MISSION KISMET

The Journey Between Karma and Choice

A Fiction Novel by

SHAILA ANDAR

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BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
www.BlueRoseONE.com
info@bluerosepublishers.com
+91 8882 898 898
+4407342408967

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Mission Kismet – Synopsis

Mission Kismet is a fantasy thriller – a story of passion, crime, redemption, and retribution.

Kismet finds the placidity of Destiny World boring. She is excitable and adventurous - traits that are unacceptable in the heavenly abode. She is sent to Earth so that she can observe a human as a case study and give a report. Depending on the report, she would graduate as a full-fledged Karma.

Kismet's first experience of Earthly life is in the company of Simi and Tanuj-Tanay (the Terrible Twins). These kids are always having a lot of fun, whereas she has to be on her best behavior. Life on Earth seems more exciting, so Kismet decides to stay. Obviously, she fails the test.

In the company of humans, she learns to use her intelligence rather than magic. Gradually, Kismet matures into a responsible young adult.

Then, the Conclave of Elders in Destiny World assign her an important mission – the slow and excruciating destruction of two cruel pedophiles.

The magical powers of the Karmas are too powerful. If used, these villains would die instantly. Their heinous crimes deserved worse.

Kismet is assigned the task of punishing them. If she succeeds, she will be deemed to have passed the Karma Exaltation Test.

Will Kismet accomplish her task? Will she prove her worth in Destiny World?

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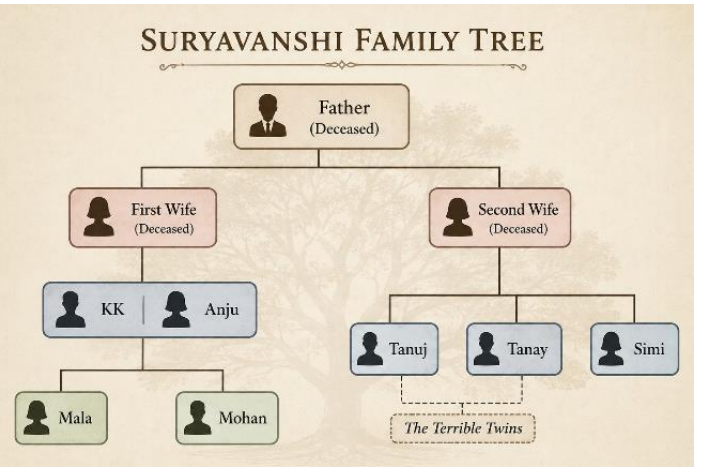
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Part 1

Why Kismet Chooses to Stay Back on Earth

Chapter 1

The Suryavanshi Family and Tara





Tara was a majestic fifteen-bedroom mansion on the outskirts of Pune, home to the Suryavanshi family for over eighty-five years. Generations of accumulated wealth had filled its rooms with antiques and jewels. Professional security was a necessity, and this included staff trained in martial arts. The study, known as the Den, housed an impressive collection of books.

The estate stretched beyond the horizon in every direction. Landscaped gardens wrapped around the mansion. Colourful flowerbeds flanked pathways lined with well-trimmed hedges and ornate old-style lamps at regular intervals. Tara's façade inspired awe in first-time visitors. Yet the warmth and kindness of the family made everyone feel at home.

Invitations to Tara were considered a status.

Chapter 2

The Award Ceremony

Simi Suryavanshi had just received the National Award for Best Film for her debut movie, *Ajay* — a Bollywood phenomenon that had dominated the year. Co-produced by her brother Tanay, the film had drawn unanimous praise, even from hardcore critics. The music by Strumming Beats had only added to its success. Simi accepted the award with grace and a quiet hint of pride. At twenty years of age, she was the youngest film producer in Bollywood.

After the ceremony, Simi walked out with the other awardees. As she descended the patio steps of Vigyan Bhavan towards the parking lot, her bodyguards Rana and Tej fell in on either side. Minutes later, her limousine was gliding through the landscaped grounds and out through the gates.

A large crowd had gathered outside, hoping to catch a glimpse of their favourite awardees. The moment Simi's car appeared, voices erupted — *"Simi, we love you!" "Congratulations, Simi!"* She instructed her driver to pull over. With Rana's assistance, she stepped out and turned to face the cheering crowd. Both guards swept the crowd with practised eyes, keeping everyone at a distance.

Simi's smile sent a ripple of joy through the watchers, who jostled and pressed forward. Reporters from several news agencies were already transmitting live footage. Simi raised her arm and waved the award above her head, and the crowd roared. Then, at the far edge, a group of teenagers burst firecrackers. Rana and Tej stiffened immediately.

As the sound faded, a young man stepped out of the crowd and stopped about fifteen feet away. The guards moved their hands to their revolvers. Rana leaned close and murmured that

it was time to leave. In the noise and excitement, Simi didn't hear him.

The young man reached into his trouser pocket and produced a lighter.

"I love you, Simi," he said, "but you are beyond my reach. I have brought a gift you will never forget. Goodbye, Simi."

Before anyone could move, he touched the flame to his own clothes. Within moments, fire engulfed him. He crumpled to the ground, writhing.

Simi stood frozen in shock. Rana and Tej didn't hesitate. They pulled her into the car and drove. Protecting her was their only duty, and their training had kicked in.

The crowd watched in stunned silence. No one moved to douse the flames. Shock had paralysed the crowd. The reporters, closest of all, kept their cameras rolling.

When the paralysis broke, there was complete chaos. People screamed and scattered in every direction. Even the seasoned journalists had gone pale. One finally thought to call for an ambulance. It was too late. The young man was already dead.

The cameras had never stopped. Every moment of the horrifying death had gone live, across every channel in India.

Chapter 3

Media Trial

"This is Nutan Chauhan (NC) of News24/7, reporting live from outside Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi, the venue of tonight's National Film Awards. The awardees were meant to be the story. Instead, the tragic death of a young man has overshadowed everything."

She continued, "Police have cordoned off the spot where the incident took place. Our cameras captured it all — a young man who declared his love for Simi Suryavanshi, and then took his own life. Was it worth it? That is the question no one here can stop asking."

"We have just learned that the youth was Manik Nayak, just twenty-two years old. He had recently joined a prestigious IT firm and shared an apartment in Hinjewadi, Pune with two colleagues. With me now is Sneha, a friend who travelled with Manik from Pune. Sneha, thank you for speaking with us."

NC: So, Sneha, you came all the way to Delhi just to see Simi?

Sneha: Honestly, I came along for the fun of it. I'd never been to Delhi. When Manik wouldn't stop talking about coming here to see Simi Suryavanshi, I just tagged along. I never imagined it would end like this.

NC: Tell us about Manik. What kind of person was he?

Sneha *(tearfully)*: He was wonderful. Quiet, but warm, liked by everyone, bosses and colleagues alike. People said he had real potential. His technical knowledge was outstanding, and he was a natural team player.

NC: And his personal life? Hobbies, relationships?

Sneha: As far as I know, he wasn't seeing anyone. His thing was singing. He had this incredible voice, almost like Arijit Singh. After a long day, one of us would always ask him to sing, just to unwind. He sang songs written by Simi. The only time he ever lost his temper was if someone criticised her work. We used to tease him about his crush on her.

NC: So, he was obsessed with her?

Sneha: I wouldn't say obsessed. But yeah, that was the one thing that set him off.

NC: Thank you, Sneha.

Turning back to the camera, Nutan continued, "Twenty-two years old. A promising career, a voice people loved, a life full of possibility: gone, in the most horrifying way imaginable. The question is not just *what* happened here tonight. It is *why*. We came to Vigyan Bhavan to bring you the joy of a celebration. We are leaving with footage none of us wanted to carry. And through all of this — where is Simi? Does she feel any remorse?"

At the same location, Pratham Samachar's news editor Sudesh was also reporting live.

"You have all watched this tragedy unfold in real time," he said, facing the camera. "I won't retrace what you've already seen. I'll only say that our entire team is shaken."

He paused and sighed. Then continued, "I've always believed that writers reveal something of themselves through their stories, often without meaning to. Simi's film, its characters, its music — it connected with audiences in a way Bollywood hadn't in years. She has been in the public eye since the release, and she has always come across as direct and honest. She is well respected in the industry, and her success has clearly been built on hard work, not shortcuts. The idea that she would engineer something this grotesque for publicity simply does not hold up."

"That said, she owes the public one answer: why did she leave so quickly? I believe we wait for the police before

drawing any conclusions. But that question, she will need to address."

Several other channels took a similar position, steering clear of conspiracy and waiting for facts. Manik's self-immolation remained the consuming story for days.

At that same hour, Simi's limousine was threading through the press, and fans gathered at the gates of the Leela Palace Hotel. Rana and Tej brought her up to her suite, where KK and Anju were already waiting. They had braced themselves — they knew what that sight must have done to her.

The moment Simi saw them, she walked straight into Anju's arms and broke down. "I didn't know him at all," she wept. "But everyone will blame me. I don't know what I've done to deserve this. I hate myself. I never want to make another film. I just want to die."

KK's cousin, Dr. Sunil Choudhary, their family physician, was always prepared. When even Anju's embrace couldn't calm her, he administered a mild sedative. Simi's sobs gradually quietened. Her maid Radha helped her change and get into bed. Anju told Radha to call them the moment she stirred. Then she and KK withdrew to their own suite, asking Sunil and KK's aide Bhave to join them.

A celebratory dinner had been planned for a small group of guests. KK cancelled it without hesitation. Sunil and Bhave offered to handle the messages, and with noon still ahead of them, there was time enough. They agreed to leave for Tara in the morning. They felt for Manik's family, genuinely. But Simi was their responsibility, and right now, she was their primary concern.

The following morning, Nutan Chauhan was back on air at eight, composed but grave. "Good morning, viewers — though it is not much of a good morning for Manik, whose death still feels utterly senseless. Our deepest condolences to his family."

She continued, "His death compels us to ask some difficult questions. Were Manik and Simi acquainted? If they were, had she made promises she never intended to keep? Or was Manik struggling with mental health — and this tragedy was

nobody's fault but circumstance? Could this have been a stunt that went catastrophically wrong, or is there something more deliberate behind it? And given the public nature of this death, will the CBI take over?"

"These questions will not go away. The nation is asking whether Simi — its newest darling, bears any responsibility for what happened outside Vigyan Bhavan."

Outside, the machinery had already spun into full motion. Reporters, influencers, and armchair commentators were dissecting every second of the footage. Podcasts were recorded, prime-time panels convened, self-proclaimed experts weighed in on Simi's culpability. Manik's family and the loss of a life went unmentioned in all of this.

Opinion split cleanly into three: those certain Simi was to blame, those certain she wasn't, and those content to hover in the middle and watch. But all of them, whatever their verdict, had already tried her — not for her films or her lyrics, but for her supposed role in one young man's death.

The award ceremony that was meant to mark Simi's success as a film-maker would now be inseparable from that image: a man lying on the ground consumed by fire.

Hard work and talent had lost the battle. Sensationalism had won.

Chapter 4

Going Back Twelve Years

Responsibility of the Suryavanshi household rested on KK, or Krishna Kumar Suryavanshi. He was the eldest at thirty-five, and at six feet five, was impossible to miss in any room. He held a Master's in Sustainable Energy from IIT Delhi, and had inherited his father's legacy – India's first indigenous solar panel manufacturing unit. KK was an extrovert. He moved easily through business and social circles in both Delhi and Mumbai.

His wife Anju, thirty-one when they met at a party, had her own IIT Delhi degree — a Master's in Biochemical Engineering and Biotechnology. Though petite, she was determined and quietly fierce. After graduating, she launched a company producing genetically altered flowers — vivid, perennial blooms that refused to wilt. The company supplied decorative arrangements for conferences, weddings, festivals, and large-scale events. She and KK married within six months of meeting. Eighteen months later, she gave birth to twins: Mala and Mohan.

Then came the twins — Tanuj and Tanay, eleven years old and incapable of sitting still. They planned their mischief with genuine precision and faced the consequences as a team. Students at Divinity Boarding School in Panchgani, they were home more often than not. The school was close enough to make weekend visits easy, which the rest of the household regarded as a mixed blessing.

Jayant Bhave was a category of his own. KK's aide and closest confidant, he was the only non-family member with a suite inside Tara itself: bedroom, living area, a permanent place

at the table and in every family conversation. He was thirty-five, devoted to KK, and treated by the household like family.

The rest of the staff lived in cottages on the grounds behind the mansion. Foremost among them was Chef Sadanand Kher, Sandy — fifty years old, solidly built man. He was the undisputed ruler of Tara's kitchen for the past eleven years. Rajeev, the butler and Ramaa, the housekeeper, were a couple in their forties, childless and quietly dependable, five years with the family.

Ratan, thirty, served as valet to the twins, who had promptly renamed him Rat and showed no signs of remorse. The twins loved and trusted Rat. Radha was Simi's personal maid. Two nannies looked after Mala and Mohan. Lata managed the soft furnishings. A rotating cast of junior staff handled the kitchen and general upkeep, with temporary help brought in from a nearby village whenever a party or festival demanded it.

Chapter 5

Family Bonding

Simi was the youngest of the Suryavanshi children — eight years old that May, just finished with Grade II at St. Mary's School for Girls in Panchgani. Schools had closed for summer, and she was home at Tara, where a large birthday party had been planned for the fifteenth. It never happened. Two weeks into the holidays, their parents (father and second wife) were killed in a car accident, and Tara fell into mourning

The nightmare came the first night. Simi woke up screaming, and Anju quietly arranged for Radha to sleep in her suite. The next day, Tanuj and Tanay arrived home from school. They took charge of her, filling the hours with tennis and chess and whatever else they could think of. It helped, until evening. The nightmare came back. This went on for over a week.

KK asked Sunil to come to Tara that weekend along with his wife Mehek and daughter Seema. After the greetings and the initial settling in, Sunil asked for a few minutes alone with Simi. She had known him since she was small, and she trusted him.

He asked about the nightmare. Simi thought for a moment, then said: "First I see myself walking along a beautiful, bright path. Then suddenly there's a tall dark shadow standing over me, and it pushes me. I keep falling into this abyss, and I can't stop. I know I'm going to die. I'm scared to fall asleep."

Sunil told her he knew exactly what would help, and that she would sleep well very soon.

He joined KK, Anju, and Bhave in the Den. "She's just a child," he said. "Losing them the way she did — it's bound to show up somewhere. I'd rather not give her anything

pharmaceutical. Chamomile tea at bedtime should be enough. Keep Radha in her room a few more nights, and call me any time, day or night, if anything changes."

The chamomile tea seemed to work. The nightmares loosened their grip, then stopped. KK and Anju breathed easy. The house, little by little, found its way back to noise: KK's toddlers saw to that. Mala and Mohan demanded constant supervision and gave back chaos in return, and somehow that was exactly what was needed. With two sets of twins underfoot — one pair eleven, the other two — Simi rarely had a moment to be alone with her grief.

Simi's eighth birthday was a small affair: close family, a handful of friends, fifteen people in all. She spent most of it in the company of Tanuj, Tanay, and Seema, and managed, despite everything, to have a reasonably cheerful day.

When the summer break ended, the three of them returned to their respective boardings and life at Tara settled back into its rhythms. Anju divided her time between her business and toddler twins. She would be dealing with emails, calls, and the steady demands of running a company. Or she would be spending time with Mala and Mohan, who were overactive even by toddler standards and required near-constant supervision.

Then the mid-term break arrived, and Simi came home with a request. "Can I learn Spanish? I've downloaded an app, but I'd like a proper teacher." Anju said yes without hesitation and passed the task to Bhave.

After some enquiries, Bhave found Miss Rosie Tellis. She was a retired languages teacher, thirty years in a girls' school, and highly recommended by everyone he asked. She had a gentle but firm manner with young students, the kind that comes only from long practice. A cottage near the flower gardens was prepared for her two-month stay. She and Simi took to each other immediately.

On mornings when Simi was at Tara, she gave two hours to Spanish, then sketched until lunch. At the end of the two months, Rosie reported that Simi had a flair for languages far

beyond her years, already quite fluent in French and Spanish, alongside English and Hindi.

The sketching had begun earlier, quietly. When Simi showed an interest in object drawing, Bhave had offered to teach her himself. Friday mornings became their time in the Den. He taught her to manage shading, tone, and depth — the techniques that give a sketch its professional finish. He noticed, without saying anything, that this wasn't casual. She had some purpose in mind. But she was just eight years old, and he let it be. At that age, interests can change.

Meanwhile, KK had encouraged Anju to keep up her music once the children were back at school. She had trained in Hindustani classical singing, and the music room had become her private retreat. On mornings when Simi and Rosie were upstairs with Spanish, Anju would sing until noon. Then Simi would come down, and the two of them would have lunch together, just the two of them, by habit and by preference.

Once Bhave was satisfied that Simi had a solid grounding in drawing techniques, he left her to choose her own projects. From then on, whenever she was home, she spent her mornings in the music room with Anju — one sketching, one singing, neither intruding on the other. Three or four hours would pass without either of them noticing. A quiet, unhurried bond grew between them, built on mutual trust. Anju had become, without any formal announcement, the mother-figure in Simi's life.

KK was usually home on weekends when he wasn't travelling. The family would gather for board games or pile into the car for a drive down to their farmhouse in Lonavala. He felt the children were too young for social media, so there were no laptops or phones — just the ordinary pleasures of childhood.

Shortly before Simi's ninth birthday, Anju noticed something shift. Instead of sketching or reading, Simi was spending her mornings bent over pages of writing. This project was closely guarded, covered whenever anyone came near, shown to no one, not even Rosie. Anju watched but said nothing. It would be some time before she understood what she had been witnessing.

Chapter 6

Guests Arrive at Tara

Simi turned nine on the fifteenth of May, and her birthday had always meant a full house — cousins, friends, whole families arriving together. Bhave had driven the three children home on the first, and Anju and the toddlers were waiting in the living room when they pulled in.

KK ran a disciplined table. Anyone not down for breakfast by nine ate in the kitchen, not the dining room. On the second of May, the twins slept in and arrived at ten, heading straight for the kitchen without any apparent guilt.

They were nearly twelve now, and boarding school had done nothing to dim their appetite for mischief. If anything, it had sharpened their technique. Lata, carrying some linen, spotted them in the passage and quietly found somewhere else to be.

Sandy, however, was delighted. Enthusiastic eaters were his favourite kind of people, and he had put together a substantial protein-rich breakfast specially for the twins. The usual first-morning-home ritual was well established: the boys would eat as though they'd been rationed for months, deliver their verdict on the school mess, and fill the kitchen with noise and laughter. Today, though, something was off. They worked through the food quickly and without comment, frowning at their plates.

"What's with you two?" Sandy asked. "Eggs glued your tongues? Tell good old Sandy — all will be well." Tanuj, elder by two minutes and spokesman by unspoken agreement, looked up. "Rat just told us that the Rajmata and Bade Raja are arriving on the sixth for Simi's birthday. Is it true?"

"It is," Sandy said. "I've already received a list of dishes to prepare specially for Her Majesty. But why should that bother you?"

Tanay answered before his brother could, and with considerably less diplomacy. "Because last time she was here, she spent the entire visit insulting Anju. Yes, she's royalty. Yes, she's Anju's aunt. That doesn't give her the right to be nasty."

Tanuj picked up in a quieter tone. "The Rajmata thinks KK isn't good enough for Anju. We heard her tell Anju that all his wealth means nothing if he isn't a Raja. She keeps telling Anju she married beneath herself." He paused. "If that's what she thinks, she has no business staying at Tara and expecting to be treated like a guest."

The boys had clearly been sitting on this since Rat told them. They were angry on Anju's behalf, but also on KK's, on everyone's, by extension, since an insult to the household was an insult to all of them.

Sandy considered the situation, then produced the Tiramisu that had been set aside as lunch dessert. It was an act of both generosity and strategy. The boys needed to arrive at the birthday in a manageable state of mind, and Sandy knew exactly what managed them best.

Unaware of the brewing trouble, Anju was in the music room, deep in Raag Malhar. Her melodious voice needed no accompaniment.

It was a morning she and Simi had both come to treasure. From tomorrow, guests would fill the house and the days would be busy and cheerful in a different way — but there would be no time for this treasured companionship.

At the corner table, Simi was writing, as she had been every morning for over a month now. Anju had never asked what it was. She had quietly observed, and quietly estimated: the file Simi kept locked in her bedroom drawer and brought down only to write must have held a hundred pages or more. Whatever it was, it was serious, and it was private. Anju respected both.

The sixth of May arrived with a convoy of guests. The Rajmata and the Bade Raja came first. Sunil, Mehek, and Seema followed from Mumbai. Anju's parents, Abhijit and Sheema Roy, had already settled in. Bhave received everyone at the door while the staff moved luggage to the designated rooms with the quiet efficiency of people who knew their work and needed no reminding. Lunch was long and warm, the table full of family news and Sandy's best efforts — which, as usual, were considerable.

Chapter 7

The Terrible Twins

A week had passed since the Rajmata arrived with Bade Raja. They had been given the best suites in Tara. Bade Raja kept largely to himself, brooding and quiet. The Rajmata did not. Not a day had gone by without some complaint — about her suite, the food, the house, something! Nothing at Tara was ever quite right.

Lunch was over. The elders had retreated to rest. The toddlers were at play under their parents' watchful eyes. The staff were eating on the verandah outside the kitchen. The youngsters had gone off to play tennis, and the living room was quiet — or as quiet as Tara ever got. Peace, fractured only by the Rajmata's habitual murmuring, seemed to have settled over the house.

The tennis party returned shortly. Tanuj, Tanay, and two cousins took over a side table with a deck of cards. Simi and Seema settled at the next table with a jigsaw puzzle. On the sofas nearby, half-hidden by heavy drapes, the Rajmata and Anju were talking — or rather, the Rajmata was talking, and Anju was listening. The men were on the living room verandah.

The subject was familiar. Anju should never have married KK. A Raja named Vijendra had been asking after her. It wasn't too late — she was still young. All it would take was a divorce, and the Rajmata was confident she could bring Vijendra round. "At least your children would grow up as royals," she said.

Anju, who by nature was measured and slow to anger, had reached her limit. "KK is the most wonderful person I have ever known," she said. "I married him for love, and I have no intention of ever leaving him. I respect you because you are

family. But I will not allow anyone, including you, to speak about him in this way, in his own home. I am asking you to stop."

The Rajmata had never heard Anju speak like that. She did what she always did when cornered: she found someone else to blame. The Suryavanshis, naturally, had corrupted her. Turned her into a small-minded nobody, just like themselves. And now this — answering back, like a person with no upbringing. She was deeply upset. She would take soup for dinner in her room. She had no desire to socialise with commoners.

She swept out of the room and went upstairs.

Simi and the twins had heard every word.

The Rajmata had made a serious miscalculation. She had just become a target!

The Rajmata was leaving on the twenty-first. She always stayed on a few days after the birthday, and those extra days followed a predictable pattern: a carefully constructed sob story, a request for money, and KK quietly complying because she was Anju's aunt. No one discussed it. Everyone knew.

After lunch, Sandy poured two coffees and called Rajeev out to the kitchen verandah. The junior staff were inside, busy with the dishes. Dinner preparations could wait. Sandy settled into his chair and, after a moment, chuckled to himself.

Rajeev raised an eyebrow.

"The Terrible Twins," Sandy said, by way of explanation. "I love those boys, commotion and all. And I'll tell you something — Simi is no innocent bystander. She's been in on every prank from the beginning. That child deserves some fun." He paused, cup halfway to his mouth. "I'm curious what they'll come up with this year."

Rajeev said, "I heard a rumour when I joined, something about a poisoning. Bhave told me during my induction that any new staff member must eat meat. Wouldn't say why. Is it something to do with the twins?"

Sandy laughed. "No, no — worse than poisoning. This was before your time. Before Lata, there was a young housemaid who changed the bedroom linen. Sweet enough girl, but completely convinced she was the next great singing star. She would sing through her entire shift — loudly, enthusiastically, and magnificently off-key. You could hear her the full length of the first floor."

Rajeev winced.

"The twins asked her, more than once, to work quietly. Barely polite about it, if I'm honest. She'd agree, forget within twenty minutes, and the whole performance would start again. Bedsheet to bedsheet, pillowcase to pillowcase — two hours of changing the linen was torture. The family and guests made a point of being downstairs before she started."

Sandy set down his cup. "Then one morning at breakfast, two of the junior cooks were grumbling about having to prepare a separate vegetarian meal for her. Why should she get special treatment, they said. The twins heard every word."

He smiled. "After breakfast, they went to find Simi. I'm certain she was part of the planning from that point. They would have gone upstairs — adults resting, staff at lunch, no one paying attention to the children. Perfect conditions to plan something."

Rajeev leaned forward.

"That afternoon, the family were all in the living room. Reading, chatting, a cricket match on the television. Nobody was watching the clock or counting heads. Then, without any warning, the passage between the staircase and the living room filled with a scream. Not a shout, a scream, like a banshee with a sore throat."

Sandy paused for effect.

"Everyone came running."

"The maid had finished her rounds upstairs and was coming down to the kitchen for tea, singing, as usual, at full volume." Sandy continued. " Someone had crept up behind her in the passage and stuffed a live moth into her open mouth mid-

song." He shook his head, still half-amused. "The poor girl was convinced she'd swallowed it alive. She came tearing into the kitchen screaming, and the kitchen staff, to their credit, laughed until they cried."

"Were the twins even slightly sorry?" Rajeev asked.

"Not remotely. I found them in the living room rolling on the floor. When I tried to scold them, Tanay told me — straight-faced — that at least she wouldn't sing again. Then they gave me a detailed account of how the moth had fluttered around inside her mouth, laughed all the way up the stairs, and closed the bedroom door behind them." Sandy paused.

"To be honest, everyone was grinning. We did feel for the girl, genuinely. I got her calmed down, KK gave her a decent payout, and she was released from duty. The singing problem resolved itself. KK hauled the twins into the Den afterwards and made clear there would be dire consequences for any repeat performance. The rest of that holiday was remarkably quiet."

Rajeev laughed, drained his cup, and went back to his duties. Sandy headed into the kitchen to start on dinner.

The twins were already there, stationed at the pastry tray with the focused dedication they brought to all important tasks. Sandy let them be and set about directing the junior staff. He was quietly lamenting that the Rajmata would miss the dinner he had planned — a genuine waste of good cooking — and instructed one of the juniors to poach tomatoes. Cream of Tomato Soup, to be served in her suite. Her Majesty's preference.

Two pairs of ears went up. Two pairs of eyes sparkled.

The pastry-binge stopped mid-bite. Something passed between Tanuj and Tanay — not a word, barely even a look. Then they were off the stools and moving, leaving their pastries half-eaten.

Simi was in the living room with Seema, halfway through a hand of Rummy. Tanuj appeared in the doorway and caught

her eye. One look at his expression and she knew. She made an excuse, put down her cards, and followed them upstairs.

On the staircase, they passed Radha. Simi smiled and told her, very kindly, to take a tea break — she didn't need anything just now. Radha, unsuspecting, headed back down to the kitchen.

The three of them shut the door to Simi's suite.

Whatever was about to happen to the Rajmata was already in motion.

Simi slipped back into the living room, apologised to Seema for the delay, and picked up her cards. The twins returned to the kitchen and resumed eating pastries with the innocent air of people who had simply gone for a walk. The kitchen was in its pre-dinner state of organised chaos — Sandy directing, junior staff filling serving dishes, everyone focused on their own tasks. Nobody was watching the twins.

Just inside the kitchen door stood the trolley used for suite service. On it sat a bowl of tomato soup, ready for the Rajmata.

The twins finished eating, brushed the pastry crumbs from their hands, and joined the others in the living room looking entirely angelic.

The full household had gathered — family, relatives, close friends, forty people in all. Among the recent arrivals was Anju's cousin Gulshan Rathore, a polite and quietly self-possessed nineteen-year-old studying architecture in Mumbai. When Sandy announced dinner, the living room emptied.

It was a good meal, long and chatty. Afterwards, the guests drifted back to the living room, where Bhave had arranged for a village vendor to set up and prepare fresh paan — customised to order, which kept everyone pleasantly occupied.

Then the scream!

It came from the direction of the staircase, sharp and unmistakable. Before anyone could react, the Rajmata's maid burst into the living room, gesturing wildly, her words tumbling over each other. The room pieced it together:

something was wrong upstairs. Someone was vomiting. The doctor was needed.

KK, Anju, Sunil, and Bhave followed her up immediately.

What Sunil found stopped him in the doorway. The Rajmata was doubled over in bed, vomiting blood!

He moved quickly. His emergency medical kit was in his luggage. Bhave went and retrieved it. Sunil steadied the maid first, speaking to her calmly until she was composed enough to assist him. Together they collected a sample of the vomit. He handed it to Bhave with instructions to get it tested immediately, then administered an antihistamine to stop the retching.

Sunil waited until the vomiting stopped, then made sure the Rajmata was sleeping before they went back downstairs. The living room had gone quiet. They told the guests what had happened, keeping the details brief. Bhave left immediately with the sample, driving to their trusted pathology lab. Sunil had already rung ahead, and a technician was waiting. Bhave described the symptoms, handed over the sample, and stayed for the results.

The festive mood of the afternoon had evaporated. Nothing like this had ever happened at Tara. Guests spoke in low voices, turning over possibilities. Food poisoning, perhaps? Sunil mentioned, almost in passing, that the Rajmata's tongue had been noticeably red — possibly a food colouring of some kind.

Then Bhave called. The sample contained traces of wax and reddish colouring agents.

KK, Anju, and Sunil withdrew to the Den. Sunil looked at KK. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" KK nodded. Anju had already reached the same conclusion. There was only one way those substances had reached the Rajmata's stomach!

"It appears to be an allergic reaction," Sunil said. "She'll be fine by tomorrow, I expect. And for what it's worth — crayons these days are made with child-safe materials." He paused. "Don't be too hard on the boys."

KK was quiet for a moment. "They're nearly twelve, Sunil. If I let this go, it won't stop here. One day it won't be crayons — it'll be something with real consequences. I need to deal with it now, while it's still just foolishness." He glanced up. "You know I don't shout."

Rajeev was sent to bring the twins to the Den.

They stood before KK, Anju, and Sunil and attempted, with limited success, to look innocent. KK let the silence sit for a moment before he spoke.

"The Rajmata has been ill since last night. Vomiting. We had the sample tested." He kept his voice level. "The results showed traces of wax and red colouring. Do you know anything about that?"

The boys said nothing.

"The only things in this house that contain both wax and red colouring are Simi's crayons. We conclude that someone crushed them into the Rajmata's tomato soup before it was sent up." He looked at them steadily. "The Rajmata is recovering. But people have died from allergic reactions to colouring agents — reactions that give no warning. If she had died, I would have had no choice but to call the police. Simi could have been sent to a juvenile remand home." He paused. "I'm going to ask you one more time. Did you know about this? Did Simi do it?"

The twins were not cruel — just creative, and occasionally unable to stop themselves. They hadn't wanted anyone to die. They certainly hadn't wanted Simi to take the blame. Tanuj spoke first.

"KK, it was us. We took the crayons from Simi's cupboard, crushed them, and mixed the powder into the soup ourselves. Simi was in the living room playing cards the whole time. She had nothing to do with it. It's entirely our fault."

KK did not raise his voice. He rarely did. But he held them with a look that was, in its own way, worse.

"In this family," he said, "we treat staff with respect — even the ones who sing atrociously. That is not negotiable." He

paused. "And you should understand something. The Rajmata is recovering, which is fortunate for everyone, including you. Had she been severely allergic to those chemicals, she could have died. And had that happened, I could not have protected you. Not even with everything I have. You would have faced the consequences yourselves."

The boys left the Den considerably quieter than they had entered it.

The following day, meals were subdued. The Rajmata was mending slowly in her suite, working through dal-khichdi in cautious increments. The rest of the household enjoyed Sandy's cooking with the mild guilt of people who knew they had no right to enjoy it quite so much.

The three co-conspirators moved through the house at low volume, radiating innocence. Simi, privately relieved that the twins had got off as lightly as they had, radiated it most of all.

Throughout the whole episode — the illness, the diagnosis, the quiet interrogation in the Den, the recovery — one person had been conspicuously unmoved. Bade Raja had not expressed concern, asked questions, or offered an opinion. He had lounged through it all with a book, as though his mother's violent illness and the commotion surrounding it were not his business. Nobody quite knew what to make of it.

Chapter 8

Kismet Zooms In

A pleasant fragrance of flowers and incense drifted through Destiny World. Karma moved through her chambers with unhurried grace, each step leaving a trail of diamond-bright stars on the air. From her place high in the heavens, she decided the fate of mankind — a role that demanded absolute fairness, absolute composure. Sentiment had no seat at her table. She was stoic, pragmatic, and perpetually placid.

Today, her forehead was creased!

Kismet was twelve years old and possessed of a mischievous streak that gave Karma genuine worry. To become a fully qualified Karma, the girl would need to pass stringent tests, and Karma was not entirely confident she was ready. She sighed. Well. Kismet would simply have to try her best.

She summoned the girl telepathically.

Kismet arrived, already excited. Going down to Earth sounded like an adventure, which was precisely what concerned Karma. "You have been assigned to a nine-year-old girl named Simi," she said, keeping her voice level. "Your task is to observe her — read her mind, listen to what she says, watch how she behaves with others. Take notes. At the end, you will propose a projected destiny for her. This must be done sensibly and without emotion." She paused. "I trust you know the drill."

"I know everything," Kismet said. "I know the instructions by rote. May I go?"

She was gone before Karma could answer.

Kismet arrived in Simi's suite at Tara. She had been told that human eyes could not perceive her, so she was free to look around without concealment. The living area of Simi's suite had peach-coloured walls and beautiful furniture, warm and a little grand. Simi was sitting across from two people, talking. Kismet studied them. They looked, she thought, a little like her own brother Fortune.

Fortune and Kismet worked well together, which was exactly why Karma kept them apart. When they were in the same place, mischief followed reliably. Fortune had learned to be careful; Kismet had not. Impulse was her natural state.

She hovered for a moment in Simi's living area, invisible and undecided. Then she drifted closer.

Simi, mid-sentence, looked up and shrieked.

She stared directly at Kismet. "Who are you? How did you get into my room?"

Tanuj and Tanay spun around and saw no one. "Who are you talking to?" Tanuj asked. "That girl," Simi said, pointing. "Right there."

"There's no one there, Simi."

Tanay stood up. "I think we all need a break. Let's meet after tea and sort out the plans then." The boys filed out before Simi could argue. The three of them had gathered to plan something special for KK and Anju's anniversary. Simi felt the meeting had been abandoned prematurely. She looked back toward where Kismet had been standing.

Nothing. She frowned. *Probably my imagination. But I could have sworn—*

The boys, meanwhile, had already reached the kitchen.

Kismet, for her part, had decided that invisibility was an excellent opportunity for entertainment. She moved between the terrace and the living area — not through the door, naturally, but through the glass. In and out. In and out. She was already bored, which, as Karma could have predicted, was when she became impossible.

Simi crossed the room toward the bookcase. Kismet stepped into her path.

Simi stopped, startled but not frightened. "Are you a guest here? Who are you?"

"Can you actually *see* me?" Kismet asked, visibly astonished. "*And* hear me?"

"Yes. Both. Who are you?"

"I'm Kismet. I've come down to Earth as a test. I'm supposed to observe you — your words, your actions, how you treat people — and decide your probable fate."

Simi looked at her for a moment. Then she doubled over laughing.

Kismet's first instinct was indignation. Then Simi's laughter became genuinely uncontrollable, and Kismet found herself giggling despite herself.

The door opened. Radha came in with a stack of folded laundry. "What's so funny, Simi ji?"

Simi pointed at Kismet. "Her."

Radha looked where she was pointing. Then she looked back at Simi with the careful expression of someone deciding whether to be concerned. "There's no one there. It's just the two of us."

Silence.

Simi understood. Radha couldn't see Kismet. She could. "I was laughing at something in my book," she said. Radha smiled, stacked the laundry in the wardrobe, and left.

Simi turned back to Kismet and nodded toward the mirror. "You see that long shiny thing…"

"I know what a mirror is," Kismet said. "It produces a laterally inverted reflection. In heaven, they teach us many things."

Simi reached out and tried to touch Kismet's arm. Her hand passed through nothing. She could see Kismet perfectly, could hear her — but there was no physical substance there at all.

"Stand in front of the mirror," Simi said.

"To see if I have a reflection?" Kismet raised an eyebrow. "I'm not a ghost. I'm a heavenly creature. Whether anyone sees me, my shadow, or my reflection is entirely my choice." But she was perplexed that Simi could see and hear her.

Kismet's mischievous streak, apparently ungovernable even in the course of official business, took over next. One moment she was reflected in the mirror. The next she wasn't. She kept this up until she grew bored of it, which took a while.

Simi watched, fascinated — and then a thought crept in. *Kismet would be incredibly useful for pranks. The three of us, with her help — we'd never get caught.*

The moment the thought formed, she noticed something alarming. Kismet's white clothes were darkening, shifting through blue-grey and brown, deepening with each word of the thought until, by the end, the dress was nearly black. Her brown eyes had darkened. Her brown hair looked black. Her lips had gone from pink to deep crimson.

Simi stared.

"Please don't think things like that," Kismet said, with more patience than might have been expected. "I've been assigned to you. That means I keep a record — every good thought, word, and action goes into one column; every bad one into another. Both affect your destiny." She paused. "I'm not supposed to tell you any of this. But since you can see me, you must carry a little magic of your own. So, I'm telling you."

Simi had half-suspected the whole thing was a prank engineered by the terrible twins. But even they couldn't change the colour of someone's eyes, hair, and clothing in real time based on unspoken thoughts. This was something else entirely. Unsettling, yes — and yet, inexplicably, she wasn't afraid. She felt, against all logic, as though she'd found a friend.

Whatever this is, I'll play along and see what happens.

"Yes," Kismet said aloud, reading the thought as it formed. "That's your best option. Besides, you don't have the power to stop me regardless."

"So, you can read everyone's thoughts?" Simi asked.

"Everyone's."

Simi considered this, then tried a different approach. "Would you like to try on some of my clothes? My cousin Seema and I swap things all the time, just for fun."

Kismet looked at her. "I can change the colour of whatever I'm wearing based on your thoughts. The clothes themselves are irrelevant."

Simi acknowledged the flaw in her logic with a shrug. "Worth a try."

When Radha came to call her for tea, Simi said she would be down shortly. She requested Kismet, "Please don't speak to me directly when others are around. If I answer, they'll think I've lost my mind."

Kismet agreed. As they headed downstairs, Simi asked, "Will anyone else be able to see or hear you? And if they think something bad — will you do anything to them?"

"No. I follow you, I observe you — your behaviour, and how others treat you. What happens to them is between them and their own assigned Karma. You are my test. Only you."

The rest of the evening passed quietly. The dinner commotion had settled, and the twins, still subdued after the Rajmata incident, were on their best behaviour.

High above, in Destiny World, Karma allowed herself a cautious moment of relief. Kismet's arrival at Tara had been — against all expectations — relatively peaceful. But it was early days. The fact that Simi could perceive Kismet at all was unusual and disturbing. Karma knew better than to mistake a peaceful beginning as a predictable outcome!

She would be watching closely.

Chapter 9

Simi's Tenth Birthday

The fifteenth of May was a date regular guests looked forward to all year. There was a ceremonial quality to Simi's birthday at Tara that the house seemed to put on naturally. This year, friends and eminent guests from Mumbai and Pune had been invited for the evening, with a fireworks display planned on the lawns to close the night. The Suryavanshis knew how to entertain, and they finished in style.

The morning was unhurried. Everyone slept in. Breakfast was a loose, meandering affair, conversations going wherever they liked. Afterwards, the elders retreated to conserve their energy. The children spread through the living room. There was a pleasant, expectant lull over the house.

The Rajmata was still sulking in her suite. The women in particular thought this made the atmosphere considerably more pleasant. Guests drifted through all morning to wish Simi, and she received each one with a beaming smile.

As the hours passed, the tempo gradually rose. Sandy was in his element. In his own words, he worked best when his arse was on fire. By mid-afternoon, the kitchen was at full roar.

By seven o'clock, the living room had filled with guests in their best outfits and finest jewellery. Even the Rajmata, sufficiently recovered, made an appearance.

Simi came downstairs with Anju and Seema. She wore a full-length blue dress trimmed with frills and tassels. Her hair was tied in a loose braid pinned with small diamond clips all the way down its length, with a single strand of diamonds at her throat. She descended the stairs with a composure that

seemed entirely too adult for a ten-year-old — until the pixie smile gave her away.

Sandy himself wheeled in the three-tiered birthday cake, waited while Simi cut it, and the room erupted. Then he retreated to his bastion to ensure dinner was ready on time.

Cake was distributed, guests gathered in clusters to eat and talk, and even the Rajmata softened slightly at the edges. The twins worked through their portions in focused silence. Drinks and starters followed.

The children moved out to the verandah, where Bhave had arranged games through an event management company. These activities were supervised, prized, and watched over by ground-guards stationed discreetly around the perimeter. The noise coming through the living room doors suggested everyone was having an excellent time.

An hour later they came back in, loud and hungry, just as Sandy announced dinner. The adults and teenagers moved to the dining room. The children were settled at a specially laid table in a corner of the living room, with maids to help and guards quietly standing around.

Dinner was everything Sandy had promised. The aromas and the presentation were equally good, and guests served themselves and regrouped into their earlier conversations. Outside, the servants were already arranging chairs on the verandah for the fireworks.

By half past ten, dinner was done. Everyone moved outside, children included. Meanwhile, the junior staff cleared the dining room. Sandy joined the group on the verandah.

The sky above Tara filled with light. Not fireworks but drones! Dozens of them, moving in formation, drawing shapes and patterns against the dark sky. The entire verandah went quiet for a moment, then erupted in a single, collective sound of wonder. This was indeed a surprise!

Bhave had outdone himself.

The first image was Simi cutting a cake. After that, the drones moved through shape after shape in quick succession

— firecrackers, candles, pastries, peacocks, phoenixes, a prowling tiger, a beach lined with palm trees, spirals, rockets climbing into nothing. Then, as a finale, the drones assembled slowly and precisely into the outline of Tara itself — the mansion rendered in light against the night sky, unmistakable to everyone standing beneath it. The verandah was silent for a long moment before the applause came.

By one in the morning, the guests who weren't staying at Tara had said their goodbyes. KK, Anju, and Bhave saw each of them off. Every member of staff — including the casual help brought in for the evening — had watched the drone display and sat down to their own special dinner. Simi's tenth birthday had been, by any measure, a great success.

Chapter 10

Post-Party Slowdown

The morning after the party, the usual eight o'clock routine was quietly abandoned. Nobody inclined to rise early, and even the junior cooks moved at half-speed, still talking about the drones. Sandy and Rajeev were on the kitchen verandah with their coffee.

Simi, however, was up.

She had finished her secret writing project a few days earlier but hadn't yet read back through the final chapter. She retrieved the file from the locked drawer, settled into the armchair, and read quickly, making corrections as she went. Radha was asleep in the servants' quarters. Simi was alone in the suite, except, of course, for Kismet.

When she reached the last page, Simi closed the file with a satisfied smile. She wanted Anju to be the first to read it. The problem was the house was still full of guests, and handing over a private file without someone noticing seemed impossible.

I'll go down before the others wake up and tuck it among the music sheets. Once the guests leave and Anju resumes her morning singing sessions, she'll open the drawer, find it, and be curious enough to read it.

Pleased with the plan, Simi slipped downstairs, followed by Kismet. She crossed the music room to the chest of drawers and was sliding the file into place when she turned and gave a startled shriek.

Bade Raja was standing near the easel in the corner, sketching.

He wasn't his usual brooding self. He looked up with a pleasant smile. "I wanted to draw in silence. I thought the others might come down for breakfast, and they do tend to be noisy." He gestured toward the easel. "Would you like to see?"

Relieved that he hadn't asked about the file, Simi went over. "Why have you pushed the easel into the corner? There's barely any light here."

"There was a lot of sunlight coming through the verandah door," he said, nodding toward it. "I shut it because it was too sunny."

He moved a little so that she could get a better look. Simi gasped.

It was a pencil sketch of her on the stairs, mid-descent, the previous evening, sketched with precision. It was beautiful.

"This is how you looked yesterday," Bade Raja said simply.

Simi wanted immediately to show everyone. He stopped her. "Too much praise makes me uncomfortable. Could you keep this between us for a little while? Tell the others once we've gone."

Kismet, invisible in the corner, observed the exchange without a word. Her senses were on full alert!

Simi agreed and left the music room smiling.

Guests filtered down gradually for breakfast. The house had a calm, unhurried feeling, a natural reaction after a celebration. Bade Raja joined the men at the dining table: KK, Bhave, Anju's father Abhijit, and Gulshan. Sunil had returned to Mumbai.

The conversation moved easily — Gulshan's advanced architecture course, educational choices, business, investment, alternative energy, politics, sports… They argued amiably and contradicted each other with visible enjoyment.

At a smaller table nearby, Simi sat with Seema and the twins, Radha helping alongside. Tanuj and Tanay had turned breakfast into a competition.

Seema watched them with the expression of someone much older. "You're thirteen. Why does it matter who finishes first? We're ten, and we don't behave like this."

Tanuj looked offended. "We don't pick at our food like teeny tiny chirpy chippy birds. We eat like men."

"You eat like juvenile delinquents."

Radha caught Simi's eye and gave a quiet, significant look toward the dining table. The men were well within earshot.

Simi took her cue and steered the conversation toward games. An animated debate followed on the subject of what to play after breakfast, eventually settling on tennis mixed doubles until lunchtime. Fortunately, the argument ended without casualties.

In the living room, Anju, Mehek, and Sheema had settled in after breakfast. They chatted amicably on various common topics of interest.

A while later, the Rajmata came down. The three women offered a collective good morning. The Rajmata responded with a "humph!" Conversation paused. Anju asked whether she would like some breakfast. "Oats with two sugars. Two toasts with marmalade." Ramaa sent a maid to fetch it, and the three women quietly resumed their coffee.

Once she had eaten, the Rajmata went upstairs to oversee her packing. She and Bade Raja were leaving in the morning. Sheema went up for her prayers. Mehek and Anju moved to the corner couch for some girl talk. Bhave disappeared into the Den.

KK, Abhijit, and Gulshan took their coffee out to the verandah, where a lively and entirely unresolvable argument about IPL cricket ensued. The dining table was cleared, and the staff went into the kitchen for their own breakfast.

Chapter 11

Mirrors and Perceptions

After two sets of tennis, the four of them came back to the kitchen thirsty and hungry. Sandy produced strawberry cupcakes and cranberry juice, and the subject of tennis was thoroughly re-examined over both.

Halfway through her cupcake, Simi remembered the file. She hadn't checked on it since hiding it that morning. She had the sudden urge to make sure it was still safely tucked among the music sheets.

She waited until Seema had finished snacking, then said casually, "I've got the full Harry Potter set in my room. You want to read the second one, right?" Seema agreed immediately. Once she was settled on the sofa with her book and clearly not going anywhere, Simi slipped back downstairs.

The living room appeared empty. The heavy drapes concealed Anju and Mehek from sight but not the sound of their voices. The twins had gone up to their rooms. The men's voices came across from the verandah.

Out there, Gulshan had been asking KK about solar panels — whether they could be viably installed on tall buildings, whether the economics worked. KK recommended several books from the Den on the subject. Gulshan noted the titles on his phone, excused himself, and started inside. He paused near the drapes to exchange a few words with Anju and Mehek on his way to the Den.

Simi, meanwhile, had come downstairs and was moving silently toward the music room. Kismet followed her, invisible as always. Simi slipped inside, went straight to the drawer, and found the file exactly where she had left it. She sighed in relief.

From where he stood, Gulshan had caught a flicker of movement. He turned, curious, but saw nothing.

Simi turned from the drawer — and found Bade Raja at the easel again. This time she wasn't startled. He beckoned her over. "Another portrait. Would you like to see?"

It was a close-up of her smiling face, eyes vivid and alive. Simi studied it for a moment. "These are extraordinary. May I keep them — both of them?"

"They're yours. Birthday gifts." He paused. "Though I am curious about something."

"What?"

"Your skin — I've tried to capture the soft texture in the sketch using shading. But I'm not sure I've got it right." He tilted his head slightly. "Come a little closer. The light in here is poor. I'd like to compare the portrait with your face properly. May I touch your cheek?"

Simi took a step toward him.

At that moment, someone came in from the living room.

The lights were off, and the figure was unrecognisable in the dimness — only its reflection caught in the wall mirror near the art table. A tall, dark shape. Looming.

It was exactly like the shadow from Simi's nightmares.

She screamed.

The shape seemed to shift toward her, and she screamed again, backing away. The sound brought everyone: KK and Abhijit from the verandah, Anju and Mehek from behind the drapes, Bhave from the doorway of the Den. They rushed into the music room.

Gulshan was standing near the art table, looking startled and bewildered. Simi was on the far side, backed against the easel, pointing at the mirror. "He's going to kill me. He'll kill me…"

Nobody saw Bade Raja lift the sketch from the easel and slip out through the verandah door. By the time the adults had gathered in the room, he was already past the tennis courts.

Anju went straight to Simi and pulled her close, rocking her gently, murmuring until the sobbing eased. KK gave Gulshan a piercing look.

"Shall we go to the Den?"

It was not a question. Whatever had sent Simi into that state, Gulshan had been the only other person in the room. KK intended to find out exactly what had happened.

Bhave offered to leave — it was a family matter, and he had no wish to intrude. KK gestured for him to stay.

The four men settled in the Den. In the living room, the twins and Seema had come downstairs hearing the screams. They were now standing with Sheema and Mehek, five worried faces looking for an explanation nobody could provide as yet. Anju steered Simi gently toward the stairs. "Come and rest. We can talk later."

KK closed the Den door and turned to Gulshan. He was keeping his temper carefully in check. "I think we deserve an explanation."

Gulshan looked genuinely confused. "I don't know what happened, KK. I was talking to Anju and Mehek in the living room when I thought I saw someone slip into the music room. I'd assumed all the children and the Rajmata were upstairs. You guys were on the verandah. The servants were in the kitchen. I was just curious. I went in to check. The room was dark; only the dim light above the musical instruments was on. The next instant Simi screamed. He shook his head. "She was pointing at the mirror. At my reflection. I don't understand it. I have never done anything to frighten her."

KK believed him. He had known Gulshan since childhood, and his instinct said clearly that this young man had not hurt Simi. But Simi was his priority, not Gulshan's feelings. "Will you do something for me? Stay in your suite until I've had a

chance to speak with her. I don't want her frightened again before I understand what happened."

Gulshan agreed, though with reluctance. *I've done nothing. And yet here I am.* He would follow KK's advice — but he needed, at some point, to speak with Simi himself.

He didn't get the chance to think further on it. As he crossed the living room, he felt the weight of the room on him — the children watching with open curiosity, the servants at the kitchen door wearing expressions that told their own story. Gulshan felt the negative aura around the room like an accusation. By the time he reached his room, he had made his decision. He began to pack.

In the Den, the three men sat with the same quiet confusion. All of them knew Gulshan. None of them could construct a version of events in which he had deliberately frightened a ten-year-old girl. Simi had never shown any fear of him before — she had always smiled, always greeted him warmly. Whatever had happened in that room, it had come from somewhere else. They hoped Anju would persuade her to talk.

An hour later, Gulshan reappeared in the Den doorway with his bag packed. He faced KK directly. "I don't want to add to the distress here. I think it's better if I go. Let me know when this is sorted out. I'll come back then. Right now, I think you need space to deal with it without my presence." KK nodded. Bhave called a cab, and Gulshan left.

Upstairs, Simi had grown quieter. Anju was in the armchair nearby, waiting. When Simi's breathing had settled and her eyes had lost their glassy look, Anju asked Radha to bring up some juice, then turned to her gently. "Can you tell me what happened? Why were you screaming?"

Simi was quiet for a moment. "It was the same shadow from my nightmares. I saw it in the mirror. I couldn't see the face clearly — but it was him. The one who pushes me into the valley."

Anju said nothing immediately. Although worried, she kept her expression calm.

By tea time, Simi had recovered enough to come downstairs. The mention of games helped. Sunil had returned from Mumbai during the afternoon and had already been briefed on the music room incident. After tea, KK, Bhave, and Sunil withdrew to the Den. Sheema, Mehek, and Anju settled in the living room. The children, left to themselves, found their game.

Lata had taken advantage of the lull to replace the heavy drapes around the sofas with new lacy, translucent curtains. From where the three women sat chatting, the doors to the Den and the music room were now visible.

The twins proposed another round of tennis. Fresh air and exercise would do Simi good, they reasoned, with the instinct of boys who solved most problems through sport. The girls agreed. All four went upstairs to change, the twins coming back down first, and together they headed toward the music room.

Kismet followed Simi silently throughout these events. She had observed Bade Raja slink off through the music room's verandah door at the first sign of trouble!

"Where are you off to?" Anju called.

"Tennis," Tanuj said.

Mehek, who had visited Tara many times but had somehow never entered the music room, looked up. "Why are you going through there?"

"It's the shortest route to the courts — through the verandah door."

Anju went still. There was something in that answer. She turned it over in her mind but couldn't quite put her finger on what it was.

In the Den, KK was walking Sunil through the incident. Simi had been genuinely terrified — he was certain of that. She had insisted that what she saw in the mirror was the same shadow that came to her in nightmares. "As a doctor," KK said, "what do you make of it? I don't think she was doing it for attention."

Sunil considered. "Neither do I. A child seeking attention finds many ways to do it. Simi's fear keeps returning to the same specific thing — this shadowy figure who means her harm. That's not the pattern of attention-seeking." He paused. "I wouldn't recommend a clinic. Chamomile tea at bedtime, Radha in her suite tonight. Let's see how she sleeps."

Simi slept without nightmares. She had Kismet for company, and she had Radha. Somehow that was reassuring.

At breakfast the following morning, the Rajmata drew Anju aside.

"I hear Simi was throwing a tantrum yesterday," she said. "You should have her seen by a psychiatrist. The girl is far too pampered. You'd do better to focus on your own children instead of someone else's hysterical child. Mark my words, that girl will ruin your life."

Anju felt the familiar heat rise. But the Rajmata was leaving in an hour, and some battles simply weren't worth fighting, especially on the last morning. She let it go.

The Rajmata and Bade Raja departed after breakfast. The household was relieved. Anju's parents stayed for lunch, then left with Bhave, who had business in Mumbai and offered to drive them. Sunil, Mehek, and Seema followed after dinner. The birthday season — eventful in more ways than anyone had planned — was finally drawing to a close.

The following morning, it was just the Suryavanshis at breakfast. Bhave had stayed on in Mumbai. KK had insisted he take a few days for himself as there was no urgent business matter to attend to. The twins had been quietly warned not to raise the music room incident in Simi's presence.

KK looked around the table. "What about Matheran?"

The children erupted. Going to Matheran meant horses, and horse riding was fun. Even Mala and Mohan caught the excitement, giggling at something they didn't fully understand but were determined to join in. KK and Anju exchanged a smile. Everyone scattered upstairs to pack.

The temporary staff had been paid off after the party. Tara would be quiet, properly quiet until the family returned for dinner on Friday.

Chapter 12

Discovering Talents

Tara was in motion by six on Monday morning. The new term was starting. Sandy had decided the children deserved a proper send-off breakfast, and the kitchen reflected his sentiments. There was considerable luggage to manage, so Bhave offered to take the twins while KK and Anju drove Simi to her school. The toddlers stayed behind with their nannies. Both cars left the grounds together.

For the next two hours, Tara settled down to a quiet, steady pace.

Then Sandy rallied the junior cooks for a simple lunch as KK, Anju, and Bhave were expected back by one. After lunch, KK and Bhave returned to the Den to work through papers for upcoming meetings. KK was on an advisory board for Indo-African trade initiatives. Anju spent an hour with the toddlers before turning to her own company paperwork.

Simi's file, tucked among the music sheets, remained undiscovered.

The following morning, after some time with the toddlers, KK and Bhave went back to the Den. Anju stood in the living room for a moment, thinking. *Just an hour of singing before I settle to work. With the monsoon coming, Raag Megh Malhar feels right.* She headed toward the music room.

She opened the drawer where the music sheets were kept and paused, looking perplexed. In the drawer was a file that hadn't been here before. Thick, heavy, easily a hundred pages. She lifted the cover.

The first page was blank except for a small note in Simi's handwriting:

To dear Anju. This is a story I have written from my imagination. I wanted you to see it before anyone else, just so I could say thank you for all the love you have showered on me. I will always love you. Hope you enjoy the story.

Anju stood very still for a moment. Her eyes moistened with emotion.

She hadn't expected Simi to notice. She was a child who had lost her parents and needed love. Anju had simply given it the way anyone would have. That a ten-year-old had not only noticed but had spent months creating something just to say thank you — she hadn't been prepared for that! She closed the drawer, left the music room, and settled on the sofa in the living room with the file in her lap.

She asked Ramaa for mid-morning tea. Then she began reading.

KK and Bhave passed the living room at intervals throughout the day — fetching a drink or collecting something from upstairs. Each time they saw Anju on the same sofa, bent over the same file, apparently unaware that time was passing. They assumed it was company business. She ran a sizeable operation; there was always something demanding attention. Neither of them disturbed her.

At one, they asked if she would join them for lunch on the verandah. She shook her head without looking up. The same at tea. By six, when they came out of the Den for the day, she was still there — though now she was on her phone. KK settled beside her. Bhave brought beers and handed one across.

Anju finally looked up. It was as if she had seen something unbelievable.

"Before she left for school," Anju said, "Simi put a file in the music room drawer. On top of my music sheets." She passed KK the first page.

He read it. Then he looked at Anju. "What's in it?"

"A novel." She paused, as if still processing it. "It's about a sixteen-year-old orphan boy, Ajay, who works his way across various countries. The research is extraordinary — the

description of the landscape, the languages, the food, the way people behave. She's captured all of it. The English is good, the story is genuinely interesting, and the whole thing is written with a maturity that is incredible for a ten-year-old."

She read them excerpts. The men listened in silence, and the silence said everything. "This deserves to be published," Bhave said eventually. KK and Anju agreed without hesitation. "She'll be home for mid-term break," KK said. "We'll talk to her then."

Anju had already called Rosie. "She knew Simi had a flair for languages — she'd seen her essays, heard her talk about books. But she had no idea about any of this. None of us did. Simi seems to have researched and written the novel on her own."

Chapter 13

Fomo

Simi woke at dawn to a pixie face peering down at her. She was startled. The face said, "Hi. I wasn't a dream. I exist — maybe in another dimension, but I'm very real. I'm your bestie Kismet, remember?" She pressed a finger to her lips and winked.

Simi lay there thinking. *After breakfast, I'm putting an end to this. She appears out of nowhere and keeps following me everywhere. I can see and hear her. If I tell anyone, they'll think I've lost my mind. I need to focus on my own life, not this. I wonder if Anju has read the file.*

Kismet, reading her mind, quietly moved to the dressing table stool and sat down. She too had a mission. She would observe. She would not interfere.

"I've been assigned to you," she said. "You can't wish me away. This is a test I have to pass before I'm declared a qualified Karma. I'll be around until I've determined what kind of future you deserve. Then I'll submit my report. You'll just have to deal with it. But I'll give you one concession – when others are in the room, I'll stay completely silent. I have no interest in making trouble for my case study." She gave Simi a placatory smile.

Simi went downstairs for breakfast. The twins fell into step on the landing, and the three of them arrived together with Kismet tagging along.

KK looked up. "Why don't you three sit at the table with us from now on?" They settled in. Kismet took the chair at the far end. The first five minutes passed in food-focused, famished silence. This was followed by an animated reconstruction of

school (teachers, classmates, incidents) delivered in bursts, in between mouthfuls.

The toddlers had already eaten and were on the carpet nearby with their nannies. KK and Anju watched the older three with quiet amusement. Kismet watched everything from her end of the table and said nothing, which Simi found deeply reassuring.

Then Tanay, a music fanatic, said, "Bruno Mars is GOAT."

Tanuj's mouth was full. He nodded.

KK frowned. "Who is a goat?"

"KK, GOAT is an acronym. Greatest Of All Time. Not the animal. *Duh.*"

"SPOFC, okay?"

Three blank faces.

"Speak Properly or Face Consequences. *Duh.*" Anju and Bhave were already smiling.

Tanay pushed back his chair. "Let's wind up. CWOT."

"Which is?"

"Complete Waste of Time. I'm referring to this conversation."

"SIHYUD? Good idea?"

Tanay stared at him. "What is *that?*"

"Shall I Hang You Upside Down? I'm politely asking for permission." KK was grinning now.

"I would like to be excused," Tanay said with great dignity.

Anju and Bhave were laughing openly. KK nodded magnanimously. The three children left the table. Kismet followed Simi upstairs. KK and Bhave went into the Den for a morning of online meetings. Anju opened her laptop. They were still smiling at the conversation that had just taken place.

Kismet's assessment so far: a close-knit family, genuine affection, no resentment or malice visible in anyone's thoughts. Admirable, but dull — until KK had started on Tanay. That had been fun.

"Come up to my suite," Simi said once they were on the landing. The twins followed, already sensing something was coming — she had that look.

They settled on the sofa facing her. "I have a secret," she said. "I've written a novel. Before the new term started, I hid the file on top of Anju's music sheets. I wanted her feedback before anyone else saw it. But she hasn't said anything since we came home for mid-term. Has she mentioned it to either of you?"

"Nothing," Tanay said. "What kind of novel? Please tell me it's not mushy."

"It's not mushy. It's about an orphan boy — his travels, his adventures across many countries. I researched stuff on the new laptop KK gifted me for my birthday. I need to know if the writing is mature enough to be published, or whether I need to revise it. Without feedback, I'm completely stuck. The silence is killing me."

Tanuj said reasonably, "You know how much Anju has on – a business, two small children, us. Maybe she hasn't had a chance to open the drawer yet. Give her some slack." Tanay added, "If she hasn't said anything by Friday dinner, show it to her yourself on Saturday morning."

That settled, the conversation drifted — and somehow arrived, as it often did, at the moth incident. The image of the housemaid tearing down the passage, screaming, set all three of them off. They reconstructed it in gleeful detail: the planning, the execution, the reactions, the chaos. Simi was enjoying the conversation as much as the boys.

Kismet saw her reactions. As the story progressed, her face grew still. By the time they reached the maid's anguished screaming, the off-white of her dress had deepened to brown, then to black. Her eyes darkened to something vicious. Her lips went deep maroon.

There was a pause. Simi looked up, saw the state Kismet was in, and turned to the twins. "Alright, that's enough. Your prank has gone on long enough. I'll tell KK if it continues. I know Kismet's your friend, and you've asked her to play some heavenly creature. But we don't keep secrets from each other." She paused. "Also, what part of physics makes clothes turn from white to black? We've done litmus paper, not *this*. How did you manage it? And why would you prank me? Aren't we still a team?"

The twins looked at each other, for once, genuinely baffled. "We don't have any friend called Kismet," Tanuj said slowly. "We haven't done anything. Are you sure you're not still half-asleep?"

They looked so genuinely confused that Simi found herself smiling. Kismet, reading the shift in the room, gradually returned to normal — or what passed for normal, in her case.

Simi turned toward the terrace door. "Kismet. My brothers and I don't keep secrets from each other. They're saying they don't know you. Please show yourself. Otherwise, they're going to think I'm losing my mind. As it is, most people think we youngsters are nuts."

Kismet shook her head and mouthed: *Not allowed. I'm here only for you.*

"Simi," Tanay said carefully, "do you need to rest? Maybe you dreamt all this, and it's still in your head. We genuinely don't know anyone called Kismet. Come on, let's plan KK-Anju's anniversary entertainment instead."

High above, in Destiny World, Karma sat very still. She hoped — she genuinely hoped — that Kismet would hold her impulsiveness. Invisibility was the first cardinal rule. Kismet was soft-hearted and young. *Please*, Karma thought. *Don't make too many mistakes. Or you'll never pass the Karma Exaltation Test.*

Kismet thought: *My being invisible to everyone except Simi could cause real problems for her. Maybe just the twins…*

At the terrace door, a strand of brown hair appeared from nowhere. Then a forehead. A face, assembling itself from the

top down — brow, cheekbones, chin, then the torso and limbs. The twins sat frozen, mouths gaping, watching a girl materialise in front of them from nothing!

Tanuj recovered first. He spun to Simi. "How did you *do* that? This is the best prank we've ever seen. And you called her Kismet — that's genius." Both boys were up off the sofa, already inventing mischievous scenarios, their minds running ahead to new staff members, unsuspecting guests…

"I cannot be used to hurt or frighten anyone," Kismet said flatly. "I am not here for your entertainment. I'm here to observe Simi and determine her future karma. That's all."

Simi said, "I didn't create her. She arrived in my room uninvited and claims to be a heavenly creature sent down to observe me so she can pass a test and become a qualified Karma. *Duh.* Who'd believe that?"

More laughter. Kismet found them irritating. She completely forgot about stoicism and pragmatism. Her dress flashed red, blue, green, yellow, white, purple. Her eye colour and nail polish cycled through each shade with it. Her hair changed from its usual short brown bob into long black tresses, then to mid-length green, then back to normal. All this happened in the space of about ten seconds.

The three children stared.

"Are you convinced?" Kismet said. "I've come from heaven. I can do magic. I'm not supposed to. Pretend I'm not here and go about your lives as normal. Observation. That's my job."

The twins needed a moment. Tanuj said eventually, "Let's just — let that idea settle. Board games till lunch?"

"I'm too worked up for board games," Simi said. "Let's dance. My roommate showed me this track — APT, by Rosé and Bruno Mars. The beat is brilliant." She found it on her playlist and hit play. The room filled with it.

When the track ended, Tanay had an idea. "I'll make up my own words and do it karaoke-style while we dance."



They agreed, and he launched in. Simi was already in full flow — hips rolling, arms flung wide, head thrown back — grinning at nothing in particular and clearly in her element. She slowed at the full-length mirror long enough to do an Egyptian-style sideways step. Tanuj lost it.

The beat was too good to hold out against. Within a minute, Tanuj was on the floor doing a smooth roll while Simi moonwalked past him, both of them with their heads lolling as though their necks had stopped working. Tanay kept up the karaoke, occasionally losing the words entirely.

Kismet watched from her corner and felt something unexpected: the urge to join in. Simi caught her eye and gestured — *come on* — and Kismet found herself on her feet, mirroring the moves. The two of them went around the room in copycat formation.

They danced through several more tracks. After almost an hour, Simi and the twins collapsed onto the sofas in a heap. Kismet sat down on a chair, not tired, not remotely sweaty, looking entirely unaffected. The children regarded this with unconcealed envy.

"We still haven't planned anything for the anniversary," Tanuj said when he had recovered enough to speak. "Properly this time. After lunch?"

Kismet said, "You should dance at the party. All three of you. You're brilliant."

Tanay sat up. "That is an excellent idea. Let's pick the track now and run through the moves after lunch." The other two agreed. It was nearly one. Without discussion, all three of them headed downstairs to check on lunch with Kismet in tow.

Simi was quiet during the walk down. *If Anju had read the story, why hasn't she said anything? Could it really be that bad?* Kismet, hearing her thoughts, gave a secret smile.

Lunch was already on the table when they arrived. Anju had just closed her laptop. The toddlers were in their high chairs, the nannies managing the considerable task of feeding them.

The twins dominated the meal with some more news from the new term — teachers, classmates, incidents from the hostel. They judiciously left out the pranks that would have alarmed Anju and presented a curated version that was still highly entertaining. Simi ate quietly. The boys didn't notice, but Anju did.

After lunch, she caught Simi at the door. "Come with me to the music room for a bit."

The boys settled at the chessboard. Anju and Simi went through, followed by the invisible Kismet.

Anju took the file from the drawer and set it on the table. "I've read it. All of it." She looked at Simi directly. "I am honoured that you dedicated this to me. It's a wonderful story, Simi — the plot, the characters, the shape of it. The maturity of the writing is amazing for your age. I've told KK. He's flying in from Delhi tonight and wants to discuss it with you. Our question is whether you want to publish now, or wait until you're older."

Simi didn't hesitate. "I'm just ten. Eighteen is a very long way away. I want to publish now. I already have the next story in my head."

Anju smiled. "That's what we hoped you'd say. Let's go through the details with KK and Bhave when they're home for

tea. After the toddlers have finished monopolising him, which should only take an hour or so, we can discuss in detail."

Simi rejoined the boys. Tanuj was in the late stages of checkmating Tanay, who was staring at the board with the expression of someone watching a slow disaster unfold. Anju went off upstairs to read.

Once the game had run its course — Tanay insisting on a post-mortem, Tanuj declining one — Simi suggested they go upstairs to settle on the party dance. She felt light. The file had been found, it had been read, and it was good. Kismet had gone undetected. Things, for once, seemed to be going smoothly.

Meanwhile, in Destiny World, Karma was worried. Kismet seemed to be mingling too much with humans. She recognized the early signs of impending disaster. She called for a meeting with the Elders.

Once the conclave had gathered, Karma bowed to Guru and greeted the others. She explained the situation– how Kismet was compelled to show herself because our case study could already perceive her presence. She needed advice.

There was a murmured discussion among the Elders for a few seconds. Then, Shwet-Karma asked permission to speak. When Guru nodded, she said, "My charge is a young man named Bade Raja. He is involved in criminal activities."

Guru spoke, "You have the powers to destroy him. Why do you need our permission?"

"Bade Raja's crimes are heinous, horrifying. Instant death would be too easy. The pain would be short. He deserves something slow and excruciatingly painful. I just thought of something – why not let Kismet mingle with humans? Maybe, in the future, we could use her help to punish Bade Raja."

Guru decreed, "Both Karma and Shwet-Karma will monitor Kismet's activities. We shall see how she progresses and then decide."

The conclave in Destiny World dispersed on this note.

Chapter 14

Struggles with Goals & Strategies

After dinner, Anju said, "KK, I have something important to discuss — but if you're tired, it can wait until tomorrow." For a fraction of a second, KK's face tightened. His first thought was the twins. Then he saw Anju's expression and relaxed. It wasn't a disaster.

Ramaa was asked to fetch Simi. Anju went to the music room to collect the file. KK went ahead to the Den.

Simi arrived with Kismet invisible behind her. KK and Anju were on the sofa, the file on the coffee table between them. Bhave was in the armchair at the far end of the room reading a book. Simi sat down and looked from one to the other, visibly nervous.

KK said, "Anju tells me you're a genius. That you've written something worth publishing." He let that sit for a moment. "How did this start?"

Anju gave Simi an encouraging smile. This was not an interrogation.

"I don't really know," Simi said. "The story just came. Tanuj showed me how to use AI for research — the countries, the details — and once I started looking into everything, I couldn't stop. What was meant to be a short story turned into a novel."

She paused. "You know how much fun we all had travelling when Papa and Mama were alive. I miss them at times. I just thought writing about travels would be fun."

A brief silence.

"I want it published." Simi sat forward. "Do you think people will like it? This is so exciting — I have to tell the twins…" She was half out of her seat.

"One moment," KK said, with a smile. "Do you have any other surprises we should know about? We'd rather hear them now than discover them later. Both of us believe in encouraging talent early. If there's anything else up your sleeve, this is the moment."

Simi's eyes flickered — just for an instant — toward Kismet, who was sitting right beside her facing KK and Anju. The adults followed her glance. Nothing there. They assumed she was simply fidgeting or embarrassed.

"You don't need to feel awkward," Anju said. "You're clearly a talented person, and you're not too young to have ambitions. Maybe we can help you hone those talents. Our parents encouraged us. That's why we are where we are at thirty. We want to do the same for you."

"Give me two minutes," Simi said. "There's something else upstairs." She was gone before KK could say a word.

She took the stairs two at a time, then paused on the landing and looked back. No Kismet. She felt a flicker of alarm — Kismet unsupervised in the Den, with KK and Anju and Bhave, felt like a variable she couldn't control! She grabbed the file and came back down faster than she'd gone up.

Nothing had happened. KK and Anju were talking quietly. Bhave had not moved from his book. Kismet looked thoughtful but said nothing. Simi relaxed and set the second file on the coffee table facing them and flipped it open.

She turned a page. "I've been sketching jewellery this last year. I want to start my own line of diamond jewellery when I grow up. These are the latest ones."

KK called Bhave over. The three of them leaned in, turning pages slowly. The designs were meticulous — labelled, categorised, organised into sections: Nature, Geometric, Funky. They moved through the first two in near-silence.

KK turned a few more pages. "This is well past the level of a hobby. You've categorised everything, labelled the collections. That's not just creativity — that's a serious organising mind."

Simi said, "I keep running into a particular problem. I want to show how the earrings look from every angle — but I can't work out how to do that on a flat page. How do architects show 3D structures in drawings?"

Bhave looked up. "There's software for that. I can teach you the basics. As for the novel — I have a friend, Swamy, who works in publishing. I'll reach out to him."

Simi felt the warmth of it settle over her. The story had taken months of hard work. The designs came more easily, like doodling, like an extension of thinking. But she was old enough to understand that turning sketches into actual jewellery would require craftsmen, expertise, hands that knew how to work with gems and precious metals. That was a long way off. For now, publishing a novel should suffice.

Kismet observed in silence. Karma, watching from above, allowed herself a moment of relief. Kismet had held her position to some extent. And what Kismet had seen — the trust, the encouragement, the way this household held each of its members — she had noted it all carefully. Whatever Simi's future held, it would be built on a solid foundation.

Chapter 15

Remembrance

The first practical hurdle was Simi's age — she was just ten. Bhave suggested a pen name for publishing the novel, and the jewellery line would take time to develop properly. But knowing that at least one project was moving forward was enough. Simi threw herself into just enjoying the remaining days of the break with the twins — and, of course, Kismet.

Christmas Eve arrived with the usual breakfast debate about how to fill the day. Tennis after the meal, dance practice before tea — that was the consensus. Tanay said, "Mixed doubles after breakfast, then?"

KK looked up. "Mixed doubles? Who's your fourth?"

Tanay realised his mistake immediately. He recovered with the speed of someone who had been covering for himself his entire life. "I meant the three of us — we'll rotate. Take turns." He fidgeted in his chair with studied casualness, hoping the subject would move on.

Simi rescued him. "Bhave uncle, have you been in touch with Swamy yet?"

Bhave looked at her eager face. "Already done. I'm meeting him after I drop you all at school in January. I haven't read the book myself, but if Anju says it's good, I trust her judgement. I am sure Swamy will consider it worth publishing."

The children were excused, and they rushed upstairs to change. KK and Bhave retreated to the Den. Anju sent the nannies to breakfast and settled on the living room carpet with the toddlers.

The three older children passed through shortly after. Tanuj was ahead with two racquets, Simi behind him with hers, Tanay trailing with a tote containing balls and face towels. As they crossed the music room, Simi paused near the art table. Tanuj was just ahead of her by the easel. She turned to check on Tanay and…

Simi went still.

Tanay, standing behind her, was reflected in the wall mirror as a tall, dim, shadowy shape. The full length of the art table was between them. Something about it stopped her cold.

She went pale.

"What's wrong?" Tanay asked. "You look like you're about to faint," Simi said they should find Anju.

Tanuj went to Anju and said, "Anju, Simi wants you to come to the music room."

Simi took a breath. "Since that day, everyone's assumed Gulshan hurt me. That he was the reason I screamed. But he wasn't. I was never scared of Gulshan. I've just realised that now — seeing Tanay's reflection in the same mirror, from the same distance." She looked at Anju. "Can I show you what actually happened?"

Anju nodded.

"Bade Raja and I were already in the room when Gulshan came in. Bade Raja had sketched a portrait of me. He wanted me to see it. I walked toward the easel. When I got close enough, he grabbed my elbow and tried to pull me closer in for a better look. I tried to free myself. His grip tightened, and it hurt. I was struggling to pull free when Gulshan came in through the living room door."

She pointed at the mirror. "The room was dim. I didn't recognise Gulshan's reflection. It looked like the shadow from my nightmares — dark, faceless, coming closer. I didn't understand what I was seeing, and I screamed. But it was never Gulshan. He was on the other side of the art table the whole time."

Anju was quiet for a moment. "Where did Bade Raja go? He was right next to you. And where is the sketch?"

They searched the room — drawers, shelves, the canvases stacked against the far wall. Behind the stack, leaning flat against the plaster, they found the portrait of Simi on the stairs. The close-up of her face was nowhere. They checked everything twice. Bade Raja had probably taken it with him.

Simi said, "I need to apologise to Gulshan. Everyone thought badly of him because of me. Can I ring him?" Anju offered her phone. The call went dead after a single ring. "He may be in the middle of something," Anju said. "We'll try again this evening."

Kismet had watched the whole exchange in silence. The twins had noticed her clothes darkening as the discussion progressed. The anger was not directed at anyone in the room, so they said nothing. When it was over, they all went to the tennis courts. Kismet, as she had increasingly become, was a quiet and unobtrusive presence.

Kismet was thinking – If Gulshan hadn't entered the music room just then…thank God he did!

Karma, watching from above, was satisfied. Kismet was performing well. The twins perceiving her remained an impulsive mistake. She would have to account for it eventually. But Simi's ability to see and hear Kismet from the very beginning was something else entirely. That had no explanation even in Destiny World.

Anju found KK in the Den after the others had gone outside. She sat beside him without speaking. He put the papers down. He knew that expression.

"Five minutes," he said. "Let me close out these last documents. Then we'll go upstairs. Bhave needs the Den." Anju waited in the living room until KK came out and gestured for her to follow.

Upstairs, he brought juice from the small refrigerator, and they sat together. Anju went through everything — the music

room reconstruction, what Simi had said, and the detail that had unlocked it all: Tanay's reflection, the distance, the mirror.

"We had it wrong from the beginning," she said. "We assumed it was Gulshan because he was the only one we found in the room. But Bade Raja had been there first. He was standing right next to her, close enough to grip her elbow. The length of the art table was between Gulshan and Simi."

KK said, "Then why was she pointing toward Gulshan?"

"She wasn't pointing at him. She was pointing at the mirror. At a reflection she didn't recognise in the dark. It could have been anyone standing in that doorway — it happened to be Gulshan." Anju paused. "She was also trying to pull away from Bade Raja's grip when it happened. She was already frightened. Gulshan's shadow probably just triggered her reaction."

KK turned this over. "Bade Raja left the room through the verandah door. He must have heard the screaming. He couldn't have gone far. Why didn't he come back?" He was quiet for a moment. "And why did Gulshan leave, if he knew he hadn't done anything?"

"We were all focused on Simi. He couldn't get a word in, and then the moment passed. I think he assumed she would explain herself in a day or two. We were the ones who decided not to push it. I didn't want to keep bringing it up in case it triggered the nightmares."

Anju looked at KK. "We owe him an apology. Not because we accused him — we didn't, not directly. But because months have passed and we haven't reached out. He may think we still hold it against him."

KK nodded. "I'll ring him. Simi's a child. He'll understand it wasn't her fault. The question is whether he'll understand ours."

Chapter 16

Living My Best Life!

Tennis had done its usual work on their appetites. The three of them thundered upstairs to change, then thundered back down again asking about lunch before they had fully arrived. Sandy, who ran the kitchen like a competition kitchen whenever the children were home, had already anticipated this.

Every meal was immaculate — beautifully presented, precisely seasoned, utterly wasted on people who ate as though they were racing a clock. Sandy didn't mind. He cooked for the love of it, and they ate for the love of it, and that was enough.

Lunch was noisy and cheerful. The toddlers were in their high chairs, the nannies managing the competing tasks of feeding them and stopping them from redecorating themselves with the food. KK and Bhave had a working lunch in the Den.

Anju ate with the children but was somewhere else entirely. She gave the occasional smile, enough to pass. Nobody noticed in the commotion — which was fortunate, because her thoughts were not cheerful.

Why did Bade Raja leave when Simi screamed? If he had nothing to hide, why not stay and help calm her down? Where is the close-up sketch? And why hide the other one behind the canvases?

The questions had been circling since the music room conversation. She pushed them aside for now. *At least we know Gulshan was innocent. I hope KK finds time to ring him. The silence must have stung.*

After lunch, the three children and Kismet migrated to the twins' suite. KK had recently installed a home theatre system

with a woofer in their rooms, rendering quiet afternoons a thing of the past. They set about building a playlist.

Kismet cleared her throat. They turned.

"Can we start with the same song as last time? I liked the beat. This time, could you teach me some more moves?"

The twins exchanged a glance. Tanuj said, with the careful tone of someone proposing a deal, "On one condition. We teach you the moves, and you do something magical while we dance." Kismet agreed gleefully.

"It's KK-Anju's anniversary today," Tanuj added. "We haven't wished them yet. They probably think we've forgotten. We're doing a surprise dance tonight, which we've been planning for some days."

They ran through the moves. Simi demonstrated hip rotations with exaggerated commitment. Kismet watched. Tanuj asked what she was planning to contribute. "Wait and see," she said, eyes full of mischief.

The music started.

What followed could only be described as four people — one of them technically from another dimension — dancing as though they had consumed too much sugar. Kismet matched them beat for beat, and then, mid-song, turned her own hair bright pink.

Simi gave her a thumbs up. Kismet blinked at her — just once.

Simi caught her reflection in the corner mirror and stopped dead. Her own hair had pink and gold streaks running through it.

The twins paused, stared, then carried on dancing with enormous grins. Kismet blinked again. Now it was orange with purple streaks. That finished everyone! They were laughing hard as they continued dancing.

In the chaos, Kismet quietly made both boys bald, with bright red mohawks running from crown to nape. Simi noticed first. The boys caught on when they walked past the mirror.

There was a brief moment of dismay, then they couldn't stop laughing either.

At four, they were hungry. Not wanting to be seen in their current state, they messaged Rat to leave a tea tray outside the door. They ate cakes and samosas and changed into the costumes they had been planning for days.

Then they turned to ask Kismet to fix their hair.

Kismet was gone.

They searched the entire suite. They called for her. Nothing. She had vanished, deliberately, and the hair remained exactly as she had left it — streaked on Simi, bald with mohawks on the twins. They showered. The colours did not budge. Obviously!

By six, they were dressed, crazy-haired, and out of options. They decided to go ahead anyway.

KK and Anju were in the living room with Sunil and family, Anju's parents, and Bhave. The three children came downstairs.

Seema spotted them first and dissolved into giggles. A ripple of alarmed expressions moved through the room. The children's courage wavered for a split second.

Then KK burst out laughing. Bhave grinned. Anju joined in. From the kitchen doorway, Sandy appeared, took one look, and retreated, holding his sides. Even Rajeev, Ramaa, and the nannies gave up their professional composure.

"Do you have any idea how ridiculous you look?" KK managed, reaching for his phone. "No, don't move — I need this on record." He took several photos while all three went red.

They considered abandoning the dance. But they had spent days practicing, and the hair was already a fait accompli, so they might as well.

Tanuj stepped forward. "Happy Anniversary, KK, Anju. We have a surprise for you."

KK murmured to no one in particular, "The hair was surprise enough."

Tanay hit play.

The first few seconds were met with polite, amused attention. Then the moves kicked in, and the mood shifted from amusement to admiration. They had practised well. The hair almost became part of the aesthetic.

Halfway through, Kismet reappeared, visible only to Simi and the twins, of course. Mid-routine, she caught Simi's hand and threw her into the air. A pirouette meant to last for five seconds lasted twenty, impossibly controlled, ending in a clean landing. The room erupted.

The dance had saved the evening. The hair was forgiven; or at least discussion deferred to a less festive moment.

At dinner, KK turned to Sunil. "Do you remember coming home from the mud-wrestling thing? We were expecting serious consequences, and Dad just couldn't stop laughing." They smiled at each other across the years. KK added, still grinning, "Monday they go back, and Tara gets her peace. I miss them when they're gone, but they can be genuinely exhausting at times."

Anju said nothing about the hair. The dancing had been wonderful, and they had clearly put in a lot of effort. The hair conversation could wait.

Chapter 17

Trouble in Both the Worlds!

Kismet was summoned to Karma's chambers without ceremony.

"This is disgraceful," Karma said. "You have been getting involved with your case study, breaking rules, and using your powers for personal entertainment. How do you expect to graduate if you cannot follow basic instructions?" She didn't wait for an answer. "I am sending you to Guru. Our Supreme Teacher will design a programme to address what has clearly become a serious problem with your attitude."

"But why should only humans get to have fun?" Kismet said. "I have to follow someone around, listen to their laughter, watch their enjoyment, and write *notes*. Do you have any idea how…"

"Stop. Arguing is not permitted in Destiny World, and you know that." Karma's expression didn't change. "Go to Guru. Now."

"I don't want to go back to being just Kismet."

"I don't want to hear another word. The other girls your age are taking their assignments seriously. You have potential, so don't waste it. Now go."

Kismet left. Karma sat for a moment after she had gone, turning the situation over. *She has grown fond of Simi and the twins. I could see it happening, and I couldn't stop it.* She sighed. *I hope it doesn't cost her too much.*

On her way to find Guru, Kismet ran into her brother Fortune. He was walking with the particular self-satisfaction

of someone who has recently done very well. He obviously wants to make sure everyone knows it.

He smirked. "Who do we have here? The great failure herself."

Kismet kept walking. He fell into step beside her. "Guru is not happy with you. Your next case study will definitely be harder, I'd imagine."

"Buzz off."

"I passed with flying colours," he called after her as she walked away. "You only coloured hair." He laughed at his own joke and disappeared.

Kismet was angry. She was also, if she was honest with herself, deflated. She had known from the beginning that getting personally involved would mean failing the test. She had done it anyway, and now here she was! She was bugged with herself, but beneath the frustration was something else: a quiet determination. She would do the next assignment properly.

On Earth, the consequences were more urgent.

Rat helped the twins shave off the mohawks. That part was straightforward enough. The baldness was a different problem. They were not looking forward to school, and Kismet had disappeared without a word, leaving them to manage the situation she had created.

In Simi's bedroom, a small committee had convened. Anju's maid was applying dark brown dye to Simi's streaks while Anju, Seema, and Mehek looked on. Mehek said, "Where exactly did you get these dyes, Simi? Some dyes could cause real damage. Next time you want to experiment with your hair, talk to Anju first. You have lovely tresses. Don't take chances with them." The real answer to where the dyes had come from was not available.

Sunday lunch was warm and relaxed. The hair crisis had been at least partially sorted; the children looked slightly normal in appearance. Bhave had left that morning for Mumbai. After the meal, the children went off to play. KK,

Anju, Sunil, and Mehek settled on the living room verandah in an unhurried way that defines a Sunday afternoon.

A maid came through the music room door carrying a bucket and mop. Anju watched her cross the verandah and a thought surfaced — Simi, the music room, Bade Raja. She went quiet. Mehek noticed the frown and raised an eyebrow.

Later, after KK and Sunil had moved to the Den, Anju suggested they go upstairs. Mehek and Anju sat on the terrace. Anju recounted the whole thing — Simi's account, Bade Raja's presence, the grip on the elbow, the sketches.

"He left through the verandah door," Mehek said, once Anju had finished. "That's the only explanation for why he wasn't there when you went in. And if he had nothing to hide, why go at all? He must have heard Simi screaming. He was right there." She paused. "And the sketch of her face — if he took it with him, it was deliberate. He didn't want evidence that he'd been in the room. He probably assumed a ten-year-old wouldn't remember the sequence clearly enough to contradict whatever story he told."

"That's exactly what I've been thinking," Anju said. "And meanwhile, Gulshan left under a cloud because we never sorted it out. KK has tried calling him several times. He's not answering. Could you ask Sunil to go and see him in Mumbai? He deserves better than a phone call at this point."

"I'll ask him," Mehek said. "Gulshan is a good person, and this has gone on long enough. But what about Bade Raja?"

Anju was quiet for a moment. "That's the harder question. If we confront him, he'll deny being in the room. It would be his word against Simi's. He's nineteen; she's ten. Most people would believe him by default."

She looked out at the garden, choosing her next words carefully. "I asked KK whether we should look into it further. He said Simi claims she wasn't harmed. His view is that without evidence, pursuing it creates more disruption than resolution. Bade Raja isn't due back until next year." She paused. "I just hope that's the end of it."

Chapter 18

Unresolved Issues

It was a typical Monday morning. Simi and the twins were dropped at their respective schools early, and KK and Bhave returned to Tara by lunchtime. They had an early flight to Delhi on Tuesday for the International Summit on the Use of AI for Environmental Innovations. The paperwork needed checking.

Anju was also travelling to Delhi for a meeting with Prakash Bhatt, her company's Vice President. Bhatt had recently negotiated a new long-term supply deal and wanted Anju to meet the client's Regional Manager before anything was finalised.

Simi was having an easy time of it. The dye had held, so the streaks were invisible. Several of her boarding friends had been at the May birthday party, so she returned to school on comfortable ground. No repercussions.

The twins were having a considerably less easy time. Through no fault of their own — a sentence that didn't often apply to them- their shaved heads caused an immediate sensation. Their roommate Sahil approached with an expression of theatrical grief. "Has someone died? Why are you both bald?"

They did not explain. Then one of the other boarders said they looked like The Rock, and the atmosphere changed entirely. Within the hour, the twins were strutting through the corridors doing their best Dwayne Johnson impression. The teasing had turned, quite satisfactorily, into admiration. Now bald was cool!

Life moved quickly for the next few days. KK, Anju, and Bhave returned from Delhi after three days. The children were

still at school. The toddlers provided their usual low-level domestic chaos, and Tara was otherwise quiet.

On Friday, KK tried Gulshan's number. He tried it several times. When it finally connected, an unfamiliar voice answered.

"Yes?"

"Could I speak with Gulshan?"

"There's no Gulshan on this number. I've just got this connection, and I keep getting calls asking for him. I don't know any Gulshan. Please stop calling."

The line went dead.

KK's best guess was that Gulshan had changed his number and simply forgotten to pass it on. He rang Sunil and explained. "Could you go to his apartment and talk to him? Invite him to Tara next weekend. Bring him yourself if you have the time." Sunil agreed. Anju, when KK told her, could only note that they didn't know Gulshan's friends well enough to try that route either.

Sunil drove to the address on Saturday morning. The flat was locked. He rang the neighbour's bell. A young man answered.

"Gulshan? He's vacated the flat."

Sunil asked about a forwarding address. The neighbour shrugged. Gulshan had left without a word to anyone. The flat owner was overseas. An agent handled the leases. He had the agent's number, if that helped.

Sitting in his car, Sunil called the agent.

"I'm Dr. Sunil Choudhary, a distant relative of Gulshan Rathore. I've been trying to reach him but seem to have an old number. Could you help me with his current contact details?"

"Mr. Gulshan went abroad," the agent said. "New job somewhere overseas, from what I understood. He vacated without notice and forfeited his deposit. Strange business. If you do track him down, would you mind telling him I'm still holding it?"

Sunil said he would, and rang off. He called KK and Anju with the news. The trail had gone cold.

Chapter 19

Simi Turns Sixteen

Summer had arrived, and Sandy was in his element. When the children were home, he could cook with the full confidence that everything would be eaten — enthusiastically, rapidly, and without ceremony. Simi, Tanuj, and Tanay had always lived to eat. KK's twins, Mala and Mohan, now nine, had inherited the same approach to mealtimes. Sandy was beaming.

In Simi's suite, Radha hummed to herself as she prepared the room. She had been Simi's maid for nine years now. She had watched a scrawny, quiet child grow into a composed and lovely young woman. On the fifteenth of May, Simi would turn sixteen. Nearly fifty guests were expected for the birthday dinner. The furniture would need rearranging — living and dining areas to be combined, making more space.

Anju had cleared her schedule for the coming weeks. Simi at home meant constant cheerful chatter and the kind of companionship she genuinely looked forward to. Mala and Mohan would compete for her attention. She smiled at the thought. Their energy was infectious, and she had always thrived on it.

The Terrible Twins — not quite so terrible these days — were expected a week later. Tanuj was doing an advanced course in Robotics and Electric Vehicles; Tanay was in hotel management. They shared a flat in Mumbai now, owned a car between them, and were driving down themselves.

Anju was in the living room, waiting and thinking. The Rajmata and Bade Raja hadn't come for Simi's birthday since the music room incident. Gulshan remained unreachable through every avenue they'd tried. KK came out of the Den and

joined her. They were halfway through a cold beer when Tara's peace ended!

Bhave's car on the drive, doors, voices, and then Simi in the living room talking at full speed about school, teachers, things that could wait and things that could not. The topics reserved for Anju alone — classmates, roommates, the particular texture of boarding-school life — would come later, as they always did, in private. That had been their unspoken arrangement for years.

After the initial greetings, Mala and Mohan were absorbed in the board games Bhave had brought them. Simi asked, before going upstairs to shower, "When are T&T getting here? I need their opinion on something." KK checked his phone. "Tanay just messaged. Tea time."

They arrived exactly at tea. The living room mood changed immediately — louder, faster, more physical. Mala and Mohan adored Simi, but they *vibrated* at the same frequency as the elder twins. Within minutes of arriving, Tanuj had both children hanging off his arms and was spinning in circles, the two of them screaming with delight.

The house filled gradually over the following days. Abhijit and Sheema arrived a week later for their customary two-month stay. Their relationship with Mala and Mohan was, as always, one of cheerful and mutual indulgence. Anju warned her children not to take advantage, warned her parents not to over-indulge, and was ignored by both parties without apology.

Sunil, Mehek, and Seema came the next day. Seema had just turned sixteen. She and Simi were inseparable — shared interests, shared sensibility, the easy companionship of two people who had grown up alongside each other. Seema's paintings had become genuinely striking. She was a brilliant artist. The two families gelled well. They had planned a trip together to Croatia the following summer.

The fifteenth began loosely with a buffet through the morning and afternoon, guests arriving and eating at their own pace. The kitchen concentrated its real energy on dinner. Sandy had been decorating the birthday cake for two days –

marine-themed, large, and frankly extraordinary. He knew it was among his best masterpieces.

At six, the family and guests gathered in the living room. Simi came downstairs in a full-length green gown, her mother's diamond and emerald necklace at her throat. She had her pleased smile. It was her day!

Sandy brought the cake in with a flourish. The room went quiet for a moment at the sight of it! Then someone said it was too beautiful to cut. Several people began taking photographs. Sandy received this with the dignity of a man who had expected nothing less.

Simi cut the cake, and the room gathered around her. The women admired the necklace; some of them had seen it on her mother. They told her she looked just like her. One aunt said, "You must miss her terribly." Simi said, "Anju has never let me miss her. Not for a single day."

When the cake had been distributed, KK stood up.

"I want to make an announcement. Some of you know that Simi has been writing fiction seriously for several years. Her first novel was published when she was ten, under the pen name Saima. She has since completed two more full-length novels. Now that she's sixteen, we're publishing them under her own name. The first will be out within the month. I'll send everyone the details when it's available, and I hope you'll read her book and send her your feedback. She deserves every bit of encouragement you can give her."

The room applauded. Sunil called for champagne. In a corner, a small cluster of guests murmured that rather a lot of fuss was being made of Simi, and that she hadn't seemed particularly moved about her poor mother. Someone else said it was surely better that she was getting on with her life. The observation was not entirely wrong, nor entirely kind.

The evening ended, as it always did at Tara, with drones.

Nearly seventy people, including staff, filled the house that night. Three were conspicuously absent: the Rajmata, Bade Raja, and Gulshan.

Chapter 20

Reunions

The sixteenth of May was, as always, a slow morning. Simi stayed in her suite as well.

"Wake up, sleepyhead."

"Leave me alone, Radha."

Someone giggled. "I'm not Radha. Though I could look like her in about a second, if you'd prefer."

Simi sat up.

A nineteen-year-old Kismet was standing by the bed, grinning. She had grown into someone genuinely striking, and she knew it.

"You've forgotten me already?" Kismet said.

Simi's questions came out in a rush: where had she been, how could she have just disappeared, did she have any idea what state she'd left their hair in… Kismet let her finish before answering.

"I was recalled. I broke every rule there was — letting you three see me, joining in, enjoying myself instead of observing. Karma summoned me back, and I had no choice but to go. I'm sorry I left without warning." She gave Simi her most placatory smile.

Simi relented. "For me it was fine. Radha dyed over the streaks, and nobody noticed. But the twins had their heads shaved at school. They were teased for days."

"I'll apologise to them myself."

"How have things been for you?"

Kismet sighed. "My brother passed his assignment and qualified as a full Karma. He was insufferable about it. I had to do a year-long refresher course with Guru, who was angry with me for the entire duration. Then they gave me a new case study — a boy whose behaviour was completely inconsistent. Nice one moment, awful the next. I couldn't get a proper read on him, and eventually I lost patience and started playing tricks on him." She paused. "He was terrified. It was very funny. I failed and was recalled again." She looked at Simi. "I haven't done anything useful in years."

Simi felt the familiar pull of sympathy. Being human, she thought, was actually easier; you were allowed to make mistakes. In Destiny World, there was apparently no such allowance. She decided, as she had the first time, to forgive her.

"Shall I call the twins? They're here for the summer."

Tanuj answered on the third ring, half asleep. Simi explained. He woke Tanay and called back. "Give us half an hour."

While they waited, Simi filled Kismet in on the years she'd missed — the twins in Mumbai, their flat, their courses, their trajectory from terrible twins to merely boisterous ones. KK had made his peace with their independence as long as the grades held and the trouble stayed manageable. They were nineteen. It was, more or less, up to them.

Radha appeared to check if Simi was awake. Simi asked her to have breakfast sent up as the twins were joining her and there was a lot to discuss. Radha nodded and left.

The twins arrived minutes later. They stopped in the doorway.

They had been expecting something like the Kismet they remembered — a slightly odd twelve-year-old. They stood there, wide-eyed, and stared at a beautiful nineteen-year-old with doe-like eyes and a charming, half-mischievous smile.

Simi rolled her eyes. Kismet, who was clearly not bothered by being stared at, grinned back at them.

"All is forgiven," Tanay said, with great magnanimity. "Everything. Unconditionally."

"You don't have much choice," Simi said.

"I know. Still."

They settled in and caught up. Kismet gave her account of the years between — the refresher course, the failed case study, Fortune's relentless gloating.

The breakfast trays arrived, and once Radha and the maid had set everything down and left, Simi raised the question of Seema.

"She doesn't know about Kismet. If I disappear to be with you, she'll notice."

"Go be with Seema," Tanay said immediately, with his large grin. "We'll keep Kismet company."

"I have to go anyway," Kismet said. "I only came to apologise. I've felt bad about leaving the way I did. I have to get back now. Probably another refresher course." She stood. "I'll come whenever I can." She swooshed out, as she had always done, in style.

Simi stopped the twins before they could leave the room.

"There's something I need to show you first." She unlocked a cabinet drawer and brought out several files, setting them on the coffee table. The boys picked one up each and began turning pages.

The jewellery designs left them speechless.

"I want to start my own diamond jewellery line," Simi said. "I'm underage. But you two are nineteen. Would one of you be willing to set it up in your name? You handle the business side while I design."

Tanuj looked up. "Have you spoken to KK? A real diamond jewellery business isn't a side project. It needs full attention. He'll say finish your education first."

Tanay was quiet for a moment. "I'll do it." He turned a few more pages. "I've been having doubts about hotel management

anyway. The course is fine — it's just not right for *me*. I'd rather talk to Bhave about the setup than KK. Bhave will give me information without the questions."

Tanuj wasn't convinced. Although Bhave was smart and accomplished, KK was the right person to consult. He was more experienced, pragmatic, and genuinely invested in their success. His knowledge was exactly what a venture like this needed.

Tanay and Simi argued back, in unison, that KK would tell them to wait several years. They were probably right.

Chapter 21

I Want It Now!

Patience had never featured prominently in the Suryavanshi genetic makeup.

Simi could barely contain herself. She showered, got ready, and put on music while she waited. Seema arrived with a racquet in hand. "What's the emergency? Aren't we playing tennis with the twins?"

Simi opened the file and spread it on the coffee table. Seema put the racquet down and leaned in. She turned pages slowly, rotating the file sideways and upside down, studying the designs from every angle.

"These are extraordinary," she said.

"I want to start a diamond jewellery line," Simi said. "Exclusive, high-end, my own designs. I want to launch a film production company as well. I've written a film script based on my first novel."

Seema looked at her. "Have you talked to KK and Anju?"

"Not yet. I showed them the designs when we discussed the novel. They were encouraging about that. I'm hoping they'll feel the same about this."

Seema's expression suggested she was not entirely convinced. "Talk to Anju first. Alone."

Simi nodded.

Downstairs, Bhave was in the Den with emails. KK, Anju, Sunil, and Mehek were in the living room. The conversation had drifted to the children — how quickly they'd grown, how different they all were.

Mehek said, "Seema has been battling with Sunil lately. She wants to drop everything and just paint. She's doing B.A. in English at the moment — not too demanding, she says, so she has time for her work. But she doesn't want to finish even that."

Sunil said, "I think she should be doing a science-based course and treating painting as a hobby."

KK nodded. "I agree. Hobbies are fine as side hustles. But everyone needs a proper education and financial independence. Building a livelihood through creative work alone takes years. The foundation has to come first."

On the last step of the staircase, Simi and Seema stopped. They had heard every word. They looked at each other. Simi made a decision: not now. Not KK, not today.

"Chess?" Seema said.

"Chess."

The twins were heading for the tennis courts and called out an invitation as they passed. The girls declined. They settled at the chessboard. Simi couldn't concentrate — KK's words were running in her mind on a loop, and she kept losing track of the position. KK watched her for a few minutes from across the room.

"What's the matter? You always play to win. Seema's about to checkmate you and you haven't noticed." He paused. "Sometimes you have to take risks for the right outcome. Don't play safe — go for it."

Simi looked up. She smiled and nodded. In that moment, her mind was made up. She would do this. She just needed to get Anju alone.

Lunch gave her the opening. In the general move toward the dining room, she fell back beside Anju and whispered, "I need to talk to you. Privately. After lunch?" Anju whispered back, "Let's go to your room once lunch is over."

After lunch, the household scattered — Tanuj steering Seema toward the upper terrace with the promise of music,

Tanay settling in with KK and Bhave to discuss books, Mehek going up for a siesta. Anju excused herself and slipped upstairs.

"I've written a film script based on my first novel," Simi said, before Anju had fully sat down. "I want to produce it. And I want to launch the jewellery line at the same time. Can I withdraw from Mama's money? It's mine."

Anju looked at her carefully. "Why the rush? Once you finish B.A., you'll be of age and can access everything you need. Why not speak to KK first? He may have suggestions worth hearing."

After Anju left, Simi sat with her thoughts. *One way or another, this needs to happen. I'll wait until Seema and her family have gone. Then I will take it up with KK.*

The Choudharys left that evening. Simi found her moment. "KK, can we talk?" He smiled and gestured toward the Den. He called through to Anju, who said she'd join them shortly.

Bhave and Tanay were at the far end of the Den among the bookshelves. KK and Simi took the sofas.

"Another novel?" KK said.

"A film. A script based on my first published novel. I want to produce it. The production company will have to be in Tanay's name, since I'm underage. He's agreed to help. And I want to launch the jewellery line at the same time. Can I have some of Mama's money?"

KK studied her for a moment. "Do you know the amount of initial capital needed for film production? It's substantial. And that's before marketing, publicity, and talent fees. Lead actors alone command extraordinary figures. This is one of the most competitive industries in the country. The established houses have infrastructure, relationships, and resources you'd be going up against from day one. Have you worked through any of this?"

"Mama left a fortune specifically for me. I can use it as capital. It's my money."

Across the room, Bhave looked up. Tanay went still.

KK kept his voice level. "I've been hoping you'll finish your B.A. in political science and consider the IAS. You have the mind for it, and the country would benefit from your talents. But if that's not what you want, choose something that fits what you're building. Change courses in June if you need to. The money isn't going anywhere."

"I don't need to study a load of irrelevant subjects. By the time I'm eighteen, I could have an established company. Tanay can register it in his name. We've planned it out. We just need the money."

"And Tanay's hotel management course?"

Tanay said, "I'll learn what I need from books. I'll focus on running the business while Simi handles the creative side. We've got it mapped out."

KK laughed, not unkindly. "You think you can learn to run a film production company from books?"

"Isn't that exactly what you're telling us to do? Learn by studying?"

Simi nodded. "We were hoping you'd guide us as we go."

"You mean supervise you through every mistake while running my own business. Yes, that sounds very manageable." His tone had sharpened. Bhave quietly retrieved juice from the small fridge and set glasses down. Nobody immediately reached for them.

KK took a breath. "I will not release any funds for this until both of you have finished your studies. The one concession I'll make: choose courses relevant to what you want to build. I'll arrange the admissions. But you complete this academic year first."

Simi said, "Tanay is nineteen. He can withdraw from his own fortune."

"He cannot. Not without my signature. Not until he's twenty-one." KK looked at them both steadily. "I am not the obstacle here. I am the reason you still have a fortune to argue about."

Tanay's voice rose. "Don't try to drive a wedge between us. I'm going to help Simi whether you support us or not. We just wanted your blessing, not a lecture!"

Simi said in a more persuasive tone, "We'll prove it to you, please."

"You're being foolish," KK said. His patience had run out. "We'll talk when you've come to your senses." He stood, left the Den, and went upstairs to the terrace.

Bhave found Anju on the verandah a few minutes later and told her what had happened. She went upstairs too.

KK looked at the door as she came in. "If they've sent you to negotiate, don't. I won't change my position."

"They didn't send me." She sat beside him. "And I agree with you. We both built our businesses on the back of actual education in the relevant fields."

He relaxed slightly. They sat in silence for a while.

"They're excited right now," Anju said eventually. "Let them research it properly. They'll find the obstacles themselves — this generation is smart. They'll come back with a more realistic picture. Give them a little time."

Meanwhile, in Destiny World, a refresher course was underway, and Kismet was not paying attention. As usual…

She had failed her second case study. She was back in class, surrounded by students at least four years younger than her. All of them were sitting in attentive silence while she stared through the clouds into another dimension. She could see the Den at Tara. She could see KK disappearing upstairs, looking like Guru did when he was truly fed up. She could see Simi and Tanay at the foot of the stairs, shaken and frustrated.

Poor things. They need help.

Through a haze, she heard her name. "Kismet. Kismet."

She blinked and looked up. Guru was watching her with the expression of a man exercising extraordinary patience.

"Where is your mind? This is the third time you have sat in this class. Can you answer the question I just asked?"

She couldn't. She hadn't heard it.

"What does it mean," Guru repeated carefully, "when I say there can be no physical, verbal, or empathetic connection between us and human beings?"

She knew the answer. She had always known the answer. She simply never followed it.

Instead, she swooshed off.

She appeared at the foot of the stairs at Tara just as Simi and Tanay were going upstairs in silence. "What was that about? I saw KK yelling. What happened?"

After the afternoon they'd had, they nearly jumped out of their skins. Tanay recovered first. "Come upstairs," he said. "We'll explain."

In Destiny World, Guru was thinking – *We have made the right decision. Kismet is perfect for the Earthly mission. She can mingle with the humans, and they don't find her too alien. Shwet-Karma was right – Kismet could be very useful later on.*

Chapter 22

Compromises

Simi and Tanay were still fuming when they found Tanuj in the boys' suite, quietly reading. He had missed the battle. They sat down and gave him the full account, clearly expecting solidarity.

Tanuj put his book down. "I think KK is right."

Flabbergasted silence!

"We're a proud family," he continued. "None of us has failed at anything significant. If this project fails — and film production is genuinely difficult — could either of you handle the criticism and bad publicity? Look at KK and Anju. Neither has sacrificed education for a shortcut."

Simi and Tanay both turned on him. Taking the adults' side against them – their own family was apparently against them!

Kismet, who had been sitting quietly in the corner, cleared her throat.

They looked at her.

"I know it's not my place," she said. "But I agree with Tanuj." She paused. "I've failed my test twice. I'm sitting in a refresher class for the third time, surrounded by students four years younger than me. And the reason is simple — I never focused during lectures. I dreamed through them. Fortune, who is every bit as mischievous as I am, passed on the first attempt because he decided to take it seriously. Without the foundational knowledge, I forget the basic rules exactly when I need them most. Every single time."

Simi looked at her for a moment. "Life doesn't seem fair anywhere, does it?" She instinctively moved to hug her, then

remembered — Kismet could be seen and heard, but not touched. She stopped herself with a rueful smile.

"Maybe we do need to research it properly first," she said. "Find out what we'd actually be getting into." She reached for the laptop. Tanay pulled his chair over. They used AI to gather the relevant information.

The following morning, they were down early, something the household noted with mild surprise. KK waited until breakfast was done. "When you're ready, come to the Den — all three of you. Let's talk properly."

They went. Kismet followed.

"Anju and I have been thinking," KK said. "If film production is genuinely what you want, there's a right way to pursue it. You don't have to abandon the dream. Instead, you have to prepare for it. Have you found anything useful in your research?"

Tanay said, "Two things. There's an International Institute of Gemmology in Mumbai. Simi could do their graduate course, which would give her the foundation for the jewellery business. And SIT Pune offers B.Sc. and M.Sc. programmes in filmmaking."

KK looked at them both and nodded slowly. "That's my kids." He meant it. "Do what makes you happy, but do it properly. No dropping out halfway. Follow it through to the end."

Simi crossed the room and sat beside him and hugged him. He let her.

"You're a new generation," he said. "You can go further than we did and get there faster. Make the most of that. As for which business to launch first — we'll decide that once you've both graduated. Agreed?" They agreed.

That afternoon, everyone piled into the car for Mumbai. Anju, Mala, and Mohan were dropped at the Choudhary residence. Seema joined the rest in the car. They stopped at SIT Pune to collect Tanay's admission forms on the way, then drove to the IIG for Simi's. They gathered information on the

graduate courses, did some shopping and headed to the twins' flat to eat and rest.

In the evening, they drove to Sunil and Mehek's to drop Seema, stayed the night, and returned to Tara the next morning.

Simi and Tanay went straight upstairs with their forms and read through every page. Simi opened the IIG website before she'd even put her bag down. Tanuj brought his book to the Den and asked KK if he might sit and read there.

KK looked up. "Tanuj, you don't need to ask. You're not a noisy kid anymore. The Den is yours whenever you want it."

Tanuj smiled and settled into the armchair.

Kismet had returned to Destiny World when the family drove to Mumbai. She was sitting alone and brooding.

She had been thinking about humans. They were strange, excitable, and frequently confusing, but undeniably interesting. She had been puzzling, in particular, over certain phrases. Simi had once said she was *on cloud nine*, which Kismet had initially taken literally and found geographically improbable.

On another occasion, Simi had looked thoroughly miserable and announced she was *in a rut*, which Kismet had somehow heard as *in rot era*, and had spent several minutes trying to work out what historical period that referred to.

The language made no consistent sense. The behaviour even less. And yet, after some serious thought, Kismet arrived at a conclusion that felt, for once, entirely sound.

The life of a human on Earth was far more interesting than the life of a Kismet in Destiny World.

Chapter 23

Hard Work Wins!

Tanuj had finished his Master's in robotics and was pursuing a PhD. His area of interest was drones for both entertainment and tactical uses. Tanay had lost time switching courses but finished a B.Sc. in filmmaking.

In his spare time, Tanay joined a band called Strumming Beats — five teenagers who spent their weekends doing bhajan clubbing. Kartik was the lead singer, Vishal the drummer, Radhika the female vocalist, Sonal on strings, and Tanay the self-taught guitarist. Being part of the band helped hone his skills.

Simi had completed two years of her gemmology graduate course and had found her footing in it. She was more interested in the study of gems themselves than the financial and commercial aspects. But KK and Bhave had been quietly filling that gap, talking to Simi and Tanay about business and finance whenever they were at Tara.

On Saturday, Simi and Seema left early to drive to Tara. Car rides on the expressway were the best conditions for sharing secrets.

Seema said, "Dad bugs me sometimes. He still thinks I should have done a science-based course. He doesn't say it directly. He knows my grades are good and my projects are strong. But at dinner he'll mention how some friend's child is thriving in biochemistry or petroleum technology. I know what he is implying."

"He'll change his mind when you've had your first exhibition and sold paintings," Simi said. "Remember what we

had to go through with KK? He came around. Uncle Sunil will too." She changed the subject. "How's Rakesh?"

Seema made a dismissive sound. "Over. He turned out to be lazy and careless about his work — always asking the rest of us to help him with projects. When we're too busy to, he sulks and makes nasty remarks. Nobody wants to spend time with him anymore. I was never serious about him anyway."

They took turns driving and reached Tara in time for lunch.

The twins arrived for tea, having stopped at Tanay's friend Kishore Mishra's place in Lonavala. Kishore's father Brijesh, was a film financier with considerable influence in Bollywood. The visit had been social. The boys did not raise the topic of business. The Mishras had been warm and welcoming, and the twins invited them to Simi's birthday before leaving.

Once home, the four of them gathered in Tanuj's room. He and Tanay had separate bedrooms now.

Simi said, "The Lonavala friend — did you get a sense of whether his father might actually help?"

"Today was just goodwill," Tanay said. "I didn't push it. But I've invited them to Tara. Let's see what happens over the birthday. I need a proper conversation with Brijesh. If it goes well, maybe he can connect us with an established production company for a tie-up."

The morning of the fifteenth, Simi found KK and Bhave in the living room.

"I need advice," she said, sitting down. "The screenplay is finished. I used AI to automate the initial conversion from the novel, then edited it myself. I managed it without missing a single lecture."

KK looked at Bhave. "Life's easier for this generation. They might have things to teach us." He turned back to Simi. "What do you need?"

"A reliable film financier. Kishore's father is exactly that — and they're coming for my birthday. I wanted your blessing to

use the occasion to get to know them better. Bhave could follow up at Brijesh's office in Mumbai the following week."

KK nodded. "Leave it with Bhave and me."

When the others came down for mid-morning tea, Simi relayed what KK had said. Tanay was pleased at the outcome so far. "He could have just dismissed us. Instead, he left the field open." Then he started moon-walking toward the music room door. Simi, Seema, and Tanuj looked at each other and followed – all four of them moon-danced their way through the music room, across the verandah, and onto the tennis courts.

The birthday party was spectacular, as Tara's parties tended to be. The Mishras arrived, and Brijesh turned out a batchmate of Bhave's cousin. The three men – KK, Bhave, and Brijesh — settled into easy conversation. It was a social occasion, and neither KK nor Bhave raised the film topic directly. But Bhave mentioned he might stop by Brijesh's office in Mumbai the following week. The foundation had been laid.

Green-Spice Productions was registered under Tanay and Simi's joint names. Bhave handled the legal formalities. Tanay brought on G. Alok, a popular assistant director who was looking for a full directorial role. He helped navigate the casting and negotiation process. They presented the complete proposal to Brijesh, who liked it and agreed to finance it.

Simi, meanwhile, was researching outdoor shoot locations and discovered there were specialist agencies in Mumbai managing exactly such logistics. She drove up, met several of them, shortlisted two, and brought Tanay in to close the deal.

They were learning, at speed, that AI could not do the legwork. Every meaningful step required physical presence, negotiation, and the careful accumulation of trust. It was exhausting. It was also, undeniably, exhilarating.

Seven months of it. Then *Ajay* was ready — scheduled for Diwali release, five songs, all lyrics by Simi. Tanay had brought Strumming Beats in for the music, persuading Kartik to sign on. The band wanted to earn enough for a world tour promoting bhajan clubbing. Their fusion style connected

immediately with audiences. The songs became hits on social media before the film had even been released.

Ajay was a success. The combination of AI and hard work had paid off.

Chapter 24

Back to the Present

The sedative Sunil had administered was still holding. Simi slept on while the others sat at Tara's dining table nibbling disinterestedly at their breakfast. Tanay was tense and silent. Tanuj was, as always, unreadable. KK and Bhave wore the expressions of men running calculations they couldn't finish. Anju looked distressed.

The image of Manik — the lighter, the flames, his form writhing on the ground — hadn't left any of them. Simi was only twenty years old. She had worked harder than most adults twice her age to make something extraordinary. She didn't deserve this.

Mala and Mohan ate quickly and excused themselves. They could feel the atmosphere without being able to name it. Sandy had promised them special goodies if they stayed out of the way. They went upstairs to their room and sat down to play Scrabble.

The adults moved to the living room without discussion, nobody wanting to be separate from the others. Rana and Tej hovered near the doorway, looking guilty in the way people who know the guilt isn't rational but can't quite shake it. KK told them to go eat something. They went into the kitchen.

Anju said, "She's been so consumed by the film this past year. If she'd known Manik at all, Tanay would have known. He'd have mentioned it. I can't make sense of any of it." She paused. "I'm worried the nightmares will come back. It's been years since she's had them. I just — she's been so well. So happy."

KK put his hand over hers. "She'll bounce back. She's young, and she's strong."

"Seeing someone die in front of her is a different kind of trauma." Anju steadied herself. "I'm sorry for his parents. Genuinely. But right now, my family is in pieces, and I feel helpless." She looked at Tanay. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Tanay said, in a tone that meant he wasn't. "I'm worried about Simi. Whatever Manik wanted, it was aimed at her. We need to understand why."

KK said, "Bhave and I have already made some enquiries. We have contacts in the government and in the police. We'll get to the bottom of it. In the meantime, when Simi wakes up, we need to keep her away from the news channels. The footage is everywhere. They're running it on a loop."

The intercom beeped. Tanuj pressed the button. Radha's voice: Simi is awake.

Anju was already on her feet. At the doorway, she turned — KK had risen to follow. "Let me go first," she said. He nodded.

Simi was sitting up in bed when Anju came in. The moment she saw her, she broke down. Radha brought water. Anju sat on the bed and held her, rocking her gently, saying nothing. Gradually the sobbing eased.

Radha settled quietly in the corner chair.

Simi said, "I swear I don't know him. I have no idea why he did it. And I know what people will be saying — no smoke without fire." She gave a hollow, exhausted laugh. "Except there was fire, and I had nothing to do with it."

"I know," Anju said. "You're never alone, Simi. There are always family or friends or the bodyguards around you. If you'd known him, someone would have known. What happened was his decision. Not yours."

Anju was quietly relieved that Simi was talking. It was the best possible sign. After a while, the tension in her shoulders had visibly dropped. Anju said, "The others are worried sick.

Tanay has been blaming himself since last night. He feels he should not have encouraged you to make the film. Then the incident wouldn't have happened. They want to see you. How are you feeling?"

"Give me fifteen minutes. I want to shower."

Anju came back downstairs with relief written clearly on her face. "She's alright. Fifteen minutes." The group sighed in relief.

Simi came down with a careful, tentative smile. They each got up and hugged her. Even Bhave, who was not ordinarily a demonstrative man, crossed the room and put his arms around her briefly and patted her shoulder. She ate a couple of sandwiches while everyone else had another round of tea, and then they all moved to the Den.

"I have one request," Simi said. "Don't protect me from the information. I'm not a child. I need to know what's being said."

KK told her steadily. The footage was running on repeat across every news channel. The CBI had been brought in. Through their contacts, some early information had come through. Manik had seen *Ajay* five times and had been a devoted fan. He had also, it appeared, been paid.

"He'd approached an agency in Mumbai, one of those operations that claims to help aspiring actors. The manager told him this was his opportunity: the TV cameras would be there, the whole country would be watching, he'd be offered film roles immediately after." KK paused.

"The clothes were provided by the agency. Forensics found traces of an accelerant. A cigarette lighter was enough to set them alight. The agency owner is in custody."

Simi shivered. "Was he uneducated? How could he have believed that?"

"He had a degree. He was employed. But they offered him a crore of rupees, and he was tempted. The CBI believes he didn't know about the accelerant — that he thought it was a performance, not a death sentence. And they believe the agency owner was acting on someone else's instructions. The

bigger question is who, and why. We should know more by tomorrow."

The Choudharys had come back to Tara with them after the award ceremony but had returned to Mumbai the following day. Just as KK finished speaking, Simi's phone lit up with Seema's name. She went upstairs to take the call.

When she came back down, her expression had changed.

"What happened?" Anju asked.

"I looked at my social media." She stood in the doorway, eyes bright with anger, tears on her cheeks. "Some channels are saying I arranged this. That it was a publicity stunt. That I *paid* him." Her voice was steady, but barely. "He *died*. Someone died. And they're saying I orchestrated it for attention. After everything I've built, after everything I've worked for — do they really think I need *that?*"

Nobody spoke for a moment.

"I can't hide forever," Simi said. "I'm a public figure. That's real, and it's not going to change. I'm furious right now — I'll admit that. But I'm not going to collapse, and I'm not going to let this define me. I'll redeem myself. I promise you that."

Tanuj said, "Simi. People say things that reflect their own minds, not the truth. The best response right now is silence. Let the adults handle this while the facts come in. That's not hiding — that's strategy."

Bhave said, "We're expecting more from the CBI contact tomorrow. Until then, let's each get on with what we need to do." It was practical advice, and it landed. The group slowly dispersed.

Chapter 25

Challenges in Your Path Decide the Future

Destiny World was not, Kismet had concluded, a happy place. Rules, regulations, stoicism — these were its foundational rules. Emotions were a liability. She had always known she was different from the others, but lately the difference felt less like a quirk and more like a sentence. Guru and Karma had long since stopped expecting her to pass. She knew it. She felt it.

She swooshed down to Tara.

Simi was on the terrace of her suite, scrolling through her phone with the expression of someone who knows they should stop and can't. The comments were ugly — some obscene, some blaming her directly for Manik's death. She had been celebrated for *Ajay* and its lyrics barely weeks ago. Now the same public had turned, and she was staring at it, unable to look away.

"Hey." Kismet settled on the ledge. "Why is my bestie so sad?"

Simi looked up. "Bestie. You disappear for months at a time, and that's what you call us?"

"Tell me everything. Maybe I can help."

Simi told her — the award, the ceremony, Manik, the footage that wouldn't stop playing on every channel. "He died saying it was for me," she said. "I had never met the man. I feel terrible for his family. And now I've decided — I'm done with filmmaking."

Kismet was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "You're tired of advice, aren't you? Everyone telling you what not to do."

"No one's telling me *how*. How to be brave. How to stand in the middle of all this and still work. This is a spectacular way to start a career, isn't it?" She paused. "Have you passed your test? Are you a qualified Karma now?"

Kismet shook her head. "They've more or less given up on me. Karma said I bonded too much with you and the twins the first time I was here. I haven't been the same since." She hesitated. "Could I stay for a few days? I think I need to collect my thoughts."

"Of course." Simi reached for her phone. "Let me message the twins."

They arrived within minutes, looking, as Kismet observed with a slow smile, considerably better than she had anticipated. It was the first time either of them had smiled in days.

"I was just saying I want to give up filmmaking," Simi said.

Tanuj looked at her. "So, you're going to let them win."

"I'm not a loser. I'm just horrified. A man *died*."

Tanay, who had been unusually quiet, said, "You're one of the bravest people I know. This is what celebrity looks like, apparently! One moment they worship you, next, they tear you down. That's not a reason to stop."

He leaned forward. "Tanuj and I have been thinking. KK is a government consultant. He's due at Davos on Monday as part of the Indian delegation for the Summit on World Peace. What if this wasn't about you at all? What if it was timed to put KK in crisis mode, distracted, unable to function at the Summit? Someone who wanted him out of the picture."

Tanuj said, "If that's true, then the whole thing was engineered. Let Bhave's contacts find out who the real target was before either of you makes any career decisions."

The four of them sat in silence for a while. Each was running their own version of the same thought – that the

world was frequently unfair. The question was what to do about it.

After a pause, Kismet said, **"Success is the best revenge. Work toward becoming indispensable. Keep your enemies close. You don't have to hurt them. Just watching you evolve will do the trick."**

Tanay sat up. Simi felt it too. The gloom hadn't lifted entirely, but beneath it something had steadied. She was going to write another screenplay. She was going to produce another film. Whoever had done this, whatever the reason, she was not going to let it be the end of her success story.

Bhave's CBI contact came through within days.

Manik's mother had been diagnosed with cervical cancer. The talent agency had offered to cover her surgery costs, in exchange for Manik accepting whatever role they gave him. In desperation, he had agreed. They had told him it was a prank, a trial run that would go viral and get him noticed. It was supposedly a comedy piece where he would get up, all fine and unhurt. They had provided the clothes, the air ticket, the lighter. He had been told to act well.

He had not known about the accelerant. Obviously!

The relief Simi and Tanay felt at this was complicated. It wasn't absolution exactly, but something closer to relief that they weren't responsible for Manik's death. Someone else was. These people had used Manik's love for his mother and his urgent need for a large amount of money to execute the plan.

The days that followed were easier. Life alternated between chess, tennis, music, and planning future projects. Kismet moved through the house as a cheerful invisible fourth, visible only to the three of them, lifting the atmosphere simply by her presence.

Simi was her usual active self. Anyone watching her could see it. Sandy stopped looking worried. Mala and Mohan, sensing the shift, immediately resumed their campaign of low-level disruptions. Under the current circumstances, KK considered this an excellent sign.

When Kismet returned to Destiny World, she knew what she was going to say.

The advice she had given Simi at Tara had been as much for herself as for them. She had come to a decision. It was going to alarm everyone. She was going to say it anyway.

She stood before Karma. "I want to be a human."

Karma stared at her. "Because you failed tests?"

"Because I have never been interested in becoming Karma. This life bores me. The humans face challenges and lead chaotic lives. But they have excitement and enjoyment too. I want that."

"The life of a human is not easy, Kismet. Most of them don't know what they want. It's a confusing, exhausting existence."

"I know," Kismet said. "That's exactly what I want."

Karma studied her for a long moment, then went to consult Guru.

She came back an hour later. Then two hours after that. By the second return, she had an answer.

"This is unprecedented, Kismet. Guru will allow it on conditions. You may live on Earth with the humans and keep your powers. But if you ever use them to intentionally harm someone on impulse, you lose them immediately and permanently. You also cannot travel between worlds on your own. If you need to come back, you contact me telepathically, and I bring you up." She paused. "Think carefully."

"I agree," Kismet said, without pausing.

She would be seen and heard and *felt* by everyone — a real person in the world, with friends and noise and difficulty and joy. She would not be able to return to Destiny World unless Karma brought her. She had considered this and decided it was a fair exchange.

That night, in their respective beds, Simi and Kismet dreamed.

Simi dreamed she was the most celebrated filmmaker in India, and that her jewellery line (not yet launched) was already coveted worldwide.

Kismet dreamed she was the most fully alive person on Earth, leading exactly the kind of life she had always wanted.

Both of them were smiling in their sleep.

Chapter 26

Kismet's Trials of Being Human!

Kismet arrived at Tara when the house had gone quiet. Simi, long accustomed to her sudden appearances, didn't flinch. She listened to the whole story — Karma, Guru, the conditions, the agreement — and then asked the obvious question.

"So, everyone can see and hear you now? Feel you?"

Kismet nodded, visibly delighted with herself.

Simi messaged the twins. They came over and heard it all again. Tanay asked about the powers.

"I keep them," Kismet said. "But I can only use them to help, never to harm. If I use them to hurt someone, even on an impulse, I lose them permanently."

"What about self-defence?" Simi said.

"That was the condition."

Tanay looked genuinely bereft. "No more changing colours? That was the best part." Kismet gave him a slow, sideways smile. He smiled back despite himself.

Tanuj, who had been thinking, said, "Where are you going to live?"

Tanay said, with theatrical innocence, "She could be my personal assistant. Day and night availability."

"Tanay will never change," Kismet said fondly.

Tanuj ignored his brother. "Simi, why not introduce her as your assistant? She can stay at Tara. Bhave's been here for years; there's already a precedent." He looked at Kismet.

"Tonight you stay in Simi's suite. Tomorrow, we tell KK and Anju we're driving to Lonavala. When we come back, you come with us. New member of the team. No questions."

The girls were up before anyone else. Simi slipped Kismet out through the music room verandah to go towards the tennis courts. "Stay there until you hear the car leaving and hop in." Kismet agreed. The three of them went down to breakfast, announced they were driving to Lonavala, and headed for the car.

In the cottage, Kismet prepared to follow.

She focused, reached for the familiar swoosh…nothing happened!

She stood there wondering what she should do next. She could hear the car on the drive. She was expected to *walk*. Like a human.

She was still processing this when a low rumbling sound broke the silence. She looked around. It happened again. Then she understood: it was her stomach. She was hungry. Nobody had thought to feed her. She was a human being. She had not eaten since — she wasn't entirely sure. It hadn't occurred to any of them. Including her.

She trotted after the car, catching it at the gate just as it turned onto the road.

They reached Lonavala in time for lunch. Kismet was famished by then in a way that felt urgent and slightly undignified. They ate at a restaurant on the main highway, visited Kishore to introduce Kismet as Simi's trusted aide, and drove back to Tara just in time for tea.

KK, Anju, and Bhave were in the living room. Mala and Mohan were in the kitchen munching cakes.

Simi brought Kismet forward. "This is Kismet, my indispensable assistant. She's been with me for some time. She had to vacate her rental in Mumbai, so I've asked her to stay at Tara. I'm sorry I didn't mention it earlier."

"Of course," KK said. Anju smiled.

"Welcome to Tara, Kismet. Ask Ramaa for anything you need. We're not formal here. Come and go as you like. The only place that's out of bounds unless you're invited is KK's Den." She gestured toward the sofa. "Please, sit down."

Kismet's stomach chose this precise moment to produce a sound that turned every head in the room.

Nobody managed to conceal their amusement. Ramaa quietly instructed a kitchen maid to bring sandwiches and cupcakes. Kismet ate with the focused intensity of someone discovering hunger for the first time!

Tanay leaned toward Simi and murmured, "She still doesn't know the other half of the basic food principle. What goes in has to come out." They both began coughing to cover their laughter. Tanuj gave Tanay a look that said: do not elaborate.

Ramaa reappeared. "Madam, the servants couldn't find any luggage in the car."

Simi said smoothly, "We were in a rush. Her things are still at my flat. She has everything she needs for tonight. I'll sort it out."

Ramaa nodded and withdrew. The evening continued without further incident. Tara settled into its familiar rhythms around its newest resident.

It was Kismet's first night on Earth as a human being. Tara was, all things considered, a very good place to begin.

Chapter 27

Every Day Brings New Lessons!

Tanuj kept the flat he and Tanay had shared in Mumbai. Simi bought a three-bedroom apartment within walking distance and vacated the PG. It was centrally located with easy access to both South Mumbai and the suburbs. The rental studio was not far off. Tanay moved into the second bedroom – home and office in one place.

The three of them — Simi, Tanay, and Kismet — based themselves there on weekdays and drove down to Tara most weekends. Pre-production on the second film kept them busy, but they made the effort for birthdays and anniversaries.

Kismet turned out to be genuinely useful. She found the concept of film production thrilling — not entirely unlike magic, she said. She settled into the rhythm of the work and the company of the trio easily, more easily than she had ever settled into anything in Destiny World. She had made the right decision. She was certain of it.

What she had not anticipated was the arguments.

Simi and Tanay could sustain a disagreement for an extraordinary length of time about something almost completely inconsequential — a location, a word choice, a lunch order.

Kismet had tried mediating once. Both of them had turned on her and told her, with some feeling, to stay out of it. She had taken the lesson to heart. After that, she offered opinions when asked and removed herself entirely when not asked. She went for walks, came back when the temperature had dropped, and kept her counsel.

During one such walk, she nearly collided with Tanuj on the pavement. He was heading toward the apartment.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Simi and Tanay are arguing about location shooting for a song. They've been at it for an hour, and neither of them wants my input. I decided a walk was more productive."

"Fair enough." He fell into step beside her. "Have you been to Krishna yet? Their South Indian filter kapi is excellent."

They walked to the restaurant and found a table. The coffee arrived in a steel tumbler sitting inside a steel bowl. Kismet stared at it.

"Do I drink from the tumbler or the bowl? Why are there two things for one coffee?"

Tanuj smiled at her confusion but didn't comment. He simply picked up her tumbler, poured some coffee into the bowl, waited a moment for it to cool, then held the bowl above his head and poured it back. The stream of coffee created a thick layer of foam at the top as it fell.

"That," he said, setting the tumbler down in front of her, "is how you drink South Indian kapi."

Kismet took a sip. It was aromatic and extraordinary. Another lesson — there was one every day.

The hardest lessons, she told him, were the safety ones. In Destiny World, you didn't think about fire or sharp edges or the thousand small ways the physical world was trying to injure you. Down here, Simi and Tanay had to stop her constantly. She was finding it slightly overwhelming.

Tanuj said, "You left a safe world where everything was familiar, and came here where nothing is. That takes real courage. If you managed that, you can manage the rest. We'll help you." He paused, with a small smile. "It'll cost you, though."

"Cost me what?"

"I'll tell you when the time comes."

They sat a while longer and drank their kapi in comfortable silence. The restaurant was loud around them, waiters calling orders, customers talking over each other...

"We should head back before they send out a search party," Tanuj said, signalling for the bill.

Kismet followed him out. As they reached the street, she asked, "What kind of party is a search party? Is there dancing? That actually sounds quite enjoyable."

Tanuj started laughing and couldn't stop. He was still laughing when they got into the lift. He was laughing as they walked into the flat. The duo looked up from whatever truce they had reached and looked at them questioningly.

Kismet shrugged and smiled. "I genuinely have no idea."

They drove to Tara that evening in good spirits.

Chapter 28

Ghosts from the Past

Kismet had been central to the completion of Simi and Tanay's second film. A full year of work, and she had contributed more than she'd expected to, without using magic even once. She had watched the two of them closely during that year: their determination, their honesty, the way they dealt with setbacks without flinching. She tried to emulate it. She was comfortable with them, easy in their company.

Tanuj was different. He was always polite, always helpful — and yet, in his presence, she felt something she couldn't name or explain. She left it alone.

Dharma, their second Hindi film, was premiering tonight. The lead stars and the wider cast were expected at the venue. After the show, a banquet had been arranged at one of Mumbai's better hotels for celebrity guests: industrialists, politicians, fellow filmmakers, actors, models, and of course eminent journalists. Rana and Tej, Simi's bodyguards, stayed close.

Outside the theatre as well as the hotel, reporters had gathered in numbers. Since New Delhi, since Manik's death, the public's appetite for anything involving Simi had grown. The news channels were running on overdrive.

The audience filed out of the theatre, talking. Reporters collected first impressions at the doors. The film was better than the first, they said. The acting was stronger, the songs extraordinary. A few thought it was a bit long. The consensus was – excellent movie.

The family was already at the hotel when Simi, Tanay, and Kismet arrived — KK, Anju, Bhave, Mala, Mohan, Sunil,

Mehek, Seema, Abhijit, and Sheema, gathered and waiting. Dinner was warm and celebratory. The guests were enjoying the delicious food and the ambience. When the guests began to leave, the family drifted toward the elevators to go up to their rooms. Tanay and Kismet stayed back to see off the lingering guests and sort things out with the hotel managers.

In the lobby, Simi and Seema chatted while they waited for the lift. Simi glanced around the room.

She stood frozen.

A large mirror ran along the wall of the passage. In it was the reflection of a tall man.

He looked familiar.

The elevator doors opened. Seema stepped in. Anju called her name. Simi didn't move. She was looking at the mirror, and the man in the mirror was looking back — a brief, polite nod of recognition. Simi gave a hesitant smile. Then Seema came back out and tugged at her arm. Simi turned, and when she looked back at the mirror, the man was gone.

She got into the elevator. KK and Anju exchanged a glance but said nothing.

In the suite they were sharing, Seema asked, "Are you alright? You've gone pale."

Simi nodded and went to shower. When they had both settled, she messaged the twins and Kismet to come over.

Once everyone had arrived, she said, "I saw Gulshan in the lobby."

A pause.

"I've always felt guilty about what happened. He was innocent. The music room incident had nothing to do with him. We let him drift away under a cloud that we never properly cleared. I want to apologize."

Tanuj said, "I agree it was an injustice. But Gulshan is not easy to reach these days. I heard KK and Sunil talking about him last month. He's designed a skyscraper in Italy –

something genuinely unique and spectacular. His name is apparently among the top five architects in the world. He's also one of the wealthiest in India." He paused. "He's not someone who appears to have been destroyed by what happened."

Tanay said, "Which raises the question of whether digging up the past helps anyone. His career is exceptional. He's not sitting somewhere nursing a wound. Why rake up the subject?"

Simi let that sit for a moment. Then she said, "There's something else I've been thinking about. Bade Raja. The way he grabbed my arm that day — the way he pulled me toward him, the things he said. I was too young to understand it properly then, but looking back, it makes my skin crawl. Do you think he's a paedophile?"

Tanuj chose his words carefully. "We could find out. But do you actually want to? Because if we look into this and find something, we have to be prepared to go all the way — formally, legally, properly. If we uncover something and then do nothing, we'll be carrying the burden of that knowledge for the rest of our lives. Sometimes not knowing really is the better option."

Seema had been listening quietly. She was not the type for confrontation and had nothing to add; she was simply present, which was its own kind of support.

Kismet cleared her throat — the usual signal that she had something to say. "Whatever you decide, I'm here. If you need help with any of it, don't hesitate to ask."

Part 2

Mission Kismet - Crime and Punishment

Chapter 1

Breaking Out of the Gloom!

Gulshan Rathore was devastated after the music room incident at Tara. The way everyone had looked at him made him feel like a criminal. Everybody had avoided his eyes as if they wished he hadn't been there. But whenever someone did meet his eyes, they seemed to be judging him as a bad person.

He had not done anything. His only mistake had been "curiosity"! He saw a movement in his peripheral vision and decided to find out who had gone into the music room. That had been the biggest mistake of his life. He looked up to KK as a mentor. KK knew him as a trustworthy person. Yet, he too had looked embarrassed whenever he had glanced in Gulshan's direction.

Gulshan returned to his PG flat in Mumbai. It was late evening. He hadn't bought any dinner on the way. He wasn't hungry. His only thought was that he had been blamed for some unknown crime without any proof. This was unfair. He knew KK well. He was sure KK would ring him or send Bhave over to invite him to Tara again.

But there was no call or message from either KK or Bhave. Gulshan waited for three weeks. There was complete silence. Several times during those weeks, he had started dialling KK's number but stopped halfway. He was the injured party here. Why should he make the first move? They must have sorted out the misunderstanding once Simi had clarified that he hadn't even touched her. So, the silence from their side must be deliberate. They didn't want him around.

Gulshan was deeply hurt as these thoughts crossed his mind. He sat on the sofa, head bent, shoulders hunched, with a

look of defeat on his face. He thought he had better take a walk to clear his head. He needed to sort out his future because KK may not help him anymore. He got up and left the apartment.

There was a small brook behind his apartment building. He started walking down the path that led in that direction. He could hear the faint sounds of water as it flowed almost parallel to the road. As he got closer to the brook, he heard someone sobbing uncontrollably. He was curious. He was just about to walk towards the sound.

Then Gulshan stopped. Curiosity was what had created trouble for him at Tara, a place where he thought everyone respected him! He didn't want to make the same mistake. He was about to turn back and go in the opposite direction. Then he thought, what if someone desperately needed help? His inherent kind nature got the better of him.

Gulshan walked towards the sobbing sounds. He saw a woman sitting on the road, looking miserable and crying her heart out. Gulshan went closer and asked what had happened. The woman glanced up and spoke between sobs. She pointed towards her hut a little distance away.

There had been a thunderstorm last night. The makeshift cloth roof of her hut had blown away in the strong winds. Her baby son was sick, and they had no roof for shelter. They had no money to buy medicines. They had not eaten for two days. She was cradling her child, trying to give it warmth. She said, still wailing, that she had sat on the main road all day begging for help. But no one had bothered to even ask what she needed.

Gulshan could not control his innate nature. He was a fall guy for sob stories. He said, "Wait here. I will bring something to eat. I too have not had dinner." He went across to a tea stall a short distance away. He bought some vada pav and tea for the woman and himself. He returned with the food and gave some to the woman. He sat a little away from her on a boulder where the brook was flowing along.

The woman fed her child some bread dipped in tea, and she ate the spicy vada herself. When he had finished eating, Gulshan offered to take her and the child to a doctor's clinic

nearby. He hailed a rickshaw which was passing by. He sat in it and so did the woman. They reached the clinic, and the doctor attended to the child. Gulshan gave her the medicines and said he would leave her at the corner of the path.

The woman was smiling now despite all her trials in life. Just the fact that she and her kid had eaten one meal and she had medicine to cure her child's cold was enough to make her happy. As Gulshan walked away from her towards his apartment, he was amazed at how little she had, and yet she dared to smile!

Now, when Gulshan returned to his apartment, his mood had completely changed. There were people on this Earth who were in far dire circumstances. Yet, they continue living and hoping their life will change for the better. They never complain because they have no choices. He had no right to complain just because one family had treated him unfairly.

Gulshan had the advantage of a good education. His uncle and guardian had made sure there would be enough money for his studies and daily needs till he started earning. The whole wide world was waiting for him to do something fantastic and showcase his talents. He was going to succeed and become the most coveted architect in the world.

If people living in shanties could cope with life, he really had no right to complain. With this thought in mind, Gulshan made a firm decision. He would leave his apartment and go live elsewhere in Mumbai. He would complete his Master's in architecture, work with a firm for a while, and then branch out on his own merit as an architect. He would show the Suryavanshis what he was made of!

The next morning, Gulshan reached college early. He went searching for Prof. Ramakant Dave, his guide for the final project and thesis. He sat with Prof. Dave for an hour and discussed his project work and thesis submission. Then, he spent the rest of the day reading through the reference books Dave had just suggested. He spent the day noting down crucial information on his tablet. At 5 pm, the librarian said they were closing, and he needed to leave.

Gulshan had missed lunch. He was famished. As he left the library, he met a batchmate, Hiren Mehta, who asked where he was going. Gulshan said, “I missed lunch, yaar. Just thought I’d go to the vada pav joint and have something. Want to join me?” Hiren nodded, and they walked out of the campus and onto the roadside where there was a line of kiosks selling different types of snacks.

They ordered vada pav and tea and sat on a parapet near some trees. A few more classmates drifted over, and the talk turned to projects and theses. Then one of them turned to Hiren with a smirk. "Yaar, why are you even stressing? Your father and uncle are top architects already. Even if you scrape through with average grades, you've got a business waiting for you. We're the ones who should be worried — we don't have godfathers."

A couple of the others laughed. Hiren's jaw tightened.

"That's not fair," he said, his voice sharper than usual. "You think it's easy? Everyone expects me to be as good as them — better, even. If I do well, it's because 'obviously, look who his father is.' If I don't, it's 'what a waste, with all those advantages.' Either way, I lose. You have no idea what that pressure feels like."

The laughter faded into an awkward silence. A couple of them exchanged looks, unconvinced.

Gulshan spoke up. "I get it, actually. Think about it — his father and uncle didn't just succeed; they set a standard. His cousin Hiten's done well too. So, Hiren's not just building a career; he's living up to a family name every single day. Every mark, every project, gets quietly measured against that. Whatever we do, good or bad, it's ours — nobody's comparing us to anyone. That's not a small difference."

Hiren looked at him, visibly relieved. "Finally. Someone gets it." He shook his head. "Everyone assumes I've got it made because of the family business. What they don't get is I never really chose this — architecture was just... assumed for me. Nobody ever asked what I wanted to do. You guys picked this field. I inherited it." He paused, then added, more evenly, "I'm

not complaining, though. I know I've got a good life, a good education, options most people don't. But I will be expected to get top grades and build something my dad and uncle can point to with pride. That's just the deal."

Chapter 2

Severing Old Ties

Gulshan returned to his old apartment determined to create his own success story. But first, he had to cut off old – unnecessary ties from the past. Hiren said he was willing to take him in as a PG. So, the first step was leaving his current apartment. The landlord lived overseas, but the estate agent was in Mumbai. It was almost 10 pm. He would call the agent in the morning.

But Gulshan did not wait till the next morning to start sorting and packing. He ordered food online to be delivered at home. Meanwhile, he pulled out his suitcases and dusted them. He kept them in the corner, ready for packing. He started sorting out his belongings into two heaps – one for packing and taking along and the other for discarding.

When food arrived, Gulshan decided to stop. He would continue packing tomorrow. He was feeling calmer now that he had made firm decisions about his plans and aspirations. Hopefully, Hiren would turn out to be a good ally. Gulshan smiled to himself for the first time in many days. He was going to leave Tara and its people behind and lead a happy life. On these pleasant thoughts, Gulshan fell asleep.

The next morning, being a Saturday, Gulshan woke up late. It was already 10 am when he had his first coffee. He felt fresh and rested. He had slept well for the first time in many days. He was ready for some serious packing. Gulshan worked like a beaver and had finished packing his stuff by 4 pm.

He immediately rang his estate agent and told him that he was moving. He wanted to vacate the flat that weekend. The agent said, "As per the lease agreement, you have to give us at

least a month's notice. If you leave suddenly, you can forfeit the deposit you have paid."

Gulshan said, "That's okay. I am willing to forfeit the deposit. I have got a very good job overseas and need to leave right away. Please could you complete the paperwork by tomorrow so that I can leave immediately."

There was a slight pause. Gulshan was obviously not telling him everything. But whatever it was, it was not the agent's business to probe. If a tenant was willing to forfeit the deposit, the flat owner would not complain about the notice period.

The agent asked, "Have you got an address where I can contact you if necessary?" Gulshan replied that he would be staying in an Airbnb till he could rent a flat. So, he couldn't provide a forwarding address at present. That afternoon, Gulshan paid off whatever pending dues were there, like the electricity bill, etc.

He had messaged Hiren to let him know he was moving in. Then he moved out of the flat forever without informing the neighbours. Most of the neighbours were probably taking an afternoon nap. He didn't meet anyone in the elevator or the lobby. Gulshan found a rickshaw that was large enough to accommodate two suitcases, which comprised his belongings.

As the rickshaw navigated through the dense traffic of Mumbai, Gulshan sat back thinking about the recent past. He had been so happy to meet KK and the Suryavanshi family. They were true intellectuals. They were well-read and had a good head for business. They had all welcomed him. He had such wonderful discussions with KK, Bhave, and Uncle Abhijit.

Gulshan decided that he would depend more on his professors for information in the future. They would be able to share knowledge in a dispassionate manner without any emotional attachment. This suited Gulshan. At present, he was in no mood to find another mentor who had a personal connection with his family!

Hiren was waiting for him. Gulshan kept his bags in the assigned bedroom. He and Hiren sat in the living room

discussing the rent, payment mode, date, etc. They also discussed who was going to do which chore around the house. They came to an amicable conclusion, and Gulshan settled down in his new premises. He had left old ties behind and was looking forward to a new life. They decided to see a movie in the nearby theatre, have dinner out and return at bedtime.

The following morning, Gulshan bunked his first two lectures. He went to a mobile service shop and got a new SIM card with a new number. Hiren had lent him a spare mobile in which he had inserted his old SIM. Gulshan put the new SIM in his own phone.

Gulshan's uncle had left him a large fortune in various forms. Some was in real estate, some in investments, and plenty in bank balances. The first thing he did was inform the bank that his phone number had changed. He had to fill out the necessary forms and attach the requisite documents. Once the formalities were done, the main job was over. He would send emails to other entities regarding the change in phone number in the evening. Then, he gave an online request to disconnect his old number.

Now, Gulshan had severed all old ties and was looking forward to a life full of new promises, adventures, and experiences. Henceforth, his focus would be on studies, projects, work, money, and fame.

Chapter 3

Knowing One's Priorities

Spring had just set in. It was a time for love and romance. Being a college student, Gulshan saw a lot of his friends falling in love. Hiren was a compulsive flirt. He knew all the girls in his class and in the other sections too. He was on first-name terms with the hostel girls as well. Cheerful by nature, Hiren made everyone laugh easily, which increased his popularity.

In Hiren's company, Gulshan met a lot of girls. He wasn't interested in any particular one and didn't believe in casual dating. He was generally friendly with everyone, including guys. Tarun Rajhans, a classmate, was studious and serious, and he and Gulshan hit it off as soon as they met. When Gulshan wanted to focus on his studies, he spent more time with Tarun. When they both wanted a break, they teamed up with Hiren and had fun.

When Gulshan and Tarun were studying, Hiren would go off with his latest girlfriend and leave them to what he called their "geek world." Hiren wasn't dumb — he was actually very intelligent, but he had a casual attitude toward life. As long as he didn't fail an exam, he knew he had a place waiting in his father's architectural firm. Gulshan and Tarun, on the other hand, were first-timers in the field with no godfathers.

They were in their final year and would be fully qualified architects by the end of the course. The projects mattered most, since each student was expected to showcase individual creativity and knowledge. Gulshan and Tarun threw themselves into their projects on a war footing — they weren't taking any chances. They had to do well; their futures depended on how hard they worked now.

Hiren fell in love for the eleventh time that year, this time with Radhika Godbole. She wasn't like his usual girlfriends. Gulshan and Tarun were surprised by her simplicity and serious demeanour — unlike Hiren's usual type entirely. They decided to corner him about it over the weekend, if he was home.

Saturday arrived, and Gulshan woke up early. Hiren, too, was surprisingly awake. Both sat on the balcony sipping coffee in silence. Gulshan noticed Hiren looked serious, as if brooding over something. He watched surreptitiously once or twice, then couldn't contain his curiosity.

"What's the matter? Romance getting too hot or too cold?" Gulshan asked, teasing. He'd expected Hiren to laugh it off. Instead, Hiren looked even more serious. "She ditched me, yaar. Called me a useless flirt. We only went out for coffee once — we hadn't even got to know each other. How can she judge me like that? It's not fair."

Gulshan just smiled. Hiren's reputation preceded him — everyone, from the dean and professors down to the classmates, peons, and canteen and hostel staff, knew Hiren couldn't sustain a serious relationship. In fact, Gulshan was surprised Radhika had agreed to coffee in the first place. Finally, a woman with courage!

But Hiren was his best friend, so Gulshan said, in a placatory tone, "Forget it, Hiren. Let's drive up to Lonavala. After the recent rain, there'll be lovely waterfalls. We can hike a bit, get some outdoor time — Tarun and I need a break too. You can shake off the gloom. There'll be other girls who'll admire you even if Radhika doesn't. I'll wake Tarun — he's still snoring." Hiren, somewhat mollified, started getting ready.

They drove up to Lonavala and had a great time, running into a group of five other classmates along the way, so they ended up as a larger crowd — the more the merrier. The greenery, waterfalls, streams, cool breezes, warm vada pav, hot chai, laughter, singing, and perfect weather made for a heady combination. They had a wonderful day and returned to the Mumbai flat happily exhausted, ate their takeaway, and sat sipping beers until they were sleepy.

Despite the fantastic day, Gulshan noticed a subtle change in Hiren — he wasn't his usual jaunty, overconfident self, but rather subdued and serious. Maybe Radhika's words had hit harder than expected. Gulshan hoped that, at the very least, Hiren would start taking his project seriously now.

Over the following week, Gulshan and Tarun studied hard every evening. Hiren's birthday was that Saturday, and he'd invited them to stay over for the weekend. They wanted to get as much done as possible by Friday. Hiren stayed back at the apartment and studied too — which wasn't a surprise; it was shocking. Hiren and studying didn't belong in the same sentence! When Gulshan and Tarun discussed the change in his behaviour, Gulshan dubbed it the "R effect" for Radhika.

Saturday dawned bright and beautiful. Hiren had gone home the previous evening; Gulshan and Tarun were expected at his place by 6 p.m. They spent the morning shopping for gifts, came back with takeaway, ate, and napped a while before packing a few things and leaving at 5 p.m.

The Mehta family villa sat at the end of a lovely avenue. Beautiful Flame of the Forest trees formed a canopy along the road. They had already started flowering in March.

The villa itself was sprawling, designed to look like one large mansion from the outside — Hiren's father Rakesh and uncle Ramesh had designed it themselves. The entrance opened into a vast living room, tastefully decorated without being ostentatious. The two brothers' families had bedrooms on opposite sides of the living room. But the two families shared everything else — a large kitchen-cum-dining room, a recreation room, the terrace, and the living room itself.

On arrival, Gulshan and Tarun offered to help Hiten, Hiren's cousin, set up a table for drinks. The Mehtas were traditional vegetarians, but they'd made peace with alcohol at parties — Hiren had mentioned this with a wink and a hint, so Gulshan and Tarun obliged.

Hiten was just as friendly and likeable as Hiren, but not a flirt. Rakesh, Ramesh, and the rest of the family were welcoming, so Gulshan and Tarun didn't feel out of place.

Hiren had invited some of his exes, and everyone was having a good time.

Hiren cut the cake, and everyone wished him well. Typical Gujarati starters were served — masala papads, khakras, fritters made with arbi leaves, and dhoklas, all with drinks — followed by a delicious vegetarian dinner laid out on a large dining table. The guests enjoyed the meal and sat chatting till midnight. Some of the hostel girls left early to make it back before the college gates closed for the night.

The Mehta elders retired right after dinner, telling the youngsters to keep the party going. Tarun, Hiren, and Hiten got busy debating the current political situation with a few batchmates. Gulshan, uninterested, drifted off to one side. Seeing him alone, Meghna walked over, sat on the sofa, and said, "Hey."

Gulshan just smiled back. "Hiren says you're brilliant," Meghna continued. "Are you always this quiet? I can't be quiet." Gulshan's smile widened. "It's obvious, eh?" she went on, without waiting for a reply. "That's why I get along with quiet people — someone's got to listen, na?" She gave him a pretty smile.

Gulshan wasn't immune to girls, but he didn't want distractions right now — this phase would make or break his career. He didn't want to burden himself with thoughts of this lovely creature, so he stayed quiet. Seeing she wasn't going to get a response, Meghna excused herself and rejoined the group.

Gulshan sat on the fringe, listening passively as sixteen people argued about art, politics, travel, human behaviour, and offered a million opinions between them. The evening passed without a hitch. Most of the guests said their goodbyes and left by 2 a.m. Gulshan and Tarun were the only ones staying over. They went to their rooms and crashed, waking up late the next morning.

By the time Gulshan, Tarun, Hiren, and his cousins came down for breakfast, the elders had already left for a puja at a relative's place, leaving a note on the dining table. The

youngsters had the house to themselves, and they enjoyed a hearty breakfast, chatting pleasantly. Hiten suggested driving to Mulshi Lake near Pune where there were picturesque restaurants and resorts. Everyone loved the idea.

Hiten pulled out the Land Rover and checked it over. He washed up, and they set off toward Mulshi Lake, Hiten and Hiren taking turns at the wheel. The weather was pleasant, and they reached in time for lunch, stopping for a light meal at a food court before spending the afternoon meandering along the lakeside under the trees.

At the edge of the lake was a pier, where they hired a paddle boat and spent an hour going around, the men taking turns at the pedals. Meghna offered to help and was mortified when everyone unkindly burst out laughing. She was still smarting about it by the time they got back to the bank. The pristine surroundings dispelled her anger, and the mood was cheerful.

At 4 pm, they decided to drive back to Mumbai. The vehicle stopped at a toll plaza. Gulshan looked around casually. In the adjoining toll lane was a dark blue car with its windows lowered. Gulshan stared at the girl on the back seat. He was positive it was Simi. She looked absolutely gorgeous even as a pre-teen. Just then, their vehicle moved forward and away from the blue car. He heaved a sigh of relief.

Memories came rushing back – the unspoken suspicion, his hurt, their silence! His mood changed. *I need to focus on my own future. I will not allow anyone else to come close enough to hurt me again.*

Tarun was worrying about his career. He knew he wasn't brilliant, but he was diligent and focused, and he needed the grades to prove it. His parents were simple, middle-class people, and he was their only child — he had to make a success of this. He dreamed of reaching great heights the whole drive back to Mumbai.

Hiten had already finished his architecture degree the year before and was now a junior partner in the family firm. He wanted to focus on the business side and learn every aspect of it. Much as he loved Hiren like a brother, he knew his faults —

Hiren would always be easily distracted. Which meant Hiten would always be the one holding the business together.

Hiren, meanwhile, was lost in a daydream, imagining Radhika telling him: *Hiren, you're such a wonderful person. I love you for your joyful nature — you're always ready for fun. Other guys are too serious, too boring. Let's go out on a date, shall we?*

Just then, Hiten braked hard as cattle sauntered into the middle of the road, blocking traffic — they were passing through a small village that served as a shortcut to Mumbai. The jolt shattered Hiren's beautiful daydream.

The rest of the ride was uneventful. As soon as they reached the Mehta residence, Gulshan and Tarun picked up their bags, said their goodbyes, and hailed a rickshaw back to their apartment.

Chapter 4

Stagnation!

Predictably, Gulshan graduated with high grades. His project was genuinely appreciated by all the professors. It was a residential complex, thoughtfully designed, keeping aesthetics in mind as well. Tarun had also done very well. Hiren scraped through with the minimum 50% and was immediately made a partner in the Mehta firm.

Hiren moved into the family mansion right after exams, but he offered Gulshan and Tarun tenancy in his apartment until they started earning and could afford their own place.

The two of them spent all day getting their resumes ready, then sent out applications to architectural firms across India.

I hope at least one of them replies and I get a job – each of them thought.

Hiten called that evening to say his father wanted to speak with Gulshan. They fixed a mutually convenient date and time.

When Gulshan met Hiten's father — the elder of the two Mehta brothers — he was offered a senior architect's post at the firm, with a good annual package and substantial perks.

Gulshan didn't hesitate. The job seemed to have no downside at all. The Mehta office was just fifteen minutes by bus from Hiren's flat. He'd be working alongside seasoned, well-known architects, with every chance to showcase his talents and creative skills. He was genuinely looking forward to starting.

Tarun got an offer from a firm in Nagpur and left the next day. They agreed to meet up sometime once they were both properly established in their careers.

Gulshan was now the sole tenant in Hiren's flat, paying full rent.

Hiren was rarely at the office. He'd walk in each morning and leave by 11 a.m., not to be seen again until the next day. Gulshan felt the equation between him and Hiren had shifted — Hiren was the boss's son now, and it wasn't his place to question his contribution to the firm. Instead, he focused on his own work.

Rakesh Mehta, Hiren's father, took him under his wing, and Gulshan learned a great deal about the legal and financial side of running an architectural firm through casual conversation. Rakesh was well-informed and sometimes generous with his knowledge.

Gulshan's first independent assignment was designing a seven-storey building for a redevelopment project. The plot was small, so he had to use plenty of ingenuity to fit larger apartments onto the same land. He threw himself into the task to prove his worth.

Two years passed this way, working on redevelopment projects.

Eventually, Gulshan grew restless. "Rakesh, I've gained a lot of knowledge and experience with redevelopment now. I'd like to move on to designing residential townships — is there an opportunity for that?"

"At present, there's nothing on hand," Rakesh replied. "But your work has been exceptional. Why don't you keep focusing on redevelopment for now — if we land a township project, I'll definitely bring you in."

Another year passed. Gulshan had been working on redevelopment projects for three years. The following Monday, Gulshan decided to try his luck again. On his way to his own office, he passed Rakesh's.

The Mehta brothers, Rakesh and Ramesh, were discussing what sounded like a residential complex with Hiten. The firm did have a township contract, it turned out — but Hiten was

handling it independently, under the Mehta brothers' guidance.

Gulshan overheard Ramesh say, "You're in sole charge of designing this project, Hiten. It's a huge one — fifty 'twenty-storey' apartment blocks and plenty of amenities. This is our chance to make real money. We'll be there whenever you need us. Let's build something that puts us on the world map."

Gulshan wasn't the confrontational type. But he disliked injustice even more. He went to his own office and sat brooding for a while. *I've been asking for a chance to design a township for years. It seems the Mehtas only trust family with something like this. I'll always be an outsider here. I wonder if they'll ever give me anything beyond redevelopment. Three years without a break — I need one to figure out what's next.*

At least they don't know about the secret project I've been designing.

Chapter 5

Exploring New Horizons

The Mehtas were happy to let Gulshan take a month's break. Ramesh said, "You've worked very hard. You deserve it." Gulshan had wrapped up his projects, leaving no loose ends. With him out of the way, the family could focus on the township project without worrying about secrecy.

Back at the apartment, after an hour and two coffees, Gulshan decided he needed some pampering. He'd saved up a good amount over the last three years, so he booked first-class flights to Milan via Doha. He planned to rent a car and drive the long stretch between Milan and the beaches of Sardinia, leaving that part of the journey flexible.

Among his packed luggage was his personal laptop, loaded with the skyscraper sketches, floor plans, layouts, and other details.

He worked out his last week at the office.

Gulshan's flight to Doha had a three-hour layover. On the six-hour Doha–Milan leg, an elderly gentleman occupied the business class seat across the aisle. Beyond the polite nod strangers exchange, they didn't speak, and then the man fell asleep.

An hour into the flight, Gulshan pulled out his laptop and got to work. He had thankfully kept it a secret from the Mehta family. Occasionally, the old man would open his eyes and glance at the screen without comment. Gulshan ordered a beer and kept working as he sipped, so absorbed in switching between the various sheets of the skyscraper design that he missed the old man's growing interest.

After two hours of reviewing and modifying his designs, Gulshan stopped as lunch was being served.

The old man spoke for the first time. "Whose designs are these?"

"They're mine. I'm an architect."

"Using a buttressed core with an outrigger system for structural stability — smart move. Perfect for the lotus-shaped skyscraper you're planning."

At Gulshan's startled look, the old man introduced himself. "Giorgio Romano."

"Gulshan Rathore." Gulshan was overjoyed. Giorgio Romano was a living legend in architecture — meeting him on this flight felt like karma.

"I have all your books, sir. I've read every one, including the author's notes. I've watched all your interviews and talks online too. You're a real inspiration for newbie architects."

Giorgio nodded in acknowledgement. "How long have you been working?"

"Three years, as of last month."

"For someone with just three years of experience, this is an ambitious project."

"It's my dream project, sir."

"Please, call me Giorgio. I'm not one for formality. Are you staying in Milan?"

"No, I'm planning a road trip to Sardinia. I'll book into a beachside Airbnb. I've got a month to explore Italy at my own pace."

"Here's my card. Call me if you run into any trouble. Enjoy your vacation."

The lunch trolley arrived, and conversation paused for a while.

Gulshan thanked him, and they both turned to their meals.

At Milan airport, the two men said their goodbyes and went their separate ways. Gulshan hailed a cab. He'd already scouted a budget Airbnb in Milan and had one picked out. He checked in for two nights, then took another cab to Piazza del Duomo, where he strolled through the historic and cultural sites around the main square.

Tempting aromas drifted from the colourfully decorated cafés along the side streets, and Gulshan realised he was famished. He picked the least crowded one and ordered some local dishes.

Two days flew by. The desk clerk had given him the name of a car rental service, and he rented a car for three weeks, extendable if needed. He could drop it off in Sardinia when he was done, since the company had a branch there too.

The following morning, Gulshan checked out, packed his minimal luggage into the boot, set the GPS, and started driving. Along the way, he passed beautiful villages, vineyards, and hillsides, stopping for the night at a quaint little town before continuing and reaching Sardinia by lunchtime the following day.

He searched for suitable Airbnb accommodation along the Sardinian beaches and drove toward it, stopping whenever he needed a break, his favourite songs playing — the long drive was a pleasure in itself. He eventually found a small cottage for rent on one of the smaller beaches, well within his budget. He called the number, paid, and moved in.

He'd spotted a beach shack restaurant nearby and headed over, ordering local vino and pasta. The shack was surrounded by trees. Gulshan was met with a beautiful aura of cool sea breezes, flowering plants, live music, and the laughter of holidaymakers.

Gulshan hadn't felt this peaceful in a long time. This was paradise.

Suddenly, a familiar voice called out. "May I join you, or is this seat taken?"

Gulshan looked up, startled, and saw Giorgio smiling down at him. He was ecstatic all over again — his hero, here on the same beach in Sardinia. Karma was clearly in a generous mood. He stood up at once and invited Giorgio to share his table. Giorgio had already ordered his meal, and the owner himself brought it over, saying Giorgio was like a godfather to him.

The two men ate and drank in comfortable silence for a while. Then Giorgio asked, "Who's commissioned your lotus project? Where will it be built?"

"It's still just at the design stage. I haven't even mentioned it at my firm yet. They don't handle projects of this size. I'll have to find someone with a lot more financial capacity than my current firm."

"Why not build it in Italy?" Giorgio said. "It would look wonderful against the Sardinian sky — a landmark, really."

"Who would you suggest I approach?"

"Me."

Gulshan was astounded.

Giorgio went on, "I've amassed a fortune. I'm a bachelor with no dependents. I like your design. Perhaps we could talk further and see where it goes?"

Gulshan didn't hesitate. Giorgio had a reputation as a man of integrity, and this was an opportunity any architect would kill for. He wasn't about to let it slip.

"This is a wonderful chance to showcase my work, Giorgio. If you're serious about the design, I'd love to talk it through. Thank you in advance for the opportunity."

Giorgio owned a branch office in a large commercial complex nearby, and it was decided that Gulshan would come by the next day with his laptop to discuss the project in detail.

Gulshan resigned from the Mehta firm just before signing the deal with Giorgio's company. Giorgio himself took an active part in finalising the design. A few tweaks and modifications were needed, but he was thoroughly pleased

with the structural concept and planning Gulshan had put into it.

The construction took three years of sheer hard work to complete.

When finished, the skyscraper looked spectacular against the clear blue skies of Sardinia. It was magnificent – a vertical lotus, its petals just about to open.



LOTUS — that's what Giorgio named the skyscraper. Simple, but effective.

Gulshan booked a flight back to Mumbai for the following week as the project was commissioned. The skyscraper created a sensation on Italian news channels, social media, as well as international news channels. Gulshan's name was mentioned all over the world – as the most talented and promising architect of the era.

When he'd left Mumbai for Italy, Gulshan was a budding architect with big dreams. Three years later, he returned a self-made young millionaire — an architect with a global reputation.

Chapter 6

Partners in Crime

After the music room incident, Bade Raja's confidence had dipped a little. He knew KK's reputation. KK was an apparently mild man but was known to be ruthless if anyone hurt his family. Bade Raja was very pleased to leave Tara along with the Rajmata. Returning to New York made him feel safe. This was home! It meant freedom!

Bade Raja's first action on reaching home was messaging his pal, Robbie. Robbie replied that he had found new "material" and they could party soon. He also said that he had eighteen clients lined up. Bade Raja messaged back that he would be in full form by the weekend.

Robbie Smithe was Mayor Larry Smithe's son. Robbie and Bade Raja were classmates. They had started a business when they were sixteen years old.

Robbie owned an estate on the outskirts of the city. They organized rave parties there. The caretaker Raul doubled as a pimp. He arranged for girls aged between four and six. They were usually kids of illegal immigrants, and the families needed money desperately.

By nineteen, Robbie had a network of clients, men who wished to indulge in their sexual fantasies with minor girls. The little ones didn't fully understand what was happening.

It was Bade Raja's responsibility to arrange for drugs for the girls as well as the guests. Raul gave the girls some goodies laced with drugs to make them compliant and cooperative. Bade Raja's supplier was reliable and obviously kept his mouth shut. After all, Bade Raja was one of his biggest buyers.

The first time Robbie and Bade Raja had arranged such a party, they had called only close friends and charged each one a small fee. In three years, they had gradually developed a reputation for "discreet entertainment". Now, some of the wealthiest New Yorkers were their clients. The fee per guest was $150,000 for a no-expense-spared-no-questions-asked weekend's partying at Robbie's farmhouse.

When in New York, the Rajmata was usually busy socializing and meeting close friends. She was rarely at home and barely met Bade Raja. She was unaware of his activities. Aside from Robbie, who had been his pal since college, the Rajmata hadn't met any other friends. She was too busy enjoying life and spending her late husband's family fortune to notice.

By the time they were in their early thirties, Robbie and Bade Raja had a successful business going. Some years back, Robbie had married Lisa Gore, the daughter of a rich businessman who was Larry Smythe's ardent supporter. Robbie and Lisa had two daughters, aged four and two.

One Friday, after breakfast, Bade Raja said, "Mom, I'll be away this weekend with Robbie and some other friends. Hope you have plans too because I won't be home to give you company."

The Rajmata vaguely nodded in his direction. She had just met the most charming man at the Health Spa and had booked a spa treatment at the weekend. *He was such a hunk. And his massages were divine.*

Bade Raja packed some essentials and met Robbie at their usual Steakhouse & Bar. Bade Raja's supplier messaged that he was parked outside. They paid the cheque and went out. Bade Raja checked the stuff and stored it in the boot. They drove to the farmhouse in Robbie's Mercedes, chatting cheerfully.

"How's the latest material? Have you tried it out?"

Robbie replied, "Not yet, but it's fresh and untouched. Raul says all the girls are virgins. No one's touched them yet. But there are two who are gorgeous. He is reserving them for us. He will parade only the others before the guests.

Both men laughed cruelly. There was silence for a while.

"Raja, I think you should be a little gentle this time. We don't want another child dying. Last time, if my dad had not been the mayor, we would have been arrested for sure."

"He has clout, so he could arrange for people to remove all traces of our activities. We also had to pay the girl's mother additional silence money of $100,000. Dad threatened that any repeat, he would not help us out. Let's keep things under control."

Bade Raja was a bit irritated by Robbie's lecture. Since his pal was arranging his weekend pleasure, he decided to be pleasant and went along with whatever Robbie said.

Bade Raja lost his smile at the memory of the dead five-year-old on his bed. To change the mood, Robbie said, "The new girl's names are Rosita and Lucia. Let's have fun."

They reached the farmhouse in time for lunch. Several luxury cars arrived one by one. The evening's party was looking promising. The men were wealthy and had paid in advance. They looked forward to spending a wonderful weekend, indulging in sexual fantasies without restrictions.

Once all the expected guests had arrived, Robbie called for refreshments. Drugs and drinks flowed freely across the room.

Half an hour later, Raul brought in the girls. They were wearing bikinis. Some were shivering – whether with cold or fear, no one seemed to care.

The men touched the girls on their faces, arms, and some ran their hands all over their bodies. The men went crazy. They started squabbling over which girl was who's for the weekend.

Robbie stepped in and took charge of the situation. He said, "The girls are going to choose the men in the usual manner." He signalled to Raul to start the process. He asked the men to hand over their car keys.

Raul collected them in a big bowl. The girls were called one at a time and told to pick a key. The man to whom the key

belonged would be her sexual partner for the weekend. Robbie generously said they could exchange girls at any time, with mutual consent and without arguments. Most times, the girls were raped by multiple men. The men were like animals who had gone berserk!

"There are plenty to go around, guys. Let the party begin."

Bade Raja and Robbie each amassed a fortune through these weekend parties on the lives of innocent girls!

AND THE WORST OF ALL – FOUR-TO-SIX-YEAR-OLD GIRLS WERE NAIVELY CHOOSING WHICH MAN WAS GOING TO SEXUALLY ABUSE THEM!

Chapter 7

Green Signal for Mission Kismet

In Destiny World, Shwet-Karma was livid. Her usually calm face was flushed with anger. She had to do something to teach Bade Raja a lesson. Accidental death would be the easiest option. But Bade Raja didn't deserve an easy punishment. His crimes called for something slow and excruciating.

She had a plan. She would use Kismet. But she would need the permission of the Elders, as this Earthly mission could turn dangerous. She asked for a conclave.

The Elders gathered in the main Hall with Guru presiding. He asked, "What is the problem, Shwet-Karma?"

"I wish to punish one of my human cases in a particular way because his crimes are terrible beyond description. Kismet has already seen the man during her first case study. I would like permission from all the Elders to use her knowledge of humans to mete out punishment."

Everyone turned towards Karma, Kismet's mother.

"I know my daughter is capable," Karma replied. "But she can be impulsive at times. Are you sure you want her help?"

Shwet-Karma nodded. "I sense Kismet has matured — she's grown into a smart young woman. She has her powers, so she'd be safe. I just wanted your approval. I also need your permission to communicate with Kismet directly, instead of routing everything through you."

Karma agreed.

Meanwhile, on Earth, Kismet was listening to Tanay and Simi discuss business. Shwet-Karma telepathically messaged

her to leave the room — she needed to come to Destiny World. Kismet excused herself, saying she needed to use the washroom, and Shwet-Karma beamed her up.

"I have an important assignment for you," Shwet-Karma said. "I think you're the best person to handle it."

"Should I speak with Mom first?"

"She's already given her permission. I'll be your coordinator for this job. It may be a little dangerous at times — are you willing to take it on?"

"Of course. I'd love to." Always ready for challenges and excitement.

Shwet-Karma explained, "I think you already know someone named Bade Raja." At Kismet's nod, she continued, "He has crossed every limit of decency — even animals are less cruel. He needs to be punished. But I want it gradual, like a boa constrictor tightening its grip little by little. Our magic is too powerful — death would be far too easy a punishment for someone like him. Can you do it?"

"But I was specifically told never to use magic to hurt someone, or I'd lose all my powers."

"I've spoken with Guru. He understands the gravity of the situation. He says it's permissible to use magic — but only if it's necessary."

Kismet and Shwet-Karma were both relieved the decision was made. Kismet went to her mother and hugged her affectionately. *I'll make you proud, Mom — I promise.*

Karma looked at her lovingly and nodded.

Shwet-Karma beamed Kismet back to Earth. Both of them knew they'd made the right choice.

Chapter 8

Reorganization

Kismet was back in a flash. Tanay and Simi were still deep in conversation and hadn't noticed her absence. From what she'd gathered so far, a lot of things were changing. She was relieved — she too had a task of her own to perform.

Simi and Tanay had profited well from their two films. Tanay had built a solid reputation in Bollywood and planned to buy out Simi's share so he'd become sole owner. Simi, meanwhile, was going to focus on launching her diamond jewellery business.

Two years earlier, after completing his Master's in Robotics and Drone Technology, Tanuj had set up a drone manufacturing unit. His brand, "Zoomie," backed by a qualified and skilled team, was doing very well in the recreational sector.

Tanuj's company was also deeply involved in R&D. They were manufacturing and testing drones for long-distance warfare, geo-centric exploration, and search-and-rescue missions during natural disasters. He was so busy that the three of them rarely met him — even their fortnightly phone calls were brief.

It was time for each of them to chase their own individual pursuits.

"Who would you like to work with, Kismet? I'd appreciate your help, and so would Tanay. You already have experience in film production — but if you want a change, come join me in the jewellery business."

Kismet looked at Simi a little guiltily. The two of them had done so much for her, but she had an important — and possibly dangerous — job ahead. She couldn't risk their lives by

involving them. She'd have to disappoint them, for their own safety.

Addressing them both, she said, "Actually, I have some important personal work. I'd like to go back to Destiny World for a year or so. Karma's given me a special task, and I want to prove myself and do it well."

"I hope you two aren't upset. I really need to do this."

Both assured her they weren't — she had every right to follow her own path.

"Our production company's a well-organized setup," Tanay said. "Alok's invaluable, an excellent leader. Simi's written two scripts I can work on for the next couple of years, and Alok's looking for other writers too."

"Tapan and I are planning a joint venture for the jewellery business," Simi added.

Tapan Banerjee was Simi's boyfriend. He'd spent several weekends at Tara, and KK and Anju admired him for his big dreams and determination.

Seven years earlier, Tapan had completed his advanced course at the Gemmological Institute of America. He'd worked at his father's diamond-polishing firm in the years since, drawing a salary and saving up a small fortune, with the dream of one day starting his own diamond jewellery business.

Simi and Tapan had met in Spain, at a World Conference of Gemmologists, and fallen in love instantly. Within a fortnight, Simi had taken him to Tara to meet the family. The following weekend, she'd driven to Ranchi to meet Gautam and Konika Banerjee, his parents.

Both families were thrilled and hoped the two would not only build a company together but eventually marry. They seemed a perfect match.

Kismet realized this mission had come at just the right time. She was becoming superfluous in the group — Simi had her partner, Tanay had his assistant producer, and neither really

needed her help anymore. She, on the other hand, needed something challenging.

She said her goodbyes, hugged them both, and promised to keep in touch if Karma allowed it. They'd miss each other, but it was time to head into new terrain.

Meanwhile, Gulshan's arrival in Mumbai went unnoticed. He'd given up his tenancy at Hiren's apartment while working on the skyscraper in Sardinia.

He checked into a lodge until he found a rental three-room apartment in central Mumbai — a place where he could design his next skyscraper undisturbed. Despite his millions, he bought a used car and lived frugally.

Gulshan's late uncle had left him a plot of land on the outskirts of Mumbai. Given how fast the city was expanding, it wouldn't be long before that area fell within municipal limits. He'd already designed a villa for himself, and living frugally meant he could afford to build. The design was ready.

Having worked with the Mehtas, Gulshan had contacts at the Mumbai city development department, and when he wasn't working on his second skyscraper, he was making the rounds to secure building permissions for his villa.

That day started like any other — bright, sunny, a perfect day to collect the final documents he needed for the villa. Gulshan rose early and was ready to head to the government office by 10 a.m.

He decided to take a shortcut, a by-lane running parallel to the main arterial road toward Dadar. Unfortunately, half of Mumbai seemed to have had the same idea, and he found himself stuck in a traffic jam.

Glancing around to pass the time, he was startled to spot a familiar face. Simi was sitting in the passenger seat of a luxury car, a young man at the wheel. She turned to face him, so Gulshan couldn't see her expression — but from the man's face, he could tell they were more than just friends.

He was tempted to tap on her window and say hello, but just then the light changed, traffic began moving, and the moment passed. He'd seen hoardings for her second film all

over the city and had wanted, at the very least, to congratulate her on her success.

In hindsight, he was glad they hadn't spotted him. He'd left Tara under a cloud of suspicion after all — better not to reach out to anyone in the family.

Still, he'd watched her first film on Netflix and loved it, so he made sure to catch the premiere of the second. He called up some old classmates, and they booked tickets together. The film was thoroughly entertaining.

Afterwards, they drove to the five-star hotel where the cast and crew were having dinner. Gulshan and his friends ate at the restaurant, and once they'd finished a sumptuous meal, the group headed down to the lobby. Rohan, one of the friends, wanted to catch a glimpse of the leading lady. They hung around the lobby chatting for a while.

Eventually the banquet ended, and guests began filing out. Rohan was delighted to see his heartthrob heroine. He was almost dancing with joy! The last to emerge were Simi and her family — but the young man Gulshan had seen with her in the car the week before wasn't among them.

Thinking it was getting late, Gulshan suggested they leave. Just as he stood up, he caught Simi's reflection in a wall mirror, watching him. Déjà vu — but this time, instead of a scream, she gave him a small, half-smile of recognition, one hand lifting in an oddly placating gesture. He nodded back, as if acknowledging her gesture. Then someone led her into the open elevator.

Gulshan sighed. He'd loved her even when she was just ten years old — a genuine love that had somehow outlasted every obstacle. But she seemed to have found someone else now. Well, she'd always been a lovely girl, and she'd grown into a stunning woman. Of course, she'd meet someone and fall in love.

Try as he might to rationalize it, Gulshan still pined for her in his idle moments. Maybe that was part of why he'd succeeded so completely. Missing her so much, he'd thrown himself into his architecture instead. In his own mind, every beautiful building he created was, quietly, dedicated to Simi and his love for her.

Chapter 9

The Most Powerful Weapon

INFORMATION — undoubtedly the most powerful weapon in the world! Kismet knew she had to gather intel on Bade Raja's activities. Only then could she plan an effective mode of punishment.

She telepathically messaged Shwet-Karma again, asking whether meting out punishment would cost her powers. Shwet-Karma reassured her that Guru had given his blessing.

Now Kismet was unstoppable.

Then, a striking young woman with an hourglass figure walked into the Woodbury Starbucks in New York — golden blonde hair, the palest blue eyes. Kismet looked herself over approvingly. She looked the part; the Caucasian look was a smart choice, letting her blend in with the locals.

In Destiny World, Shwet-Karma smiled, certain she'd made the right choice. Kismet was a rebel in their world, but she was perfect for this earthly mission — imaginative, resourceful, and clever.

The blonde ordered a crispy grilled cheese sandwich and an Americano, collected her order, and sat at a corner table looking out into the street. She placed her handbag on the table and a black leather tote on the floor nearby. She powdered her nose, looking into a small handheld mirror.

A huge man parked his Harley-Davidson outside, then walked in through the door. His arms and face were covered in tattoos. He stood out like a sore thumb among the New Yorkers.

The biker collected his coffee and walked toward her table. She looked uncomfortable, wary. She dropped her compact and mirror into her open handbag. He sat down opposite her anyway. "A beauty like you shouldn't be alone, babe. Your boyfriend must be some kind of dud, leaving you here."

She asked him, politely, to sit elsewhere and leave her alone. He acted as if he hadn't heard. "Come on, babe. I've ridden a long way to see the bounties of nature in New York, and here you are. Don't be shy — I can be a kind man, depending on my mood."

She asked again to be left alone.

Four men sat at the next table — hefty, strong, rugged-looking types. One of them, whom the others called Mark, spoke up. "Let her be, man. Leave her alone."

"Try and stop me." The biker guffawed at his own joke.

A huge mistake.

The four men were Marines — combat-trained, veterans of actual war zones. The biker should have recognized the type from their crew cuts.

"We were just asking nicely," Mark said.

The biker laughed some more and reached out to tug at the blonde's shoulder-length hair.

In an instant, Mark was on his feet and had landed one on the biker's chin. The biker didn't take it kindly. It was one biker against four Marines, and neither side showed any sign of backing down — one punch turned into a full-blown brawl.

Pandemonium followed. Customers near the blonde's table abandoned their food and rushed for the exit. She gave a terrified scream and fled too.

The fight ended as abruptly as it had started. One moment the biker was taking a swing at one of the Marines. The next, he threw up his hands and said he was done. The Marines circled him warily for a few seconds before Mark realized he meant it.

They stepped back. The biker apologized, walked out the door, started his bike, and rode off before the manager could call the police.

In the chaos, no one noticed the black bag Kismet had left on the floor beside her chair vanish with the biker as he left. Nor that he'd leaned down and dropped something into her open handbag just as the fight broke out.

Kismet walked briskly to a turn in the road and ducked into an alley. She opened her handbag and smiled at the sight of the hard drive. The biker had delivered the evidence she needed against Bade Raja.

Now she could build a well-informed strategy to take down both him and Robbie Smithe. Robbie would be the harder target. It would have to be a coordinated strategy – both in trouble simultaneously and unable to help the other.

Oh, planning this is going to be fun. Maybe I have a cruel streak in me.

Kismet altered her appearance slightly — she didn't want anyone recognizing her as the woman who had caused the Starbucks commotion.

She hailed a cab, asked the driver for the nearest shop selling used laptops, bought one, and checked into a B&B on a nearby lane. She sat down to review the footage on the hard drive. It showed Robbie Smithe and Bade Raja.

Anyone who saw Kismet in that moment would have thought she was a witch. Her eyes had gone black, blazing with cold fury. She was seething — her clothes had turned pitch black, along with her nails and lips.

Shwet-Karma didn't intervene, even telepathically. In Destiny World, anger was unknown, but it seemed the norm on Earth. She sensed that the angrier Kismet was, the more effective her vengeance would be.

One of the videos showed Bade Raja holding a little girl's neck while in the throes of passion. When he had got off her, the girl had been dead.

Robbie is going to meet his Karma soon, but for you, Raja Saheb – I shall plan a slow, scary, and excruciatingly painful end.

Chapter 10

A Change of Heart

Simi and Tapan, as business partners, were doing fairly well despite being rookies. After all, Tapan's father owned a diamond polishing company. They had access to the choicest stones a jewellery business would wish for.

On the business side, Tapan's dad, KK, Anju, and Bhave were also there to provide valuable input. It was the competition that they had to deal with on their own. The rivalry was fierce – each brand trying to outdo the other.

Simi and Tapan were not the type to quit. Being young, they came up with creative marketing ideas. The business flourished within a couple of years. Both families started dropping hints that they should marry.

Both Simi and Tapan were hesitant. They realized their business partnership was working better than they had imagined. But their personal lives were not going as planned.

"We need to talk, Simi."

Simi realized from Tapan's tone what the topic could possibly be.

"I know, Tapan. We have been so focused in our work. I feel as if things have changed between us."

"I too feel the same. We are great as business partners. But as life partners and in marriage – I am not so sure anymore."

"The old spark seems to have gone. Although I trust you more than I would trust anyone else. But there's more to marriage than mere friendship."

Tapan nodded in silence.

It was as if, by mutual agreement, they had decided not to marry each other. They decided to inform their respective families about their decision.

A fortnight later, the two families were guests at a housewarming party. The house was owned by a senior couple known to both families. Simi met Ridhima, the couple's granddaughter.

The minute Simi saw Tapan and Radhika together, she realized Tapan had met the love of his life. It was instant attraction and everyone in the room realized it.

Anju gave Simi a keen sideways look to see her reaction to Tapan and Ridhima standing in a corner, deep in conversation. Simi looked genuinely happy for them. She had just been saved from a loveless marriage she might have drifted into.

As she chatted with some of the other young guests, the image of another face was flitting through her mind – a strong jaw, a pleasant smile, the gentlemanly demeanour, the slight nod in the mirror…

I wonder where he is now. He must be very busy since he is such a successful architect. Yet, I wish there was some way I could contact him, hear his voice, convince him that we did not blame him…sigh!

Simi made small talk in the midst of her thoughts, but her heart wasn't there – it was with someone who seemed unreachable.

Noticing Simi's preoccupation, Anju still wondered if Tapan's obvious attraction to Ridhima was upsetting Simi. She had to find out but hesitated to probe.

Simi was staying at Tara for the weekend, taking a short break. She asked to speak with KK and Anju.

"KK, Anju, Tapan and I have decided we are not suitable for each other. We are besties but not in love. Somehow, the old spark is missing. We talked about this a week ago. So, I am glad Tapan is taking an interest in Ridhima."

"I don't want his parents to be upset with me thinking I had broken off with Tapan. This is the best way out. Hope you guys

don't mind. I know you wanted us to marry. Whether Tapan ultimately marries Ridhima or not, the two of us do not want to get married."

KK and Anju were a bit disappointed, but they said it was her decision.

KK asked, "Do you have anyone else in mind?"

Simi opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something, then changed her mind. She said her goodnights and went upstairs to her suite.

Simi was still confused about her feelings for Gulshan. He was always in her mind like an unfulfilled dream.

Am I just fantasizing? Maybe I need to meet other men before I try to find a way to contact Gulshan. I need to get him out of my system somehow. What's his age? Maybe he is too old for me. On second thought, he might be just perfect for me. Otherwise, why have I been dreaming about him almost every night?

I call out his name. He walks into the dark room where I am standing alone. The minute he enters, the room fills with a beautiful glow. An inexplicable aura surrounds me. The air is positive, filled with a charming fragrance.

On that pleasant note, Simi fell asleep like she did most nights nowadays – dreaming of Gulshan.

Chapter 11

Setting the Stage

Kismet needed to plan really well. There was no room for errors once the plan was put into motion.

Bringing down Robbie Smithe was going to be a bit tough. His father, Larry Smithe wielded a lot of power. She decided to sit back and think things out for a few days.

Kismet decided to take a sightseeing tour of New York. *I might as well see the sights while I have the chance. Maybe I'll get some fresh ideas. I need to get rid of the gloom that's set in after seeing the videos.*

She could see the sights from Destiny World, but nowadays she had got so used to thinking like a human. She decided to continue playing the part and behave like one.

She opted for a half-day's bus tour of New York City's prominent places to see. The tour guide was explaining interesting facts about the landmarks. Kismet's mind kept going back to the mission and the videos. She would pay attention to the guide off and on.

An hour on the tour had passed. Suddenly, Kismet noticed a huge hoarding of Larry Smithe. He was shown giving out free food to the poor, and the slogan said he was such a compassionate man!

Out of curiosity, Kismet kept a lookout for more hoardings and posters of the mayor. One hoarding showed Larry with his family. She asked the guide who the other people with Larry Smithe were.

The guide proudly said, "That's Larry Smithe, our esteemed Mayor. He has done wonderful work for the poor. He is a true empath."

"His family must be so proud of him."

"That's his family with him. His wife died last year. On his right is his only son, Robbie Smithe. On Larry's left is Robbie's wife, Lisa Goretti. Those are their two kids in front. I think they are three or four years of age, not exactly sure."

Robbie Smithe – here I come.

Kismet left the tour halfway and took a return bus to a commercial area near her B&B. She went into the same electronics shop and bought a used printer and carried it to her room. She stepped out to buy takeout. Before that, she purchased some prepaid burner phones as well.

She sent the biker a prearranged identifying coded message and received a reply shortly. She rang and just said "Grand Central 11 am."

The next morning, Kismet donned her blonde avatar. She spied the biker standing near a column – a large-bodied person with a fierce face and tattoos all over; yet, incongruously, reading a business magazine! People gave him curious looks as they passed.

Kismet walked over casually and said, "Shouldn't you be reading a biker's manual or something?"

"What's up."

"I need more juice on Robbie. Solo videos. Double fee. Make sure it's worth it. A fortnight from now. Will call."

Kismet whispered this quickly as she passed the man.

The biker looked up at the overhead display as if to check the departure time of his train. He saw that his train was at a particular station and walked in that direction. The blonde walked in the opposite direction towards the exits.

It was Friday morning, and Kismet woke early. It was exactly a fortnight since her last contact with the biker. She

used the second burner phone and called him using their usual coded message.

At the other end, the biker used a payphone and returned the call.

"I got the books you wanted. I have left them at the book stall at Grand Central. 5 pm should be fine. Seeya."

Kismet, in her blonde avatar, picked up the "books" as planned and left a black bag for the biker.

She returned to her room. The videos of Robbie were equally explicit and horrifying. Destroying both men was going to give her immense pleasure.

The sheer rage at the men turned Kismet into her dark avatar automatically. She needed to calm down and think clearly.

Her thoughts went to the bus ride, the hoardings, Robbie's wife, and their little daughters – the same age as these sexually violated girls. She had the drugs to make Robbie's guests groggy and less aggressive.

Kismet, in her blondie avatar, met a hooker and struck a deal.

"For this much money, I could bump my mom. What's the job?"

Kismet showed the hooker a photo.

"You'll find this guy at Luke's Bar. He has two boxes with drugs in his apartment – one large box and one smaller one. Make sure you meet him and persuade him to take you home. Once he is fast asleep, add a few drops of this liquid into each packet in the larger box. Make sure they are resealed so that he won't realize they've been tampered with. This last bit is very, very crucial. Don't mess up. Your life depends on it. If the job is done perfectly, I'll leave an appreciation bonus in your flat."

"But you don't know where I live," the hooker smirked. "I could take the money and disappear."

In a soft, menacing voice, Kismet said, "I am saying this just once – mess with me, and I'll send my men to torture and kill you slowly. No one will ever find your body."

Meanwhile, on a Friday, Bade Raja and Robbie met at a café to plan the weekend's party. This time the guest list had seventeen names. This info had been relayed to the supplier so that he would have everything ready.

The hooker had done the job.

Lisa, Robbie's wife, had wanted to divorce Robbie a year earlier. Larry had threatened that she would lose custody of the daughters and not get a single penny as settlement. Lisa loved her kids and didn't want to lose them. She had capitulated. She feared Larry. Ever since, she had maintained a low profile.

While arrangements for the party were in progress, Kismet was busy too.

Lucas Marshal was one of the leading divorce lawyers in New York. He was Lisa's cousin and had tried to help her get a divorce. Lisa had backed out of her own will. Kismet had rung a few days earlier and booked an appointment with Lucas. She had left a cryptic message on his answering machine that she had some info that could be of use to Lisa and gave a number to call back. He was curious and arranged to meet her on Friday.

At the arranged time, a blonde entered Lucas' office.

"So, what's your name?"

"Why bother with names. The info I have is explosive. It involves Robbie Simthe."

"You will not get a penny till I check. It might be worthless for all I know!"

"I don't want payment. Bring Robbie down – that is payment enough."

"Why, what has he done to you?"

"Never mind me. Do you want to see the videos or not? Or I can always find someone else to help me."

"Let's not get excited. Show me what you've got."

Kismet handed over the drive on which the videos were copied.

"I have the originals. These are copies. This should blow up in Robbie's face by Monday."

"Why the rush?"

"Timing. Or there's always the press and social media…"

Lucas just raised his eyebrows as Kismet walked out of the office. He watched the videos and knew he had Robbie. He had always detested his brother-in-law. He had even tried to persuade Lisa not to marry the guy.

Lucas knew Lisa dropped the kids at their yoga centre every Saturday. He messaged, saying he had urgent info he wished to share and that he would meet her at the centre.

"Do you still want the divorce?"

"Yes, I am desperate to be free of Robbie. Our marriage isn't working. He is never around. I don't know how I can be free without losing custody of the girls."

"I have something to show you. It's unpleasant, but you need to see it. My car is parked in that alley. Let's go." He didn't want Lisa to come to his office in case Larry got to hear of it.

Lucas and Lisa walked across. Once in the car, he opened his laptop and showed her some of the videos of Robbie raping girls who were as young as her own daughters. Lisa went pale and looked like she was about to faint.

Lucas said, "Here, have this." He offered her a can of juice to calm her. She refused, saying she felt like puking. Somehow, she tried to regain her composure.

Robbie was an animal! She had to be free of him. She feared for her daughters.

What if Robbie or his friends violated my babies! I have to save them. This is my best chance at getting a divorce and a huge settlement. The kids will be mine and there will be enough money for their future.

These thoughts gave Lisa some solace. Her fear slowly turned to revulsion and anger. Her resolve strengthened to save her kids from potential danger.

"Lisa, do you remember Carl, who was with me in Law School?"

At Lisa's nod, he continued, "I met him recently at a party. His girlfriend Lara Maynard is a journalist. From some of the conversation, I guessed she has been trying to dig up dirt on Larry Smithe and his family for a while. She could prove useful."

"Do whatever you think is right. I just want to be free of that horrible creature."

Lisa and Lucas split. Lisa went back to the yoga centre to pick the girls.

Lucas rang Lara. "Do you want a scoop – something that is explosive and is guaranteed to put your article on the front pages?"

"What's it about?"

"Can't discuss on the phone. Need to show you something. Are you willing to handle something tough? This news will ruffle some powerful feathers. There will be a lot of backlash but the weapons you will have in hand are too powerful. You will win despite a tough battle. Are you game?"

Lara was a tough lady who was always looking for challenges. Routine reporting bored her. She agreed to meet Lucas and see what info he had to offer.

It was showtime!

Chapter 12

Showdown

Monday morning began the same as usual. The weather was bright and sunny. New York City slowly woke up to start another boring week of drudgery.

Lisa made sure the girls were ready early for school.

"Larry, I have to pick up a few things at the boutique. I had ordered a dress for the weekend party. Maria has called me early for a trial. The girls and I have already had breakfast."

She left the house saying she would drop the girls at school and go on from there. Larry nodded and didn't pay much attention.

And then the news broke!

It first appeared on social media. Then the early morning news bulletins on every TV channel were full of it.

Robbie Smithe, the beloved son of Mayor Larry Smithe, had been raping underage girls. Graphic pictures showed him in the nude standing over a tiny naked girl sprawled on a bed. The girl's face was masked by the channels, but it was obvious that the girls were different in each picture. The videos were worse.

Similar videos of Bade Raja and other prominent citizens of New York were all over social media networks and news channels. By 8 am this news was all over the world, not just New York City.

Robbie woke up late on Monday, not realizing what had happened. Larry hammered on his door and yelled at him to come downstairs at once.

"Where's the fire, Dad?"

"Larry started thrashing Robbie. I have been working my arse off day and night to give you a good life, and this is how you repay me?" Larry pointed at the TV screen on which Lara was reporting everything about Robbie's little farmhouse activities.

Robbie turned ashen. He had never imagined anyone would find out. He recovered fast.

"Dad, you are the mayor. No one can touch you. Don't worry. I am sure you can take care of things. You have the police force eating out of your hands. Don't worry."

This time Larry was not to be mollified.

"You fool! Last time when the girl died, I could cover up the mess and get rid of the evidence because no one knew. Now, it's gone public. My voters know! Do you think I can afford not to take action?"

Just then the bell rang. The butler opened the door and the Commissioner of Police himself walked in along with two FBI agents. Paedophilia is a federal offence under US law. But, as the son of the mayor was involved, the Police Commissioner requested that he accompany the agents.

Putting on his best politician smile, Larry walked towards the Commissioner to shake hands. The Commissioner did not offer his hand. He said, "Sorry, Mr. Mayor, but this is not a friendly visit. These FBI agents are here to arrest your son, Robbie."

"Surely this can be sorted out in a less public manner?" Larry said in false hope.

The agents read Robbie his rights and handcuffed him, showing no mercy. They led him out to their car and drove away. The Commissioner left as well, immediately!

Larry was left standing alone – for the first time in his life, feeling powerless and defeated!

Simultaneous arrests were being made by the FBI all over the city, Bade Raja included. Raul, the caretaker at the

farmhouse, was being questioned. Raul turned State's witness and agreed to tell all he knew in exchange for a lighter sentence.

Robbie and Bade Raja were men who had spent their entire lives in luxury. Jail was going to be slow and steady torture for life.

Larry said he needed a stiff drink to no one in particular. He walked into the study and closed the door. In the commotion, no one had switched off the TV and the news was still showing gory details of Robbie's activities.

A few minutes later, the bell rang again and the butler opened the door. This time it was Lucas. He came with the intention of serving Robbie a divorce notice. With the evidence going public, Lisa was assured of a large settlement.

Suddenly, they heard the sound of a single shot from the study…then deathly silence!

The butler was thinking – *I need to inform the police.*

Lucas was thinking – *Thank God the divorce was not filed. Now Lisa will inherit everything.*

The news of Larry's suicide spread everywhere.

Kismet still felt her mission was incomplete. She used her burner phone again. Then she sat on a park bench and thought hard. A few minutes later, a heavily tattooed biker sat on the bench as well. He offered her an energy bar. She took it. He loitered for a while, making casual conversation. Then he ambled off.

The biker had handed Kismet a small piece of paper while giving the energy bar. She saw just one name on it – Jonas Byrde.

Jonas was the Chief Warden at the New Jersey federal prison. He had a special hatred for paedophiles. His ten-year-old daughter had been raped and killed twelve years ago. He had never recovered from the shock. Ever since, he had been on a crusade to destroy child abusers.

His technique was simple – he placed such a prisoner with a sadistic homosexual. Unfortunately, there were plenty of such lifers available. The child abuser prayed for death every day.

Kismet used her best telepathic powers to ensure that Robbie Smithe and Bade Raja were both sent to Jonas' prison for processing. When she was assured that things were working out just as she planned, she breathed easy.

Mission Kismet was complete.

Chapter 13

Final Tasks

Kismet zoomed into Simi's flat. More than a year had gone by. She was curious to know what had happened in her absence. To her surprise, she found only Tanay at the flat.

"So, how are Simi and Tapan? What about Tanuj?"

"Hey, Kismet. Where have you been? Haven't seen you for what – a year now!"

Yeah, I had to complete a task. Now I am back. What about Simi?"

"Simi and Tapan's diamond jewellery business is doing very well. It is the leading brand in India and is also popular in Europe. They are planning on launching something in the US next year."

"And what about marriage?"

"They decided they didn't want to marry. They didn't vibe so well after the initial attraction. In fact, Tapan is engaged to another girl. Simi hasn't met anyone yet. She is staying at Tara and operating her business from there, just like Anju."

"I think I too will go to Tara. Do you think she will like that? I hope she isn't resentful that I went off for a year?"

Tanay offered his mobile. "Ring her and find out."

Kismet smiled. She waved at Tanay and zoomed to Tara. After all, she had not lost her magical powers. Why ring?

Simi was sitting on the terrace of her room sipping a mojito. Seeing Kismet, she decided to play hard to please. She glared at Kismet silently.

"They didn't take away any of my powers, you know. So, I can read your mind. Don't waste your time faking anger." Her grin was so cheeky that Simi couldn't help smiling.

They sat there chatting and exchanging news. Kismet didn't mention the mission in New York. Then, she zoomed back up to report.

In Destiny World, the Elders were in a meeting. They knew Kismet had successfully completed the New York mission.

Shwet-Karma said, "I am very pleased with Kismet's careful planning and implementation of the mission. She showed restraint throughout despite her anger. She did not do anything on an impulse. Her work has been exemplary. I vote that she should be awarded the full Karma title."

Karma, Kismet's mom could not vote. She waited hopefully for Guru's approval. The others around the room voted in agreement, but Guru had veto powers.

Finally, he spoke, "Kismet seems to have matured into a sensible woman. She had carried out her task with precision and care. With her magical powers, she could have just killed the two criminals. Yet, she has shown restraint, patience, and careful planning – abilities which she had never displayed earlier. I agree that she should be given the title of Karma."

Her mom sighed with relief. Finally!

Just then, Kismet walked before the gathered Elders. Guru spoke, "Kismet, we are all pleased with the successful completion of such a delicate mission. I confer upon you the official title of Pushpa-Karma and give you the enhanced powers that come with it. I trust you will use them wisely."

Kismet knelt before Guru and joined her hands in namaste, accepting the honour.

"I thank your benevolence and shall endeavour to keep my actions within the Destiny World's protocols."

Having passed the Karma Exaltation Test, Kismet could now do the same tasks from up here. She didn't need to be on

Earth to execute. Of course, she hadn't been aware that the mission had been a test and she could have performed it very well from up here as well.

"I know it is unusual, but I have a special request."

"What is it?" Guru asked.

"I wish to continue being Simi Suryavanshi's Karma."

Guru agreed and the others smiled. They had read her thoughts – *I have to bring them together. They are made for each other.*

While this was going on, Simi was rushing to New Delhi to attend a meeting. She and Tapan were negotiating with a realtor from Dubai who owned several showrooms. She wanted to expand her jewellery business.

Simi checked into her usual hotel, leaving the luggage with the concierge. Followed closely by her bodyguards, she stepped into the elevator – and stood absolutely still as the doors closed. She was looking right into Gulshan's eyes. She was transfixed. She couldn't move or speak and neither could Gulshan.

All the memories came rushing back as they stared at each other. She had been indirectly responsible for Gulshan's banishment from Tara. He had borne the blame for an action he hadn't committed. The Suryavanshis had not allowed him to prove his innocence. Simi had been carrying this guilt all these years – as if a heavy boulder was weighing down her heart!

Slow, silent tears started flowing down Simi's cheeks.

Seeing them, Gulshan asked, "I am the injured party and you are crying! Why?"

Simi stuttered, "I am sor…"

Gulshan opened his arms wide. His eyes filled with unspoken love. She rushed into his arms, placed her face on his shoulders and cried softly.

In that moment, the past was forgiven. They were together at last.

Sitting in Destiny World, Kismet sighed and smiled down at them approvingly.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED.