s shoulder. She had drifted off as the medicine had finally taken effect.

Fingers combing through his hair he held his head in his hands, looked at Sujal. Sujal was equally shaken. It’s not that they were naïve as to what sadists in this society did to women and children. It’s just they had never seen a first-hand victim, that too a colleague and a friend. Their mom’s youngest sister Sia, who was adopted by their granny, had faced some abuse in her life. But they had not seen her broken and shattered like Sunaina. And now, under their grandmother’s influence, Sia was growing up into a strong and confident person.

They looked perplexed as to how they were going to help this little thing. She looked so small, so hurt and broken.

“Ma, what if she does something to hurt herself?” Sujal asked.

Dia was worried. She was working on her lecture when Sujal had come, clearly worried, and asking her to come downstairs to the living room immediately. She didn’t respond and looked at Piyush for answers.

Piyush took a deep breath and explained how he had seen her slumped over the table and the things that happened next, how he had taken her to the hospital and told them what Dr Savitri had said. He also mentioned his small meeting with her step-father, his anger clearly indicating how he would easily commit a murder if he could. They were all shaken to the core when they came to know who the monster was. Even if not Sunaina’s real father, that monster was still the girl’s step-father.

## Chapter 3

Piyush sat by the sleeping form of Sunaina as Dia went to get the guest room ready. Sujal sat across him on another seat.

“We never saw any signs of it, Bro!” Sujal said. “We have been interacting with her for the past few months, but we didn’t see any indication of it. She has had too much pent-up pain. I hope we can help her come out of this trauma. You are not going to allow her to go back, are you?”

Piyush was looking at the small battered figure. “Never.” His voice sliced as a lash. “I’m going to kill that bastard.”

Sunaina stirred. “NO! Please, don’t...” her painful wail pierced his heart.

Piyush saw Sujal flinch through his peripheral vision.

She whimpered again “Please don’t hurt me...” her voice was barely a whisper, but the silent night made it crystal clear. “...it hurts. I will not fight, I promise, but don’t...”

Before she could continue, Piyush and Sujal got up together. Sujal looked at his cousin for a moment as Sunaina continued her pleas to not hurt her, and stormed out. Piyush couldn’t bear to hear any more but neither could he leave her alone. He pulled her from the couch into his arms, taking care not to hurt her broken ribs.

“Shhh...No more, no more I promise, little lady.” He made soothing noises and rocked her sleeping form while she sobbed on and on.

Dia found Sujal sitting on the bottom steps of the staircase. “What happened?” She asked.

Sujal got up and looked at her. She saw the pain reflected on his face.

“How could anyone do that to a human being?” His voice broke. “She is living it again in her nightmares Ma, she is pleading not to hurt her.”

Dia quickly pulled her son into her arms to comfort him.

They both found Piyush on the couch, tears brimming from his eyes as he held the sobbing figure. Sunaina was still rambling. Then Dia gasped as she heard what she was saying. Sujal just left the room. Dia wanted to do the same but she had to be with Piyush. Their kids had grown up in a beautiful

environment and this was too much for them. She went to the rocking figure and pulled his head to her bosom.

“It’s ok to cry, son. Everyone needs to let go at some point.” She felt his tears wetting her Kaftan as he let his tears free.

“What happened, Sujal? You are scaring me.” They heard Mia’s voice as she came in the room in a hurry, obviously worried after seeing Sujal’s condition, and froze as she saw the three figures huddled together. Piyush was holding a woman draped in a saree and Dia was holding her crying boy. *He doesn’t cry, he is a man now*, Mia thought. Then slowly it dawned on her that something was really bad. Sujal walked in behind her and held her shoulder, as if to support her if she fell. She clutched his hand tightly.

“What happened? Who is she? Is she Piyush’s lover? Did something happen to her?” Mia’s voice broke. *Please, God, don’t let anything happen to her*, she prayed.

She knew all about the pain of losing the person you loved. When her husband Venkat had gone missing just a year after her marriage while she was pregnant with Suba, Mia had lived on with the belief that he would return; but Venkat never came back. This was supposed to be his last mission before he resigned for good. Venkat was with Research and Analytical Wing, also known as RAW, the foreign intelligence agency of India. Mia’s family had stood by her. Venkat was a highly skilled Engineer. She never knew the particulars of his missions, but he was soon going to retire from the field job and stick to an office job within the same organisation, when he had gone missing in-action.

She couldn’t bear if her son had to go through that same pain of losing a loved one. Sujal made her sit on one of the cosy chairs, and explained. In between, when Mia heard Sunaina’s rambling, she gasped. Dia sat in the chair next to her.

Piyush didn’t let Sunaina go. He held her closer whenever she rambled. He asked Sujal if he could get the medicine and the bags from the car. Piyush let his head rest on the couch as he waited for Sujal to get the bag. Suddenly, he felt her body stiffen. He lifted his head and saw her snuggled in his lap, her head resting in the nook of his neck. Her head was tilted up and her eyes were open, watching his face with fear etched upon her expressions. Her hand which had clutched his shirt slowly released it. She tried to get up quickly,



and she let out a gasp at the shooting pain searing through her. He knew it was not just her ribs, even her abdomen would be painful as the effect of the medicines was almost gone. She dropped back into his arm with pain.

“You should take her to the guest room, Piyush!” Dia said.

Sunaina looked at the unfamiliar faces, her curiosity obvious.

“That’s my mother, Mia Mauli.” Piyush said, pointing to Mia, reading the question in Sunaina’s eyes. “And that is Sujal’s mother, Dia Verma. They are sisters.”

Sunaina said a soft hello and tried to get down from his lap.

“You are in no condition to walk. I will take you to your room.” When Piyush looked at Sunaina he noticed a flicker of embarrassment on her face. *She is so beautiful without her makeup*, he thought. Immediately, Piyush felt embarrassed at his thought and his hands sagged a little.

She quickly clutched to his shirt with a gasp as if afraid he was going to drop her. “Trust me! I will never let you fall,” he whispered with a warm smile.

Sunaina looked at him oddly, as if looking to decipher the hidden meaning behind his words.

Mia and Dia heard the exchange and looked at each other *Was something new being ignited here?* The older women were not sure, but they wanted neither Piyush nor Sunaina to get hurt. This was no moment for a relationship to begin. All the more, Sunaina wouldn’t be able to stand another setback and Piyush was very sensitive, even though he had a tough exterior.

Piyush carried Sunaina to the guest room while Dia and Mia went to get something to eat for Sunaina so she could take her medicines.

Piyush placed her on the bed and adjusted the pillows behind her. She flinched with pain at the sudden movement. He didn’t want her to move too many times. He sat next to her, but she didn’t look at his face. Her eyes were downcast. He continued looking at her. Piyush sensed that she expected him to go or look away, seeing that she was not responding. But he was patient.

Finally, her eyes lifted and locked with his. Piyush realised just then that her glasses were missing, probably left in the hospital. He could see her eyes clearly. Her greenish-grey eyes had brown flecks in them. Her eyes searched his for something as her brows moved closer. He smiled when he saw the

confusion on her face. Her hair had come loose and was falling over her face. He slowly lifted his hand so as not to alarm her, and pushed the loose hair behind her ears. Sunaina didn't flinch from his touch this time but she stiffened. Piyush couldn't understand whether she had relaxed enough not to run from his touch or if she was too tired and in pain. He turned away from her, picked the blanket from the foot of the bed and wrapped it around her sitting figure. When she tried to lie down he stopped her.

"First eat something and take your medicines."

She fidgeted with the edge of her Saree.

*Maybe she would forget the pain with some work*, Piyush thought. "Are you up for a little work?" He asked.

She looked at him as though he had gone crazy. Frowning, she nodded.

Sujal helped the older ladies by bringing some food for Sunaina. Mia came in and asked her if she would need anything else and when Sunaina shook her head in the negative, Mia made her promise to call if she did. Sunaina felt that these two women were so concerned for her, as her mother would have been if she were alive. She struggled to hold back her tears. Sujal patted her back awkwardly, trying to comfort her.

"Sujal, Sunaina would like to work over the design with us till she feels sleepy. Stay with her and I will go and get the designs." Piyush said.

It was obvious Sujal felt awkward. "Bro, you stay with her and I will get the designs. I have kept them in the office." Without waiting for a response, he went to collect the designs and the drawing board.

## Chapter 4

The trio worked for about three hours and made a few changes in the existing designs. Sunaina came up with many innovative ideas that were also very environment friendly. Soon she started feeling sleepy due to the medication, though the throbbing pain in her abdomen was getting bad. She needed to change as she felt stuffy in the saree she had worn for office. Sensing her fatigue, Sujal looked at his brother, motioned towards Sunaina's bag that he had brought to her room earlier, and left. He knew they couldn't leave her alone as she was too fragile at the moment. Piyush got up and went through her dresses and took out her night dress and took it to the bathroom. He adjusted the water temperature and filled the tub. She needed a good soak.

He went back to the room and asked, "May I carry you?"

She shook her head and slowly started to get up. He helped her up and supported her to the bathroom.

"Would you need my help?" asked Piyush.

She felt tears brimming in her eyes. She shook her head. "May I call you if I need anything? I don't want to disturb your mother and aunt as they must have just slept. It is already 4:30 am."

He had postponed the meeting to the afternoon for her as she felt unsure of being able to make it. Then she remembered that she had not planned to be alive the next day. She looked at the water filled tub and then at Piyush. Piyush's eyes went wide for a second at the implied meaning. He wanted to shake some sense into her, but it won't do any good, especially in her condition.

Taking a deep breath, he moved towards her and said, "Do you trust me?"

She smiled, a genuine sad smile. He was taken by surprise. She was so beautiful and looked guileless with all her defences down.

"After what you and your family have done for me, I won't be able to un-trust you." She never imagined she would ever trust any man in her life.

He felt his heart tighten. "I will help you."

She looked at him in alarm for a second. Then, she didn't know why but she was nodding her head to show her consent.

He slowly removed the safety pins without touching her shoulder. He didn't want anything sharp near her. He slipped them into his pocket and turned away. "I won't look while you get into the tub. You can leave the clothes on the floor. I will pull the curtain and stay here in case you feel too sleepy."

She nodded. She did trust him. He seemed to genuinely care for her. She wished she had come to know him this well under better circumstances. Would he have liked her? Then the sudden realisation that he would never want a battered girl like her, hit her. Shaking her head, she gave a sad smile.

Piyush heard the rustle of her clothes falling to the ground and after a moment he heard her entering the tub. She pulled the curtain herself. He sat over the closed commode. He wanted to keep her mind busy, so he started a conversation.

"Sunaina."

"Hmmm"

"We might get a five-star facility residential project."

"Where is the location?"

"Kammasandra. It's in the Electronic city phase II."

"You don't get corporation water there, right?"

"No, we don't. The connection is there for the bio research project situated on the other side of the National Highway. But I doubt they would bring the connection for a residential project, however big it may be." He felt a little positive when he could successfully divert her mind because the look in her eyes earlier when she saw the water was scary.

"Hmmm...That would be a hitch." She was silent for a moment and then called his name. "Piyush!"

"Yes?"

"Why don't you get into full-fledged construction? Why do you only stick to the designing part?"

He was thrown off track for a moment but then he quickly grasped her meaning. "It helps in channelizing or we would end up discussing the trivialities of cement and steel. Now, at least I am sure of the kind of work my partners do, just as they know that I strive for excellence. I also have the

guarantee that all my partners will keep the name of our designs.”

“Your uncle is the founder of this company, right?”

“Yeah, his designs are in great demand even in Dubai and the States.”

“Yes, he is a role model for the new generation architects.”

He felt the smile on her lips and he also smiled himself.

They continued talking until the water went cold.

“Drain the tub, Sunaina, and I will give you the towel.”

He heard her gasp at his comment. He didn’t want to embarrass her, so he kept quiet. He thought he would wait for a few more seconds.

“Piyush, I...am not able to get up.” Sunaina started crying.

“Shhh... Don’t cry. You trust me, right? “

“Hmmm.” He heard her soft whimper.

“Let me help you.” He took the towel and slid the curtain to one side. She had her eyes downcast. He saw her sitting with her knees pulled towards her chest, the ugly bruises on her shoulder plainly visible. He bent and helped her up. Her eyes were closed so he supported her with an arm around her as he drained the tub. Then he wrapped her up in a long fluffy towel. Then he noticed the tears streaming down her face.

“Does it hurt too bad?”

She shook her head. “I am sorry, I know it’s disgusting.”

He frowned, not understanding what she meant. Then he saw the blood in the water and grasped her meaning.

“God! No...listen!” he held her in his embrace. “This so called disgusting thing makes you a woman, makes you fertile to give this world a new life, something we men cannot. Honey! I come from a family with lots of women around, where we have been taught to respect a woman for what she is, what she stands for. And trust me, we have been in a lot of trouble for teasing girls about their PMS.”

She looked up, her palms resting on his strong chest, “You teased them about it?”

He smiled sheepishly and nodded.

“Good that you were punished for it.”

He chuckled and went out to get her a sanitary napkin. He looked away as he passed her the night gown along with the napkin and panties. He could sense her awkwardness. He immediately started talking about their ongoing project to ease her mind. Then once she was ready, he turned to see her completely spent.

Supporting her, he guided her to the bed and on their own accord, his fingers loosened her bun. Her dense long black hair cascaded down. Involuntarily, he combed his fingers through her hair as she closed her eyes.

*It felt good*, she thought, tilting her head towards his hand.

*‘This felt too intimate.’* Piyush paused a moment and slowly let his hands slide down.

They both didn’t notice Sujal standing at the door, shocked. Suddenly, as if waking from a trance, Sujal left. It felt as if he was interrupting a private moment of a couple. Why did he think of Bro and Sunaina as a couple? But the picture they had presented as he had helped her on the bed and loosened her hair was so domestic. A sad smile played on his lips. If it’s going that way, good for them but just like his aunt and mom, he didn’t want either of them hurt. And it seemed to be the wrong time for anything to brew between them.

## Chapter 5

Piyush eased the pillows around her as she lay down. The pillows now cocooned her back and lower abdomen. He had noticed Naina, his sister, do that during her cramps. Pulling the blanket from the foot of the bed, he tucked her in. He spread her hair to dry as it was a little wet from the tub. He felt a desire to play with her hair. It was so beautiful like thick pure silk. He couldn't pull his hands back. While caressing her hair his fingers grazed her scalp and she sighed. Smiling, he let his fingers caress her scalp and she leaned more into his hands. He now let his other hand join in the head massage.

He was watching her hair in his fingers with a smile, when the feeling of her watching him made him look towards her and his eyes locked with hers. His fingers froze at their position as his eyes were transfixed by her green and grey ones. His eyes slowly moved down and stopped at her soft pink lips that were now marred by the ghastly purple colour. And the corner of her mouth had bruises and a cut. Reality came crashing upon him. *What am I thinking? How can I be so callous?* he thought. He cupped her face, smiling softly at her.

“Now go to sleep. You have had enough difficult times. Now forget everything and sleep without worry.”

Her lips trembled, and he saw the tears pouring down her beautiful eyes. She bit her trembling lips.

His thumb caressed her lips, easing them from her teeth. “No more crying.” he said, “Your pain filled days are history. You said you trust me, didn't you?” When she nodded amidst her tears he continued, “Then believe me, I am going to make everything all right.” His thumb caressed the bruise on the corner of her lips. He wanted to take away all the pain from her life.

She looked at him, her eyes full of trust. He smiled at her and without giving a second thought, he pressed his forehead to hers and took a deep breath. Without any hesitation she let him, her eyes closed. Her hands came over to cover his, which were still cupping her face.

“Sleep, little one.”

His husky voice caressed her skin. She opened her eyes, a little surprised. No

one would have called her a little woman. Yes, she was just 5'3'' but with her broad shoulders and full figure, she appeared big. She was not fat, but neither was she thin. Though his 5'11'' height and strong built was pretty intimidating. With him hovering over her, her face in his palms, she really felt 'little'. She smiled, though it hurt as her lips stretched. "Good night!" she whispered as she closed her eyes. She had not known how exhausted she was.

Sujal walked in to see Piyush still sitting beside her, but he was staring unseeingly at the wall.

"Bro, we should be stealing at least a couple of hours of sleep before the meeting tomorrow." Sujal said.

Piyush looked at his cousin and nodded. "You take the couch. I will lie down on the floor if I feel sleepy."

"Floor?" Sujal asked, surprised.

"Sujal, I didn't like the way she looked at the water in the tub. I am not planning to leave her alone for quite some time. I know you would prefer to sleep in your bed but-" Piyush combed his hair with his fingers, "If she loses it, I need you here to help me. They violated her and to make things worse, they put..." he took a deep breath. It was difficult to say what she must have suffered, "...some object into her. The doctor had to do a D and C."

Sujal became pale. He remembered Sunaina's mumbling from downstairs. Then the anger rushed in. He swore vehemently but when Sunaina shifted from her position, he became silent.

"Bro, call the Police. We need to file a complaint. The doctor would give us her report."

"It's not that I haven't thought about it. We had discussed this in the hospital but she wants some time to recuperate and I too want to give her some space before she is grilled by the Police regarding it. I can't imagine how she would take everything and react to being questioned about it."

Sujal understood Piyush's point of view and nodded in agreement.

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Piyush got up with a start, throwing the blanket away from his body, when he heard a stifled sob. He saw that Sujal was still asleep on the couch, snuggled in his blanket. He heard the sob again and he got up and saw Sunaina still



asleep but sweating profusely. She sobbed again and tried to push some invisible thing away from her. Soon she started thrashing her legs. It was clear she was reliving her past in a nightmare. Piyush immediately tried to calm her, but she started fighting him. Sujal slowly opened his eyes, and though he was confused at first, he soon realised the situation and got up.

“Sunaina, calm down.” Piyush tried to pin her wrist to her side. “Stop, Su... It’s only a nightmare.”

With stifled sobs, Sunaina continued thrashing with more vigour. Piyush pressed his weight on her to stop her from moving her legs while his hands pinned her, but it didn’t help. She gave out a soft cry of surrender that was more painful to hear than her earlier rambling.

“I will stop fighting...” She whispered. “Please! It hurts. Don’t hurt me. I will not fight.”

Piyush felt her pain seeping into his own being. He slowly lifted his weight from her and she whimpered, as if waiting for a blow to come. He got up slowly and trying not to hurt her, he gathered her into his arms and onto his lap as he leaned back on the headboard.

Sujal felt his respect for Piyush increase. He watched as Piyush settled back and he pulled the blanket to cover them both. For the second time that night, Sujal went back to the couch feeling like he was intruding in a private moment.

Sunaina finally stirred, and when she opened her eyes she felt protected, as if a warmth was enveloping her. She didn’t need to look who held her. The strength, the comfort which seeped into her was witness enough. The only problem was the pain she felt in her lower abdomen.

“Piyush...” her voice was barely noticeable.

“Hmm...” He opened his eyes and looked into hers.

“It hurts. Can I have a painkiller?”

Piyush checked the time. It was not six hours yet since she took her last dose. He placed a pillow on her lower abdomen and spooned her.

“Not yet. Your next dose is after breakfast. I will hold you and comfort you. Please try to sleep.”

Sunaina sniffed. She didn't remember the last time someone had taken such diligent care of her. She slowly drifted off, sleep engulfing her senses.

When Dia came to wake them up with coffee, she was surprised to see Piyush sleeping on the bed, holding the girl close. Sujal was barely able to hold his six feet lanky frame on the couch. She felt proud of the boys. Though unconventional, Piyush would have a good reason for being on the bed. She kept the coffee on the side table and shook Sujal first to wake him up. Sujal was groggy as he wished his mom a good morning. Then Dia woke Piyush up. He looked confused for a moment, and then slowly detangled himself, suddenly feeling awkward at having his aunt wake him up while Sunaina was in his arms.

"She had a nightmare and was in pain but I couldn't give her pain killer..." Piyush tried to explain.

Dia brushed it aside and asked him to drink the coffee instead. Sujal and Piyush sat down on the couch, drinking coffee. Dia slowly woke Sunaina up who tried to get up suddenly and flinched with pain as a result. Piyush was about to rush to her when Dia motioned him to relax. She then helped Sunaina into the bathroom. Every step she took looked unbearable. But Piyush thought it wouldn't be proper if he volunteered when his aunt was helping Sunaina.

"Piyush!" It was Dia's alarmed voice that got both Sujal and Piyush on their feet in an instant. Piyush motioned Sujal to stay while he went into the bathroom. Dia was holding the tired figure of Sunaina sitting on the edge of the tub.

"She is bleeding badly. I helped her into fresh clothes. But she is feeling dizzy." Before Dia could finish her words, and her head rolled back as she became completely unconscious.

Piyush easily lifted Sunaina up and placed her on the bed. He immediately called Prathyush to ask for Dr Savitri's number. Prathyush said he would call her and ask if Sunaina needed to be brought to the hospital.

The five minutes wait seemed like an hour. Sunaina still was unconscious and Dia was using a cold towel on her forehead. Finally, the call came. It was Dr Savitri.

"Does she have a fever?"

“No, I don’t think so. Let me check.” Piyush placed his hand on Sunaina’s forehead to check. Then he realised that with the cold towel on her forehead, he won’t be able to sense the temperature. He let his hands slide inside the neck of the t-shirt Dia had helped Sunaina into. She was warm but not hot. “She doesn’t have a fever.” Piyush said to the doctor.

“How bad is the bleeding?”

“Errr... wait.” He turned to his aunt and gave her the phone.

Dia spoke for a few minutes to the Doctor and then disconnected the call.

“Dr Savitri says that it can be her body trying to shut down from the pain. Sunaina wouldn’t have had proper rest last night. She said she is coming to have a look at Sunaina’s condition.” Saying this, Dia quickly texted their address to the doctor. “If she thinks Sunaina needs medical help, we can take her to the hospital.”

Piyush nodded as he looked at the unconscious woman on the bed. He felt something tug at his heart. Sunaina was such a good-natured girl. He had been too judgemental about her until he saw the trauma she had been hiding, while working every day and coming up with some extraordinary designs. *Judging her by how much makeup she wore? How superficial had he been!* Had it been a girl who is not as strong as Sunaina, she would have given up long back. *But now I will make sure that she stays strong,* he promised to himself.

## Chapter 6

Dia said she needed to attend the one-hour lecture so she needed to leave. Mia was home and said she will be with Sunaina and make sure everything was fine.

Within half an hour Dr Savitri came. Sunaina was awake but a little groggy. She patted the weak girl's face which was white as a sheet. She said she would come again in the evening to take a look. Sunaina nodded and drifted back to a disturbed sleep. Piyush came in, still wet from the shower when Dr Savitri had just finished her examination. Piyush led Savitri to the dining room, offering her breakfast. She hesitated for a moment but later accepted. She asked if she could speak with all his family members once they finished the breakfast.

"I know she is not family, yet you have taken her well-being as your responsibility." Savitri said. Piyush was about to speak when she stopped him. "I know the person who should be responsible is the one who did this to her. You all need to know she was raped brutally by more than one. They had hurt her in ways we can't even imagine. She has injuries inside her because of what they did. That's why I had to do D and C. And if the bleeding doesn't stop we may have to do the procedure again or depending upon the severity, we may have to do a surgery."

Sujal cursed out loud and then whispered a 'sorry'. But his eyes blazed with anger. Piyush was struggling to sit quietly. All he wanted to do was to kill that man with his bare hands.

"This is only the physical trauma. She will heal from it, as she is young and healthy with no medical problems. We only have to keep infection at bay. But-" she paused to check if she had everyone's attention. "-the mental trauma she has gone through is difficult to overcome. She will need counselling. And trust me, if she doesn't get a proper counsellor she would end up hating herself even more. It's easy for them to feel disgusted with themselves, feel dirty, or spoiled. Thanks to the stupid notions circulating in the name of culture and values, girls are taught that if they are abused sexually, they are no longer pure but filthy and that it's nobody's fault but theirs." She looked at each of the Verma family members to see if they understood her.

“She might want to end her life.” Savitri said.

Dia and Mia gasped. They had thought of it too but now that Savitri had put it so bluntly, it was shocking.

“See, all of you are good people and you are trying to help her. She never approached the Police and as her doctor I should have but didn’t. If she does something stupid...” She paused. She didn’t want to sound insensitive, but this family had to know what was at stake. “Your family will be under the scan. People will ask questions. What is she doing in your house? If she is only an employee of yours, why such familiar treatment? And we have records in the hospital of having done D and C, that too at night. Usually it is scheduled for morning unless it’s an emergency. Being from an affluent family can bring bad attention. They could twist the story. What I am trying to say is...” she was not sure how they would react. “Maybe you should send her to a Rape crisis centre instead of keeping her here.” Savitri concluded.

Piyush stood up, almost toppling the chair he was sitting on. “NO!” He looked at Dr Savitri, and for a moment she feared him. Mia nodded, acknowledging his decision. Sujal stood up and patted his cousin’s shoulder.

“She is going to stay here. She is our responsibility, a part of our family now. We are a mixed bunch ourselves. We accept her as a part of our family.”

Hearing Piyush’s words and seeing the family supporting the decision to keep this girl, Dr Savitri felt overwhelmed.

“You are good people. But remember what I told you. It’s easy for people with such mental trauma to do something stupid. All rational thoughts just go out of the window. You have to be very careful around her. Someone has to keep an eye on her, at all times.” Promising to come in the evening to check Sunaina’s progress, Dr Savitri left.

Piyush called his office and arranged for the meeting to be conducted via video conferencing. He, Sujal and Sunaina attended the meeting, apologising for not being present in person, but the clients quickly dismissed it. The new lead asked about the new person on the block -Sunaina. Her ideas were quickly noticed by them during their discussion. Sujal said she had got sick last evening and was taken to the hospital and that’s why she couldn’t attend in person. He didn’t elaborate further. The meeting was a success. They were asked to go through the contract and check if they needed any change and

sign it in a day or two.

Mia had joined Sunaina after the meeting and when she noticed Sunaina's hesitation, she started talking about general topics.

"Would you like to know how we got Piyush in the family?" Mia asked.

Sunaina frowned. "Got? He is your son, isn't he? Is there a story of his birth?" She asked curiously.

"Well!" Mia smiled. She was used to getting that question often. "Piyush is my adopted son."

Surprise was written all over Sunaina's face.

"Actually, out of my three children, Naina—the second child—and Piyush—the youngest—are adopted. Suba—the oldest—is my only biological child. I delivered her after —my husband—was reported missing in action." Mia took a deep breath. Shaking herself off the painful memory, she continued before Sunaina could enquire about Venkat. That story can wait for another time. "Sujal is the youngest adopted son of Dia. Her elder son Salim is also adopted."

There was a pure wonder in Sunaina's eyes. Mia chuckled and said, "Yes dear, you will be surprised. Ours is truly a family with diversity. Being an adopted child ourselves, it was as natural as breathing for us to adopt children we felt connected to." Mia was again lost in her memories.

"What is Piyush's story?" Sunaina's hesitant voice brought her back.

"I adopted Piyush fourteen years ago. He was twelve at the time. He was always the silent one and never spoke much. Being very aware of his short temper, he liked to believe he had placed a firm lid on it. Except for the few times he did lose it. According to him, it was only to help people who were being bullied.

Soon his fights came to the notice of his orphanage principal Father Johnson. And Father Johnson started noticing this quiet, strong and bright boy who was always eager to help with anything only asked for access to books way beyond his age in return. I went to the orphanage with my mom, Gayatri, one day when Father Johnson mentioned Piyush. It didn't take even a moment for me to feel connected to Piyush and I adopted him.

It didn't take long for Piyush to adapt to the family and soon he was one

among us. He started opening up and conversing easily with all the family members. Soon he was learning the different languages we use in the family and he found his true calling once he met his uncle, Raj. He excelled in Architecture and now he is handling a major part of Raj's architectural empire at such an early age."

Sunaina was mesmerised by the family whose backbone was Gayatri, Piyush's granny. She smiled but slowly the smile turned to sadness. She wished she had a family like that. Mia saw the flash of wistfulness. She patted the girl's head with affection and said that she is also a family member now, but Sunaina knew better.

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Piyush had just finished a call with one of their clients when Sujal came in hurriedly. "Bro, Sunaina is asking for you."

Piyush frowned as he saw how worried Sujal looked. He rushed upstairs to the guest room. Sunaina was clutching her knees to her bosom and was rocking herself fast. He didn't like it. No wonder Sujal was worried. He walked in without alarming her and made sure his presence was felt. She looked at him but continued to rock. He sat next to her but not too close. He made sure there were a few inches between them. He waited for her to speak as she had asked for him. He had checked his peripheral vision. No one had followed him. Somehow, he knew that whatever she had to say, it would be better if he was alone.

"Piyush..." Still rocking, she continued, "I think you should send me somewhere else, a hostel or someplace where they take care of ra-" she stopped herself, the pain of having trodden through hell etched on her face. With a heart wrenching sob, she finished her sentence, "...girls like me."

"Why?" Before he could say anything further, she turned to him in a quick move and clutched his shirt by his collar.

"Don't you sense it..." Her voice was barely a whisper, her eyes were brimming with tears. Her pupils moved frantically before it locked on his. "I...I am on the verge of wanting to end everything." She started to shake. Her voice so low as if she was whispering, fearful that someone else would hear her. "I know that people with suicidal tendencies will succeed, sometime or the other. Life is absolute hell for all the people around them. For how long can anyone keep an eye on me? Do you know, I almost filled the tub

with water just now and all I wanted to do was go under?” She let out another sob. “If I succeed my suffering will be over, but I don’t want any of you blamed for it.” She looked deep into his eyes, shaking him, “Do you hear me, Piyush? I am BAD NEWS.” she whispered a little louder. “Please don’t put so much pressure on me. Let me go.” By now her tears were flowing nonstop. “I can’t ask any of them. Your mom and aunt have already started talking as if I am a member of this family. Sujal hovers around me like a brother and you... you make me feel secure.” Her breath ended in a sob. “But, for how long? Please, let me be free!” Her body sagged. Piyush gathered her in his arms and pulled her closer. “Please, let me go, I don’t want to be the cause of all your trouble.” She sobbed and sobbed, and slowly drifted into a tired sleep, his shirt soaked with her painful tears.

When he was sure she was deep in her sleep, Piyush slowly laid her on the bed. She was still clutching his shirt. He pulled the blanket over her.

“Is she alright?” Sujal asked from the door.

Piyush didn’t know how to answer that. “Sujal, she is not okay. She wants to go to some hostel or rape care centre. She believes she will commit suicide and she doesn’t want to end up doing it here and because all of us will be in trouble. In short, she wants me to let her go so that she doesn’t feel the pressure and she can commit suicide.”

Sujal came and sat on the couch.

“What are you going to do, Bro?”

Piyush didn’t have an answer to that. He just looked at the sleeping form next to him, still clutching his shirt.

After a pause Sujal added, “Bro, don’t her words sound like a plea for help? She doesn’t want to trouble us, yet she wants us to help her come out of the depression which is leading her towards suicide.”

Piyush nodded. He slowly released his shirt from her hold and he looked at her for a long time.

Sujal sensed that Piyush had made some decision. There was clarity in his eyes.

“She needs help and I am going to be with her throughout this ordeal.”



Sujal looked at Piyush. He desperately hoped that both, Piyush and Sunaina, would manage to come out of this deep trough unharmed.

“Take care of her. I have some work to be taken care of. I’ll be back in a few hours.” Piyush said and left.

Sujal frowned. He was sure the ‘work’ was not office related. He wondered where Piyush wanted to go but he didn’t say anything. He knew the priority was to make sure Sunaina felt at home.

Dr Savitri came at 6:00 pm and after a thorough check-up, she announced that Sunaina was recovering. The test results from the hospital indicated that Sunaina was anaemic and that could be the reason for the heavy bleeding. She promised to drop in again to check on Sunaina, and left.

Sujal made sure he was always around, keeping a hawk-eye on Sunaina.

All the while he kept wondering what was going through Piyush’s head and where he had gone off to in such a hurry. He didn’t like not knowing what was happening. Piyush usually shared everything with him, but this time he seemed to be a closed book. When Sujal heard the car, he knew Piyush was finally home. He wanted to know what it was that Piyush had run off to do, though he didn’t want to leave Sunaina’s side because Piyush had asked him to take care of her.

Dia came in, asking Sujal to go downstairs since Piyush was looking for him. Sunaina opened her eyes and they caught Sujal’s. Immediately guessing her need to speak to Piyush, Sujal went downstairs after giving a silent nod. Dia went inside the room and sat next to Sunaina. Smiling, she placed her hands on the girl’s forehead.

“No temperature. Your body is healing well, honey. You are soon going to be fit as a fiddle. Always remember that we are there for you. You are now a part of our family. No one can deny that. And you have to accept that it was never your fault. It was those men who were wrong. Please remove any other thoughts from your mind.” She raised Sunaina’s face slightly to make Sunaina look at her. “It will be hard to come out of the trauma. But promise me that you will fight against the darkness. For yourself as well as for us, the family. I don’t have a daughter of my own though Naina and Suba are very much my own too. But if I have my way, I will adopt you as mine. I would feel honoured to have you as my daughter – a survivor. But now that you are

a big girl, can you see me as your mother?” Smiling, Dia continued. “You did call me Ma, and I would love it if you continue to call me that.”

By now Sunaina’s tears were flowing non-stop. No words came out of her. In a moment she was hugging Dia who pulled the girl into her embrace and with Sunaina’s head on her bosom, she rocked her as if she were a small child.

Soon Mia brought in Sunaina’s dinner. Piyush also came in and said that he would join her for the dinner. The other members ate in the dining room.

The duo ate in silence, with Sunaina stealing a glance now and then. Piyush didn’t say anything until both of them finished. His silence seemed to be killing. Sunaina glanced at Piyush but he never asked her anything. She didn’t know how he was behaving so normally. Not even once did he bring up what she had told him, her fears and her worries.

Piyush noticed that Sunaina had leaned back on the headboard. He saw her throat move anxiously.

“Sunaina!” he called.

She opened her eyes and looked at Piyush.

“Do you want to speak with me?”

She felt frustrated. After his silent treatment, now he was asking if she had anything to say as if they had never spoken earlier about her problems.

“Piyush, have you really not listened to me or do you think that once I expressed my thoughts, there is nothing to discuss or decide?”

“No.” He moved closer and held her small hands in his big ones. “I remember every word you said very clearly. Don’t worry, we will work on it. You will be perfectly fine one day. I am not letting you go to some shelter or some rape crisis centre. But yes, we can meet a counsellor that can help you.”

She shook her head vehemently. “Piyush, look at me. You have no clue what phase I am going through at any given time. One moment I could be as normal as anyone else and the very next moment I feel completely opposite. What will trigger my darker thoughts, I have no clue.” Seeing Piyush frown at her description she continued, “Piyush I think I have depression.”

“Sunaina, whatever phase you are going through or the depression you are

going through, we will sail through it together. We can see a doctor who can help you. Trust me, we can deal with it, together.” He pulled her closer. “You said you trust me, didn’t you?”

She didn’t answer. She wasn’t looking at him, her eyes staring unseeingly and looking lost.

“Look at me, Su...” He raised her chin and she looked at him. “We are in this together. We will deal with it with proper help.”

She shook her head, almost defeated and said, “You think my depression is because of the ra... rape?” Her voice faltered. “It isn’t. I have had depression way before that. My father died when I was two and my mother married Subbaiyya, my step-father. He was a widower. His first wife had died while giving birth and they couldn’t save the baby either. My step grandmother used to stay along with us in the same house. She didn’t like me or maybe I didn’t matter to her just like I didn’t to her son. But then my mother was more than enough for me. I didn’t want anyone in my life but amma.

Then amma’s health started to deteriorate when I was about ten years old. She died in two years, when I was not yet twelve. It is since amma’s death that I have been swinging from these self-destructive thoughts.” She looked unseeingly to a distance. “It’s not that they treated me badly, but their complete disregard for my presence was a trigger to me drifting into darkness. The feeling of being unwanted was too painful to express.

After school I helped with some household chores and I used to visit a small park by our house. Only for a few minutes. I never played with other kids, just sat in one corner doing nothing much. I would either stare at a piece of grass or a bird or a branch of a tree, all the time wondering why my life was so meaningless. One night, I think it was in the eighth or the ninth standard, appa scolded me badly and hit me. I tried slashing my wrist after that. I guess I didn’t have the courage to cut deep or to do any harm, yet the cut was deep enough and I had to tie it up with a piece of cloth. For me, the world was no longer a happy place. I didn’t see the need to be in a place where no one wanted me. My family was not my family anymore. My absence wouldn’t matter to anyone.

The next day in the park, an aunty came and sat beside me. She just said ‘Hello’ and I nodded. The next day again she said ‘hi’. Then one day after the other, she would come visit me and sit next to me and soon I became

comfortable with her. We used to talk a lot. Those few minutes with her were very precious to me. Her name was Sujatha and she came with her kids to the park. She stayed close to the park hence she visited almost daily. I was so happy to have a companion at last. The long talks with her made me feel valued. She guided me to do meditation. I started sharing everything with her. She was my friend even though she was my mother's age.

She asked me to concentrate more on studies, especially my favourite subjects. She guided me in my studies and helped me chose a degree in architecture. I continued meeting her for few years in the park. I had completed my twelfth exams, and I was waiting for the entrance exam results. She told me that she was a Psychiatrist and that she worked in the government hospital. She made me promise that even if I couldn't meet her, I will continue the positive approach to my life and never let depression overcome me.

I never knew that depression was a sickness until then. And she explained to me that she noticed the signs of depression in me and my concentration in studies were one way of having my mind shifted to positivity. She asked me to continue my meditation and concentrate on my studies and have a career I loved. She made me promise her. It was after I got the placement at your company and went home that I came to know of aunt's passing two years ago.

Just a couple of days before I was to join the office, I woke up very tired and sore." Piyush swore under his breath but she continued, even though she had heard him. "I didn't understand what had happened. Even in my wildest dream I would never have imagined what was happening until one night I became conscious. At first, I thought it was a nightmare. There were two men touching, groping and tearing me apart. But soon I started to struggle with what little energy I had left, even with the drug they had given me. The next day when I woke up, I didn't have any doubt left as to what was happening to me. It didn't take long for me to fall back into the depths of darkness. I felt as if I was being dragged back into darkness, except that this time it was too dense. I didn't feel like living. If my own stepfather could do this, how could I blame the other men? I wanted to end everything. But I found it difficult to take the final decision. I have brought a blade to my wrist and backed away so many times. I thought of many different ways to end this terrible life. The quickest way, the longest one, the most painful one...every possible way."

She took a deep breath.

“Then my days in the office started and it was a breath of freedom. I started locking the door, stopped eating or drinking anything at home. The work and my involvement in the design process helped me from sinking into darkness too fast. Then he...appa,” She spat the word as if it were filthy, “tried to convince me that it was beneficial for us financially to play along with these men and that soon we could lead a life without having to work.

He noticed I didn't heed his advice, instead I was disgusted at his thoughts. I never even paused to listen or give him even the slightest importance. Instead, I ignored him. Soon, he started hitting me. First, they were only slaps, then they became severe blows and kicks. I was already using make-up to cover my dark circles, soon I started plastering more and more make-up to cover my bruises. He started hurting me more. Seeing me bloodied and in pain gave him a sadistic satisfaction. He was furious that I was locking the door as soon as I came home after office. I didn't come out even to make him tea or food.

One evening he acted as if he was not well and asked me to make him a cup of medicinal coffee. I guess I was stupid that I believed him. I went to the kitchen to make him coffee but he hit me with a pan at the back of my head and raped me in the kitchen. After that I kept away from him all the time. I waited by the shop or talked with the neighbours so that I knew when he was leaving. I would then immediately lock the door to my room. One day he made one of his friends latch the door from outside so he could hide inside the house to attack me. I was made a fool of once again. He left one mark after the other. Then I was almost sure that there is only one way to end my pain and I had to decide fast. I no longer felt that I had it in me to fight him off.

A few days back when I returned from the office, I was shocked to see the door lock had been removed. When I created a huge scene, he along with his friends jumped upon me and forced me to drink some liquid. I struggled hard and tried to fight them off but in vain. That weekend they used me like I was some kind of a rag-doll. I screamed and shouted to no avail. After the weekend I thought they would let me go. But they waited for me to return from the office to continue the torture. They just didn't want to rape me, they wanted to push my limits. It was as if they wanted to see how much a woman

can endure. It was terrible.” Sunaina paused for a long moment.

“Piyush, even now I will easily choose to end my life than remember the harrowing nights that followed.”

Piyush’s jaw was hurting by now. He had been clenching them tight. He wanted desperately to go and kill that bastard with his bare hands.

“When I made the plan to end everything, you found me asleep at my desk. I was mentally prepared that day. I had tried twice before, but this time I was sure to go all the way. That feeling of self-destruction is inbuilt in me. Rape was just a trigger. Please Piyush, I have read a lot about depression. It is not easy to overcome it. It’s not a pleasant illness which can be cured with some medicine. It affects everyone related to the patient. In my case, I don’t want such beautiful people like you all to suffer.”

Piyush remained silent for few moments and then he pulled her into his arms and held her tight. “Su-” He whispered. He pressed his lips to her forehead. “Su! Do you trust me?”

He spoke against her forehead and she frowned. It had been very taxing for her to narrate her agony to him. If she didn’t trust him, she wouldn’t have bared it all. What did he mean? Of course, she trusted him. She managed to nod. “Why else would I share everything with you?”

His hold tightened. “Then please trust me and be with me as I decide and take a few steps in a day or two.”

She was confused. *Be with him in what?*

## Chapter 7

The next two days went by in a blur. The second day, when Dia helped Sunaina to the bathroom, she placed a new saree for her to wear—an off-white saree with a golden border and a golden blouse to go with it. After the shower, she wore the blouse but it was a little loose unlike her normal blouses. Since it was readymade you couldn't expect it to be a perfect fit. She was not sure why they gifted her with a new saree and why there were so many relatives around. She heard voices she didn't recognise as she came out of the bathroom.

Her wet long hair was still wrapped in the bath towel. She stopped when she saw two beautiful and confident women about her age standing with Mia and Dia. They were all wearing sarees and were looking extremely beautiful. One of them looked like the younger version of Mia, except she was a little taller with light-brown eyes. The shorter one was beautiful too, with different features and a bright smile. As soon as they saw Sunaina, they came towards her. The taller of the two was introduced as Suba and the shorter one was Naina, both of them Mia's daughters. They gave her a hug and Mia took a big round *bindi* and placed it on Sunaina's wide forehead. She looked beautiful. Dia helped Sunaina to do the hair. She took a strand of hair from either side by her ears and plated it with a strand from the back of her head. She let the rest of her wet hair in a loose tie. Naina took some flowers from a bag on the side table but Suba jumped in, "Me! I will put the flowers in her hair."

Sunaina smiled as the family's enthusiasm was contagious but she did wonder why everyone wanted to make her look beautiful. She didn't feel out of place. Then she heard some unfamiliar voices approaching the room. She saw a stout short but a very beautiful old lady coming in. She was Gayatri, the person who started this beautiful family. And soon she was followed by a few others. She realised she will not be able to keep a tab of all of them. She hoped that she would meet them again before she left, since she had asked Piyush to take her to some hostel. Piyush had not mentioned anything about it or spoken to her much. She had not brought up the topic either. Then she heard a knock and without waiting for a response, a very tall boy came in, and smiled at everyone. When he noticed Sunaina, he whistled.

"You are very beautiful!"

Sunaina blushed. Mia hushed the newcomer. She quickly came over to Sunaina.

“Please don’t mind him, Milind is like that. He loves theatrics.”

Sunaina smiled. “It’s OK.” she said softly. Thank you for the compliment!” she said to Milind.

He smiled at her. Dia told Sunaina that Milind was fast friends with Salim—Sujal’s younger brother. But Salim was in the medical college and hence he couldn’t get permission to come.

“Come for what? Is there some festival or some party?” Sunaina asked.

“You’ll see soon. All the ladies are asked to come down. And Piyush has asked if Sunaina needs help to climb down the staircase.” Milind said.

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“Even if she is not, we will carry her down. We don’t need the boys.” Naina said, challenging his statement.

Milind lifted his palms up in mock surrender. “Will convey the message.”

Sunaina could climb down the steps without much trouble. It still hurt, especially her broken ribs, but she had healed well. As she reached the living room she felt overwhelmed with the entire family members present there. She knew they considered her a part of the family, yet all of them were making her nervous.

She looked for Piyush but there were too many tall people around. She saw Sujal who nodded at her and then she saw Piyush standing alone by the fire place, leaning on the frame. She smiled at him. He smiled back. He was dressed in a blue denim and a white shirt. She felt an odd twist in her stomach seeing him. She lowered her eyes. One by one, all the family members came to introduce themselves.

Piyush came to her followed by two men with a ledger in their hand. Every one took seats. Mia led Sunaina into the room and made her sit on a chair. Piyush came and sat next to her.

“How are you?” Piyush asked.

“I am fine. You?” She asked so innocently, he felt she was tugging at his heart. Then a man opened the ledger in front of them.



“You should sign here.” He said.

First Piyush signed at the place they showed and he passed the pen to her. She frowned and looked at the ledger and saw the word ‘marriage’ jump out at her. She suddenly stood up.

“Piyush!” she whispered. She swayed with the sudden move she made. He supported her in a flash and placed a finger on her pink lips shushing her. Excusing himself and Sunaina for a minute, he took her to a room on the ground floor. Sunaina couldn’t think straight. She felt her every step falter.

“You can’t!” she blurted even before he closed the door.

“Why?”

“Why!” She looked at him as if she was seeing him for the first time. “To marry someone, shouldn’t you ask her first? POLITELY?”

“NO! Not when she is not thinking straight.”

She raised one of her brows, her anger emanating from her. “I am not out of my mind and I am thinking straight. And I don’t want to marry you.” She clenched her teeth.

“Why?”

“Why what?” She fumed. “I asked you why you want to marry me.”

He shook his head. “I asked you first.”

She took deep breaths. “What are you doing, Piyush? Look around. Have you got the whole family here to marry me? Seriously? What are you trying to do? Be some kind of a saint?”

“I thought saints didn’t marry.”

She lunged at him at his reply, clutching his collar. “You think this is a joke?”

He caught her hands. “Have you seen me joking around much?”

Her eyes were getting moist. “Why are you doing this?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

His hands almost crushed her arms. “I am going to marry you. That’s final. Whether you like it or not. I am not sending you to some hostel or a rape

survivor's camp or any such godforsaken place." His voice was dangerously soft.

"I don't want your sympathy. You don't marry someone when you feel sympathy." she said through her clenched teeth.

"I don't sympathise you, girl!" He spat the words.

"You don't even know me."

"I know enough to want to marry you."

"I doubt that, Piyush. I bared my heart and life in front of you and here you are, making a mockery of my trust by coming up with this awkwardly grandiose idea to give me a life! NO! You don't know anything. I will not marry you." Then she took a couple of long breaths as her shoulder sagged. She looked at the man who in the past few days had started to mean a lot.

"Please stop this, Piyush. I am not meant to lead a normal life of a married woman."

"We can overcome the depression, Su. Whatever it is, I have decided to stand by you. I have already got an appointment with a very renowned doctor who can help you with depression."

She tried to move away from him, but he held him on.

"It's not just that, Piyush."

"Then what else?" Piyush wanted to end all her doubts once and for all.

"Don't you see? I...I can't bear to be with a man. Any man. And at the end of the day, you will need companionship. And..." She brought her brows together and almost hissed, "I will not tolerate my husband going to another woman."

He looked at her with a twitch on his lips.

"Piyush, do you know what I went through? I feel disgusted by what they did to me. I don't want any one touching me like that ever again. I am not so naïve not to know that physical intimacy is a vital part of a couple's life. How can you think this will work out?"

"Sunaina, I am not letting you go anywhere to get yourself killed. And I am loyal to any kind of relationship. You are going to be a part of our family without any more argument."

She pushed him away. “Piyush! NO! You don’t love me. All you want to do is protect me from doing something stupid.”

“If it were only about that, I didn’t have to marry you. I could just ask my mom to adopt you. One more person in the family will only make it richer. But no, I want you in my life.”

She clenched her hands into a fist and with a firmness, she turned quickly. She felt slightly dizzy but she held herself.

“Piyush! Tell me, can you touch me and not feel disgusted?” Her hands went to her throat, giving away her agitated mind. “Can you kiss me and not remember that I have been used and abused?” She saw him flinch. “Yes. Used, torn, hurt, poked, exploited and abused. I am filthy. Don’t you see that?” By now her tears were flowing nonstop. “You don’t even want me, Piyush. Love is not even a probability. What sort of a marriage do you expect this to be? I am scarred, broken beyond mending. You don’t want me in any way. All you want is to protect me, which you can do without marrying me. You are a young man. A sexless marriage is not what you want. I can give you only that, so please let’s forget this happened. I doubt your family will hold you against it.”

He only stared at her hard. She didn’t know what he was thinking and it was frustrating. She turned towards the door.

With a swiftness she didn’t expect, she felt his hands catch her wrist and pull her to him. She crashed right into his chest. The sudden movement made her feel light-headed. As she tried to push him away, his hands held her right there not letting her bring distance between. His eyes held hers, then they slid down to her lips that were now parted, trembling ever so slightly.

His eyes looking at her lips made her stomach to do a flip. Almost in slow motion, he bent to slightly brush his lips against hers. She gasped. She had expected his lips to crash hard on hers. Instead, his lips brushed against hers softly, once and then twice. He waited for her to push him away. Instead her hands clutched his shirt into a fist. Encouraged, he pressed his lips to hers, softly letting her get the feel. His lips pressed into the corner of her mouth and then slowly captured her upper lip in his and pulled it softly. She took an audible breath. Then his teeth did the same to her lower lips. On its own accord, her body pressed itself against him. Her hands loosened on his shirt. His lips now possessed hers with confidence. They tasted her, devoured her.

She felt him pull at the very soul of hers. She didn't realise that her arms had gone around his neck and her fingers were clutching his silky hair as his kiss became deeper.

He slowly released her lips and nipped them, and kissed the corner of her lips one last time. She almost sagged into his arms. She let her head rest on his shoulder, hiding her face from him. His hand was on her waist, one on her bare midriff. She felt an odd pull in her lower abdomen. The healing muscles hurt a little at the contraction, and she flinched. He tipped her chin up and looked at her dazzled eyes.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It hurts a bit"

"Where?"

She lowered her eyes. She moved her hand to the lower abdomen.

He smiled, "Do you know why?"

She remained quiet.

He knew she had the same idea. He let her head rest on his shoulder and lowered his head so that his lips brushed her ears lightly. "Your body wants more than a kiss, Honey! But your body needs rest and I can wait till you are ready. But I guess I have answered the main question. Pressing her against him so she could feel his need for her, he said, "I have found you beautiful from the time I saw you ... let's say...since I saw you without make-up. And I don't find you disgusting. Why should I? What happened to you is an accident, and you are healing. And those monsters are the ones that are disgusting and filthy. Why should you feel filthy or dirty? They should feel that. I will make you forget everything and start afresh with me. I want to live a life with you. A full-fledged marriage. Why should I or you compromise? We will lead a healthy life. And as far as love is concerned, we can let it happen slowly. And believe me honey, you are very easy to love."

## Chapter 8

The day went by in a haze. She saw the curious but warm pairs of eyes on her the whole day. Everyone came to congratulate them once they had signed the paper. Soon, Gayatri hushed the excited Verma Clan and got them to gather in the living room where she asked the newly married couple to exchange garland and rings. She was surprised when the ring fit her perfectly. She never knew when he took her size. Gayatri gave the *mangalsutra* to Piyush to put it around Sunaina's neck. Sunaina felt as if she was out of her body and watching everything unfold in front of her. He applied a little *sindoor* at the beginning of her hairline where her hair parted. She smiled and talked but almost in automation as the whole family was excited to have a new member. She was surprised how everyone accepted her as one among them. Slowly, she started feeling tired and exhausted, though everyone made sure she was seated and not exerting much. As she was sitting on the couch Raj came and sat by her side. She tried to get up but he motioned her to sit and sat next to her.

"Welcome to our family dear!"

She smiled and thanked him.

"So, when are you coming back to the office?"

"In a few days I hope. I can't be confined to a house, doing nothing. As soon as my health permits, I will join back." She, herself was surprised at her response. Then shaking out of her thoughts she looked at Raj. She had always adored and idolised him and she was surprised to see that he was so down-to-earth and approachable.

"I liked your ideas for the new project. I like the way you incorporated the environment friendly concept into it. Rainwater harvesting, waste and water recycling, everything was put in the design. Especially the placement of the windows and the patio utilising natural light to the maximum; that was the winning point."

She blushed at his compliment.

"Uncle, are you stealing my girl?" Piyush came and sat on the arm-rest next to her, pulling her to his frame.

Raj smiled and said, "I wish she was that easy to steal, son. Take care of her, boy. She is one heck of a talented architect. Help her get well soon and bring her back to the office."

Piyush smiled and tightened his hold around her, his pride obvious on his face. He looked at her and kissed her by the side of her forehead. There was a surprise on Raj's face and the silence around brought Sunaina's attention to the people and she realised that almost all eyes were on them. She blushed and Piyush chuckled. She was surprised at his public display of affection. She still felt his imprint on her lips. She let her fingers brush her lips reliving the earlier kiss. His hands on her shoulder tightened. She had to crane her neck to look at his face as he sat high on the armrest. His brows were raised and a wicked tilt of his lips told her that he knew what she had been thinking about. His hands moved up to her neck in a smooth caress and her lips parted as his thumb caressed the sensitive skin behind her ears. Unknowingly, her body leaned towards him, resting her weight on him.

Once the dinner was over, Mia came to them and said, "I will take Sunaina upstairs and help her change. You can join her in a few minutes."

"Mom, I can take her."

Mia's face changed into alarm. "I- I don't want you to scare her. She is still recuperating, son. So, I don't want you..."

Piyush looked at his mom. "Mom, I took care of her too, so I know. She is safe with me. I wouldn't do anything to hurt her or scare her. Ok?"

"I think he is right." Dia told Mia. They had not seen Dia joining them. "He has been with her, helping her, nursing her. He will take care of her." Mia still had a frown on her face. "Give him credit for his sensitivity, sis!" Dia said. Mia finally nodded reluctantly.

Piyush turned to see Sunaina trying hard to keep her eyes open. She needed to rest.

"Sunaina." Piyush called her name.

"Hmm..." She slightly opened her eyes and smiled sleepily. "Sorry! I can't keep my eyes open."

He smiled and let his one arm slide down the back of her knees while his other hand supported her back. She didn't resist. He lifted her up into his

arms and held her close. He could see the relief on Mia's face. He smiled and bade everyone a good night and Sunaina too said good night in her tired voice.

Watching the newly married couple go to their room, Suhaan came to his eldest sister.

"You have brought him up well." Mia smiled, with a slight doubt still lingering on her face. "I hope she won't feel intimidated."

Suhaan looked confused. "Why do you think she will be intimidated?"

"She is entitled to fear men after what happened to her."

Then as realisation dawned, Suhaan was shocked. "It's her?"

Mia nodded.

"God! Did you tell Piyush to be cautious with her? It's only been a few days. Sis, do you want me to go and talk with him?"

Mia smiled and patted her brother's strong arm. "No. He would be fine. I trust him. He will be cautious. It's just that I don't want Sunaina to be on edge; she is still recovering. Thank God, her doctor ruled out the need for an operation. We were getting worried about her health."

"We do have a great family.", Suhaan said. His pride in his family, and especially his nephew, was evident on his face.

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Piyush placed Sunaina softly on his own bed. "Welcome to your room, wife!"

She smiled. She wanted to say something, talk to him, but her eyes were drifting shut.

Piyush watched his wife. She was almost out. The medicines were doing their job. Amidst the chaos, Mia had made sure she took her medicine on time. He smiled. She was his wife now. He somehow felt an odd lightness. He had his other half with him. It was not based on passionate love but he respected her strength, her talent, and her clarity of thoughts. She was an asset to him as well as for his firm. But after having known her for the past few days, even though they were a low phase in her life, he had seen her strength and resilience. She was not only perfect for him but for the family as well. It had

not taken long for him to decide how to end her conflict of leaving for some rape crisis centre.

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Piyush had shifted her belongings to his room earlier. He wanted to make her feel so secure and comfortable with him that maybe, one day, they would start to love each other as well.

Piyush was sitting next to Sunaina, working on his laptop. He wore a black t-shirt coupled with grey and black checked Pyjamas. She looked at him. He was so big and handsome. Long chiselled face, square jaws, thick brows, a thin upper lip, a prominent lower lip, an arrogant tilt to his head as he was deep in thought made him very attractive. She wished she was not damaged as she was, physically and mentally.

As if sensing her eyes on him he turned, tilting his head a little more. His lips curved into a smile.

“Hey, sleepy-head.” His hands tousled her hair which was spread on the pillow. He had always wanted to see her hair spread on his pillow for him to play with. He chuckled. Now he had a lifetime to do just that.

Sunaina realised that she was wearing a loose t-shirt that was not her own. It was big as well as loose and to her mortification, she was wearing only the t-shirt and her panties. She curled up a little under her blanket. She was conscious of her state of undress

Piyush saw her blushing and leaned towards her very slowly. She held her breath. He kissed her forehead slightly and she could feel his heat coming closer and closer. His lips slowly slid to the side of her forehead placing a kiss there, then it moved to her ear lobes placing a kiss there, and then it moved to kiss her just under her ear.

“The blushing bride!” He said with a smile when she took an audible breath. “Do you know how beautiful you looked today in that saree? Why are you so surprised?” he asked.

Sunaina swallowed hard. “No one has ever said such things to me before. Is this flirting?” Her eyes were wide as she looked at him with wonder.

It was his turn to frown. He raised his brows and said, “Honey! That was just sweet talk.”



He looked at her—the confident and extremely efficient fresher with a face plastered with paint is now more than just that to him. She was his wife now. He had seen her in lots of situations and moods. When she was scared, worried, hurt, in pain and even when she was smiling and happy or dazzled and confused like she was now. He wanted to see her in throes of passion. *But that can wait. He had all the time in the world*, he thought. But he can give her a big dose of sweet talk and dollops of flirting in the meanwhile. He smiled wickedly as he felt so good. She acted so mature in office. Now he was seeing the naïve side of her that he loved teasing.

She was engulfed in his arms. His elbows were on her sides and his face was only inches away from hers, but he made sure that his weight didn't press against her. She could still feel his warmth yet their bodies were not in contact. He inhaled her scent, his face almost nestled in the nook of her neck. Her hands clutched the pillow tightly, holding her breath.

“Breathe!” He nuzzled her. She took an audible breath. Then she flinched as her lower abdomen tightened. He felt her flinch. “Sorry!” he said.

“Why?”

“Your body is still regaining its strength. I forgot in my playful mood.”

She looked at him oddly. *That was just his playful mood?*

“Why?”

He frowned at her repeating the question, but her voice had gone softer.

“Why what?” he asked.

“Why did you marry me?”

He smiled at her precise question. “Because I want to be the one to bring a smile to your lips. I want to be the one to touch you and your soul. I want to be the one to flirt with you and teach you all about making love.” He continued as her eyes became as wide as saucers. “I want to be the one, only one.”

She gasped. She didn't want to believe a single word but his face was serious. She couldn't let herself believe all that he was saying. “You don't love me.” It was more of a statement.

“No, maybe not yet. But I care for you. I feel protective of you. I want to be

all the things I said earlier and yes, I am attracted to you. You are a beautiful and an intelligent woman. I want you. I can give you the proof but I don't want to scare you. And trust me we have all the time in the world to reach that stage of our life. Besides, I'm in no hurry." He smiled wickedly.

## Chapter 9

Sunaina had had enough. She couldn't let this continue. If he had someone in his life she wanted it cleared now. She already had her burden to bear. Piyush had asked her to file a complaint against her stepfather. She had pushed the subject away for some other day. It has been three months since their marriage and Piyush has avoided her for the last two months. He took all the official trips outside Bangalore and at times even outside India. When home, he made sure he came so late so that she had slept and even then, mostly she found him sleeping on the couch in the study. Nobody mentioned a word, but everyone had noticed.

She was going regularly for her counselling. For the first few appointments Piyush had accompanied her. But slowly he had stopped coming and now made sure to keep his distance. She was sorry for that day when everything had come crashing down.

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She was leaving the office a few weeks after their marriage, and Piyush had gone for a meeting with a client at another location. Since Sujal had gone to the office that day she had left the office early, saying that she would wait by the car. As she reached the car, she noticed her father and four of his friends standing there. She felt the hair on the nape of her neck stand up. Were these the people who had hurt her? She was drugged that night and didn't remember their faces, though the pain was still vivid.

"Where are you staying?" her father asked.

She couldn't believe he would still have the courage to even talk with her.

"None of your business." she retorted.

He came towards her, his manner menacing. "You are my daughter. I have every right to know. Just because you are an adult legally, you cannot decide about your life."

"I already have. And it's none of your business." She said firmly, though she could feel the fear grip her heart.

One of the guys had an odd glint in his eyes as he started moving towards her. She cringed and moved back and felt the cold metal of the car press

against her back.

Suddenly they heard voices coming closer.

“Next time I will make sure that we are not interrupted.” her step-father threatened.

And before she knew they left. When Sujal came, she was still plastered to the side of the car, her face was pale and her body was shaking like a leaf.

Sujal knew something has spooked her. Then he noticed the men walking away in a hurry. He quickly helped Sunaina into the car. Following the men would have been futile. He made a note to check with the security how these men could enter the car park of the tower.

That night Sunaina did not eat her dinner properly. Dia and Mia looked worried but they didn't ask anything. After tossing and turning a lot, she took the tablet her doctor had given her to help her sleep. She finally slipped into a disturbed sleep.

*She saw them burst into the room. She couldn't move. She was sure her father had drugged her. Was it through food or water? Groggily, she looked up and found some stranger, “No!” she screamed.*

*She tried to close everything out but then she felt an arm around her. Trying to make herself invisible, she balled up in a foetal position. Then she felt hands graze her breast. She pushed with all her might and jumped from the bed.*

Feeling disoriented, she tried to find her way to the door. She was scared; she didn't want that kind of pain again. She wanted to have a normal life with Piyush. Where was he? Why was he not here? Then she heard him calling her name. Turning slowly, she saw him dishevelled, wearing a t-shirt and pyjama.

She heaved a sigh of relief and comfort as soon as she saw him. But she witnessed pain in his eyes.

They heard a knock and Piyush got up to open the door. Mia, Dia and Sujal stood there.

“We heard a scream and came running.” Sujal said, worried.

The reality came crashing down on her, along with heartache. *What had she*

*done?* She had just pushed away her support her comfort system. She had started to have feelings for Piyush and she didn't want to hurt him. She looked at him, pleading forgiveness. He looked almost sad.

"She would prefer your company than mine, mom." Without looking back, Piyush left the room.

Her eyes were brimming with unshed tears. She looked broken and exhausted. "I pushed him..." She started sobbing. "I...I was having a nightmare."

Sujal came in. He patted her head then placed his hand on her shoulder. "Did the men in the parking lot trigger it?"

Her eyes grew wide with fear. He didn't ask more because he already got his answer. He helped her to her bed. Mia said that she would sleep with Sunaina in the room.

After that night, Sunaina had tried many times to explain but Piyush always excused himself before she could. The distance between them grew bigger and bigger.

Today she was at her limits. If he didn't want her in his life, she would leave. But she couldn't live like strangers under the same roof.

He came by 11:30 pm. She heard him but she wanted to give him time to freshen up. She lay still, knowing well that if he noticed that she is awake, he will find an excuse to leave the room. He came out from the shower in his fresh pyjamas and t-shirt.

She was sitting on the couch, waiting for him. She looked determined.

He didn't say a word and was about to leave, when she said, "I want an advocate."

He stopped. He hadn't expected that.

"Advocate? For what?" Piyush asked.

She did not elaborate.

He thought that she wanted to leave behind her past and was seeking justice for the crimes against her.

"I am glad that you have planned to move on. You are a strong woman, Sunaina. You will finally have closure. I will inform my advocate to contact

you tomorrow.”

She stood up with a start. She had just thrown something to stir him up. *But he wanted a divorce!* She felt pain seize her heart. A sob escaped her lips.

He looked at her surprised. Her tears were unshed, her pain so tangible. She was still in pain from all that had happened, he thought. He didn't want her to push him away again in fear like that night. It's better he left and sent his mom or aunt to check on her. He started to leave the room when in one quick movement she came in front of him and blocked the way.

“Is there someone else?”

“Someone else?” he asked, confused.

“Yes. Is that why you are so eager to get a divorce from me?”

He took a step back as if she had slapped him.

“Or- or why would you agree to send the advocate?” she concluded.

Everything started falling into place. She wanted a divorce. That's why she asked for an advocate and to make it worse she doubted he was having an affair.

*'Damn!'* He had thought that he was giving her some space. Then a scary thought came into his mind. *Did she move on? Has she met someone?* With one quick move, his hands held her arms in steel-like grip,

“Have you?” If there was someone else in the picture, Sujal would have noticed it and informed him. That night he had promised himself that he wouldn't touch her until she took the initiative. He frowned as he remembered how Sujal had supported her. He actually had left Sujal to be there with her. “Sujal?” He didn't realise he had spoken it out aloud.

Her face held the pain his fingers were giving her and she frowned as she heard him.

“What do you mean? And what with Sujal?”

“Is it Sujal?” he asked again.

She looked confused at first and then understood what he meant. She tried to free herself from his strong grip.

“How dare you?” She finally managed to released her hand and hit him on

his shoulder. The first two times he took the hit but the third time she tried to hit him, he clutched her wrists.

“How dare ‘I’?” His voice shook with fury. She could feel the anger pulsing through his body. “You ask for an advocate so that you can divorce me and lead a life with my cousin?” She tried to escape, her tears already flowing without any barricade.

## Chapter 10

“You...you really think that?” her voice broke but he held her tight. She tried to leave. That was the final blow for her. She couldn’t stay with him if he had such a bad opinion about her. “Let me go, Piyush.”

He pulled her closer and plastered her to him but she still struggled. He realised that her struggle was unlike the few times he had seen her scared and surrendered to the violence she thought was coming. She was not scared of him. She trusted him enough to know that he would not harm her. An odd peace came over him but immediately he remembered.

“Then why do you want a divorce from me?”

Her eyes were too full of tears to see his face clearly. “Don’t humiliate me more.” She tried to free herself. “Let me go Piyush.” She was sobbing.

“I humiliated you? You are planning to leave me and you say I humiliate you.”

She was losing her energy. He could feel her struggle becoming weak.

“Please!” Her voice was barely a whisper. She finally let her head rest on his shoulder. “Don’t do this. Just say the words and I will leave you in peace,” she said.

“What words?”

“That you have someone in your life and I am no longer welcome.” She struggled with her sobs. “I am sorry I put you in such a position – a complete meaningless marriage.”

His hands tightened around her. The whole conversation was going over his head.

“Why do you think ours is a meaningless marriage? And why do you think there is someone else in my life?”

Her hands clutched his t-shirt tightly. It was difficult for her to even think of him with another woman. She lifted her head and looked at him.

“Am I so disgusting that you couldn’t be anywhere near me?”

He felt the pain emanating from her ram into his chest. *‘Was that what she had thought when he kept his distance?’* How could he have not seen that? He



couldn't allow her to have such a wrong notion. If there was a way to salvage their marriage he was up for it. He wouldn't surrender without a fight. He had to try one last time.

"I gave you space to adjust to my presence around you."

"Space?" She almost spat the words. "By moving away from me? I tried to explain why I got scared. You never allowed me. I am married to you. I wanted your presence, the security 'YOU' provide me, not Sujal's. He was trying to make sure I was fine because he knows something scared me that day. And even more because he was worried I might lapse back into severe depression."

"Which day?" Of course. She meant the day she had hurt his feelings by pushing him away. Then he remembered how Sujal had come to tell him she was worried about something that happened in the parking lot, the same night she had pushed him. He had been too furious to hear anything.

She felt awkward about that day. She had cursed that day again and again for the past two months. She missed Piyush's presence, his comfort, his warmth, his smile, his voice, his closeness. She just missed him terribly. He made her crazy by his absence. It was like she was in love with him.

She reached out and her hands caressed his cheek. He tilted his head to let his stubble graze her soft skin. Her audible intake of breath made him want to let his lips take over, but he had to wait to clear the muddle that was his own making. But one thing was as clear as the daylight. He affected her just as she affected him. There was no one else. He was stupid to consider such a notion even for a moment.

"Which day are you talking about?"

She shook her head to clear her mind. *She loved him. There was no doubt about it.*

"The day I pushed you away." she paused, but she had to tell him. "In the office parking lot, my father and his friends were waiting for me. He threatened me.

I was afraid to see them all there. I realised they..." she took a deep breath. He shook her so that she was looking at him. "Listen! They violated you, that was not your mistake. They are sick. You don't have to feel disgusted or bad

about yourself. Do you really think that would make me feel disgusted? Damn it! Girl, look at me. I..." His voice broke, the realization that he loved her was a shock to him as much as it was going to be for her. "I love you."

She looked at him and all her emotions were evident in her eyes. She tried to smile but a sob escaped her lips. *Did he really say that...and mean it? Do I deserve this kind of happiness?*

"It is me who doesn't deserve to be with this strong, beautiful and loving woman."

She had not realised that she had spoken her thought out aloud until he said that. She tried to control her tears but they had their own will tonight.

He looked at her face, tears flowing without a pause. One moment he was looking at her and the other his lips closed on hers, reverently. She let her lips feel the devotion of his lips and then she couldn't let hers be a silent participant. She had her own tasting to do.

Sunaina tasted him and he let her. This was a new side of her that he was experiencing. She nibbled his lips and nipped them, mimicking what he had done the day they got married. With a content curve on his lips, he helped her deepen the kiss. Soon, they both were lost to the world, but finally they had to come up to take a breath.

"Stop, Sunaina! Or I will not be able to stop with just a kiss."

"Who wants you to stop, damn it? It's high time you stop teasing me and show me what this hue and cry about making love is."

He chuckled hearing her scintillating words in a raspy voice. He was falling in love with her even more. Pulling her so that every inch of her body was plastered to his, he made her aware of every contour that existed. He watched her reaction and saw the colour rise on her cheeks when she realised his arousal.

"Don't you think we have to get rid of the barriers between us?"

She looked at him with a little fear and a little anticipation. He smiled and leaned forward to nuzzle under her ear, and placed a kiss. He lifted her easily in his arms and carried her to the bed and placed her on it softly. Her breathing grew heavier and she clutched the pillow and the sheet. She anticipated his touch any moment but was confused when none came. She

opened her eyes and blushed upon seeing him watch every contour of her body with rapt attention. Then his nimble fingers eased her of the barriers he had complained of earlier. Her green nightie out of the way, his eyes took in the beautiful creature on his bed. She tried to ball up with shame but he held her arms above her head and shook his head.

Sunaina tried to turn away to hide as she felt completely exposed, but his other hand held her thighs, stopping her from turning away. Her lips parted as her skin sang for more of his touch. Before she could comprehend, her hands eased from his hold above her head and pulled him to her as she buried her face into his chest. She realised that since she was so exposed, it was fair for her to demand the same and without a single word her fingers fumbled to pull his t-shirt out of the way. He helped in pulling it out of the way and he made it easier for her by easing off the pyjama he was wearing.

He paused to let her eyes have her fill. She felt a shiver run down her body. Sunaina wet her lips with a slight fear in her eyes. She looked up into his eyes, her eyes giving away her fear. Slowly bending to kiss her forehead he whispered, “Do you trust me?”

“With my life.” she answered.

With his fingers under her chin, he tilted her head and his lips brushed against her brows. She lifted her face for more contact and his lips were equally eager to do the honours.

Moving back a little, he let his eyes feast over her body. She had not bothered with her brassiere and he devoured her womanly curves, her flat stomach and her butter soft skin shining in the soft illumination of the room with his eyes. His hands cupped her squirming waist and becoming conscious of her naked form she tried to cover her chest.

“Shhh...No...Let me...”

She looked into his eyes which were now feasting over every inch of her body and she closed them.

“No!”, he said shaking his head with a soft smile on his lips, “look at me... See how my eyes want to devour you, how it wants to hold the very vision of you. See how drugged I am by your beauty.” His deep husky voice made her skin tingle with anticipation. It was as if his voice was making love to her.

“Piyush....” Her husky voice was driving him mad. He feared that just her voice was enough to finish him off even before it began. He couldn’t let that happen, could he? He chuckled at his feelings. With the limited experience he had, he knew that his partner’s satisfaction was equally important. He wanted to love Sunaina to the core; love her body, mind, and soul. His own satisfaction was no longer a priority.

Piyush let his weight press her against the mattress. She gasped at the feel of him against her skin. His weight on her made her stomach crumble with desire. Unsure, her hands slowly touched the side of his torso. Feeling the strong muscle tighten under her touch, knowing he was equally affected by her, made her even bolder.

“You work out.” It was more of a statement than a question. He knew she had never seen him working out. He did try to find some time to keep his body fit. It was easy for him to go from fit to fat so he maintained his working out hours.

She let her fingers explore the muscles on his back. He gave her some time to explore.

“My turn.” And quickly he let his fingers do the exploring too. She felt herself melt in his arms. She never realised her skin was so sensitive. Every new touch made her body jump, as one shock wave after the other was sent to her brain. Before she realised, he had found her sweetest spot of all. Without giving her a moment to grasp, he started pleasuring her.

Her brain was still revelling in these new sensations flowing through her body and suddenly she felt an intense sensation building up. She wanted to scream but not yet. Her clenched fist opened and hit the bed with unknown desperation and the other hand clutched his hair. He looked up at her upturned head without breaking the contact. Her body was arching, struggling to hold the sensation. And finally, with a hoarse cry, she let her body spasm in wave after wave of pleasure. Tears escaped her eyes as her body lay limp after his love making.

Piyush caressed her smooth abdomen and her body jerked at the contact and then relaxed. He let his hands caress her as he felt her body rest after her first experience of pleasure. Her eyes were closed and he noticed the tears trickling down her eyes.

“Su...Su...” he called her. He pulled her into his arms. “God! Did I hurt you?”

After the initial ecstasy of giving her pleasure, he was now scared to death now after witnessing her tears. He cradled her head to his chest, “Su... Say something. Please open your eyes. Wake up! You are scaring me!” He straightened up and cupped her face with one hand. “Please...” He begged. *Did he hurry in making love to her?* He held her to his chest. Nothing had felt more important to him than her well-being. He hated for having stayed away from her for this long. He was wrong to think distance will help her be comfortable with his presence and now he had pushed her to let him make love to her. He was worse than those monsters who at least stayed true to their existence. And he turned out to be a monster disguised in a sheep’s skin. He loathed himself. She had lost consciousness, may be due to pain. Then he felt her stir. He blinked, did he just imagine her move or did she really move?

She opened her eyes. She had heard him call, but it was as though he stood far away waiting for her to be back. With his skilful love making, he had sent her to heaven and she felt satiated. She didn’t understand why he sounded so worried. She looked up at his worried face. She let her hands touch his rough cheeks. “I was in heaven.”

“What?” He frowned. *What did she mean by that?* “Did I hurt you?”

It was her turn to frown at his question. “What do you mean by hurting me?” Shaking her head in confusion she looked at him, “I thought I experienced pleasure; my first.”

He looked at her, trying to grasp what she just said. She had said she experienced her first orgasm and she almost lost consciousness. He chuckled and then laughed throwing his head backwards and gathered her close to his heart. “My little lady, that’s called *la petite mort*. And here I was, worried witless that I have hurt you.” He pressed his lips to her forehead.

Sunaina straightened in his arms and held his face in her small hands. She kissed his prominent nose and let her lips trail upwards to his thick brows and kissed the eyes that had made love to every inch of her skin. She no longer shied away and kissed his lips. She nipped his thin upper lip followed by his fuller lower lip. His hands spanned her thin waist. Her smooth skin was taunting him. He couldn’t stop from caressing the creamy smoothness of her skin, slowly letting his fingers find the way to her firm breast, weighing and

feeling them against his palms. She kissed the side of his face as she revelled at the feel of his hands on her breast. She raised herself on her knees and he watched mesmerised as her body moved closer, giving access to his mouth to taste the offering. She gasped at the first feel of his mouth on her buds.

Arching her back, she gave him more access. He lifted her and slowly made her straddle him. She gasped and opened her eyes but his mouth didn't let go of the perky mounds and ever so slowly he lowered her until they were one. His head rested in the smooth valley between her perky breast. She was a sight to behold—her eyes were closed, her lips parted as she placed her hands on his shoulder. She moved ever so lightly. It was a torture for him to hold still when she was trying to feel him. He grunted as she moved again. She opened her eyes and sighed.

“It's... so perfect...” her husky voice was pushing him to the brink.

“This is where... we belong, with each other... fused for life... as husband and wife... as man and woman... as lovers... as soulmates- forever.” He had to struggle to let every single word out of his mouth as she continued moving. Then he no longer could be a silent partner. “I can't hold for longer, honey.” He grunted again, “I am going to move. Tell me if it hurts...” And he moved slowly, holding her waist, letting her adjust. Steadily, he increased the tempo their bodies dancing together rhythmically, and she threw her head back with passion, still gripping his shoulders. He wanted to let go of the reign he held on his passion, but this was new to her body and he wanted her to adjust to his need. Piyush felt her body tighten and soon they culminated their union together. She sagged onto him, her head nuzzling at his neck. Slowly, reverently, he eased her onto the bed. When he tried to get up, her soft and tired voice whispered a ‘no’, pulling him to her. He chuckled.

“I am not going anywhere my sweet. I need to pull the blanket. We pushed it on the floor.”

She smiled, only barely awake. Pulling the blanket over their naked bodies, he pulled her into his arms again, her head resting on his arms, as he held on to her and drifted to a blissful sleep.

He woke to find her space empty. An odd fear gripped him. *She wouldn't have-?*

“Su...” He pushed the door to the bathroom. She turned, startled. She stood there by the sink, her sleepy eyes, her tousled hair and her naked beautiful

body flushed, to prove their lovemaking. The sudden fear was soon engulfed by fierce wanting.

She didn't want to leave his warmth but she had to use the bathroom. His sudden bursting into the bathroom had startled her, but now seeing him like this, she felt her body craving to be claimed again by this man—her husband. She swallowed hard, looking at him standing by the door and his body giving away his need. He walked in, a glint of predatory instinct in the way he walked towards her, and the way he took in every contour of her appearance.

“Just say the word ‘no’ and I will go back, and we can continue just as we did earlier. Soft and slow love making in the confines of the bed. Or, I can take you right here against the wall with no pretences.” He watched if she was shocked or scared by his words.

She stood there surprised at his words, but was not frightened. She had only seen his soft side since he saw her battered in his office. She had seen his aggressiveness during projects but seeing him here like this, as her husband, the wild aggressive streak in him inflamed by their passionate lovemaking, she realised she wanted to witness this side too. It's the whole package she had fallen for.

“I hope you are not waiting for a printed invitation.”

A groan escaped his lips and before she knew, he had her up and pinned to the walls by the shower. He pulled her left leg to his side and he buried himself in her. She let out a content moan. This time he wanted to claim her raw, without the fear of breaking her. No more handling her with kids' gloves. He wanted to be with her and claim her with pure unrestrained passion. To his satisfaction, she let her legs wrap around him as he unleashed his passion and need.

“I love you.” She exclaimed, as they hit the pinnacle yet again. Her eyes were unashamedly shedding tears of fulfilment.

He looked at her tenderly. “Say that again.”

“I love you, Piyush Mauli, with the whole of my being. You complete me. I love you.”

What more could he have wanted? His lips captured the ones that had proclaimed her love for him.

She felt him tenderly take her back to bed.

“Are you ok?”

She smiled at his question.

“Did I hurt you? God, I don’t know what got into me. Not finding you by my side I rushed to the bathroom, fearing what I would see, and when I saw you standing there with your body flushed and your hair tousled like that, I just wanted to make wild love to you.”

“I’m glad you did that.” she said, with a shy smile playing across her lips as he held her to him. “I have seen your aggressive side in office and have been awed by your tenderness here at home. But now I know there is a wild aggressor in you whom I can easily fall in love with too.”

“And I thought you fell in love with the tender soft ogre who hovers around you.”

“Even I was under the same impression, though the ogre had stopped hovering around me for the past few months.”

He inhaled her fragrance. “I am sorry, I am sorry. I thought I was letting you adjust to my presence.”

“By distancing yourself?” she asked sarcastically.

“I know it all sounds stupid. But I felt torn when you pushed me away. I guess it left a big dent in my ego.”

“I’m sorry from the bottom of my heart.” She kissed him tenderly.

His hands tightened around her waist pulling her closer. She liked the feel of belonging to this man. Slowly she slipped into a peaceful slumber.

She felt a nuzzle under her ear. Smiling, she woke up. “Piyush!”

His hands tightened. He kissed the ear lobe, then her long neck. She was lying on her stomach and his arms draped around her,

“Sunaina”

“Hmmm?”

“When you mentioned an advocate, I thought it was to ask for advice regarding how to handle your step-father.”



She stiffened, then looked at him. “I- I can’t!” She saw the flash of anger in his eyes. “Please listen. I don’t want this to affect my sister – her future.”

He sat up, his fingers dug into her arms.

“You didn’t mention your sister even once. You left her there with that animal?” He spat at her. He didn’t expect that of her.

She shook her head her eyes clouded. “She is six years younger to me. She is his daughter.”

Piyush let out a controlled breath. “Woman! Animals like him don’t bother if it’s his daughter or not. You are his daughter too, although not biological. He couldn’t respect that relationship with you. How will he keep it with his daughter who is still so young?” He was becoming furious.

“Granny is always with her. Sunanda stays with her in our ancestral home since the last few years.”

“Then why were you not with her too?” He asked through his clenched teeth.

“She is Sunanda’s paternal grandmother.”

He didn’t say anything to that fact. He would never understand the difference. His family was wired that way. Here in Verma clan all that mattered was that they were one family. By relation, she was Sunaina’s grandmother too. He looked at her, even being with the so-called father and grandmother and sister, she had lived a life of an orphan. Always alone. Having a family, yet not being one among them. He pulled her back into his arms and kissed her hard.

“Such men are without morals. They are not to be trusted with anyone, not even their own daughters. I hope my fear doesn’t come true. But I can promise you one thing—you are never going to be alone again. No one is going to dare to hurt you again. You are mine to be loved and protected.” His arms tightened as his breath brushed against her lips.

“I didn’t know you were a hopeless romantic.” she teased him.

“Sorry to break your bubble, but that’s what you get in this life.”

“And for many more lives to come.” She completed his sentence, kissed him and added. “A promise of togetherness forever.”

## Epilogue

Sunaina finally felt relieved as she sat in the courtroom with Piyush's arm around her, supporting her. She had delayed this for too long but now there was nothing which held her back. And here she was, finally seeing it, that her culprits are where they belong— handcuffed and behind bars, facing charges of violent assault, rape and physical harm. She looked at her sister who looked so beautiful and so happy, sitting with her husband, his hand holding hers. *Her happy ending*, Sunaina thought. Life certainly was crazy. She thanked all the Gods she knew that her delayed decision regarding punishing these monsters hadn't produced another victim like her. She let her head rest on Piyush's shoulder. She couldn't wait to be back home to her sons, Kiran and Rishabh.

"I love you!" Piyush responded by kissing her head and tightening his hands on her shoulder. He was keeping his promise and she had absolutely no doubt that this togetherness was forever.

### A Request:

Thank you for taking the time to read ‘A Promise Togetherness Forever– Piyush and Sunaina’s Sanctum’, the second book of the Sanctum Series. If you enjoyed it, please consider telling your friends and posting a short review. I’d love to hear what you think. Word of mouth is an author’s best friend and would be much appreciated.

Please also consider leaving a star rating on Amazon and Goodreads. We authors really need that. One or Five...all star ratings are welcome and accepted humbly.

Reshma Ranjan

## ***About the Author:***

Reshma Ranjan is a passionate romantic who loves literature and has been driven by the romance around her. She has made up her own happy endings in her imagination for every movie and for every book with a sad ending.

“Slowly I started to create my own characters and situations, creating a world of romance and happy endings to my liking. But for my laziness, I would have penned umpteen numbers of stories with unexpected people meeting and falling in love and uniting for a lifetime.”

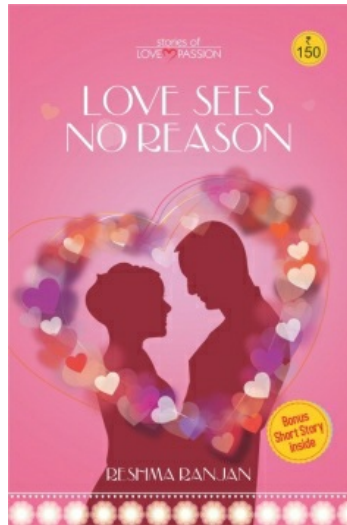
She is also a voracious reader without which she could never have started writing.

“If I can bring a smile and a happy sigh on at least one reader’s lips, I will feel as a blessed writer.”



## Other works by the author:

**Love Sees No Reason** (Romance Novella)



Sceptical of his twin brother Suraj's hasty marriage to a complete stranger Ria Nair, has made Suhaan suspicious about his brother's wife whom he has never met. The fact that the couple adopts a baby immediately after the wedding, only serves to increase his antagonism.

Who is this Ria, and why did she marry his brother?

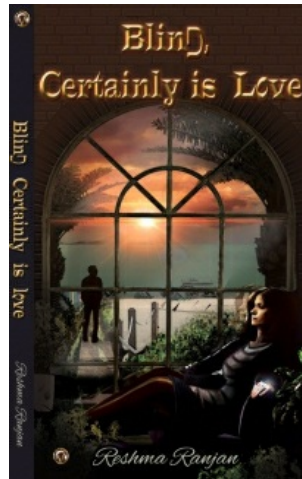
Suraj dies, forcing Suhaan to return to the homestead to take over the family business. That's when the inevitable happens – he comes face to face with his brother's widow and discovers that he is attracted to her.

On one level, Ria is all innocence and vulnerability. On another, is her mysterious and hurried marriage to his brother. She could be a gold digger.

Is his attraction for her mere lust – or could it be... love?

Universal buying link: [myBook.to/LSNRBook](http://myBook.to/LSNRBook)

**Blind, Certainly Is Love (Romance Novel)**



Neha Jaiswal is beautiful and intelligent—an alluring combination—but chooses to be a recluse. What works for her is her intimidating personality that comes with her success. With no desire to get into a relationship, the strong, assertive, and hardworking Neha manages to keep the men at bay—all except one.

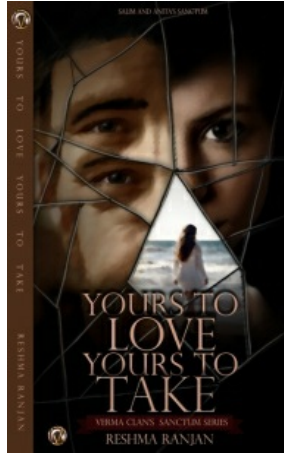
Sumit Conrad, a super successful businessman, is an intriguing specimen of a man. Known to the world as the good Conrad, Sumit is actually a recluse who prefers only his own company, with the exception of his brother John and sister-in-law Sarika.

When fate throws the flirt in Sumit and the furious Neha together, sparks are bound to fly. Will Sumit be able to convince the headstrong and opinionated Neha that what he wants is a long haul and not a passing phase?

Or will the stubborn and cantankerous Neha be successful in driving him away? Will their love make them blind to each other or to their own flaws? Will this blind love ever find its way?

Universal buying link: [myBook.to/BCIL](http://myBook.to/BCIL)

## **Yours To Love Yours To Take**



Salim and Anita's Sanctum Book 1 of Verma Clan's Sanctum Series (Romance Novel)

As if losing her parents and her voice in a childhood accident wasn't cruel enough, Anita Batra now has to come to terms with her twin's death and help her sister's partner get a new lease of life.

Adopted by the Verma Clan after his parents died in an accident, Dr. Salim Verma finally finds love and a chance to be happy only to lose it in an accident he himself survives.

When fate strikes a final blow and brings two strangers together, Salim can't help but punish Anita and make her tread through the hell he himself was in, while all Anita wants is to help her sister's partner start afresh, no matter what the cost.

Will Salim ever be able to ignore Anita's resemblance to his dead girlfriend and fall in love with her instead? Will Anita be able to reveal the real Salim hiding behind the monster? Will they be able to embrace their tumultuous attraction for each other despite their terrible start?

Yours To Love Yours To Take is a heart-warming saga of love and sacrifice that will reinstate your belief that love conquers all.

Universal buying link: [myBook.to/BCIL](http://myBook.to/BCIL)

**Marijuana Diaries** (Anthology)

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# **Between the pages...**

## **Meet the Editor:**

**Dola Basu Singh:** An expert in capturing the pulse of the characters and the world an author creates, she helps in making the book nearly perfect as an editor.

Contact her: <http://www.shiuli.com/editing-services>

## **Cover Illustration:**

**Sachin Venkatesh:** He likes to capture the fleeting moments of life. With every new cover he never fails to surprise you.

Contact him: <https://www.facebook.com/SachinVenkateshPhotography/>