

THE PERFECTLY *Imperfect* VACATION

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Stories Matter

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Ma, Baba, and Musto, my life revolves around you three.

Most importantly, the founder decided to leave a few sandy
coves here and there while creating the land and sea.

Chapter 1

We were about to board. Passengers had already started forming a line at the gate, and I kept hollering his name, but he was doing God knows what, talking to the lady at the coffee counter. He straightened his back, towering over her when she handed him a sealed bottle of water. He looked down at his hands, rotating the bottle and evaluating its quality from the brand name printed on its body. He always thought that he was too smart.

Ideally, he should have made the payment and rushed back to me, but rather, he planted his legs slightly apart and stood his ground. The woman was not in a hurry. Clearly, there were no other customers to cater to. Her ponytail, bound high on her svelte build, bobbed when he said something, and in response, she flashed a dimple. In another world, I would have liked her. She was what one would refer to as winsome. Round eyes, rosy cheeks, and a small heart-shaped face. That said, I detested the way the tips of her ears had gone pink. If someone asked me how I could see that standing at such a distance, my answer would be that it is a gifted inherent ability all living wives possess.

I called out to him several times, but my husband kept talking to her, laughing his heart out. The woman echoed. She certainly enjoyed the company. Her eyes gleamed in wonder as if I had relayed some of my saintly wisdom. Others found it saintly, but I knew better. Listen to him the second time, and you would know it was nothing but banal. This is the trade secret of his charm.

I waved my hands to send him a signal, but the throng of people milling around obstructed his view of me.

Looking behind my shoulder, I saw the line moving forward slowly, and I prayed that he would get back before it got thinner, before the final call was made. I glanced at my watch, which suggested that we were way ahead of our scheduled departure time, but you never know when the airline decides to start early.

The display board flashed our flight number along with its current status, which had changed from 'Security' to 'Boarding', and from the way the crowd kept clearing from near the gate, it was soon going to flash the sign of 'Gate closed' on our face.

At one point, I thought I should march up to him and drag him back, but my feet felt plastered to the ground, unable to move. I tried to lift one foot to check, but somehow, all of a sudden, it felt heavy. And now both of them. It was as if my weight was yanking me down into the earth, to its core. I opened my mouth to shout at him. A small squeak, similar to a whistle, erupted. At least this could draw his attention, but he just looked past me as if he heard a distant sound and then went back to the intense discussion he was having with the new-found company. What if I was the only one who heard my voice? There was too much noise to distinguish a particular person's voice. I waved again, stretching my hands as far up as they could go. What if he could not see me either?

Anything could be possible, looking at the way my body was betraying me. My brain buzzed. The heaviness in my feet and my potential invisibility confused each cell in my body.

The woman in her navy-blue uniform, who was shouting instructions and zipping passengers out to the empty bus that stood waiting for the remaining ones, gave me a skeptical look. Her eyeballs stealthily glided toward the two passes I was holding. I decided to spare her the unpleasant effort of pointing out when I spoke for myself: “I am waiting for my husband. He’s just coming shortly.” She averted her gaze and scanned the remaining tickets.

Thus, my shouts remained unheeded, my pleadings unanswered, and we missed the flight.

An alarm went off in the distance. It was so loud that people started scattering and running in every direction, their screams ricocheting off the huge glass walls of the airport. My heart leapt into my throat. A boy with a burger in his hand and headphones looped around his head bumped into me and left a slice of cheese on the sleeve of my dress. “What the...” I called out after him. He stumbled and hit his knee on the steel armrest of a chair when he heard the words but then immediately vanished into the chaos.

I strained my neck to look back at the magnitude of the damage, and oh God, it was bad. My beautiful green flared dress now had a stain resembling a puppy’s paw, and I abhorred the idea of carrying it throughout the air journey.

Another woman hit my shoulder while trying to pass through the crowd. “I’m so sorry” she said, shooting me an apologetic look. I nodded chivalrously and stepped aside to give her a wide berth. This proves that the immobility and invisibility were momentary.

I let out a sigh. But then I saw her child with his face resting on her shoulder. She scowled at me for no apparent reason. Her cute little cherry-like face then cracked into the grin of a labubu doll. Weirdo. Her mother hit me. What was my fault in all this?

The alarm blared repeatedly. I stood at the same point, my gaze sweeping in all directions, searching for my husband's familiar face. I was scared. He should have been here with me, allaying my fears and protecting me. However, I had no idea where he was. The counter at which he was standing was now vacant. The lady also gone. Maybe fled somewhere. I pressed my palms against my ears to dampen the sound. However, the ground beneath me still vibrated with the sound of the alarm, alerting me of its existence.

The next time it went off, the sound was different, more like a melodious bell. Instead, it was the sound of a bird. This was accompanied by a loud knock.

My eyelids fluttered open as I woke up. The doorbell kept ringing incessantly as if a frustrated soul waited outside and would barge in anytime if the door was not opened soon. I sat upright, attempting to make sense of my surroundings. The room revolved around me as an effect of my abrupt awakening. I wiped the drool stain from my chin that might have dripped during the intense dream of the missed flight with the sleeve of my nightshirt.

Jumping off the bed, I scurried towards the door, praying all the way and thanking God that it was merely a dream and not reality. I opened it slightly to see a tall figure standing there, his sky-blue shirt drenched in sweat from the collar to the waist. My brain said he looked somewhat like the man I had encountered in

my dream a while ago. The man then shook me by the shoulders and brought his mouth closer to mine to say something.

That was when I actually jolted awake from my dreams. This was my husband, and that was a dream, which meant we did not miss our flight. Great!

"Will you let me inside please, I need some sleep, haven't slept the whole night." He shouted again in my face, which made me stagger backward. He walked into the living room and dropped his bag on the sofa.

I rubbed the sleep off my eyes while he trotted towards the bedroom without another word.

"Didn't you...? Forget it." Ronit usually took an overnight bus, but at the same time, he mostly got a sound sleep. I left the question hanging, incomplete, and convinced myself that the look of enervation was just to manipulate me into doing all the packing by myself.

In the kitchen, I tore a sachet of vanilla coffee, poured it and some hot water into the cup, and doused my slumber with the aroma that permeated. The cup had my name on it. 'Shreya' it said in bold and cursive, a birthday gift from my best friends who were also my colleagues at office.

One sip of the drink made me close my eyes in relief, and I was all set to open my daily journal and make a note of all the things that I needed to accomplish today, including managing my husband.

A loud piercing music broke out from the bedroom, and I spilled some coffee on my shirt. Fortunately, it was just my shirt and not the journal where I maintained the TO-DO list of my life.

Every minute task was entered into the pages along with a time stamp.

For example,

- Brush your teeth – 6:35 am – 6:40 am
- Make and have coffee – 6:40 am – 7 am
- Freshen up – 7 am – 7:30 am
- Yoga – 7:30 am – 7:50 am
- Breakfast – 7:50 am – 8:00 am
- Audiobook while on commute – 8:30 am – 9:00 am
- Review meets with the team – 9:30 am – 10:00 am
- Working on the policy document – 10:10 am – 10:30 am
- Chatting with my fellow colleagues – 10:30 am – 10:40 am
- Reworking my presentation slides – 10:40 am – 11:15 am and so on.

The unaccounted time called for some rest for my nervous system without any deviation. Until now, I have managed to successfully adhere to the strict time management rules I had made for myself.

"Old kid" I mumble. He said he was going to sleep, but I knew better, fully aware of his traits in the past seven years of our relationship. A kid I could not even punish the way I wanted to, and even if I thought of doing that, he would give me that sheepish adorable smile that would melt me, and my anger would diffuse.

I released a breath, blowing away the loose hair that kept entering my eyes, and sat back on the sofa with my cup of coffee and the journal. The day was going to be long, and I needed all the strength in the universe I could muster.

I removed the cap of the pen with my teeth and held it there while jotting down items on my checklist. ‘Catch a flight’, the last entry said. I underlined it. After a six-month-long preparation, we were finally ready for our first wedding anniversary. Tickets were booked, accommodation was sorted, and all thanks to my husband. My role in the entire plan was another checklist, which was an extremely important part of the trip. This included the itinerary, activities, and moments to be captured.

We had been married for a year but still craved each other’s company. A long-distance relationship of six years gave way to a long-distance marriage. Rare but happened. Our jobs ensured so. If one could believe it, I had a calendar too where a few dates had been marked, circled with green pens. These were the days I had planned for us to meet. We made sure we did everything that any normal couple madly in love would do. This included at least three passionate kisses around the clock, curling up in each other’s arms while watching an evening movie, and treating each other with cozy snacks and a romantic dinner night.

So was today when we decided to take a six-day trip to a beach destination of his choice. We both loved beaches and, in the early days of our relationship, we always dreamed of building a hut right on a cliff surrounded by pastures on either side.

Not worrying about the mode of survival, he would quote scenes from the Pirates of Caribbean and other sea fantasy novels and talk about becoming a sea pirate one day, leaving his current

mundane sales job. He would sit beside me, his hand winding its way from behind to rest on my eyes, shutting my eyelids closed, and then he would ask me to imagine what that life could entail. I imagined all the good things – waiting on the porch, looking down at the white sea foam while waiting for my man to return from his adventures, bringing luxurious charms from the depths of the sea.

We no longer talked about such things, and with each passing year, the dream of spending time in a quaint little beach town slipped away. Hence, to revitalize ourselves, this year, we finalized Goa, but not the crowded part. We chose the less trodden, serene landscapes of South Goa to spend most of our days.

My phone pinged with an incoming text message. I picked it up from the table and squinted against the bright light pouring in from the window.

Papa: You're awake?

Papa never texted. He called. If one dared to miss one, the calls would repeat every minute after the other person had to pick up, even if they were busy enjoying a good time in the toilet.

I looked at the clock crucified on the opposite wall, in all its agony. Its boisterous sweeping hand alerted me to its presence every second. There was a time when I loved to hoard clocks, and my house was converted into a horologist shop. This was the last collection from the hoard, and I carried it as a reminder of that peculiar hobby when I had to shift to this new apartment, living a life of my own.

Five-thirty am. It was too early for my father to be awake. I replied back.

Me: Yes, it looks like that.

Papa: Okaaay....so the packing's done?

Me: Yes Papa.

Papa: Great.

There was a gap of a few seconds before the three dots reappeared. I dreaded what was to come.

Papa: So is ours.

People often talk about the three magical words that changed their lives forever. I had no idea that these three words would change my world. So is ours.

I did not know how to respond. Rather I wanted to desist from answering at all. I tried to recollect if Ma told me anything earlier about them planning to go somewhere but came up empty with no such recollection.

Me: Your? Where are you going now?

I picked the cup with my free hand and took a swig. It had gone cold, and I had no intention of abandoning my relaxing perch, walking all the way to the kitchen, and reheating it. I chucked the liquid into the pot of Petunia sitting next to me on the windowsill.

Papa: What? With you guys of course...

He added a wink.

My jaws stilled in surprise, unable to figure out whether to gulp down the cold liquid I had slurped which was still waiting to go down the oesophagus or to jettison it. I looked towards the bedroom door and then back at the message which was sitting there waiting for an acknowledgement.

Me: With us? Why...when?

Enough of pulling my chain. I searched his contact info and hit on the call button.

"Oh, hello dear, was expecting your call anyway." Papa said cheerily.

"Hi Papa. Do you want to tell me what you were talking about earlier." I deadpanned

He sounded surprised. "Didn't Ronit tell you?"

I knew he had to be involved in all this. Something was happening, and I had to get to the bottom of it.

Papa waited for a second and then continued "When we heard that you guys were planning for Goa, I and your mother thought why not...it will be fun." Hell yes, it would be fun. For a moment, I processed the information being fed to me for the first time. On the day of our departure.

"When did you tell him this?" I pressed further for clarification on this issue.

"A few days back...I mean he also had to get the bookings done, right? And we have apologized for the last-minute inconvenience we had caused him."

"Oh, yes, exactly. That's...that's great." I stuttered.

"Wait, why are you asking as if you do not know we were coming? Didn't Ronit tell you?"

"No, no. Why won't I know? What are you saying" I tried to intersperse my words with a bemused chortle. "I'm just fooling around."

I heard my mother's voice from behind who was definitely trying to reach for the phone "Sameer, ask her if she has taken the tank I recommended." Ma had a fascination for bright coloured printed tanks and she forced me to purchase one which costed me a fortune based on my standards.

"You mother is asking..."

I interrupted him "I heard Papa. And yes, I have packed it. So, when are you arriving here?"

"We're enroute. Looks like another two hours." my father said. "And don't bother about the pickup. We know your address by heart now."

Oh yes. They did.

"But why did you leave so early? We have plenty of time before we set out."

"So we can help you, beta. And we have made a list of purchases that we are planning to do once we reach your town." Ma said on the speaker.

Inside, the songs blared one after the other and my head throbbed. I was not sure how to act in the current situation, and he said yes to their request and did all the bookings without even consulting me. I was fuming with rage. I could see all my meticulously formulated plans and the titillating anticipation rapidly fading away.

Two thumbs alighted on my shoulder blades and gently started to apply gliding strokes.

"Hey" Ronit said leaning closer to me and dropping a kiss on the top of my head.

If he had heard our conversation and wanted to explain what he missed out telling me, then he was too late. The damage has already been done. The omission of information was also a form of lying, and he should have known that he was lying to me.

I shifted on my seat and looked him in the eye “You never thought of discussing before finalizing it by yourself?”

“What are you talking about?” His bafflement was also a sham and I was sure of it.

“Don’t act like you’re out of the loop. You told them to come with us without even telling me? I thought this was our anniversary trip and it was supposed to be just the two of us.”

He contemplated, caressing his beard. When he stopped, the shaggy bush metamorphosed into a conical shape akin to that of a Maratha king. He looked up, recognition dawning in his eyes.

“What? You forgot that you promised them and did their bookings?” I exclaimed.

“Not exactly that. Ah...I mean...somewhat.” He gave a one-sided shrug in response.

“You can’t be serious.” I jabbed a finger into his chest to drive home the reality of the circumstances he had landed us in. “They are on their way and will be here any time now. We cannot go back telling them that it was a mistake. That, you forgot. Moreover, you have booked the hotel. Is it the same one we are staying at?”

He nodded.

“Great. Because I will not risk them staying alone in an unknown territory, fending for themselves.”

“Of course, we won’t,” he said, looking at the tiles on the floor.

A short while later, the doorbell rang, and my parents arrived, all set for the trip. Ma embraced me tightly in a bear hug while my father beamed, smiling from ear to ear. He wore a huge hat and donned a t-shirt and a short that screamed of beaches. I took them from top to bottom.

“How are you son?” My father crossed the room to pat my husband’s back who had just risen from his so-called sleep and was adapting to his self-planted invasion.

Ronit hugged him back. “I am good, Papa. The train was running late, wasn’t it?” He ushered my father inside and they continued their man-to-man conversation.

“You look pale, is everything okay?” My mother had this habit of scrutinizing my face every time she visited me, and each time her reaction was the same. I looked ill to her. She held my chin between two fingers and turned my face from side to side as if looking for an injury. She purportedly saw something in my eyes that the doctor could not see.

This was the drawback of being a single child, where you got saddled by the excessive interest of your parents, and you had to make sure that you always had an answer to all their concerns, or their worries would snowball into something that had the potential to suck you in.

“Nothing, I am all right. Maybe not slept well.” I exhaled after speaking. I slowly peeled her fingers off.

“Oh! come on, Ronit didn’t reach yesterday night or did he?” She gave me a smirked as she jested. If not earlier, I might have

looked pale. Sometimes, they passed off comments that only made sense to them. My cheeks turned pink.

“Ma” I rolled my eyes, trying to shrug off the effect of the remark.

“What? Don’t I have a right to be concerned for you?”

I relented.

Their preparation went beyond the normal. I compared our luggage with the bags they were going to carry. Ours was simple: a trolley bag and my husband’s backpack. This was an exaggeration. Two trolley bags, not the smaller or medium ones, a backpack, and a jazzy handbag.

“Ma, we are going for only seven days, I mean not even seven, six to be exact. Even our flight leaves at midnight. Why do you need so many bags?”

“I know beta, but see you’ll never know. We may need an extra set of clothes now that we are going to the beach. There will be water all around the area. Just for extra caution.” She said it in an empirical manner. “Also, these are not the only clothes. I have brought some munchies we may devour through the night.”

“We will eat dinner at home before we leave for the airport Ma.”

“Again, believe me when I say the travel time is long so it’s always better to keep things handy than to just set out unequipped.”

I did not want to argue any further, and now that the bookings had already been made and my parents were already here, I did not want to hurt them, so I went along.

Chapter 2

It was going to be a three-hour long flight if I accounted for the time it would take to get off the plane and lumber over to the baggage belt. Even at this hour the airport was flooded with people. We checked ourselves in and waited for our departure announcement.

I willed my eyes to stay open which were frighteningly close to getting shut every so often. *Please don't, it's not the time to drift off. The night was just the beginning.* I used every convincing assertion in my arsenal to make my body listen to me, but the biological clock did not care about my commands and had its own way of controlling me.

“You happy?” Ronit kissed the side of my head. We were sitting side by side on the chairs and his height gave him an advantage where he could easily get a full overhead view of me. “And I’m sorry.”

I spared a glance towards him “What for?”

“I didn’t forget to tell you. I just thought to surprise you.” He scratched the side of his nose and rubbed it hard as if that was

going to give him the much-needed confidence to finally tell the truth.

I stopped ruffling our boarding passes, which I had been made the custodian of, and turned my gaze up. I knew it. Compulsive liar. My parents were surveying a Makaibari store and were busy clicking selfies. They were clearly happy and far more excited than us.

“You know this time of the year is so crucial for us. We get to see each other not very often and spending seven days at a stretch together was all that I wanted. I wanted each and every second to just be with you.”

“So be with me, who is stopping you from doing that but just look at their faces” he gestured towards them “they are fully engrossed in their own world.” As if on cue, my mother smacked my father’s arm while scrolling through his phone. He may not have captured a single good picture.

All passengers from Kolkata to MOPA are requested to board through Gate no. 103, the voice shouted.

“Give me a minute, I’ll just come.” Ronit stood up and went somewhere. This was my pet peeve, him going to the washroom every time at the exact moment when the boarding started or whenever there was an emergency to attend to and his presence was necessary. I waved at my parents and the three of us waited for Ronit to arrive. By the time he returned, we were the last passengers to board the plane. Fortunately, my dream did not come true this time.

I was ravenous and unable to sleep due to hunger. The flight was nearly empty and we could have occupied any of the vacant

seats we wanted. So, we did that. It had always been harrowingly difficult for me to take such long flights. I knew others would scoff at my definition of a long flight which in this case was only lasting three hours, but that's me, though. With a company, which I should call a group now that there were four of us, I thought it would be easier to pass the time. However, all three fell asleep soon after the flight took off. So, I just ordered a cup noodle which turned cold by the time I opened the lid and fired up a romance audiobook to help me get through the unsatiated hunger and the painful seat.

"Hold me, oops, not here. Naughty." A seductive moan followed by the sound of a murmured laughter drifted to my ears from somewhere very close. The whimper was so distinct that it invaded the protection of my earphones. I peered through the gap between our seats. A couple was seated right behind us making all sort of unacceptable noises. Then I saw a hand sneaking into the skirt of the girl while she giggled.

I tore my eyes off the scene, flustered. What the hell did they think they were doing?

"You want more?" The boy asked. The voice sounded familiar but I preferred to ignore. It could be anyone but the tone suggested he had to be Punjabi.

"Yes. I dare you," the girl whispered. I gagged.

Fortunately, Ronit had booked front-row seats for my parents, who were far away from us. They had been salvaged from witnessing the crime being carried out in mid-air. I looked beside myself at my husband who was snoring lightly with his mouth hanging open.

"Ronit" I patted his arm which he kept tightly crossed on his chest.

"Ronit, listen" I shook him harder.

He woke with a start. "What happened? Have we reached? Didn't realize I slept so heavily."

I pointed a thumb towards the couple "I think we should change our seats."

He chanced a glance at them and then shifted his attention back to me "Come on, don't be silly. Remember our time? Even we were like this. We'll pass."

I wondered what he saw that made him so confident.

A loud laugh resounded. And then a sudden force rocked my chair. Were they making out? Who did that on a plane? Kudos to them if they made it possible when in reality people like us are consistently carping about scanty leg space.

"See? Two lunatics were sitting right behind me. I'm not sitting here." I emphasized on the word not. My voice was deep enough for them to overhear, only if they were interested in paying attention, which I was sure they were not, considering their loud amorous entanglement, which was unlikely to cease before long.

"Only two more hours"

"No"

"Okay, let me see."

He stood up to inspect the front rows. The crew members were also not present for their regular rounds. Everyone appeared to be out for the count, and calling them specifically felt weird.

"Are they still doing it?" I inquired by giving the hem of his T-shirt a hard tug.

He shook his head.

"Is that a no or you don't want to look at them?"

He gave me a scathing look which told me to stop the flurry of questions, and I relaxed back into my seat, pulling a long face.

"All the window seats seem to be taken." He confirmed.

"Not an issue. I'll take the aisle one."

"That settles it then."

We snatched our bags out of the overhead bin and trudged through the aisle to the newly located row.

"Hope this is fine."

I nodded.

"Good. Now if you need anything call the crew." He leaned back and instantly gelled with his chair.

The darkness outside never gave me the opportunity to take in the beauty of the landscape at the time of landing but the moment we stepped foot outside the airport we were awestruck. The weather was balmy after a cold day in Kolkata and an even chillier three hours in the flight. This was exactly what we wanted. The feeling of an eternal summer is why we love beaches so much. You do not feel the impact of the earth's distance from the sun when you are around so much water.

Ronit literally sprinted to a statue of a man holding a guitar that stood at the periphery of the airport. Everything amplified my giddiness to such an extent that all I wanted was to dive into a pool

of cool water and channelize my inner calm. He took quite a good amount of time to capture the perfect snapshot while I called up our driver who was supposed to pick us up.

The phone rang. There was no response. I tried again but all I could hear was the caller tune the other person had set. I failed to understand the logic behind it. He could hear the song when someone called. And why the hell would someone want to listen to his heart's song?

"Will you please take a picture of us?" Ma requested me and my parents stood in front of the statue.

Ronit glanced at my face and saw the unease written across my forehead. "Let me take it." He took his phone out and captured their bright smile in a frame.

I dialled the number again. However, this time, the automatic message declared that the number was switched off. Fuck. Not now. I was so wiped out that I could sleep right here.

I leaned my back on the line of baggage carts waiting to be picked up outside the terminal and tipped my head up, wishing the stars above would grant me an answer to my question. It was a clear sky. Apart from the low hum of the breeze and my parents' chuckle, there was no other sound nuzzling our ears. The exitway was mostly empty, save for a few cars that seemed to be either abandoned or left by passengers with a promise to come back.

"Hey, any luck?" Ronit moved past me and extracted a cart.

I took a long breath and then exhaled loudly "Not yet. Switched off it says."

"What do we do now? Don't see any other taxis also. Did we pay already?"

I nodded.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Do we stand any chance of getting it back?”

“I think so.”

After twenty minutes of fretting out but still revelling in the outside warmth, we decided to seek help from the airport cab operators. One of the kiosks were illuminated signalling someone’s presence but the chair in front of us was vacant.

“Do people here retire so early? I must have fallen asleep. let us try something else,” I said.

“Where will you go at this hour. We are either hailing a taxi from here or returning back home,” Ronit spoke in an agitated tone.

“Anybody in here?” Ronit knocked on a glass ticket window.

“Do you see a contact number anywhere to call whosoever is in charge here?”

“No. Let’s go check with the airport authorities.”

“Oh! I’m so sorry sir. How can I help you?” The voice came as soon as we turned to leave the room. The boy rose from below the table, and his hair was tousled.

“We want a car to this address.” I handed him my phone, and he leaned in for a closer look.

“Sure. May I take your name and your contact number?”

We provided the details, and soon after, our ride was standing on the curb. I saw my husband turn around and wave at the boy

at the taxi counter. His head full of curls bounced as he cheerily waved him back.

“You see my fan base?” Ronit said with a smirk.

I scoffed. Nonsense. Sometimes, the vapidness of his actions irked me, especially when we were stuck in the middle of the night, almost on the verge of staying back at the airport or going back as he warned.

Nonetheless, he was adorable even then.

“This was a result of my charisma, don’t you believe that? What do you think you will get a ride so easily? There are unions here.” He said when I held Ma by her elbow and we sped past him and dove right into the car. Papa was already inside. Ronit walked behind with our luggage. “By the way, we need to ask for a refund first thing in the morning.”

Chapter 3

It was around two at midnight when we reached our BnB. I had not slept and desperately wanted to crash on the bed. On the other hand, after a good two-hour sleep, if I didn't factor into the time before the interruption, my husband was fresh enough to wander the streets.

I took off the hair clips freeing my hair from their tight clutches. The light inside was dim but the walls were awash in white which scattered the necessary amount of brightness around the room. On the bedside wall, Athena's owl was painted inside a pink circle. Beneath the image, the goddess' name was etched in blue ink. The strip lights under the bed frame illuminated the bed slab in such a way that it imitated the goddess' throne. It resembled a miniature Greek palace.

"I do not feel sleepy; do you want to go for a walk? The beach is not far away. I learned that we were somewhere in the middle of Baga and Calangute, but I thought we could easily walk to Baga. What do you say?" He lathered his face with facewash while he spoke. The foam coated his cheeks like Santa's beard.

He cracked open an eye when he received no response from me. I entered the bathroom and started the tap.

“Wash yourself first.” I grabbed the smaller towel hanging on the towel ring, soaked it in water, and gently dabbed the soap off his cheeks. I could touch his face all day if I was allowed to. Admitting only to myself, I liked the way his stubble pricked my bare palms. I continued slowly, digging my fingers into the dense fog of his hair. He saw me watching his lips, which led me to immediately lower my gaze.

“What if I want to sleep?” I handed the towel back to him and spoke through a fake yawn.

“Come on, do not be a spoil sport. We have not come here to sleep. And remember you only said you wanted to spend each and every second with me?” He wiggled his eyebrows as he spoke.

“Wipe yourself first.” I pointed to his hand.

“I thought you liked my lips better this way,” he said.

I glared. “Darling, you have slept on the flight and the entire day while I was the one doing all our packing.” I wanted to display my aggression, but somehow it did not come out as planned. I sounded tired.

His shoulders slumped but he gave me an understanding smile. But then the expression of defeat on his face cajoled me into giving in. I convinced myself - he was not wrong when he said that we should utilize every second of this trip.

“Fine,” I said.

His face lit up at once.

“Don’t worry it won’t be long, we’ll just see what’s there nearby and come back soon, I promise.” He pinched the skin around his Adam’s apple. He seldom broke his promise. So, I agreed.

The town was awake, and tourists poured out of all the streets. Ronit opened the map on his phone and pointed towards a road. “I think that’s the way. Let me check if I can get a rental scooter nearby. You want to wait here or you want to come with me?”

“No, it is not required. We can walk. How far is it again?” I asked.

“Approx two kilometers as per the map.” He looked at the phone and then at the road and then back at his phone. He then stared at my face awaiting the amendment of my answer. I shrugged. He was right. Distances greater than 500 m were placed in the non-walkable category. My feet won’t allow me the exertion.

It was a narrow downhill lane flanked by trees on one side and a dhaba on the other. There were no lights on the road and it was completely blanketed by the shadows being cast from both the sides. I couldn’t see anyone coming or going in that direction.

“Are you sure this is the road we need to take?”

“Well, Google says that. So, if the application is sure then...we don’t have another option.”

I stood on the front porch of a shop while he walked down to where the shopkeeper had pointed. Five minutes later the headlight of a scooter was shining bright on my eyes.

"Here, how's it?" He screeched to a halt in front of me and thumped on the side frame of the scooter.

"Pink huh?"

"For you. You asked for the colour, don't lie. I'm not going again for an exchange."

"Why should I lie? I didn't tell you anything. You need to seriously stop blabbering needlessly and create stories." I hopped behind him and placed my entire weight through my arm on his shoulder.

"Yes, I'm always wrong and you have a right to break me."

"I will if you say another word."

"Fine, now hold this and be my guide." He handed his phone over to me which had the map on.

We headed straight following the arrow that pointed our direction. I scooted a little closer, my chest flush against his back. Goosebumps covered my skin, less from the temperature since it was hot here, but more from the contact. His loose T-shirt flapped in the wind, and I lightly leaned my cheek on his shoulder blade, feeling the strength of his athletic muscles underneath. The soft moan that escaped his lips suggested that he liked it too. I held him tighter hugging him from the shoulder to the waist.

"This reminds me of the time when you held me captive for those three days. No food, no water. I did not even have access to a washroom whenever I needed one. Like a dungeon." He slightly turned his head back and spoke through the wind, with a few words escaping with the air.

"What exactly did remind you of that incident?"

“Your hug. I can’t breathe. You’re hurting my chest.”

I laughed at the top of my lungs “Even then you begged me if you could stay for an extra day. I had to concoct a story for my flatmate about why I was not allowing her to come inside my room. Don’t you dare paint me the villain here.”

Digging through our past bittersweet memories only made our relationship and his presence in my life seem real. It was like grabbing onto whatever I had and then relishing it for the rest of my life, like a camel preserving water for survival. The only difference was that I could not alter my physiological features or contain my perspiration, so I stored them in a mental box inside my brain. I would write it all down once I returned home.

I pocketed his phone and glided my hand inside his t-shirt. Fuck the direction. I would prefer to get lost into the night and keep riding with him. Just then, I felt something hard, misshapen.

“What’s that?” There was a bulge on one side of his chest. Upon my touch, whatever the thing was, it detached itself from its perch and fell like a ramshackle building’s plaster. He was flustered and stopped the scooter for a while. Slipping one hand inside his t-shirt he pulled out the skin-colored pad, my bra pad which I remembered he took out of the bag and never replaced it inside.

“What the hell?”

“Ops, I forgot. I was just checking.” Horror flooded his face.

“You were checking what?” I tried to contain my laughter and clipped both of my hands over my mouth.

“Oh! come on, its’ just. I’ll keep it inside. Don’t want others to notice it.” He said in a hushed tone and managed to fold it somehow and put it inside his trouser pocket.

I shook my head “Are you serious? And what the hell were you checking?” I cackled, my eyes watering out of control. “Also, everyone must have already noticed. You have been roaming around with this inside you all along. And you went to fetch the scooter too with this inside you all that time.”

“Let’s stop talking about that and forget it. Nothing happened. Okay?”

“I can. But I cannot guarantee for others who have seen this side of you.” I enjoyed kindling it some more.

He gave an angry snort. “Your fault that you were carrying it. I was just being inquisitive.”

I rolled my eyes inside my helmet, but he did not get to see my expression. “It’s my thing. I’m carrying this for my personal use not yours. Do you want to tell me why you needed that?”

“I told you and I won’t say this again. I was just checking. Stop saying as if everything is my fault. And before we set out from the hotel, I asked you to see if I was looking good.”

“But how would I know. Not that it was conspicuous.”

“Precisely. If it’s not conspicuous then others would also not have noticed it.”

Touche. But again.

“I agree that the bulge was not visible. But that wouldn’t have stopped it from falling out of your t-shirt, the way it did right now,” I justified. I was not going to give him the chance to win this time.

He made a disapproving sound. "I have kept it back inside. Now be happy."

Twenty minutes had passed, and we still had not arrived at our destination. My apprehension proved to be correct. There was not a single soul nearby who could help us. Something or someone could be lurking in the shadows for us, and we would never know until they pounce on the opportunity. Mafias? Or other peddlers. Living with my peculiar partner had made my imaginations also run amok, reaching unreal heights.

"I think, we are lost. Shall we ask someone? Your phone has no network." I had left mine at the BnB.

We stopped and he took off his helmet. "Give it to me." He took the phone and tapped the screen multiple times. Then he thumped it with his fist.

"What are you doing? It's not going to bring the internet back." I scolded.

He looked at every direction but all we could see were trees and a few houses at a distance shrouded in darkness.

"Should we knock on doors?" He asked.

"Absolutely not. I don't know what to expect. I think it is a failed attempt. We should call it a night," I said.

"You sure?"

"One hundred percent. And just look at the time it took. I'll only ruin our tomorrow if I don't get proper sleep today."

He looked at me for a few seconds and then exhaled through his nose. "So be it."

We returned the scooter to the owner, showed him the photographs Ronit had taken at the time of signing the rental form and ambled towards our accommodation. Thankfully he remembered the way back or else we would surely have gone for good.

“Just imagine if I never thought of touching your chest. And if we had managed to go to the beach,” I said.

“You have made enough fun of it. Just wait.” He placed his hand on the small of my back and tickled me hard on the waist.

“No, that’s not happening.” I laughed while thrashing my arms to stop him.

He pinned both my hands on my back with the crook of his elbow and restrained me against his rock-solid build. I had to admit that it was commendable. He brought his lips close to my ear to speak in a hushed tone. The warm breath caressing the back of my ear. “Try as you might. I have the hold on you.”

“Don’t behave like the couple on the flight. Everyone is watching.” I tried to shrug out of his grasp but his force was just too much for me.

The comparison might have invoked some conscience in him, and he abruptly released me. “Thank me later,” he said.

I laughed the entire way as he took my hand in his and dragged me back to our hotel. No one else seemed to have understood what happened but they stared at us as they saw a man dragging a girl who might have been drunk and laughed her insides out. I was not drunk by the way but my head buzzed with my own laughter.

Chapter 4

Last night had been crazy, a whirlwind of events which felt nothing less than a dream. I silenced the alarm which went off signaling eight o' clock in the morning. There was a volley of missed calls, all of them from last night. I tried to remember who that was or if there was an emergency I had forgotten to attend to. That's when I remembered I had left my phone at hotel when we went for the night stroll. But still ten missed calls meant someone was trying to reach out to me desperately.

I felt a heavy hand atop me and my back pressed against my husband's chest. I tried to pry open his clasp but his grip grew even stronger resembling a quicksand. Struggling was only going to suffocate me so I gave in.

"You awake?" I asked groggily, my voice heavy from sleep.

He moaned from behind me and pressed his lips on the nape of my neck. I took a mental screenshot of this moment and saved it in the back of my brain to retrieve it again when I missed him after this trip. "Yes, with you in my thoughts."

“Then get up, we need to be quick. We have only a day here.” I sat up with a jerk and slipped my feet into the slippers. My long hair was scattered everywhere on my face and I gathered my curls together and tamed them into a knot.

“What’s the plan for today?” He asked, lying on his side and propping himself up on his elbow.

Okay, so it was always me who was the itinerary expert and not him. His duty was to book travel tickets and hotels as I recommended. The rest was up to me.

I cleared my throat and tried to sound authoritative “As I told you earlier, my husband, we will be exploring North Goa, not the entire North Goa, but most of it, the hyped destinations I mean. And we have only today to do it.”

I slightly crinkled my eyes assuming they sparked with my revelation of today’s plan. I had made this itinerary a bit differently from what others would usually do. Of the six days we had left, we planned to spend four days in the southern part, which attracted fewer tourists, just relaxing and soothing our souls.

“Only today.” He repeated with a drawl.

“Yes, only today. Now get up quickly or else I’ll push you out of the bed.”

He fumbled for his trousers and then pulled them over his legs. I did not have a recollection of what we did after we reached our room, but looking at the disarray of our bed, it was certainly not decent. His tousled morning hair made me want to run my fingers through them, grab them and hold his face back to plant a hungry kiss on his lips. However, I thought I should not make any moves right now. This would only delay us further.

By the time he was in the washroom I sifted through our things and picked out the best outfits for both of us. I held the blue striped silk shirt in my hands and marveled at my choice. I knew for a certainty what looked best on him. And then picked out my dress as per the day one plan. I had packed my journal too but he took that out before we left for the airport without telling me once. Another opportunity he presented to me to be angry at him after he invited my parents. I was angry, but lashing out could wait until the trip was over.

We hadn't heard from my parents since last night. Not that I was in a mood for a distraction though. But they usually woke up early in the morning and it was difficult to believe that Papa hadn't called me yet, even though my mother would sure have cautioned him to do otherwise.

Not even two seconds passed when my phone vibrated on the nightstand. 'Papa' the caller ID said. And here we were, everything was normal with my father it seemed. How could he even deviate from his usual behavior?

"We're ready, have called the staff to bring our tea to our room. So come once you guys are ready." He started speaking immediately after I placed the phone to my ear. No morning greetings or checking if everything was okay. Always in his typical haste.

"Sure, we're coming shortly," I said. Before he hung up, I added "Papa, did you call me last night or asked someone to call?"

"No. Why?"

"Nothing. Forget it."

“Has anything happened? Who called you?”

“I don’t know. There were missed calls last night so I thought maybe...”

“No, we weren’t missing you. I and your mother were fast asleep as soon as we spared a look at our bed. Believe you me, the mattress is just too comfortable.”

“Good that you liked it.”

“Now come soon or the tea is going to get cold. Ask your husband to shake a leg. He is always the last one to arrive.”

“I’ll convey your message, Papa.” I said, releasing a long breath through my mouth.

After I disconnected, I sat at the same position staring at my phone and pondering. It was unusual for him to admire something in the first instance. He was determined to find small faults in everything. I was prepared for a too honest feedback from him this time also. Although, I believed he should be grateful to me to have prepared such a meticulous plan involving them. Though not part of my original plan.

“Was that Papa?” Ronit asked stepping out of the bathroom. He wiped his wet hair with a towel while wrapping another around his waist. His naked torso did things to me which he could plainly tell just looking at my eyes, a figment of my subconsciousness. Had my mind not been preoccupied with the worry about the calls, I would have measured him up against a Greek God.

“Yes.” I pinched my thigh to pull myself out of the reverie. “Ronit, do you know this number?” I showed him the list of calls. “They called me ten times.”

“Don’t think I recognize.” He took my phone into his hands “Let me give it a ring.” He sat at the edge of the bed, and I crawled beside him, trying to catch hints of the conversation, if any. He switched to speaker.

After two rings a voice spoke from the other end. A man.

“I got a call from you yesterday. May I know who this is?” Ronit asked a tad too politely. Had I been there at his place, my irritation would have transmitted via the phone line and imprinted a punch mark on the other person’s face.

“Sorry sir. This is Ravinder, your driver. Actually, you booked a prepaid taxi last night from the airport and unfortunately, I lost my mobile phone. My car broke down on top of that. So, I couldn’t connect with you. I’m extremely sorry sir.” He took a sharp breath, as if he was on the verge of tears while explaining his case to us. “Then I arranged for your number from the agency and told them everything after I got back home.”

Ronit glanced at me, and I nodded in approval. I took my curse back.

“Oh.” Ronit said. I heard everything through the phone’s speaker. “Not an issue. Hope we would get a refund.”

“Of course, sir. I have requested your refund myself and you will soon hear from the agency about that in next two days.”

“Great.”

“Thank you for understanding sir.” Then he hung up.

“So, that’s it then.” Ronit looked at me.

“I do not understand why nothing is going according to plan. However, the man was honest. Huh. What all we had to endure last night thanks to his phone thief.” I said languidly, throwing my hands up in the air.

I opened Outlook to check some work-related emails. My inbox contained 20 unread emails. Fuck them all. I was certainly not going to reply to any of those, or people would start expecting me to be available for them, which I was not. I typed in an ‘out of office’ message and then closed all the open applications.

My phone dinged with an incoming text message.

Abhay: Please send me pictures when you arrive.

Abhay: I am using your chair cushion. My back pain is sitting on my beaten-up chair.

Abhay: I am using your chair too. We will see if we need to exchange once you come back.

In other circumstances, I would have replied to his text with a capital and bold ‘NO’ accompanied by a middle-finger emoji. Abhay was one of my closest friends at the office, and I always made sure I remained available for him and Varun, my boss and another close friend of mine. But not this time. This trip was extremely important for all of that. For any distraction.

I did not open the messaging app and turned the phone on flight mode. I would say that I had not seen his message and would handle it somehow later.

The four of us huddled together in front of what appeared to be a café. “I would prefer something light.” My father said this

while stroking his paunch, which grew an inch bigger every time I met him.

“Stop it, Sameer.” Ma swatted his hand, but he continued doing it even more to infuriate her. Handling the four of us was going to be a task in the coming days. I crossed my fingers, resting them on my thighs, and chanted all the prayers I could recall. This was only the beginning.

Ronit scanned the menu board pinned to the outer wall of the shop from top to bottom. “I’ll have idli. Anybody else? He motioned for us to speak our preferences, but we just nodded, so he went along ordering the same for all of us.

There were only four of us here. The remaining tables were empty. As per the general trend of this place, tourists preferred the night over the day. We had not seen anyone else in our BnB either who was awake and about, save for the golden retriever who was waiting near my door and followed me downstairs. My heart palpitated inside my ribs, and it took everything I had not to shriek in fear. He was undoubtedly cute, but he was still a dog. Canines were capable of biting if they felt like it or if they ever decided to realize their full potential.

“We’ll hail a taxi; you guys wait here.” Ronit wiped his mouth with a tissue once he was done and pulled up the mobile app to make the payment. I waited for him outside, staring at the coconut trees that stood circling the back side of the café. Green tender coconuts dangled from the trees, and the sight again sent a jolt of giddiness through my veins. It was just day one. It was morning, so I had the entire day with my husband. However, the sadist time flew quickly exactly at the moment when you wanted it to stop.

Chapter 5

Our first view of Baga was nothing short of the divine. I jumped off the car and ran down the beach towards the waves. We were a sucker of sandy beaches, and this one was so thick and dense that it impeded my stride. A wave crashed on my feet, and that was it. I lost myself and felt as if the wave was retreating with all my worries.

We could not come here last night, and I wonder what it would have felt like when the shacks were glazed with twinkling fairy lights and the crowd cheered their filled glasses. I was not much into the prospect of the nightlife it provided but just wanted to sit back on my beach towel or plop down on the cottony soft sand, read a book, devour some snacks, and get a tiny bit tipsy, of course. I saved this plan for the next four days, and the mere thought of it was too titillating.

My hand closed around Ronit's elbow as he came beside me, folding the hem of his trousers and preparing to dive in. "Absolutely not." I gave him a warning look. "We have three more places to visit. You can't drench yourself right now."

His full-face grin shrank.

“No,” I reiterated again.

“I’ll borrow the extra clothes that your parents have brought,” he challenged, his lips spreading wide again.

Thank you for summoning me back to reality - a constant reminder of being watched by two more sets of eyes. I swiveled my gaze to check where they were, and as I had anticipated, they stood inside a shop, trying every pair of sunglasses. My father saw me watching, and he waved at me, which I returned.

“You want to try any activities?” My husband asked.

“No. I just want to stand here relishing the cool sea breeze and the waves washing my feet,” I said, staring at the horizon.

“Come with me, let us move a few steps ahead, nothing will happen. We have a towel in the car remember?” He tried to convince me, but I knew exactly what he was thinking.

I shook my head.

“Don’t be scared. I am not asking you to dive. Just a step or two ahead and the water will wash your knees.”

I took two steps back. “Am done here. Let’s go.”

“Shreya dear, can you please click a good picture of us, it must be an insta worthy one. Your dad is useless,” Ma taunted.

“Anita. Please don’t say that. I can be as good as the children,” Papa countered.

Ma scoffed.

“Ma, papa, do not get started here. I am not going to People are watching you.”

“So what? It’s true. Your father simply knows how to carry his camera around his neck. Please ask him to take a good picture. He doesn’t know the basics of the art.”

“Come on Anita. Let me show you.”

They argued. I cut them off with a wave of my hand.

“Papa, let me do it this time. Next time you take the charge.” I requested in a tired tone.

He acquiesced. I did not think he would go down without a fight. Goan vibes seemed to quell his adamancy.

My parents took their position, and the name of the beach was displayed in the background. They had made their purchases, and a tote bag full of goodies dangled from my mother’s hand.

“You want to put the bag aside?” I asked as I took the bag and their phone and positioned the camera for a ‘this could work’ shot. My father wore his new glasses, and my mother kept them on top of her head. I clicked a few snapshots and handed the camera back to Papa.

“Papa. Can you please keep your hands in the front.”

“What’s wrong in this pose?” He stood with his hands clasped at his back and legs planted a foot apart from each other.

“This” I said wagging my finger at the ‘at ease’ position he was flaunting “looks like you are posing for a school group photograph. Only difference is you’re standing beside your wife and not your bench mate.”

“Fine.”

“Now, our time is out. Let’s move on to our next destination.”
I commanded.

“Not so soon. Let’s first get some coconut water.” Papa protested.

“We’ll be late, we need to cover other stops on time.”

“This is not right. We have been here for twenty minutes. This way, we will only spend our time in the car. And please this time I’m not going to sit in the middle of you two.” Ma pointed her finger at me and then at Papa.

“Okay, okay, but not more than ten minutes. We will leave sharp by ten thirty.” I tapped my watch, and the stopwatch in my mind started making calculations.

Ronit rolled the hem of his trousers back to their full lengths.
“You have spoiled my mood.”

“Bear with it honey,” I said, and without letting go of his elbow, I leaned my head on his chest. I reached only to his pectorals, and thus, his huge body felt like it was engulfing me in a hug. I trailed behind as my parents strode forward, looking for shacks selling coconut water. Ma crinkled her nose at every shack when she heard the price.

“It is a loot everywhere. What’s the benefit of being plenty in supply?” She said.

“Do we have a choice?” I asked.

“Oh yes. We do.”

Her eyes fell on what she wanted. We purchased raw mangoes sprinkled with spices.

Ronit's phone blasted a shrill ringtone. He pulled it out of his pocket and held it before my eyes. "Why is she calling me?"

I looked at the caller ID in shock as I answered. The first was because Sonia called out of the blue. Second, she called my husband's phone. I then remembered that my phone was in flight mode.

"I have no idea."

"That's your friend. Who else would know?"

"She's not my friend."

"Nor is she a friend of mine, he said. So you will have to take the call so we can all know why she called on my number." He again thrust the phone towards me. "Answer?"

I waited for a few more seconds before taking the phone from his hand and answering it.

"Hello," I began.

"Where are you? I was so worried." My colleague Sonia did not know I was planning this trip, and I had not meant to tell anyone, let alone her. Did Abhay or Varun tell her about it? They will not do that, or what if it slipped from their tongue one fine morning? No, they could not have betrayed me. I had not posted any pictures on social media yet. The bigger question was why she bothered wherever I was.

Unfortunately, she had Ronit's number because I called her once from his phone, and I made him save her number in case of

an emergency. At that time, I was new to this organization, and I only knew her. I now talk to her only when required, which is maybe once a week. She worked in the talent acquisition department, doing all the hard work, as per her narrative, and was widely recognized as the most ungenerous sort of person who could not talk without twisting her mouth in every direction.

‘She is sweet, ’ I once told Ronit. I didn’t know. Thinking about it makes me laugh now. She must have called to check if I was having fun while she worked her head off. Simply out of jealousy.

“Didn’t you see my auto mailer?” I was fuming. She was just a colleague I had to work with sometimes, not too often, and I wondered why the hell did she worried and why she called my husband of all people. She could have checked with anyone on my team, and they would have mentioned that I was on leave.

“I just, something came up I had some queries. do not bother; I will check with Abhay. You enjoy your vacation.” Well, what was that? She knew and even then...

She hung up without saying another word. She might have understood that I was irritated.

I brushed it aside and quickly returned my expression to normal. I returned the phone to Ronit.

“What did she say?”

“Nothing important. I wonder how she knew. This has to be Abhay, he can never be light lipped around girls.”

“Is she attractive?”

“Why do you care?” I looked at him suspiciously.

“I’m just asking.”

“If you consider a wild cat, who steals your freshly cooked meal despite you having given her cat food, beautiful.”

He looked at me with amusement. “Ouch. Do you want me to block her number? She calling me...sounds weird, eh?” Ronit brandished his phone in one hand and asked.

“Yes, please do that permanently.”

I had forgotten to eat my share of the raw mangoes, and my parents were already waiting near the car in the parking lot. The call wasted a few minutes, and I could not afford to lose any more time.

Our next destination was Aguada Fort. The fort was built in the 1600s during the Portuguese era to help ships replenish their fresh water storage. The thirteen-meter-high white lighthouse stood at one corner of the fort, overlooking the vast expanse of the Arabian Sea. I adjusted my visor cap to protect myself from the heat that was beginning to scorch my forehead. I leaned my arms on the railing and tried to make out the ripples in the sea beneath.

I felt as if I was being watched and focused my gaze back on my husband. He looked at me intensely.

“What?” I chuckled.

He started at me for a few more moments before starting “You’re looking cute in this dress.”

I was wearing a pair of jean shorts and a checked orange crop top. He advanced towards me, his gait so focused and manly that my legs wobbled. I had never seen this look on him before. The place certainly brought about some positive changes in my

husband. I loved it. I took another screenshot with my eyes and saved it very safely somewhere in the back of my mind, but this time with a passcode. My cheeks burned. Whether it was from the day's heat or the heat of his gaze, I did not know. It was strange that I felt this way about him, even after so many years. Although such moments are extremely rare. I took a step back and hit the railing. Ronit caught me in time, caging me between his forearms.

"Say something new. I already know how good I look," I said.

Well, that was indeed magic. When did my bear-like husband become wolfish? I braced myself against his charm. His muscles popped from below the sleeves of his shirt.

"Your father's watching us." He gestured behind me. "I think they're jealous of me getting all your attention."

"What are you saying? They are pretty busy themselves taking what they call insta worthy selfies." I made an air quote.

"I know but I'm telling you this because I've noticed." He kept his hands on both sides of my body, holding me in place.

I turned my head to give them a glance. Ronit's claims couldn't be valid. But my father averted his gaze at once, and now they, along with other tourists who were standing near a crumpled fort wall, busied themselves taking pictures of a lone boat that traversed the waters below towards Sinquerim Beach.

"You only made this decision and never bothered to ask me," I said.

"What do I do? They insisted on tagging along, and I could not say no. How could I? And I thought you'll love it."

“Yes, being chaperoned on our first anniversary. I love it.” The boat gradually slowed down with the expectation of returning home.

I returned my gaze to him. “I’ll be scared of your pleasant surprises from now on.”

His look turned sullen.

My eyes fell on a mark on his upper arm. It looked like a tattoo.

“What is that?” I pointed to the blue and red lines sneaking in from within his shirt sleeves.

He eyed the mark “Oh, that?” He lifted his sleeve to show me a drawing of a flute. Some of the stains came off after rubbing, but the marker traces were still visible. “It’s Niharika’s doing. I tried to wipe it off, but the colors did not erase. Some kind of alcohol-based marker it seems.”

Ronit’s five-year-old niece could draw on anything she could get a hold of. Almost every day, whenever he got free from work, he preferred to pay a visit to his elder sister Pallavi and would play with her two children. Niharika being the elder one knew how to take advantage of her uncle. The other little one, only two years old, was taken advantage of. Poor soul.

I smiled. “She’s adorable.”

“I know. And I love them.”

I traced the patch of skin with my fingers. “Don’t worry. I have a solution to this problem. We can use some oil.”

“You’re going to give me a massage now?”

“I will love to. But don’t consider it a prize for what you did.” I trailed my fingers further inside, caressing the half-faded blue ink.

We waited for my parents to arrive, who were making their way down slowly towards us. It had been difficult for my father to climb the steps owing to the pain in his knees, but he persevered, taking one step at a time, resting in between, and perusing the stone blocks that narrated the history of the place.

“Do you know that these stones have been sourced locally? They are available right here in Goa.” Papa said pointing his chin towards the reddish-brown laterite stones the fort was made from. The architecture of our country is similar. Incredible.”

“We are aware of that, Papa. We need to be quick,” I said.

“Coming. Coming. These old knees have started tormenting me.”

The crowd near the gate and ticket counter had soared extensively, and we dodged bodies to snake through the masses.

The thought of getting into the sedan jostled between my parents on the backseat, making me dizzy. Ronit was comfortably sitting shotgun, stretching his long legs, and enjoying the beach town’s aura while manipulating the head unit. Ma adjusted her dupatta and Papa his backpack on his lap. In the process, I was pushed forward. It is very close to the handbrake. This is similar to squeezing a tube of toothpaste. My head hung between the front two seats, and my arms were thrown wide over the backrest.

“What? You want to sit here?” Ronit turned his head towards me and looked through his brown glasses in an indifferent manner.

As if he would let me. I twisted my lips in scorn and struggled to lean back.

The streets with small beautiful houses and cafés soon gave way to a long winding road with greenery on both sides as we searched for a vacant place to have our lunch in. Every other hotel we encountered on the road was jampacked.

“Let me know bhaiya if you would like to wait for a table to turn empty.” Our car stopped at an open dhaba. There was a line of people waiting for their turn. “Restaurants at this time of the year are mostly overflowing.” Our driver looked at Ronit and then turned his head towards the three beanbags in the back, which were us. He wanted a unanimous decision.

I had sunk into the seat, and both my parents’ arms pressed into my chest. I wriggled my body out of the restraints and straightened myself to get a better look at the restaurant. Three foreign tourists made their way out and towards their scooters, and two more came out, but the line did not move.

“I do not think waiting here will be of any use. We must proceed.” Ronit answered while removing his sunglasses.

After a long drive, Ronit asked our driver to stop at a restaurant.

“This place looks like there will be empty tables.” Ronit scratched his eyebrows and inspected the parking areas, which were completely vacant except for our car. A middle-aged man in grey Bermuda shorts sat on the front porch. He stood when he saw us approaching and opened the door for us with a huge grin.

“It is a bit too empty. Do you think the quality of food will be good?” I asked looking around. Regarding the ambience, they had only four six-seater tables and an aquarium placed at an extreme corner. We created a second table.

“I’m too hungry to be concerned about the quality at this moment,” Ronit said, sitting on one of the chairs.

“Same,” Papa said.

“What? You will be sitting here, with me?” He spoke with a start when I took the chair next to him.

“Yes, why not? You want me to sit somewhere else?”

“I mean...you guys will be feasting on dead fish,” he said bringing his lips closer to my ears so that my parents didn’t catch the discomfort in his voice “not sure if I can eat after inhaling the odour.” After a few second of silence he continued “please understand.”

“Dead fish? How can anyone eat a living fish?”

“I mean...leave it.”

I looked back at him with a broken heart.

“Okay, okay. But please do not touch my food with your blood-smeared hands,” he said.

“What do you mean by blood smeared? I am not a wild bear who is hunting and eating things alive and uncooked,” I complained to my husband.

He dismissed my plea and moved his chair an inch away.

Finally, we sat together. The rules of the meal had been dictated even before we ordered our choices. I ordered spicy fried pomfret.

“Do you know how these overfishing practices are depleting the number of juvenile pomfrets in Goa? Excessive consumers like you are one of the reasons for that.”

I rolled my eyes. “Please stop. Also, just to revisit the botanical concepts, let me remind you that most plants have defense mechanisms too which means you too are hurting them.”

“Arguing with you is of no use.” He turned his attention to his phone and started scrolling through Instagram reels. He should have known that fighting with his wife yielded no dividends. I drummed my fingers on the table, glancing towards the kitchen every now and then.

After a worthwhile wait of 20 minutes, a server placed our food on the table. Ronit dug into his biryani without sparing another glance at our orders. My mouth watered as I looked at the delicacy lying in front of me. I picked up the knife and fork and began slicing it along the spine. The juicy flesh tickled my taste buds as soon as I placed a piece on my tongue. Then, my hands did something disastrous.

“I’m so sorry.” I tried to muffle my laughter when I saw his face. He was literally shellshocked looking down at his blue shirt which had been stained with flecks of the sauces that had been used in my fish. “I was just trying to flip it.” I said, with a hint of innocence on my face. My parents, who were sitting right opposite us, stopped midway, awaiting a fight to ensue, but to their respite, nothing happened.

Ronit smiled “don’t worry dear, see you should eat like this.” It was a miracle when he took the knife from my hand and cut the fish into pieces. “Now it will be easier for you to eat.”

Great. I huffed out a breath of relief, and so did my parents. He poured two drops of water onto the stain and rubbed the area with a tissue.

“Let me help you,” I said.

“No, you eat,” he said without looking at me but then to compensate for the abrupt reply, he added with a smile “it’s nothing baby.”

Strange. Why was he acting so placidly?

“Are you sure?”

For a moment, he stopped rubbing and raised his eyes to peer at the opposite seats. Okay, so that was the reason why he did not react. The other couple had already returned to their occupations.

“How will you repay for this?” He moved his lips slightly, but I understood each word he spoke.

“A kiss,” I imitated.

I wanted to kiss him at that moment, but a fish-mouthed kiss would surely aggravate his troubles, and I did not want him to jump out of his seat, find another table away from us, and cause a scene for others to enjoy.

Chapter 6

The flea market on Anjuna beach was teeming with buyers and tourists who were readying themselves for the nightlife that awaited them in the beach cafes.

The street leading to the beach was bracketed by shops on both sides, exhibiting a wide range of dresses of varied designs that snagged my attention. This time, I had to part with my husband, who was looking for a secluded place to smoke and make some purchases. My parents were already enthralled, pausing at every stall and perusing the contents. The brim of my mother's hat bobbed with every step as she strode down the street in excitement.

"Don't go far, I won't come looking for you" I warned Ronit.

"Nah, just behind this shack" he pointed to a corner.

I sifted through the dresses hung on the rotatable clothes rail and picked a purple poncho. The material did not feel very high in quality, but it was comfortable enough to last through this trip.

"What fun do you think they get?" Ma pointed towards the throng of tattooed girls and boys standing in line to enter the bar.

“Ma, it’s their business,” Who are we to comment on this? Moreover, they are quite beautiful inside. Awesome interiors, views and some of them are being run by foreign nationals who have settled down here.” I counted the reasons on my fingers and tried to justify their causes. Though I had not been there myself, there had to be something when I saw all those vloggers raving about these places, of all the fun people had when they talked about luxuriating in the sunset view and relishing their drinks.

“I am just curious. You do not have to be so defensive. And that’s what we are here to explore, aren’t we?”

I huffed.

“Where’s Ronit?” she looked behind me.

“He just went to look for some souvenirs. Oh, here he is.”

My mother looked at his hand “What did you get son?”

Ronit looked completely blank, unaware of the explanation I had provided them for his little escape. My parents were unaware that he smoked. In fact, he rarely did so. He did it only when I was around. According to the theory he provided, my bickering caused him stress, and to relieve that, he needed something strong. That was weird.

“Baby, we should look somewhere else, I don’t think you’ll get an evil eye in those shops.”

“What’s that? An eye?” My mother looked inquisitively at me. This trip certainly brought several new things to light for them.

“It’s just a thing believed to protect you from negative energy. A common token here. Where’s papa?” I wrapped my arms

around my mother's shoulders. The topic of Ronit's whereabouts is forgotten.

"Inside the shop, payments are made. However, tell me more about the protection you were talking about. Does it have a similar effect to lemon and chilies? And where do you hang it?"

I was saved by papa, who appeared from a shop at the far end of the street, scanning both sides to see if he had missed something. "Hey Papa, we were looking for you."

"Oh, your mother left me with all these bags. Will you please hold one?" I took a bag from his hand, and Ronit took the others.

"What all did you buy? Are you now going to carry them back home?" I asked.

"Why not. Light bags are these. Not that you get to visit Goa every month." Papa said.

"Papa is right." Ronit said, and I punched him in the butt for taking the wrong side. He always did this when he knew I was not going to win the battle with my father.

We waded through the rocky intertidal zone of the beach, where hardened coral formations jutted out into the sea. Water pooled into the small troughs, and we could see small fish and crabs peeping from the holes inside. I caught a glimpse of the mudskipper. It remained blended with the color of the sand in such a manner that I realized its existence only when it skittered. It was rare to see one of them here in such rocky terrain. Ronit stood on the edge while a wave entered through a semi-circular gap, crashed on the shore, and water sprouted like erupting lava.

“Hold it, hold it.” My father came running, holding two Cornettos, and handed me the butterscotch one. “The chocolate is for you” he said to Ma. I had not noticed when he went to fetch the ice cream. We desperately needed them now that we had been travelling since morning. A woman came by holding several colorful threads in her hand and asked if I wanted to get my hair braided, but I had to politely decline.

“This beach is so different from the others, isn’t it?” Ma said while slurping on her ice cream. My father nodded, his attention completely focused on his cone, trying really hard to finish it quickly lest it melted in the breeze.

This was almost the time of sunset. The sky slowly began to turn pink. The sun shone bright red, and the intensity of its glow abated gradually, and its reflection was now clearly visible on the horizon.

“What is your husband doing?” Ma pointed to Ronit. He was intently watching a boy who could not have been more than twelve or thirteen years old. He held a long iron rod in one hand and a small bucket in the other and poked it inside the troughs. My husband then took both his supplies and started poking himself with the needle. The boy watched for a few moments and then went away, and Ronit kept doing that without even realizing or remembering the fact that he had come to spend time with his family and not with the crabs.

Minutes passed, and the sun was almost on the verge of disappearing into the horizon, and still, there were no signs of the boy. He might have thought my husband was his good Samaritan, helping him sort his dinner, and he could collect the bucket once Ronit was done.

I shouted his name. After shouting for the second time, his attention fell on me. He grinned and realized that the boy was gone. I gestured for him to keep the supplies down and come back, and he did.

“do not bring it here. Keep the bucket there.” I gestured wildly with both my hands while he placed his palm on his ear, trying to listen clearly.

He jogged back towards me, hitching up his trousers. “That was a lot of work. What if someone steals.”

“That is the owner’s responsibility. Not yours.”

“He is a child.”

“I know but that doesn’t mean we’ll keep on waiting for him while he fled the scene.”

He released a resigned breath.

“You know how many crabs were there? This big.” He demonstrated the measurement, with his fingers four inches apart. “That boy taught me to kill them first and then collect. I felt bad.”

“Now who is the killer?”

“I was helping a small boy. That’s his food, not mine.”

I shook my head, unconvinced by his words. “But you killed him for him. This makes you a killer. Did you manage to collect any?”

He ran a finger through his hair and gave a wry smile. ‘ No. I couldn’t. That explains I didn’t want to harm anyone.”

“Or that explains you tried but failed. That boy must have thought that now that he handed this over to you, he would not be

able to make any money today. So, he left.” I mocked him by folding my hands on my hips.

“It is a matter of perspective. I should know that one cannot get an appreciation from you.” He said it lightly, but it hit my nerve.

By the time we returned to our homestay, daylight had vanished. Its white and blue walls are glossed in the evening light, giving the building a dramatic look. My parents retired to their rooms. On any other occasion, at a venue as romantic as this, with its Greek-style architecture, I would have told my husband in a singsong voice to give me a kissing tour of this place. By that, I mean hitting every secret nook where no one is watching us and making out there. But I felt tired. Throughout the journey, Papa asked me questions about the place as if I was their personal guide, and I kept on answering each one of them, some from my knowledge and others through Google search. I was going to charge Ronit a hefty sum.

The two of us remained downstairs, sitting by the poolside. I scooted closer to him, and he discreetly bit my earlobe.

“Ouch, what was that? I asked. Someone will see, stop it.” I attempted to push him away.

“Then let’s go upstairs, nobody will disturb us there.”

“Not right now.” I pulled my hand away from his, which he held tightly. I knew that if we returned to our room, we would not be able to go out again, and we still had one destination left that I did not want to miss.

“Then let me do something here.” He fondled the skin on the back of my ear with two of his fingers. A shiver runs down my

spine. I clenched my fist, controlling the tigress that wanted to jump out of my body.

“You are not going to listen, are you?”

He shook his head. I stood on my feet, laced my fingers with his, and guided him to our room.

Since morning, this was the first time we got a moment to ourselves away from the other old couple who kept a watch on us. I closed the door behind me, and Ronit pushed me, my back pressed against the door. His height gave him power over me. He grabbed my waist and pulled me up with his powerful arms. I wrapped my legs around him in response and kissed him, satiating the hunger that had been building throughout the day, smoldering like hot coking coals.

“Should I?” He had never asked for my permission, and although I did not want to grant him any right now, I could not restrain myself. I nodded slightly, my breath coming short, more out of anticipation than the tightness of his hug. I held onto his shoulders, balancing myself as he crossed the room towards the bed. He slowly laid me down. We had strewn all our clothes across the bed in a hurry to leave this morning, and he just piled them up in a corner to make ample space for both of us to lie down. He carefully lifted a strand of hair away from my face and gave me a peck on the cheek. Somehow, the heat of our passion did not make us uncomfortable, even in hotter weather like this. His kiss came as a blow of tranquility. I undid the buttons of his blue and white striped shirt one by one, and he puffed hot breaths onto my face.

“It’s in the waist bag.” I motioned for him to fetch a condom from the tabletop.

“You didn’t forget that?” He smiled on top of me.

I flushed vermilion red “No. I didn’t.”

At that moment, a knock on the door startled us. Ronit hurriedly tried to get up and hurt his muscles in the process.

“Are you okay?” I rubbed his hand and tried to soothe him.

“Yes.” He rubbed his arm and hit the nightstand. “You go first and check who that is. W...wait.” His fingers fumbled to button up his shirt. I bit down on my fingernails, but why were we acting so nervous? We are married now, right? We needed to practice being married. What if someone intervened? We could certainly ask them to wait, right?

I opened the door once we both calmed our nerves. “I thought you were asleep. It took you long.”

I looked at my husband questioningly. “We were in the bathroom,” I said.

“We?” My mother squealed.

“I mean I was in the bathroom and Ronit was asleep” congratulating myself mentally on completing the sentence.

Ma took in the sight of our room through the slightly cracked open door. Behind me, Ronit feigned rubbing the sleep off his eyes and slowly peeled the blanket off the top of him.

“We are waiting downstairs, you come soon.” Ma spared me a final glance before turning back and heading down the corridor.

Ronit lifted an eyebrow “are we going to get any time alone?”

"That is a question I should ask you. However, it was good that they interrupted. Let's be done with the dinner and then we can have the entire night to ourselves."

"Hmmm, sounds fascinating," he said.

After our ruined romantic stunt, we were famished. The auto rickshaw dropped us at the entrance of Calangute beach. They called it the queen of beaches, and it certainly was. The sand shone a bright gold even at night. The beach was so wide that we could not see the waves from there. Nightlife was fully active. Yellow and blue strip lights clung to the trees surrounding the beach shacks, and tables and chairs had been put out for people to enjoy a beach dinner with a view of the open sky. I selected the perfect spot for us to sit and ran towards it, my short black dress flapping in the wind. I sunk into the chair, which in turn sunk a little deeper into the dense sand.

"I'll have prawns." I declared.

My parents browsed the menu, trying to figure out the next best seafood.

Ronit stood near the table, looked around contemplating something, and then said, "I will be right back. You can also order something for me. Just keep your food from touching mine."

"Where are you going?"

He signalled for nature's call, patted my shoulder, and then went inside the restaurant.

My prawns arrived, sizzling and hot, ready to be devoured. "Will you wait for Ronit? Where's he?" Ma asked clearing the table for the waiter to place the cutlery there. The waiter, a

handsome middle-aged man, thanked her, and she smiled back. Papa coughed.

“Everything okay Sameer?” Ma said handing him the glass of water.

“Y...Yes. I’ll serve, thank you.” He spoke to the waiter and dismissed him.

I glanced around the area, but it was difficult to recognize a face in the blinding lights radiating off the shacks and bars. Our food had arrived, but Ronit had disappeared. My pet peeve again. The lamp shade candle flickered in the wind, as did my patience. Wavering, threatening to wear down the relationship. Minutes passed when he arrived, wiping his hands on a handkerchief.

"What took you so long?" My anger simmered. He was not supposed to leave me even for a second, be it in the bathroom. This brief excursion did not appear to be a bathroom break. In response, he just gave me a wiggle of his eyebrows, which told me everything. He must have had a drink. If he did, then darn, he was fast.

I glared at him, but he pretended to ignore me. Slinging an arm over my shoulder he said “You won’t believe who I met there inside.”

Here, another fabrication of the tale occurred. I lifted an eyebrow “Who?”

“A friend of yours. He simply looked at me and then, pointing his finger at me, he said, ‘You are Ronit, are not you? Shreya’s husband?’ Trust me, for a moment I thought I would punch him on his face when he took your name but then he said he was traveling with his girlfriend and all of it was a nice coincidence.”

Although this was not the story I was anticipating, it reeked of a lie.

“What did he look like? Describe him.” I said, rolling my tongue through the half-chewed salad.

He stared into the sky, trying to conjure up a face “Hmm...he was thin and tall. Not taller than me, but okay. His facial features were slightly blurred in dim light. Had a thin moustache and what else...?”

His description did not match anyone known to me, at least not in my close friend circle.

“Why did not you ask him to come meet me? Huh?”

“Oh! I did. He said he was in a hurry and that he would try to catch up with you later. So, I didn’t force. We diddid not want to ruin our vacation with a third person’s involvement. You see...?” He paused, realizing his mistake, and then dared to glance at my parents’ faces.

Ma had her eyes trained on a group dancing under a tree at a distance, but Papa looked straight into my eyes.

Chapter 7

We left for our hotel. The night events were still in full swing and were likely to continue until dawn. However, for me, another day had already passed. It glided past like a speeding car while I stood there watching, rooted to the spot.

Life was short. We had vowed to spend seven lives together, but looking at us right now, it felt like we had already spent so many crucial days of our marriage, and we were not sure if we would be able to make the best of what limited time we had together.

Some days, the distance shattered me, and loneliness carved my soul away in splinters. All I had now were four days to fill the void created by his absence in my life over the past few months. I was determined to live life to the fullest.

The next day, on our way, Papa was quiet. Ma spoke as much as she usually did. However, the atmosphere inside the car was silent, devoid of any madness. I personally liked it. However, if he felt any pang of guilt about ruining our trip, he did not show it.

He had not discussed this with Ma. Her constant chitchat proved it.

The tropical Goan roads suddenly gave way to industrial land. Lorries zipped past us, honking loudly and releasing puffs of smoke that hit our nostrils. All my fantasies of sitting together with Ronit in the back seat of the car and holding his hand throughout the journey had evaporated. I was complacent with my new companion. *Or rather used to.*

Papa dozed off on my left and Ma kept looking at her small mirror every now and then combing her hair back into place.

"I am done wearing a mask. Will anyone tell me why the AC is not working?" Ma faced me but directed her question to the driver, who looked in the rearview mirror and then back at the road ahead.

"Ma'am, it is working fine. You just need to give the air some time to circulate." If he wanted, he could have clearly told her to close the window, but he looked at her through the mirror. This time at me.

I got the hint. I was the custodian.

"Ma, please roll up the window first," I said.

"How will I breathe then?"

"You can. Listen to me. I'll tell you something." I took the opportunity to press the power window switch. "You should wear that pink kurta I got you this evening. Believe me it will look so good on you."

"You think so?" She beamed and stuffed the mirror back into her bag.

This was how she used to distract me when I was a kid. I was glad to learn that I had used the same tactic on her. This was simple and effective. She remained silent thereafter.

The stoppage at the Fontainhas was brief. Papa woke up from his slumber and started pestering us to find him a salon. So, we did. After dropping him off, we left for a stroll through the town's streets, gazing at the blue, green, yellow, and maroon houses. The guilt he was supposed to harbor had petered out the moment he stepped outside the car.

When we were done, he came out of the double doors of the parlour and insisted that he would take the tour alone, angry at all of us for doing it without him.

“Sameer, you were the party pooper. Now do not act like we dumped you,” Ma said.

“Oh, didn’t you? I was inside for what? Ten minutes. And you guys didn’t deem it necessary to wait that long?” He grumbled.

“Fair enough. But don’t start a drama. We can take a round again with you.” Ma attempted to make amends.

“No, it’s either me or we’re getting inside the car.”

So be it. We stepped away from the path. He took a good thirty minutes to keep us waiting in the sweltering sun.

He has been making a grumpy face since then. His expression grew even worse when we came to a stop at the location that Google Maps pointed to our accommodation in Palolem. I was sure when I researched this property that the description said it

was beach-facing. But standing here, I could not see any signs of a coastline or hear the gurgling of waves.

"Have we been abducted?" Ronit looked around as he sat inside the car.

"Don't think so. It says we are the location." I justified and disembarked from the vehicle.

I could not find the entrance to our hotel. On one side, there was a narrow sandy path bracketed by green garden shades on both sides, and on the other was a vacant area that seemed to be the backyard of another property.

Ronit got off and disappeared into the trees and returned a minute later, signalling for us to follow him. We dodged the low-hanging tree branches and maneuvered through a gap between two boulders.

I gasped when I saw it. The azure sea lay before me in all its vastness. I looked back at my father, who was trailing behind, wheeling his luggage through the sand. The wheels bumped into a small pebble. He pushed the handle in and hoisted it. His lips turned up when he saw what I saw, and his eyes twinkled.

"Are you upset now?" I asked him.

His smile grew wider. Managing retired parents was a task no less convoluted than handling two children of different ages. In most cases, same-age siblings were close. They always support each other. The problem arose when one of them started getting extra attention, mostly in cases when they had an age gap.

He turned towards my mother and said something in her ear, and she smacked him on his arm in return. My gaze flicked to the

sight they were referring to in their hushed conversation – a group of men and women playing in the water in bikinis—and I shook my head. I considered discontinuing this conversation and pressed on. A flight of stairs took us to the reception area, where we checked into our rooms.

“You are a genius.” Ronit cupped my face from behind and bent down to rest his chin on my head. Adorable. We stood on our balcony, which overlooked the sea. Our resort was at an extreme corner of the beach, and from here, we could see the full view of the entire crescent coastline.

“That I know. So, what should be our plans for today?” I asked, feeling a little overwhelmed by his weight.

“I’ll sleep the entire day.” He pretended to yawn and flopped down on the bed in a starfish-like position.

“Why?”

“Come on, you only told me that we wouldduldfor relax for these four days. It’s just day one which means we have ample time to roam around.”

I went inside and threw a pillow at his face, which he parried.

“You moron, that does not mean you get to sleep right now. Just look at all this. You want a beach vacation. Remember?” I said.

He bolted upright in protest and jumped down the bed “okay let’s do one thing.” Rummaging through his backpack, he took out a one-rupee coin and something else. “I’ll toss it. If it was a head, both of us would go swimming. But if it’s a tail” he dragged his

syllables in an effort to drive home his point “you come sleep with me.” He produced a condom from his other hand.

Not again.

It made me ponder. Neither option appeared particularly attractive. I will not have an advantage in either. Sounded paradoxical but even after being a sea lover I was scared to get into water. And his other option.... well screw that.

I snatched the coin from his hand and sucked my teeth in disgust. “Neither suits me. It’s my itinerary and we’ll follow it to the tee.”

“We paid for an AC room” the shouts came from right outside our room. I hit my toe on the leg of the table in an attempt to hurry, and Ronit caught me from tripping at the right moment. It was my father who was yelling at one of the hotel staff. Ma watched it happening, her eyes shooting daggers at the man as he tried to justify why the AC of my parent's room didn't work and why would it take the mechanic another six hours to arrive.

“Papa, what happened?” I came by his side.

“Just hear what he’s saying. The AC in our room is not working. And this gentleman has no desire to repair it.” He swept his hands in front of himself.

“That’s not what I said sir.” The man chipped in.

“We had done our booking so much in advance. How could you not have kept the room ready?” Ronit cut him off and took charge of the situation. I started emulating my mother's demeanor as well, defending their rights. However, my ears did not miss the

word when he said it. *In advance*. So that was it. Although it was thoroughly planned, it was poorly executed.

Ma continued talking under her breath. “The AC situation persists. In the car and now here.”

The number of angry stares disconcerted the man, and his grumpiness inflated his lanky frame a little. He pinched his nose, exhaling loudly while he spoke “Sir, as I told you, the AC mechanic will come and check.”

“But how shall we survive this room till then? You said six hours. Where is he coming from? Outside of Goa? From another country? You don't even have windows here.” Papa made a rectangular shape in the air demonstrating his point. I peeked inside. He was right. Ventilation was an issue.

“This is not right, brother. This should have been checked before allotting us the room. Now tell me do you have another room? We would like to change this one.” Ronit asked.

The man looked unhappy, but the air that he had gathered earlier had deflated, bringing his body back to its original scrawny shape.

“I'll check and let you know sir.” He turned on his heels and vanished into an area at the corner of our floor.

“Your room's AC is working, right beta?” Ma asked.

The color drained from my face. I hadn't realized Ronit was holding my hand until he dug his fingernail into my right palm. His nails...another one of my pet peeves. He had manicured hands, and when he forgot to cut his nails, they grew longer, sometimes scratching himself or me.

But before we could answer, God must have sympathized and poured some of his blessings on us. The man rounded the corner and returned, smiling. He could smile which was a revelation. If he did not provide us with a suitable room, I would wipe the smile off his face.

“Sir, we have a room cancelled by another guest. We can accommodate you there. It is spacious and has a beach-facing balcony,” he confirmed.

“Fantastic. What about the charges?” Ronit asked.

“It’s similar to yours sir. But to make up for the poor experience, we will be providing you a discount of fifteen percent.”

“That doesn’t sound bad.” Ronit said. Call it a cursed miracle. The room turned out to be the one right adjacent to ours. My parents could have a full view of all the activities we would be performing in the balcony.

We paid extra charges, but my parents’ jubilation compensated for it. Now that everything was settled, I collapsed on the sofa on our balcony.

I was a fetish of listening to the music of the repetitive waves crashing on the shore - if that made any sense—and I could lie down here the whole day and night listening to its rhythm. Sometimes I did this at home too, playing an hour-long video of the waves on my TV while lying on the settee. Abhay once told me that he found the mountains more enthralling and refreshing than the beaches. However, I preferred them for their restlessness. The sea was like me, I had told everyone, holding both rage and calmness at its disposal.

Remembering my phone, I turned off flight mode to check if the place had a reception to upload a few pictures of yesterday on Instagram. A flurry of notifications set my phone vibrating constantly. I pulled down the screen to see what was happening. There she was again, hitting likes on my previous pictures. Was she stalking me? However, why would she do this? I cleared all the notifications in one go and tapped my screen fervently to come up with a witty caption for our picture in front of the church. Out of the twenty-five pictures Papa had taken, this one was really good. I applauded the combination of the dress I had picked for myself - a pink full sleeve top and a pair of black jeans. I had kept my hair loose which flew to my face every now and then. The picture was captured when I tried to slide a strand off. Though my father did have absolutely no photography skills, he did almost a good job here.

'These delicate hair treasures the warm breeze on them.' I wrote the text in italics and attached it with the picture before putting it out there on the social media.

An instant like came. Sonia.

Ronit came outside, talking on his phone, and shoved it into my hands. "You speak with them. I have lost the energy to do so," he said.

The images of his two sisters filled the screen. "Hello dear, how are you? Is bhai behaving?" Rohit, the youngest of the three siblings, always received showers of pampering and all their attention.

"Hey. We are perfectly well. And no. Ronit is behaving as well as a pain in the ass."

They laughed. "I knew it." Pallavi said. "Niharika saw her mama's pictures and said he looked like a monkey. She literally said 'bandar mama'."

"She must have said I looked like a hero. Don't dilute her words or try to shoot over her shoulders." Ronit said to the screen.

"I said what she told me. Verbatim." Pallavi said, laughing again and winking at me.

"I'm with Niharika if she said so," I added.

"You are supposed to be on my side. You're my wife."

"I am darling. You guys carry on. I have got something to attend to. I'll be right back." I pressed my lips to Ronit's cheeks and then pulled them hard. "I love you. You are my hero."

I waved at the sisters, faking exuberance, and pretended to have forgotten something, ducking inside the room to steer clear of any further conversation. I usually talked to them once in a week and to be honest I considered that a chore. Not that I did not like them, but for the past few months, maintaining relationships has been really difficult for me. I tried, but I could feel that I was failing. Not only once, but repeatedly. So, I had stopped trying.

My phone vibrated again in my hands. I had completely forgotten what I had done a while ago. This time, it was an incoming text. It said, "Can you please let me know whenever you are free? It's a bit urgent. I'll wait." It was going to linger in my mind and ruin everything. I wanted to break this device with all my energy. What does she want from me? She could have clearly told me this yesterday when we spoke.

I switched it off again and kept it inside Ronit's backpack, zipping it closed, hoping for a permanent solution for the next four days. I swiped my forehead with the back of my palm, attempting to forget all my worries and start anew. Some people could be so irksome. They must do some introspection. I, being their HR, must plan a one-on-one counselling session with all those who believed their absolutely nugatory worries were urgent and for that they had the right to fling someone's peaceful day into a hellhole.

Chapter 8

The night air brought a mild chill of the season, not as cold as the winter in other parts of the country or the feel of wanting a bonfire, but enough to crave for some booze. It was almost dinner time, and we had scoured all the nearby eateries only to return to our hotel with empty stomachs. Papa had his reservations. He wanted a view and said that the views from the eateries were not satisfactory.

Being at the extreme corner our side of the beach was lively with fishing activities, fishermen returning to the shore carrying net full of various shiny scaled mackerels and kingfishes and women segregating them for their sale the next day.

“What do we eat? I'll try some fried mackerel along with...” Papa looked at the three of our faces. We captured only the empty table of the restaurant. We were late. Other guests staying here had already secured their favourite spots which sported the best of the views.

Right beneath my chair, a dog slept peacefully, making me fidget in my seat. I tried adjusting myself into a comfortable

posture while being cautious of waking him. My eyes were cast downwards at the illegible list of food items. I had to figure out something extremely light since the two of us had our own plans, which I was not going to get derailed. A perfect sight was not a prerequisite to avail that, at least.

Papa turned towards Ronit “listen, you can have a drink if you want.”

My gaze shot up. Papa looked expectantly, waiting for an answer which I knew was not going to come.

Ronit cleared his throat and looked at me from the corner of his eye, unsure of how to traverse these choppy waters, especially in uncharted territory. I nudged him with my leg. Not sure if he understood it was a sign to say no.

“It's okay with me if you want to have.” Why was he being so persistent Ronit must have thought. I knew because he thought that if Ronit had one, he would simply ask for a sip to taste, and thus he would be saved from being the one to order directly and then getting embarrassed when we shot him a surprised look.

God save me, Ronit understood my cue. He tipped his head back and laughed hard, wiping his eyes with the heels of his palms. “Papa, come on, why don't we try something continental. I'm sure they'll have plenty of options to choose from.” Clever. Papa must have seen his plot failing when he picked up the napkin and started wiping his lips even before he ate anything.

“I shared these pictures to your Mami, see.” Ma swiped at her phone screen and showed me a few snapshots of the view from her room. “They wish if they could be here with us too. All six of us together. That would have been great, wouldn't it?”

I nodded amazed at her expectations. First, they crashed our first wedding anniversary trip, and now they wish they had invited more of our relatives to add to my predicament. I wanted to rap my palms on the table.

On any of our trips, the evenings were an extremely crucial part when I would get drunk and kick up on my heels. Unlike today, which was bland, our eyes drooped, and dinner felt like a perfunctory activity.

“Your mama has sent you his blessings. I have promised to bring something for them.” She tucked her phone away, swallowing down her pain. Mama, ma’s brother had to undergo a heart surgery a few days back and she was dying to meet him once he got discharged from the hospital and returned home.

“We sure will. Say hi to him when you guys talk again,” I said.

“I will,” she said with a heaviness in her voice.

I wanted to meet him too. He was my favourite. But delving into these feelings right now was only going to cast gloom upon this beautiful moment. We needed to make this quick so I and Ronit could get back to our grand schemes.

“Your father is incredible.” Ronit croaked. As soon as my parents turned in, we successfully pulled off our preplanned escapade. He swilled down four bottles of beer and then growled ‘the pirate is in action now, where’s my lady?’ while I restricted myself to only three glasses of Smirnoff so that I was sober enough to rein him in....just in case. The handsome, dark-furred wolf I had pictured earlier was now behaving like a werewolf belching his guts out. He patted my thighs and then pushed his hands inside my dress. I pinched him hard.

“Fuck” he groaned.

We asked the staff to bring us the bottles and glasses discreetly so that the adjacent room would not notice them coming our way. The grumpy man I came to know as Bablu, the manager of this hotel, well the name did not match the surliness he held within himself, eyed us with suspicion as the waiter set the things down on our table.

“This boy seems to be nice. I talked to him earlier. He lives alone here at the hotel and saves money for his family who lives five hundred kilometres away,” Ronit said.

I nodded and peeled his hand away. A sudden sense of disappointment appeared without warning. Insobriety began to take roots. I was not ready for what I was going to say next.

“What is it? Did I do anything wrong?” He asked.

“No, not you.” I released a long breath before speaking “Ronit, I'm tired of all this.”

“Tired of what?” Concern flashed on his face and he turned on his seat towards me.

“Us being apart. I cannot continue like this. I feel like leaving everything behind and....and...” I tried to articulate what I felt, but my tongue twisted, slurring the words. I thought saying it out loud would make it better. Everything was as it is. We were trying really hard to find a solution to our situation but everything was just stagnant, not moving ahead at all.

"Listen, proximity cannot define my love for you; it is my faith in you and your faith in me that will strengthen it. Believe me everything is alright and now that we're here together why not think

about the present. Why are we worrying about what will happen after four days? We will only lose out on what we have right now. Just think."

A drop of tear dripped from my eyes. He was right. But it was really difficult to control a worrying mind, easier said than done. Whatever it was, he was sailing on the same boat as I and if he thought so then I should also think on the same lines. A bigger question kept hitting my brain. Although I tried to shake it off, it stayed – was he really trying, or was it only me rowing the boat?

Chapter 9

The stairs leading to the beach were narrow, and we descended with extreme care, with Ronit holding my hand and helping me down one slow step at a time. I had my favourite pink beach slippers on which scraped in the sand that got collected on the stairs. I held onto his hand like a toppled raft in the middle of the ocean.

“Be careful,” he said. My feet touched the sand, and it was like standing on clouds.

The sea had retreated back following the low tide, and the waves were visible only as a thin white line as they crashed, and in the darkness, the boulders sprawled across like sleeping giants. Dizziness hit me eventually, and a sudden jolt of delirium yanked my feet towards the main beach area visible from here. Lights dazzled across the sky, and loud music poured through the shacks resting on the huge expanse of sand.

“How to we cross to the other side?” I yelled. It was the vodka that performed on my behalf. “Howww do I go...there, there.” I gyrated to the music playing from our hotel while standing at my

place and pointed towards the rocks that stood between us and the shacks, jutting out into the sea and separating the two patches of land.

“Do you want to go now? It’s dark,” Ronit cautioned.

“Now. Right now.”

How could three pegs even get the better of me? I felt as if I had consumed too much alcohol. Way more than my gut could process. The sensible part of me prohibited me from crossing the limit, but at that moment, it felt like the sneaky exercise was going to be my last chance of getting drunk on this trip. Therefore, I guzzled until the liquid reached my chest, and my body asked me to stop.

We had to flip our gazes time and again to see if we were being watched, but the other balcony seemed quiet from down here. Lights turned off and curtains drawn closed. Only the wet towel was there which sat stagnantly. Despite the wind it didn’t flutter.

Searching for a flat rock, I placed a foot there. My feet slipped but he caught me right before I tripped.

“Did it hurt?”

“I think so.” I whined.

“Don't move any further. That’s why I was telling you not to. Let me check first.” He put one foot on one of the rocks and extended the other trying to jump onto the next but it was too risky. Water entered through the gaps and engulfed his feet completely.

“Don't think this is going to work. There has to be another way. But it’s too dark in here.”

“Why. Oh no.” Petulance crept into my voice.

Rather than the pleasant dizziness, a headache started pinching the back of my skull. I searched my insides for confidence, but all I felt was fatigue. I was aware of what I was doing or where my limbs were taking me, but everything felt forced. Heavy, against my body’s will, just like the dream from the other day. I was certain that the heavens were dead against my wishes. If I took one step forward, it dragged me two steps back. And this was happening right from the day this vacation had started.

“Because the path is not reliable, let's try again tomorrow morning?” The shoe was now on the other foot and he was the one supervising me with whatever sobriety left in him.

“Oh no, then how do we party?”

“We party here, see” he twirled me on my heels and held me tight in his arms.

“What if someone sees?”

“Nobody can, that's the advantage.”

I looked around. He was right. It was only us.

I edged closer to the shoreline. A wave rolled closer and washed over my feet, depositing sand everywhere. The next person took the grains away. Somehow it knew I was going to be unrelenting. The sand I stood on was tender, compressing under my weight, while I felt like I was being pulled in. I stepped away from the indent and in the process formed another. Water filled it up, replenishing the gap I had caused.

“Is it twelve yet?” I asked.

“Ten more minutes to go.” He came up behind me.

I whirled around facing him “But before that there has to be a proposal.”

“A proposal? Interesting.” He pondered. “For what?”

“Okay, so let me be very clear on this. You proposed me to fall in love with you.”

“Yes.”

“And then I made you to propose for marriage.”

“Okay.”

“So now, you’ll have to ask me to allow you to spend the rest of your life with me.”

“Will you not, if I don’t ask?”

“I will. But please note that this will be like a bond. A verbal contract. A certainty. Like come what may, we will stick together.”

“Got it.” He took my hand in his and planted a soft kiss on the cold skin. The warmth seeped into me and at that moment I just wanted to crawl beneath his t-shirt and build a nest somewhere on his soft torso.

Away from everything else and wrapped under each other's affection we sang our hearts out and danced under the stars until the fuel we had consumed burned itself out.

One year of our marriage, how the time had flown. But it didn't feel any different. Yes, there certainly was a positive difference now that we could express our love freely in front of our parents.

However, if you ask me what is there apart from that, the response will be void.

"So, what kind of a gift you want this time?"

I pouted my lips before making a clucking sound with my tongue "You to the entirety."

"That looks difficult with all the distractions we have."

I smacked him hard on his arm "you are the one to be blamed."

"I was not talking about your parents."

"Then?"

Ronit swivelled his gaze and pointed his chin towards a woman standing outside on her balcony hanging her hair loose and wearing a diaphanous night gown. She was tall, and from the spot I was standing at, I could clearly see what she wore inside that gown.

"You...how dare. She looks too old to be a distraction. Poor taste" I wanted to hit him hard but stopped in my tracks when I realized I was cracking up despite myself.

"Not that poor. She is sexy. Or rather, her dress is." Ronit said.

"I don't think so. I can see only one beautiful woman in the entire beach and that's me."

"Yes, because no one else is there apart from us on this side. And I cannot call myself beautiful."

"Not fair."

The clock struck twelve. "A very happy completion of one year of us, my wife." He leaned down and kissed me deeply on my lips. The beard, which had always felt like barbed wire, felt soft to the touch. Just like a bear's fur. I could absolutely dig my fingers into it and then get lost in the thickness.

"Happy anniversary to you too my love." I placed my hands on both sides, cupped his face, and pulled him close.

His lips were always inviting. The way they swelled and turned pink after a kiss coaxed me into sucking on them harder. I knew I would wake up the next day with a red, blotchy face and regret my decision. But at this moment I didn't care.

The lights of my parent's room were on by the time we returned in the midnight. "Do you think they'll be up?" Ronit asked.

I shrugged. This was unusual. They usually slept by ten and tonight also they retired long back.

"Should we knock and check?" I asked.

Papa opened the door, his expression distraught. "Papa. You guys are awake? Is everything okay?" I asked. He stepped away from the door and kept it ajar for us to walk inside. Ma sat on the edge of the bed talking to someone on video call. I could catch only the hints of what the other person was saying "...next ten days...critical." This was my aunt, my mami. I could tell from their voice.

I waited for her to finish the conversation while looking at Papa for clues. Anything he could provide that could explain the looks on their faces. He kept his arms crossed stiffly on his chest and stared down. My heart started beating faster. I hoped that nothing was wrong. Ronit stood beside him unsure of who to comfort first.

Ma hung up the call and her head drooped. I put an arm around her. "Ma what is it?"

"Your mama suffered another pain attack and doctors had taken him into the ICU again, but not to worry it was something minor and he's perfectly alright now. They are going to keep him under observation for the next few days." I held her hand tight and rubbed her arms that had gone ice cold. She was crying. Tears fell one after the other.

"Didn't mami say anything about this when you were talking to her in the evening?" I asked.

She shook her head.

The three of us started at each other's faces figuring out what to tell her when she wiped at her eyes and asked papa "Sameer, I think we will have to cut this trip short."

Papa nodded.

I froze.

"We can leave for Chennai tomorrow morning. I'll check for the flight options and get our bookings done." Ronit contributed. The words came out of his mouth even before he planned to. He then looked at me for confirmation. I was dumbstruck. I did not want to say 'Yes' and was in no position to say 'No.' Hence, I stared back. Only my eyes had gone wide and thankfully it was only he who could understand what I was processing inside.

"You don't have to beta. And I feel so shitty that we ruined it for you." Ma leaned back into my arms, slumping her shoulders.

"Ma, why are you saying that? We must be there for the family at this moment. They need us right now." Ronit concluded

without seeking my confirmation. Though I agreed to whatever he said, my dumbstricken mouth betrayed me. I was made to be the evil one for not uttering a word of consolation.

Papa stayed quiet too. His eyes remained focused on the wooden floor. I got up, training my legs that buckled under my weight to remain straight, and uncorked a bottle to pour some water into a glass. I handed it over to Ma, who first refused and then took it from my hand when Ronit insisted.

“I’ll take care of the tickets. Will you please check with the hotel if they can cancel the rest of our days’ booking?” I asked Ronit to sit back again to comfort her.

“On it.” Ronit turned on his heels and went out of the room.

“Shreya. Please reconsider this. I promise that everything will be fine. We really don’t want to spoil your anniversary.” Papa started and then paused. “Darn, it’s already twelve and we missed wishing you. Beta, really, you don’t need to go through with this.” Papa hadn’t spoken a single word while Ronit was here. In reality, Ronit was the one who actually took the decision for us. And I had to go along with it.

“Papa. You can’t say that. It’s an emergency and how can we leave you guys all alone like that?”

“We are not kids and you don’t have to chaperone us. There are too many people, and it would be difficult for your Mami too. Reeta is singlehandedly managing everything there. She won’t be able to manage a crowd.”

“Exactly and that’s why we need to be there so we can be of assistance. You two won’t be able to run errands at the hospital.”

Ma sniffed loudly and let out a hiccup. I increased the pace of rubbing as if that could bring some respite to the situation, but rather than making her warm, it only made my palm hotter. So, I stopped. Rambling to myself than to actually soothe her, I talked under my breath. "I'm here mom. I'm with you. I'm with you."

"Reeta assured me that we did not need to come. But you know her. She will not seek support under any circumstances. But I know. I understand what she is going through right now. Even if I stay here, I won't be able to keep my mind in this place." She said it in one go and then wiped her nose with a small cotton handkerchief that I did not see her clutching.

"Shreya" I heard the voice and whipped my head towards him, looking over Ma, who was blocking half of the view. "They will not...cancel." Ronit said the word cancel after a contemplative pause. "Said it was too last minute. If we had only told them..."

"Told them when? We arrived today Ronit. Moreover, if they are reluctant to cancel for tomorrow, I understand their policy of informing a day ago, but what is the issue with the two days after that? That can be cancelled right?"

He nodded pinching his forehead "I told them that but..." He let his hands fall, and a look of retirement crossed his drunken eyes.

I consciously turned my head to the other side and coughed into my hands. Clear. Or Ma would have caught the whiff.

"But let's not worry about the cancelation. More important is, Shreya what about the tickets?" Ronit asked.

I was shaken awake from the reverie "Yes, yes, on it. I'm so sorry." I ran to our room to fetch my phone.

Flicking the light switches on, I groped under the rumpled blankets where I remembered I had thrown both our phones. I found Ronit's, an inch of it peeking out from under the pillow. Mine declared its presence with a ding at the extreme corner of the bed, face down. I walked around the edge, fitting my body through the narrow gap between the bed and the bathroom wall.

Right above the playlist I was listening to earlier sat a message.
Sonia: Can we talk?

Sod off.

Brushing away the message with my thumb I opened the airline website. Eighteen thousand glared at me against one of the flights. I clicked on the calendar button to check the trend and the price for tomorrow was highlighted in green. Definitely the lowest. Did I have the option to rethink? Supposedly not. That's done. Couldn't retract from the decision that had already been made.

Chapter 10

Ronit flicked through the TV channels while I paced the room back and forth, carrying our clothes from the wardrobe located at the extreme tenebrous corner of the room and throwing them into the bag with all the force I could muster.

He shifted his gaze to me, worried "What happened?"

His voice was muffled by the loud background music from the news channel he stopped at. It was played with such urgency that it would keep you at the edge of your seat, awaiting something horrifyingly intriguing. As per the announcement, top hundred news of the country was next. There it was - a slew of fire accidents of the day. Earth was getting hotter even during winter it seemed.

"Will you please power down the TV?"

"Tell me what happened?"

I chucked one of his trousers at him and he caught it mid-air.

"Hey. I thought everything had cooled down. But you are still brooding." He then turned off the television. "Listen, I'll justify myself again. It's not my fault that they asked to come. What could

have I said? That you are not welcome because this trip is supposed to be a romantic trip for the two of us and you will only be intruding on our personal time. I don't mind their presence. And they are your parents."

"Everything is fine. But the one thing you fail to understand is this" I emphasized with whatever dramatic gestures I could think of "was important. Months of waiting just in order to get some time at a stretch with you."

"So I'm there. What's the problem? Only the circumstances will be different."

"You don't understand. And when have you really tried to? You are always surrounded with family."

"And that's what I thought for you too." He exhales loudly and stood up, exasperated. "You know what? Living alone on your own terms has rotted your brain. You can't bear anyone's presence now. Sooner or later my presence will become insufferable too."

I shot my pupils towards him in anger. About what he said. There was a scintilla of truth I won't deny. There is a lot of truth in this, which I had trivialized until now. But claiming that I would prefer my loneliness over him or others. That was cruel. Also, even if that were true, who should I blame for my predicament? I didn't want that and would never incline on having such a life.

A slight wobble caught my lips and before me trying to hold my composure they shook hard and a tear fell down on my clean and crisp blue kurta sitting on top of the stack I was holding.

"Baby" Ronit sat on the edge of the bed, pulling me towards him. He locked me between his thighs blocking my movement when I performed a ruse of resisting.

I didn't fail to take cognizance of the ever so soft touch he laid on me. His embrace was always warm and gentle. I adored that. Which made me reflect back on my opinion that he didn't care. That was a bit harsh of me.

Had I grown that harsh that I had started feeling the prickle of my loneliness back on my skin and drifting people away from me in the process. If that was truly the case then serious intervention was required but I was sure my Cortisol levels were well under check.

He clasped his hands behind the small of my back and I blended into his arms. "It's fine. Please don't be so harsh on yourself and especially on them at this moment. I understand this was not what we planned for. But tell me one thing. Will blaming the circumstances make it any easier?"

I knew it won't.

As if hearing the words straight from my mind he replied back "Then? We'll finish this trip some other time. We have plenty of time okay?" He looked directly into my eyes boring each of his words straight through my nervous system "Let's jilt this calendar of yours. Let every day be a possibility for us to create something new together."

It was difficult to estimate how long it would take to get there or by what time we would be able to return home. As per Ma, she gave us a timeline of ten days. I wished he got well before that.

To be on the safer side I dropped a quick text to my manager.

Me: There's a slight change in the plans due to a family emergency, might take a few more days.

Varun would understand. He always did.

An incoming call on Ronit's phone shattered the silence.

"Mansi." He said and answered.

I could feel my head slowly calming down. After cramming all our belongings back into the bags, I sat down to sip a glass of iced tea. Ronit had a lot to deal with too. First my parents' dilemma, then my protracted sulks. And now he got a distressing call from Mansi. I could hear her loud cries pouring through the phone speaker when she mentioned the fight she had with Pallavi. The sisters always fought, and Ronit, the only brother, had to conciliate. At least that was a responsibility I could shirk, considering that I was single.

"Hold on. Tell me from the beginning." Ronit spoke on the phone and nodded violently when Mansi explained everything to him.

"I understand, and you need to know that I am with you. Therefore, for now, relax and try to get some sleep. I'll call you first thing in the morning," he said.

"Yes. Everything is going fine here." He replied to her queries.

"What was she saying?" I asked when he disconnected the call.

"Same old story. Why do I always have to get caught in the crossfire?" He said and left the room to take a breather. I didn't mind. We all needed some quiet right now.

Our tickets were ready and bags packed. I had no despair left. I was ready to go along with my destiny and flow with the time. I was also done blaming Ronit for landing us in the situation. This was not completely his fault. I was adamant. My hopes too high.

A hustle of footsteps along with hysterical murmurs came closer to my room and then stopped abruptly outside the door. New guests may arrive. I thought to myself. Tomorrow, or I should call it today since it was already midnight, our room would also be occupied by some other guests, and they would be having the fun that was intended for us to have.

What I would miss the most is the view from this room. All you had to do was open the sliding doors, and the roar of the waves would fill your ears in an instant. I took in a long breath trying to fill my lungs with the aroma of this place. The warm tropical breeze which dragged me here.

The door banged open. Ronit glided inside and sat patiently on the sofa beside the bed.

“What happened? Did you get a call again?” I asked.

He shushed me and pointed his fingers towards the door. The curtains parted to declare the entry of Papa followed by Ma. They shuffled inside forming a line. Papa slid the door closed and pressed his back against the frame. Were they going to announce something awful? Mama had to be alright. They said he was well now. Yes. But the looks on their faces stated otherwise.

“Ma? Will anyone tell me what’s going on.” The suspense began to grate on my skin. Their faces had gone pale.

“Is Mama okay?” I asked.

“Just relax.” Papa said holding his hands out “Your Mami called. She said that Mama was out of danger now, as confirmed

by the doctors. She called her brother earlier and he has reached Chennai a few minutes back. So, she told us not to worry.”

I stared at him to provide me a conclusion, but it seemed that was it.

“Okay?” At least nothing terrible then.

“Yes,” Papa said.

“So, what are you guys suggesting now?”

“That we stay. No need to cancel.”

I took time to process this piece of information. My parents had always been a living example of sensibility. Taking a reckless decision at the spur of a moment had never been their attribute. What propelled them now was beyond my understanding. No amount of stress could give me the labile hypertension that their vacillating decisions were doing to me right now. I couldn’t understand whether to be relieved or worry about bearing the brunt of an additional cost. I felt like I was being hit by nausea. I wanted to sit.

“Are you sure you want to continue staying?”

“Yes. Reeta assured me everything is fine. Once we are done with this trip and once they are back, your mother will stay with Reeta for a month to assist her,” Papa said.

“What about the flight tickets that I have already booked?” I didn’t mention the cost. Saying it out aloud was surely going to knock me out.

My parents looked at each other guiltily and then at me with a sorry expression. Ronit cleared his throat, trying to save the

situation from getting out of hand. “Don’t worry about that. I’ll talk to the airline.” He reassured. “And to the hotel manager of course.”

Chapter 11

The day was bright, a perfect one for some sea activities. But when it came to the number of options, well that was less. I and Ma lugged my beach towel, a bottle of water, some wafers and a book down to find a dry sandy patch to settle ourselves in. It was eight, certainly not the morning I had expected. I woke up at five after only two hours of sleep the previous night to witness a sunrise and waited and then waited some more until a prickling sensation started clawing at my neck. Mornings came late in this part of the country, and I had forgotten that.

Most of the beach was wet, water seeped into the sand making it extremely itchy to sit on. Finding a dry area in that scenario was like hitting a jackpot. Ronit donned a blue PUMA tank top matching it with a short and jogged down towards me. I smiled and waved at him to come but instead he halted midway surveying the colourful kayaks stored under a shed.

Exhaustion had burned my insides when I woke up this morning. It was Ma who plastered a gentle kiss on my forehead and begged me to come with her and enjoy the morning beach in

the way of an apology. Agreeably, there was something in the air that whisked away the fatigue of the previous night. The likely presence of negative ions boosted my alertness to a level that I had never experienced before.

There was no effect of the previous night though on my husband as if the episode never really unfolded in his life. But whenever I opened my phone and went through the text messages, my eyes fell on the money deduction notification. That was going to sting for some more time.

Ronit raised his arms overhead and stretched his body bending left and then right. What was he planning? A bearded man looking close to forty came and they fist-bumped. Anybody looking at me currently would find question marks embossed all over my face, impossible to believe that in such a short span of time he had managed to make friends. But that was a normal behaviour for him, wasn't it?

I wanted to return to my book, didn't realize I missed to hit a pause to the audiobook and it flew at its own pace, totally indifferent to what was happening in my life's story. I immediately hit a pause and then started it again from the beginning of the current chapter. I usually read my book while simultaneously listening to the audio. This gave me a vivid experience as if the story was playing out in front of my eyes.

He and the bearded man who must have been the owner hauled a green single-seater kayak and launched it carefully into the water. He hadn't bothered to ask me. But then why would he? It's not that I would have agreed to ride alongside him. I was crazily scared of kayaking especially in lakes or in the ocean. Floating on that almost flat structure felt like I was dangerously

close to the water, and at any moment something or the other would pop up from under the water and give me the heebie-jeebies. I had developed this phobia recently when I kayaked through a river inhabited by crocodiles and saw a half-eaten deer floating close to my boat. That's why I preferred to stay away and was not a single bit upset when he didn't ask me.

"Your husband is adventurous." Ma said

"Huh?" I plugged off my earbuds to listen.

"Your husband" she said, pointing her chin towards him. He was paddling with an amazing stride, getting ahead of all the amateur paddlers.

"I know" I sighed.

"How are you guys planning to celebrate the day."

"Today?"

"Yes."

"We'll leave post breakfast for the sightseeing."

"I don't mean that my dear. I mean, your anniversary. Today is special," she said.

After yesterday night's events it had completely skipped our minds. We kissed each other morning and then I was out scheming today's activities with whatever verve left in me. I didn't realize when he was up.

"Nothing?" She frowned and I shook my head in return. I wanted to ask her did we have time to figure that out. But then zipped my lips shut, swallowing the discontent that threatened to bubble up. She looked down when she spoke again, " You know

we thought your marriage would turn out differently, but I think we were wrong. It's good to see the two of you happy. He is managing things pretty well."

I had no intentions of delving into this topic. They were against me marrying Ronit because of the cultural mismatch. I appreciated that they had accepted the fact now, but this was not the right time to discuss all this. I kept my expression blank, wooden to the point that my teeth started aching from being clenched. My cuticles betrayed it all and she fell silent not to make this moment any more awkward.

"I'll go check on your father. He must be up by now. He was quite relieved after Reeta's call." Mom stood up, gathered her belongings and gave me a peck on my forehead.

"Why don't you ask him to come?"

"You know him, right? See" she pointed to the balcony of the restaurant which overlooked the beach.

"He's already got his favourite vantage point to enjoy his morning from. Don't think he'll move his ass from there." He lowered his head, engrossed in something. I choked down a laugh.

"But you sit, wait for him to come" she said, and I nodded. Ma trotted back towards the hotel. I stared at her retreating, fragile frame. I didn't remember her looking so old. She had always been lively and radiant. At least, that was my memory when I looked at her closely. Was that years ago? Did I miss the period when their lives pivoted in a completely different direction? This transformation they had undergone.

They must have observed the phases of my life minutely, my vulnerabilities and what made me tick. The gradual socio-

emotional changes that carved my personality. The way I learnt to pronounce a word and then with great difficulty managed to weave them into sentences. I never knew what they liked because all their attention was focused on providing what I liked. We used to be so close. Though being the only child was always a disgruntling experience. And sometime after I crossed the age of twenty, I drifted apart like a sheep from its herd who decided one day to see what's in there for her at the other end of the world.

In the morning brightness the teal colour of the sea deepened to a dark blue shade. I closed my eyes, plugged my earphones and started feeling the words pouring out of the narrator's mouth. Before I could concentrate on my story, a football hit me on the back.

"Sorry...we are extremely sorry. But can you please move a bit further?" A group of boys who I didn't notice before now circled me. The ball they were playing with trampled my packet of wafers after hitting me. If I was not by myself right now, I swear I would have asked for a compensation for two things - one for displacing someone from their abode, which was the comfortable position I had discovered after a lot of effort and second for destroying the rations.

The one who spoke stood there while gesturing his friend to fetch the ball. I brought my eyebrows together and shot them an angry glare.

"Mam, please if you may." I liked that tone. Who was this again?

The boy with the solemn voice came forward, parting the closed group. His hair was neatly combed, and the fringes were

slightly wet from either sweat or water, which I did not mind. But they shone bright in the sun, clean like pointed swords. But a pretty face was also not something that could've dissuaded me at that moment.

"Can't you guys go somewhere else to play, maybe on the other beach side? I came here first so I don't think I should be the one to leave." I mustered all my courage to put my point across. The pretty face seemed not only cute but conscientious too. He gathered his friends trying to make them understand. The rude one who spoke first, ordering me to move, swat his hand off, adamant but then the group shift took over and the first boy, who was clearly overreacting, raised his hands in defeat. And so, I won. Thanks to the cute-faced boy. Without giving another glance towards me they strode off.

Almost an hour later Ronit arrived. His breath came short, and he gasped between words, " That was cool. You always tend to miss it. You should have come." Behind him, another woman stabilized her kayak, slid out, and scrubbed her dress. She looked at Ronit and winked...a wink? He rubbed his hand on his neck and gave her a sheepish smile. I watched the entire exchange with utter disbelief.

"What was that? I asked.

"Oh...nothing. I met her on my way. After we left the crowd of kayakers, it was just the two of us surrounded by water everywhere."

"Oh, great."

"She's a Canadian by the way. And interestingly she didn't even have the safety jacket on, said she didn't need it. Such a confidence." He added.

"I see."

"It's cathartic, you know. Being out there in the middle of the sea. Nothing apart from water in sight. All you can hear is the sea lapping. Close your eyes and it's like the giant is cheering you up. To go ahead. Further into the wilderness. And oh my god you will not believe, her strokes were just so practiced, he said. Clean. Tak tak tak. He demonstrated. "I'll have a round again tomorrow."

"And make me sit here idle all by myself?"

"That's what you wanted, is not it? To relax and get some quality reading time? What you call - your beach reads."

I snorted and looked away. That's what real men were like – imperfect and agonizingly irritating. Unlike the picture-perfect ones in those beachy romance reads Ronit was talking about. He smiled and threw me a kiss when he saw my lips pinched on either side. I had to admit, though reluctantly, I loved those imperfections too.

"But I told her it was our anniversary, and my wife was waiting for me ashore, so I needed to hurry and would not go any further in case she was worried. "

"Hmmm" I pretended to look back down into my book.

Ronit lifted it off my hands "don't give me single syllable answers."

"What else do you expect me to do? You are just so busy." I yelled.

"Because you will not accompany me. What's my fault in there."

He was right. I should not have forced him to do what I wanted. So, I bit back a reply. "Where's Ma-in-law?"

I pointed to the restaurant where both of them sipped on their fresh lime soda while gawking at a couple trying to film their so-called dance for an Instagram reel. This was the third time the woman rebuked her husband for failing to take the perfect shot.

"Cool."

"Yes. And they seem to have forgotten what they did yesterday," I said.

He sighed.

"Come on. Don't be so harsh again. They need a distraction, and so do we. Let me show you something."

"What?"

"Something special for my special woman."

We kept everything in our room and plodded through a bushy path that emanated from our backyard. The trail didn't look like it would lead us anywhere but then it was my husband's discovery which meant it had to behold something beyond doubt.

"Are you taking me to a hidden cave or what?" I asked.

"You'll know once you see. Have some faith. I'm not as disappointing as you think."

I shrugged.

The trek, which had started on a gritty uneven path, gradually led us to a slick trail flanked by ivy-covered wrought iron fencing on either side. I planted my feet carefully at every step to avoid falling. It looked like a part of a forgotten garden. Water accumulated in one corner of the trail suggested presence of a water source nearby which prevented this place from drying up. My eyes wandered over the small yellow wildflowers hanging from the top of the fence. I laced my fingers through the apertures in the mesh and rose on my toes to reach the flower. I plucked one.

“A daisy? Those are not poisonous, are they?” Ronit asked.

“Not that I am going to consume it. A flower so beautiful, can't be noxious.”

I brought it closer to my nostrils and inhaled deeply. Nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary.

Ronit jabbed his foot against the fence and attempted to climb.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I'll get you more.” And then he yelped.

“What happened?”

“Nothing. It's just a small cut.” A broken piece of wire had punctured the tip of his finger, and a drop of blood was visible.

“It's not a small cut. Did I ask you to show your bravery? Why do you always have to act impulsively?” I inspected the cut and put his finger into my mouth. He threw his head back and groaned blissfully.

“Stop, you fool.” I laughed.

"Now you don't bother my long fingernails?" He asked.

I did and I gagged.

"Why should I not? And I've figured out a solution for it."

"What is that?"

I smirked. "You'll know in the course of this trip."

We crossed a sodded section that we supposed belonged to another property, most probably the one where the woman from last night was staying. I tried to survey the entire lawn to see if I could catch another glimpse of her. Just to double check if she was as beautiful as Ronit thought. Doubting me.

"Just be careful over here" Ronit walked ahead of me, guiding the way. Two flat rocks lay side by side, separated by a narrow gap. My ankle twisted as soon as I jumped, and I yelled in pain.

"What happened?"

"Nothing. I think I twisted my ankle yesterday when I slipped."

"We're almost there, do you think you'll be able to make it?" This time I wasn't staying behind.

"Yes" I said, and then winding through a damp passageway, we emerged onto the main beach.

"Here we go." He rested his hands on his hips and, with the proud grin of a tour guide, awaited an accolade.

The sun was overhead, and I squinted, shading my eyes from the glint. He pulled down his shorts to reveal another hidden underneath. He grinned, displaying his two squirrel teeth.

"You want to go get a dive?" He asked.

"Have I ever done that?

"Oh! come on you're not going to drown." He insisted, and in the next moment, I was swept off my feet, hurtling through the damp beach towards the incoming wave. It smacked my waist and ebbed away. He held my wrist so tightly that I could not move even if I tried. A second wave crashed around my chest. Had he not held me, I would have been spewed out onto the prickling sand again. The feeling was nothing less than being submerged in water.

Somehow, he understood that I won't be able to withstand the third one and slowly pulled me out, his hand placed firmly on my back. Unlike him I didn't carry any spare clothes and the one I was wearing right now was completely drenched. The only way to get a change of clothes was to go back all the way to our hotel, following that tricky path.

I collided with a small girl who was trying to duck down and find out her frisbee, which she, along with her elder sister and mother, were playing. Well, I assumed their relationship from the matching bikinis all three of them wore. Her sparkling round eyes flicked up to me, her ponytail dripped water on her neck as she came out, and her hair over her head stood like that of a wet bird's crown. Her mother called out her name and her little limbs flailed in the water to get across towards her.

"I will sit here and watch you swim as usual. And dry myself in the heat." I plopped down on the sand where the water would hug me just right without drowning me. Ronit waded a little deeper, his long legs cutting through the water as he attempted to take long strides. During our early romance days, he had those skinny legs which I used to make fun of. He was even thinner than

I was, which gave me a complex. But now, they looked strong, and he was unflappable.

From here, the crowd was palpable. Every few feet away were people either sitting like me or playing in the water. Families and friends whooped and cheered. The lovers floated together side by side and looked at each other with crazy starlit eyes.

Ronit immersed himself in the water and repeated it three times; the reason was unknown, but it certainly had to do something with his religious beliefs. Only his head bobbed over the surface, and then he smoothly slinked away like a crocodile pursuing its prey and stopped at a point. His eyes scoured the area, searching for signs of me. You never knew how far you had gone when you were in or under water, and the same happened to him. I ignored him, busy with my own thoughts.

My fingers grazed something on the sand, and I started expecting it to be a crab or any other creature, but when I looked down, an auger seashell was left behind by the retreating wave. I picked it up inspecting it from every corner hoping for something to come out but it turned out to be dead broken. With another wave, the sand eroded further, and boy oh boy the beach was filled with scallop and sunray venuses. They were spilled across the sand as if jewels collected from the ocean had been toppled over by a sea vessel upon reaching the shore. I dug out a few, washed them clean of sand, and selected the ones I wanted to keep.

Water splashed on my face all of a sudden and I gritted my teeth from the saltiness of it.

“I called you so many times, waved at you too. What are you even contemplating about?” His gaze fell on the shells I had

collected after so much hard work, and I quickly shut my fist, clutching it tightly. He cupped more water into his palms and splashed it again. The water met my tongue and I grimaced, scrunching up my nose. I wanted to do the same to him provided my hands remained unoccupied. But even if they did, I knew my palms were so small that the water it would have held would not even drench his moustache. It was a tough decision to let go of something to achieve something else.

I pulled myself up, and that was it. I hadn't realized that sand was getting into my shorts every time the waves hit. It poured down in chunks when I stood. Ronit doubled over at my predicament. Neither could I stand upright nor could I sit fearing the possibility of further sand accumulation.

"Don't laugh. It's not funny. It's your fault, you made me sit here."

"How is that my fault? It's the beach."

"This wouldn't have happened if..."

"Come I'll wash you up. See this is why you should always be in the water." He guffawed even harder at his own comment. I wanted to cover my face with something...anything, feeling like a culprit hiding from the media. Fortunately, everyone else seemed completely occupied with their own activities and did not notice me.

I wanted to disappear.

Chapter 12

My parents were sitting in their usual cozy corner when we returned, sipping on their fresh lime soda. This was acutely adorable, the way they were together at all times. I had never seen any of them sitting outside the room alone. Their attention snagged on a lady bickering with the manager.

"These guests also have the same problem. This hotel manager is not at all cooperative." Ma said and shot his back a glare. His head turned towards us just once as if to retaliate to the accusation. But it seemed he couldn't hear us distinctly over the lady's pitch which was indeed a good thing. I waited to hear more of her opinion. She took another sip and swallowed it relishingly before adding "good that we got our room changed. These resorts now a days have become increasingly opportunistic. No one cares about public reviews. In the peak season, their greed goes completely through the roof. Poor lady."

The grumpy guy inflated again, but the woman overpowered him this time, deflating him back to shape with just a pointed finger. Ballsy. We watched the drama until the woman wheeled

her suitcase out of the hotel, her heels clanking on the floor. Papa and Ronit had started and finished all the parathas from their share while I and Ma kept licking on the chutney, completely unaware of our share getting cold and hard.

I picked up a slice from a paratha which was cut into four quadrants and tore it into half. "I'm done. Rest you guys finish. I got to go get ready now."

"Where are we going today?" Papa asked shifting on his seat towards me. Now that he was done and already had his Goa vibe T-shirt on, he would prefer not to wait for us.

"I've asked the reception boy to arrange for a car that will show us around." Ronit said.

"Mmm, you need to give me time, I'm not ready." Ma said between her chews. She had brought six dresses for six days, and to clarify it further, these were only for outings. There were additional twelve sets of clothes, six as the backup of previous six and the rest were nightgowns. Amazing. I had already worn the three I had brought in the past three days, and now I was left with my husband's oversized T-shirts.

It was time for a high tide and water had come very close so only a small patch of dry sand remained for people to sit on. I and Ronit came downstairs to wait for the two who were going to come out together as their all-time ritual. Ronit's hands were tanned up to his arms. While we were coming back from the beach, I had not noticed him as I was still reeling from the salty taste in my mouth while my teeth grounded the sandy particles that accompanied with the water. Once we were inside our room to get cleaned up, I saw. Something about the way water dripped from his body and

the little droplets that clung to his back sent a shiver down my spine. Goosebumps automatically broke out everywhere in my arms and thighs. Most importantly, his hair and beard were just like morning dew after a long cold night. I soaked him in, the condition of my clothes completely banished from my thoughts. Why was it happening to me even seven years later? Surely, the way I was looking right now would give him goosebumps too, but out of fear because my hair was completely messy. Although my clothes had dried up.

Papa came down and hitched his backpack up on one shoulder. "Why are you carrying this?" I asked. "And where's Ma?" I craned my neck to look behind him, and there she was, donning a kurta set different from the one she wore thirty minutes ago.

He looked behind his shoulder and said, "Great, but you could have tried the one I told you to this morning. That would have appropriately matched with the weather. This one is also good but then doesn't match with mine."

Ma ignored his remarks and carefully treaded through the narrow trail heading out to the parking area making every effort on rescuing her pajama from the mud puddles formed as a result of the morning vehicle washes.

Our car was waiting for us at the exact same spot where we got off the day before. Before they could conspire to sandwich me again in the back seat, I jumped into the car on one side and banged the door closed. Others didn't seem to have noticed my achievement and slid next to me one by one. I praised myself internally, lifting the corner of my lips just so slightly so as not to catch anyone's eyes. Although the itinerary was etched in my mind, I took my journal out to spell the names of the places I had

wish-listed to our driver so that he could arrange the sites as per the route.

Our first stop came into view. Agonda was not very far from where we were staying at. The beach was mostly secluded and uninhabited. Apart from the four of us and a few boats moored at the shore, not a single soul was visible far and wide. It was pristine and sandy, although not as huge as Palolem.

I took off my slippers and placed one foot on the sand to feel its warmth. The sea breeze whipped at my hair and a strand came loose. I tucked it at the back of the ear but the wind was unrelenting so I held one side of my head with a hand and placed my slippers at a safe space which could be recognized later. The water here was dark blue, turning into white foam as it kissed our feet.

"Doesn't look like there are many stay options here." Ronit shielded his eyes with one hand and scanned the area. We had coupled our clothes today wearing similar green colour t-shirts with a red coloured heart painted right at the centre inspired from a cartoon character. Fortunately, this was the last set of clothes remaining with me, and I did not have to borrow his. Mine fitted perfectly well but he was getting a little jittery adjusting his shoulders every now and then.

I nodded in response. He engulfed me into a hug, the way he always did while walking together and we walked along the beach a little further to explore the area.

"Look at them." I turned my head back to check on my older guys and they seemed to be pretty busy climbing a set of smaller rocks sitting at the corner of the beach. My father extended his hand which my mother took and he helped her up and then he

took out his phone to click a selfie. I liked the way they smiled, their skin glowing with the happiness of being here, being with us. This trip was certainly turning out to be something else, but nonetheless, I had started liking it.

“Less our anniversary but more like their honeymoon, isn't it.” He smirked after saying this.

“I think you took the right decision.” I extricated myself from his grasp and looked into his eyes. He stopped in disbelief. The mischief that had eternally lived in those eyes was replaced by something else. Something unrecognizable that wanted to tell me to be grateful for what we had right now. And I undoubtedly was.

“What brought this sudden transformation?”

“Not exactly a transformation. But yes, I thought it through. I think you were right earlier. I'm getting a tad self-absorbed. And no, I don't feel bad about what you said yesterday. That I can no longer bear anyone's presence. I accept that. Right now, it's more of a reflection. That's it. But let me tell you this candidly: I still do not believe that you invited them to bring me around. Accept that you had forgotten.”

“I will accept if you really think I was right in doing so.”

“We have a confession then,” I asked.

He bowed.

We reached closer to a resort. Its wooden cottages boasted polished slanted roofs that gleamed in the sun. Recliners graced the front. The towels draped on them billowed in the hollow, sandy wind. Right across from it was a surfing zone. Surfers,

mostly beginners, practiced paddling on blue and yellow surfboards.

“Baby, I wish we stayed here. I want to surf. This is so exciting.” I exclaimed loudly and gave his arm a violent shake.

His gaze drifted to where I was pointing. “Seriously, now who is saying that? You can do this when the surfing board is on the land and not in water. Or you’ll end up using it like a pool hammock.” He pointed his chin towards a girl who was trying to position herself, lifting her chest up, and balancing to stay at the middle of the board. She fell after several attempts.

I shot him an angry glare as I walked away. “Why do you think I'm scared of water at all times?”

“Because you are dear.” He patted at the back of my head and moved on ahead.

“Not true. That's only in case of kayaking. I always snorkel better than you remember and I'm always the one who remains calm doing that...unlike you.” I hurled my retort back and it landed just perfect. What did he think of himself?

He deliberately took long strides, which made it difficult for me to match, and I had to run to catch up to him. Therefore, this meant that he still did not agree. Now it was up to me to prove it.

“Prove it.” As if he could hear my inner thoughts, he echoed my thoughts.

When my eyes zeroed in on the second destination mentioned in the itinerary, I knew in an instant that God was in my favour, helping me to win the bet I was playing with my husband.

Fortunately, my co passengers were unaware of what to expect when we reached there.

"Your grandma called this morning, and I completely forgot to mention it. Did you courier her the medicines I asked you to?" Papa said without looking up from his phone and typing a response or a question, I was not sure, to someone in a long text thread.

Between all this, it just slipped my mind. I couldn't think of a convincing answer to give to him right now, a justification for why I forgot. And lying here was not a good decision in this case. So, I stuttered when I spoke "uh...I could not. There were a lot of things going on and I just..."

"It's fine, Shayan said he's on his way there and will drop them at her house."

I exhaled the breath which I had been holding inside but still spared a few minutes to gauge his expression, just to check if he was disappointed. In reality he shouldn't be. In my circumstances, anyone would have floundered. After sometime when I reassured myself that everything was normal, I looked outside to let the views distract me.

"From here you'll have to hire a bolero. Five hundred per head, give it to him." Our driver pointed towards an SUV parked at a clearing in the middle of the forest. Its driver propped himself up on its bonnet and waited for additional passengers to fill all his seats.

That was unanticipated, even for me after so much of research work. We had settled down so well that the three of us were reluctant to climb out of the car. Ronit got out first with a swagger,

extremely indifferent to our situation where we were constantly trying to accommodate our butts in the best way possible. The other vehicle was completely empty, which meant we would have to wait until the universe sent some other tourists trundling down the dust path we came from. We took the back seats even after knowing that it was going to be jumpy...my father's decision it was. Better to let in the boos. A black sedan came our way but didn't stop, it continued its way towards the beach.

"How could they do that?" Papa exclaimed. My eyes followed their trail and then shifted to our driver, who leaned his body on the car in a very relaxed position. Inside a flimsy shirt like his, I would have felt the severe heat of the metal on my skin, but he did not flinch.

"I think there's some permission kind of thing which we don't have," I doubted.

"Did we check if we could avail that? Or can we get it now?" Ma asked.

"Not sure if that's possible, and I do not even see anyone here to ask.' And this man" I pointed to the driver "seems to be of no help."

Papa shouted at him "Hey, no one else seems to be coming. Shall we leave?" We received no response to this request. He swivelled his gaze once towards us and then went back to contemplating.

My father rapped at the body of the vehicle now wanting his attention. Only half of his face was visible from one side, black and white stubble covered most of his face and the grey shirt he wore

had a small hole close to his underarm. Completely neglected his life might have been, maybe that's the reason for his nonchalance.

“Hey” Papa tried again.

“Sir, I think we should go now, getting late waiting here.” Ronit's tall frame stood in front of him, with his back straight. Fire in her eyes, ready to bore a hole into the man. The driver untangled his crossed arms, slightly scared just a bit. He said something under his breath that sounded like a grunt and then got behind the wheel, the semi-bald back of his head facing us in disdain.

Such a formidable self my husband could be when he wanted to be. I encountered many hidden facets of his personality.

“Please start the car now, please” Papa added.

“He's starting Papa.” I shushed him.

The driver stuck the key in the ignition and revved the engine. Ronit sat shotgun as if not wanting to leave his side even for once.

The ride as I thought was not only bumpy but it felt like a five-magnitude earthquake. We jumped off the seats whenever the path turned rocky and for the rest of the time our entire body including our jaws shook violently as if we were hit by a live electricity pole.

Whenever I tried to convince myself that whatever happened was for the good, I was handed the short end of the stick. This life can be biased at times. My husband got all the fun and abandoned me completely to deal with my father's judgement, the way I was dealing now.

Finally, after ten minutes, when we reached our destination, the first thing I did was massage my buttocks, which had turned

sore from all the shaking. The smaller hair at the front of my scalp stood up. I took out a small comb which I carried in my waist bag everywhere I went and smoothened the strands back into place.

A set of stairs descended to the beach area. Tiled roofed shacks bordered the beach while coconut trees sprang up everywhere it found a space. I had done enough research to know exactly what I was here for. A backwater that stretched from the beach and ran for a few kilometres. Papa removed his backpack and placed it at a safer spot inside a shack asking the owners there to keep a watch on it. The beach was extremely small, not where you can enjoy the waves or swim or let alone think about taking a dive.

I took one step after the other carefully to reach the shore.

“Shreya” I heard Ronit call my name and I turned towards him. He waved his long hand at me and pointed his thumb towards the kayaks as if to remind me of our bet earlier. I remembered it too. As clear as a bell.

“I’m up for it,” I said in a bold tone and surveyed the water just to be sure the depth was what I had learnt.

"Are you sure?" He asked.

I held my head high and strode towards a dry kayak “we’ll take this one.” I pointed a finger towards a multi-colored kayak sitting idly on the shore. The guy in charge gave me a slight nod and dragged it on the sand towards the entry point of the ravine.

“What I was wondering, since your mom and dad are green in this and I won’t trust them to handle the oars for the first time, why don’t we switch positions?”

“What do you mean?” I swallowed hard. I knew exactly what he meant.

“You and I are experienced and since the water is also only waist deep, I was thinking...”

“I’ll go with Ma,” I proclaimed.

“You go with Papa,” Ronit offered.

We both said at the same time as if trying to win a toss. Who gets whom.

“I win, the bet’s mine. You just get to play, that’s it.” He smirked devilishly.

“Or since I get to ‘just play’” I said with an air quote “I get to choose who I accompany.” I placed my hands on my hips, giving him my most confident look.

“Okay then, be my guest.” He said, with a flick of his wrist.

I looked at both of them who were busy surveying the surrounding and looking up at the cluster of coconut hung on the trees and completely oblivious to the fact that I was going to pick a player of my choice out of the two. It didn’t take me long before I bellowed out to Ma and asked her to join me.

She inspected it for some time before saying, “Do you think I can do this? Well, I’m not going with your father if that’s what you guys are planning.”

“No Ma, you are going with me, Papa with Ronit, sorted.” I concluded casually.

“That suits me fine then,” she said, smiling.

I and Ronit took the front seats while my parents sat at the back, trying their best to balance their oars. The water was not deep, but I had not expected this view. It was worth it. Coconut trees lined up on both sides, their green hues reflected in the water. Two other kayakers were riding in front of us. Small rocks were visible underneath. I planted my paddle blade deep and cut the water with perfection. Water particles flecked up but didn't reach me to soak my clothes. I kept on drawing forward strokes, my mind completely fixed on achieving the distance and then coming back to the starting point.

"You can keep your oar down, Ma." I shouted over my shoulder.

"You sure? I can help." She proffered.

"No Ma, it's fine. Let me paddle the way I want to."

"Okay. Can you give me your phone so I can take pictures? Your father took my purse. And his camera, God knows why he brought that contraption if he had to leave it at the hotel."

"Your purse?"

"Yes."

I held the oar carefully in one hand while my other hand worked on fiddling with the zip of my waist bag. "Here" I handed it to her. "And now let me focus on the task."

"Sure." Her voice sounded cheerful coming from my back.

Till now everything was fine. Water was shallow and the paddling didn't take much of an effort. I made gentle strokes, sweeping the water back while Ma rotated my phone at every angle trying her best to capture a shot of both of us which was difficult

with the positions we were seated at. But then in an instant the water grew murkier.

Wait, it was not the colour of the water. The visibility of the river bed blurred owing to the increasing depth. My heart stopped beating and my brain stopped functioning. A sudden fear lurched its way through my gut and pulled me into its fold. My hands stopped working.

I stilled my paddle board for some time trying to make sense of my situation. It was like when you start losing the struggle and let the water take you beneath its surface. Was I drowning? And what about Ma? How was I going to save her?

The wave of the ravine took us a few feet ahead, but to take the correct route, I had to muster the courage to paddle, which I had lost. My stomach churned and sweat started making my palms slick. My ears turned red hot.

Ma must have realized something was wrong when she spoke in a concerned tone “you okay beta? Want me to help?”

I tried to formulate words through my chocked mouth “Y...Yes. I’m good Ma.” When I saw a few kayakers making their way back towards us, I thought to paddle forward. In case we drown there would be someone to witness since Ronit and Papa had gone very far and they couldn’t see or hear us.

That was a fair distraction. I gripped the oar tightly in my hands and made a backward stroke to align the boat in the right direction. I knew that what I felt was an exaggeration, but still, fear knew no boundaries. My nervous system began to react to the stimuli. My hands kept making deep strokes, lugging all worries

to the back of my mind, and finally, I reached a point where we could see those rocks again.

“Is that them?” Ma shouted. Just ahead of us I could see the back of my father trying to lean his torso forward. He wanted to push himself up and peer over my husband's shoulders but the basic requirement of maintaining the kayak's balance prevented him from doing that. From a distance it looked like they had reached an extreme point and their kayak got stuck in the rocks.

Ronit tried to propel themselves away a little while pushing his oar on the nearby rocks but to no avail. I paddled a little closer but a burly man standing on the other side waived his hand towards us asking us to turn and leave so that we also don't get stuck. My mind whirled with a lot of options I could take at this very moment, and I tried to grasp the optimal choice. I wanted to help, but I could not muster enough courage to save myself and them simultaneously.

Ronit put one foot down and tried to balance himself over one of the slippery rocks. But that jeopardized the balance of their kayak and my father let out a shriek in panic. I got distracted by all this and felt myself gradually floating towards the shallow area when the shouts from the burly man pulled me out of my reverie and I made a fast backstroke. My heart raced.

The trees bracketing us suddenly felt like they were closing in on me, wrapping me tight with their strong, gnarly roots. I quickened my pace. My muscles on the verge of giving away. All the power was draining out of me and I just wanted to stop, let the water take its course and take me anywhere it wanted. Ma called out to Papa, but he was too busy inspecting their situation to heed our shouts.

“Nothing will happen to them, right? I told your father not to undertake this but he will never listen to me.” Her panicked quivering voice reached me from the back in bits and pieces, and I could not make sense of what she was saying, only that she was tense for them.

“They’ll be alright Ma. It’s us I’m worried about.” I shouted back, hoping she could hear my words clearly.

“I should also get to work now.” She replicated my hand movements and cut through the water making deep forward strokes. Our kayak propelled ahead miraculously and we maneuvered our way between the other kayakers safely without hitting them even once.

“Slow down, slow down” I raised my hand to give Ma the signal and stopped paddling any further. Our kayak hit the shore and a boy came running down to slide it carefully onto the sand. I got out first and extended my right hand to Ma for support. I didn’t feel the weight of her pull as my hand had gone numb. Fortunately, I didn’t drown myself and even better was the fact that I managed to do everything while remaining completely dry.

“Ohhh, for the grace of God. I got so scared.” Ma ran towards Papa as they hurtled down towards us, their gait heavy. “Are you two alright?” She ran her hand through Ronit’s hair, checking for any signs of pain. Ma was equally melodramatic like me or maybe that was a trait the heavens decided to pick from her and bequeath to me.

“Ma, we’re good. And come on it’s not deep, you can never drown here.” He said, holding both her hands. Hearing this, she let out a heavy breath, and her shoulders relaxed.

“Yes dear. And trust me it was fun.” Papa whooped with delight.

“But then we heard your panicked cry and that got us all the more worried.” Ma said.

Papa scratched the back of his head with a hand and gave a meek response “Just had a blond moment.”

I sidled up next to Ronit and rubbed my palms together, celebrating my win inside my brain “So what do you say now? I win the bet, don't I?”

He lowered his gaze, and his eyes locked onto mine just enough to freeze me in place. This was what he always did to get the best of me, vanquish my temerity with a mere look, as sharp as a knife cutting through a cube of cheese into pieces. His eyes narrowed teasingly and his long eyelashes cajoled me into entering a dreamy world that lay inside. My mouth stopped forming words, craving for water or for his lips on mine. My feet wobbled and I started feeling the previous numbness all over again.

“If you say so.” He said very calmly and brushed my cheeks with two of his fingers. I could feel the heat forming inside me and making its way through the veins to burst out from my face leaving spots of red. My sudden inertia shocked me when he burst out into laughter. He cracked up so hard that tears formed at the corner of his eyes. I wanted to admonish myself. How could I be so weak, didn't understand his tricks even after seven years.

“Now who's the winner honey?” He said with an arrogant smirk on his face. Loser.

I kicked him on the shin and strode away. If I continued talking to him, I was certainly destined to dissolve into this murky green water.

“Accept it.” He shouted from behind. I didn't look back.

Chapter 13

The shack was mostly crowded, and all the tables were occupied by the time I entered. From the look of the empty beach, save for one man sleeping with his shorts on and his tattooed hands clutching a book, it never felt like we were actually in the middle of so many tourists. Ma and Papa had managed to bag a corner table and motioned us over to join them. “The tea here is good, try some.” Papa took a loud sip and released a sigh of satisfaction.

I ordered one for myself, along with an omelette and a soda for Ronit. I was perspiring like a buffalo and would have loved to douse myself with all the cold water packed inside the bottles placed in the refrigerator. Ronit scooted beside me flipping his phone screen on “just look at this.” A picture of me struggling to paddle right, my face distorted and mouth forming a snarl, popped up on the screen.

I chocked back a laugh despite myself “When did you take that?”

He shook his index finger and then pointed it towards Papa, saying, “do not blame me, your father took it. I was completely unaware.”

I cut him off with a wave of my hand “must have been you giving him the instructions.”

He shrugged. By the time our food was placed on the table, I caught a whiff of the tea and inhaled deeply, soaking in the aroma. Even in this scorching heat, I thought I would relish it, considering that all my energy had been whipped out of my body. I extended my right hand to pick up the fork with great difficulty. The muscles in my arm had gone taut, making every slight movement torture.

“Wait, wait, I know you have done hard work. Save your ego for another time. Let me” he cut the omelette into large pieces, wrapped one around the fork, blew on it to cool it down, and then shoved it into my mouth.

“Mmm it's good. I have ordered some lime soda for you. What's taking them so long?” I formed my words while simultaneously chewing my food.

Ronit looked around to find someone to ask, and then his eyes landed on a girl leaning on the counter, dressed in a short skirt and an apron. He raised his arm and waved at her. Her cherry red lips lifted in a jovial smile as she made her way towards our table.

“Yes sir, how may I help you?” She asked in a velvety tone.

“My wife here says she ordered myself a special wedding anniversary drink. Do you have any idea what that could be?” He replicated the ebb and flow of her voice.

Her face said she was clearly stunned and was absolutely not expecting this. Even I was not when a food particle took the wrong way and got stuck at my wind pipe. I overcame this by an uncontrolled coughing spell. My eyes watered as Ronit patted my back to soothe me.

"I'm fine." I managed a croak, my voice still recovering from the attack.

"My bad, I did not mean this to happen. Can you please just check if my lime soda...oh there it is...sorry to bother you," he said to the girl when a boy placed a chilled glass of soda in front of him.

"You are never going to clean up your act, are you?" I elbowed him hard in the ribs when the girl and boy went away.

"Don't think so. And that's what attracted you in the first place remember?" He said.

I tuned him out and focused on grinding my omelette thirty-two times with my molars.

"I'm done for the day. Are we stopping anywhere else?" Papa pandiculated, his arm stretched up and dropped on my shoulder with a loud thump.

"Ouch Papa. You're going to break my bones." I yelped.

"Sorry, seems like you're down on your luck today." And then he and Ronit snickered and shook their hands behind my back. Wait, what was that again?

Among the four of us, only my husband seemed fresh. He jogged back up the stairs and waited at the landing for our enervated legs, which took a good amount of time to make the harrowing climb. Ma joined him next and motioned for us to be

quick. A single SUV waited in the parking area, which already had three people seated. Papa and Ma accompanied the two tourists seated in the middle and I and Ronit took the entire back space and stretched our legs as far as they could go.

"Let me massage your hands." Ronit took my left hand in his and pressed it with both hands. I wanted to moan at the feeling. It was so comforting. "You're liking this?" He asked for a feedback for the service.

I groaned, a muffled "yes" escaping from my lips.

He took that as a sign and shifted his attention from my hand to my right leg, which stretched onto his seat, and started making slow circles around my ankle.

"Stop" I mouthed hoping others wouldn't have noticed our little pursuit here in the back. He didn't stop but rather his fingers crawled a little further inside through the hem of my jeans. I swept his hand away and pinched his feet, which were extended toward my side. A sudden jerk moved me from my seat. I was about to hit my head on the roof when he caught me.

"Oh God. Why is everything wrong happening to me today." I cried out while finding a purchase to stabilize myself.

"That's why I told you to sit beside me, right here." And then he patted his thigh.

"Fuck off"

The sun was giving me a headache now when we reached our final spot for today. Cabo de Rama beach. My itinerary said we had to trek to the fort and then catch the sunset from the view point but the heat and our hungry stomachs both became unforgiving.

We stopped at the cliff to take a peek below. The azure blue water was tantalizing. The thin stretch of sand that we could glance from here glowed bright. Hints of thatched roofs below indicated the existence of a resort standing alone on the seaside like a sand castle.

I stepped a little closer to the edge. A dense thicket lined the steep slope. In case I slipped, I was sure I wasn't going to tumble down but would get wedged somewhere within the bushes. Ronit pulled my hand and tugged me closer for a couple photograph.

"Smile" Papa said and rapidly clicked a few pictures of us. Everything happened so fast that I didn't even get a chance to pull the loose strands of hair away that kept whipping on my face.

"Guys...wait, what are you doing?" I shouted agonizingly but my voice got swept away with the wind, far from the cliff. Ronit let go of my hand and pulled Ma close. They had been wearing similar color clothes for the last three days, and today they were both in green. Also me, of course.

"We need to be quick. It's already two and we're getting late." Papa said without taking his eyes off the phone screen.

We took pictures in all the possible permutations and combinations and wrapped up the day trip in thirty minutes. If someone looked at the pictures, they would find all of them similar: two people standing straight, unsmiling, and holding the rails at the back.

By the time we reached our hotel, my stomach rumbling had subsided. Papa's backpack proved to be the saviour of the day as I wolfed down two packets of potato chips he carried. He didn't

know that. I was not going to tell him the truth in case he searched his bag for the packets, which he would undoubtedly do.

"I'll retire for the day. Not in a mood for lunch." I said, fatigue filling my tone while grabbing my belongings from the car. Ronit took all of them from my hand and unbuckled my waist bag to wrap it around his. Then, he placed one of his arms around my shoulder and helped me up the steps to the hotel as if I were an old lady.

"Just have some soup or something to drink. You'll feel better, I'm sure." He pressed my shoulder firmly.

"Let's go change first, how about we meet in fifteen minutes?" Papa said.

"Sure, let me order our food so we don't have to wait." Ronit started to make his way towards the restaurant when Papa grabbed his arm and stood in front of him. Sometimes I really didn't understand why he did what he did. He had clearly scared Ronit, for my husband's eyes grew wide in horror. Why the hell was he acting weird?

"You two should go and change first. It won't take long, trust me." Papa insisted. Ronit gave him a skeptical look and turned his head back towards me, confused. I shrugged, as I also did not have an answer for it. He was my father, yes. But that didn't mean I was supposed to know what was playing in his mind. He knew how to conceal it well.

"Please" Papa was certainly not giving up.

I narrowed my eyes and looked at Ma for some signs, anything that could justify my father's demeanour at the current moment. Her lips were pressed into a thin line. Her lips were so small that

it was sometimes difficult to understand whether she was stifling a smile or just radiating her normal expression. The long and short of it was that she would not tell. Something was definitely up, looking at the way she stood completely still, backing her husband up. I was scared about the possibility of another bomb dropping on our heads. If it did, I won't be able to endure it.

"Papa..."

"Please beta." He didn't let me complete and hijacked the conversation.

"Whatever", I puffed out a breath, waved my hand in dismissal, and stomped towards my room, my husband in tow. He thrust the key into the keyhole and slid it open. I removed the curtains on one side to let us in. The room was dark, except for a few rays of sunlight that trickled through the transparent panel of the door left bare. I flicked on the light switch, and before Ronit could throw our belongings onto the bed, we saw this. A white round double tiered cake sat primly at the centre of the bed, hundreds of rose petals circling it from all sides. Cream coloured roses covered the top while two chocolate hearts containing our names stuck out from the cream bouquet. This was completely obscured by darkness.

"What the fuck?" Ronit exclaimed.

My jaw dropped so low as if propped open by a rod and declined to close when I saw the room decorated with balloons at every corner. I picked up a petal to check if it was genuine, and its velvety touch confirmed it.

"There's something underneath, he swiped his palm on the bed, shifting the petals to one side to reveal a piece of satin, happy

anniversary written in all bold. He held it in his hands and stared at it for a few seconds, without saying anything.

"Ma asked me today in the morning when you were out there kayaking, if we had any plans for today."

"Huh? What did you say?"

"Well, I just sat there blankly. I had forgotten after yesterday's knotty circumstances."

"Do you think they planned all of this after that?"

I shrugged. My legs buckled from all the excitement I felt at that moment. I took a closer look and rotated the cake board for inspection. When a smidgen of cream chipped off the corner of the cake and stuck to my finger, I noticed the small decorative cream roses circling its rim.

"Oh my god! It's speckless. I cannot cut it but it looks so delectable." I said. My breath came short and in gasps.

"Yeah. Now I understand what that weirdness was all about. I was seriously not expecting this."

"So did I."

"A very happy first anniversary" my parents entered the room shouting. A few more shrieks accompanied their excitement. I stared at the phone screen Ma held in front of my face. There were my sisters-in-law, both holding small red anniversary cards. This was a bit too much in such a short amount of time, but I appreciated the efforts they took.

"We are also cutting the cake here on your behalf. But you get to only see because the eating part...that we'll do." Mansi, Ronit's

second eldest sister spoke out, tugging at the collar of her shirt with two fingers.

"Fair" I laughed, surprised by the deluge of adoration.

"Did you guys patch up finally?" Ronit asked in a loud voice.

Mansi rolled her eyes and said to me "tell him I'm a decent lady who doesn't hold grudges."

"He heard." I laughed.

"Happi anniveerb" Pallavi's two-year-old son chirped, his words mangled by all the chaos surrounding him. He placed a small palm on his lips and blew me a kiss. Aww can this day be any better. I kissed him back, and his toothless grin spread across his face.

"Oh my god, when did you guys do all this?" I said as Ma handed her phone to Ronit and tucked me into an embrace. Just beside me, the three siblings chitter-chattered, their pitch scaling up as each tried to get themselves heard over the other.

"Did you like this?" Ma asked.

"Of course, why won't I?" My parents took time to accept our relationship. This trip seemed to have changed all their perceptions about Ronit. I knew they would come around eventually, but that would happen so soon...well, that was a good sign, was not it, universe? I looked up hoping I'd get a wink in return from someone making all of this happen.

"Now, now, it's time for the cake cutting." Papa picked up the plastic knife from the cabinet and handed me the hilt of it. The decoration upon the cake was so intricate that it was going to fill me with remorse if I even tried to touch the knife to its edge. I

made two triangular slits and carefully slid a piece out, ensuring not to ruin the other half of the cake.

My eyes were on the verge of shedding tears, but my ears kept ringing so loud with all the babblings surrounding me, showering blessings and love that they decided to trace their steps back. I broke a small piece from the one I had just cut out, fed it to Ma, and picked up the larger one for Papa.

“Don't you have to do the partiality to please me,” he said.

“I am not pleasing you; it's really delicious and soft. And is your choice. If you don't want it, I'll be happy to eat all of it.” I gorged myself on a piece of cake. Putting up with a kook, that was my husband, was one thing, but managing three of them needed sheer determination, which I think I had managed to imbibe in the last few days.

“That was for me.” Papa groused.

“But you didn't want a partial treatment,” I said, lifting an eyebrow.

Ronit hung up the call and returned his attention to us. Papa patted his back, his smile suggesting how proud he felt right now, a dimple flashing on his face. He took Ronit's hand, clasped it between both of his, and dipped his gaze. “It feels so good to see the two of you happy. Just stay the way you are with her, will you?” He said very softly. His emotions threatened to spill all over the place. It was the first time I saw him wistful after my marriage. He put on shades the moment his eyes turned glassy. He thought that nobody noticed, but I did. I was sure Ronit did too standing so close to him.

Ronit's cheeks grew hot and red, overwhelmed with the sudden change in the atmosphere. The true depth of love was abstruse, somewhere it was shallow and at other times it was cavernous. It never stayed the same, always giving you a varying degree of joy balancing your life in just the perfect manner.

I had always given it a single definition. Love meant my husband, and hence I thought our anniversary would be something where the two of us would create a moment for us to look back upon. I had never associated the rest of my family to be a part of this. I felt like the happiness I was destined to get on this very day had intensified manifold upon looking at all the faces who were equally happy for us.

Sometimes, reality does not echo our expectations, and we tend to assign a higher weightage to the latter, but today, I learnt the real meaning of it. The reality had surpassed all my expectations and I was grateful for expecting less earlier.

I cleared my throat which had suddenly become too heavy. "Ma, Papa" I shifted my gaze from one to the other "I'm so glad you are here with us today. I don't know what it would have been like with just the two of us. But what I have right now is better, I love it." I clenched my fist tight trying to stabilize myself and my emotions which could betray me any moment now.

An hour was gone and hunger forgotten, we had no intention of leaving each other's side. I leaned my head against my father's chest.

"Told you, don't try to please me," he said teasingly and ruffled my hair.

"Oh papa, come on now."

“Okay, leaving everything aside. When did you plan all of this? And how did you even execute? All these arrangements, how did you manage?” I held my head up gently rubbing at my eyes to help me bounce up.

“It was nothing. That manager, what’s his name, Bablu. Yes, he helped. We told him exactly what we needed, and it seems that he has gone overboard. So, it was only our instructions and the rest of the credit goes to him and of course his team.”

“That frustrating one?” I asked.

“Yeah, exactly that one, she said. Well, he's quite resourceful it seems.” He said while sweeping his eyes across the room, taking in the decorations. “The décor and the cake, they said they could arrange it all so we thought let's give it a try.” That made sense. “While we were away, they got everything arranged, and he called me up to tell me that everything was ready. So that's when I asked your mother to hurry.”

“Incredible. Which means the guy in reality is not as frustrating as we considered him earlier, is it?” Ronit chimed in.

“The scrawny body has a big heart.” Papa said.

“True.” I acceded.

“Not only that Pallavi called me today in the morning, said they were also planning on a surprise, so we decided to join hands.” Papa said.

I remembered the placards that read No to Certainly, this would have taken time to prepare.

“But everything aside, we felt really sorry for ruining your perfectly planned vacation, and this was the least we could do.

When your mother told me that you guys had no plans and then recalling the gruelling night you went through, we decided to do something special. Although pretty small it is, but that's all that could be done within the time we got." He continued on.

Chapter 14

We didn't order food. The cake had already satiated our hunger. After the happy ending, my parents drifted back to their room, leaving us alone to clean up the mess the four of us had created. I had my own reasons for not helping, the muscles of my arm burned in pain so I snuggled in one corner of the bed and stared up at my husband's face, my eyes glittered seeking sympathy.

"I got it. You take rest." He placed the blanket on top of me and cranked up the temperature of the air conditioner. I pulled the blanket up further to cover my ears which still rang, the constant din tapping at my eardrums. Everyone's voices still reverberated inside my brain.

From a small gap through the blanket, I watched him carefully pluck the petals up from the bed and deposit them inside the cabinet drawer. He closed it slowly so as not to make a noise and then used the towel to brush the cake crumbs off the bedsheet. His biceps bulged when he picked up the pillows from the sofa and replaced them back on the bed.

I wanted to touch them desperately and grip their tightness in my palms. I hoped he didn't waste time and came crashing on top of me when he slid beside me on the bed. Rather only inches apart he lay down, eyes fixed on the ceiling and deep in thought. I crawled my body close to him, dragging the cover along and burrowed my head on his soft hairy chest. The masculine aroma of his perfume still lingered on his skin, and it took everything in me not to give in to its power. I traced my index finger through the middle of his chest, wrapped it around the soft hair where it was dense, and stopped at one point to give it a tug when he still did not respond.

"What?" I asked when he shot me a look dipping his head to his left. "You were not heeding to my call." I pleaded.

He quirked an eyebrow "You want something?" The words flew right across from his lips and into my ear and I felt the heat of it. Its warmth percolating down my neck to the rest of my body. Without mincing another word, I took my turn and planted a soft kiss below his ear. He moaned. I knew this would elicit a response. His adam's apple took a leap up and bounced back down as he swallowed, clearly not anticipating my move either.

"Will yes as an answer suffice or do I need to elaborate?" I asked.

In an instant, he was on top of me, his lips leaving their mark everywhere on my neck and then down to my breasts. I let out a loud moan. I pulled at the neckline of his t-shirt and tugged him closer when he tried to pull away and we dissolved into another flurry of intense kisses.

“You don’t have to. I know what your needs are. Let me take this off” he pulled his t-shirt over his head and then shook the dense thicket of tousled hair. I ran a hand through its coarseness to smoothen it back. They listened to me and cooperated with my tough fingers. He undid the buttons of my sleep dress one at a time, his fingers leaving a sharp sting at every step as they made their way from my neck to the lower belly. I gripped his shoulders tight while fully aiding him in his venture.

“Wish I get to see you like this every single morning when I wake up” his voice came hoarse. Once he finished with my dress, I arched my back to take it off. I snaked one hand through his neck, and he balanced himself over me with one of his.

“You still can. We have three more mornings to wake beside each other.” I realized the heaviness of it once the words left my mouth. He noticed the sadness flashing across my face and brushed his lips against my eyelids.

“Not three. Plenty. I’m going to give you so many opportunities to wake beside me that you’ll get fed up. I promise.”

I smiled.

I traced the contours of his jaw with a thumb and extended my slender finders to graze the mole beside his sideburns. I always said this was where my heart belonged. During our earlier days I used to kiss this mole in his pictures. He asked me whether I would love him if he didn’t have that and I had said no, I wouldn’t in a comical way.

He pried my legs apart to prop himself between them and slowly glided his hand over my breast in a circular motion. I rested

my free hand on his other arm and invited him to delve deeper into my emotions.

He took the cue and pinched my nipple, which had grown hard under the blessing of his gentle caress. My blue and white underwear was on the brink of dampening as his knee pressed into the skin of my inner thigh. I let out an aching moan, savouring the touch, but he placed a finger on my lips to shush me. I closed my eyes, imagining his next move when the same finger sailed farther down into my waistband. The pirate had aroused from his slumber it seemed and I was defenceless. I opened my eyes to see his face growing dark, a madness orbiting him and his lips crashed into mine erasing all my thoughts. I placed my palms on his chest, transferring this electricity directly into me and channelizing it inside my nerves.

“Can't wait. Please” the words tumbled out beseechingly, without warning and I felt hollowed out from inside as the desire escaped my mouth inadvertently. He fiddled with the knot of his short pants and swiftly pulled himself out of them, his hands working at a frightening speed. He pushed his erection into me, taking his time and exploring me inside and out. I cupped his face firmly with both of my hands so that his eyes could catch the exact moment when I came.

His back collapsed on the soft bed when he finished and he let out a sharp breath, resting his head on one hand. It didn't register us while adjusting the temperature of our room that our afternoon was going to culminate like this. We were soaked in sweat and completely out of breath.

“Believe I was able to soothe your pain then?” He smirked.

“Huh?”

“Your arm.” He pointed his chin towards my hand. “They no longer hurt I assume.”

I flushed, unable to retrace my steps to uphold my frail state, now that he had witnessed my energy.

“Somewhat.” I said meekly.

“Then maybe we can have one more round?” His smirk grew into a mischievous grin. Try as you might, this man was incorrigible. He gently stroked my cheeks with his fingers drawing his lips closer to me but I backed away angling my face to the other side.

“Three more mornings remember? Only three. Let's make the best use of it. And today's our anniversary so you can't deprive me of you.” He grabbed me so hard that my limbs froze. Unable to move, I lifted my head and sank my teeth into his earlobe, trying to stop him in his tracks. This only provoked him further. He clasped both my hands on either side and looked down, his eyes focused on mine, and then gave me a soft peck on my forehead before releasing me.

“I swear, you are the most beautiful gift God could ever bestow upon me.” He lowered his mouth and murmured in my ear. That was it. His way of undoing me. Completely, beyond recovery. His warm breath coiled snugly around the curves of my body and left me immobile.

We fell asleep immediately after the act and were startled awake when my phone screen lit up with an incoming call.

“Fuck, who is this?” Ronit sighed in his slumber and dozed off over again.

I didn't have the strength to get up and answer, so I lay there quietly waiting for the pealing to stop. It did finally but still as a precautionary measure I switched it off for good. I didn't know who that was or didn't bother to check if it was an urgent call. That was not important right now. The thing that I cared was lying down right beside him for some more time. He snored slightly, absolutely undeterred by my shuffling. I touched his lower lip gingerly - the best way to wake someone up - and he made a face in his sleep.

I slipped out of my cover, walked over to the counter and brought some water to a boil. I filled a cup to the brim while dipping a green tea bag into it and sauntered out of the room. The sun was almost hanging low in the sky, preparing for a descent. The crescent coastline, always a hubbub of activity, started to lighten itself up. Chirping of birds grew louder as they flew over the sea in batches towards the forest and some landed on the palm trees adjacent to our property. The sound of their wings flapping grew louder as they came closer. I leaned on the balcony, soaking in the views, my orange shirt dress crumpled from the passionate sex we had.

On our side, the water had created ripple marks on the sand, which looked like sand art, changing its pattern repeatedly whenever the waves hit them. I took a long swig of my tea and let it trickle down my throat. There was something extremely relaxing about this part of the state, away from the loud and crowded north and snuggled inside a forested landscape, with beaches covered with jagged rocks infusing further wilderness into them. A soft

music played somewhere downstairs, its bass mixing completely with the swoosh of the incoming waves.

I swirled my tea, dredging up the dregs that had come loose out of the bag. I liked it sweet unlike majority. The day after tomorrow would mark our last day here, just two more days, and all of it would become a memory that we could only leaf through if we ever wanted to relive it. Real moments would be crammed into rectangular snapshots, the only signs of our presence, while our vestiges on this land would be washed away by the sea, forgotten forever.

Chapter 15

"How much more are you going to make me walk? We're not even halfway. You see the lights there? That's where the beach ends." I was dead on my feet, huffing and puffing while we scoured each and every shack looking for plain chapatis for my father. After we decided not to have lunch but just make do with the cake, I was perfectly normal but that didn't do much good to others' guts. Dad complained a stomach ache and kept pestering us to bring him homely food which till now proved to be difficult to obtain.

"Just a few more shops and then we go back, okay?" He held my hand in his and gave it a tight squeeze.

My entire body was creaking like old wooden panels left unattended for quite a long time. The pain in my hands had alleviated but the muscles of my thighs had gone taught. They seared as I dared to compliment his strides. "I think I cannot walk anymore." I said.

He released my hand and sighed. Though he didn't show I knew he was equally tired. "You want to sit here and wait? I can quickly check around and then come get you."

I pondered this thought evaluating all the possible outcomes - what if he forgot? What if someone kidnapped me? Or what if he took too long to come, just like that dream of the airport? Without my phone, I would have gone crazy and would never have found him.

"Don't overthink. I'll be right back." He started to leave but then stopped and backtracked. "And yes, don't teeter very close to the shore, okay? No crossing that line." He pointed his finger towards the red flag that swayed in the evening wind, its wooden stick bending forward and backward. "The evening tides are often cruel."

I rolled my eyes at the instructive tone and pushed him away with a hard shove on his butts. "Now go. And be quick please. I'm not a child who doesn't know how to be safe." I retorted.

"I know. I know. But it's my duty to tell you as your husband."

Once he was gone, I circled the tables sitting outside the shacks and picked a suitable spot which was isolated from the rest of the crowded area. A red and white checkered napery covered the tabletop, and surrounding the table were four cane chairs padded with fluffy cushions. Two candles adorned the edges, and above me was a white garden parasol for shade.

I stared out at the sea and focused my gaze on the ship, boat, or whatever it was that floated away, its red light gradually dissolving with the distance. The sunlight was fading, and the sky morphed into a dark shade of purple. I sat there and watched the dimness inside the shacks being swept aside by the lights being switched on and illuminating the nearby areas like a domino.

"Can I sit here?" An intoxicating voice spoke from above me. I raised my eyes to meet her, and there she was, the woman from the other day on the balcony, the one Ronit had pointed out.

"H... hey" It came out more like a question than an actual greeting since I had no idea why she was here.

"I said can I sit here, if you don't mind." She repeated, unrelenting to let go of my table.

"Oh...yes, sure." I croaked with a stutter. She sat gracefully on the opposite chair and covered her knees, which were exposed in the process, with the fabric of her slit dress. The neckline of her red dress plunged so low that I was sure I could see her abdomen sitting right opposite from her. She fished out a long cigarette from her purse and then flipped open a lighter to spark it up.

Straight long hair graced with auburn highlights reached her hips. For once I thought she might sit on them. But they hung loose slightly above her waist. I could kill for such hair, any day. Nine of her ten fingers were covered in rings ranging from gemstones to grey metallic imitations. I recognized a few of them or I thought I did from my basic understanding. However, she didn't appear to be the sort of person who would believe in the effects of those rings.

She took a long drag and puffed out the smoke, her eyes squinting at a distance, and then turned her head towards me. I didn't realize she wanted to indulge in a conversation. However, the way she settled into the seat, she surely was. Somehow, all of this felt scary, and my palms suddenly grew cold. Could this be the outcome of my second assumption? But then she was alone, she couldn't kidnap me all by herself, could she? Or did she belong

to a gang that was lurking somewhere in the dark, waiting for her signal?

"Hope you are not averse to my smoking in front of you?" she said.

"No, that's not an issue." I shook my head.

She took another drag of the cigarette and turned her head to the other side to release the smoke. I was stuck. Getting up and pretending to have forgotten an important task was not a plausible excuse. Secondly, Ronit would keep searching for me otherwise. So, I sat there, awaiting whatever came next.

"You're traveling with family?" She asked. How did she even know that? Was she spying on me? Or did she think we were spying on her and hence she thought of talking me into divulging a truth which I knew didn't exist? I tried to process a response that would not reveal much. I should have listened to my husband's instructions. I admonished myself internally. The world he said and sometimes the people seeming innocuous from the outside were in reality treacherous, just like the Drake Passage. You would never know when they decided to unleash their hidden fury and trample you in the process.

"Yes, I am." I tried to neutralize my voice and sat straight, facing her.

She nodded as if she were making calculations in her head. "Great. I'm traveling alone. By the way" she offered me her hand for a handshake, her silver bracelets jiggling with the motion "I'm Ritika and I'm a journalist. A wildlife journalist, I mean. I write for The Unseen. It's a wildlife magazine."

I took it "Hi, Shreya." My eyeballs darted around for any signs of my husband, and my knees started bouncing reflexively. Though I had not heard the name of this magazine she was talking about, but I made a mental note to google it once I was back in my room.

She waited for me to ask a follow-up question, but when she saw that it was not coming, she continued, "We write about the smaller wildlife phenomenon happening right in front of us, but which somehow gets missed, maybe because we are too occupied in our lives to notice. For instance, here, I have come to capture the lives of baby Olive Ridley turtles. This is the time when they come ashore for resting and oh, it's a beauty to catch the hatchlings crawl out of the sand and waddle across to the sea with the help of their little flippers." She paused and took a breath before continuing. "Have you ever seen that? They are so cute." She cupped her palms to create the shape of a turtle and then kissed the top of her hand.

I shook my head. How could I miss capturing that in my itinerary? Next time, I will have to be thorough in my research and ensure that everything is covered.

"Oh, you should. Tomorrow I'll be going to the site. You cannot take a photograph or carry any sort of light there. Just observe if by any luck you get the opportunity to."

"That sounds cool. Maybe, next time I'll try to" I said.

"Why next time? You can come with me tomorrow, if you want to." She offered.

She could see an anxiousness written all across my face "Will that be a problem?" She enquired, her fingers gripping the cigarette stilled.

"No, it's just" I scrambled for the right thing to say "my husband. He asked me to wait here and it's been quite some time." I trailed off. Without my phone it was difficult to note the time since when I had been sitting here talking to a complete stranger.

She picked up from where I left, "Oh yes, I saw the two of you together. It looks like a love marriage, huh? I apologize; please do not think that I am stalking you. It's just the way I am. I can sometimes come across as a little too candid. That scares people off but I don't mean any harm." She said this so casually as if that could be expected a lot from the general population.

I put on an awkward smile, but my speculation about her spying on us was correct. She had seen both of us. And how the hell could she conclude that it was a love marriage? She couldn't have heard us, that's for sure.

"I had a love marriage too." She gave me a woeful smile and then continued "He died in a road accident."

My head jerked up and I caught her eyes turning glassy at a distant memory. Her chiselled jaw grew even tighter, and her bright maroon lower lip puckered. I thought I spotted a slight wobble in her lower lip.

"He was on his way to pick me up from the office when his bike collided with a lorry and that was it. End of our story. I was waiting, thought he forgot, and I wanted to tell him off for that when he came to the meeting. However, he never gave me the chance to question him again. He was gone. So far away that

however much I waited for him, he was never going to come. Anyways, that was a long time ago, ten years now."

I looked into her eyes, searching for the pain. But somehow, to my surprise, all I found was a void. Listening to her rendition, it would be wrong for me to judge her at this moment. I couldn't pinpoint what it was but something in those eyes creeped me out and the hair at the back of my neck stood up like a frightened cat.

"How long were you two married?" I asked, unwilling to break the flow.

"Two years."

I cleared my throat, pulling myself out of the trans her story had created "I'm sorry for what happened to you but why are you telling me all this?"

"I don't know. I just saw you two and thought what it would feel like to walk alongside your loved ones. When I lost him, I lost everything. By then, I had already drifted far away from my family. So..."

She did not get to complete when Ronit walked around our table and stood at my elbow, wishing to catch a hint of our conversation. He didn't realize how intense it was until he saw her pausing midsentence, a silence sitting heavily between us. I turned towards him "Oh you're here."

His gaze shifted between the two of us, eyebrows drawn together and baffled. If I sat here any longer, I was going to be swept away with her melancholy. But leaving her like this when she was laying her life bare in front of me, didn't feel right. However, it still did not make sense why someone would share their personal afflictions with someone they were meeting for the

very first time. She didn't look like she had remarried but I didn't pry any further.

Somehow, she understood the discomfort stretching between us and started to stand up "I'll leave you two alone. You kept your wife waiting for quite some time." She told Ronit.

"No, it's fine. Anyways my father is waiting for us, so..." I pointed towards our hotel which was clearly not visible from here.

"Oh, that one. I'm staying in the Serenity. That's right beside yours."

I thought I should tell her that I knew, that I saw her in that transparent gown, and gossiped about her with my husband.

"That's great. We can catch up later then." I said as a courtesy.

"Oh yes. In fact, we can meet tomorrow for the visit to Galgibaga, if you do not mind. Trust me it will be fun." She said.

Ronit gazed at me in surprise. There had been quite a lot of discussions during his absence.

"I will not disagree that it will be fun. But you know, we are here with my parents so I need to be with them also. I cannot promise but I'll certainly try to."

"Yes please. I'll wait for a positive response." She stubbed out her cigarette which was left to burn by itself and clasped both of her hands together before speaking "and it was really nice talking to you."

"Same" I said with a smile.

Chapter 16

I didn't look back when we headed straight to our hotel.

"What was that about?" He asked. I thought he would come empty-handed, but his hands were full, holding bags of food packets, and that might have taken him time. I took one bag, which seemed to be the lighter one from his grip, so that we could hold hands. "Isn't she that girl from 'The Serenity'?" He asked.

"Yes. The same woman." Serenity was the resort right next to ours, with beautiful tall double-storied cottages and recliners for the guests to enjoy a full view of the sea while sitting right in front of their rooms. I felt bad for her, but the way she talked to me, not only displaying her knowledge about us but also sharing her life details, which I did not even ask for, felt uncanny. I shook my head, letting go of the thought, and focused my attention on the present.

"You got what you went for?" I peeked inside the bag to see what he bought. "Gee. That's my favourite." I dug out a piece of prawn rissois and scarfed it down at once. The hot cheesy prawn filling scalded my mouth. "It's piping hot."

“Then put it away for now. Let them cool down a bit.” He took the half-eaten pie and placed it back inside the bag. “I need to wash my hands now.”

I curved my lips downwards, looking dejected.

“All of this is for you, dear. No one is going to claim your share. Before that tell me one thing” he asked not willing to leave the previous subject so easily “what were you guys discussing about and abruptly stopped when I came?”

I took a long breath through my mouth to calm my nerves and cool my burned palate. “She was asking who I was traveling with and she said she had seen us before and that she liked the chemistry between us.”

“Oh, is it? And when did she see all that, or did she mention if she had witnessed something more than our mere chemistry?” I smirked and smacked him hard on his arm, which was so tight that my hit would have had no impact on him. “No seriously I know people are envious of us but a stranger walking up to you and saying that in my absence. That’s strange.”

“Yes, she is strange.” I said in a low murmur. The words dissolved inside my mouth before even coming out properly. More than the strangeness of her act, I was worried about the invitation which stood in front of me. I wanted to decline right then and there, but somehow, I could not gather the resolve at that moment.

“Ah, she was also saying something about a visit, wasn’t she? Which is that place again?”

“It’s a secluded beach. A turtle nesting site. She is a wildlife journalist and said that she was there to capture the lives of the

turtles bred there. She wants me to accompany her tomorrow when she visits the site.”

“Sounds fascinating.”

“I know. But I really don’t want to go with her.”

“You must. Why are you always shy of socializing? You have made a friend, so you must utilize that time. In fact, I will insist that the two of you have your day. What do you call it? Enjoy your girl time. Yes.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I’m for real. You need a change in your lifestyle, and I cannot see a better option than this.”

“I’ll think about it, okay? Don’t force.”

He draped his arm around me and pulled me towards the steps of the hotel.

I planted my legs firmly on the ground. “I’ll wait here. You go up and take this with you. I would like to sit here for some time.” I slipped my shoulder out of his grip and wrapped my arms tight around myself. A light breeze flowing from above the sea brought a chill and goosebumps appeared on my naked arms.

“Okay, I’ll be back with our supplies, wait. And do I need to carry your shawl?” He asked. I nodded, moving only my head and keeping the rest of my body frozen in place.

The tide was going back, revealing the ground underneath, but this time I did not choose the sand but climbed atop a small flattened rock and settled therein. The boulder was not completely dry but was devoid of the itchiness of wet sand.

Ronit jogged down the path and shuffled to balance himself on the remaining space, crowding my territory. “Didn’t you get anywhere else to sit? Scoot over.”

“Nah, I like it.” I made room for him while holding the locks of hair that flitted about leaving its confined territory.

He unwrapped a packet of salted crispy corns and popped open a bottle of vodka. “This one is for me. Don’t you dare touch it. And here are your prawns. Be happy.” He brought a small tray to keep our glasses on. I poured vodka into our glasses and carefully placed the tray in a safer spot.

Our food and drinks were perched in one corner; he threw the warm cloth he brought around my shoulders and laced his fingers through mine. I leaned my head on him, and with my free hand, I drew shapes on the exposed part of his neck.

“Tell me what I wrote?” I asked.

“You drew a penis.” He said.

My mouth fell open in shock, and I pulled away immediately.

“What?” He laughed “Wasn’t it a penis?”

“Stop shouting the word. And no. It was not a...” I lowered my voice “A penis. It was the moon. A crescent moon, just like the one in the sky. Think something decent, will you?”

“My bad. Try again, I’ll tell you.”

I drew the shape of a heart and punctured it with an arrow through its middle.

“Don’t you do that here or I’m carrying you back to the room.” He whispered.

I stopped. "Why can't you distinguish between romance and sex?" I asked.

"Is there a difference?" Why did he have to always be so obdurate? Every time I wished for it to be a titillating moment, he had to turn it into wild sex.

"Yes, my dear husband. And we are not talking about sex right now." I picked my glass up which was precariously sitting on the edge and took a few gulps.

"Slow down buddy. Don't make it difficult for me to not go wild." He cinched my butt and pulled me close.

"Ha ha, not funny."

I didn't understand why couples spent a fortune to have a beach candlelight dinner whereas I would any day prefer a setting just like this. Find a snug romantic corner, ensconce yourself in the warmth of your lover's body and eat your favourite snacks. An added advantage – no prior booking required. You can also stargaze free of cost. I looked up at the sky, trying to discern the shapes of the constellations, and spotted Orion. Its belt shone bright. The doggedness of the structure differentiated it from the rest of the sky.

I strained my ears to listen to the sound of waves that had gone far away with the low tide. I could do this all day, listening to its roar and never getting tired of it.

"Are we going? My glass is empty, and so is my food. And I feel cold now." Ronit said.

"I don't want to go. Can we stay like this?" I asked him, my eyes fixed on the stars.

He didn't say anything in return but just wrapped me in a tight hug and planted a kiss on my temple. The kiss was extremely fragile, transient like a meteor descending to the earth at lightning speed. I let it flow through my brain and infuse into the blood. We had each other at this very moment, and I didn't want to let it go. This time I didn't take a mental screenshot but pulled out my phone from his trouser pocket and took a selfie of us in the night mode, our eyes shining red like ghosts in the picture.

"Listen, I wanted to tell you something but with everything going on, I forgot."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Mansi called me again, and she was crying so badly. I...I don't..."

"Again? What happened?"

"Another fight with Pallavi. Very bad fight. Good heavens, I'm tired with both. And not only Pallavi but Ma and Baba were also extremely riled up and said something too hurtful. I didn't know how to console her." He ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "I don't have the strength anymore."

I held him and rested my chin on his shoulder. "Was it again about the marriage?" I asked.

He nodded, and then his head drooped.

"I understand why they are putting the pressure on her, but I can also understand where she is coming from. She just wants time to think, and others are absolutely not ready to give it to her. And you know Pallavi, she's never ready to listen. She was also not

easy on her either. Sometimes she forgets I and Mansi are not her kids but siblings. She really needs to learn to be sister, a friend.”

“Pallavi has a lot of responsibilities on her shoulders, we all know. But she also needs to be available for her so that Mansi feels comfortable sharing her worries and not bottle them up in fear. I cannot be of help always, you know. It’s not the same.” Ronit said.

Mansi had been in a relationship with Akshay for the last three years but somehow when the topic of marriage cropped up, we saw a hint of nervousness in her eyes. Purely from the prospect of marriage and nothing to do with the guy, of course, I thought. The other side of the story was Ronit’s grandma who had almost crossed an age of ninety and was not keeping well. We were counting days. Her last wish was to see Mansi in a beautiful wedding attire on her wedding day, as she always adored Mansi the most, and hence the hurry. Nobody was at fault here; just the circumstances and tons of emotions pulling their strings like a puppet master.

I fiddled with the button of his shirt “I can understand. And you being there for her is really nice.” Although he was the youngest, the way he dealt with relationships was admirable. His serenity heightened in the case of calamities like this.

He shook his head. “Would you suggest anything else I can do to console her or to somehow fix the situation?”

To be honest, I did not have anything to say on the matter, and that was when I realized that I was so bad at handling relationships that mattered. Relationships that formed the foundation of our lives, which ensured we stay intact and didn’t crumble down in the face of a tornado.

"There's always light at the end of the tunnel. I promise."

"I can't afford to sit the entire evening here. This hard rock is piercing into my butts. Shall we go somewhere else?" He twisted his mouth in agony and slid down the boulder to land on the sand with a thump, barely managing to save my half drunken vodka glass from falling. He had forgotten the pain while talking about Mansi.

"Ops." I snagged the vodka bottle that toppled over from the nudge of his elbow.

"Some more time, please. I'm quite liking it. They sat shoulder to shoulder and clung to each other. Fuzzy head and dreaming." I said.

He rubbed his back, emphasizing the pain.

"I get it. But then what do we do. I do not want to go back to the room, nor can you coerce me into going to the beachside. I have had enough of that today already. That woman must be there still." I said wagging my finger.

"Point taken. Well, I've an idea. Not sure if you'd like it." He looked around as if his suggestion was going to materialize at any moment.

"What is it?"

"Cycling." He said. "There's another beach nearby. I saw a few from our hotel too going in that direction. Think that will be a good escape. Something different we can try." The idea was indeed appealing. Adventurous. We rented two hybrid bicycles. I didn't know this Bablu guy had a solution for

everything. My opinion about him was gradually changing. He provided us a contact and within next five minutes our rides were standing before us.

I buckled the red and blue helmet atop my head and, with some difficulty, hefted myself up the seat. It felt uncomfortable. I had to, since I was riding a bicycle after almost five years. I tried to sit properly, but my feet kept falling off the pedal. I let out a shriek of excitement and immediately attempted to conceal my mouth with my palm, stifling the urge to frighten Ronit with another squeal. The bike wobbled before I could take full charge of it, but then finally it relented to my grip.

"Oh my God. What are you doing? Balance it right." Ronit said.

"I am. I apologize; I got carried away. Shall we begin?"

"On three, okay?"

There was a bite to the air which eventually became more evident when the wind whipped against my loose hair and pressed on my bare skin. I wanted to stow myself away inside blankets or to draw myself in, cowering in a corner. The eerie emptiness of the road punctuated only by the sounds from our rhythmic pedalling, with no heat radiating sources nearby, made it worse. I channelled my breath inside, letting the exertion thaw my numb muscles.

I accelerated, matching Ronit's pace, who raced ahead and was now waiting for me to catch up to him.

"It's not that cold, come on. You're behaving like we're on a trek."

I shrugged him off.

"It's only three kilometres so I believe we'll be there in" he looked at his watch "like ten minutes."

A white car zipped past us, dislodging dust from the road, and my leg slipped from the pedal. A loud sneeze shook my entire body. "What the hell? Why do they have to be in a hurry?" Ronit shielded his eyes from the high beam light and removed his hand once the car disappeared from view. He rubbed at his eyes which were itchy from something that went inside. An insect maybe.

"Think they own the road. Drunken brats." Ronit shouted after them.

The surrounding was pitch black. There was not even a single fly in sight. After another kilometre we might start encountering eateries or other shops. The contents in my stomach churned and the prawn I ate was at risk of regurgitating. I dismounted the bicycle, parked it on the verge and strode towards him.

"What happened? Show me." I pried open his left eye and plucked out a lash that was sticking halfway out from the bottom of his eye. I slightly blew to make sure no other dust particles remained inside. "Does it feel good now?"

He nodded and put his helmet back on again.

By the time we reached the beach, the sensation of cold had evanesced, and a fresh touch of ecstasy broke through our veins. After spending an hour sitting on the golden sand, we preferred to walk back slowly, keeping to the side of the road. Holding the handlebars, we pushed our bicycles along next to us.

Sweat glistened on Ronit's forehead, and I fished out my kerchief to wipe it off. He paused his steps letting me do that and

stared at me. His eyes were intense. If you peered into them, you could find a story in their depths. A story that could change your life for good. I knew what brushing my lips against those soft long lashes felt like. A thought bubbled inside my brain. We could do something naughty.

I slipped my hand into the crook of his arm "there's no one here. Can I get a kiss?"

He was knocked out of the loop.

"What? Are you serious? Here?" He replied.

"Yes, why not? Why to get dizzy then when you don't even want to relish its effects? Trust me making out in open, in this kind of a place while there's no fear of getting caught can be fun."

Looking at my animation, he laughed.

"You've gone crazy. It's not as lonely as you think. You saw vehicles earlier. No one would miss a chance to catch a glimpse of the scene we'll create."

"Oh, come on. Let's be sporty. And you are the one who should actually be having this thought in the first place."

"Yes, but you took me by surprise this time." He didn't wait for my advance, pulled my hand and yanked me closer.

"Now you can." Ronit said.

But before I could stand on my tiptoes and lift my face to reach his, he leaned closer. His gaze dropping to my lips evaluating how he wanted to play the game.

A rustle in the bushes nearby and we caught a hint of something running off from one side of the road to the other. It was so fast that all I saw was a shadow cutting across. In the blink of an eye, whatever that thing was disappeared. I flung myself off Ronit.

“What was that?” I asked.

“I think I saw an animal. A cow, maybe. There are plenty here.”

“Come on, have you ever seen a cow running that fast.”

“I have, but that is a story for another time. As of now, I’m sure there are no other animals in this part of town. In fact, it’s a tourist destination, full of life and noise. How can any dangerous animal prowl around here. They need space and peace. A town crowded with drunken people and loud music can provide them none of those.”

“But where we are standing, is secluded. You agreed to that,” I said.

He pondered this thought for sometime but then shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

The leaves were slightly parted again. I startled. We gawked at what we saw. At first a hand and then two legs and then the entire figure emerged. A man. Seemed to be in fifties or maybe even sixties, I couldn’t tell. His hair was almost entirely white, save for a few black strands protruding from his scalp. His eyes searched our faces while he stood still like a statue moulded in a shock state. He could see the same expression written across our faces too as we wondered whether he caught us in the act we were indulging in before.

He parted his lips to stammer the words “I...I was going somewhere but then got lost.”

We could not understand half of his words, but it was clear that he did not see anything. In fact, he thought we had caught him between something dubious. The faded shirt he wore was mostly tattered. I gulped down the bile that threatened to come up to my throat. Ronit squared up, ready for a flight as if at any moment the man could produce a knife or a gun or anything that could harm us.

“Who are you and what do you want?” I asked.

His voice came shrill when he spoke “I was lost. I don’t mean any harm. Just lost.” He looked towards his left and right and then took a step back when he saw the fury in Ronit’s eyes. “Please don’t hurt me. I have no ill intentions.” His legs trembled in fear. Was he scared of us? We didn’t look dangerous. Ronit relaxed his stance when he saw the horror in the man’s face.

“Can you please help me with the direction to Mandala’s Inn? I think I’m lost.”

I stared at Ronit for affirmation. He pointed his head in the opposite direction to where we were coming from.

The man, unsure if he understood, uttered, “Thanks. I will go there and ask around. And apology if I scared you off.”

I let out a breath of relief when he scampered away into the darkness.

“What is happening today?” I said. “First that lady and then this shabby looking man.”

“He was drunk.” Ronit confirmed.

“I know.”

Either that was a mere coincidence or a portent of something calamitous that was about to happen. Just like when you saw a black cat crossing your path or dogs howling at the dead of night. I did not want to dwell on the superstitions, but something like that happening twice in a single day was nothing less than a bad omen.

“I know what you are thinking. But don’t worry. We’ll better not wander around in the night anymore. It’s too risky. And considering the strength of my heart, which you already know, I don’t think it will be a good idea.” Ronit placed his hand on his chest and took sharp breaths.

“You only suggested this. I told you to stay.” I complained.

Chapter 17

A loud knock on the door jolted me awake. I looked beside myself to find Ronit deep in sleep with his mouth wide open. I stirred him but he didn't budge. So, I staggered towards the doorway, groggy and yawning and latched it open. Papa stood there with his fist raised, about to knock again.

"Papa, what is it?" I looked behind his shoulder and then at my phone. It was six in the morning and still dark outside. "Is everything alright?"

"My toothpaste. You forgot to give it back yesterday. Care to give it to me now?" He outstretched his palm up. Seriously? Could he not understand what a pressing subject sounded like? He had to really work upon prioritizing things based on others opinion too.

"Is Ma awake?"

"No, not yet. We will wake up in next one hour."

"We will? You are already up."

"I am still waking, maybe another hour. After your Ma is up. But I need my toothpaste right now or you will forget."

One may not come across a person with OLD who is as possessive as Papa was with his belongings. This could be as trivial as toothpaste. I huffed out an exhausted breath and without questioning him any further and saving my sanity for the rest of the day, I rummaged through the cabinet drawer, my eyes half-closed, picked up the red tube, and placed it on his palm, which remained upturned until I found the thing.

"Thanks." He took it from me and turned to leave.

I had a fretful sleep last night, my brain foggy from the excess alcohol I consumed and the drunken sex we had afterward. Ronit was slightly tired and when to relieve his stress I straddled him while he was seating on the balcony chair and closed his eyes with my palms, he groped me hard and lifted me up. With his eyes closed, he walked inside the room, dodging every other piece of furniture effortlessly, and deposited me on the bed like a flower bouquet.

After a peculiar night yesterday and a vexing morning today, thanks to Papa, I was going to have a migraine for the rest of the day. This I knew from experience. But the headache – that could not be the result of only intoxication and sex. There was something else too. Something that I cudgelled by brain to figure out. But...okay."

The girl.

The man.

I didn't feel like going back to bed so I unlocked my phone to check on my Instagram. As I turned on the internet, flurry of notifications started popping up on the screen - missed calls, texts and other highlights.

Most of them were from Sonia. God, I did not know how to handle her, but the strange fact was that this time it was not only her but my other colleagues too. Did something happen while I am away? I opened her text thread to check.

Sonia: It's urgent. Please call.

Sonia: Remember Harpreet? He has started creating ruckus.

Sonia: Please call.

Sonia: Beware of him there.

What nonsense, couldn't she wait for three more days to discuss this? But the real concern was why others were calling. There were two missed calls from Abhay too. Before I could delve deeper into the thought, Ronit groaned "Where are you" poking around in bed looking for me.

Reluctantly, against my body's wishes to plunge into the tranquility that was beckoning me from the bed, I dialled Sonia's number. If she could tear down my blissful vacation, I could also utilize the privilege to call her at odd hours.

She picked up the phone on the third ring. "Hello". It appeared that she has not seen the caller ID.

I placed my mouth as close as possible to the speaker and said in a muted tone. "You were calling. And texting and then inundating me with notifications. Now tell me what happened."

"Oh, it that you Shreya?" I imagined her squinting at the screen with bleary eyes.

"Yes, it's me. I demand that you tell me what the emergency is. Please be quick or it will be very difficult for me to hold my patience."

"Okay, okay" there came an exasperated pause before she resumed "Harpreet, the guy you kicked out, wrote a lengthy email to the HR department stating that he is innocent and that there are some illicit practices within our team that he is all set to expose. He named you in that email. Said you were sullyng the company's name somehow."

"So?" I drawled out the 'o' for emphasis. I gulped down the bile which was threatening to crawl its way up to my head and lent her some more patience.

"And then the picture you posted day before yesterday with your mom...he is there in the background."

What?

By then unbeknownst to me, I had wrenched a piece of cuticle from my nail fold and a small bubble of blood poked out. If I did not hang up fast, I would carry this piece of distraction like baggage throughout the day, and all the good things would take a backseat. No, I couldn't let that happen. I took a few deep breaths closing my eyes and sitting in a mudra until I was sure I could redirect my thoughts.

"Hello, earth to Shreya. You there?"

"Yes, I'm listening. Crazy people doing crazy shit. What else can you expect from these kind of people?" I shook my head, my words coming out fast, trying to convince myself that it was nothing to worry about. "Did something major happen after that email? I mean any repercussions.

"Not exactly. I got to know from your manager, what's his name? Varun, yes, that he was a complete lunatic. And I believe

they have already taken care of that email. What I'm really worried about is...when I saw him in the picture, I thought..."

"Forget about it, could be a coincidence. By the way I have not seen him around. And a dolt like him can only harm themselves, not others."

"Fine. But just be careful. Will you?"

I rolled my eyes on her unsolicited concern. She was seriously rattling my cage right now.

"And just for that you guys were calling me repeatedly? You could have simply texted me this entire thing." I growled, teeth clenched or if I had the green light, I would have bitten her head off.

"Oh yes, that didn't cross my mind. You're right. But wait, you said 'you guys'. Who else called?"

I massaged my temple, this conversation was steering me into insanity. "Never mind. I understood. I'll be careful as recommended by you."

"Oh yes, you mean Abhay. Sorry, but I had to tell him when you were not receiving my call."

"Fine."

I hung up after she had nothing more to say. That sounds pretty harmless, does it not? Had it been an avalanche, Varun would have surely contacted me. In this case he didn't which clearly meant the weight was off my shoulders. I asked her to tell others also and not to bother me anymore. I could handle a situation like this, not that it was the first time.

I tiptoed towards the bed and snuggled into my husband's arms "good morning love. How are you?"

He moaned "With you. Good."

"Where did you go?" He tightened his embrace around me.

I traced my thumb on his lips which were still wet after a long night's sleep. He flipped me to my left in such a way that my back touched his chest and tucked me into him. His hand circled around my waist to cup my breast. I shrieked against the pleasant pain it caused. His crotch touched me exactly where I wanted him and I let out a satisfied sigh.

He first gently rubbed his thigh against my skin, and then his grip turned solid. My whole body turned into liquid and I diffused into him. I pressed myself further into him and he kissed me on my neck giving me the most tantalizing promise.

"Nowhere. Papa was there at the door." I said.

"At this time? Did he need something?" Ronit asked.

"Oh no, just to check on us." I said.

He must have missed the conversation I was having a while ago with Sonia or else he would have questioned. For once, I thought about telling him. Pull the burden out of my head and place it between us to share. But my intuition convinced me it was nothing. A false alarm, that's it. Better not to put him in another distressing call after what he was already dealing with. His family affairs and his concern about Mansi was enough for him right now.

I sat on the beach at my usual spot. Due to the high tide crossing to this side of the beach through the rocks was impossible. So, I emptied Ronit's backpack and stuffed everything that we were going to need for the next two hours and carried it along the small hike from our hotel's backyard. I spread my beach towel and layered another towel from the hotel on top of it for better protection to my butts from the itchy sand.

Ronit stripped his t-shirt off and threw it on top of my head.

"Go to hell. It smells" I scolded him and cast the piece of cloth aside.

"I thought you liked that. It's your husband's." He giggled after speaking and then entered the water. His back shone under the bright sun, and it took everything in me to keep my hands from wiping the water from his body. He went far and when he reached a comfortable spot to stand on, he whirled around checking upon me. I waved at him so he could know I was alright.

The last three days had been extremely tiring and Ma requested for a leisure day to cool her feet before we proceeded with our final activities tomorrow. In my case it was my brain which was knackered more than my body so we decided to have a relaxing morning and start a bit late.

I played with the towel's tussles while scanning the sea for my husband's whereabouts. The silhouettes all looked the same, grey in the afternoon sun. I screwed up my eyes to locate the familiar figure but to no avail. He was lost in the crowd. His love for swimming is a source of my trouble. He forgot about me when he was in the water. Now I had no idea how long this wait was going to be. It suffocated me.

For the next five minutes I gazed at the time on my phone. I tried to count the seconds but then lost track around three hundred. It was futile, not going to bring my husband back.

My palms clutched the wet sand but then a splash of tide washed it away emptying my hands leaving an auger shell behind. Its tail got stuck between my fingers. I took a closer look at the broken surface. A hermit crab squirmed its way out with three of its legs curling around the shell body. I touched it briefly and it retracted. Everywhere there was a competition and nature was no exception. Even these hermit crabs had to fight among themselves to bag the perfect shell that fitted their coiled bodies. I kept it away from the water's reach and planned to check on it every now and then until Ronit returned. His head was still not properly visible, and I wondered how far he had gone. The beach was a heaven for those who loved to float in the water. You could walk for longer lengths without encountering a sudden dip in the seabed.

"Shelly, my dear, would you like to go with me or wait for Ronit?" I asked my newly found pet.

As if it understood and found itself vulnerable in my presence, it crawled back inside after sneaking a quick peek with its pointed black eyes.

"No? Okay. As you wish. We will stay."

I sat back and sang to myself in the most monotonous voice I had ever heard coming from my vocal cords.

Somewhere between the frenzy of tourists, the whoosh of waves and my dissonant tunes, a beguiling voice drifted to my ears. A familiar voice of a woman. I turned my head back to find the source. Fuck. Ritika sat on one of the sun loungers draping her

long, waxed legs in a red polka dotted sarong. Her hair was wet as if she had just come out of the water and sat down to dry herself. She laughed hard while talking to someone on the phone. If I dared to move from here, she would catch sight of me, and I did not want that again.

‘Where are you Ronit?’ I spoke aloud in my mind and popped my fingers with anxiety. Shelly felt my pain. She emerged, and her eyes blinked once.

“You are a darling. See, its only you who is giving me a company. My husband doesn’t care.” She didn’t go inside and stayed, half in and half out.

I didn’t wait for Ronit and came back to my room. I carried Shelly along with all our possessions and left her on the sand on our side.

“You will be safe here, away from the crowd. I’ll find you bigger shells for when you grow up. Okay?” She didn’t come out this time.

I was sleeping like a dog when he came back. He stood at the foot of our bed. “How could you leave me there? And where is my t-shirt?” Ronit said while covering his exposed chest with both his hands.

“You don’t have to act so weird. You are very much inside the four walls. Go to the bathroom. I’ll ready some dry clothes for you.”

“First answer me. Why did you leave? You know how worried I was. Good that I thought of starting the search operation from our hotel.”

“Very quick-witted.”

“Will you...”

“That is a question I should ask. Do you have any idea how long I had to sit there? Eighty minutes. I couldn’t take the sun any longer. It was burning.”

“But that doesn’t mean...”

“That doesn’t mean what? How was I supposed to contact you? And who would have I informed? You never care.” I said and threw the same t-shirt he left on the beach at his face. “Wear it.”

“What are you doing?”

“Giving your scent back to you.”

His mouth slackened in disbelief. “My pants?”

I ransacked his backpack and dug out his short pants from the bottom of the bag. “Here.” I held it out to him, and he snatched it from my hands.

Chapter 18

“Anybody home?” Papa announced himself before entering.
“Where’s Ronit?” He asked.

I pointed towards the bathroom.

“Oh! I have brought you something.” He lifted the stainless-steel cloche and produced a plateful of chilli pakoras. “Crispy mirchi bajji. I made them cook in my style.”

“And they let you enter the kitchen?”

“Why not? I’m paying.”

I picked up a piece and took a nibble. Good. I knew papa was a good cook but his enthusiasm here had reached another level.

“How is it?” He asked and stared at the bathroom door awaiting his other customer.

“Delicious. And a little too spicy.”

“Great.”

“There you are. Try these. I made them myself for you son.”
Papa extended the platter towards Ronit.

“But you said you made them...”

“It’s the same thing. I made them. It’s my recipe.”

Ronit chewed the thick green chilli and licked the spices around it. “It’s perfect. How fortunate I am papa to have you with us. Shreya should learn from you. Never has she ever cooked anything new for me.”

“I will if we get the opportunity to live together.” I protested.

“We’ll see.”

“Have some more.” Papa said.

“I’m taking one more. Here. I’m good.” Ronit covered the lid back and handed the platter back to papa.

“Papa. Do you guys want to join me on an evening excursion?” I broached the subject.

“Evening excursion? Today?”

“Yes.”

He looked at Ronit for details, but Ronit simply shook his head.

“There’s a beach nearby. They have turtles who breed there and then the smaller ones after hatching crawl through the sand and go under the water.”

“Hmm. Sounds a little boring. Not my type. I’m sure your Ma will also not agree to go. She’s still grappling with her leg pains. If there’s a beach party then let me know, I’ll try to convince your mother.”

“We can be quick. Half an hour maybe.”

“Beta. You and Ronit should go, enjoy the evening.” He patted my head and left.

“Don’t look at me. I have already told you this. I’m going to watch a movie tonight while you are out there.” Ronit said.

“In that case I’m also not going, especially with her.”

“Suits me fine.” He threw his hands in the air and flopped onto the bed.

“I will go and have a chat with my friend. She is the only friend I’ve got.” I picked up my phone and started to leave.

“Who? That cigarette girl?”

“No. A hermit crab.”

He thought this through. “How do you know it’s a ‘her’?”

“Because a woman can only understand other woman’s agony.” I was not sure how much of that was true. If she was still at the spot where I had left her and waited for me then it would be for certain that she cared. Otherwise, I would know it was a pie in the sky.

I slid the door aside removing the curtains and stopped on my tracks. Oh my god. What was she doing here? Ritika climbed the stairs to our hotel and walked towards our room. She donned a loose pair of trousers and a slim fit white top. Tied around her waist was a black belt bag that completely hid the bare belly she would otherwise have flaunted.

“Ronit. What the hell is she doing here?”

“Your crab?” He mocked.

“Shut up. Ritika. That woman from yesterday.”

“Oh! She is here already. Get ready soon then. I’ll ask her to wait.”

I snarled. How did she know which room was ours? I never told her. I didn’t even see her going to the reception area to ask. Someone should stop her, question her on why she was here. But there wasn’t a single staff nearby. She strode forward, her back straight and her stride confident.

“You need to tell her that I’m not well.” I requested.

“Why would I?”

“Because I’m telling you to.”

“Mind you. I’m not taking your commands. And this will be your punishment for leaving me alone at sea. I didn’t expect that from you.”

I exhaled irritably and peered through the gap in the curtains. She was almost here. I ran towards the bed and started to clamber inside the blankets. My heartless husband ripped the blankets away.

“How dare...” At the exact moment the bell rang.

“Coming.” Ronit crooned.

“Fuck you.” I distorted my lips to form the words without actually saying it aloud.

He opened the door “Hi. And you are?” He tapped one finger on his lips as if trying to remember. He knew how to play along. Swine.

“Hi. I’m Ritika. Is Shreya there? I wanted to take her to the Galgibaga beach. We talked about it yesterday.”

“Yes. Yes. Absolutely. She mentioned that to me. Shreya? Hope you have changed. Your friend is here to get you.”

Chapter 19

I, like a coward, had to concede. I reluctantly put on my blue kurta and followed her through the door. When we reached the landing, I saw Ronit standing on the balcony, waving me off. He hollered “Enjoy.” The grin on his lips spread wide, showing all his teeth. I was going to get even with him when I returned. For now, I am focusing my attention on this woman. She walked ahead without glancing back at me. She was aware that I was following her.

“How are we going to go from here?” I asked.

She spun around. “Yes. I forgot to tell you. I will bring my self-drive car from the parking lot. Just allow me two minutes?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

I waited while she went to the back of her property to fetch her car. I glanced at my balcony again. Ronit was gone. As he planned, he might be watching a movie right now, leaving me alone with an unknown person.

She pulled a sleek, white sedan out of the parking lot. A gawked at the model. The outline of the headlamps was so much like the one we encountered yesterday. In fact, no. This was the same car that whizzed past us. The same one Ronit had shouted at. However, we could not see the driver.

Ritika rolled down her window. "Come inside."

I got in albeit reluctantly.

She fired up the vehicle. "So, how did your anniversary go?" She initiated the conversation.

I just wanted the journey to be quiet. I had made no preparation, so I had to answer them off the cuff. "We went for cycling." I said.

"Wow. That's exciting. Where?"

"Patnem."

In spite of the fact that there was no traffic on the road save for a bike or two, she drove the car slowly and smoothly through the single lane. Last night, this same car was running at a breakneck speed. Was she the one driving? Now, I had a question of my own which I wanted her to answer.

I dared to ask, readjusting myself through the seatbelt while angling my body sideways to face her. "When did you get this car?"

"This car?" She asked surprised as if she thought that only she had the right to interrogate.

"Un-huh."

“Two days back.” It lingered in my mind, and my unease grew. Did that mean she drove it last night or lent it to someone?

“Have you been to Patnem? It’s a beautiful beach.” I asked.

“Is it? I have heard about it but have not yet got the chance to visit.” She said this while the car entered a narrow dirt road. “We are almost there.”

Sunset was approaching and we were the only ones who stored their vehicle in the parking zone. I couldn’t cut this trip short now that I was here. However, I was going to call Ronit the moment I felt a warning signal.

When one said the beach was secluded, they meant that it was completely devoid of anything. No beach shacks, no food stalls, only water activities and profound silence. A few birds circled the area, and two dogs played in the sand, trying to dig something out. Apart from them, two women, who were us, shattered the silence.

We made our way through the pine trees and coconut palms fringing the beach area and headed straight towards the water.

“These are rough waters so be careful around the tides.”

“Okay. I prefer to stay on the dry side. It’s my husband who is an aquaphile.”

She smiled at the remark, and I waited for whatever came next, as per her plan.

Beside me were a few rectangular protected areas enclosed with a green net mesh. It was open from the top, and its hexagonal holes made it easier to watch the area from outside.

“These are the pits.” She said, and I noticed the display boards that mentioned the pit number, the date of hatching, and the number of eggs that lay inside the sand.

“This is magnificent.” My hand went to my open mouth, and I laughed.

“Isn’t it? I came here yesterday for an inquiry, and they asked me to visit today. After sunset, you are not supposed to use lights, or the turtles might get scared. These are endangered species you know?”

I nodded and wondered how far below the eggs were.

“Let’s watch the sunset, I said. After that we can check on the pits.”

“Sure.” I said, and I sat on the golden sand with her.

“You should have asked your husband to come. He would have liked this.” She said.

“I know. I wanted that too. However, he had his own plans. And my parents. They wanted to rest so he stayed to accompany them.”

“That sounds fair.”

Once the sun made its way to the other end of the horizon, she gestured for me to follow her. “Come. We should now see which pit has the closest hatching day.”

We got up slowly and stowed all our belongings inside her car. Seeing this car again prompted me to probe her further. I needed to establish whether she was the one driving yesterday, before the two of us parted today.

“You know, I saw a similar car. Just like this one yesterday heading towards Patnem. This place must be renting plenty of similar models. This one is beautiful.”

She shrugged. I took that as a ‘that’s-not-my-problem’ response.

I paused my examination looking at her disinterest.

“Okay. So where are we starting from?”

We started at the extreme corner and covered around thirty nests checking at their hatching dates. All of them mentioned dates which came after thirty days.

“It usually takes around forty to sixty days for the eggs to hatch. So these can be tentative dates.” She said.

“But then none of them are closer to today. You said you enquired right?”

“I did.”

“Can’t we ask that person or anyone who is in charge of this area.”

I looked around, but no one was in the vicinity.

“We can go there and see if someone...”

She butted in. “It’s really not required. I think we should wait without making a fuss about it. I’m sure we can catch sight of one or two.”

“Don’t you think it’s better to be certain.”

She held my hand and stopped me from leaving. From her reaction, I knew I was getting on her nerves with my constant

probing. "Let's do one thing. We will wait for thirty minutes. If we see someone around in the meantime, we'll ask otherwise we will go back."

"But..."

"Shh. We are not supposed to make any noise here. Just wait and watch."

I did as she said. I had no other choice.

Her phone beeped. She held me so obnoxiously close to her that I could see the incoming text that lighted up her phone screen as she took it out of her pocket with the other hand. 'I am coming' it spelled. Who the hell was coming? Did she call a friend too? Or could it be a guard from the beach who was going to guide us? But how could that be considering the way she stopped me from pursuing?

Loosening her grip, she immediately swiped the text away and put the phone back in her pocket.

"Let me get the beach towel from the car." She said and padded around the nests towards the parking.

"Shreya" I heard my name being bellowed out.

Ritika turned back on her heels and looked at me questioningly. The voice sounded like Ronit's. My gaze cast about in the dark for signs of him, but I did not move. Where was his voice coming from?

I saw him when he came closer, flashing the light of his phone. "My goodness. I called you so many times. Why weren't you picking up?"

“I...I don't. You said you will not be coming.”

“I said. But then I was worried when you were not answering and thought better not to be bored sitting in the room alone.”

Ritika gaped at the entire exchange in wonder. I had completely forgotten about her then. She cleared her throat. “Um, I think waiting any further will be pointless. Let's head back?”

“Why? Did you guys see what you were here for?” Ronit asked.

“No. And I don't think today's the appropriate day for that.” I replied.

“Okay?” Ronit said.

“I have my car, so I can drop you.” Ritika suggested.

The three of us got inside her car while Ronit asked the taxi he had hired to leave.

Chapter 20

Today was our last day here, and we had booked a day trip to the Butterfly Beach. Yesterday, once we were back, I had voiced my trepidation about the car, but Ronit had set it aside. He said I was being foolish for being so skeptical.

“There would be hundreds of such cars on the roads of Goa, he said. For the sake of argument, let us assume that it was the same car. It’s not like they hit us or anything.” He had said in her defence.

“But then why would she lie that she had not been to the beach?” I had retaliated.

“If she said so, then it means that was not her car. And tell me. Did you take the number?” He had questioned me, and I fell silent after that.

My heart hammered inside my chest as I revisited the night’s events. I had missed mentioning the text message to him in my light-headedness. There was definitely an ally, and the two of them had plans I was not aware of.

I wished the last day would be peaceful, neutralizing the effects of all the bad omens that had been circling around our heads for the last few days. We are not alone today. There were six other tourists who would accompany us on this trip.

The helmsman asked us to come down by nine, so here we were, waiting at the pickup spot and surveying the line of beautiful boats sitting ostentatiously on the sand, vying for attention. One was named 'Ocean Queen' with a lustrous eye painted on its hull. The black lashes appeared as if they would fly open at any moment, and the boat would come to life.

I looked around to see if there were any familiar faces from our hotel who would be tagging along, but it seemed we were early.

"Which one do you think is ours?" I sidled up next to Ronit and asked, my face a mask of confusion.

He spun towards me "How would I know?"

"Well, you are the one who booked this trip. So, I thought..."

He shook his head and turned away.

The sinisterness I had been dreading trudged down the beach, the slim-fit trousers accentuating her hips. She kept her long hair loose which trailed down to her waist just like the first evening I met her. The only difference was that she looked sporty unlike the smokiness that radiated from her that night. She replaced a strand of hair to the back of her ear. That's when I noticed her long artsy nails, immaculately designed to represent small shiny stars that glinted in the morning sun. That was new. I was sure they were not the same yesterday.

"Hi" She greeted us in a soft tone, looking at me and then her eyes rested for some time, which I considered too long as per any acceptable standards, on my husband. The journey back to our hotel last night was silent. None of us talked much with each other but I caught her glimpsing at the rear-view mirror towards the backseat where Ronit was seated. Fortunately, he was staring outside.

"Hello Ritika." I said to break the silence which was getting dangerous.

She stuffed her hands into the trouser pockets "Are we waiting for someone?"

I didn't care about other tourists but I was certainly waiting for the boat driver without whom we could go nowhere. Not even pull the boat out to the sea, nay identify which one was going to ferry us to the cove.

"Morning, Morning sir. Sorry to be so late." The helmsman jogged towards a tricolored boat with a green shade. He untethered the knot from the nearby pile and threw the rope inside the boat.

"A very pleasant morning to you too, Vinayak bhai. Where are you coming from? Directly from home?" Ronit asked.

The sailor nodded.

"You know Shreya he stays fifty kilometres away and everyday he along with a few other fishermen travel all the way here in the morning for their livelihood. Isn't that impressive?" It was indeed. You might ask my husband about the family background of the shack owner from whom he purchased Papa's chapattis, and he would have an answer to that too. I looked at the man's feet. The

worn-out blue slippers with cracks on their soles indicated their excessive use. I knew that the lives of fishermen were not easy.

Okay so this was the same man who owned the kayak. Great. "Morning ma'am." He greeted me, and I smiled back at him. He must have recognized me as Ronit's wife.

Vinayak checked his watch and then dialled a few telephone numbers. "Others are on their way, we can leave in fifteen minutes."

He took a headcount when he thought everyone had arrived.

We climbed into the boat one by one. Ronit came in last and took the seat right behind me so he could lean on my seat and get his opportunity to touch me. I let him. The ride was too romantic to decline his advances.

The water was deep, and the undulating waves lapped against the hull of our boat. There were several others proceeding in the same direction, some in front of us, and a few alongside. As the launching cradle cut into the water with deep thrusts, flecks of salty water splashed onto my face.

We were surrounded by hills, and the wild forests cast a deep green reflection on the water surface, and the entire journey felt like we were entering a fantasy world. It was as if I was floating in a dream. Only difference was that you could bring a token of this dream back with you.

Papa opened his huge backpack which he insisted to carry at all costs and took out his binoculars. I did not know that he was carrying that and what it was for. He rested his eyes against the lenses and adjusted the barrel.

I patted him on his shoulder from behind. "We're not on a safari Papa. Why do you need the binoculars? You won't get to see any rare animal here." I told him.

He turned around and gave me a lopsided grin. "There are dolphins, right?" He said this proudly displaying his preparedness.

I opened my mouth to say something but then decided against it.

My attention was drawn to Ritika, who was sitting at the front on the opposite row. Her hair flew like Medusa's in all directions, giving it the feel of water snakes springing up from the sea to pounce on their prey. She looked straight ahead and clicked pictures whenever we encountered a rock structure jutting out of the water.

My heart cracked for her just a little. I understood, if not fully able to empathize, the feeling when you wanted to pour out your heart's contents to receptive ears. However, something about the turn of events did not seem right; I could not place a finger on the exact anomaly, but her occurrence creeped the hell out of me. Especially after the way he clutched my hand yesterday and the text. How could I forget that?

After the ordinary greeting from her in the morning, she said nothing else. Maybe she didn't want to face any further questions from me.

"There" Dad yelled, he saw a dolphin through his binoculars surfing the waves which we also saw, but with naked eyes.

"We can see it dad. Even without your binoculars. You don't actually need them you know." I said in a monotone. This was the

second time I underscored the fact that he was being hyperactive. But this didn't bother him even slightly.

"Ah, let him be Shreya. Why argue and waste your time?" Ma said waving her hand.

Our boat veered around a rock formation that resembled a giant tortoise. A triangular head protruded from behind the round dome like shell.

"It's called the tortoise rock." Our guide and boat driver told us. He steered the boat a little closer so that we could get a good view. Upon circling its perimeter, we understood that it was not one but two different outcrops.

Ronit crossed his arms and placed them on the back of my seat, resting his chin on them. I could feel his hot breath on the nape of my neck, conquering the cool sea breeze. It was enough to alert me to what was coming next. He glided a finger through my skin, drawing a wave on my neck. I detached myself from the backrest and leaned forward to escape the blush that threatened to manifest. He pulled me back, tugging at my top.

"Stop." I whispered in shock.

"I was wondering" he spoke in a hushed tone drawing his mouth close to my ear "don't you think she looks sad? I mean I know when people do this solo trip kind of thing, but she seems to be lonely."

"You are still saying this after I told you about yesterday's incidence?" I said angrily and then glanced towards her seat to ensure that we were out of earshot.

I remembered what she told me the first day about her marriage, but I hadn't discussed that with Ronit. Would I even do the right thing in disclosing her life's secrets which she entrusted me with? I didn't think so. Therefore, I refrained from providing him with an answer.

"Why are you casting doubt on her when you do not have sufficient proof?" He came a little closer, sliding his legs out of his chair. "Do you think we should go and ask her? Perhaps, we could befriend her. Nobody can deny a company. And she looked quite sociable yesterday. So, we can try. What do you say?" He supplemented.

I turned around in my seat. "Look at her. I think she will prefer her privacy at this moment. We will only horn in on her own business."

He left the topic and slumped back on his chair. I felt relieved. For once I just wanted to enjoy the views without anyone else clouding my thoughts.

"Ooh, you are always so late. Put this away and better use your camera or we will miss out on everything." Ma snatched the binoculars away from Papa and watched it happening, open-mouthed and shocked by her sudden response. Two dolphins jumped and dove in tandem. I berated myself for not being quick and produced my phone out of the pocket. I kept the video on and balanced it on the gunwale to be prepared for any further movement in the water. Three other boats clustered around us, all their passengers' heads turning in every direction to catch a glimpse. A splash sounded somewhere from my left and a huge black shiny body with an elongated rostrum dived underwater leaving us awestruck.

Ma clapped furiously and Papa's chest swelled with pride for he managed to capture an amazing shot this time.

The lush green hills rolled closer as we approached our destination. The tides were high, which made it difficult to find an exact spot to secure the boat, and it created a rough wobble when people began to file out. As I stood from my seat, I felt a sense of disequilibrium. I held onto the wooden pillar which was supporting the top shade of the boat.

“Slow down. Let me go first.” Ronit jumped off into the water, his feet submerged to the knee, and he hauled me up from my waist as I struggled to find a foothold while deboarding.

I clung to him, my arms wrapped around his neck tightly while he waded through the water. My body dangled like a fishing net from a fisherman's shoulder. His hands held my legs to his chest, and his fingers left their marks on the bare skin of my thighs. He wiped the sweat from his forehead using his other hand and stepped out of the water and dried himself.

From the corner of my eyes, I could see everyone staring at us in shock. What they saw was a passionate couple daring to display the intense care they had for each other. There had to be something which could make us different. I enjoyed this attention, though I knew that if I conjured up this memory sometime in the future, I would only get embarrassed.

But the dream of being a special couple, a love coveted by all others, shattered when he deposited me on the sand mercilessly with a thud.

“What are you doing? You hurt me?” I cried out in pain.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to...” he started. “Shall I pick you up again?”

I shot him a glare and stomped towards my parents who snickered pitilessly. When did they start enjoying seeing a couple engaging in an act?

“That was quite a show.” Ma said. Her body still shook with laughter.

“Yes, definitely. He showed exactly how cruel he is. Unromantic. My feet hurt Ma. He’s ruthless.” My nostrils flared.

“I didn’t do it intentionally. Sorry.” Ronit said and sprinted towards me.

I dismissed his plea.

It was a small rocky beach hidden in the corner of a hill. The huge waves gobbled up the majority of the sandy area leaving a triangular patch of land to stand on. Apart from the passengers of the three boats including ours which moored on the shore, there was a family of three who made the trek down to the beach. I busied myself taking a few pictures of this beautiful place and making a video when I noticed my husband missing. I looked around to check if he had gone climbing up the boulders but he was nowhere in sight. I surveyed the area and the spot where my parents were mingling with another tourist family. He was gone.

So was the girl.

My heart suddenly went into a panic mode. Dreadful thoughts started fiddling with my brain all at once. I didn’t leave his side for that long. Before I could shriek in alarm or call my parents for help, Ronit ambled down the trail.

I sighed in relief.

“Where did you go? I was so worried?” I jogged towards him and he enfolded me into his arms.

“Really? You’re not miffed any longer? Thank God.” He smirked as if happy to see the fear in my eyes. He threaded his fingers through mine and pulled me towards the road he had come from.

“What is it? Where are you taking me? Papa and Ma will be worried.”

“Don’t worry. They are already occupied. You just come and see for yourself.” We went a few steps further into the woods and he pushed me against the trunk of a tree.

“What are you planning? Don’t think we should do this here. Stop.” I said.

“If you already know my plans then why are you asking?” He took one of my hands and folded it behind my back. Leaning down for a kiss he first touched the tip of his nose to the skin adjacent to my ear and took a whiff of the lavender shampoo I used this morning. But more than the excitement of this moment I felt the itchiness springing from the bark of the tree and traversing down my skin.

“There are insects on this tree.” I declared and tried to shove him.

“Let them be.” He grabbed my other hand too. But I managed to wrestle it free.

“Stop.” I gasped for air and placed my palm over his lips. The closeness itself seemed to take my breath away. “Not here.”

“Just for once? One kiss is all I want.” He whispered. I nodded and swung my head from side to side at the same time, my mind forming incoherent responses to his pleadings.

I clenched my fists tightly, squeezed my eyes shut, and held my breath. Then I released it. “Okay, Be quick. This indecency won’t be appreciated in the court my love.”

“I promise I will be as quick as a flash.” He touched the tip of his moustache and rolled it. My heart began beating faster. It amazed me how effortlessly he wrung out my heart and squeezed the blood out of it. I loved it.

My fingers reached the top button of his shirt. I undid the button and felt the skin underneath, cold to my touch.

“Should I go ahead?” I asked gnawing at my lower lip.

“Do you need my permission?” He crushed my palm which was pressed to my back harder.

I winced but then the corners of my mouth slightly turned up into a smile. I had never batted my lashes for him which I now did for the very first time. Stupid me.

“Oops I’m so sorry, didn’t realize you guys are here.” The voice was enough to scare the daylights out of me. We parted abruptly, creating a significant distance between us. Ritika stood there watching with great pleasure, without any intention of leaving. It didn’t look like she came here by accident. It had to be deliberate. “Beautiful couple you are. And sorry again if I disrupted anything.”

“No worries, we were just...” Ronit let go of my hand with a jerk and ran his fingers through his hair.

“I was looking for a signal. There is something urgent back home and it seems like I’m unable to make a call.” She thrust her hand clutching the phone in various directions and then paused for a minute gauging the situation before she spoke out again. “Do you mind if I borrow your phone?” She asked this question not to me but to Ronit. I fixed my gaze upon him to see if he agreed which he definitely did. How gallant of him.

Before he could hand it over to her, I held out my phone. “You can take mine.”

She looked between the two of us and then took it reluctantly. “Thanks.” She said.

She tapped the screen a few times and then placed it on her ear. For a long time, she held it there without speaking, as if the other person had not responded, and then she tried again. There was no conversation to be heard. “Bad luck, not going through. You can take it back.”

She passed it over to me and started to leave the way she came. I unlocked my phone screen, curious to check who she called, but she had deleted the call log. Scandalous. I could smell it. It showed the last call, which was made only to Sonia at six fifteen a.m. yesterday.

“See, I told you she was lonely. We should go and talk to her. Maybe she also wants the same.” I didn’t like the concern spilling out of him for that girl, at all.

“Yeah, I think so. But sometimes I feel like she is stalking.” I said without dredging up the last nights events. Only I could understand that whatever was going on was not normal.

“Come on, she is a single person and there are four of us. You are overthinking, that’s all.” When he didn’t see a change in my features, he added “What? Do you think she’s carrying a gun or something like a terrorist looking for an opportune moment to strike?”

I closed my eyes and pouted my lips. “Forget it. We should go now.”

We jumped onto the boat wishing to take our previous seats, but a couple not more than our age, certainly on their honeymoon, took the two seats at the back, so we had to make do with whichever was vacant.

“Ugh, so that marks the end, does it?” Papa patted my shoulder while he passed me through the aisle and sat diagonally across from me. He fiddled with his camera and snorted when he saw something funny that he had captured.

“Yes, it does. But we have an option if we want to cancel our tickets for tomorrow and reschedule our flights.” I said.

“I won’t be okay with that. The three of you can stay. I would rather go. My manager is not as charitable as Shreya’s.” Ronit said and tilted his cap covering his face from the sun which had soared up on the sky casting its rays directly upon us. The skin on my arm prickled from its intensity as I sat right on the side facing the sun.

The heat was unrelenting but I loved it. I would always be envious of a place which preserved the summer warmth throughout the year. I didn’t want to fathom the cold that awaited our return or the physical slackness which was going to drive me back to hibernation. And even more than that the loneliness that would

engulf me once Ronit left. I couldn't let that emotion come to the surface so soon and ruin the moment we were having. However, this time, the emptiness of the house was painful.

As if Ronit could see through me clearly, he extended his hand to my side and clasped mine creating a bridge between us. "Tell me." He asked.

"Huh? It's nothing." I confirmed.

He nodded and turned his head back to the other side without letting go of the hold.

Chapter 21

“Take Ma and Papa to the room. I’ll make the payment and come in sometime.” Ronit said after the boat dropped us to our starting point.

“You will not roam around, will you?” I asked scrunching up my face.

He held up his hands as if to accept my terms.

We came back exhausted. My short pants prevented me from getting soaked but the sticky sand got deposited all over my slippers and my shin. I looked down to find two different colors on my leg, the skin below the knee had darkened whereas the part above it was normal.

Coming back upstairs, I poked around in my short pocket for the key which seemed to have been trapped deep inside.

“Have you planned something after all of this is over beta?” I was struggling with my lock when Ma lightly touched my arm before making her way towards her room. It startled me. Inside

their room, Papa slumped on the bed, unaware of our conversation.

I turned to face her. “We don’t have anything else today Ma. You guys can relax and yes, we need to leave early tomorrow so check if everything is packed before you leave the room.”

“I’m not talking about that, and you know it.” She raised her voice slightly and enunciated each word slowly to ensure it landed perfectly without leaving a scintilla of doubt.

My shoulders slumped. “Ma, can we...” I knew this topic was going to crop up someday during the trip and I thought I was grateful Ma hadn’t brought it up thus far. You had to confront the difficult conversations one day or the other.

“No, don’t try to change the subject. Both of you need to work on getting your lives back on track. You are not a hippie, are you? You cannot live your entire life like this. I can see your health deteriorating. And have you seen him? With his white long beard, he has started to look like a vagabond.” She held my shoulders and looked me straight into the eyes “Shreya, time will pass and you will never know what it is to spend your life with your soulmate.”

I had kept this thought in abeyance, locked away in a forgotten, cobwebbed closet. Hearing this out aloud was like opening an old wound. What if she was right? What if time just flew, and before we knew it, it was over?

“We will figure something out Ma. Let’s not discuss this right now. Please. We have only been married for a year. And to clarify, he doesn’t have white long beard either. Why do you guys always have to condemn him?”

She released her grip and took a step back. "You better do. And I'm not finding fault. Having said that, your man has a heart. A kind one. We admired the way he called Reeta to check on her, and he did not even tell us. Reeta called me. She was also taken aback when I told her we had no clue. He is a good man."

I stared at her blankly. This was news to me. A sweet surprise to my tired eardrums which had chafed from his mushy romantic ramblings.

"Did you know?" Ma asked.

"N...no. I didn't."

"Hmm. So, he hasn't told you either." She released a short laugh, completely astounded by his benevolence.

"You have made the right choice, beta. However, do not allow time to take away everything good from you. Life is fleeting my dear." She said this and then directed her steps towards her room. My lips parted to say something, to stop her and ask more about what she felt, to make her say things that would give me the much-needed conviction. She should have told me that I could withstand this and things would get better. But she closed the door on my face.

I had wanted a slow relaxing vacation but it turned out to be a melodramatic one. Now, all I wanted was to go back and fling myself into the banality of my real life. At least that was predictable, unlike this trip, which revealed a different color at every turn. The newness scared me.

However, I was proud to hear what he had done. And not very unexpected from the way he was. Caring. It was new that he would

not tell me this either. Or with his recent spells of forgetting after doing, this could be another example of that.

I had waited for nearly forty-five minutes by the time he came.

“You were real quick.” I taunted him, but he did not react. He dug through his clothes in his backpack and tsked when he didn’t find what he was looking for. Finally, he took out a set of previously worn trousers.

“Don’t wear this. Let me find you something better.” I demanded.

“Not required.” He snapped and barged inside the bathroom. He shut the door loudly behind him locking me out.

The blue flowers printed on the bathroom door stared back at me. My eyebrows crinkled in confusion. What was that? Did something happen while he was away, or did he pick up a fight?

I knocked on the door, concerned. “Ronit, is everything okay?”

When there was no answer, I knocked again. I pressed one ear to the door. Shuffling of clothes and snapping back of elastic waistband. There was no sound of running water.

He opened the door after changing his clothes. “You should have told me. She said she told you.”

“What are you talking about? Will you please explain what happened? Why are you behaving so strange? And who told you what?” I shot all the questions at him at once and then took a step back from the flash of his anger, completely unaware of who it was actually directed towards.

“Shreya, why do you always have to be so insensitive? It’s Ritika I’m talking about. She told me what she said to you that evening and you didn’t tell me that. Why? She told me gloomily that she was happy to have gotten a friend, but then she felt that you were turning her away. That’s rude.”

His abrupt change of demeanour unnerved me. What did she tell him that brought about this wrath? If he was talking about her life history and why, even after knowing that, he thought she was acting fishy, he was kidding me. This was too much to bear.

“Are you being serious? I didn’t want to discuss about her so I didn’t. And we don’t know her entirely. Also, I told you what she did yesterday but you won’t believe me. She is not as innocent as you think she is. How can you talk to me like that because of a random woman?” I yelled, the anger fighting to make a release through my eyes and tear spilled down. But I didn’t stop. I pressed on. “Even if I would have told you about her life story, what difference would that have made? What would you have done? Sympathized with her? You left me alone with her yesterday. A stranger. And when did you arrive? At the last moment. She texted somebody and they had...”

He didn’t let me finish. Whatever it was that got into his head was nothing less than a cyclone. It was going to die down only when it had shredded its temper. “It’s not kind Shreya. I thought you have changed. You’ve realized the importance of people surrounding you. But I was wrong,” he said.

“I am as I should be. And you don’t have to dole out your kindness to everyone. There is a limit to charity.”

“Why do you think you always need to control me? I have my own mind to make decisions.”

“Which always turn out to be the wrong ones.” A snuffle breaks the flow. “Have you made any effort for us? For us being together? You have not because I’m the last person you would think about.” The thought had lingered from that day.

Fights like this made me delirious and I always went a bit down in the dumps. Seven years and I still sometimes felt like the last one in his priority list. Even his estranged friend’s dog would be there a notch higher, was what I used to tell him.

“Where is this coming from now?”

“You know it very well so don’t pretend ignorance.” I overpowered him. The ache in my heart was so strong that it would have shattered at any moment spraying blood in every direction.

He facepalmed and then dragged his hand down his face. His temper faltered when he realized the mistake he had done. “Shreya. I didn’t mean it that way. I was just saying...” he took a step towards me.

I batted his hand away and slumped down on the bed wiping my tears. “Will you please leave me alone, just want some time away from you.”

I knew that I could have handled the situation differently. However, I expected the same from him. How dare he pin the blame on me? One moment, I was praising him; the next, he had to destroy everything. I didn’t look up at him and kept my face hidden between my palms as I cried.

Loneliness these days took a toll on my mental health, but I had gradually come to terms with it. It had become an inescapable labyrinth with only an entry point and that too had eroded, sealed with the time. There seemed to be no other way to make an exit.

“You are crowding my space. Go.” I said between sobs.

I was delusional to think that it was becoming my new normal. I needed everyone to keep me afloat. That I was liking everyone’s company. But that’s not the case. I was only going to get hurt while trying to bend myself to everyone’s requirement. He was right. At that moment I couldn’t bear his presence.

Two could never be a company. Two was always a crowd.

He didn’t stay. He did as I asked him to, leaving me to fight the darkness descending upon my soul alone. I pulled the pillow from the sofa where I had thrown it in the morning and lay on it facedown, tears staining its cover.

A text message illuminated my phone screen, and I unlocked it to see his name at the top and a message below, written in all caps. “SORRY. CAN I COME BACK TO SEE YOU, PLEASE? FORGIVE ME.” Quick realization.

The room was completely dark, except for the light from the phone. He had drawn the curtains closed on his way out. As if he knew I was going to sleep after a good hearty cry. So thoughtful of him.

I had shed all the tears and was feeling vacant from inside, without the remnants of any emotions, be it happiness or sorrow. I clicked on the message so that he knew that it was seen. But despite that I was not going to reply to it or forgive him so easily for the act he pulled off moments ago. The ache was too fresh. I

rechecked my phone to see if there was anything else but only the previous text stood there along with its time stamp suggesting that thirty minutes had passed after he sent the message.

Rather than throwing it away, which I desperately wanted to do, I opened my gallery and scrolled down to the old photographs. One of them caught my attention. It was taken nearly six years ago when he looked skinny and my face gave me a chubby look. I remembered this time when we used to cruise through the town's streets on his motorbike, with me riding pillion, and we often did that after ten at night when the food carts and street vendors were starting to wrap up for the day. We would approach them at the very moment and ask them to make their last service to us. The pitch-black night and the vacant roads would intensify the rush of adrenaline, and I would wrap my arms tightly around his chest while leaning my face on his soft cool shirt. After our nightly adventures, he would sneak into my dorm and drop me off, our stomachs full and eyes drowsy.

This photograph was taken on one such day when I bought new eyeglasses, and despite my warnings, he had to try them on, only to end up looking like a raccoon. I was trying to stifle a laugh, but he still took a picture of us, just the way we were. A smile broke off when I recognized the flimsy top I was wearing in the dead cold. I was shivering on our ride back home and he had to take his jacket off and wrap it around my shoulders like the movies.

Our relationship did not change much and nor had we or our love for each other. Only the circumstances had. And we were constantly trying to find our places and roles among all these changes.

I flattened by body on the bed staring at the ceiling. At the rotating fan which continuously whirled churning the hot wind that blew inside through the gaps in the door.

Sleep came to me the instant I stopped scrolling through the photos, each photo telling its own story and vying for my attention.

A cacophony of kids playing downstairs suddenly roused me, and I rolled my body to find him sitting on the edge of the bed. I squinted trying to understand if the heartbreak I felt earlier was a dream. His face zoomed in and out, blurring a bit as if my pupils were trying to set the focus.

I saw his sorry face. No, it wasn't a dream. He really did break my heart.

I hadn't realized when he came back. The sleep was so dense that I couldn't even hear the door clicking open and the daylight streaming in.

"You are awake?" He was just sitting there looking at me, waiting for me to acknowledge his presence.

Uprighting myself slowly I kept my back leaned on the pillow attached to the headboard.

"What do you see?" I asked.

"That you are." He coughed into his fist and then clutched the edge of the bed with both hands. He fiddled with his shoes. The shoes which should have been left in the corner of the room. He wore them inside and was walking around. Was this ever going to change?

I looked around the room. It had been rearranged. His backpack and the clothes he had dug out in anger were gone. Most

probably hidden inside the cupboard, all of them were mussed up. My half-eaten sandwich, which I chewed while waiting for him, was also not visible. From the glass door, I could see the plate sitting on the floor outside the room in a corner for the staff to pick up.

This distinctive quality of his was enough to ease the hardness of my soul. Whenever he couldn't come up with an appropriate thing to say or was enduring an inner turmoil, he just watched me and somehow it gave him the comfort he wanted.

The innocence oozing out of his eyes reminded me of another instance when one day he missed me so much that he came running to me, forgetting that it was raining outside. Fully drenched in the heavy rain, he just stood there looking at my face. I had to force him to go somehow, and for the next few days, he had a bad throat. That's how crazy and unpredictable he was. That's how imperfect he was.

"Do you want to say something?" I asked, fully aware that this marked the end of the tiff we had. I had managed to prize out an apology from him and that was quite an achievement for now. Though I could never be satiated with only that.

"Uh...if you are up to it, I have arranged something for the two of us."

I quirked an eyebrow "What?"

"I can't tell you that here. You'll have to come with me."

"I think we should postpone it for some other time. Not really in a mood for it. Or if you want, you can ask your new friend to come with you."

“Please don’t stretch it. Listen, I’m so sorry for what happened and I know I was being a dick. Please forgive me now.” He inched closer and I had nowhere else to go. Holding my chin up he glided his thumb through my lower lip. “I promise this will never happen again.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Fair. But will you tell me what she said and what brought about that reaction?”

He turned slightly, folding one of his knees on the bed. My eyes went again to the shoes which were now too close to the white bedsheet. If I interrupted him, I would again be labelled as a controlling wife. Which, although I was, was for the greater good.

“She said that she was hurt. Not exactly the word ‘hurt’ but she said that she thought she could share her grief with you, but you pushed her away.”

“You really think I would deliberately do that without any reason?”

“Well, let’s not get into that again. That is not important for me anymore. And she didn’t have the change at that time, so I helped her to pay. That’s when we talked. She told me about her past life and what she wishes to do on this trip.”

“You paid her share?” I asked in surprise. Given my husband’s chivalry, this was not surprising.

His look and answer rubbed me the wrong way.

“Kind of. See, she didn’t ask me to. I insisted because there was nobody else around and she looked worried.”

“Okay?”

He scratched his beard. I then realized why Ma called it long and white. There were plenty of white strands hidden underneath which I was unaware of.

“So, then I asked if she wanted to join us. She said yes and then she told me what she told you the first day she met you. I know I overreacted in a way I have never done before. Something got into me for sure, which I repented of later. Please let it go.”

His shoulders slumped.

Three different emotions raced through my mind. Each of them running faster than the other to ace the competition – Anger, Frustration and Exhilaration. In a normal situation I would have gone with either of the first two choices. However, considering the fact that today was what was left, my shrewdness told me to select the third one.

“Or should I sing a song for you? If that makes you happy.”

I started to say no but he stretched his arms wide and jumbled up the lyrics of a song I had never heard of.

“It’s fine. I’m going.”

“Wait, what if I danced along with it?” He shimmied his shoulders and tapped his feet which were insanely close to the bed now.

Again, the shoes came into picture. I darted my pupils back to his face.

“How about we do it together? It will be fun.” He started to climb on the bed to snatch my hand and get me off the doleful sitting position.

“No.”

“Ooh!” He looked at the back of his hand. “You scuffed my hand.”

“No, I didn’t. Show me.” I crawled towards him to see but he held my hands.

“I’ll forgive you if you say yes.”

“Fine. I have already said I’ll go.” I yielded.

Chapter 22

Twilight was in the offing. The silver crescent moon appeared in the sky long before the sun sank below the horizon. It glistened like a freshly sharpened sickle. Utilizing the remaining daylight, the three fishermen hauled the boat, balancing the wooden beam of the slipway on their shoulders, into the water.

I focused my attention on my husband, who was helping them in the launching process by slathering oil on the rollers and placing them on the path to help the boat's movement. It surprised me how seamlessly he blended himself with the local customs. It had only been five days and I had seen so many dimensions of his personality that I couldn't gauge even in eight years.

I rose to my feet, brushing the sand from the boulder off my buttocks, and strode towards the boat, which was now ready, thanks to the labor of all four of them. This was the same boat that took us on our day trip today and was now going to take us to a fishing expedition.

"Will there be others with us?" I asked.

“No dear, just you and me...and of course fishes, if we manage to catch them.” He attempted to make a quip but failed miserably.

Vinayak’s son, I had come to recognize him now, carried our supplies that we were going to need for the trip. He looked just like his father. The same tanned skin and the wind of labour that wafted from his body.

“Where’s the fishing rod? Are we only going to use this?” I gestured towards the roll of fishing line the boy was holding. He nodded enthusiastically as if to say that was quite normal. That was what they used on a regular basis. Fair enough. He loaded the supplies saying out aloud the names of each of them before placing them inside.

Something from the back of my head struggled to come forward. Something which had completely skipped my mind in the middle of all this. Shelly. How could I forget her? Yesterday, I thought of checking on her, but then Ritika came, and everything that happened after that was nothing less than a fever dream.

“Give me five minutes. I’ll be back in a jiffy.” I told Ronit and handed him my phone.

“Where are you going?” He asked.

“Nowhere. Just wait for me.” I provided no other explanation and ran towards the spot where I had left Shelly for the last time.

It was childish of me to think that she would wait if she cared. Why would she care? She had a life of her own to live, to survive. I searched the sand around and dug in a few places to check if her shell had been buried under the sand.

She was not there. She was gone. I was never going to find her again amongst the sea of creatures.

I took a deep breath and exhaled sharply.

“Goodbye friend.” I said to myself. Few hours ago, I thought I should have lived with my solitude. But now, I was searching for a friend who never consciously understood that I existed.

I brushed my palms against the clothes I was wearing. I wondered whether she still had the same home or if she had changed her dwelling. She needed to grow. It reminded me of the shells I had collected earlier and I rushed to my room, hoping Ronit wouldn’t worry that I was gone long.

“Where are my collections?” I said aloud after entering my room talking to myself and combed through my short pant pockets for the shells I had collected. “How far inside? Why can’t I find you? There.” I dug them out. Seven in total. Three of them were small and did not fulfill my purpose. I kept the smaller ones back inside and stowed the four larger ones in the pocket of the dress I was wearing.

I turned around to leave and headed straight to the spot I had left her at. Like a silly little child and the silly bond that I had formed with her, I set them down on the ground in the silly little hope that she would find them one day.

“What took you so long? We are getting late.” Ronit said when I returned to the boat.

I didn’t respond.

He lifted an eyebrow. “I saw you running towards the hotel and then to the beach.”

"It's personal. About Shelly."

"Oh! The crab?" He contorted his mouth while saying.

"It's Shelly." I repeated protecting her dignity.

"Okay. Shelly." He finally said.

I lobbed my slippers first before getting myself into the boat. This idea came to my mind at the right moment or just like in the morning I could have lost either of them to the waves. I had a single pair so all the more reason to keep them safe.

It was just our boat out there. As we started to sail away from the shore, our lungs swollen with gleeful anticipation, the remaining population inside the water had come out. Not a single soul hovered near the edge. This beach was always tranquil, gentle with the swimmers and no strong currents. A few strands of loose hair flapped in the wind and then plastered themselves on my moistened face. Tired when they could fly no longer.

The boat undulated, rising up and falling back down with the waves, and it was so fast that I had to clutch the gunwale tightly with both hands to prevent myself from bumping off the seat. On the other hand, Ronit was unaffected. He stood at the bow unmoving, his hands sticking into his trouser pockets and eyes trained ahead as if on a ship looking out for an enemy.

The sky began to darken, but at a distance, hints of activities at Patnem were in full swing, the glittering lights a testament to that.

"You know what I'll miss the most?" Ronit said, his voice tinged with nostalgia.

"What?"

"Our cycling trip. It was the same evening as today." He smiled, trying to recollect the memory.

All the complications of our lives seemed to have been washed away by the euphoria of this moment. I reciprocated. "You're right."

"By the way, what I heard, is it true?" I asked.

"What did you hear?" Shifting his weight with the boat's movement, he held onto the wooden beam and sat on the thwart opposite me.

"That you called Mami."

"Okay." He sucked in a breath through his teeth. "Ah! I did. Your mom said your aunt was managing everything alone so I just thought it would be good to check."

"Hmm."

"Who told you this? Did aunty call?"

"She called Ma. She said that you are so thoughtful and caring. Ma was delighted to hear that. Said all the good things about you."

"That's quite an improvement."

Indeed. I smiled back at him.

We halted near a rock and Vinayak dropped the anchor. The gurgling of the boat's engine stopped creating a layer of vacuum surrounding us. He handed me the fishing wire "hold it like this" while hooking a piece of fish bait to its tip. The rest of the wire was stuffed inside a plastic bottle and kept in a corner. Ronit

learned the technique and imitated the same sitting on the opposite seat.

"What do you think we can catch here?" I asked Vinayak who busied himself arranging his own wire.

Without looking up from his hand, he said "Mackerel, maybe. Let's see though." He flung the wire into the water and gestured us to follow suit.

I waited. Without a rod or a bobber and that too in the utter blackness, I had no idea how to identify the right moment to tug it out. I gave it a little shake to see if the wire seemed heavy but it felt loose. Had it been daylight, we could have seen movements on the surface of water but in the darkness, the twitch could only be felt. Whether that was due to a fish or an involuntary hand movement, was unascertainable.

"Don't take it out so soon. You need to be patient." Vinayak said from his side, calmly threading the wire through his finger.

I turned my body facing the side of the boat while resting my chin on my knuckles.

"I have got something."

"I think I have caught..." I and Ronit said in unison and Vinayak jumped up to help us both. The boat bobbed with his steps as he stomped to Ronit's side and then mine.

I pulled it hard but to no avail. "it's huge. We have not caught a shark I believe."

"Let's say a giant fish that we can cook later or sell." He went down the rabbit hole as usual.

I rolled my eyes. Vinayak came to my side and tried to assist me. Despite both of us pulling hard, it showed no signs of coming up.

"It's pulling my string down." Ronit yelled.

"What?" Vinayak exclaimed.

"The fish. It's pulling me towards her." Ronit said.

"How do you know it's a 'her'?" I asked.

"Oh, come on, now is not the time to argue about the gender. When your crab. Sorry. Your Shelly can be a 'her', then why can't the fish?" Irritation flared in his tone when he gave another strong tug while holding my seat with another hand.

"Woah, Ronit bhai, you need to stop. Both of you." Vinayak let go of my wire and ducked under the wooden plank to retrieve a scissors.

"What happened?" Ronit asked. Before my husband's ire could burst out and ricochet off the surrounding hills with another pull, Vinayak snipped the cord dangling from his hand.

He let out a breath of relief before he spoke. "There was no fish."

"What? What do you mean there was no fish? I tried to pull it up. It was so heavy." Ronit said. His eyebrows drew close together, unwilling to buy the fact that all the sweat he shed was for nothing.

"Your cords got tied up together." Vinayak said and ducked down again, replacing the scissors back to its original place. "It happens, nothing to worry. I'll give you another cord." He

explained when he saw our confused faces in the flickering dim light of the boat.

He tied another bait to my wire and unwound the coil on Ronit's side to produce a fresh cord for him. We dipped it underwater for another try. During the previous attempts in my childhood, Papa used to take me for fishing at a local pond and we would always come home loaded with fresh Tilapia which then Ma would cook, serve us hot and praise us for the hard work.

"Got it. Here we go." Ronit exclaimed and pulled his thread up a few minutes later to reveal a long shiny body of something. Its mouth resembled not a fish but...

"Oh God. It's an eel." I shouted.

"What?" He was smirking while looking at me, unaware of what he caught. He took a close look afterward and his face blanched. He was going to faint for sure. "Take this away from me. What is this creature?" He kept the string at an arm's length but the eel battled with the hook trying to get close.

Vinayak reached out to him and examined the creature "Hmmm, you're right. Wait, don't move or let it get closer. It may sting."

"Does it sting? Really?" I asked in surprise. Never had heard of it.

"Anything can harm you if they feel threatened." Vinayak said.

"Then take it away. Fast." Ronit cried.

I could see from my husband's reaction when he took a gulp that his mouth was parched. "Please be quick." I requested Vinayak to make it quick while he fumbled through his plastic bag.

The fisherman retrieved a heavy wooden handle and bludgeoned it right at the creature's head. Its dead weight plunged back into the sea with a loud splash. I looked at the water. It was so dark that the ripples could not be seen. I knew it was gone only from the sound of its fall. I let out the breath I was holding, my palm clutching my chest as if at any moment I would tear my heart out if anything went wrong. Ronit's hand shook.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"What was that? A snake?"

"No. And they can't sting. They're harmless. People eat them." I consoled him.

Ronit mimicked the action of retching. The long coiling figure in the darkness was certainly frightening. I felt bad when the hit came on its head. But then what other choice did we have. At that moment it was like acting in self-defence.

"Bad luck. We have been waiting here for so long and not a single catch?" I whined looking at Vinayak and he simply shrugged.

We gave it another shot, hoping against hope that we would have our pick of the litter this time.

"Let's go a little further. Think we have only eels here." The fisherman said and pulled the starter rope, bringing the engine back to life. We had come far away from the beach, and there was

no evidence of livelihood around us. Everywhere it was just churning black water.

"I think this should be our last try." I said with a defeat in my voice.

"I agree." Ronit said. He was still scared.

Twenty minutes had passed. I couldn't take my phone out to see the exact time that had passed, owing to my seating position and also to the fact that I felt gross and hence I calculated the seconds in my brain which was somewhere around one thousand two hundred. I felt a slight tug on the string and I plucked it out rapidly.

"I have a catch...oh no." I shrieked. My shriek was so high pitched that I assumed all other sea creatures would scatter away from the mere sound. My hands trembled in panic when I saw the giant eel dangling from the cord, its mouth open to bite and its body slithered viciously. "Help...help me."

Ronit left his post leaving his cord lying there and jumped into action. He snatched the wire from my hand and I clung to his shirt standing at the back.

"Kill it." My husband ordered Vinayak and he did hit it hard but the eel showed no signs of relenting. It thrashed pulling the fishing line that was stuck in its mouth.

"It's still alive. My goodness." Vinayak said.

"Hit it again, harder." Ronit shouted.

All the efforts seemed to fail when it wrapped its body firmly around the cord. The movement jerked the wire so hard that for once I thought the eel would land on my husband's hand and I

shrieked even louder summoning all the gods to come to our aid. But at that very moment, masterfully, Vinayak severed the thread, rescuing us all. Fortunately, we did not cause any further harm.

Chapter 23

We wrapped our expedition far ahead of time. Once we knew it was no longer going to work, we wound our way back towards the beach. I slumped on my seat like a sack when Ronit extended his arm and rested it on my shoulder, and I leaned onto his touch.

He waited for some time to watch if it elevates my mood before saying "don't be sad. It was fun, different instead."

"You liked it?" I turned my head towards him.

"Yes, a lot. Except for that slick thing. It was scary " He said.

"Come to think of it, yes, it was a unique experience," I replied. Everything on this trip had been unique and uninvited. And I was tired of it. I maintained a smile on my face and a bounce in my gait so that I would not look exhausted. Ronit was continuously trying to appease me.

He smiled and at that very moment I would have kissed him only if we were alone. I brushed my cheek with this hand to express it, and he understood.

"Next time when you come Ronit bhai, I'm going to take you some other place, that won't disappoint." Vinayak said, who I now realize had been watching everything from the back. He steered the boat left and the sharp turn made me strengthen the grip on my husband's arm.

Up ahead, the beach shone bright, perpetually full of life, while blue and yellow beams of searchlights crisscrossed their way up to the sky. The hum of the engine gradually subsided as we neared the shore, and Ronit helped me carefully land my feet onto the water.

"Shit, I forgot to fold my trousers. See what happened." He gestured towards the hem, which was completely soaked with sand particles clinging to the fabric.

"Don't blame me for that."

"Hey, I'm not. Why do you always have to steer the conversation in an entirely different direction?"

"Please don't get started again," I said.

He held up his hands less in defeat than to forestall an argument that he thought could ensue and started to walk towards the nearby shade when I interrupted. "Why are you going there?"

He hollered back. "My backpack. I left it there. You want to come?"

I agreed. He slung his arm around my shoulder and took my hand to insert it into his trouser pocket.

"You can follow me now. I won't let you get lost." He said.

"I could have..." My sentence was interrupted by a commotion and then my gaze fell upon the riled-up faces of my parents who were literally participating in an altercation. I felt a churn in my gut. Was that something to do with the hotel staff? On second thought, why would they do that in the open, outside the hotel, and on the beach? Or did they lock horns with fellow tourists this time?

"Ronit." A fear-stricken wail wrestled out of my dry mouth.

He had not seen that yet. I wrenched my hand out of his pocket and gripped his hand tightly to stop him. "Ronit. What's happening there? Why are Ma and Papa shouting?"

He stopped on his tracks too. He looked back at me and then at Papa, who kept his arms hooked around the emaciated figure. The man didn't move but my father swayed his body this way and that anticipating his captive's escape.

We ran towards them, everything else taking a backseat in my mind. We had been gone for nearly two hours. I wondered what had happened during our absence. Something extremely horrible since there were police officers circling them. I hoped and prayed at every step until I came close enough to see exactly what was transpiring.

"Papa, what is it?" I jumped out of my skin when I saw the figure wriggling in my father's arms, trying to free his limbs like an insect wrapped inside the claws of a spider.

The man looked familiar. This face. The gaunt eyes were sucked into the eye sockets. Puffiness in the lower skin of the eyes. All of it. I knew him.

But something was different. The hair which had grown long and matted. Then it struck me. "Harpreet? Is that you? What are you doing here?"

"We caught them putting drugs in your husband's backpack." Ma explained.

The police officer patted down Harpreet's trousers, checking everywhere inside the pockets and inside his shoes, and came back up completing his search. His navy-blue cap went wonky as he stood up. "Clear." He said and reined Harpreet in, discharging Papa of his duty. Papa dusted off his hands.

"Putting what?" For a moment, I thought I had misheard. However, the scene before me confirmed that the words were loud and clear. Behind Ma stood two lady police officers holding Ritika. She sported a scowl and stood straight and tall. Her black sequined bodycon dress and stilettos gave her the appearance of a black racer lifting its forebody off the ground. "Ritika?" I looked at her for an explanation. She whipped her head to the other side. "Why is she...?" I asked Ma.

A look of confusion crossed my face and I glanced up at Ronit who was equally taken aback witnessing the event.

"She is also involved in all of this. We have been searching for her for a long time. We were aware of a drug peddling gang operating in this area but had not found any clue to track them down until now, and we would thank your mother for tipping us off about them. Any such sort of malpractice is highly condemnable here." The male police officer holding Harpreet said:

I went completely blank. My brain stopped functioning, unable to make any sense of the events. I felt Ronit tucking me into a protective embrace as if at any moment the two culprits could pounce at me. Harpreet didn't look like he could move. His cheeks were hollow. A heady scent clung to his clothes. It is the kind of stench that lingers no matter how much you try to scrape it clean, and it carries itself around wherever you go. The smell that becomes a part of you, an identification.

"But why?" I looked at Ritika, who I thought could give me a plausible answer. "Why would you do that?" I repeated, folding my palms on both sides into tight fists. I knew it. I knew she was up to something. I had a feeling that her presence was a sign of something suspicious. Every time I tried to warn Ronit, he dismissed me. What answer did he have now? Would he still speak in her favor? But this never crossed my mind that she was up to something like this. I seethed in anger. Exhaling short, angry breaths like an irate bull.

"We have been asking her the same thing, but she has not said a word. Guess she wanted to loot us. I am glad I caught him fiddling with your bag. At first, I thought it was a similar blue backpack, but then he put some kind of packets, and this girl was looking here and there, as if trying to hide something. It looked suspicious." Ma said.

"Yes, and when your Ma shouted at them just to see if her fears were true, they tried to run. That is how we knew that something wrong had been done. I called out to everyone present there on the beach and then our hotel staff and that helped us nab them." Papa said.

“We have asked the manager of The Serenity to hand over all the belongings these two brought here. Said they had also noticed something shonky about them, but they thought it was just tourists having some fun. I’ve given him a telling for assuming that.” The police officer said.

Vinayak ran to our side, looking at every single face, trying to comprehend. We had left our belongings under the lookout of his son when we left. He was not there. However, this did not mean anything.

“I told Nakul to be there until we come back. Where did he go?” Vinayak said from beside me. He fished his phone out of his pocket and dialled the number. There wasn’t an answer which meant...could mean anything. I shouldn’t be suspicious of that little boy.

Rather, I needed answers from these two right here. “Ritika, do you feel any shame? You’re under police custody now. Anyways they’re going to yank out an answer from you once they take you away.”

She clicked her tongue, absolutely unperturbed by what could happen to her next. She appeared to be completely accustomed to this treatment. "Because of you. You ruined our lives." She spat at last.

"Ruined your lives? Please explain." I roared, but my voice cracked as tears threatened to betray the fear churning inside me.

“Ask me. Because of you, I lost my job and my livelihood. Daddy ji kicked me out of the house, and my girlfriend and I were left to fend for ourselves. And then we planned to create the same ruckus in your life what you did to me.” He cried like a small,

scared boy. Although at first glance, it seemed like crocodile tears. But he sniffled.

I wanted to punch him on the face and knock the air out of his lungs if given the opportunity or if Ronit loosened his grip, but the law enforcers here would forbid that so I kept my cool and before I could probe further, he continued, ' But all is not over, a sweet surprise will be waiting for you once you resume office. My love here has done the work for me." He laughed. I knew that was a fake cry. He was a fraud by the way. He was kicked out due to some fraudulent activities he carried out, his continued absence, and drug abuse, which came to light. Was this really happening? I couldn't believe my eyes. I hadn't known my profession would come with such hazards.

"What do you mean?"

He laughed hard "Surprise, surprise." He bared his yellow and black half broken teeth and gestured towards his lover who stood tall and intimidating as compared to her dimwit better half. Whatever this surprise he was talking about had to be as stupid as him, nothing I couldn't manage.

My leg was raised to form a kick. I was going to kill this man. How dared he try to be vindictive about a loss that had resulted from his own doing? This was extreme. I dragged my feet, trying to get closer to him and print a shoe mark on his face. I bared my teeth yelling all the nasty slangs I could think of at that moment. Ronit pulled me back containing me and unfortunately succeeding in it too. Harpreet just laughed.

Once all the fight left my body, I looked up sympathetically at Ritika, without meaning to. Can a girl like her have no choice but

to take a guy like Harpreet as her lover? Well, who was I to pass judgement on her behalf? It was her decision.

I shook my head, clearing the fog in my mind that was leading me towards baseless topics, and coughed out the words. "That was your own doing."

Ronit stroked my arms which had gone cold as dead frozen meat. "A drug abuser like you can't be employed when all he does is consuming drugs during work hours."

Harpreet jolted his head to one side, shrugging off my explanation. Another thought that had been nagging my mind. This voice. The two of them. The flight and the couple.

"Were you following us? You were at the plane sitting right behind us. Weren't you? Has this been your plan of a revenge all along? And how did you know we were..." I felt my throat getting choked. Ronit stared at me in surprise. Recollection of the day dawning on him too.

"I...I think we met in the bar." Ronit stuttered and then corrected himself. "Um...the restaurant that day in Calangute. You said you were Shreya's colleague."

My mouth fell open. So that was it. I bore my eyes into Harpreet seeking an answer.

"We did not intend to follow you. I just saw you at the airport after landing and that's when we thought...to have some fun." Harpreet said, giggling. "Then I asked my love to follow you."

Although Ronit had turned a deaf ear to the car incident, I still thought to bring it up. Asking it out was not going to do any further harm than what had already been done. "Where else did

you follow us? Were you driving that same white car while we went for cycling?" I asked.

"So, you noticed huh?" He laughed again. "Yes. We tried to kidnap you that day but somehow it didn't work. I was too drunk when I drove. The next day, when Ritika took you to Galgibaga, I was on my way, and we had thought of executing the abduction on our way back. But then your husband came out of nowhere."

"How did you know he won't accompany me in the first place?"

"We had plan B in case that happened."

How could one be so brazen? I could never believe him. I still thought this was pre planned. Better to leave it to the police to beat the truth out of them.

"Let's not waste any time on them. We have better things to do. Thank you again for helping the police. Rest we will manage. If you find anything suspicious or require further assistance, please report it. Someone from my team will come to your assistance at the earliest." The police officer said as the other two lady constables led Ritika and Harpreet away. They didn't even bother to cover their faces. I only saw the face of Ritika when she turned her head back to shoot a final glare at me, which I returned by narrowing my eyes.

Chapter 24

A silence fell all around me when the chaos subsided. The police jeep pulled out of its parking spot taking both of them. Ronit released me but held my shoulders, afraid I would fall down if he left me entirely. “Was just happened? Who was this boy?” He asked.

“It’s a long story. Let’s not discuss this right now. I’m too tired to answer any of your questions.”

He understood.

Vinayak’s son had still not come, and he was furiously dialling his number time and again. I didn’t know whether to feel sorry for him or he should be sorry for my condition. Finally, a voice replied back. It narrated something that we could not hear. We just saw Vinayak nodding his head to that. When he got off the phone he said “they told him they were your friends and you were traveling together so they would take care while they asked Nakul to fetch some supplies for them too. He is innocent, didn’t have a clue.”

I agreed. I scoffed at their plan. Fools.

“Ronit beta, you two go and rest. It’s been a lot to deal with. Don’t worry about us. We are fine. But Shreya looks like she might use some sleep,” Papa said.

Ronit took me back to our room and helped me into a fresh set of clothes for the night when he realized I was not going to move my limbs. It was relieving to note that nothing wrong happened and after Harpreet's declaration of what they did with my phone, I checked my email outbox but couldn't find anything. Either it was just for the sake of deception or she had actually sent an email and then deleted it. But fortunately, if I could recall it, no revert sat there in my inbox.

All I could do now was wait to see if there were any repercussions. I was a fool. All that time, she wanted to get hold of my phone and not Ronit’s. It was a ploy when she asked him, and just like a doubting wife, I handed her mine, leading myself recklessly into the trap.

"Here, take it and let's call it a day. We need to get up early in the morning tomorrow." Ronit handed me a glass of water and sat beside me on the sofa.

“Can I get a pain killer too?”

“No. Rest is what you need. No medicines.”

I remained curled up in a corner, my mind still trying to make sense of the past few hours, which felt like a nightmare.

"I have never imagined my work could yield into something like this. Those two stupid brats, they don't even know what they are doing." I shifted my gaze towards him, sitting face to face. "Did they really think they will get away after doing the harm?"

He shrugged. "And we would have never realized that something was there inside my backpack or at the airport we were gone. What if Ma had not witnessed this in time? That was sheer luck." He held his head and propped his elbow on his knees. His face had shrivelled up and looked even smaller than mine.

"Which means they have proved it again the advantage of taking them along with us." I smiled.

He scoffed "Very true."

"I could have stopped it from happening when I met him the first day at the bar. I should have probed," he said.

"How could you know? That's not your fault. But you could have listened to me when I was repeatedly telling you that it was the same car. She was up to something," I said.

"Listen, I'm sorry again for taking that woman's side. Her story sounded so genuine and hence..." Guilt flashed across his face. "Do you think whatever she told us was a lie?"

"It has to be. What else can we expect from a drug peddler? I had listened to her too, but I was not as gullible as you," I said in a raspy voice.

"I accept whatever you say. I told you I am idiot. I am reiterating this. Now please forgive me. I really want to reclaim whatever time we have lost." He begged me to look at him with those pleading eyes yet again.

I got up and walked towards the bed. "I'm sleepy."

I felt a strong pull on my hand, and in the next moment, I was sitting on his lap. "What are you doing?" I gasped.

“Reclaiming the lost moment,” he said, brushing his lips on the skin below my neck.

“Stop. Seriously, I am not in the mood for all of this. Let’s go to sleep.”

“Why? Not that anyone is watching us. What happened to your idea of spending every single second with me?” The soft touch dipped lower and lower, his strong arms thwarting my attempts to flail out of his grasp.

“Ronit.” A tinge of frustration crept into my voice as I spoke.

He released me abruptly. “Okay.”

He pushed me out of his lap to a standing position. It surprised me to notice that this brought a look of confusion on my face. I turned my head and looked back at him. Why did he have to be so unromantic?

He said innocently “you only wanted.” Therefore, it was a proven theory that men could never understand a woman's actual feelings. But before I could prepare my feet to stomp away, he spun me towards him and held my face in his palms.” let make this night a bit special. Shall we?”

My lips quirked upward despite myself “Hmm. What are you up to?”

“You will see.”

Our watches said it was two in the midnight, but the dazzle of the party on the main beach area continued, lights spilling on our side too. We strode down into the restaurant, my husband carrying a bottle of beer in his hand.

“When did you get this?” I asked pointing towards the bottle. It was late enough for the staff to be awake and serve us dinner.

“I preserved it. I knew I would need this tonight,” he said.

“Okay? Will you tell me what are we doing staying awake at this hour?” I pulled out a chair and settled myself onto it, waiting patiently for the revelation.

“Just some more time, waiting for this area to go a little dark. Oops.” He jumped.

“What happened?” I asked. Spooked again. Ronit’s butts got repulsed by the figure he was trying to sit on. The shape took its form, which was clearly a human, and removed the blanket covering his face.

“Oh my god. I didn’t notice you in the dark. I apologize.” Ronit fumbled when he saw Bablu wiping his face and examining the features of my husband. His mouth contorted, which I could see even in the dark, but the appalling look soon transformed into something wistful. Was he sad about the fact that it was our last night here?

“Sir, why are you still awake? Don’t you have an early morning flight?” He slowly sat up, pulling his blanket together to cover his chest, which I realized was naked. “And by the way, your parents really did a heroic act. This was the first time we saw guests busting a gang.”

“Oh yes, they are amazing. However, to answer your first question, we do have an early morning flight. But I think there’s still something pending on this trip and that’s why we’re here to catch a glimpse if luck is in our favour.” Ronit kept glancing at the beach.

“A bioluminescence? Well, considering the new moon, you may get that opportunity.

But for that, you will have to go a little farther into the sea to get away from all these lights,” the manager said.

“There, is that it?” I pointed towards the sea, sleep still conquering my eyes.

Ronit laughed “no dear, that’s just the wave. No worries, let’s go down and wait. I am hopeful.”

The rocks had become our permanent seating lounge on the beach. I no longer felt the sting. “I am just thinking about what I will be doing tomorrow at this time,” I said, dangling my feet from the rock.

“Can we not think about the future and focus about the present? Tomorrow this place will be missing us,” Ronit said.

“That was too clichéd.”

“Oh! come on, that was poignant.”

“Ronit this moment is fleeting. It will pass before you realize it. We’ll have to now see what comes next.” I tried broaching the subject but the moment was a tad flimsy. Things might break if I forced too hard.

“So is our entire life.” He held my hand and gave it a light squeeze. “Those tomorrows will lead to the weekends, which is when we are going to shop for your cousin’s wedding, remember? Shreya, I know what you want to say. I want that too. Everything will turn in our favour I promise. Just believe me for once.”

At that moment, staring into the sincerity of his eyes, I wanted to commit to believing him.

I nodded and he opened the bottle of beer with his teeth. "You want a swig?" He asked and I shot him a questioning look. I hated beer. The taste of it per se. "Fine," he said and then he gulped down half of it and spoke again without glancing at me. "Mansi said she is okay for the marriage."

"What? When did that happen?"

"When you were angry at me, I came back once to retrieve my phone and that's when I saw two missed calls, both from her. She and Akshay had a long conversation. While she didn't take me through the nitty-gritties of it all but it seems like Pallavi has managed to convince her somehow. Or maybe grandma. She loves Mansi you know. And she can never see her displeasure. She adores us all but when it comes to Mansi, she sees herself in her." Ronit's eyes turned misty. "During our childhood, I was the one who used to partake in the mischiefs and Mansi used to save me from the wrath of our neighbours and Papa who was always prepared to give me the beating. So, when Mansi took my blame and his attention diverted to Mansi, grandma would always come to her rescue."

He was happy, but the thought of Mansi's changing priorities and her going far, far away after her marriage was something that was going to take time to sink in.

I rubbed his arms which had gone cold in the wind. "I'm sure she will be happy. I know Akshay. He is a good man and you know the most important thing in this marriage would be for her

to get a husband who will genuinely care for her. What if she goes far away? We can go there whenever we want. Can't we?"

This brought a smile to his face, and he leaned his head on my shoulder. I curled my arms around his broad frame and rested my palms on his hair. His face was so close to me that all I wanted was to cuddle him like this throughout the night. He was not the only one who felt the sadness of her loss. In the past few years, Mansi and I had grown very close, sharing with each other our secrets and vulnerabilities.

"You are forgetting what you took me here for. What do we do? Just sit here and wait?" I asked. "Where is your big surprise?"

"I know. But the possibility of it looks bleak. Anyways, fuck the bioluminescence. Let's have sex here." He said softly into my embrace.

"What?" I jerked away. "Don't be crazy."

"It was your fantasy remember? From your TO-DO list of romantic moments." He laughed hard. "You are the only person in this whole world to have a list for that. I will only make your wishes come true. That's the job of an ideal husband and I'm an ideal one"

"Who told you that?"

"Self-proclamation."

"Go away. And for that we didn't need to come down here. That could have been done in the room."

"I'm in. Let's go back."

"You're crazy."

“Orbiting you, anyone would be.”

He brought my face very close to his, almost to kiss, when the wind sprayed my open hair all over his face, lashing into the beautiful set of eyes which looked at me in wonder. I slid my finger through the opening where the first two buttons of his shirt were undone. I had been interrupted while performing this same activity in the morning, but now there was no one who could stop me. Or him. I could feel his heartbeat which was threatening to break me into a sweat.

“Mmmm...hummm...siiii...taaa....raaa” We heard the hum and saw the source where it was coming from. A boy unquestionably drunk. Petite but cute, carrying a pack of beer bottles for his friends who might be waiting for him to start the party.

He passed us, taking in our appearance, and saluted with two fingers. My husband, who always attracted unwanted attention, responded equally.

“Not again. I don’t want a drunk stalking us home now,” I said. But the boy didn’t wait, he walked past us.

“The coast is clear,” Ronit said.

“Yes.” I pressed my lips greedily over his taking my time savouring and licking the taste of desire off his lips. He curled his hand around the small of my back and drew me to him while using his other hand to remove a curl of hair from the side of my face. Our bodies slipped from the rocks with each passionate movement during the kiss but none of us cared.

“This was so much like our first kiss,” he said once we parted.

“Let every other kiss be our first,” I said.

Chapter 25

“My whole body is aching from this journey. What kind of a landing was that? For a moment, I thought my head would bump into the overhead bin. Seat belt...a waste.” Papa said crossly and wheeled the two bags they carried down the parking area while Ma flicked open her small mirror to inspect whether her lipstick had distorted by the meal she had on the plane.

I and Ronit stayed awake throughout the previous night, filling our ears with the melody of the sea and recalling every good moment we had without realizing what that would do to our morning appearance with blackness rimming our eyes. Now, the two of us looked like we had risen from the dead, clawed out from below the ground.

“Hope there wasn’t anyone stalking us in this flight too. It was full unlike the last flight.” Ronit asked.

“I don’t know. And even if there was, I don’t care.” I maintained a wooden expression.

Tonight, if I dreamt, the dream too was going to be about sleep.

"I just want to fall asleep. Make sure you carry me to my train on time." Ronit's train left at ten in the night, so he had the entire day to sleep and leave the task of unpacking to me. His rationale behind doing that – "You are pro with this, owner of my life." And hence, I didn't bother to ask him any further for help. That would have been a waste of time. Moreover, if I let him help me, it would only intensify my woes. He was so unorganized.

"Papa ji, your taxi is underway," Ronit said. "The driver said he'll take another five minutes."

He craned his neck to look behind the line of cars near the exit. Papa harrumphed in response. He relinquished his grip on one of the trolleys to wipe the sweat off his forehead, but the bag slid across the concrete ground and bumped into a pillar.

Ronit chased it down and seized its handle. "I got it," he said, lifting his other hand in victory as if he had managed to climb to the heights of Mount Everest.

I took my mother's hand, and we walked over to a nearby seating area to deposit our handbags, which had started to burrow a cleft in my shoulder.

"Ma," I said.

Shifting her full attention to me and shoving her glasses up the bridge of her nose, she utilized her super mom powers to see through me and declared forthright "what did he say?"

"How do you...?" I trailed off. I knew.

She raised her eyebrows.

"Okay, so he is exploring some good opportunities and is expectant that he will soon land on a decent one," I said in one breath.

"Good to hear that. You two will be the best decision makers for your lives. Just ensure that you are happy. Okay?" She flashed me a hopeful smile and looped her arm around my elbow. "Whatever you decide, just remember, we are there to support you."

I smiled back. Relieved that she didn't prolong the awkwardness of this conversation by dispensing her sagely counsel.

The car trundled forward weaving its way through the parked vehicles honking its horn loudly on the way. Ronit flagged it down, and it stopped in front of Papa. He loaded the luggage into the trunk and turned to face me. "Beta, we had the best time of our lives, honestly. Take good care of yourself, both of you." His eyes turned misty but he soon regained his composure.

"You too Papa," I said.

He clambered into the car while I turned back to give Ma a peck on her cheek before she too followed him inside. I was going to miss them. Miss every good and bad thing that happened on this trip. Less about the bad thing but let's say everything. It felt like a long time and not just six days. I wondered how could life cram so much into such a short span of time. There might not be a movie or a novel that was as fast paced as my last few days were.

I stood there for quite some time after the car pulled away, staring at the tire tracks it left behind. Only if the wheel of time could turn and take us back to day one.

"Come, we need to go." Ronit said, holding me in a bear hug.

By the time we arrived at our doorstep, our heads tossed on either side on the car windows, in a mild snoring state, the driver called out "sir, ma'am, we are at the location."

I rubbed my eyes to get a clear picture and shook Ronit to wake him up.

"Seven hundred fifty-five," the driver said and produced the QR code.

Ronit snatched the phone from my hand when at the right moment he saw I had added an extra five at the end of the actual bill amount.

"Let me, you are too tired to do this," he said.

The house was a mess, exactly how I had left it, but all I wanted at that moment was to navigate the boxes and shoes and make my way towards the bathroom. My bladder gave me a red signal. I stormed into the restroom and closed the door with a loud bang, shutting the world out.

A knock came on the door followed by a bleary voice. "They have boarded the bus on time. Your father called." I remained silent but he didn't wait for an answer and most probably had slinked away.

When I came out, he was already sprawled on the bed with his socks on. The frayed edges of the socks were like a slap on my face. They screamed that I was probably not taking good care of my husband. His shoes were thrown on one side, and one of them was face down. I carried them out of the room like I was holding a dead rat by its tail and then put them into the shoe tote he was going to carry in his luggage.

Standing at the foot of the bed, I scrutinized his face, looking for signs that he was actually asleep or that it was an act again. Were all husbands like that? I knew my father and he wasn't like that. So why in my case it had to be a skunk? Or I wondered if

there were creatures with similar characteristics like my husband around the globe. If yes, I commiserated with their wives. You were not alone.

His long eyelashes casted a thin shadow on his cheeks. Making sure not to make any noise, I climbed up and snuggled into him, wriggling my body into the gap created by his outstretched arms. The soft hair on his chest tickled my forehead, and I could feel his heart thumping very close to my ears. I tried to rearrange myself into a comfortable position, but a heavy hand thumped my waist, curtailing any movement. His eyes fluttered open for once and then closed immediately followed by a hint of smile on his lips and I stayed there, just like that. I was going to miss this.

Chapter 26

The night before had been long and excruciating; I woke seven times in the less than six hours of sleep I got. Call it out of the pattern I had fallen into, my hands involuntarily patted the bed beside me looking for the familiar shape that had been my bolster for the last seven days. The soft, fluffy, and hairy monster I used to snuggle with.

“Where are you?” I called in half sleep and pressed the green icon on my phone screen to answer the call. Initially, I thought the alarm had gone off. However, the ringing made me crack my eye open properly to recognize the ringtone and two separate buttons to answer or decline.

“Thought you would like to see my face before waking up,” Ronit said from the other end of the line.

I moaned. “Or in reality, it’s the transpose of what you just said. I take it.”

“If you say so. Stay with me for some time like this?”

“Only if you turn on the lights. I can’t see your face. Can’t talk to the dark.”

“Here we are.” He slid the curtains of the window behind his bed.

“Better. When did you reach? You didn’t call.”

“I thought not to disrupt your sleep. You look beautiful in the mornings, freshly landed from the heavens.” He gave me a loving smile, large enough to fill my day.

I beamed. The morning light from my giant windows fell directly on my eyes, and I squinted. I loved sleeping with all the windows open. It was enough to wake me up at the exact hour every day without the need of an alarm clock. However, considering my energy depletion and lack of sleep, I kept one today for safety. Though it was pretty cold outside and the night air was freezing, still I preferred it that way as if awaiting that something good would enter with the dawn breaking.

I began to sit up.

“Don’t. It feels like you’re here. Stay until I count all your eyelashes. Call off going to office today.” Ronit said, propping the phone on a pillow and sleeping sideways with his arm bent.

“Can’t. It’s already late. I need to hurry. There’s a lot to catch up with.”

I left the house early, hoping to grab a strong cup of latte before I strode into my usual office building. I pulled up in front of my favourite coffee shop and left my maroon Renault next to the walkway, ensuring it's far away from the busy road. The slight limp in my feet remained, though it had recovered as compared to the

last few days. Mechanically my hand reached for the journal inside my bag to add a note of massaging my feet in the evening.

No. This time, it would be different. No journals. No hard and fast rules. There is no calendar marking the meeting dates. I was going to either burn them all or shove them inside a locker in such a way that I could never retrieve them, kicking my darkest habits forever.

I placed my bag on the first table I encountered, enticed by the shiny streaks of sunlight pouring onto the tabletop. This was not my usual spot, but I thought I could use some change in my lifestyle from now on.

The cafe was empty save for a young couple who seemed to be on a breakfast date, both of them sitting side by side leaving no noticeable gap between them. I paced up to the counter but before me putting forth my request, Kavita chirped "Your latte will be ready. I saw you coming in." It's lucky to have an angel like her in your life who understood exactly what you needed even before you asked for it.

I laughed. "You should know you're my favourite." I said and then retreated my steps and slumped back into my seat, waiting.

The beautiful golden morning kept my apprehensions at bay, but I did not know for how long that would hold. The day ahead would be full of revelations that I had been running away from these past few days, and which were soon going to unfold one after the other, leaving me to defend myself from the onslaught.

A waiter carried my order and laid it on the table. I took a whiff of it hoping the aroma would distract my mind from the unwelcoming anxiety. I took a sip and dropped a quick text to

Varun stating that I was running a bit late. He replied me back after some time with a thumb's up emoji. He had to try hard; I was sure. As per Varun, he found it interesting how people could hunt out the appropriate emoji at the right moment while texting someone. For him it was always easier to write back rather than search through the series of pictures while the other person waited, biting their fingernails and staring at the three dots.

The elevator dinged me to the eighteenth floor and I stepped out only to be greeted by Abhay who stood like he was talking to his subordinate but in reality, I knew him better than that. His attention jumped back to me when I swiped through the doors.

“Hey. Finally, look who has come.”

I gave him an eyeroll and stepped towards my cubicle.

“I and Varun were just discussing...”

I cut him off “and that’s why you were waiting to tell me what happened while I was gone. Now come on, divulge everything that I don’t know yet.”

“Okay, okay but you need to sit down first.” He didn’t wait for me to slide my chair close to my workstation and perched himself on my desk. “Now, listen. I didn’t want to disturb you on your vacation but I called you three times to let you know about this Harpreet guy.”

“I know. And you won’t believe what we had to face there.”

“What are you talking about? How do you know?” He asked.

“As Sonia rightly feared, he was there stalking me and looking for a chance to get his vengeance. He attempted to place drugs inside our backpack. We were fortunate enough that my parents

caught them red handed and they called police. He had been arrested. Is in police custody right now along with his girlfriend.”

“What? Did your parents accompany you? But didn’t you say it was your anniversary?”

“It’s a long story I’ll tell you some other time.” I massaged my neck while saying. What with ergonomic chairs, these were absolutely useless.

“And what is this story about Sonia? How did she know?” He enquired.

“She must have seen the picture I posted on Instagram and called me incessantly just to warn about that person.”

“Oh, goodness. She didn’t tell us anything about that.”

“Wait, she didn’t? She told me that she asked you to contact me when I was not answering her call.”

He thought for some time and then said: “Putting it that way, she did tell me to ask you to call. But she didn’t mention this thing about Harpreet. She just said there’s something she wanted to discuss. She didn’t tell me what. But I ignored her request, better to not let anyone disturb you when you were having a peaceful vacation with your hubby. And now I can say your parents too.”

I mulled this over in my head. “Then why were you guys calling?”

“It was to tell you that he had written a long email threatening that he’ll sue you. He will prove that you are doing something wrong. Just FYI. Varun has handled him well, that idiot.”

“Wow, how stupid of him. And now that he and his girlfriend are behind the bars. So, I’m least worried about that anymore.”

“That’s news. But since when Sonia turned out to be your well-wisher?” He laughed.

I huffed out a breath “Don’t tell me. But if I think back, she is not a person who would do any harm to you. So, I believe when she saw the photograph, she just put the two and two together and alerted me.”

I extracted my laptop from the drawer and turned it on, expecting my mailbox to hang from the deluge of emails, but it looked discharged. I plugged the charger into the socket, and the screen came back to life. Abhay picked up his mug from my desk to take a sip of the coffee he had left to cool down.

“I texted Varun that I’ll be late but now that I’ve come, I think I should go meet him once,” I said.

“I’m right here. Now tell me how it was like?” Varun pranced across the floor when he saw us talking. More than the relationship between a boss and subordinates, the three of us were friends sharing every piece of gossip we garnered from inside the office. His eager expression showed that he wanted to know about my experience in Goa but the story that I was going to tell him would be something different.

Abhay’s coffee sprayed out from his mouth while trying to laugh.

“What the hell dude. You ruined my shirt. I have a meeting to attend to.” Varun snapped when a few flecks flew towards him, staining his ice blue shirt and he rubbed at the spot trying to wipe it off fruitlessly.

“Sorry boss. But if you would have been at my place, you would have done the same thing.” Abhay snickered.

Varun’s eyes gleamed as they always did when he awaited the recount of an interesting affair. Abhay filled him in with the details, narrating the scenes with vivid descriptions that he himself concocted in his mind from the brief account of the incident I gave him.

“Not only that, Ms. Sonia saved her day. The girl who never shows compassion to even her closest of friends, all of a sudden became the good Samaritan and raised an alarm when she saw him lurking behind her in a picture.” Abhay augmented.

“Ahm, to correct you, she cares for no one but one.” I pointed my palm towards Varun. Everyone in the office knew that she had a soft corner for our boss. And that boss neglected the poor girl’s feelings.

Varun lowered my hand down. “That’s a myth. But seriously, had I known he was there I wouldn’t have gone to the lengths of giving him an email retort. Would just have told you to punch him on his face, break a few of his teeth and bring them back as souvenirs for this office.” Varun laughed at his own joke.

Eww. His teeth. I would have thrown up if I had to lay my hands on them or even touch them with my shoes. I made a nauseated face.

“Sorry, I mean it’s difficult to see you so calm at the mention of his name. We can never forget the way you bolted to catch him by his collar and drag him out of the office that day. That never happens in a normal office with normal people,” Varun said.

“Hmmm, he was literally assaulted by your hands. Seeking revenge was inevitable.” Abhay added.

“What else was I supposed to do? First his alcohol addiction and repeated complaints about him. And then that day he was clicking pictures of the accounts lady. It took me an entire week to console her and make her feel comfortable rejoining. She had made her plans to resign.” I asserted.

“I know. Okay, so let’s not discuss any further about that obnoxious clod. Now that you are back, we have a lot of catch-up to do..” Varun said.

“About work?” Abhay asked.

Varun shrugged him off. “That, the two of you take care of. I’m not getting involved, have this full day occupied with Mr. Kishore. Plan something for dinner and I’ll meet you guys directly there.”

Abhay touched two fingers to his forehead and then pointed them towards him, mimicking a half-salute. “Okay boss.”

“Not today please. I’m still grappling with the weight of the last six days. Can we do it tomorrow?”

“Okay. As you wish. Then we meet at my place. Tomorrow eight PM. Pratibha will also be delighted to hear your funny tales.” Varun said.

Not funny, I wanted to say. But sharing the same with Pratibha, his wife, won’t be that bad. I liked her and an evening together with all the four of us was going to be soothing, a good excuse for my lassitude.

I left early after the presentation with the CHRO. We had been making a list of all the good initiatives our department had taken for the employees and all the improvement areas recommended and post this discussion, that was going to be circulated to the board members.

“These are all negative feedback. Why do we need them? Employees talking ill about the organization, venting their frustration.” Parul asked who was closely working with Varun to prepare the presentation.

“Why not? Each of them is a valuable input. It is now up to us to decide which of them to work upon, if we really want to. Also, when we are expecting from the government that they would respect our freedom of speech, then why not have the similar expectation from an employer too?” Abhay said fittingly.

“Touche. You have your answer, Parul.” Varun said.

In return she had only pressed her lips into a thin line.

I got off the elevator while trying to book a ride home when the girl I had been circumventing loomed in my peripheral vision.

“Hey.” She saw me and came closer to talk.

“Hi Sonia. How are you? And thanks for tipping me off.”

She nodded and then took a step ahead. At first it looked like she was trying to build a response but then I saw her eyes turning glassy.

“Sonia? What happened? Anything wrong? If you wish you can tell me.” I expressed my concern.

She shook her head, looked away for a second and then her eyes again focused on me. "I know what happened to you there. I ought to tell you everything but when you were not responding and then called me in such a hurry, I decided against it."

"What do you mean?" A dubious look crossed my face.

"Ritika. I know how she cheated on you. Before you wonder how I knew I must tell you the truth. She is my cousin sister, and she told me exactly what she and her boyfriend were planning at. When she told me that her boyfriend was none other than that Harpreet guy, I was shocked and thought it was a moral duty to warn you. I tried my best to make her understand that she was wrong and could get into trouble but she didn't listen. Somewhere I felt that the guy was misleading her or blackmailing her to support him."

If we were talking about the woman I encountered there, it was difficult to surmise that someone could mislead her but still I listened intently. Should I tell her what the police said? That they had been looking for her? That she was part of a drug peddling gang? No. The earth had already slipped off my feet and I was standing on air. I could freefall if she revealed any further secrets but she merely stood there sniffing and dabbing her nose with a napkin.

"We got a call from the Goa police. It was a shame for my family." She cried and wiped the snot off her nose. That meant she knew. At least, I didn't have to be the messenger to deliver the bad news.

She continued. "After her mother died we took her in but since last ten years she has been estranged. Living alone in a small town

in Punjab and picking up some random part time jobs that she never discussed with me about.”

“Did she ever marry?” I asked. Though I knew whatever she said was a lie.

“No. She didn’t. But she used to love someone during her teen years but he left her eventually because of her habits. She had become a dipsomaniac. She was not like this you know. She used to be a sweet girl. The centre of gravity for friends. Teachers always applauded her. I don’t know when she met this outcast Harpreet. But after aunt died she became very alone. Uncle was always busy and so she spent most of her years with us.”

I exhaled after she finished telling the story. A painful story indeed.

“But I’m really sorry for what she did to you. When you said you’ll manage I believed you. I thought I could be relieved. And I really had not expected she would actually take such a big step. But all in all, do let me know if I can be of any help, you know.”

She produced her hand as a friendship gesture and I took it. “Thanks.” I gave her a tight smile.

Epilogue

Two years later

Dear Shreya, my lovely Bhabhi,

I know I could have called you to tell you this, but I insist that you read my thoughts through written words this time. We are planning a baby, and your brother-in-law has already started taking very good care of me. Since last three months, he is the one waking up before me, doing all the chores and then waking me up with a warm cup of tea. I hadn't known we would come this far in such a short time. You always told me about your and bhai's love stories, and I wondered if they could actually be true, whether all of it happened in real life. But now I understand what love looks like up close. It's the care. The feeling of safety that someone will always be at your side, come what may.

But more than that, I'm happy for the two of you. I pray this remains the way it is. For bhai, he never spared a thought for himself, always caring for the people surrounding him. He's the

best brother and I love him. Just tell him to stop worrying about me now. Akshay is already doing that part now.

Also, I'm going to tell you a little secret, I'm sure Ronit wouldn't have told you. Do you remember the love cards you made for him? He has all those stashed in the briefcase he carries everywhere. Do look for them in the small black folder. I sneaked a peek into the folder once and we had a huge fight afterwards. He hit my head with his fist and when Ma saw the bump on my forehead, she locked both of us out of the house. We fought outside too, but after an hour, when she still did not let us in, we fled to his friend's house for some food. Thinking about all that, I cannot contain my laughter. We were grown-ups, but it was still fun.

There's another thing I thought I should tell you though my brother made me swear not to. He was really alone without you. He was surrounded with family, friends and so many others who always wanted to be in his vicinity, you know how he is with people. But still he longed for you. Whenever you came home to him and then went back, he would always refuse to return to the room the two of you shared, for days. He roamed around, barely talking to anyone.

I'll stop here talking incessantly about him. But please visit us soon. I want to show you around the beautiful place we are residing in and how peaceful it is, far from the bustling city. If not now, you must when I tell you the good news. You would love to interact with the little one before she or he comes into the world. However much I thank you for the support you always bestowed on me, will be insufficient. And I promise you that I will stay happy, the way you want me to.

Apart from all this I want to admit that I miss you and I miss home. He tries his best whenever my mood turns gloomy, but it will still take some getting used to before I fully acclimatize to the new culture.

With love,

Mansi

My sister-in-law got married six months ago and after that Ronit moved in with me. Their grandma, finally happy to see all her grandchildren married, passed away last month. We all felt the loss. But it was Mansi who was affected the most.

I made a note to look for the secret black folder Mansi told me about. Those cards should have decayed till now but still I would like to see what condition they would be in. That was from our first year together. I knew it was going to be embarrassing to read them after so long.

The day my life took the turn, he was at the door ringing the doorbell at eleven at night while he talked to me on the phone simultaneously. He didn't tell me earlier that he was going to come so I had no clue who waited outside. It was unusual for someone to pay a visit at my apartment at that hour. So, I refused to answer the door.

"Open the door and check. Don't worry, I'll be there on the call." He said on the other end of the call.

"I won't." I put an eye close to the peephole but saw no one.

“Everything will be fine. I promise. Do as I say.”

“Are you sure?”

Upon his assurance, I cracked it open a millimetre and a foot stuck into the opening. I gasped. My husband was standing in front of me holding a letter in one hand.

“We did this. I got the job.” He exclaimed.

He had tried, more than he was capable of, for us. After he landed onto the luxurious paying job, we bought a new apartment and now our house was full of his things scattered everywhere for me to clean. I couldn’t complain about his presence now.

Today, we had made it a routine to spend every weekend together. I didn’t have to write the details of the moments build together since there were so many at every step of my life. We would watch a movie together, get tipsy and help each other back home, survive on the leftovers from previous night and the sleep through the night and the next morning without being in a hurry to leave the cozy embrace.

On the other hand, just two days after the fight with my dad when he declared he don’t go anywhere with me, he was perusing travel packages for four and offered his travel suggestions every now and then without being asked to.

I folded the flowery pink paper back and carefully slipped it inside the envelope I tore it from.

The doorbell signalled his presence and I jumped from the sofa to stroll down towards the door. Ronit kissed my cheek upon entering. I hugged him tight but he hauled me on his shoulder, my

feet dangling to his waist. I had no idea what had brought this change in him. But I liked it.

“Pease drop me.” I laughed through a strained voice, struggling to balance myself.

“You’ll get hurt if I do.” He pitched his messenger bag in one corner and held my thighs with both hands.

I decorated this house with all the might I could muster only to be relapsed into shambles by his presence. But I cherished it. I cherished all its imperfections if at the end of the day I could call this house our love nest.

“Also, tomorrow I’m taking a day off which means we’re going to transfer all our remaining stuff from that house.” Though we had shifted, we still had a few things in the old house that were yet to be brought. But there was one thing I wanted to leave behind – the shackles of loneliness I slept with.

Shelly

A diary

I am in search for a larger shell. The current one is not able to accommodate me any longer. I have looked everywhere. In fact, I have tried all those shells that were hidden underneath the mossy rock. None of them fit and I am growing really fast.

That reminds me of that girl. A human. She held me in her hands. In other circumstances I would have pinched but I didn't feel threatened for the first time in a human contact. Rather, it felt like home. Soft and moist. She looked at me and said something I didn't know. I thought it was out of friendliness but I was wrong.

She abandoned me or so I thought. Human feelings are sometimes so difficult to breach and that too in case of a woman. Fortunately, it is not a complex phenomenon in our case.

May the lord of the ocean give strength to her partner (if any).