

The Price of *Love*

SHREYA GUPTA



BlueRoseONE^{.com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Shreya Gupta 2026

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



BlueRoseONE
Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-93-7825-888-6

Cover design: Ajay Dhyani

Typesetting: Sagar

First Edition: July 2026

Disclaimer

This is a work of fiction. While the themes explored in this book are inspired by social realities, cultural contexts, and lived observations, all characters, events, and situations portrayed are entirely fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to real, life incidents is purely coincidental and unintentional.

The narratives in this book are not intended to represent any one individual, family, community, or tradition in its entirety. Rather, they are reflections of emotional experiences, internal conflicts, and societal patterns that many women may recognize in different forms. The intention is not to generalize, judge, or diminish cultural values, but to examine the complexities that exist within them.

This book does not seek to assign blame or present definitive truths. Instead, it offers a space to explore the layered realities of women navigating expectations, relationships, responsibilities, and identity within the framework of society. The perspectives presented are meant to encourage reflection, conversation, and understanding, not to challenge belief systems for the sake of opposition, but to question where silence, sacrifice, and strength intersect.

Readers are encouraged to approach the stories as individual narratives shaped by specific circumstances, rather than as universal representations.

THE PRICE OF LOVE

Every lived experience is unique, and this book acknowledges that no single story can encompass the diversity of women's lives. At its core, *The Price of Love* is an exploration of emotional truths of love, duty, resilience, and the often unseen costs that accompany them.

Prologue

The Day I Stopped Believing the Word Goddess

I remember the first time someone called me a *Devi*. It was during *Navratri*, on the morning of *Ashtami Pooja*. I must have been eleven years old. My grandmother had draped a vibrant red dupatta over my head, placed a small, perfect bindi between my brows, and asked me to sit on a raised stool while elders touched my feet. They said I was the embodiment of Durga. They said little girls were pure, powerful, and divine.

I remember feeling a profound sense of confusion. I had scraped my knee that very morning while playing in the dirt. I had fought bitterly with my brother over the television remote. I had lied about finishing my homework just an hour prior. How could I be a goddess?

The word stayed with me, though. It followed me like a shadow as I grew up.

When I helped in the kitchen, I was told, “You are the *Lakshmi* of this house.” When I adjusted my opinions to keep the peace, I was praised for being *Sushil*. When I supported someone else’s dream at the expense of my own, I was called selfless. When I endured something quietly, I was told I was strong. It sounded beautiful, like a melody I was supposed to love.

THE PRICE OF LOVE

But somewhere, over time, the melody began to feel heavy. I noticed how easily we gave women divine names, and how quickly we denied them basic human emotions.

A goddess does not complain. A goddess does not get exhausted. A goddess does not say no at all. A goddess does not need reassurance.

She does not falter. She does not feel small. And slowly, I began to see something different. The women around me, my friends, my neighbors, my teachers, were not struggling because they were weak. They were struggling because they were expected to be more than human.

The girl who stayed silent after being wronged was called mature. The wife who handled everything without asking for help was called ideal. The mother who sacrificed her career was called great. The widow who endured humiliation without protest was called dignified.

But what about the cost? What about the nights spent crying into pillows so no one could hear? What about the dreams quietly adjusted and tucked away to fit someone else's comfort without realizing the cost of it? What about the bone, deep exhaustion masked as efficiency? What about the guilt that followed even with the smallest act of self, priority?

Somewhere this way, I realized we had mistaken endurance for virtue. We had confused silence with strength. We had elevated sacrifice so highly that we forgot to ask whether it was chosen or imposed.

The day I stopped believing the word "goddess" was not a dramatic day. There was no loud argument. No breakdown. No grand rebellion. It was a small, quiet moment. I saw a

THE PRICE OF LOVE

woman , someone I had always admired for her iron strength sitting alone in a room after everyone else had gone to sleep. Her shoulders were slumped. Her eyes were hollow and tired. She was staring at nothing, her hands resting limply in her lap.

In that moment, she did not look divine.

She looked human.

And somehow, that felt far more powerful. It made me realize that maybe the problem was never the names themselves. Maybe the problem was how we used them. We used them to praise women, but also to bind them. We used them to honor women, but also to expect more from them than we expected from anyone else.

We turned appreciation into obligation.

We turned reverence into responsibility.

We turned divinity into discipline.

That day, I did not reject the word goddess. I redefined it.

A goddess is not someone who never breaks. A goddess is someone who breaks, and still gathers her pieces. Not because she must, but because she chooses. Not because she is forced to endure, but because she understands her own capacity to rise.

This book is not about removing the names women carry. It is about looking beneath them. What does it mean to be called *Grihalaxmi*? What does it mean to be praised as *Sushil*? Who is she when the lights are off?

Who is she when no one is watching? Who is she when she finally allows herself to feel, fully, honestly, and imperfectly?

THE PRICE OF LOVE

The women in these soft pages are not goddesses. They are daughters, wives, mothers, dreamers, and students. They are afraid sometimes.

They doubt themselves. They make mistakes.

They seek rest, recognition, and space. But they also rise. Not because society calls them strong, but because somewhere, quietly, they begin to believe they deserve more.

And perhaps that is the truest form of power. Not perfection. Not endurance. But permission. Permission to be human, and still worthy.

The Weight of a Name

There are names we give women before they even understand the weight of the syllables. Some are whispered with affection. Some are spoken with a swelling pride. Some are wrapped tightly in expectation. But every name carries a story.

The first name is often the most beautiful, and sometimes, the most suffocating.

A girl does not choose these names; they are placed upon her gently, lovingly, almost ceremoniously. She grows into them the way she grows into her clothes, unaware at first that they may not always fit.

“Good girl.” “Responsible one.” “Lakshmi of the house.”

Each word sounds more like a blessing. Each word feels like belonging. In the beginning, she wears them gladly, because to her young heart, approval feels exactly like love.

Slowly, however, the names begin to shape her choices. She learns what a “good girl” does, and, more importantly, what she carefully avoids. She learns how a “sanskari daughter” speaks, sits, laughs, and disagrees, or how she chooses not to disagree at all. The name becomes a mirror she constantly checks herself against. If she steps outside its outline, even slightly, she feels the quiet, cold pull of correction.

What begins as affection turns into alignment. What begins as pride turns slowly into pressure. She is no longer just herself; she becomes a reflection of the name she carries. And because that first name is so beautiful, so admired by those

THE PRICE OF LOVE

she loves, she hesitates to question it. She does not yet realize that something can honor her and confine her at the exact same time.

She only knows that she must live up to it. She only knows that the price of the name is her silence.

Contents

Preface	1
I Grihalaxmi.....	7
II Sushil.....	18
III Dharmapatni.....	28
IV Karyeshu Dasi.....	38
V Matrishakti.....	47
VI Samarthani.....	57
VII Sadhvi	68
VIII The Price Of Love.....	79
Epilogue	84
Author's Note	87
About The Author.....	89

PREFACE

There was a time when I believed that being called a goddess was the highest compliment a woman could receive.

I grew up hearing words like *Devi*, *Lakshmi*, *Matrishakti*. They were spoken with reverence, folded hands, and lowered eyes. We were told that women are powerful. Sacred. The backbone of families. The strength that holds everything together even when the foundation begin to crack and everything else begins to fall apart.

And as a child, I believed it unquestioningly.

There is something deeply comforting about being told you are divine. It feels like a shield. Like protection. Like a quiet certainty about your place in the vast, confusing world. When that belief is repeated often enough, it settles quietly within the marrow of your bones, shaping the way you see yourself long before you have the language or the courage to question it.

During festivals, I watched women fast all day, their strength fueled by something other than food, as they served others before taking a single bite themselves. I saw mothers wake before the sun had even touched the horizon to light lamps, arrange marigolds, and prepare *prasad*, their faces glowing in the soft, golden flicker of *dias*. Their movements were practiced and rhythmic, almost ritualistic in their precision. I saw daughters touching elders' feet with practiced grace, wives

standing a half, step behind their husbands during rituals, and grandmothers reciting stories of goddesses who destroyed demons with fierce grace and unwavering strength.

There was devotion in every act. There was beauty in every detail.

There was also, though I did not understand it then, a quiet, repetitive pattern. We were told we were powerful, yet I kept noticing something unsettling beneath the surface.

The same woman who was worshipped during the festival was silenced at the dining table.

The daughter who was called *ghar ki Lakshmi* was told to adjust a little more, to shrink her presence to fit into the corners left for her.

The same mother who held the family together was never asked what was breaking inside her own heart.

The same strength that was celebrated in the public square was expected in the private kitchen, without pause, without appreciation, and without question. Somewhere between devotion and expectation, the woman herself was lost.

It was not loud. It did not happen in one dramatic moment of loss. It happened quietly, in instructions passed down gently over afternoon tea, in corrections delivered lovingly during chores, in phrases that sounded harmless enough to go unquestioned.

“Good girls don’t argue.”

“Good wives don’t complain.”

“Good mothers don’t think of themselves first.”

PREFACE

These were not said with cruelty. They were said with concern. With conditioning. With a deep, rooted fear of what the world might say if these invisible, ancient rules were ever broken. They were spoken by people who believed they were guiding, protecting, and preparing us for a world that demanded our disappearance.

But over time, I began to see how easily reverence can become a heavy responsibility, and how easily responsibility can become a suffocating pressure. I saw how quickly admiration can turn into a rigid expectation, and how often expectation leaves absolutely no space for the simple act of choice.

This book was not born out of anger at all. It was born out of observation. It was born out from watching women slowly negotiate with themselves, not in grand, cinematic ways, but in small, heavy, everyday decisions. It came from seeing dreams quietly folded and kept away like expensive festive sarees preserved carefully in mothballs, but worn rarely, if ever at all. It came from noticing how often strength was assumed to be infinite, but rarely acknowledged in its true, exhausting cost.

It was born from the conversations that were never meant to be recorded. Stories whispered in steam, filled kitchens while stirring tea. In quiet college corridors between the rush of classes. In hospital waiting rooms where time stretches and thins. In crowded buses where strangers share heavy truths they might never dare to say at home. In those late, night phone calls where voices soften to a hush, and honesty finally finds a small, safe space to breathe.

I remember one particular evening when a woman I knew, strong, respected, admired , said softly, “I don’t even know what I would choose for myself anymore.”

She did not say it dramatically. She did not cry. She did not seek sympathy.

She simply stated it as a cold, hard fact of her existence.

And it stayed with me. It haunted the corners of my mind. Because how does someone so capable, so aware, and so vital to everyone else’s life forget the sound of her own desire? At what point does responsibility become so constant that it begins to erase preference?

At what point does the act of giving become so habitual that the act of wanting starts to feel like a foreign language?

Each chapter in this book carries a name , a label we lovingly give to women. *Grihalaxmi. Sushil. Dharmapatni. Matrishakti. Samarthani. Sadhvi.* Names that sound powerful, almost divine. Names that carry respect, identity, and a sense of belonging.

But what do they truly mean? Are they crowns... or are they cages? Or perhaps they are both, depending on how they are worn, and whether they were chosen with joy or assigned with a heavy hand.

This book asks a gentle, but firm question: What if a woman could carry these names without being crushed under their weight? What if she could be the goddess, and still be allowed to be human? Strong, and still allowed to rest? Loving, and still allowed to choose herself ?

PREFACE

These pages hold seven women. Some of them will remind you of a neighbor, a mother, or a friend. Some may remind you of the person you see in the mirror. They are not perfect. They are not fearless. They are not always victorious.

But they rise. Not loudly. Not with a shout. But steadily, like the tide.

I

GRIHALAXMI

The Keeper of Home

The rain began just before midnight. It was not the loud, stormy kind that rattles windowpanes and always demands a reaction, it was a steady, patient rain.

It was the kind of rain that lingers, as if it is trying to whisper something vital without ever insisting on being heard. It fell softly against the iron balcony railings, against the waxy leaves of the neem tree outside the front gate, and against the weathered roof tiles that had absorbed decades of ordinary family sounds. The rain was not urgent. It did not demand attention. It simply stayed, a damp witness to the night.

Madhvi was wide awake when it started. She lay on her back, staring at the ceiling fan that made a rhythmic, metallic clicking sound every few rotations, a heartbeat for the room.

The house was quiet, the specific, heavy kind of quiet that follows a significant loss.

Ten months had passed since her mother's death, yet the silence still felt like an intruder, an unfamiliar guest who had forgotten to leave. Sometimes, in the half, light of dusk, she still expected to hear the familiar percussion of her mother's footsteps in the corridor, the faint, comforting rustle of a

cotton saree, the soft chime of glass bangles brushing together in the kitchen.

But the house had learned a different rhythm now.

Before her mother died, the house was a symphony of small lives. Bangles clinking against the sides of stainless steel bowls. The sharp, triumphant whistle of the pressure cooker. Her mother humming old, half forgotten folk songs while folding the laundry into neat, scented squares. There was movement in every room, small, ordinary things that made a house feel like a living, breathing entity.

Now, there were only instructions.

“Madhvi, give Dadu his medicine.”

“Madhvi, have you ironed the shirts for tomorrow?”

“Madhvi, why is the dal so thin today?”

At nineteen, she had become the invisible clockwork of the home. No one had formally asked her to take over the burden.

No one had sat her down to announce the change in her status. It had simply happened quietly and inevitably, the way responsibilities often arrive for daughters in the dark.

They called her *Ghar ki Lakshmi*, the fortune and the light of the home. It sounded like a blessing. It settled on her shoulders like an ancient, leaden responsibility.

Sometimes, while stirring the yellow dal or folding the freshly dried clothes that smelled of sun and dust, she wondered if people truly understood how heavy blessings could feel in the hands that were forced to carry them.

In the mornings, she woke up before the sun even considered rising, not because anyone explicitly asked her to, but because she knew the day would simply refuse to begin otherwise. She tied her dark hair into a tight, practical bun, splashed her face with bracingly cold water, and stepped into the kitchen. The tiles were always freezing under her bare feet. She liked that sharp chill. It reminded her she was awake. It reminded her she was present.

The kitchen still smelled faintly of the spices her mother used to grind fresh every week, turmeric, cumin, and the bite of red chili. Even after ten months, that scent had stayed trapped in the pores of the walls.

By ten, her grandfather would be seated in the verandah, his wooden chair creaking under his weary weight. Her younger brother, Shantanu, remained buried in his textbooks as usual, the pressure of board exams looming just a month away. Her father was usually already gone, swallowed by the noise of the city for work.

And then there was her uncle, Chachaji.

He moved in and walked out of the rooms like he belonged everywhere, his presence a constant, low, frequency hum that set her nerves on edge. She somehow avoided looking at him. Not obviously. Not dramatically enough to cause a scene. Just enough to ensure she was never within his immediate reach.

People often imagine that fear arrives loudly, with a crash or a scream. It doesn't.

Often, fear is a quiet thing. It is a subtle tightening in your shoulders when someone enters a room.

It is the hyperawareness of exactly how many steps you are from the nearest door. It shows up in the small, frantic adjustments, taking a different path through the hallway, timing your chores to ensure you are never alone, offering a small, hollow smile at the right moment just to keep the surface of the water still.

Normal.

That was the word that ruled Madhvi's life. Everything must remain normal. Her mother had believed in dignity above all else. In keeping the peace, in the long slow work of endurance.

"She will grow into a powerful woman," her mother used to say, pride shining in her eyes.

Powerful. Madhvi turned that word over in her mind like a jagged stone. Did powerful women always felt this cold and uncertain inside the walls of their own homes?

The first few times it happened, she lied to herself. She told her heart it was accidental. A hand lingering a second too long while she passed a dinner plate. A body leaning too close in the narrow, dim hallway. A gaze that did not move away as quickly as social grace required.

She told herself she was imagining it, inventing ghosts where there was only clumsy affection.

She did this because imagining it felt easier than naming it. And naming it would mean accepting something far more frightening, that the house she held together each day with her bare hands might not be holding her at all.

It was the night of her mother's eleventh month death anniversary when the illusion finally shattered. The house had

been heavy that day, thick with the scent of incense and the weight of memory. Relatives had come and gone in a blur of white cotton. Prayers had been offered. Condolences were repeated like rehearsed lines from a play everyone had seen too many times.

People spoke about her mother in hushed, reverent voices about her kindness, her infinite patience, her legendary strength.

Strength, Madhvi noticed, was the word most often used for women who had endured the most without ever interrupting the comfort of others.

By eleven, the house had finally exhaled, and everyone had retreated to their rooms. She was just about to turn off her lamp when she heard his voice vibrating from down the corridor.

“Madhvi, bring some water.” Her body stilled instantly.

Every muscle locked into place.

But saying no would invite questions. Questions from her father. Questions from her grandfather. And in this house, questions were never simple things.

She walked to his room, her fingers cold around the rim of a steel glass. The corridor felt miles longer than it had that morning. The overhead tube light flickered once, a dying pulse, before settling into a hum. His door was half open. He was sitting on the very edge of the bed, waiting.

“Keep it there,” he said, gesturing toward the low side table. “And get that blue file from the almirah.”

Her throat tightened until it was difficult to swallow. "It's late, Chachaji," she said, her voice small and brittle.

"Just take it out."

She stepped toward the dark wood of the cupboard, telling herself to be quick. To be efficient. To be unnoticeable. As she reached up to grab the edge of the file, she felt it.

It wasn't a touch, initially.

It was a shift in the atmosphere.

The air behind her grew warm and heavy.

Before she could even begin to turn, his breath brushed against the sensitive skin of her neck.

Her body locked. She tried to step away, to slide into the safety of the shadows, but his hand caught her waist. It was tight. It was certain. It was practiced.

"Don't overreact," he whispered, his voice oily and calm, as if she had already shouted an accusation.

Her mind detached, floating toward the ceiling to watch the scene from above. *This is not happening. Stay quiet. Finish this. Get out.*

His fingers pressed hard into the soft flesh of her arm. He began to pull her back toward the bed.

She heard a sharp, sickening sound, her kurta sleeve tearing slightly at the shoulder.

"Please," she said, but the word was thin, lacking the shape of a command.

Then, something shifted.

Something deep within her, a mixture of instinct, inherited memory, and pure, raw resistance, rose up all at once.

She didn't think, she moved. She slipped out of his grip with a sudden, violent twist and ran.

She didn't scream. She didn't make a sound. She simply ran until she reached the bathroom and threw the bolt.

Her hands were shaking so violently she had to sit on the cold floor to keep from collapsing. The mirror above the sink reflected a girl she barely recognized. Her braid had loosened, strands of hair sticking to her damp forehead. Her sleeve hung unevenly, exposing the pale skin of her shoulder. Her eyes looked a thousand miles away.

For a long moment, she only stared, as if trying to understand whether the girl in the mirror was still the same girl who had walked into that room five minutes ago.

She opened her phone with trembling fingers and looked at her mother's photograph.

"Maa..." she whispered.

She didn't expect an answer. She just needed to say the name out loud to make the silence of the house feel less like a tomb.

That night, she told no one.

In homes like hers, silence often feels like a safer sanctuary than the truth.

Days passed in a blur of performance. He behaved as if nothing had ever happened. He sat beside her grandfather at breakfast. He discussed the volatile state of politics. He laughed at the mindless television shows in the evening. The

normalcy was almost more unsettling than the incident itself; it was proof of how easily a lie could be lived.

She learned to become even less visible, a ghost in her own home. But fear does not disappear when it is ignored; it only settles deeper into the joints. Her appetite vanished. Her sleep became a series of fractured nightmares. She flinched at sudden movements, at the sound of a door closing too loudly.

Shantanu was the one who noticed first.

One night, as she lay under her thin blanket pretending to be asleep, she felt the mattress dip slightly under a familiar weight.

“Didi?” he whispered into the dark.

She turned her face toward the wall, her eyes squeezed shut.

“What happened?” he asked, his voice cracking with the start of a man's gravity.

“Nothing, Shaan. Go to sleep.”

He didn't leave. He sat there, a silent sentinel. “You don't look at him anymore,” he said quietly. “You don't even breathe when he's in the room.”

Her chest tightened until it ached.

The small room felt like it was closing in.

And suddenly, the act of holding it in felt infinitely heavier than the risk of letting it out.

She sat up, her shadow long against the wall. Her voice trembled, not loudly, not with the drama of a movie, but with the steady vibration of a breaking dam.

And she told him.

Not everything.

Just enough.

His fists clenched so hard his knuckles turned white. His jaw tightened into a rigid line. He stood up abruptly, the chair scraping against the floor.

“Don’t,” she said quickly, grabbing his wrist.

“Please, Shaan. If you want this family to stay together, if you want peace... don’t.”

The words surprised her even as they left her lips. She realized then that she was still trying to be the *Ghar ki Lakshmi*, as if she were the one solely responsible for keeping the fragile glass of their family intact.

But Shantanu was no longer the little boy who needed her to tie his laces. He walked straight out of the room and into the dining area where their father and grandfather were hunched over their accounts.

He spoke. He did not lower his voice for a minute. He did not use euphemisms. And in that one, terrifying moment, the silence that ruled for four months shattered into a thousand pieces.

What followed was not cinematic at all. There were no grand speeches or dramatic music.

There was disbelief first, a thick, choking cloud of it.

Then shock.

Then a silence heavier and colder than any Madhvi had ever known.

Her father's face went a sickly shade of pale. Her grandfather stood up slowly, his joints popping, as if the sheer weight of the truth had reached him all at once.

"Is this true?" he asked, looking directly at her uncle.

Some answers do not require words. Her uncle could not meet the old man's eyes. He looked at the floor, at the cold tiles Madhvi scrubbed every day. That was enough.

Her grandfather's voice, when it finally came, was not loud. It was simply final.

"You will leave this house. Tonight."

There was no shouting.

There was no negotiation.

Just the sound of a heavy wooden door opening, and then, the definitive thud of it closing.

That night, for the first time in ten months, no one called her *Lakshmi*. No one praised her for her quiet strength or her endurance. They sat together in the living room, uncertain, awkward, and profoundly unfamiliar with what to say to one another now that the "normalcy" was gone.

Her grandfather reached across the space between them and placed his wrinkled, trembling hand over hers.

"You are not at fault, Madhvi," he said.

It sounded so simple. But it was the very first time in her nineteen years that anyone ever suggested that her primary duty wasn't to stay silent for the sake of others.

In the weeks that followed, healing did not arrive in a sudden wave. She still startled at the sound of footsteps in the hall. She still avoided dark corridors when she was alone. She still woke some nights with her heart racing against her ribs like a trapped bird.

But something fundamental had shifted in the foundation of the house.

She had spoken.

And the world had not ended.

The house had not collapsed into dust. The family had not shattered, if anything, the air felt easier to breathe.

Something else had broken instead, the ancient, poisonous belief that silence is the only way to protect one's dignity.

They still call her *Grihalaxmi* sometimes. But now, the word feels different when it echoes in her own mind.

A goddess is not the one who endures every slight and every shadow with a quiet smile. A goddess is the one who refuses to carry a shame that was never hers to begin with.

And when the rain returned a month later, soft, patient, and familiar, Madhvi stood by the wide open window and simply listened.

She felt steady. She felt aware.

And for the very first time, she allowed herself to wonder not who the house needed her to be, but who she might actually become if she no longer had to hold the whole world together alone.

II

SUSHIL

The Virtuous One

In the village of Mirzapur, mornings arrived softly, carried on a breeze that smelled of damp earth and woodsmoke. The temple bell rang well before sunrise, its deep, metallic echo stretching across the vast mustard fields and the clustered mud houses. Roosters crowed from the courtyards. Gray smoke rose in thin, graceful plumes from the *chulhas*.

Women stepped out of their doorways with heavy metal pots balanced against their hips, their colorful dupattas pulled carefully over their heads in a gesture of modesty that was as old as the village itself. Morning in Mirzapur was never rushed.

It unfolded slowly, like a familiar ritual repeated over generations, the same sounds, the same footsteps, the same quiet rhythm of life that had existed long before the people living there now were even born.

Among them walked Mohini.

She was known throughout the village by a single word, always spoken with a nod of approval, *Sushil*.

Soft spoken. Obedient. Respectful.

She was the kind of woman elders praised over tea and mothers pointed to as an exemplary North Star for their own daughters.

“Learn from Mohini,” they would say. “She never answers back. She knows how to keep her head down and her dignity up.”

They meant it as a high compliment. Mohini carried that admiration like a heavy, invisible responsibility. Sometimes, she tried to remember the exact moment that word had become hers. She could not.

It felt as though it had always been waiting for her, like a role in a play she had stepped into without noticing the script being handed to her.

Her day began before the sun had fully broken over the horizon. She swept the dust from the courtyard, prepared the first tea for her husband, Sanjeev, packed his stainless steel tiffin with care, and woke her children with a gentle touch.

Her movements were efficient and practiced, almost musical in their economy. Years of repetition had taught her how to move through the house without causing a single disturbance. Even the clinking of steel plates seemed quieter in her hands, as if the objects themselves had learned to respect her silence.

Sanjeev was a respected man in the village. He did not speak loudly, but whenever he did, the people listened. His words carried the weight of authority. Mohini, in contrast, carried silence.

And silence, she was beginning to realize, has its own weight.

It settles between conversations like dust. It lingers during meals, becoming so familiar that it begins to feel like a natural part of the very air you breathe.

Once, long ago, she had not been this quiet.

In the local school, she had been the girl who raised her hand first, her eyes bright with the thrill of a correct answer. She had loved science, the logic of it, the way it explained the hidden world. She used to argue with her teachers, always respectfully, but with a firm mind. She had dreamed of becoming a nurse, of wearing a clean white uniform and moving through hospital corridors with a purpose beyond her own home. She still remembered the dry, dusty smell of chalk and the quiet, electric excitement of opening new textbooks at the beginning of each year.

Back then, the future had felt wide and open, not something to be measured or managed.

But marriage came at nineteen, soon enough. Dreams, she quickly learned, could be folded neatly, like expensive, silk wedding sarees, and kept away in a dark trunk.

Not discarded. Not forgotten entirely. Just placed somewhere where they would not interrupt the daily, demanding rhythm of everyday life. She did not resent her life; she had a good husband and healthy children.

But there was something unfinished residing deep within her. It wasn't regret, exactly. It was something quieter, a lingering, ghost, like curiosity about the person she might have become if the road had taken a different turn.

The first time Deepa came to her doorstep, the girl was trembling. She was fourteen years old. Her eyes were rimmed with red, and her skirt was discolored with a dark, terrifying secret.

“Bhabhi...” she whispered, her voice barely audible over the sound of a distant tractor. “Something is wrong with me. I think I'm dying.”

Mohini understood immediately. Some knowledge does not need a formal explanation.

Women recognize certain fears the moment they see them in another's eyes. She brought the girl inside, closed the heavy wooden door gently, and sat her down on a low stool.

“It is not wrong, Deepa,” she said softly, her voice a soothing balm. “It is natural. It is the way of the body.”

Deepa stared at her, her expression one of utter confusion. No one had ever explained the mechanics of life to her. In Mirzapur, girls were taught what to avoid and who to fear, but rarely were they taught what was actually happening within their own skin.

Mohini gave her a clean piece of cloth, clear instructions, and a steady reassurance. But when she finally left, slipping back into the afternoon heat, Mohini remained seated for a very long time.

She remembered the old shame.

The suffocating silence. The way her own doubts had stayed unanswered. She remembered the roughness of reused, poorly washed cloth and the physical discomfort that no one ever dared to name.

That memory lingered on like a shadow long after Deepa had gone.

Over the following months, more girls began to arrive at her door quietly, like shadows. An older woman with constant, gnawing abdominal discomfort. A newly married bride unsure about basic hygiene. A mother hesitant to speak to her own maturing daughter.

Mohini listened. She shared what little she had learned from a stray health camp she had attended years ago. But listening no longer felt sufficient.

Something within her shifted.

It wasn't anger, it was something steadier, like a foundation settling. Clarity has a way of arriving quietly. It settles into your thoughts until ignoring it becomes a greater burden than acting upon it.

One calm evening, the village gathered beneath the ancient, sprawling banyan tree to discuss farming subsidies, the water supply, and petty disputes. The men sat in the front, their voices booming. The women stood behind, a silent, colorful backdrop. The arrangement had existed for so long that it no longer felt like a choice; it felt like a law of nature.

Mohini stood among the women, her palms slightly damp against the fabric of her saree. The topic shifted to sanitation and a new government scheme.

Toilets. Clean water. Waste management.

Her heartbeat quickened. This was the moment. But moments are fragile things; they appear briefly and disappear into the ether if you wait too long to claim them. She glanced at

Sanjeev. He was listening intently, entirely unaware of the storm unfolding within his wife.

Her mind moved in frantic circles. *Stay quiet. This is not your place. What will the neighbors say?*

But another thought rose, quieter, but firmer. *If not now, Mohini, then when?*

Before she could reconsider and retreat into her comfortable silence, she stepped forward.

Her voice trembled, just slightly, but it held.

“We talk about sanitation,” she began, her voice cutting through the masculine rumble of the crowd. “But we do not talk about the women.”

The murmurs began immediately, like a disturbed hive. A few men shifted uncomfortably. Some women lowered their gaze, embarrassed for her. She continued anyway, her voice growing stronger with every word.

“Girls in this village suffer infections because they do not have access to sanitary napkins. They feel ashamed to ask. They feel ashamed to even speak the words. If we truly want healthy families in Mirzapur, we must begin by ensuring we have healthy women.”

A man in the front row scoffed loudly. “These are women’s matters. Why discuss such things here, in the open?”

For a fleeting second, the old doubt returned. It was quick and familiar. This was the moment that could close her throat forever. She steadied herself, drawing a deep breath of the evening air.

“Health is not a ‘women’s matter’,” she said, her eyes meeting the man’s. “It is a village matter. A family matter.”

The silence that followed was heavier than any shout. Sanjeev looked at her, not with the anger she had expected, but with something she had never seen before. It was genuine surprise.

The female head of the panchayat, seated slightly to the side, leaned forward with interest.

“Let her speak,” she commanded.

And Mohini did. Not loudly. Not forcefully. But with a clarity that did not waver until she had said everything that needed to be said.

The following weeks were not easy. Whispers followed her to the well and the market.

“She is becoming too outspoken,” they said.

“Does her husband allow this kind of behavior?”

“These modern ideas will spoil the village.”

But something else shifted, too. Women began gathering in Mohini’s courtyard. First five, then ten, then twenty.

At first, they came hesitantly, looking over their shoulders. Conversations began slowly, often wrapped in nervous, high pitched laughter. Now they spoke about hygiene. Income. Education. Small ideas about sewing and savings.

But gradually, the conversations deepened into something more profound. Stories that had remained unspoken for decades found their way out, hesitant at first, then steadier, as if the words themselves were finally learning how to exist in the open air.

Sanjeev noticed the change before he truly understood it. The courtyard, once quiet by the afternoon, now carried a low hum of voices, careful, but undeniably present. He would pause at the doorway sometimes, not entering, just listening to the strange new music of his home.

He heard fragments of laughter that stopped abruptly when someone remembered where they were, questions asked in half, sentences, and the names of things that were never spoken aloud in public.

It unsettled him, not because he disagreed with the words, but because he realized how much of this world had existed just beyond the reach of his awareness.

One evening, as Mohini folded the day's laundry, he watched her for a moment longer than usual. There was something different in the way she moved, not louder, not defiant, but less contained. It was as if she was no longer measuring every single action against an invisible, restrictive line.

"You could have told me," he said finally, his voice low.

She looked up, her expression uncertain, not defensive, just unsure of what he truly meant.

He hesitated, searching for the right words and finding none that felt quite complete. "I didn't know... you were thinking about all this," he added, slower this time. "I didn't know it mattered to you this much."

It was not an accusation. It was a realization, quiet and slightly uncomfortable. Mohini held his gaze for a long moment, then looked back at the clothes in her hands.

“I didn’t know it mattered either,” she said softly. “Not like this.”

She paused, then added, almost as if she were admitting it to herself as much as to him:

“And I didn’t know I was allowed to think about it.”

The words stayed suspended between them.

Sanjeev felt something shift, not in her, but in his very own understanding of the woman he had lived with for twenty years. He thought of all the time he had taken her silence as ease, her compliance as simple contentment. It had never occurred to him that silence could also be an absence, of space, of permission, of a voice.

He opened his mouth to respond, but then closed it again. Anything he said felt either too small or too late. So he said nothing.

But the silence between them was no longer the same.

It was no longer empty.

It was aware.

At the next village meeting, Sanjeev did not interrupt when she stood up to speak. Sometimes support does not arrive as a grand gesture of approval. Sometimes it arrives simply as the absence of resistance.

Months later, a small sanitary napkin distribution drive was organized in Mirzapur. It did not make the national headlines. No reporters came with cameras. No colorful banners were printed. But something fundamental had shifted.

Girls no longer entered Mohini's courtyard with lowered eyes and hunched shoulders. They walked in openly. They asked questions without lowering their voices to a whisper. At the next village gathering, when sanitation was discussed again, no one laughed. They listened.

And this time, when Mohini spoke, her voice did not tremble in the slightest. Sanjeev sat beside her.

Not ahead of her. Beside her.

As winter settled over the fields with a crisp, cool air, Mohini stood outside her home watching Deepa cycle past on her way to school, her bag bouncing lightly behind her.

Deepa waved, openly and without hesitation, Mohini smiled. The village still called her *Sushil*. But the word no longer felt like a boundary or a cage. It felt unfinished, like it was still becoming something else entirely.

And as she stood there in the golden afternoon light, she found herself wondering: was she still living up to the name they had given her, or had she quietly begun to change what that name actually meant?

III

DHARMAPATNI

The Keeper of Shared Duty

Delhi never really sleeps. Even in the quietest, most concave hours of night, there is always something moving somewhere, a distant truck rumbling on the highway, a stray dog barking at a shadow in a narrow alley, the faint, flickering glow of a tea stall still open for the weary night workers.

But their home once did. It once slept peacefully, without the low, electric hum of worry running beneath its foundation.

There was a time when mornings began with Kamal humming in the bathroom. He was always off key, circling the same old Kishore Kumar tune. Radha would tease him from the kitchen, her voice light above the sound of the stove.

“At least learn the words properly,” she would call out.

He would laugh, a sound that was loud, careless, and vibrantly alive. Those mornings felt ordinary. The kettle whistling its steady tune. The newspaper landing at the door with a soft, familiar thud. The children arguing over whose turn it was to sit near the window during breakfast. These were the small, mundane stitches that held the fabric of their day together.

And ordinary, Radha later understood, is a fragile thing. You only truly recognize its beauty after it quietly packs its bags and disappears.

Now, the house woke differently.

The alarm rang at 4:45 a.m., but Radha was already awake. The ceiling fan spun slowly above her, its shadow circling the room like a restless, repetitive thought. Kamal lay beside her, turned slightly away toward the wall. His breathing was steady, but it was not deep, it was the kind of sleep that never truly reaches rest.

Even in total silence, worry has a physical presence. It lives in small, jerky movements.

In the way someone sighs too deeply in their sleep. In the way mornings begin long before the alarm has a chance to ring.

Three months ago, a white envelope had arrived.

It was thin, formal, and devastatingly final. The company logo printed neatly at the top had once meant stability. It had meant security and a predictable, paved future. Now, it meant something else entirely. He had folded it once, carefully, before placing it inside the back of a drawer, as if creasing the paper could somehow crease the reality itself.

"I'll find something better," he had said that first evening, his voice tight.

She had nodded. She still believed him.

But with belief, she was learning, not because faith disappears, but because it must carry the crushing weight of uncertainty every single day.

Radha moved quietly into the kitchen. The matchstick flared briefly before the stove caught, the blue flame flickering in the dark. She boiled the tea exactly the way he liked it, strong, dark, and almost bitter.

Out of habit, she still placed his cup on the right side of the table. Some routines do not surrender easily. They remain even when circumstances shift, as if stubbornly reminding the house of what life once looked like.

When Kamal entered the room, freshly bathed and his shirt ironed to a crisp edge, he looked like a man going somewhere important. Appearances mattered now more than ever. Even when there was nowhere specific to go, the hair had to be combed neatly. The posture had to be held.

He pointedly avoided the folded newspaper near the door. The employment section had begun to feel like a cruel mirror reflecting his own uncertainty back at him.

"I'll step out early today," he said, not meeting her eyes.

She nodded, her hands busy with a dish towel. "I've kept your tea."

In the beginning, she had asked the questions that now felt like thorns.

"Which company is it today?"

"What time is the interview?"

"What did they say when you called?"

Now, she remained silent. She didn't ask because she realized that questions sometimes sound exactly like doubt.

And doubt was the one thing she refused to add to the weight he was already carrying.

The colony had begun to notice and see the change. Balcony conversations paused abruptly when Kamal passed. Neighbors offered advice that was poorly disguised as sympathy.

“Try the private companies, Kamal,” one would say.

“Maybe it’s time to reduce the salary expectations,” another added. “Times are tough for everyone.”

Each suggestion landed gently, and yet, heavily. Advice, even when well, intentioned, has a way of reminding people of their own vulnerability.

He began leaving earlier and returning later.

Sometimes he came back with the news of interviews, and sometimes without a single word. Sometimes he carried a quiet, flickering hope; sometimes he carried nothing at all. He spoke less at dinner.

The children sensed the shift, though no one said anything directly. The television volume stayed lower. Laughter was careful, measured. Even the clatter of plates felt subdued, as if the house itself understood that a sharp noise might disturb the fragile balance holding the family together.

One evening, while clearing the plates, Radha heard him telling their son softly, “Study hard, beta. Stability is the only thing that matters in the end.”

It wasn’t the words that caught her. It was the crushing weight behind them. It sounded less like fatherly advice and more like a lesson learned the most difficult way possible.

The sewing machine had belonged to her mother. It sat near the living room window, where the afternoon light fell generously across the floor through the curtains. For years, it had been a quiet companion, small alterations for neighbors, blouse fittings before the festival season, or hemming school uniforms. It was nothing serious. Just something she felt to do to fill the quiet afternoons.

Sometimes while stitching, she would remember her mother sitting beside this very same machine, guiding fabric carefully beneath the silver needle.

“Work done with patience never goes to waste,” her mother used to say.

Radha had not thought about those words in years. Until now.

The first time she accepted money for a larger stitching order, she mentioned it casually at dinner, trying to keep her voice even.

“Mrs.Sharma needed ten cushion covers,” she said, focusing on her plate. “She insisted on paying for the work.”

Kamal looked up briefly, his fork pausing in mid air. “That’s good,” he said. He picked up his tea cup, but didn’t drink immediately. “For passing this tough time, it’s fine,” he added after a moment. “But don’t take on too much work, Radha.”

The words were pretty casual, but something in the way he emphasized *too much* stayed with her.

That night, while she was noting down measurements in a small diary, Kamal spoke again from the doorway.

"You don't have to push yourself like this," he said, his voice thick with a strange mixture of pride and shame. "It's only temporary."

She looked up at him. "I know."

"I'll find something soon. A real job."

"I know," she repeated softly.

A long silence stretched between them, filled by the distant sound of a car horn. Then, without planning to, she asked the question that had been forming in her mind for weeks.

"But what if this also matters, Kamal?"

The question caught them both off guard. Kamal frowned, his brow furrowing.

"This is not the same thing, Radha. You know that."

"Why not?"

His jaw tightened slightly. "Because it isn't. This... this is small work. It's not a career. It's not what I've been doing for fifteen years."

The words came out sharper than he intended. He looked away immediately, regret flickering in his eyes. Radha didn't respond at once. She understood now, it wasn't just about the money or the labor. It was about what the labor meant. It was about the identity he had lost. It was about the man he was afraid of becoming.

"I'm not trying to replace anything, Kamal," she said quietly, her voice steady. "I'm just trying to keep the wheels moving."

He exhaled, a long, weary sound, but it wasn't a sign of relief.

“And what will the neighbors say?” he added, almost under his breath. “That I’m sitting at home idle while my wife runs around earning the bread?”

The sentence hung like a cold mist between them. Radha met his gaze and refused to look away.

“We are not living our lives for the people on the balcony, Kamal,” she said.

He didn’t reply, because deep down, he knew she was right. But knowing something and accepting it in your heart are not the same thing.

The room fell silent again. This time, the silence was heavier.

The electricity bill arrived sooner than expected that month. Radha paid it using the money from the cushion covers. She didn’t make a grand announcement. She simply placed the receipt on the table where he would see it.

Kamal saw it. His fingers rested on the paper a moment longer than necessary. For a brief second, a flash of pure guilt crossed his face.

“Next month,” he said quietly, his voice cracking. “I’ll take care of it.”

She shook her head gently. “We’ll manage.”

Not you. Not I. We.

That night, for the first time in months, he did not turn away toward the wall while sleeping. Their shoulders rested close together in the dark. They weren’t quite touching, but they were no longer distant either.

The catering opportunity came unexpectedly, a week before a major local engagement ceremony. A neighbor's cook had cancelled at the last minute.

"Can you handle the snacks and the main course, Radha?" the neighbor asked, breathless. "It's just forty people. Simple home style food."

Radha hesitated, not because she doubted her own ability to cook for a crowd, but because she understood the symbolic weight of accepting.

"Yes," she said. "I can handle it."

The next morning, their small kitchen expanded. Lentils soaked in giant steel bowls. Spices were roasted until the air was thick with the scent of cloves and cardamom. Even the children were given small tasks, peeling garlic and sorting greens.

Kamal stood at the doorway at first, his hands in his pockets. He was watching a world he didn't recognize. He had always believed he was the sole pillar holding the roof up. He was the provider. The steady one.

Now, he saw that the house was still running. It wasn't because of him, but it wasn't falling apart either which he thought. The realization unsettled him deeply. Not because she was always doing more, but because he did not know where he was supposed to stand and fit in this new landscape.

Then, quietly and without a word, he moved. He rolled up his sleeves.

He began to chop onions with a surprising, focused intensity. He carried the heavy vessels of water. He checked the supply list. No one announced the shift. It simply happened.

Sometimes partnership is not a grand declaration. It reveals itself in the shared, quiet labor of the hands.

The function went perfectly. Compliments followed, then more orders. First two, then four, then a regular stream began. Radha's days grew longer and more exhausting. Kamal began maintaining the accounts, his professional precision finding a new home in her ledger.

The first time a former colleague asked him, "So, Kamal, what are you doing these days?" he paused for a fraction of a second.

Then, he looked the man in the eye and said, "We've started a catering business."

Not she. *We*.

Diwali brought an avalanche of work. More noise. More movement. More life. One evening, completely exhausted, Radha rested her forehead on the cool surface of the dining table.

Kamal placed a glass of water beside her hand. Later, he looked at the ledger and said quietly, "We made a real profit this month, Radha."

They looked at the numbers together. They were small compared to his old corporate salary, but they were *theirs*.

That night, after the last order had been delivered and the kitchen was finally scrubbed clean, they sat together in the quiet.

“I thought I had failed you,” he whispered into the dark.

Radha looked at him. He didn't look diminished to her. He didn't look like a man who had lost his way. He just looked changed.

“You didn't,” she said.

She said it not because she had carried everything on her own back, but because through the storm, they had never let go of each other's hands.

In the soft, warm glow of the Diwali *diyas*, their shadows rested side by side against the wall. Not one ahead. Not one behind.

And perhaps that, Radha realized, was the truest meaning of being a *Dharmapatni*. It was not silent devotion or sacrifice without a voice. It was standing beside someone when the very ground of your life shifts, even when neither of you fully recognizes the other anymore. Even when the roles blur and strength changes direction.

It was choosing to stay, and choosing to build something new from the pieces.

IV

KARYESHU DAS

The Silent Labour

Ananya was known for two things. Reliability. And speed.

At the office, if any crisis arose, her name surfaced almost instinctively. It was the default setting for the department.

“At least Ananya will handle it.”

It was said with a casual confidence, often followed by a sigh of relief. Deadlines tightened, clients escalated, systems failed and her name appeared like a solution that had already been decided before the problem was even fully understood.

She didn’t just respond to the chaos; she anticipated it. She pre-empted the fallout. She closed loops before others even noticed they were open.

She was dependable. She was the anchor.

At home, the sentence changed only slightly, but the weight remained identical.

“Ask Ananya.”

“She’ll remember where it is.”

“Ananya manages it all.”

Different words. Same crushing expectation.

Rohan often said it with a quiet, unearned pride, especially in front of their friends. "She keeps everything running," he would add, half, smiling, as if acknowledging a particularly efficient machine.

He worked long hours too, finance, midlevel management, steady and structured. His work had always clearly defined boundaries. His problems came with definite systems and protocols. His endings were visible at the end of a spreadsheet.

Ananya's work never had a finish line. Her work spilled. It spilled into her evenings, into her weekends, and into the rare pockets of silence she tried to claim for herself.

The assumption around her had not arrived with a bang; it had formed slowly, layer by layer, until it became invisible, like the air.

At first, being the "reliable one" felt like appreciation. Then it became her identity. And identity, once fixed, is rarely questioned by those who benefit from it.

Her days ran on invisible, high, tension threads.

Breakfast before the sun touched the horizon. Emails sent during the morning commute. School reminders texted between conference calls. Groceries ordered while reviewing quarterly spreadsheets. Dinner planned during the red glare of traffic signals.

It wasn't dramatic. It was just constant. She didn't rush, because rushing led to mistakes. She just didn't stop.

Sometimes, she tried to remember when her day had last contained a pause that wasn't interrupted by a notification or a request. A cup of tea finished while it was still hot.

A moment by the window without checking the time.

Nothing came to mind.

Even her rest had become functional, sleep was just a way to recharge the battery for the next day's labor.

Aryan had grown up inside that frantic rhythm. He understood, with the sharp intuition of a child, when to interrupt and when to stay quiet.

He could tell, just by the specific tone of her “hmm,” whether she was actually listening or only performing the act of listening. He had learned not to repeat himself. He had learned to wait.

The week before the school function, he said casually while tying his shoelaces, “Mumma, don’t forget Friday.”

He didn’t look up. He didn't want to see her eyes.

“I won’t,” she replied automatically, her fingers typing a response on her phone with practiced speed.

He nodded once. For him, this was not a request; it was a test of a pattern. She remembered things. She always did.

Friday arrived with a global escalation. A client issue. A rescheduled call from a different time zone.

Deadlines collapsing into each other like a house of cards. Her inbox filled faster than she could clear it.

Messages blinked. Names appeared. Questions stacked.

She kept glancing at the corner of her screen.

4:10 p.m.

The function began at 4:30. If she left this very second, she could still make it. She might be slightly late, but she would be present.

Her laptop screen reflected her own face back at her, tired, focused, framed by open tabs and pending approvals.

“Just wrap this up, Ananya,” her manager said, leaning over her shoulder. “We really need you on this.”

Need. It wasn’t a new word. But today, it felt like a demand disguised as a compliment. She looked at her handbag. Then at the glowing screen. Then back at the time.

4:14 p.m.

Her fingers returned to the keyboard. She stayed.

At 5:12 p.m., her phone vibrated suddenly on the desk. It was a photograph from Rohan. Aryan was on stage, dressed as a tree. His arms were stretched out wide, cardboard leaves taped unevenly to his sleeves. One branch tilted slightly to the left, as if the glue hadn’t held properly. Someone had drawn veins on the leaves with a green sketch pen, carefully, imperfectly.

She zoomed in on his face. He was still. He wasn’t crying, but he wasn’t smiling either. His eyes were searching the crowd. Not wildly, not anxiously, but with a steady, quiet persistence. He was looking from one row to another.

Pausing. Moving again.

He was expecting something he had already begun to doubt.

In the corner of the frame, other parents stood loudly clapping. Some were recording; some were waving frantically. And there, in the front row, was one empty chair.

Her chair.

She stared at that empty space longer than she expected. Not because it was empty, but because she had known, at 4:10 p.m., exactly what it would look like. And she had still chosen the screen.

When she finally reached home, the costume lay on the sofa. Crumpled. One cardboard leaf was bent at the edge.

“How was it, Aryan?” she asked, her voice sounding thin in her own ears.

“It was fine,” he said.

He didn’t look at her.

He was building something with blocks, aligning them with a focused intensity, adjusting them when they leaned. Rebuilding. Quietly.

Children don’t always express disappointment with words, sometimes they just reorganize their world around the hole you left.

Rohan said gently from the kitchen, “It happens, Ananya. Work is important. He understands.”

He meant his words kindly, but there was a subtle justification beneath the words.

Not for her, but for the situation.

Because somewhere, unconsciously, even he believed that if a father missed a play, it was an unfortunate necessity. If a mother did, it was a failure that needed a cover story.

Later that night, while she cleared the dinner plates, she heard him speaking to his mother on the phone in the other room.

“*Haan*, she had a meeting... it was important.” A pause. “*Bachcha samajh jayega*. The kid will understand.”

The sentence stayed with her. Not because it was harsh, but because it assumed that Aryan would adjust his expectations to fit her absence, because she would not adjust her work to fit his life.

That night, Ananya lay awake longer than usual. The house was quiet, but her mind was a riot of noise. She replayed the moment at 4:10. The choice. The hesitation. The decision. It wasn't that she didn't care; it was that *everything* demanded her care at the exact same time. And somewhere along the way, she had stopped asking: *Which one actually matters right now?*

The next morning, the office celebrated her.

“Brilliant handling of the crisis, Ananya.”

“You saved the account, honestly.”

“We couldn't have done it without you.”

She smiled. She nodded. She responded. But the words felt displaced, like they belonged to a different version of her, a version that was only complete in the office light.

At lunch, she opened her digital calendar. Meetings. Targets. Reviews. Color coded and perfectly structured.

She scrolled ahead to the personal entries. School events. Parent teacher meetings. Anniversary. All entered in the same font, the same color, the same size.

Everything was organized. Nothing was prioritized.

She stared at the screen. It was efficient. It was complete. But it was not truthful. Not everything held equal weight, and she had been lying to herself by treating them as if they did.

That evening, she was sitting with her laptop open again. Rohan walked in.

“Another late night?” he asked, reaching for his charger.

She looked up. For a moment, she didn’t answer.

“No.”

She closed the laptop. The sound of the lid snapping shut felt sharper, more final than she expected.

“I’ll log in later if it’s an emergency. Otherwise, it waits.”

He looked at her carefully, sensing a shift in the air. “You sure?”

“Yes.”

The next Friday, Ananya left the office at 3:45 p.m. Her manager hesitated at her cubicle. “We may need you for the wrap up call.”

“You have my notes,” she replied, packing her bag.

There was no apology. Just a boundary, drawn in ink.

At the school, she sat in the second row. When Aryan stepped onto the field for the rehearsal, his eyes moved automatically across the crowd. Searching. Then stopping. On her.

It wasn't dramatic. There was no wave, no shouting. Just a physical shift. His shoulders straightened. His posture settled. Because presence doesn't always need to announce itself; it just stabilizes the room.

After the event, he ran toward her, breathless. "You saw?"

"I saw every bit of it," she said.

This time, there was no explanation attached. No apology following. Just her, being there.

At home, things didn't magically rebalance overnight. Work still demanded. Deadlines still existed. Rohan still defaulted to asking, "What's pending?" as if she was the project manager of their lives.

But something in her had changed. When he asked, she handed him the list. When work stretched too far, she said, "Tomorrow."

At first, it was uncomfortable. For him, for her. There were long pauses and small frictions. Redistribution is never seamless; it reveals exactly what was unequal for too long.

One evening, while they were setting the table together, Rohan said, "You don't have to carry it all, you know."

She looked at him. "You didn't say that before."

He paused, a plate in his hand. "I thought you had it handled. You never complained."

She held his gaze. "I did have it handled," she said. "That doesn't mean I should have been the only one holding it."

That night, as she tucked Aryan into bed, he said softly, "You came."

No excitement. No exaggeration. Just a quiet certainty.

And she understood then: children don't measure love in the magnitude of your sacrifice. They measure it in the simple fact of your presence. In whether you are visible when they look for you. In whether "I'll come" actually means "I'll be there."

In the quiet of his room, she sat a little longer than usual. For years, she had believed that being dependable was enough. That holding everything together was the same as being there.

But they were not the same. One sustains the structure; the other connects the souls inside it.

Ananya realized she could still be dependable. But being present that was her choice. And for the first time in a long time, she chose it deliberately.

V

MATRISHAKTI

The Quiet Fighter

Aditi came from a family that valued education but strictly within the lines of a well defined boundary.

Her family was a respectable middle class household where university degrees were encouraged, evening conversations were informed, and the newspapers were read cover to cover every morning before the first cup of tea went cold.

Her father discussed current affairs with a quiet, practiced authority; her uncles debated government frameworks over afternoon snacks; and her grandmother took immense pride in telling the neighbors that every single child in the family was “well-educated.”

Learning, in their world, was not a rarity, it was an expectation. But ambition, especially when it concerned the daughters of the house, was measured with extreme care.

Education was meant to refine a woman’s character, not to redefine her place in the social order. It was viewed as a tool for stability, not a catalyst for disruption.

And somewhere within that delicate balance lay an unspoken boundary, one that Aditi was about to cross.

When Aditi first announced that she wanted to study law, the house did not react with an immediate explosion. Instead, it

reacted with a pause. Her father looked up slowly from the editorial page. Her grandmother paused mid, stir, her spoon clinking once against the side of the pot. Even the ceiling fan seemed to continue its slow, rhythmic rotation with a newfound heaviness, unaware that the air in the room had suddenly shifted.

“Law?” her father repeated.

The word wasn't harsh. It was simply unfamiliar, like a foreign object placed in the middle of a familiar room.

“Yes,” Aditi said, her voice steady despite the racing of her heart. “I want to become an advocate.”

The word settled in the room differently. *Advocate*. It didn't belong to the quiet, curated future they had imagined for her since she was in pigtails.

In their family, girls became teachers, doctors, or bankers, noble professions that fit neatly into conversations about stability, respectability, and eventually, marriage.

Law did not fit. Law meant arguments.

It meant dusty courtrooms and public speaking. It meant late hours, unpredictable career paths, and rubbing shoulders with the grit of the world. It meant standing in spaces where women were traditionally expected to adjust, not to assert.

And beneath every practical concern about safety or salary, one unspoken question waited patiently in the corner of the room: *Who will marry a woman who argues for a living?*

The question surfaced slowly over the next few days. It appeared at the breakfast table, over evening tea, and between casual conversations that weren't casual at all.

"Beta, it's a very demanding field," her father noted, his tone cautious.

"You'll have to deal with difficult, often dangerous people," an uncle added.

"Court environments are not easy for girls from families like ours."

Then, from her grandmother, the voice of a generation that valued silence above all else:

"Ladkiyan zyada bolti hain toh achha nahi lagta. Court mein toh roz bolna padega."

Girls who speak too much are not liked. It's better to be quiet.

That very sentence didn't come with anger. It came with a devastating certainty, as if she were merely stating the law of gravity. That was what made it so hard for Aditi to fight. She didn't argue back immediately.

She listened.

She nodded.

She retreated.

That worried her mother, Sushma, more than open resistance would have. Because Sushma recognized that specific brand of silence. It was the kind of silence that begins to bend under the weight of expectation until it finally snaps.

But Aditi had not always been quiet. As a child, she had asked the kind of questions that made people shift uncomfortably in their seats.

“Why does Didi have to serve the food while Bhaiya stays seated?”

“Why can’t I speak up if I know I disagree?”

“Why do the rules always change depending on who is asking the question?”

At first, the family had laughed it off. “She talks too much,” they’d say. “She’s very sharp for her age.”

But as she grew, the tone shifted. The laughter was replaced by warnings. “Don’t argue unnecessarily, Aditi.” “Learn to adjust for the sake of peace.” “Not everything in this world needs to be questioned.”

She had eventually learned when to stop speaking. But she had never learned how to stop thinking.

That night, the conversation moved into the privacy of the bedroom. Sushma’s husband sat at the edge of the bed, his elbows resting on his knees, staring at the floor.

“I’m not against her dreams, Sushma,” he said, his voice low.

Sushma folded the laundry slowly and quietly, smoothing out the wrinkles with her palms. “I know you aren’t.”

“But think practically,” he continued. “Families look for simple girls. Adjusting girls. This field... it changes people. Lawyers are... different.”

Sushma looked up. “Different how?”

“Outspoken,” he said, as if it were a symptom of a disease. “Confrontational. Always looking for an argument.”

The word *arguing* lingered in the air between them, a ghost of a threat. As if disagreement itself was something a woman should fear more than failure.

Sushma didn't respond immediately because something about this moment felt entirely too familiar. It wasn't the situation; it was the pattern.

Years ago, she had sat in a similar room, in a different house. She had asked her own father to let her study further, to pursue a master's degree. Her father had not refused harshly. He had simply redirected her with a gentle, crushing smile.

“Why more study, beta? You'll be married soon. Focus on the life ahead.”

He had said it like a fact. Like something already decided by the stars. And Sushma had smiled, and she had agreed, and she had never asked again. Life had moved forward exactly as expected, marriage, responsibilities, stability.

She wasn't unhappy, but sometimes, in the quietest moments of the afternoon, she felt the hollow absence of the woman she might have been.

“I never want her to struggle later and regret,” her husband said, breaking her reverie. His voice was calm and soft now, more honest. It wasn't about control; it was about a father's fear.

“What if society rejects her?” He added.

Sushma sat beside him. "And what if someone rejects her because she is strong? Is that the kind of person we want her to be with anyway?"

He frowned. "That's not how the world works, Sushma."

"Then how does it work?" she pressed. "Does it work by us telling her to hide who she is?"

He exhaled a long, weary breath. "You know how our society is."

"Yes," she said. "I do. And I also know it doesn't change on its own. Someone has to stop shrinking."

He looked at her then, really looked at her, seeing the woman behind the wife for the first time in a long time.

"You would risk this?" he asked.

Sushma hesitated. Of course, she was afraid. She was afraid of the judgmental relatives, the constant comparisons, and the whispered criticisms disguised as "concern."

But something else felt much more profound: the possibility of watching her daughter's spirit slowly grow smaller and smaller until it vanished.

"I would risk the discomfort of the neighbors," she said slowly.

"But I will not let her learn how to shrink her soul." She added.

The conflict did not stay inside their four walls. It spread like a fever. Relatives called with advice that arrived in waves of unsolicited concern.

“Law is not a stable line for a girl.”

“The court environment is not suitable for a decent woman.”

“You are being too emotional, Sushma. Think of her marriage prospects.”

One evening, an uncle said bluntly over the phone, “Too much freedom ruins girls. Keep things under control now, or you’ll regret it when it’s too late.”

Aditi’s father did not argue with him. He just listened. That silence made Aditi uneasy. Dinner became a performance of normalcy. It wasn’t peaceful; it was careful. Every word was measured.

One afternoon, Sushma found Aditi sitting with her law entrance books open. She wasn’t reading. She was just staring at the black and white text as if it were a wall she couldn’t climb.

“Are you unsure, Aditi?” she asked gently.

Aditi shook her head, but her eyes were bright with unshed tears. “I’m just thinking... if I’m asking for too much. If I’m being selfish.”

The sentence hit Sushma harder than any shouted argument.

Because it wasn’t rebellion.

It was the sound of a daughter doubting her own right to exist fully.

That evening, something shifted in Sushma. It wasn’t a loud change, but it was firm, like iron. At dinner, when her husband began again with, “Perhaps we should look at more ‘stable’ alternatives for her...”

Sushma interrupted him. "No."

The word landed sharply, like a gavel. Everyone looked up, even the grandmother.

"She will face difficulty in any path she chooses," Sushma continued, her voice gaining strength. "The world is difficult for women. But at the very least, let the difficulty be for something she actually chose for herself."

The room went silent. Her husband stared at her, not with anger, but with genuine shock. He had rarely seen her oppose a consensus, let alone interrupt him.

"And when people talk?" he asked.

"Let them talk," she said. "They have been talking since the day she was born. Why should we stop her life to please their ears?"

The grandmother spoke then, her voice a low warning. "You are encouraging her too much, Sushma. Girls need limits to stay safe."

Sushma turned to her. "Or maybe, Ma, they just need the space to breathe."

The room tightened. This was no longer a polite family discussion; it was a necessary conflict. It was uncomfortable, and it was real.

Later that night, the house felt unsettled and open. Decisions rarely come peacefully when they challenge centuries of patterns.

"They will blame us if things go wrong," her husband whispered in the dark.

"I know," Sushma replied.

"And you're still okay with that?"

She paused, her eyes on the ceiling. "No. I'm not okay. I'm terrified. But I am more afraid of watching her give up on herself without ever having tried."

That honesty changed everything. Because fear, when spoken plainly, loses its power to control.

The final decision didn't come as a grand agreement. It came as an acceptance of the inevitable. Months later, when Aditi received her admission letter, her hands trembled so much the paper rattled.

"Are you really okay with this, Papa?" she asked.

Her father didn't answer immediately. Then, he placed a hand on her shoulder. "*Bas... apni jagah banana*. Just... make your own place in that world."

It wasn't a full, glowing approval, but it was no longer a wall.

On her first day of classes, dressed in the sharp contrast of black and white, Aditi stood before the hallway mirror. She adjusted her collar, her expression a mix of pride and nerves.

"You look strong and confident," Sushma said, leaning against the doorframe.

Aditi hesitated, looking at her reflection. "Will that be a problem out there?"

Sushma stepped closer and straightened her daughter's dupatta. "If it is," she said quietly, "then that is the world's problem to solve, not yours."

At the gate, as Aditi walked forward toward the bus stop, she didn't look back immediately.

When she finally did, she saw her parents still standing there. They didn't look entirely certain, and they certainly didn't look comfortable, but they were present.

And for the first time in her life, that was enough. Because sometimes, change doesn't begin with a burst of confidence.

It begins with a conflict, a mother's refusal to let her daughter shrink, and the decision to move forward anyway.

VI

SAMARTHANI

The Keeper of Her Own Voice

Lata had grown up in a town where life did not ask women what they wanted. It told them, with a quiet and unwavering firmness, exactly what was needed.

It was a place where mornings began with the rhythmic, distant tolling of temple bells and evenings settled into predictable, comfortable routines.

Houses stood so close to each other, their brick walls sharing secrets. Conversations traveled easily across courtyards, and lives were quietly observed by a thousand eyes, nothing was fully private, and nothing was ever entirely unseen.

Girls in her town studied, but they did not study endlessly.

They were taught enough to read the scriptures, enough to write a proper letter, and enough to calculate the household accounts to ensure that a home ran without debt. They were educated to guide children and to hold conversations with dignity in social circles. Beyond that, ambition was expected to soften into practicality.

“Too much thinking makes a woman’s life difficult,” her mother often said.

She didn't say it unkindly, or even as a warning. She said it as a truth learned through years of endurance and passed on like a family heirloom.

It was not a restriction. It was an inheritance.

Lata did not question it. She had not been raised to find the cracks in the foundation. She learned what was expected of her: how to cook without a grain of waste, how to stitch a seam without a single error, and how to understand the moods of people without ever having to ask a question. She watched the women around her move through their lives with a quiet, ghost, like efficiency.

Their strength was never measured in what they demanded for themselves, but in how much they managed to hold together without causing a single disruption.

By the time she was married, she was only 20, she carried these skills like a second nature, unspoken, practiced, and entirely unquestioned.

Her husband's home was not very different from the one she left. It had the same rhythms, the same expectations, and the same quiet, rigid structure of living.

Her husband was a man of few words. He wasn't distant or cold; he was simply contained within himself. He handled the "outside" world, the money, the fundamental repairs, the negotiations with strangers.

He was the bridge.

Lata managed everything within the walls.

There was no formal division of roles, no contract signed, but the boundaries existed clearly in the air they breathed. And it worked. Their life was not extraordinary, but it was stable. And stability, she had once considered, was a sufficient foundation to build a lifetime upon.

Until one afternoon, without a whisper of warning, that stability shattered.

The day Lata became a widow, the house did not fall silent immediately. Instead, it filled to the literal bursting point. Relatives arrived in waves of white cotton. Neighbors followed with hushed voices. Instructions, consolations, and ancient rituals were coordinated with a practiced, terrifying efficiency.

Someone held her arm as if she were made of glass. Someone adjusted her *pallu* to cover her head. Someone told her exactly where she was allowed to sit. Her bangles were removed one by one, the glass snapping with a sound that felt like it was coming from inside her own chest.

The red *sindoor* was wiped clean from her forehead.

Each action was done gently. Each action was final.

She did not resist. It wasn't because she agreed with the stripping of her identity, but because her body had not yet caught up with the reality of the void that filled her. Grief had not yet settled; shock moves much faster.

Understanding arrives later, slower, heavier, and impossible to outrun.

The rituals passed like a sequence of a play she had seen many times before, but never imagined she would lead.

Fire.

Prayers.

The gray reality of ash. Voices lowered as the day stretched into a long, hollow evening.

And then, just as quickly as the crowd had arrived, it vanished. People began to return to their own "extraordinary" lives. The house, once overflowing with the noise of mourning, began to empty. Silence entered gradually, and then completely.

The first morning after the ceremonies ended, Lata woke before sunrise. It was a habit born of twenty years. For a brief, blissful moment, her body tried following the routine. Then, it waited. It waited for the familiar sound, the clearing of his throat in the courtyard before he stepped outside to greet the day.

The sound did not come.

She lay perfectly still, staring at the shadows on the ceiling, waiting for her mind to correct the absence. It did not. Each morning after that repeated the same cruel pattern.

Wake. Wait. Realize.

Grief did not crash into her like a wave; it settled over her like dust. It lived in the pauses between breaths. It lived in the habits of the kitchen. It lived in the absolute absence of small, predictable sounds.

Practical concerns arrived long before she was ready for them. They always do. Her brother came to visit one evening, sitting on the edge of the chair sipping tea as if unsure how much space a widow's grief required.

“You can’t stay alone in this big house for long, Lata,” he said gently.

She listened, her hands folded in her lap.

“You should come with us. At least until things ‘settle’,” he added.

Things. The word felt sketchy and insulting. Nothing felt temporary anymore.

“And this house?” she asked, her voice cracking.

He hesitated, looking at his shoes. “We can rent it out. Or later... we can sell it.”

Sell. The word pressed deeper than the loss of her bangles. This house had not been bought by her, but it had been *lived* in by her. Her children’s first wobbly steps had echoed on these tiles. Her husband’s presence still lingered in the corners, in the rusted tools he had left in the shed, in the hinges he had repaired, in the very habits the house still held.

A house does not forget its inhabitants immediately, and neither do those who have poured their lives into its walls.

She did not argue with her brother. But that night, she walked through each room slowly, her fingers brushing against the cool plaster of the walls. She traced the familiar spaces, not to remember, but to hold on. It was as if the physical act of touching the house could delay the inevitable change, even if only by a few minutes.

Widowhood changed more than just the presence of a person; it changed the very way the world looked at her. The first time she stepped outside after the mourning period, she

noticed it instantly. It wasn't in the words people said, but in the pauses they took before speaking.

Conversations softened when she approached, as if her presence were a contagion of sadness. People spoke with a forced, exaggerated care. Sympathy, she realized with a jolt, creates a distance that is almost impossible to cross.

At a wedding a few weeks later, that distance became visible. She had debated not going, but the silence of the house was beginning to roar. She went, draped in a pale, colorless saree. No ornaments. No flowers. Her absence of color announced itself before she even entered the room.

Women greeted her kindly, but when the auspicious rituals began, a hand touched her arm, lightly, but firmly.

“Sit here, Lata,” someone said softly.

The seat was not among them. It was slightly aside, on the periphery of the joy. The space was small, but the meaning was vast. She sat. And she watched. Laughter moved freely across the room like a breeze. Bangles clinked. Voices rose in song. Life continued with a frantic, beautiful energy. It just no longer included her.

For the first time, she truly understood: widowhood was not only about losing a husband. It was about being quietly, politely repositioned in the world.

Back home, the silence felt different. It was no longer empty; it was aware.

Money made the reality sharper. School fees for her children needed to be paid. Groceries did not cost less because her

heart was broken. The electricity bills arrived with their usual, heartless punctuality.

Her son had begun saying, "It's okay, Ma," more often than a young boy should. Her daughter watched her with a hawk, like intensity, as if trying to learn the secret of survival without having to ask the question out loud.

Children adjust faster than adults, but they also observe the shadows more deeply.

Lata opened the steel chest in her bedroom. She counted the remaining money. Then she counted it again, hoping for a miracle in the math. Numbers do not lie, but they do not provide comfort either. They only ask questions she did not yet have the answers to.

How long can we last on this? What happens when the trunk is empty?

Fear did not shout at her. it calculated.

In the corner of the courtyard stood her old sewing machine. It was black, iron, heavy, and reliable. It had always been a part of her life, but it had never been the center of it. It was something she did in the spare pockets of time between her "real" responsibilities.

Until now.

She wiped the dust from its surface until the black enamel shone. She sat before it and pressed the foot pedal. The wheel resisted at first, stiff with neglect, and then it moved with a low, metallic hum.

The first garment she stitched was uneven. Her hands were not steady, and her mind was drifting toward the graveyard. The customer noticed immediately.

"You've become careless, Lata," she said, not harshly, but publicly, in front of others.

The words stayed with her longer than they should have. Because this time, there was no husband to absorb and bear the embarrassment. There was no one to soften the blow of a bad day. Responsibility does not just add work; it removes the cushioning that women are taught to rely on.

That evening, she sat beside the machine long after the light had faded. She wasn't thinking emotionally; she was thinking practically. *If this fails, what remains?*

For a brief, tempting moment, leaving felt easier. Going to her brother's home. Letting someone else bear and make the hard decisions. Being the "guest" who was cared for. But then, another thought surfaced, clearer and colder than the rest.

If she left this house, she would not only lose her space. She would lose her agency. She would become a shadow behind someone else's light.

The decision settled quietly in her chest. She would stay. Even if she did not yet know how.

The change began not with a burst of confidence, but with a refusal. A refusal to disappear.

Sunita, a neighbor who had also known the weight of silence, came over one afternoon. "I heard you are taking on more work," she said hesitantly. "I know a little idea of stitching... perhaps I could help?"

Lata looked at her. She saw the same uncertainty she recognized in her own mirror. She saw a dependence that she had finally begun to resist.

"If we work together," Lata said slowly, the idea forming as she spoke, "we can take on the larger orders. The school uniforms. The festival batches."

It was not a grand plan. It was a desperate possibility. They started small. Alterations. Uniforms. Hemming. Deadlines were missed. Measurements went wrong. Payments were delayed by people who thought they could take advantage of a widow's desperation.

There were days when the doubt returned in full force, threatening to drown her. But this time, the doubt was shared. And shared doubt, she found, felt very different. It was less isolating. It was less final.

When a cloth supplier asked her one morning, "Where is your husband? I should speak to him about the credit," she looked him in the eye.

"There is no husband here," she replied.

She didn't say it softly. She didn't say it defensively. She just stated it as a geographical fact. The answer did not shrink her. It grounded her. It marked the moment of her shift from explaining her reality to simply stating it.

Slowly, others joined the courtyard. Not because she went out and called them, but because they noticed. They noticed that Lata had not withdrawn into the shadows. They noticed she had not accepted her invisible "place" aside from the rituals.

The courtyard changed. The sound of machines replaced the heavy silence. Voices returned. Work filled the vast, hollow space that grief had left behind.

Her son began helping, delivering the finished clothes and learning a sense of responsibility without being asked. Her daughter learned the precision of measurements and the focus of threading a needle under pressure.

They were not told to grow up faster, but they did, because the world had shifted beneath their feet and they were learning to walk again.

The day she went to open a bank account in her own name felt heavier than any ritual she had ever performed. Her hand trembled as she held the pen to sign the form. It wasn't from grief. It was from the sheer, terrifying weight of ownership.

This signature did not sit beside someone else's. It stood alone on the line. And in that small, ink, stained act, something irreversible settled within her.

Months passed.

The work increased, not dramatically, but steadily. It was enough to remain. It was enough to continue. They eventually rented a small, whitewashed room near the market. Three machines. Bright lights. And a hand, painted board above the door that read:

"Sakhi Silai Kendra"

The letters were not perfect, but they were bold and visible. And visibility, Lata had finally learned, is the first step toward power.

One evening, at another community wedding, Lata stood near the entrance. She waited for a moment, expecting to be moved aside by the unspoken rules of the town. No one moved her. It wasn't because the traditions of the town had changed; it was because *she* had.

She did not wait to be placed. She chose exactly where she wanted to stand. And she remained there.

On her way home that night, she paused in the center of her courtyard. The neem tree rustled in the breeze above her. The house stood quiet, but it no longer felt heavy or empty. It just felt present.

She placed her hand on the cold metal of the sewing machine.

The feeling was familiar, but the meaning had now been completely transformed. It was no longer something she turned to in her spare time to "pass the hours." It had become the very ground she stood upon.

And for the first time, her thoughts were not about survival. They moved beyond the act of staying afloat.

If one woman can hold her ground, she wondered, what happens to the world when we all refuse to move?

VII

SADHVI

The Keeper of Her Purpose

Aarti grew up in a small village where ambition for girls was measured with extreme care, much like sugar in a cup of tea. Too much, and it quickly became a problem that everyone felt the need to comment on.

Her village in eastern Uttar Pradesh was small, but it was far from silent. It observed. It remembered. And above all, it judged.

Evenings in the village unfolded on wooden *charpais* placed outside the mud and brick homes. Women discussed upcoming weddings, rising dowry expectations, and exam results, though usually, the results belonged to the sons of the house. The conversation around daughters always followed a different, more muted rhythm.

“She studies well,” someone would say, offering a polite nod.

“Good. That’s very good. She’ll get a better marriage match because of it.”

Education for girls was encouraged, but only up to a point. Beyond that point, it needed a heavy justification. It needed a reason that didn’t threaten the status quo.

Aarti studied not because she was told to, but because she was insatiably curious. She noticed the things others chose to ignore. Why did the floods destroy the exact same nearby districts every single monsoon? Why did one government officer command a sudden, heavy silence in a room full of elder men? Why did the rules of the world seem to exist differently for different people?

The questions stayed with her much longer than the answers provided by her schoolbooks.

The first time she saw a district officer visit a nearby block after severe flood damage, something fundamental shifted inside her.

He did not shout. He did not rush.

But when he spoke sharply, people listened. Decisions moved through the bureaucracy. Relief supplies actually arrived. That day, for the first time, she understood what authority could look like when it actually worked. It wasn't loud. It was simply effective.

That evening, she asked her schoolteacher, "How does someone become like him?"

"Civil Services," he replied, his voice tinged with a mix of respect and distance.

The word stayed with her. IAS. Not as a dream of power, but as a dream of possibility.

When she mentioned it at dinner months later, the reaction was immediate, not loud, but incredibly firm. Her father looked up, the light of the kerosene lamp casting long shadows across his face.

“UPSC?” he repeated. “That exam is not for girls, Aarti.”

It wasn’t spoken with anger. It was spoken with the kind of certainty that one uses to describe the setting of the sun. Her grandmother shook her head, her bangles clinking softly.

“*Itni badi padhai... aur ladki?* Such a big education... and for a girl?”

Her mother stayed still. Silence, Aarti was beginning to realize, was not the absence of an opinion. In this house, it was the sound of agreement.

“Those jobs need a lot of toughness,” her father continued. “Transfers to remote areas. Court cases. Political pressure. It is not a life for a woman who needs to run a home.”

Aarti did not argue.

But that night, lying under the slow, moving ceiling fan, watching its shadow circle the room, she understood something clearly: She was not being stopped from attempting a difficult exam. She was being stopped from imagining a life that didn’t center on someone else. And that was a truth she could no longer unknow.

Delhi was presented to the village as her “graduation.” It was not presented as her preparation. Her father had agreed reluctantly, knowing the weight of the village’s eyes and mind laid heavy on his shoulders.

“Study,” he had said as she boarded the bus. “But don’t forget your limits.”

Limits. The word followed her to the city like a shadow she could not step out of.

Old Rajinder Nagar did not look like anything she had ever known. The walls were plastered three layers deep with coaching posters. The cafes were crowded with students in hoodies discussing polity, ethics, and international relations over cheap tea. The names of past toppers were spoken like legends of old. Books were stacked in the shops like weapons in an armory.

Everyone seemed to know a secret talk code that she didn't possess. Her PG room was tiny a cell of ambition. One bed. One wobbly table. One window that opened only to the gray, damp wall of another building.

Her roommates were different from the girls back home. Riya was on her third attempt confident, sharp, and terrifyingly fast with her answers. Neha was an engineering graduate, already familiar with complex concepts that Aarti was seeing for the first time. They spoke in an exhausting and weird language of abbreviations.

“GS2... IR... PYQs... the cut-off...”

Aarti listened more than she spoke. The first time they sat together to attempt a mock test, she realized how vast the gap truly was. There were questions she had not even read about and answers she could not even begin to frame in her mind. Time ran faster than her thoughts.

When the mock results were discussed, Riya said casually, “This paper was easy. A walk in the park.”

Aarti had left half of the OMR sheet blank.

That evening, in the dim light of her room, she stared at her notebook. For the first time, the doubt was not external. It

didn't come from her father or her grandmother. It was internal. Maybe this exam wasn't for her. Maybe her father had only said aloud what reality already knew.

She didn't call home that night. She feared that if she heard her mother's voice, she would say, "I'm coming back," and she would hear nothing but relief on the other end of the line.

Shruti entered her life without any grand announcement. There were no credentials displayed, no flashy introduction. It was just a small and cohesive group session in a dim, dusty library basement. Aarti went only because the session was free.

Shruti did not look intimidating. She wore a simple cotton kurta and held no notes in her hand. She asked only one question:

"How many of you think you are not enough for this exam?"

Almost every hand in the basement went up. Shruti nodded, a small, knowing smile playing on her lips.

"Good," she said. "Now we can start honestly."

She did not speak about ranks or prestige. She spoke about the process.

"UPSC is not a mountain to be conquered," she said, her voice steady. "It is a fire that must be sustained."

After the session, Aarti waited until the others had left. "Ma'am... how do you do it? How can i not feel overwhelmed by the sheer scale of it?"

Shruti smiled. "You *do* feel overwhelmed, Aarti. You just don't stop because of it."

Then she added: "Prepare like a *Sadhvi*."

Aarti frowned, the word feeling out of place in a room full of competitive exam books. Shruti explained:

“A *Sadhvi* does not perform her rituals for validation. She doesn't do it for the crowd. She commits to the discipline. Quietly. Every single day. Whether anyone is watching or not, the prayer remains the same.”

There was no hollow inspiration in her tone. There was only truth. And the truth stays in the mind much longer than motivation.

The first attempt came faster than she expected. Her room was no longer quiet. Books were stacked high like fortresses. Notes were taped to every available inch of the walls. Maps and timelines were her new wallpaper.

The night before the Preliminary exam, no one in the PG slept properly.

The air was thick with a shared, vibrating anxiety. No one said it, but everyone knew: tomorrow would measure more than just their preparation. It would measure their worth.

The exam hall felt cold and unfamiliar. Rows of identical desks. A wall clock ticking louder than a heartbeat. She held the question paper, her hands slightly damp. Some questions felt like old friends; many others felt like strangers. Time slipped through her fingers.

She attempted what she could. She guessed what she had to. When she stepped out, the postmortem discussions had already begun on the sidewalk.

“What did you mark for question 23?”

“The cut off will definitely go high this year.”

Aarti stayed quiet. Because deep down, she knew.

The result confirmed it a few weeks later. She had not cleared. The disappointment was not loud; it was heavy, like a wet coat. She walked through the streets of Delhi that evening, unnoticed by a city that carried thousands of failures just like hers. Failure did not break her, but it exposed her. It stripped away the vanity of the dream.

Shruti found her after a week of silence. “You disappeared,” she said, sitting across from her in the library.

Aarti looked away. “I failed.”

“Are you quitting because you are done,” Shruti asked, her eyes piercing, “or because you are hurt?”

The question did not leave any space for Aarti to escape.

That night, Aarti rebuilt her schedule. Not dramatically, but systematically. She changed how she studied, how she revised, and most importantly, how she approached the idea of failure.

Her second attempt was significantly stronger. She cleared the Prelims. She cleared the Mains efficiently. She reached the interview stage, only to miss the selection by a heartbreaking margin.

This time, the pain was sharper. It was the pain of coming close enough to see the light, only to have the door shut.

The calls from home increased in frequency and pressure.

“*Ab bas karo, Aarti.* It’s enough now.”

“We need to talk about your marriage now. The proposals are coming.”

The pressure was no longer subtle; it was a structure. Her father finally arrived in Delhi, his concern having curdled into a sense of urgency. He sat in her small room, his presence making the walls feel even closer.

“You will come back with me,” he said.

The corridor outside felt smaller, more familiar, like the village had followed her all the way to Rajinder Nagar. But something fundamental had changed inside her. She did not lower her gaze this time.

“Give me one last attempt, Bauji,” she said.

It wasn't a request. It was a decision. He did not agree, but he did not force her onto the bus. It wasn't full acceptance, but it was space. And space was all she needed.

Her final attempt was different altogether. It wasn't louder; it was quieter. Her routine became a clockwork of precision. 5:00 a.m. wake up. Newspaper. Revision. Answer writing. Mock interviews. No comparisons with Riya. No panic over the news.

Just the steady, repetitive rhythm of the *Sadhvi*.

She no longer studied to prove the village wrong. She studied because she had chosen this path fully, with her eyes wide open to the cost.

The interview day arrived. The UPSC building on Shahjahan Road stood imposing and silent. Candidates waited in stiff formal clothes, holding files that contained years of life and effort.

She adjusted her collar in the reflection of a window. Her hands were perfectly steady.

Inside the room, the board members observed her closely. The questions were no longer just about the Constitution or the economy. They were about *her*.

"Why civil services, Miss Aarti?" one member asked, peering over his glasses.

She paused. She didn't reach for a memorized answer about "serving the nation." She spoke from the heart of the girl who had watched the floods from a village courtyard.

"Because I come from a village where decisions are always made *for* people, usually without their input. I want to be in a position where those decisions are made *with* people kept in mind."

There was no performance. No rehearsed drama.

Just a clarity that filled the room. When she stepped out into the Delhi sun, she did not analyze her performance. She simply exhaled.

The result day arrived with the usual chaos as we see. The website crashed. Messages flooded her phone. Her heart raced until it felt like it would burst.

When the PDF finally opened, she scrolled slowly, her eyes blurring.

And then, there it was. Her name. Her rank.

For a moment, the entire world stilled. Then, the dam broke and there was all water. It wasn't a celebration; it was a release.

She called home. Her father picked up on the first ring.

“Bauji...” she said, her voice thick.

He didn't let her finish. “*Ho gaya?* Did it happen?”

“Yes.”

There was a long, heavy silence on the other end of the line. Then, quietly, came the words she never thought she would hear:

“*Hum galat the.* We were wrong.”

It wasn't a dramatic apology, but it was enough. It was the sound of a wall crumbling.

Years later, sitting in her own district office, Aarti saw a young girl waiting in the corridor. She was nervous, hopeful, and looked heartbreakingly familiar.

“Ma'am... I want to prepare for UPSC,” the girl whispered when she was called in.

Aarti looked at her, seeing the village and the “limits” in her eyes. She smiled.

“Prepare like a *Sadhvi*,” she said.

The girl looked confused, just as Aarti once had.

“Discipline without noise,” Aarti explained. “Effort without the fear of the result. And most importantly, don't leave the path just because it hurts. Because that is exactly when the work matters most.”

As the girl left the office with a new light in her eyes, Aarti sat back for a moment. She thought of the measuring of sugar in the tea.

THE PRICE OF LOVE

In places where ambition for daughters is still measured with a careful spoon, one girl's courage never remains her own. It travels.

It moves from one house to another, from one whisper to the next, until slowly, quietly, what felt like an impossible dream begins to feel like an inevitable reality in itself.

VIII

THE PRICE OF LOVE

For years, she believed she was many different women.

A different version of her appeared in every role she fulfilled, every expectation she carried, and every name she was given. Only later, in the quiet lucidity of hindsight, did she understand something much deeper. There had never been many versions. There had only ever been one, seen differently by others, shaped repeatedly by necessity, and named conveniently by a world that needed her to fit.

Grihalaxmi in the kitchen before the first light of sunrise. *Sushil* when she softened her voice to keep the peace. *Dharmapatni* when she stood as a silent pillar beside her husband. *Karyeshu Dasi* when her creative effort blurred into an endless loop of duty. *Matrishakti* when her very presence became a shelter for everyone but herself. *Samarthani* when she learned the bitter, cold strength of standing alone. *Sadhvi* when she finally chose a singular purpose over the comfort of approval.

Each name described what she *did*. None of them held who she *was*.

The world has always preferred simplicity. It reduces women into manageable forms it can recognize and rely upon the dependable daughter, the adjusting wife, the selfless mother,

the "strong woman" who is praised because she does not break under the weight.

Different words. Similar, heavy expectations.

To give. To adjust. To remain.

She had done all three, first willingly, with a heart full of hope; then unconsciously, as the years turned into a rhythm she no longer questioned.

Her days always began fresh before sunrise. In those brief, blue moments when the house was still and the air was cool, nothing asked anything of her to do. No roles required a performance. No voices demanded a response spontaneously. No expectations sat at the table waiting to be fed.

And in that stillness, a question had slowly taken shape:
Who am I when I am not being needed?

For a long time, she believed love meant constancy. To be available without a moment's pause for herself. To be dependable without a single question. To hold the entire world together without ever letting the strain show on her face. And she was valued for it. She was trusted because of it. She was relied on without a second thought.

But slowly, like a tide receding, something began to feel uneven. The more she held the world together, the less space remained for her outside of what she held. Love, as she had lived it, came with quiet, invisible conditions. They were not imposed suddenly with a shout, but reinforced over decades with a whisper.

To understand everyone without ever being truly understood.
To support every dream without the interruption of her own.
To continue moving without the grace of a pause.

Nothing about this life looked like loss from the outside. It looked like a success. It looked like a well run home.

Until she began to notice the quiet tally of what it had taken from her.

Time she never claimed for her own thoughts. Choices she delayed until they were no longer possible. Like parts of her soul she had learned to silence so they wouldn't disturb the harmony of the house. It wasn't dramatic. It wasn't visible to the naked eye.

It was just a quiet, persistent cost.

For years, she had not questioned the price. Because the world told her it was "strength." Because the people she loved called it "devotion."

But strength, when exercised without awareness, becomes a hollow habit. And habit, over time, becomes an identity that fits like a cage. That was the fundamental shift.

She realized she had not been *choosing* her life every morning; she had simply been *continuing* it.

The world often misunderstood and judged her. Her patience was misread as submission. Her silence was taken as total agreement. But she knew something else now. Strength is not always found in loud resistance or a slammed door.

Sometimes, the greatest power comes from the simple act of recognition, in noticing the exact point where you begin to disappear.

She did not walk away from her life. She did not abandon the people who relied on her.

Instead, she changed the way she stood within the space she occupied. She began to pause before offering an automatic "yes." She began to respond with her true thoughts, rather than a rehearsed script. She began to rest without feeling the need to provide an itemized explanation for her exhaustion.

Small changes. Almost hidden to a stranger, but they returned a piece of her soul to her.

The roles remained.

The responsibilities stayed on her shoulders.

But she no longer confused what she *did* with who she *was*.

For a long time, she believed she had to choose between care and self, between belonging to a family and maintaining her independence. But the truth was far simpler. She did not have to leave love behind to find herself. She had to stop losing herself inside the love.

She still cared deeply. She still showed up every day. She still held her world together with capable hands. But she no longer did it at the cost of disappearing into the shadows of her own home.

Because she had finally understood the most important lesson of all: **Love should not require absence.**

Sacrifice, when chosen freely, can hold a profound beauty and meaning. But when sacrifice is expected as a baseline to always do, it becomes nothing more than a silent surrender. She had lived that difference for years without naming it. Now, she could say it aloud.

Clarity did not change her life overnight. It was not a lightning bolt; it was the slow rising of the sun. It changed *how* she lived the life she already had. She was still everything she had always been, the daughter, the wife, the mother.

But now, she existed *within* those roles. She was no longer buried beneath them.

The next morning would come. The house would wake with its usual demands. Life would continue in its most familiar, rhythmic hum. Nothing on the outside would look different to the neighbors.

But something within her had finally settled into place. When she stepped into the light of the new day, she was no longer defined by the tasks that awaited her. She was grounded in the woman who was walking into them.

And in that quiet understanding, she saw it clearly: Love, when lived without awareness, asks for a price that is far too high. For years, she had paid it quietly, in time, in silence, in the slow erasure of herself.

Now, she chose this.

Not by leaving love, but by refusing to be the price of it.

Epilogue

Change rarely announces itself with a trumpet blast.

It never arrives with grand declarations or sudden revolutions. It appears quietly, in the pauses between sentences, in the questions asked at dinner, and in the small, unremarkable moments where something familiar begins to feel different.

Perhaps you see it in a daughter who speaks a little more freely, with a little less fear, than her mother once could.

Perhaps it is in a son who notices when his mother finally sits down, and instead of asking why the tea isn't ready, he asks how her day was.

Perhaps it is in your partner who learns, through slow and sometimes uncomfortable practice, that partnership is not "helping" his wife, it is the act of sharing the weight of the world they built together.

Nothing looks dramatic on the surface. And yet, everything is shifting beneath our feet.

The world you see today is not entirely the one that existed a generation ago. The air is different. The conversations have changed. And the world that will come next will not be the same as this one either.

Change is already in motion, it is uneven, it is incomplete, and it is sometimes fiercely resisted, but it is undeniably present.

The question is not whether change is happening.

The question is where you choose to stand within it.

In the many roles you carry, at home, at work, in the delicate web of your relationships, what have you accepted without ever asking *why*? What have you continued to do simply because it has always been done that way? And what, in the quiet corners of your heart, has it cost you?

Not all costs are visible to the world. Some are paid in lost time. Some are paid in a strategic silence. Some are paid in the slow, agonizing fading of a voice that once knew exactly what it wanted from life.

But change does not demand that you burn everything down and start again. Sometimes, it asks for something smaller, yet much more difficult.

A pause before you agree to something that drains you. A question where there was once a heavy assumption.

A choice made consciously, rather than one inherited from the past.

Times are changing. Not perfectly, certainly not completely. But they are changing. And perhaps the most meaningful change of all does not begin in the halls of power or the streets of society.

It begins within you.

It begins in the exact moment you recognize yourself, not as a role to be played, not as an expectation to be met, but as a person allowed to exist fully and vividly within the life you are living.

And once that recognition arrives, even if it comes quietly, like a whisper in the dark, something irreversible has begun.

THE PRICE OF LOVE

*She was never becoming someone new.
She was simply remembering who she had always been.*

Author's Note

When I first sat down to write this book, I genuinely believed I was writing about a collection of different women.

I thought I was documenting a woman in the kitchen before the first light of sunrise. A woman habitually lowering her voice in crowded rooms. A woman standing steady but unseen beside her husband. A woman holding an entire household together without ever being asked just how heavy the burden felt. I thought I was writing about a woman learning, step by painful step, to stand on her own, and another choosing a singular purpose even when it came at a staggering personal cost.

Each chapter felt like a distinct, separate life.

But somewhere along the way, as the stories began to breathe, I understood something much more honest. These were not different women at all.

They were different phases of the same woman, shaped by time, by societal roles, by crushing expectations, and more often than not, by a long, cultivated silence.

Across our homes, our cities, and our smallest villages, women are gifted names that describe only what they offer to others. *Grihalaxmi. Sushil. Dharmapatni. Matrishakti.*

Some of these names are meant to honor. Some are meant to quietly define limits. Most of them, however, capture only a tiny, convenient fragment of the whole. Because, behind

every title is a living, breathing person negotiating her place between love and expectation, between her responsibilities and herself, and between what is freely given... and what is simply never asked for.

This book was not written in a spirit of defiance against tradition. Nor is it a rejection of the beauty found in love or family. It is, instead, an attempt to look more closely at the architecture of our lives, at what we give, what is expected of us, and what we often give up without ever naming the loss.

I believe a woman can carry many roles and still not lose her soul within them.

If this book stays with you after you close the final page, I hope it does so quietly. I hope it settles in your mind not as an answer, but as a persistent question:

What parts of yourself have you offered so freely that you no longer even notice their absence? And were those parts ever truly meant to be the price you had to pay for love?

About The Author



Shreya Gupta is a writer and fashion designer, currently building her own resort wear brand Sweet & Spicy with focus on creative design and evocative storytelling. She completed her degree in Mass Communication and later pursued a postgraduate diploma in Garment Production, a journey that allowed her to weave together creativity, communication, and craft in her daily work.

A lifelong reader, Shreya has always been drawn to stories, both the ones written on paper and the ones lived in the quiet corners of the world. What started as a passion project two years ago gradually evolved into this intentional, heartfelt collection.

The Price of Love is rooted in the observations Shreya has carried over time, conversations overheard in passing, silences in the middle of rooms, and the subtle patterns of behavior that often go unquestioned in everyday life.

When she is not writing or designing, Shreya continues to find spark in the people around her, in ordinary moments of grace, and in the stories that exist just beneath the surface of the mundane. This is her first book.